

The Texas Test Score Flap

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The ongoing flap about the Rand study of Texas students performance on the Texas state tests versus their performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests reveals some important facts about testing that a lot of people do not know. For one thing, the NAEP tests are not designed to determine if students are learning what they are being taught in school. Instead, they are nationally normed tests to find out if what is learned locally generalizes to permit students to apply their locally developed knowledge and skills to the performance of tasks they were not taught. It is not unexpected that tests that are designed to find out if students are learning what they are being taught will show much more improvement than tests that are not designed for that purpose.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's I led a team that developed the Army's functional literacy (FLIT) programs for improving the literacy skills of undereducated inductees. When we evaluated the Army's general literacy programs that were already in place we found that they made about seven months improvement in reading skills on a general reading test in their six weeks of instruction, but only about five months improvement on job-related reading tests. However, it was improvement in job-related reading that the Army was looking for in six weeks, not the ability to read and comment on topics such as The Westward Ho Movement or interpreting Tennyson.

We developed new job-related, functional reading programs and found that we made four to five times as much improvement in job-related reading as had the general literacy programs. But what was of equal interest was our finding that we also made as much or more improvement in general reading as had the general literacy programs.

These types of finding will result when testing is closely aligned with the curriculum to find out if students are learning what is being taught and are then assessed on the extent to which the local learning is detected on national assessments of generalizability. Because students are more likely to learn what they are taught than what they are not taught, local tests will show more improvement than national tests. Over time, and with a very large amount of local learning, as happens when students progress from one grade level to another, students will have acquired enough knowledge and developed enough skill that their increased competence can be detected on the national tests of generalized ability. That is why 13 year olds perform better than nine year olds on the national assessments.

In Texas, it is a generally positive finding that, as the Rand researchers noted, the Texas state test results were in some instances two to four times better than their performance on the NAEP. This indicates that children in Texas are learning what they are being taught. Importantly then, the finding of improvements in the NAEP scores, though not as large as the Texas scores, show that the local learning is generalizing beyond the state school districts.

This is a pattern that is likely to be found more often as other states develop state assessments aligned with their curricula to find out if what is being taught is being learned and national assessments continue to determine the extent to which local learning generalizes to what was not taught.