CURRICULUM BASED ASSESSMENT

Third Edition

CURRICULUM BASED ASSESSMENT

A Primer

By

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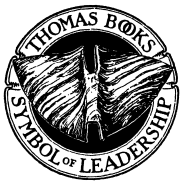

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PREFACE

In the first edition, I attempted to explain the concepts that make up, what I called curriculum-based assessment. I provided some illustrations on its use and made some suggestions on its implementation.

The ingredients of this curriculum-based assessment were not new. I relied heavily on work done by Arthur Gates and Emmett Betts generations ago. The ideas I expressed were not new or at all complex. Yet, the results of the recipe that synthesized its components were novel and, on some points, controversial. Still, I remain convinced it represents the best way for low achieving and learning disabled students to gain adequate educational opportunity. The principles have proven sound and, when applied, benefit all children. The additions to this edition are in the way of providing detail and explanation in the context of current and emerging issues in educational assessment and standards.

Academics typically prefer to deal with arcane and obscure sources of our educational ills. They do not like to believe that our problems may be due to such obvious, and to them trivial, causes, certainly not if it would implicate them as part of the problem. But, as Justice Holmes believed, it is the obvious that generally needs explanation. I have again further attempted to explain the obvious in this third edition.

C.H.H.

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Chapter 1

CENTRAL CONCEPTS

The Bed of Procrustes

Remember Procrustes? He was that legendary scoundrel from Attica with that horrible iron bed. Travelers who were unfortunate enough to sleep in it were either stretched to fit with a rack if too short or were shortened with an ax if too tall.

Fortunately, Theseus took care of Procrustes and his bed. Unfortunately, there is still a Procrustean bed to which a group of children must fit.

This iron bed is the typical curriculum for kindergarten through high school. Routinely, student progress is measured against the curricular components of her or his particular grade. Each grade has a set of curricular objectives for each subject sequenced over the nine-month school year. The assessment procedures in use determine how the student measures up to the curricular objectives. If the student doesn't measure up, then she or he is given a failing grade. Regular failure will attract a label, usually suggesting a learning disability. Indeed, failure is the primary diagnostic procedure by which we identify learning disabled children.

Procrustes now is the school board, the administration, and the teachers who design and control the curricular beds to which they force children to fit. The axes and racks now used to fit students to these iron curricular beds are the traditional forms of assessment used to assign failure when stu-

dents don't measure up. Fifteen to twenty-five percent of all students don't fit; consequently they fail.

Despite substantial learning ability, these students, who are often called learning disabled, are actually casualties of inflexible curricula.

There needs to be a modern Theseus come to slay this new Procrustes and replace his iron bed with one more generous and humane. Curriculum-based assessment (CBA) is such a champion. It is a system used to adjust the curriculum to fit students and so eliminate such unfortunate casualties.

An Early Observation

The observation that the curriculum is rigid is not new. As early as 1899 William J. Shearer noted that not all students of an age fitted their grade very well (Shearer, 1899). William Hawley Smith (1912) described the great attrition rate in America's schools that he felt was directly attributable to rigid curricular organization. Emmett Betts (1936) stated that many reading problems were created simply because we do not make basic adjustments to deal with individual differences. Betts estimated at the time that about 15 percent of the children were reading disabled in this way. Later (1946) he elaborated on the problem, attributing it also to the "lock step" nature of school organization. Here instruction was provided based on the assumption that every child was to climb the same curriculum ladder. Objectives were set up in grade levels. Each level represented a rung on the curricular ladder. At about the same chronological age, usually 6, children took the first step, the first grade. The goal of each teacher was to prepare the class for the next grade. The grade itself was broken into units of work through which all children were to proceed. Reading programs and content areas alike were designed for these gradations or steps on the assumption that all children are capable of uniform achievement. Children who could not manage to maintain this rate

of achievement might be provided with "remedial" instruction to help them achieve grade level. Those who could not keep the pace were either socially promoted or repeated the grade. The same rate of learning progress was required of all children regardless of the individual intrinsic readiness level or speed of learning.

Much verbiage has been devoted to the importance of individual differences in instruction. However, in practice the comments of Betts apply quite accurately to today's schools.

George Spache (1976) said that flexible, primary-level teachers can handle students that vary six months or so from exact grade placement. However, in the existing structure a child who functions a year or more below grade placement presents a demand for individualized instruction that the average teacher does not recognize or readily meet. Spache also pointed out that 30 percent of students above the primary grades are a year or more below grade-level placement in reading achievement.

Harris and Sipay (1975) stated that 25 percent of all students need reading instruction that differs from regular reading programs. These "slow learners" require materials that proceed at a slower pace. Frank Smith (2001) stated that the way our educational system structures time produces many of our learning casualties. Many students require substantially more time to learn than is allowed in our lock-step school organization. He believes that it is time to take a radical new look at an organizational system that is about 150 years old, introduced about the same time that technology of industrial efficiency was introducing the production line. This was the model that our emerging free public schools chose to adopt and remains in place.

Jansky and de Hirsch (1972) showed that teachers rated as adequate by their principals had a failure rate of 23 percent of their students. However, teachers rated as poor showed a 49 percent student failure rate. The Cooperative Research