

RUNNING HEAD: Book Review

Book Review: A Critical Look at Testing

Andrew Wilson, Ph.D.

Emory University

### Book Review: A Critical Look at Testing

Society's obsession with testing remains a major issue in American education. When looking to buy a house or gaining admission to medical school, test scores become a major focus. Daniel Koretz tackles the complexities related to America's testing obsession in his new book, *Measuring Up: What Educational Testing Really Tells Us*.

As a Harvard professor specializing in educational assessment, Koretz receives endless inquiries from families trying to identify the best schools for their children. Early in the text, the author explains that most families mistakenly equate high test scores with high-quality schools. Koretz uses these inquiries as the best example to illustrate how Americans misuse testing. While he recommends looking at test scores, families trying to assess school quality should also consider "the strength of the school's music or athletic programs, some special curricular emphasis, school size, social heterogeneity and so on" (p. 5). Basically, Koretz urges readers to avoid using testing to make decisions without examining other intervening variables.

To help readers understand how to appropriately utilize testing, Koretz tackles complicated testing issues such as reliability, sampling, inflated scores, bias, and students with special needs. He explores each topic in a manageable way that engages experienced educators and newcomers to the testing conversation. For instance, when discussing sampling, Koretz refers to the state rankings for the SAT. Formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the SAT no longer claims to measure aptitude but now predicts college readiness. Koretz reports that SAT rankings appear on the front pages of newspapers every year with many commentators making conclusions about the education

system. However, few commentators or articles explore sample size. Examining sample size seems important because students taking the test differ significantly in achievement level and number depending upon the region. Since colleges in the Midwest rely more upon the ACT, Koretz postulates that only high-achieving students seeking admission to colleges outside the region take the SAT. Meanwhile, many more students in the South take the test and represent a wider variance in preparation and background. Most importantly, Koretz points out that the general public draws inaccurate conclusions by extrapolating SAT scores to signify underperforming schools when sampling issues should limit such generalizations.

Koretz dispels myths about testing that few have challenged. For instance, socioeconomic status impacts test scores more than any variable. Koretz posits that society criticizes teachers working in lower socioeconomic areas for poor test scores but does not set a higher bar for teachers in more affluent areas. Such provocative questions help readers apply the researcher's sensible uses for tests.

Learning to use tests sensibly would certainly inform practice among not only K-12 educators but also college professors and administrators. Whether educators feel pressure from legislation such as No Child Left Behind or students' families, assessing student learning must evolve past testing. However, in order to develop credible and manageable measures, educators must utilize testing appropriately to help students succeed. Koretz's text helps view tests through a more critical and appropriate lens so educators at all levels can inform their practice.

References

Koretz, D. (2008). *Measuring up: What educational testing really tells us.*

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.