

WRITING ASSESSMENT AND MINORITY STUDENTS

Speakers: Rosentene Purnell, *California State University, Northridge*
Paul Ramsey, *Educational Testing Service, New Jersey*

Introducer/Recorder: Sonja Armour, *University of California, Berkeley*

Rosentene Purnell opened the session by considering the widespread implications of writing assessment for different minority groups. Although an entire school population is affected by any writing assessment, the misuse of tests impacts most significantly on minority students. Test misuse usually stems from insufficient knowledge about the purpose of tests and from a failure to observe recommended policies in administering tests. The SAT was cited as a test which is frequently misused. Although the SAT is an aptitude test which supposedly predicts student success in the first year of college, schools misuse it as an admissions or placement test or a test of writing skills. Often minority students are denied admission to professions based on test scores alone. However, Purnell noted that the Bakke case challenged the fairness of considering criteria other than test scores for admission to medical school. According to Purnell, many minority students would not have been admitted to college if their counselors had relied on test scores alone as predictors of success.

The predictive validity of many tests is more relevant to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than for many minority students and for students from rural and lower economic areas. In addition, the cultural bias of test makers who determine the content and shape of the tests tends to influence favorably the performance of students of high socioeconomic status. Since most tests measure learned, not innate ability, misunderstandings, especially regarding minority student performance, arise when terms like "intelligence," "aptitude," and "achievement" are applied to tests.

Societal improvements will contribute to the advancement of minorities by allowing them access to decision-making positions including school faculties. Purnell believes that writing assessment gains its most convincing rationale when it is most closely tied to instruction. Assessment procedures can be improved by relating testing and teaching in the classroom. A good test will evaluate teachers and students. Purnell pointed out that a test should involve and aid critical thinking. In school, students should be trained to adapt what they know to new situations. Many minorities lack this training, which results in fear of tests, a lack of confidence, deficient perception regarding the relevance of tests, and insufficient motivation to commit themselves to the task of test taking. Purnell warned against giving students false illusions about their ability to perform on tests and against lowering standards for minorities. She maintained that tests should diagnose deficiencies and educational institutions should provide remedies.

The second aspect of testing related to teaching involves continuous testing. A clearer picture of the

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student emerges from multiple evaluations, and students have the advantage of various exposures. Students should be involved in the selection and evaluation of tests as well because children from the most favored socioeconomic backgrounds accept tests more readily than do minority children since tests are a part of their culture. Purnell advised that minority students must come to see tests as a well-established feature of all schooling and as gate keepers to upward mobility. She advocated that minorities learn to "play the game and play it well."

In conclusion, Purnell maintained that tests be used to advance rather than retard learning and that the worth of a student should not be based solely on a single test performance. She provoked further reflection on the ultimate test by her reminder that some students pass tests but flunk life and other students flunk tests but succeed in life.

Paul Ramsey began with the suggestion that problems in assessing minority students' writing differ little from assessing minority performance in other subject areas or from assessing the writing of the majority of students. Ramsey pointed out that most English teachers object to arcane features of multiple-choice writing tests. He then cautioned participants to:

1. "Know your test and teach to the concepts it is assessing." In order for writing instruction and test goals to match, teachers should be the assessors.
2. "Make sure your students know the test they have to take." They need to know the general subject areas *and* the test format. The latter is particularly important for minority students who need specific instruction on the language and concepts assessed by the test.

It is important that tests be valid, that they assess the student's writing skills and not the student's test taking dexterity. Ramsey cited a personal preference for the essay test for two reasons. First, the essay test is valid because it reveals whether a student can "generate, organize, and develop rhetorically effective prose in standard written English." Second, an essay test serves as a "prod to the less industrious of the profession to give their students writing assignments rather than fill in the blanks." However, essay testing has its problems.

The first problem cited was the limitation of a "one-shot" writing test (which is still preferable to none at all). The second problem is the difficulty of setting criteria or standards for readers who score essays. English teachers favor essays, but they must consider whether one type of score — holistic, analytic, primary trait — seems to favor or disfavor minority students more than another type. Ramsey noted the absence of studies in this area.

Ideally, readers will be well-trained, will have well-chosen samples of acceptable writing at their disposal, will have a clearly-delineated scoring guide, and will have made conscious decisions beforehand about the surface feature errors which will pass or fail a paper. Additionally, readers should reflect the racial characteristics and linguistic backgrounds of the test-taking population.

Ramsey concluded that further research is needed: "If white students did as poorly as minority students on standardized tests, we would either know why, or we would change the test or we would stop testing."

Several participants asked questions about training readers to score essay papers written by minority

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