PS1 for 7/27/89 How Illiteracy is Concealed

Secretary Lauro Cavazos's figures are staggering: "13 percent of our citizens are illiterate, 27 million are functional illiterates, and another 40 to 60 million could be called marginally illiterate." Instead of responding with a plan to start using a reading method that will actually teach children to read, the public school establishment is responding with a plan to conceal the fact that present reading methods simply do NOT work.

That's the conclusion we must draw from the new Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) which will give all public school children in that state in the 4th, 7th and 10th grades between September 25 and October 20 a so-called "reading test" that doesn't test reading at all. Educators admit that this new test is radically different from past reading tests.

The new Michigan test does not test the students on reading skills, that is, the skill of looking at combinations of letters on a printed page and formulating them into words, and then into sentences which they understand. Instead, the new Michigan test asks the students to respond to questions about attitudes, feelings, values, and expectations, which are matters of opinion not fact and have no right or wrong answers.

Thus it would be appropriate to test a pupil on the meaning of the word "unhappy," but it would be inappropriate to ask the pupil "what makes you unhappy?" That is a privacy-invading opinion question, not a reading skills question.

When the test instructs the student to read a story about "Tony wants a dog" it tells the student to answer yes or no to such questions as, "Boredom often results when you use your imagination," "Being determined usually results in losing," and "Caring for a friend requires that you give of yourself." These answers don't tell you whether the student can read the words "Tony wants a dog."

Nor does it tell you anything about skill in reading the "Tony/dog" story when the student is asked multiple-choice questions about "what most likely happened" after the end of the story, or what "experience would be most helpful in understanding this story." A real reading test should find out whether the child actually read the story and found out what happened to Tony and the dog.

All the MEAP "reading" tests include a series of yes-or-no questions like this: "I had trouble understanding the story," "I worked hard so I would do well on this story," "I would read a story like this in my free time," "I dislike reading stories like this," "Reading more stories like this would be boring," and "Finding stories like this in the library would be fun." Those are all opinion questions for which a child is able to answer yes or no irrespective of whether he could read the story or not.

Here are more of the opinion questions which are masquerading as a "reading test." The child is told to answer yes or no to these statements: "Success is unrelated to wealth," "Only famous people have true success," "Sensitivity implies that a person respects others," "Sensitive people

are likely to ignore their families," and "The more sensitive a person is, the less successful he is likely to be."

Many Michigan teachers are upset with this new MEAP test because so many questions are subjective rather than objective, or are value-related, or require personal evaluations, or have no relation to the story which the pupil is supposed to comprehend in order to answer the questions. Furthermore, the test inquires about subjects that are none of the school's business.

What is Michigan's justification for this peculiar new "reading test"? A news release from MEAP states that it was caused by the state's having adopted in 1986 this new definition of reading: "Reading is the process of constructing meaning through dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation."

Under this ridiculous definition, it is no longer necessary for the student to understand the printed words on the page. He can just "dynamically interact" based on his prior knowledge, on whatever is "suggested" by the few words he can actually read, and on the "context," which means figuring out the story line from the illustrations on the page.

The educators pushing this type of text have dressed up their deception by calling their approach the "whole-language" method. The practitioners of this jargon tell teachers at training session that they should focus on "students' overall understanding of the critical concepts and ideas in a text" instead of on reading the actual words. The new-style "reading tests" are devised to accommodate the pupils' failure to read individual words.

The whole exercise is designed to conceal from the public the fact that the schools have simply given up on the primary task on teaching children to read. It's a consumer fraud and a disaster for the children who spend years in school but never learn the skill of reading, much less the joy of reading.