

10-1-1977

The Nature and Role of High School Reading and Language Competency Tests in Today's Society

Donald C. Cushenbery
University of Nebraska, Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

 Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Cushenbery, D. C. (1977). The Nature and Role of High School Reading and Language Competency Tests in Today's Society. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 18 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol18/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

THE NATURE AND ROLE OF HIGH SCHOOL READING AND LANGUAGE COMPETENCY TESTS IN TODAY'S SOCIETY

Donald C. Cushenbery

REGENTS PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA, NEBRASKA

During the past several years a sizable segment of the general public has expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the overall academic skills demonstrated by graduates of public and private high schools. According to some reports, scores on national achievement tests relating to reading achievement have been decreasing in many areas of the United States and various colleges and universities such as Stanford have found it necessary to implement massive remedial programs for freshman students in the basic skills areas. Several recent newspaper accounts reveal that the results obtained from different public surveys indicate that a significant percentage of the adult population of the United States suffers from problems related to such everyday tasks as reading a recipe, completing a Social Security application, and passing a written driver's test. It is not difficult to understand the results from a recent Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward The Public Schools which indicated that 65 percent of the general United States populace believes that all high school students should be required to successfully complete a standard national achievement test before a diploma is awarded.

Due to the recent curriculum developments at the university level relating to competency based instruction, legislators have either introduced or passed laws in twenty-nine states¹ requiring high school students to demonstrate a minimum competency in basic skills before they can be allowed to graduate. According to one journal² the high school equivalency G.E.D. test developed in California and adopted for national use in the United States may have fueled the trend.

The implications of such legislation are far-reaching and present a number of immediate decisions which will need to be made by secondary teachers and administrators. A recent publication³ of the National Council of Teachers of English suggests that these problems include:

1. the possibility that scores on competency tests will determine promotion or non-promotion and thus will lead to a return to grade-repeating, a practice which disappeared from American schools after research pointed to its ill-effects on students and on schools;
2. the possibility that there will emerge diplomas of different "classes" dependent on the student's scores on a test, with attendant danger of social stigmatism;

3. the possibility that statements of competence will lead to a circumscribing of the curriculum to a point where it will be merely preparing students for the test rather than educating them broadly;
4. the possibility that statements of competence will lead to didactic teaching as a shortcut to improving student performance, when research has indicated that such teaching is not as beneficial as more varied approaches to teaching;
5. the possibility that educational resources will be concentrated upon those students who have trouble attaining the minimal level of competence, and will be diverted from the gifted and the broad range of students who can attain the minimal level fairly easily but need to go beyond it;
6. the possibility that educators and the public will be satisfied with bringing students to a minimal level of competency rather than to a level of mastery that is appropriate to their age, their view of themselves, and their aspirations;
7. the possibility that statements of competence and measures of competency will make schools less responsive to the cultural and linguistic diversity of this country.

In order to focus on some of the major issues surrounding the concept of competency testing of basic skills, the following topics are discussed in this article: a description of the reading problem; the present status of competency tests in reading and language; each teacher's role and responsibilities; and the significance of competency tests in shaping curriculum and instructional patterns of the future. A summary is furnished at the close of the discussion.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE READING PROBLEM

Most educators, including several reading authorities, admit that far too many young people possess inadequate skill levels in such basic reading areas as word analysis, comprehension, and study skills. There are several apparent reasons for this condition: too much television viewing; lack of proper home environment; inadequate funding for elementary and secondary reading programs; and compulsory school attendance laws.

Thompson ⁴ believes the real root of the problem may lie in the home environment since a positive feeling toward intellectual and academic excellence can only be created and encouraged in a child within the walls of his own home and by his parents. He makes the observation that it is time that we stopped blaming the schools and that unless children start discovering the excitement of intellectual achievement in the home the schools can never be anything but an expensive baby sitting facility.

Some educators, such as Alf Nelson ⁵ of Pennsylvania, believe that the major causes of reading problems are the unwillingness of most school boards to provide reasonable class size for elementary classroom teachers; inadequate space for remedial teachers; and ignorance of what kinds of reading programs are needed at the secondary level. For whatever the

reasons, a “back to basics” movement has been promoted by the media and various conservative parent groups. Inferences have been made of the complete shock which has come over university instructors who demand minimum reading and writing competencies.⁶

The reading skill problems of most high school graduates appear to center around the word analysis and comprehension skill areas. Intensive teaching, particularly in phonic principles and interpretive comprehension, needs to be promoted. Professional texts such as those by Miller⁷ and Cushenbery⁸ may be useful to teachers who desire specific teaching helps.

THE PRESENT STATUS OF COMPETENCY TESTS IN READING AND LANGUAGE

Competency tests which are being administered in various locations vary considerably as to nature and kind. For example, Alaska is developing evaluative devices which correlate with state educational objectives. The State Board of Education of Arizona requires each school district to certify that all graduates can demonstrate basic reading, writing, and computing skills at the ninth grade level. The Los Angeles Unified School District requires all graduating seniors to pass the *Senior High Assessment of Reading Proficiency* test.

The Westside School District of Omaha has developed competency tests in reading, oral communication, writing, and four other areas. High school students start taking the examinations at the ninth grade level to discover those who need remedial help for aiding them to pass the tests with achievement at or above the ninth grade level before they graduate. According to Assistant Principal James Findley, 1 to 3 percent may miss graduation because of the tests. Westside High School graduating seniors of 1977 have completed three years of the minimum competency testing program.¹⁰

The West Milford Township High School of Newfoundland, New Jersey, employs the use of the *California Achievement Test* with minimum competency expected at the eighth grade level for all graduating seniors. According to school officials, the probability that West Milford students will graduate with the ability to read, compute, and understand the scientific approach has been enhanced.

There appears to be much controversy among some educators and public authorities regarding the kinds of skills needed and the level of achievement which should be expected. Typical of one such opinion is that offered by Monk¹²:

Defining basic education is impossible. What one individual needs and/or is able to accomplish is unique unto him.

Nothing could be further from the truth than the statement “Every child can achieve a minimum level of competence in the basic subjects.” Think about it. What are the basic subjects? Ask 10 educators, you’ll get 100 different answers.

The specific survival skills are well known. Right? Wrong! We can't even define survival, much less what we need to survive.

Gilman¹³ suggests that when a minimum competency testing program is introduced, an accompanying program of remedial study is essential for all persons who have not passed the test. A clinical approach to remedial education which involves a diagnostic interpretation of the specific areas of a student's difficulty is absolutely vital in order to help students. Inservice training of secondary teachers must and should take place. While a number of states such as California, Arizona, and Wisconsin require high school teachers to complete reading courses, most states still do not require course credit in reading methodology for high school teachers. Competency levels of students will improve when all instructors have reading training. *Each* teacher, regardless of grade or subject taught, must be a *reading* teacher. Reading instruction cannot and must not stop at grade six. All instructors must assume responsibility for teaching vocabulary, comprehension, and study skills each and every school day. If they don't know how, they should be instructed through the use of *effective* inservice which is conducted by trained, experienced reading specialists.

EACH TEACHER'S ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

If we accept the thesis that each teacher must assume both diagnostic and intervention roles in the process of an adolescent's competency training, two basic principles related to these functions must be clearly understood by each instructor. In the diagnosis realm, the teacher *must have a clear understanding of the student's present level of reading and language development*. For example, if a given textbook is known to be of tenth grade level difficulty, then each student who has general reading competence at that level should make no more than five errors when reading sample 100 word passages from that book. At least 75 percent comprehension of the material when reading silently should be demonstrated. Any student who cannot perform at these critical levels should be given remedial instruction involving the use of materials which are commensurate with his or her present reading level. Intensive, individualized reading lessons should be provided for those who are severely retarded in reading skill development.

A second basic principle of diagnosis involves *the careful study of all test data available regarding a given student*. Do scores from recent standardized tests relate favorably to information derived from informal classroom procedures such as oral reading and teacher-made comprehension checks? After information has been studied carefully from both informal and standardized instruments, each instructor should use these data as the foundation for the daily teaching of vocabulary, word analysis, comprehension, and study skills. At the beginning of each class period those words and phrases which are likely to cause difficulty for many students should be presented to the class. All words should be presented in context

with the proper pronunciation and meaning(s) carefully explained. Phonic and structural analysis techniques should be used to help with the pronunciation process.

Since comprehension consists of such aspects as reading for details, understanding main ideas, and selecting propaganda techniques, all oral and written questions supplied by the instructor should be varied to suit both student and teacher purposes. (Far too many teachers are guilty of perceiving the comprehension process as a sole task for reading and remembering details.) Proper techniques of outlining and summarizing should be explained both to individual students and total classes.

Reading growth can be assessed in each class by the use of such standardized secondary reading tests as the *Nelson-Denny*, *California Achievement Test*, and the *Diagnostic Reading Test* (Survey Section). The two reading methods mentioned in the references section contain detailed procedures of an informal nature which may be used for assessing current reading and language competency in the basic skill areas.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMPETENCY TESTS IN SHAPING CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL PATTERNS OF THE FUTURE

The use of competency tests will cause high school curricula and teaching practices to change in a major sense. Teacher accountability will be directly related to how well students perform on the tests and significant failure rate will cause a segment of the general public to blame teachers. This prospect does not set well with many educators. For instance, Henry Acland ¹⁴ says:

My prediction is that teachers will respond to proficiency tests for high school graduation by teaching a dreary list of skills in areas such as form-filling, letter-writing, and marketing. For students these will appear as another senseless school ritual. Teachers will tend to find it demeaning and within four years will use their bargaining power to eliminate it.

The results of the competency tests should help teachers and administrators to pinpoint those areas of the curriculum which need strengthening. If, for example, many students have difficulty reading and completing job application forms, all teachers (especially English teachers) need to place greater stress on this area. (A recent survey of leading literacy authorities indicated that ability to accomplish everyday reading skills constituted the best measure of reading competency.¹⁵)

Educators need to be cautioned not to make the minimum competency requirements the new maximum standard. That is, in order to avoid wholesale failure, levels of proficiency will be so low that they will be worthless.¹⁶ Certainly each student should be challenged to achieve at his or her maximum level of learning.

Every teacher must have a complete knowledge of the competencies required of each student. School reading specialists should serve as resource personnel to all instructors. Each teacher should understand his or her role for helping adolescents become competent in all areas, especially reading and language.

During the testing process of any large school population, the data bank will no doubt suggest that as many as 10 percent of the learners of a given school have serious reading and language difficulties. The average teacher, regardless of ability, is not in a position because of time and class load to give intensive remedial instruction. Those students who are in this category must be scheduled into special reading and/or language courses which are designed to render individualized instruction. These classes should be taught and directed by trained reading teachers who have vast knowledge of diagnostic and remedial techniques. Such courses should be modeled after principles such as those outlined by Bond and Tinker.¹⁷ The combined program of classroom reading instruction and specialized teaching should result in a higher level of competence for all students.

SUMMARY

The administration and successful completion of competency tests by all high school students tend to be a firm trend in the United States. Though there appears to be much debate about the nature and level of competency desired, much agreement does rest on the thesis that schools and teachers can do a better job in preparing young people for everyday literacy requirements. *Every* teacher in *every* school must assume the role of a skills teacher using the diagnostic and remedial principles explained in this article. Our nation's children will be the better for it.

REFERENCES

¹Sink, Dave, "Competency Tests Gaining Support," *Omaha Sun Newspapers* (West Omaha-Dundee Edition) May 26, 1977.

²_____. "Before You Hand Out Those Diplomas: Should Your Students Prove They've Learned Something?" *The American School Board Journal*, Vol. 164, No. 3 (March 1977) pp. 41-42.

³"Minimal Competencies and Measures of Competence," *Support for Learning and Teaching of English*, National Council of Teachers of English, Vol. 2, No. 2, December, 1976.

⁴Thompson, Jan M., Editorial, *Durango Herald*, Durango, Colorado. April 1, 1976.

⁵Nelson, Alf., "Johnny's Graduated—But He Can't Read," *Pennsylvania School Journal*, Vol. 124, No. 2 (December 1975), pp. 67-69, 84, 86.

⁶Farrell, Thomas J., "Literacy, The Basics, And All That Jazz," *College English*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (January 1977), p. 443.

⁷Miller, Wilma H. *Teaching Reading in The Secondary School*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, 1974.

⁸Cushenbery, Donald C. *Reading Improvement Through Diagnosis: Remediation, and Individualized Instruction*. West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing Company, 1977.

⁹Jordan, Steve, "10% of Westside Seniors Learn Tests No Joke," *Omaha World-Herald*, March 20, 1977.

¹⁰"Minimum Competencies Pass Test," *Westside Schools Report*, May 19, 1977.

¹¹Cannava, Ernest J. and Koy, William F., "New Jersey School Requires Competency Test for Graduation," *N.A.S.S.P. Bulletin*, Vol. 60, No. 398 (March 1976) pp. 119-121.

¹²Monk, James A., "But What Is Minimum Competence," *Instructor*, Vol. 86, No. 5 (January 1977) p. 28.

¹³Gilman, David Alan, "Minimum Competency Testing: An Insurance Policy for Survival Skills," *N.A.S.S.P. Bulletin*, Vol. 61, No. 407 (March 1977) p. 83.

¹⁴Acland, Henry, "If Reading Scores are Irrelevant, Do We Have Anything Better?" *Educational Technology*, Vol. 16, No. 7 (July 1976) p. 29.

¹⁵Finch, F. L. "Is Coping With the Real World The Criterion Test of Reading Ability?" *Address*, International Reading Association, May 2, 1977, Miami Beach, Florida, p. 6.

¹⁶"Some Apprehensions About Minimum Competency," Washington, D.C.: Council for Basic Education, May, 1977.

¹⁷Bond, Guy L. and Tinker, Miles. *Reading Difficulties: Their Diagnosis and Correction*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1973.