

Assignment: Choose and describe your example assessment.
Choice: The Maryland State Performance Assessment Program

I have chosen to look at the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program, or MSPAP, for many reasons. First, this test is different from those that we have examined in class in that the MSPAP, though administered to individual students, is primarily used to measure school or district performance. The test is supposed to assess how well the students in individual schools are meeting the statewide standards for satisfactory and excellent performance, and provide data to help schools diagnose weaknesses and plan for the resolution of these problems. The state as a whole also avers that it uses the data as an “impetus for many state sponsored programs and legislation to counter discouraging performance trends” (MSPAP, 2001).

A second point about the MSPAP that intrigues me is that the state of Maryland seems to be using this test as a way to change instruction in this state. In fact, the MSPAP web-site states, “Teaching to the test is good instruction, the kind of instruction that results in understanding, not in the mere rote recall of isolated facts”. Maryland seems to be using a ‘Messick-like’ interpretation of consequential validity that I am not sure that I agree with. I would like to find out what (if any) evidence they have that the consequence of these assessments is that the students’ cognitive skills are stronger rather than that the students have just become better test takers. Inspection of the test scores in several counties does show that the scores have generally increased over the last several years but making the leap from higher test scores to higher levels of cognitive ability will require quite a bit more evidence.

A third point of interest for me is that the MSPAP utilizes performance assessments as opposed to the dichotomously scored items found on most standardized tests. In order to respond to the problems put forth on the MSPAP students may use short verbal responses, essays, drawings, tables, or graphs rather than simply bubbling in a multiple choice option. Due to the performance nature of these responses trained raters must be used to score the test using established rubrics. This adds the same interesting level of complexity to the testing that is found in the AP studio art portfolios already discussed in class. It is hoped that the nature of the questions used on the MSPAP exams

will allow students to apply their skills and knowledge to solve real world problems. In other words, the MSPAP is supposed to measure higher order thinking skills. I also wonder if the structure of the MSPAP items lend face validity to the assessments which in turn helps the students to make the connection between their academic studies and the real world.

Another interesting thing about the MSPAP is the nature of the scoring. Each student in a school receives a scale score in each content area. Generally these scores range from 350 to 700 with a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 50. These scores are then converted to proficiency levels from 1 to 5 (with 1 being the highest level of proficiency). For each school the percentage of students at level 3, which is considered satisfactory, is reported. Only a school that has 70% of its students at that level or better will receive a satisfactory rating itself. According to the MSPAP web-site this rating “denotes a level of performance that is realistic and rigorous”. A school that has 70% of students at level 3 or better and 25% of students at level 2 or higher will receive a rating of excellent, which is said to mean “highly challenging and clearly exemplary”. One question that I have with this scoring is how the proficiency levels are defined. Since the locations of cut scores on the NAEP have been called into question (National Research Council), it seems reasonable to suspect these levels as well.

Finally, on a purely pragmatic note, as one who teaches about classroom assessment in the state of Maryland, the knowledge that I gain about the MSPAP will be useful in my teaching. As a former science teacher I will, of course, be looking at the science content area. However, though my certification was in high school physics I want to examine the 3rd grade forms. Having talked to elementary school teachers in some depth on the issue of K-12 science curriculum I know that science is often given short shrift or ignored totally in the elementary classroom because teachers feel ill equipped to teach it. Based on that, I wonder just what it is that the state of Maryland is testing children on in science in the third grade and how well the students are doing on those assessments. Hopefully, an in-depth examination of the MSPAP will help me to answer some of the questions I have about this exam and give me a basis to judge other similar exams that are sure to be developed in the future.

References

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