

# A View from Askance

*There is nothing humorous about the effect that 'authentic' tests are having on math instruction.*

**By Bob Dixon**

*(Dr. Dixon is a member of the board of the Association for Direct Instruction and the father of a grade 2 daughter.)*

Personally, I don't really care whether students love reading their entire life or not. No kidding. What kids love and hate is really none of my business. All I care about is whether kids can read or not.

If they can read, then I'm happy. Once they can read, they can choose to love reading, or just like it as a friend or, for all I care, hate it. When did educators get the idea that it is important for the schools to dictate likes and dislikes for children?

All these performance<sup>1</sup> tests are pure and utter nonsense. Is it just me, or do you too find a problem in trying to think of a contrived assessment tool of any description as being *authentic* in any sense of the word at all?

I've had the extreme displeasure in recent months of looking at some of the most 'non-authentic' tasks from state-wide performance tests that anyone could possibly imagine.

For instance, in one task from one state, grade 3 students are supposed to show on a grid where a watering trough could be placed in a cage for a giraffe. That's *potentially* a pretty authentic task for all those kids who will grow up to design zoos.

But here's the real catch: the only way this task can be completed 'correctly' (according to the scoring guide) is to place the trough in a place that would allow the giraffes exactly one foot of space between the trough and the wall of the cage!

There is nothing authentic about any of the performance test items I've seen so far. Who really cares about authenticity, anyway? Not me.

Do I care about whether or not students can *apply* fundamental knowledge and skill in a wide variety

of ways? You bet. That's what *Direct Instruction* is all about. Generalization. Transference. When we do that well, we have nothing to worry about.

Students become fluent in valued knowledge and skills, and then learn to generalize and transfer them. They can use them later in life, in genuinely authentic situations or in highly-contrived situations. If they've learned well, it doesn't matter. And, moreover, *it isn't any of our business.*

We're in the business of giving children as many choices in life as possible. We are not in the business of dictating what those choices ought to be.

## Authentic Performance Item from Ontario's 1997 Grade 3 Test

Barney is thirsty from working in the garden!

Is **1L** a lot to drink at one time?

Explain why or why not using words, numbers and pictures.

I live in Washington State, where some clever person decided to make up a new word — 'learnings' — and develop a set of 'essential learnings.' Then, long after the 'learnings' were developed, the state hired a testing firm (also known as a house of ill repute) to develop a performance test around the 'learnings.'

This year, my daughter's school district is using a new math program. If I can find a math program with less math in it than this one, I'll be amazed. Like fat-free potato chips, this thing is math-free math. Why did the district adopt it?

Last year, a neighbouring district adopted the program and their performance test scores in math went up. I should open a side business: how to raise performance test scores without improving student achievement.

This is criminal. First, the state gets a bunch of dilettantes together to develop 'learnings.' Then they pay a

lot of money to some company with no scruples to develop a 'test' void of reliability and validity (but at least expensive to develop and administer and score). And then school districts adopt 'instruction' to improve performance on a worthless test because the stakes are high for *not* improving performance.

There is no possibility whatsoever that any of the performance tests I've seen could hold up in a court of law, where reality is certain to infringe upon the opinions and beliefs of educators. No possibility. The tests simply are neither reliable nor valid.

Back to my daughter. I must confess that she has some advantages that might not be readily available to children of poverty. There is a decent chance that my wife and I can repair this gigantic blunder our school district has made.

But why should we have to? And who is going to repair the damage to children of poverty? Who is going to do that? Who?

Here's something specific you can do if you live in a performance test state. Sue — as in, file a law suit. I really hope people will start taking educators to court. And I really hope that when they do, they'll call me.

I want to sit in. I can't wait to hear someone from some state department sitting on the stand, trying to explain items and tasks and scoring to 12 normal (non-educator) people. HA, HA, HA. See? I'm laughing already, just thinking about it.

Performance testing is the tail wagging the dog. And kids suffer for that. You could raise the math performance test scores in any state by increasing the time you spend teaching kids to write, while *decreasing* the time you spend teaching math.

Something criminal is going on, but it can be stopped most effectively in courts of law. No kidding.

*(Adapted with permission from Effective School Practices, Spring 1999)*

<sup>1</sup> Ontario's grade 3 and grade 6 tests are 'performance' or 'authentic' tests.