

Technical Report

High-Stakes Tests vs. Diagnostic Assessments

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Let's Go Learn

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Introduction

With test-based “accountability” often determining the nature of curriculum, instruction, ranking status, and funding of schools today, it’s no wonder that the words “assessments” and “tests” make emotions run high. High-stakes tests, as the name conveys, offer high risk to schools, teachers, students, and families. The nature of high-stakes tests is to discriminate students by achievement for particular purposes. These high-stakes tests determine eligibility for various educational funding sources, enrichment programs, real estate values, and college admissions. Two underlying principles of high-stakes tests are: 1) that they truly discriminate (i.e., accurately identify the ability differences among individuals), and 2) that setting benchmarks such as “proficient” on these tests will ultimately help change instructional practices in a way that promotes the learning of children. However, according to research (Black & William, 1998), high-stakes assessments often adversely affect children, while assessments (often called “formative assessments”) which are designed to inform instructional practices to improve the child’s learning directly can help accelerate the growth of a struggling learner. The purpose of this paper is to distinguish the differences between summative assessments (which include high-stakes tests) and formative assessments (which include diagnostic assessments like the Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment).

What is a Summative (High-Stakes) Assessment?

Summative assessments generally evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs at the end of a pre-determined period, often at the end of the school year. They make a final judgment on a student’s competency after a period of instruction. Summative assessments are not designed to provide teachers or students with immediate contextualized feedback during a particular student’s learning process. Instead, they attempt to quantify a student’s knowledge at the end of the learning process. State

standardized tests (sometimes called high-stakes tests) like the STAR, CAT6, FCAT, SAT, ACT, MCAT, and GRE are all examples of summative assessments.

What is a Formative Assessment?

Information about students' learning (gained from various sources) becomes a formative assessment when information is specifically designed and used by teachers to directly adapt their instructional practices on an on-going basis to help students learn better. Some examples of formative assessments include teacher observations of children, interviews, writing sample reviews, and diagnostic tests. Making children more aware of their own learning processes, and making them better learners simply by providing teachers with specific information about their students' strategic behaviors, are key elements of formative assessments.

What are the Effects of Formative vs. Summative Assessments?

When they are used in truly formative ways, there is evidence that formative assessments help children learn better. The gains students make are especially significant for those who struggle in school. In contrast, the same research has indicated that summative or high-stakes assessments have adverse effects on children. Because of the high-stakes nature of summative assessments, teachers often change their assessment and instructional practices to match the nature of the questions asked on these high-stakes tests. Unfortunately, these changes often involve providing children with more rote and superficial activities. Rather than attempting to investigate the nature of their students' learning to inform the kinds of instructional strategies that help children become more independent and strategic learners, summative assessments' emphasis on grades and meeting benchmarks often influence teachers to overemphasize the importance of test scores in their classrooms at the expense of teaching students to hone the strategic behaviors they already employ. As a result, high-stakes tests often convey the message to struggling students that they are failures, incapable of learning (Black and William, 1998).

What are Diagnostic Assessments?

While many diagnostic assessments fall under the category of “formative assessment,” there are distinct features of diagnostic assessments that make them different from other kinds of formative assessments (such as essays and observations). The main goal behind diagnostic assessments is to provide teachers a holistic profile of a student’s strengths, weaknesses, and abilities in a particular area to help guide placement of that student in the most appropriate instructional intervention. Some examples of diagnostic reading assessments include The Qualitative Reading Inventory, Diagnostic Assessment of Reading, Basic Reading Inventory, and the Diagnostic Reading Assessment. While all diagnostic assessments are used for initial placement, most diagnostic measures are also used to help guide students’ progress during the course of their instructional program to help make adjustments to the kinds of instructional activities they receive. The Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment (DORA) is a formative assessment, as it informs teachers of how to adjust instruction according to a particular student’s reading profile. It also helps teachers provide information about the nature of students’ progress throughout the year.

How can DORA help students improve their reading skills AND do well on high-stakes tests?

The focus of DORA is to provide teachers with the information they need about the reading abilities of each of their individual students. This information helps teachers make better instructional decisions about appropriate book choices, placement in collaborative or guided reading groups, specific areas of reading that most need support, and more. In addition to giving an accurate profile of each student’s reading abilities, DORA also offers an individualized recommendation as to which instructional strategies in reading would benefit a particular student. As such, by enabling teachers to deliver more effective reading instruction to their students, DORA helps teachers improve their students’ reading skills and by extension helps students do better on high-stakes tests.

Diagnostic Assessments	High-Stakes Assessments
Formative	Summative
On-going	One-time
Directly inform instruction	Do NOT directly inform instruction
Help student learning	Adversely affect student learning
Low risk	High risk
Information is contextualized	Information is de-contextualized
Qualitative focus	Quantitative focus
Encourage individualized instruction	Encourage rote, superficial instruction

References

Black, P. & William, D. (1998). *Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment*. From Phi Delta Kappan.