

## **A Challenge to Assessment for Education: *Guest Editorial***

**David Wall Rice  
Edmund W. Gordon**

**Morehouse College  
Chair, Gordon Commission on the Future of  
Assessment in Education**

Across the education enterprise, assessment, teaching, learning and achievement standards are central. But the explication of what we want learners to know about specific disciplines and to be able to do in meeting these standards must be considered as instrumental as what we want learners to be and to become. Strictly speaking, Binet-rooted “scholastic aptitudes” are not far from the mark in an effort to achieve distance from specific content covered in diverse national curricula. These scholastic aptitudes can be thought of as generalized developed abilities that not only reflect the capacity to handle academic work, but also, more importantly, they reflect abilities that result from high-quality education. Instead of scholastic aptitudes, however, we think the most appropriate term is “intellective competencies.” These developed abilities are not so much reflected in the specific discipline-based knowledge a student may have acquired, but in the ability and disposition to use the meta-products of having learned to engage and solve quotidian and novel problems adaptively.

Accordingly, the success in developing strong learners and dynamic contributors to American democracy and the global community hinges on the effectiveness with which we stoke intellective competencies across one’s educational lifespan. This attention to increasing abilities within the learner is of special importance in reconsidering the troika of assessment, teaching, and learning. How it is that we understand the positioning and the privileging of assessment in the most effective interest of the learner is crucial. Assessment must be ordered and situated in a way that serves the learner, not in a fashion that has the individual as a student of the test, or as a blind consumer of information, therefore, sacrificing the assumption and application of knowledge. This emphasis on how it is that assessment will operate across teaching and learning is particularly important when considering shifts in ontological and axiological mores in education. Accordingly, the futuring of epistemology—assessment and pedagogy in particular—is requisite in understanding present and potential abilities of the learner as central.

Appraisal and assessment within education must move away from prediction and selection based on the measurement of developed abilities and toward diagnosis, prescription and placement, and must ultimately shift to learning situations involving the kinds of interventions that build intellective competence. Assessment for education in such a world—one where diversity, equity and excellence are concurrently privileged—will likely give more attention to the analysis of teaching and learning behavioral processes and situations than to the status of the learner’s achievement. The status of one’s developed ability will still be of some use, but primarily as it relates to an understanding of the processes by which abilities and competencies develop and are acquired in order to serve a dynamic learner-centric education scaffolding.

This may be a challenge for traditional and colloquial approaches to measurement science, as well as to the learning systems that it should serve. Changes consequent in the futuring of the patterning of the education cycle, as well as focus on learners as diverse and capable, irrespective of context and culture, is against conventional practice, if not conventional norms. Measurement science and the field of education itself have not resolved issues having to do with the juxtaposition of diversity and variation in human characteristics. Because of this, there is the need to intentionally push applied research agendas in which the diversity and variation at issue are inclusive of equity in access to appropriate opportunities to learn, and excellence in the quality of human performance. Competent attention must be paid to better conceptualizing these issues and pursuing research and development that goes beyond the adjustment of scores to compensate for lack of opportunity to learn; the search for evidence of bias in the tests or testing situation; and advocacy for social justice.

Furthermore, the concern for excellence, equity, and fairness in assessment requires that responsible approaches to educational assessment include attention to the quality of teaching and learning

transactions, and to the sufficiency of learner access to appropriate opportunities to develop intellectual competencies. Given demographic changes in the United States, systems of assessment, teaching and learning that are incapable of addressing the issue of diversity, equity and academic excellence will quite simply become marginalized in the 21st century. Assessment, teaching and learning will of necessity have to be appropriate to the diversity in the population that must be served and informative of the teaching and learning processes in which they will be embedded.

Bluntly, conceptions of what it means to educate and to be an educated person have changed. Notions of and demands on teaching and learning are broadening and expanding, while preoccupation with accountability forces this growth to constrict in the interest of meeting certain accountability criteria. Creativity and flexibility in teaching and learning transactions are squeezed at the very time when pedagogical and societal changes are demanding greater fluidity, more canonical inclusiveness, contextualist and perspectivist thought, and personalized pedagogical engagement directed by the learner. Assessment in education and pedagogical intervention are moving in opposite directions.

These are among the perceived problems that led to the creation of the Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education (<http://www.gordoncommission.org>), and are reflective of the asset-driven thinking around the learner presented in this special focus section. The Commission—distinguished scholars in the fields of education sciences, psychometrics and public policy, and thoughtful leaders in the arena of public affairs—was asked to anticipate how the field of education will respond to these evolving changes and to think about how the field of assessment in education can become adequately responsive to our nation's future needs and practices in education. We operate with an assumption that assessment in education can inform and improve teaching and learning processes and outcomes.

In the work of the Gordon Commission attention was called to the possibility that the long tradition of decontextualization and standardization in measurement are inconsistent with what we are beginning to understand concerning the correlates of human performance and diversity. Commission members argue that, in too many instances, we are generating inaccurate and inconsistent data from tests that place as central this tradition since such practices ignore the relationships between attribution, context, perspective situation and performance. Assessment theory, instruments, and practices of the future will need to be sensitive to these conditional correlates of human performance and factor them into the calculus by which judgments are made concerning the status of developed ability and the processes by which it is achieved. There is potential for enabling us to incorporate these constructs in appraisal and assessment, but prior to the application of the new technologies, the conceptual work that must root our explanatory inferences must be engaged.

Consider for a moment the late Curtis Banks's (1989) efforts to demonstrate that motivation may be as much a characteristic of the stimulus as a characteristic of the responding subject. Think on Claude Steele's (1997) "stereotype threat," Mendoza-Denton's (2007) "bias perception," Dalmos Taylor's (1968) "sense of entitlement," (Bordeaux refers to it as polity) and recall the very percipient research of Ira Katz (1964) in which he found the performance of Black students was diminished when they were told that their test scores would be compared to the scores of White students. This line of work is illustrative of the kind of empirical and theoretical studies required to inform the conceptual work needed to enable crucial developments in the measurement sciences.

The five essays that precede a commentary by Outlaw Jr., begin to focus our attention on some of the problems in diversity, equity and the pursuit of excellence. These authors raise questions that demand research attention. Hakuta reminds us that the critical construct and behavior of language may be insufficiently understood to enable the next stage of investigatory work. He calls for an epistemology of language. Thurlow reminds us of both the potential and the limitations of accommodation. Mendoza-Denton's essay on the achievement gap and test performance is convincing with respect to the broader attributional and cultural context in which these issues must be approached. Meroe introduces the possibility of a paradoxical tension between the ideas of democracy and meritocracy on which much of measurement science rests. She uses this tension to suggest that the rank ordering of subjects so prominent in normative approaches to assessment may be counterproductive to democratic development. Boykin concludes that the development of capacity

and competence may be a more constructive purpose for assessment than the actuarial function that has been universally embraced as accountability in U.S. public policy.

Unfortunately, the industry and much of education have been willing to settle for less than that of which the assessment industry is capable. In the course of the work of the Gordon Commission, we uncovered a variety of developments and evolving notions that reveal an industry capable of the qualitative analysis of teaching and learning behaviors; of the diagnostic and instructional use of assessment probes; of integrating assessment, teaching and learning; of deconstructing rich records of assessment, teaching and learning processes to reveal the instrumental abilities; and underlying mental processes associated with pedagogy.

Early on, the Commission was advised that the ideas that were surfacing in the course of our work are not new to the assessment industry. We were told that we would not find much resistance to these ideas among measurement scientists, but that it would be difficult to move the field to exploit and to develop these ideas until policymakers, practitioners and consumers of these devices and procedures asked for them. It appears that our knowledgebase and even some of our models are considerably ahead of national and state policy and practice. The preoccupation with the measurement of the status of developed ability in the interest of promoting accountability has eclipsed our assumption of responsibility as a nation for investing in the production of knowledge and the pursuit of understanding what it is that we do and what needs to be done in the interest of serving, informing and improving the processes and the outcomes of teaching and learning. This special section of *The Journal of Negro Education* uses this focus on Diversity, Equity and Excellence to stimulate a national conversation concerning the possible relationships between assessment, teaching and learning. In the course of this treatment of issues related to assessment as a problem in the pursuit of social justice, we interrogate some of the critical issues concerning the future of assessment in education.

#### REFERENCES

- Banks, C. (1989). Achievement in Blacks: A case study in cultural diversity in motivation. In Gordon, E. W. (Ed.), *Human diversity and pedagogy* (pp. 8.1-8.38). New Haven, CT: Yale University, Center for Research in Education, Culture Ethnicity Institution for Social Policy Studies.
- Katz, I. (1964) Review of evidence relating to the effects of desegregation on the intellectual performance of Negroes. *American Psychologist*, 19, 381-399.
- Mendoza-Denton, R., & Aronson, J. (2007). Psychosocial processes in the cultivation of intellectual competence: The interpenetration of affective, cognitive, and situative processes in intellectual behavior. In Gordon, E.W., & Bridglall, B.L. (Eds.), *Affirmative development: Cultivating academic ability* (pp. 189-205). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Steele, C. 1997. A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52, 613-629.
- Taylor, D. (1968). The development of interpersonal relationships: Social penetration processes. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 75, 79-90.

#### AUTHORS

DAVID WALL RICE is Assistant Provost for Student Success, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology at Morehouse College. EDMUND W. GORDON is John M. Musser Professor of Psychology, Emeritus at Yale University and Richard March Hoe Professor of Psychology and Education, Emeritus at Teachers College, Columbia University.

All comments and queries regarding this article should be addressed to David.Rice@Morehouse.edu