Article Review
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How Well Aligned Are State Assessments of Student Achievement With State Content Standards?
Within the United States’ education system a growing concern on whether or not the states assessments of student achievement is aligned with state content standards has become a focal point in many governing conversations. Since the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind educational plan, teachers, schools, and school systems have been affected tremendously. This study deals with the coherence of the standardized tests and if they are measured rationally across the board. Because so much relies on whether or not schools pass or fail because of the enacted laws, much is at stake. Morgan S. Polikoff, Andrew C. Porter, and John Smithson presented a study to the American Educational Research Journal entitled *How Well Aligned Are State Assessments of Student Achievement With State Content Standards?* for which this review will be concentrated.

This study measures the differences between thirty-one states and their tests. The research investigates the coherence of state content standards and assessments that were given in English Language Arts and Reading or ELAR, mathematics, and science. Two primary questions were asked: (1) To what extent are state assessments of student achievement under *No Child Left Behind* aligned with state content standards? and (2) to the extent that there is a misalignment between assessments and standards, what is the nature of the misalignment? (Polikoff, Porter, Smithson, 967). The desired result was to shed light on the implementation of the state tests whereas policy could be improved in terms of design and effectiveness of the test. Hence, the measure was quantitative in that data was collected.

Three different methods were used to measure the coherence of the tests given within the thirty-one states: The Webb procedure which codes the depth of knowledge of a set of standards, goals, objectives and assessment items; The Achieve procedure which measures the alignment of standards and assessments as well as the degree of challenge of the tests; and the Surveys of Enacted Curriculum which maps the standards and assessments on a common framework. The data collected was used collected from the Surveys of Enacted Curriculum while the approach was taken from Webb and the Achievement procedures.

The findings of the study were that only 19% of the standard’s content in ELAR, 27% in mathematics, and 26% in science are in perfect proportional agreement at the topic by cognitive demand level. This finding answers the first question of: To what extent are state assessments of student achievement under *No Child Left Behind* aligned with state content standards? Further the author states that “In general, half the content in mathematics and science standards and two-
thirds in ELAR is misaligned with test content, meaning that the test does not assess substantial proportions of the topics specified in the standards” (986). In answering the second question of: “What is the nature of the misalignment?” the author explains “while there is no set standard for how much of the standards content should be tested on any particular test, there is certainly room for improvement, insofar as the 17% of standards content in mathematics and ELAR and 25% in science that is currently tested at the wrong levels of cognitive demand could be redirected toward increased alignment without affecting test length” (987).

The results of the study was simply that the answer to “are standards and assessments aligned with one another?” depends on the definition of alignment. According to the authors “When the alignment is defined in the way that is most predictive of value-added to student achievement the answer is no.” (989). Also, “misalignment is when the standards and assessments do not agree on the cognitive demand levels, topics, or both to be tested. Across subjects and grades, this form of incoherence comprised moderate to large Alignment of State Assessments and Standards proportions of the total content targeted” (989). Lastly, the author explains that “roughly a quarter of the content on typical tests was not reflective of topics that were mentioned at all in their corresponding grade-level standards (990).

Fortunately, the authors offer a solution to the problem. They explain that “each of the three approaches described in the following should be especially appropriate as standards including the new Common Core State Standards begin to reach a steady, mature state. One approach is to eliminate all complete misalignment on the tests—those test items that test topics that are simply not covered in the standards at all” (991). They further suggest that “to deal with complete misalignment on the standards, a second solution would be to build test forms that sample from the domain of the standards, such that all content in the standards is tested, if not on every form or in every year, then across forms and years in proportion to its relative importance in the standards” (991).

Most teachers and administrators have conflicts with standardized tests as being a way of measuring whether or not students are actually educated in the sense of being able to apply knowledge to life skills. It is outrageous to discover something that has previously only been an assumption but can now be proven. First, the question must be asked: “Does a standardized test actually measure whether or not a student has been taught well be a teacher?” Second, the
question must be asked: “If a student fails to pass a standardized test does this mean that his/her teacher did not teach them properly throughout a school year?” With the American education system being judged by the No Child Left Behind school measurement, administrators, educators, and students alike cannot meet the requirements set before them in order to fully pass the measurement and standards. It is therefore ludicrous to gage schools, teachers, and students by something so per ponderous. Further, to discover that the standardized tests do not even align themselves from state to state nor is half of the tested material aligned to content standards is amazing.

The findings from this article are disturbing from the point of view of a teacher or administrator. Disturbing for a teacher because a teacher plans his/her lessons based on standards given them by the state. Then to discover that only a small portion of what the teacher has tried to teach over the course of an entire year is actually measured is shameful. As an administrator who implements curriculum and does everything possible to aid the teachers in the quest to teach for the students while knowing that if the students do not pass the administrator’s school could be placed on a list whereas his/her school will be possibly disciplined, it is maddening. To discover what content will be tested certainly becomes a major issue for both administrators and educators especially if such a small number of skills are actually tested. Further, when noting that from state to state these test are not aligned makes one question how on earth does a measurement actually take place across the United States in order to actually measure how a child actually academically achieves. This certainly poses a problem for teachers who may move from one state to another state.

No Child Left Behind should have been examined long before now. If it was necessary that a national mandate be put into place, the content of a standardized test should be aligned to the standards of the test. Nationally, the test should be the same otherwise what true curriculum is being followed by the each state and how will this prepare students for high education? The article was both revealing and yet alarming. It did provide a few hypothesis on how to solve the problem yet some a rather simple. If people’s employment hangs in the balance because of standardized tests, surely the tests should be set up whereas the content being taught is covered in the standards being presented otherwise everything is aimless and pointless and a complete waste of time for the administrators, educators, and students. Therefore it would be wise not to measure any school on a system that is so flawed.
This article is important to curriculum and instruction because it challenges the curriculum writers to become more aggressive in making certain that the standardized tests given to the students align with the standards given to teachers to teach them. If this is not achieved, curriculum writers, administrators, and teachers alike are merely spinning their wheels for naught and the students will never be completely able to pass and test given. This is utterly disturbing information that the entire education system need to re-analyze and act upon immediately.
Reference: