PS for 11/30/89

Look Who's Cheating on Reading Tests

The state of Michigan last month gave a new-style reading test to all public school pupils in the 4th, 7th and 10th grades. A careful look at the Michigan test (called MEAP: Michigan Educational Assessment Program) shows that it is a cheat on the public because, instead of testing reading skills, it tests the children's ability to guess at the meanings of words, and inquires about the children's opinions, attitudes, and value judgements.

The new Michigan MEAP reading test is expected to have national and international influence because it is being used as a model for the 1990 test now being developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The U.S. Department of Education has already submitted four passages from the Michigan MEAP test to the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

Fourth grade pupils were given two little stories in Book I called "A Pet Racoon" and "The School Play." Instead of querying the student on what happened in the story in order to determine whether the child could read it, the test asked "What will most likely happen" after the story ended, which is just a matter of opinion and not a reading skill.

Many questions probed the child's feelings and emotions while having nothing to do with reading skills. The pupil was told to answer yes or no to: "Does feeling well help to tell about feeling jealous?", "Does feeling excited help to tell about feeling jealous?", and "Is wishing you were invited to a party instead of a friend an example of caring about someone?"

Book II of the grade 4 "reading test" featured a depressing and unrealistic 5-page tale about a child who was so jealous of her new baby brother that she tried to sell him in a rummage sale for $6.49 in order to buy a play disguise kit (with fake nose, mustache, etc.). Fortunately, the mother showed up in time to buy the baby before someone else did.

The 4th grader was asked 46 questions about this story, most of which reinforced the mischievous storyline but did not test reading skills. For example, 21 asked, "How do you know that the person telling the story is a girl?" The correct answer

was: “By looking at the pictures,” and that is the only way one could answer the question because no female name or pronoun was used in the text.

Some questions had no correct answer. For example, 28 asked, “what kind of a story is this?” The options listed were: “a mystery, a fairy tale, a story that could be real, a science fiction story.” The story was actually none of the above: it could not be real.

Question 16 asked, “Which of the following BEST describes how the girl feels at the end of the story? (a) proud, (b) jealous, (c) silly, (d) bored.” Since nothing in the story gave a clue as to whether the girl felt any of those things, this question simply called on the child to make a value judgement about the idea of selling a baby brother.

Twelve of the questions asked the child to evaluate his own reading skills by requiring him to check “strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree” about such statements as: “It was easy for me to read the words” and “I worked hard so I would do well on the test questions.” These questions about the child’s feelings apparently substituted for actual testing of the child’s reading performance.

How students are taught to guess at words rather than reading them was revealed in question 23 after another story: “If you did not know what the word ‘polluted’ means, how could you find out?” The expected answer was, “Find the word ‘polluted’ in the dark print and read the sentences around it.”

The 7th grade test had an outrageous 6-page story called “Cheating Mr. Diskin” about a couple of boys who cheated a merchant and got enough money to go to the movies. The lesson was that, although they felt “bad” about their dishonesty, they did achieve their goal of getting enough money to go to the movies.

Question 15 asked, “If Mr. Diskin had NOT noticed the trick, Robt would probably have felt (a) nothing at all, (b) sorry he had not used a bigger stone, (c) bad about what he had done, (d) lucky to have a friend like Soup.” There is no right answer to this question based on reading the story. It is a hypothetical question that required a value judgment as to how the student thinks the dishonest boy should have felt.

Question 30 asked the student, “what type of story is this?” The options were, “a fantasy, realistic fiction, an adventure story, [or] science fiction.” The answer should be: stupid, unrealistic fiction teaching that dishonesty pays.

To explain why so many non-reading skill questions were included on that "reading" test, the teacher was told that it is important to report on the students' "attitudes and self-perception, knowledge about reading, and topic familiarity" because those factors "influence reading performance." Indeed they do, but a reading test should test reading performance. If it mixes the test score with other factors, it is a fraud.