

# RESEARCH NEWS AND COMMENT

## Standards, Assessment, and Equality of Educational Opportunity

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For some thirteen centuries, the Chinese government recruited its officials through an intricate system of examinations . . . . The purpose of the examination systems was, first, to break up the hereditary aristocracy and, second, to collect talent for the state. "The world's men of unusual ambitions have been trapped in my bag!" boasted the emperor T'ai-tsung (627-649) after watching a procession of new graduates. (Walzer, 1983, p. 140)

The two-fold purpose of testing that Michael Walzer describes has a quite modern ring. Similar to these justifications for the ancient Chinese civil service system, today testing is commonly advanced as both a fair means of distributing opportunities—because it rewards talent rather than birthright—and an efficient means—because it puts talent in service to society. One of the major problems that beset the Chinese system also has a modern ring. In particular, individuals who were talented but disadvantaged by social circumstances did not perform well on the examinations. Thus, insuring equality of educational opportunity was required for testing to make good on its claims. According to Walzer (1983), this is something it never managed to do.

Testing has recently occupied a central role in proposals for school reform: It is variously touted as the key to improving student and teacher performance, the curriculum, and economic competitiveness. But ample research evidence demonstrates that educational testing works to the disadvantage of various minority groups, as well as girls and women (e.g., AAUW, 1992; Gould, 1981; Haney, 1984, 1993;

Oakes, 1985, 1990; Pearson & Garcia, 1994). Paralleling the Chinese experience, then, inequality of educational opportunity poses a significant obstacle to claims made on behalf of educational testing.

That certain groups are "disadvantaged" by educational testing, however, in the sense that they receive different opportunities as a result of it, provides only a prima facie case against educational testing. There may be ways of justifying the decisions made on the basis of differential test performance that are consistent with the requirements of equality. This article critically examines this general proposition, particularly the claims for testing incorporated into educational reform proposals over approximately the last 10 years. My discussion is framed largely in terms of the principle of equality of educational opportunity. Thus, I begin with a few remarks about the position this principle occupies within the broader terrain of social justice.

The principle of equality of educational opportunity is a specific instance of the general principle of equality of opportunity. The latter serves as a criterion for determining whether given social arrangements are just: It stipulates that so long as individuals are afforded equal opportunities to obtain social goods, inequalities in the distribution of such goods are morally permissible. The principle of equality of educational opportunity focuses this reasoning specifically on education: It stipulates that so long as individuals are afforded equal opportunities to obtain an education, inequalities in educational results are morally permissible. On the assumption that educational attainment is an important

determinant of the range of opportunities that individuals enjoy for other social goods, an assumption widely shared since *Brown v. Board of Education*, satisfying the principle of equality of educational opportunity is a prerequisite to satisfying the more general principle.

Precisely what is required to obtain equality of educational opportunity, however, is highly contested. There are at least three competing conceptions: formal, compensatory, and democratic (Howe, 1993a.) Each supports a different perspective on just educational testing.

### The Formal Framework

A formal conception of equality of educational opportunity may be identified with requiring the absence of barriers to access based on "morally irrelevant" characteristics such as race or gender. "Morally relevant" characteristics, however, may be used to distribute educational opportunities differentially. Academic performance, as measured by tests, is the paradigm case of such a characteristic.

On the recent scene, testing schemes that embrace a formal conception of equality of educational opportunity typically have educational reform as their central aim. *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and *America 2000* (U.S. Department of Education, 1991) are good examples. Rigorous stan-

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dards and assessment (*assessment* has displaced *testing* in the vernacular, and virtually goes hand in glove with standards) are touted as the major vehicle through which reform should occur. These proposals employ a rudimentary carrot-and-stick psychology, in which students and educators alike receive presidential awards for excellence or are bludgeoned with "accountability." The basic idea is that educational results will improve if the distributions of goods such as salary, promotions, placement in advanced courses, high school diplomas, and admission to college are based on performance on rigorous assessments which are, in turn, based on rigorous standards.

At the level of social justice one finds a confused and confusing mix of free-market libertarianism and meritocracy exemplified in formalist frameworks. For example, promoting testing to facilitate choice schemes (on the model of an educational *Consumer Reports*) is rooted in free-market libertarianism, whereas promoting testing as a device for bureaucratic control based on specified performance is rooted in meritocracy. (Both of these purposes are advanced in *America 2000*, for instance.)

As it turns out, the theoretical incoherence of mixing libertarian and meritocratic principles need not be belabored, for educational testing schemes based on a formalist framework may be summarily dismissed on the grounds that they fail to take into account inequalities experienced by children both in and out of schools—a fact that hardly needs documentation. In virtue of such inequalities, many children enjoy equality of educational opportunity only in a very formal and abstract sense that ignores the interaction between schooling and what children bring to it (not to mention the effects of vast inequality of resources among schools, e.g., Kozol, 1991). Thus, it can hardly be just to ignore these inequalities and evaluate all students in terms of the same assessments when many of them have had little or no opportunity to master the knowledge and skills upon which such assessments are based.

This intuition about justice is no doubt responsible for the inclusion of notions such as *opportunity to learn* and *delivery standards* in more recent education reform proposals. I will return to

those notions later. Here it is worth briefly examining the kind of formalist response they have prompted. Albert Shanker provides a good example of such a response when he quips: "We don't abolish medical school exams because not everyone has had the opportunity for top-notch premed education. Nor do we say that tests for airplane pilots shouldn't count because not everyone has the opportunity to do well on them" (Leo, 1993, p. 3c).

Two ready rejoinders to Shanker's analogies may be advanced. First, general educational standards, those associated with receiving a high school diploma, for example, are much more ambiguous than those associated with being a medical doctor or an airplane pilot. Furthermore, unlike these examples (so convenient for Shanker's purposes), standards for a high school diploma are ones that (nearly) everyone should meet if K-12 education is to fulfill its obligation of producing citizens who, whatever their occupation, are capable of leading happy and fruitful lives and of participating in democratic decision making. Second, even in the case of his own examples, Shanker is far too sanguine about unequal opportunities. Although not everyone can become a medical doctor, the opportunity to do so should not be heavily or exclusively determined by social circumstances that are beyond one's control. Rather than retreating into the what we *in fact do*, and begging the question in favor of the *status quo*, what we *ought to do* is take general measures to insure that individuals' educational opportunities are as far as possible equalized.

### The Compensatory Framework

A compensatory conception of equality of educational opportunity, like a formal conception, requires the absence of formal barriers to access based on morally irrelevant characteristics. However, to more closely approach a substantive form of equality of educational opportunity, a compensatory conception requires mitigating the various ways in which individuals can be disadvantaged. Head Start is a prime example of a compensatory program in the sense intended here, for it seeks to mitigate the effects of poverty on educational performance.<sup>1</sup>

Influential documents that have succeeded *A Nation at Risk* and *America 2000*, for example the *NCEST Report*

(1992), *Goals 2000* (U.S. Department of Education, 1994), and the recent CRESST conference on equity (Rothman, 1994), all incorporate a compensatory conception of equality of educational opportunity. Specifically, because these proposals incorporate equalizing "delivery standards" (conditions of schooling) to insure that students receive an equal "opportunity to learn," they incorporate the intuition (contra Shanker) that it is unjust to hold students who have not had adequate educational opportunities responsible for the same level of educational performance as students who have had adequate opportunities. These proposals also hold that such inequality of educational opportunity should be mitigated.

To complicate matters, however, "delivery standards" and "opportunities to learn" may be interpreted in terms of at least two kinds of more comprehensive compensatory frameworks: utilitarian and egalitarian. Which of these frameworks is adopted has important implications.

*Utilitarianism.* Utilitarianism grounds the principle of equality of educational opportunity in the principle of maximizing benefits. What is to count as a "benefit" in utilitarian calculations has never been clear or uncontested. Candidates have included pleasure, happiness, and, most recently, preference satisfaction. Perhaps the easiest interpretation to work with, however, is economic benefit, and this interpretation has been prominent in educational reform proposals since *A Nation at Risk* (see Strike, 1984). The basic idea is that by applying rigorous standards and assessments to all students, and by developing the talents of individuals who are disadvantaged in the name of equal educational opportunity, the economic health and leadership of the U.S. will be restored.

This kind of utilitarian reasoning exemplifies what Nel Noddings (1992) calls the "ideology of control." The impulse for control runs deep in U.S. education, spurred and reinforced by 20th century positivist social science and the associated technocratic solutions to political problems it encourages (e.g., Howe, 1992). This impulse has been heavily fueled in the last decade by the attempt to lay the blame for a faltering economy and other social difficulties at the doorstep of education, and it involves a quite pro-

nounced and explicit appeal to competition. (Consider the ludicrous sports-inspired notion of world-class standards, introduced in *America 2000* and which continues to be employed.) As it turns out, the supposed relationship between the nation's economic health and its levels of educational achievement, presupposed in much of the rhetoric, is quite weak (e.g., Bracey, 1992; House, 1991; Spring, 1984). And this serves to undermine a utilitarian framework.

Furthermore, a utilitarian framework renders the commitment to equality of educational opportunity precarious. That is, equality of opportunity conceivably could be suspended to achieve the overarching aim of maximizing benefit, because the shape of the distribution of benefits, including the gap between the most and least advantaged, does not enter into utilitarian calculations. Thus, utilitarianism sanctions cuts in educational programs for the most marginalized and poverty-stricken elements of society to make available the resources to graduate more engineers and scientists. This observation illustrates the notorious problem facing utilitarianism: the perceived injustice of requiring certain individuals or groups who are less well off to sacrifice social benefits to those who are better off.

*Egalitarianism.* An egalitarian framework is well articulated by John Rawls, in his celebrated *Theory of Justice* (1971). He develops his theory in opposition to both meritocracy and utilitarianism.

Rawls employs the concept of the "natural lottery" to capture the fact that individuals come by their talents in ways that are largely beyond their control—as if by the luck of the draw. (For instance, one cannot choose one's parents, talents, or physical condition.) For Rawls, this renders natural talents "arbitrary from a moral point of view," which is to say that individuals deserve neither credit nor blame for the natural talents they possess or fail to possess, for the social circumstances into which they are born, or for what flows from either or these. In turn, insofar as distributing society's goods and opportunities on the basis of merit assumes that individuals do indeed deserve to be rewarded for their talents and social circumstances, such a principle of merit must be rejected as unjust.

Nonetheless, Rawls does not believe it is, in general, illegitimate to distribute goods and opportunities on the basis of talents, particularly acquired ones. The justificatory principle, however, is "legitimate expectations" rather than desert. That is, although individuals do not deserve their station in life, strictly speaking, they nevertheless form expectations against a background of social practices and institutions. For Rawls, there are circumstances under which such expectations ought to be satisfied for individuals who live up to the demands associated with them, namely, when the background of social practices and institutions in which the system of expectations and rewards is embedded are just.

One of Rawls's central requirements for just background conditions is *fair* equality of opportunity, a concept that can be naturally extended to include fair equality of *educational* opportunity. Fair equality of educational opportunity is a compensatory conception in that it requires going beyond formal equality of opportunity and intervening to mitigate contingencies that put individuals at a disadvantage through no fault of their own, such as being born with a disability or into poverty. In addition to being antimeritocratic, fair equality of educational opportunity is also antiutilitarian. It construes equality of educational opportunity as fundamental, such that it serves as a check on what is done in the name of maximizing benefit.

Insofar as current reform proposals detach the justification for "delivery standards" and "opportunities to learn" from utilitarian justifications, they may well incorporate the idea of fair equality of educational opportunity. It is important to note, however, that, even so, they fall considerably short of what egalitarians such as Rawls demand in the name of justice. Unlike utilitarians, Rawls separates the question of distribution from the question of equal educational opportunity. For utilitarians, equality of educational opportunity is just, provided only that it maximizes benefit. For Rawls, equality of educational opportunity (fair equality of educational opportunity) is only a necessary first step in achieving justice.

Because fair equality of educational opportunity focuses exclusively on mitigating disadvantages in the inter-

est of rendering competition fair, it is too narrow to stand alone. To illustrate, suppose that we do all we can to mitigate the educational disadvantages experienced by a child with significant brain damage. Are we then justified in letting the chips fall where they may, having done all we can to render the competition fair? Obviously not. In general, fair equality of educational opportunity is quite consistent with vastly unequal capabilities that, despite our best efforts, can lead to vastly unequal results that are unacceptable from the perspective of justice. Thus, fair equality of opportunity cannot by itself determine how to justly distribute opportunities and benefits.

Egalitarians such as Rawls respond by supplementing fair equality of opportunity with an egalitarian (and explicitly nonutilitarian) principle of distribution. The general form of such a principle may be stated as follows: Inequality ought to be minimized to the degree reasonable by redistributing society's goods and opportunities from the more advantaged to the less advantaged. This principle is based on the general Rawlsian intuition (1971) that redistributing from the more advantaged to the less advantaged (in which inequality is narrowed) is asymmetrical with and morally preferable to redistributing from the less advantaged to the more advantaged (in which inequality is widened).<sup>2</sup> Given such a principle, utilitarian trade-offs of the kind described previously, in which the educationally less advantaged must sacrifice in a way that benefits the educationally more advantaged, are precluded in yet another way.

Despite the important differences that exist between utilitarian and egalitarian frameworks, they both may be charged with uncritically assuming a universal ideal of education that embodies the historical dominance of white males. In this vein, Nel Noddings (1992) challenges the platitude "the best education for the best is the best education for all." Jane Roland Martin challenges the traditional "ideal of the educated person" (1982, 1993). Henry Louis Gates (1992) challenges present conceptions of the liberal arts. The list could easily go on. What these challenges share is the general view that compensating children readying them, and providing their

with the opportunity to learn is misguided and ineffective if the ideal in terms of which they are compensated, readied, and provided an opportunity to learn is irrelevant or threatening.<sup>3</sup>

It is a short step from here to challenging the approach to standards and assessment that dominates today. The traditional liberal arts curriculum has been echoed in government reports since *A Nation at Risk*, and the emphasis on X level of performance in traditional liberal arts subjects (particularly math and science) continues unabated. It is thus difficult to see the present clarion call for more precise and rigorous educational standards and assessments as doing anything other than simply articulating and further entrenching the educational status quo (e.g., Apple, 1993; Martin, 1994). And, as noted previously, the status quo has not been particularly congenial to marginalized groups. Assessing all children in terms of it is thus liable to the charge of a form of bias implicit in the very standards that are to serve as the anchor of assessment.

If educational standards and assessments were based on uncontested educational practices and ideals, then a compensatory framework (at least in its egalitarian form) would have much to recommend it. Because educational practices and ideals are not uncontested, a democratic framework is required.<sup>4</sup> It is to such a framework that I now turn.

### The Democratic Framework

A democratic conception of equality of educational opportunity, like a formal conception, requires the absence of barriers to access based on morally irrelevant characteristics. Like a compensatory conception, it acknowledges that formal equality of educational opportunity is not enough, that steps have to be taken to compensate for the various ways in which individuals have been disadvantaged. Going yet one step further, a democratic conception acknowledges that educational practices and curricula have developed in a way that has excluded the full participation of groups such as females and people of color in determining what educational practices and curriculum are to count as the educational goods to be distributed. In this way, a democratic framework significantly blurs the distinction between fair equality of educational opportu-

nity and principles of just distribution. To more closely approach a genuine, substantive form of equality of educational opportunity, a democratic conception requires including voices that have historically been excluded in negotiating educational goods *worth wanting*. It also requires changing schooling accordingly.

However intertwined and permeable the boundaries may be, it is useful to think of a democratic framework at two levels: the political and the personal.<sup>5</sup> At the political level, the fundamental educational aim is fostering the capacity to effectively participate in democratic processes. At the personal level, the fundamental educational aim is fostering a secure sense of self-worth (valuable in its own right and also conducive to democratic participation). The question to be addressed in this section is how educational standard setting and assessment are to be conceived so as to further these two aims. I begin with the political level.

*Political Level.* Amy Gutmann (1987) contends that the fundamental aim of education in a democratic society is to foster the capacity for effective political participation, or, as she variously puts it, the capacity for "conscious social reproduction," the capacity for "democratic deliberation," or simply (and what I shall prefer) "democratic character." This aim is fundamental, she contends, because without it genuine democracy cannot be realized or maintained.

The specifics of how schooling—its curriculum and its institutional and instructional practices—should be designed so as to form democratic character is a matter for democratic negotiation, which requires carefully balancing the interests of the state, parents, and professional educators. Whatever shape these negotiations take, however, they must be circumscribed by two principles formulated to insure that no one is excluded from effective participation: nonrepression and nondiscrimination. The principle of nonrepression insures that no individual's particular conception of the good (and good education) will be denied a hearing; the principle of nondiscrimination extends this idea to whole groups, such as females and ethnic, racial, and religious minorities.

To round out her theory, Gutmann adds an egalitarian principle of distri-

bution, tailored to the distribution of education: the "democratic threshold" principle. This principle requires that, with few exceptions, all students must be educated up to the threshold of knowledge and skills required of democratic character. Like the principles of nonrepression and nondiscrimination, Gutmann contends that unless this principle is observed, not everyone will have an effective voice, and, as a consequence, true democracy will not be achieved.

When democratic character is made the locus of educational standard setting (as opposed to economic efficiency or reverence for the liberal arts) questions of whether, and how much, math, science, literature, social studies, and so forth to teach, and to whom, must be viewed in a different light. Take the science curriculum. There is a tendency to ask questions in the abstract. The general question of how much and what kind of science needs to be taught leads to questions such as: Is knowledge of photosynthesis required? Mastery of the periodic table? Skills in tree identification? Familiarity with Newton's second law? The question that begs to be asked is: Required for what?

Adopting the goal of fostering democratic character doesn't make these questions any easier to answer. Instead, it suggests that asking them in the abstract is misguided. In this vein, the goal of democratic character requires fostering general habits of mind that render individuals capable of and disposed to gathering and evaluating information, scientific and otherwise. There are few things by way of "content knowledge" that everyone needs to know (which is not to say that everyone needs to know only a few things). As Jane Roland Martin observes (1994), decisions have to be made about what is educationally valuable to determine what to include in and exclude from the curriculum. To believe that traditional "domains of knowledge" certify themselves as valuable commits what Martin calls the "epistemological fallacy" and entrenches historical biases.

The "content standards" that are currently touted are typically not coherently related to the aim of fostering democratic character. On the contrary, the emphasis on "core" academic goals—in English, history, geography, mathematics, and science—crowds

out the political goal of fostering democratic character. Traditional academic goals become the be-all and end-all of public education as well as the means of distributing virtually all educational opportunities. Citizenship gets little more than lip service; notably, it is not a "core" subject and no performance standards whatsoever (let alone the "world-class" variety) attach to it.

The alternative standard of democratic character is likely to be criticized from certain quarters on the grounds that because it is amorphous and open-ended, as well as contested, it is both difficult to capture in terms of rigorous standards and is a poor candidate for precise measurement. But to reject it for these reasons places the quest for accurate measurement—and control—above the quest for educationally and morally defensible policies.

*The Personal Level.* Nel Noddings (1992) grounds her proposal for educational reform in the importance of caring and connection (see also Martin, 1993). She concedes that U.S. public education is in serious trouble. But she traces the problem to its failure to respond to diverse talents, interests, needs, and to changing social circumstances, rather than to the absence of accountability and of uniformly high standards and expectations. Her alternative curriculum includes a core of basic and pervasive educational aims such as literacy, rudimentary computation skills, and traditional subject matter such as science, mathematics, and literature. She would organize the curriculum around "centers of care"—caring for self, caring for strangers, and caring for ideas, for example—rather than the traditional liberal arts. And she would permit individual students to pursue certain topics in depth to the exclusion of other topics. In her view, subjecting all children to the same curriculum and standards guarantees that outcomes will be unequal and that many children will fail.

The pedagogy that complements this curriculum entails much closer relationships and much greater give-and-take among teachers and students than presently characterizes public education. Anchored in the idea of fostering healthy relationships between educators and students, both for students' current as well as future well-being, Noddings' proposal requires

taking students' interests, talents, and foibles seriously to cement their sense of self-worth and foster their ability to effectively relate to others. This, in turn, requires a significant level of participation on their part, in both negotiating and pursuing educational aims and activities. It also counts heavily against uniform standards and assessments. Related to this, Noddings eschews a summative aim for assessment (rooted in competition) in favor of a formative aim (rooted in interests). Consistent with her rejection of the "ideology of control" and of a truncated set of educational objectives, she proposes an open-ended form of assessment, emphasizing self-assessment, that focuses on the actual accomplishments of children, as opposed to rigid preset goals and standards. As she put it: "We should move away from the question, Has Johnny learned X? to the far more pertinent question, What has Johnny learned?" (1992, p. 179)

Notwithstanding what the general tenor of my arguments might suggest, I should make clear that a democratic framework does not entail a wholesale rejection of educational assessment. It does not condemn locally designed assessments that have primarily a formative purpose,<sup>6</sup> and it does not condemn large-scale testing for the purposes of monitoring educational outcomes, on the model of NAEP. It even does not necessarily condemn a system of educational assessment used for distributing educational opportunities. It condemns educational testing only when it is practiced in a way that is blind to the requirements of a democratic form of equality of educational opportunity. Were these requirements to be met, there would be much less need to compete for worthwhile educational opportunities. When competition for such educational opportunities did arise, say, for positions in highly selective universities, we would be in a better position to say that the competition is fair.

### Conclusion

*Goals 2000: The Educate America Act* was enacted into law on March 31, 1994, just before the AERA Annual meeting. At the convention, there was much interest and some optimism, coupled with a good deal of uncertainty, about what "opportunity to learn" standards will bring. In my esti-

mation, the prospects for substantive progress toward equality are not good.

One proffered interpretation equates "opportunity to learn" with the "value added" by education (Elmore, 1994). This kind of economics lingo is indicative of the mindset that presently predominates. Moreover, the conception it embodies is indistinguishable from one of the outcomes-based definitions of equality of educational opportunity James Coleman entertained and rejected over 25 years ago (Coleman, 1968). Such a conception requires only that schooling prevent the relative disadvantages experienced by certain groups upon entering school from becoming worse upon their exit; it does not require that outcomes be equalized. And the value-added interpretation is progressive by comparison to the interpretation of "opportunity to learn" emanating from the House of Representatives (1994) and the Department of Education (1994). Those interpretations focus almost exclusively on a formal interpretation of educational opportunity.

Present priorities are so egregiously—I should say savagely—misaligned that even a compensatory framework seems completely out of reach, at least in its more egalitarian forms. It strains credulity and belies even a modest commitment to equality of educational opportunity to suggest that implementing national standards and assessments could be anywhere near as effective a means of improving educational opportunity as addressing the conditions of schooling and society directly. It is rather like suggesting that the way to end world hunger is to first develop more rigorous standards of nutrition and then provide physicians with more precise means of measuring ratios of muscle-to-fat.

### Notes

I thank Ernie House, Scott Marion, and Lorie Shepard for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup>It is worth noting that formalist and compensatory schemes typically do not come in pure forms. For example, *America 2000*, which is formalist in its emphasis, advocates increased funding for Head Start. In the real world of educational policy the formalist-compensation distinction is one of degree that depends on the relative tilt toward one or the other end of the spectrum.

<sup>2</sup>Rawls himself advances the "difference principle," which stipulates that inequalities

in the distribution of society's goods are justifiable only if they provide the greatest benefit to the least advantaged. This principle has proven quite controversial, but one need not endorse it specifically to share some of Rawls's key criticisms of the principles of merit and social utility. See, for example, Nagel (1991).

<sup>3</sup>Various scholars have come to a similar conclusion regarding females (e.g., Martin, 1994) people of color (e.g., Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986), and working-class children (e.g., Willis, 1977): Schools pose a threat to their self-identity and they face the unwelcome predicament of either opposing the norms and practices of the dominant culture and performing poorly in school, or of capitulating and assimilating these norms and practices as the cost of performing well.

<sup>4</sup>Entertaining the question of whether liberal egalitarians can marshal an adequate response to this criticism is beyond the scope of this article (but see Kymlicka, 1990, 1991; Okin, 1989; Rawls, 1993; and Howe, 1992, 1993a, 1993b).

<sup>5</sup>The distinction between the political and the personal has been pointedly criticized by feminists. I should emphasize that the boundary is indeed permeable, and where it should be drawn is the object of controversy. This, however, does not entail that it altogether collapses. On this point I agree with feminists such as Seyla Benhabib (1992) and Susan Moller Okin (1989).

<sup>6</sup>This practice was promoted long ago by Dewey (1981). It has been recently proposed

by prominent scholars in the educational policy/testing arena such as Darling-Hammond, 1994, and Madaus, 1994.

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