



A critical look at the appropriateness and the impacts of high-stakes testing

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Abstract

This paper examines education standards and the ethics of standards-based assessments. The article *Fairness and Test Use: The Case of the SAT and Writing Placement for ESL Students* written by Kristen di Gennaro of Columbia University takes a critical look at testing and the appropriateness of high-stakes consequences of Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) tests and the impacts such testing has on schools and ESL students in the United States. The first author seeks to promote discussion concerning the fairness of using such tests for assessing the academic ability of ESL/EFL students and using high-stakes test results for university admission and placement purposes in this paper.

Keywords: high-stakes testing, standards-based assessments, academic assessments

1. Introduction

A variety of tests are available to educators and administrators. Educators must know what kinds of tasks accurately reflect the student skills being tested, and whether a test can be said to be reliable and valid as a measure of evaluation.

There are three major types of assessments used to measure students. *Achievement tests*, *placement tests*, and *proficiency tests*. In addition to these three major types of tests, there are *diagnostic tests* and *aptitude tests*. Diagnostic tests are used to assess the academic level of students before taking a course by testing some of the material they will be learning. Aptitude tests are used in an effort to predict the potential success of a student at a predetermined academic skill level. The American College Test (ACT) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) exams for high school students in the United States are examples of high-stakes aptitude tests.

Assessments through testing can be a useful tool for educators and administrators to measure the general ability of students; however, standardized assessments have the potential of being misleading. The author would like to raise awareness of the potential negative impacts of high-stakes testing.

The “high-stakes” of high-stakes testing is not necessarily the characteristics of the tests itself, but the serious consequences placed on the outcome of the assessment. Whether a test is written, oral, or based on performance, when used as an assessment for licensure or for gaining entrance into an academic institute, the outcome importance and risk are high. The term “high-stakes” implies that uncertainty and a potential for loss is high. Test takers are required to “win” or pass the assessment instead of obtaining the goal through another means. High-stakes tests are a single, defined assessment that has a clear line between those who pass and those who fail and has a direct consequence or something “at stake” (CPE, 2009) [5].

Driver’s license tests, theater auditions, university entrance exams, job interviews, drug tests, doctorate exams, bar exams

for lawyers, FAA tests, medical licensure exams, and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are examples of high-stakes tests (Mehrens, 1995) [18]. Moreover, Japan’s common first-stage exam for university admission and focus on college entrance examinations introduces regionally determined high-stakes assessments.

A great deal of controversy exists over the use of high-stakes tests to determine a person’s future. Common criticisms of high-stakes tests include that such tests may not correctly measure the individual’s knowledge or skills; therefore, the high-stakes tests do not reflect the person’s true ability. For example, a test may seek to measure medical knowledge for a doctor, but it cannot identify how well a doctor will perform under the stress of an emergency situation. A more comprehensive evaluation is arguably needed to evaluate one’s true potential (Mehrens, 1995) [18].

High-stakes testing also encourages teachers to omit material that is not tested causing selective instruction that might narrow curriculum and ultimately lower skills (Pearlman, 2001) [24]. Such “teaching to the test” may ultimately go against the quality of education standards. Social implications such as the stress caused by high-stakes testing has been attributed to the high suicide rate among students—especially students in Asian countries (Zuriff, 1997) [34]. High-stakes tests may be penalizing test-takers for not having the necessary skills through no fault of their own. This creates a debate on the issue of fairness of whether those taking exams have an equal opportunity to learn the material (Myers, 2001) [20].

Although some academic institutes and governments have gone as far as abandoning the use of high-stakes tests, the use of high-stakes tests is still widespread. Whether for or against the use of high-stakes test, both sides acknowledge the importance of accurate test design to guarantee quality of the assessment (Myers, 2001) [20]. High-stakes testing places the burden on test-takers to prove they belong or meet a specific predetermined standard. The roots of high-stakes assessments

is correlated with education standards and the standards movement in education.

2. Education Standards

Standards in education were largely implemented in an effort to raise student academic performance. Although there are many regional variations, the standards set in the United States are merely used by this author as a reference for education standards worldwide. The standards movement is an attempt to remedy the lagging performance of students in schools as employers and parents are dissatisfied with schools failing to teach the youth basic skills (Miller, 2001) ^[19]. The education standards movement in the United States gained support through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation initiated in the year 2001. Early ventures in the standards movement focused on vocation training as evident through *School-to-Work* (STW) legislation passed in 1994 coupled with *Learning a Living* published by the Department of Labor in 1992 (Duffy, 2008) ^[9]. The history of education in the United States suggests that parents and school boards lacked the systematic assessment information needed to monitor student progress and disagreements concerning what children should know and be able to do were common (NIEER, 2004) ^[21]. Emphasis in education was less defined before the education standards movement as many discrepancies existed over educational goals.

Standards are used to assess content of academic study and the performance and proficiency of the students. Academic standards describe what students should know and be able to do and how well they must perform (Kniess, 2008) ^[15]. Academic standards are divided into four groups: *developmental standards*, *content-specific standards*, *grade-level objectives*, and *performance objectives* (UOP, 2006) ^[29]. These four types of standards are used in creating national and regional academic standards. Standards state clear objectives in order to provide direction. Standards in education are to address the academic, physical, and social-emotional development of students (NIEER, 2004) ^[21]. The standards movement has reformed education through changes in curriculum, student assessment, and promoting accountability in schools.

Standards are expressed through high-stake assessments that monitor student progress and performance and standards serve to promote higher achievement among students. The success of this effort is largely determined by the content of the standards and the ambition and interest of the students. Criticism against high-stake assessments includes that such evaluation maintains a focus on implementation of standards instead of the actual content of the standards (Miller, 2001) ^[19]. High-stakes testing inherently maintains a capricious element that prevents it from being an absolute for all stake holders.

2.1 Standards for Schools

Accountability in schools is also a concept strengthened through the standards movement. The national push for accountability in schools represents a paradigm shift toward seeking evidence of value and quality in education standards. Accountability is synonymous for *liability* or *responsibility*. Therefore, accountability in schools refers to the liability or

responsibility of schools and instructors to provide quality education to students. Such standards also encompass governmental responsibility to provide an education to citizens. Moreover, accountability through standards also includes the teacher's responsibility for their students and the student's responsibility toward themselves and their studies.

Under the NCLB Act's accountability provisions, each State in the United States must describe how schools will close the achievement gap and make sure every student, including students who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency (USDE, 2003) ^[30]. State and school progress must be informed to parents and communities through annual school report cards. Supplemental service such as after-school assistance or free tutoring becomes the responsibility of the schools. If public schools do not produce satisfactory results, the government terminates accreditation and such schools are transformed into charter schools. Governmental regulations keep schools accountable for performance as a standard for accreditation. The accountability of charter schools is established in each school's charter. Ultimate purpose of accountability is to raise student achievement (Edison Schools, 2006) ^[10]. Curricula and assessments in schools have been aligned to conform to academic standards (NIEER, 2004) ^[21]. Accountability is monitored through School Accountability Report (SAR) information, Benchmark Assessments, Annual Achievement Reports, Customer Satisfaction Reports, and NCLB applied standard reports (CDE, 2008) ^[4]. Most States use an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report to assess if accountability standards are being achieved. School and district performance such as attendance and graduation rates also manifest school accountability (PDE, 2003) ^[23]. Every public school must develop an academic performance report. Such reports enable parents and taxpayers to make informed choices that will enable children to have an opportunity for a quality education (CSBE, 2005) ^[7]. School Accountability Reports enhance the ability of State Boards of Education to monitor the progress of schools and provide a uniform system of measurement. Just as report cards for students are to inform parents, accountability reports provide the public with vital information concerning the quality of public schools.

2.2 Standards for Teachers

Teachers are required to pass licensure to become full-time educators. Licensure has become a standard representing a teacher's ability and qualifications to instruct. Such standards have been adopted by most public schools throughout the United States. However, licensure is not a universal standard. Private schools have non-standardized hiring practices making proper licensure not an absolute requirement. Lateral entry is also offered by certain school districts. Moreover, schools that are outside of the federal regulated system such as reservation schools or international schools do not directly conform to national standards.

Home schooling is discouraged as parents are not licensed instructors and the home schooling environment does not have an exact measure for standards. Education standards present a challenge to home schooling and certain private schooling programs. Standards as a measure for correlation in performance are annulled through the home schooling

environment.

One might also consider pay standards such as tenured pay as crippling teacher accountability at both K-12 and higher education institutes. Tenured pay is kryptonite for teachers to maintain responsibility and motivation. Accountability of teachers is manifested through a caring attitude toward students as instilled in an instructor's teaching philosophy. This author believes that tenured pay debilitates ambition and causes teachers to lose sight of their responsibilities as instructors. This perhaps opens a debate between tenured full-time teachers and non-tenured part-time teachers. This author's experience dictates that part-time teachers are often viewed as being incompetent or inferior as instructors even when sharing the same credentials as their full-time counterparts. Likewise, part-time teachers are often openly denied opportunities for both career advancement and professional development including research presentation and publication.

2.3 Standards for Students

Ultimately, the student's attitudes toward education determine the effectiveness of applied education standards. If students want to study, the opportunity to succeed is presented. Government, school and teacher accountability through standards is provided for students and parents. Students can void their right to an education or embrace the opportunity. Education is a privilege as schools and teachers are obligated to provide instruction as long as students are responsible for their behavior and the educational rights of other students. The parents of students must also be included when considering standards for students. Parental contribution to children's education is intrinsically valuable for the development of the youth. As education standards dictate that schools are held accountable for providing proper education, parents should also be held accountable for the education of the youth. Education is a shared responsibility. Morals such as discipline, work ethics, personal values, and honesty are taught most effectively in the home. Morals should be taught in the home and practiced in the classroom.

3. Standards-Based Assessments

Academic standards promote quality in education. Standards in education has reformed curriculum, assessments and introduced concepts such as accountability. Schools, parents, and students should be knowledgeable of education standards. Such knowledge establishes a standard of accountability in schools and responsibility of schools and instructors to provide a quality education to students can be ensured.

Academic proficiency of students is measured through standards. As standards and accountability continue to be a trend in education, standards-based assessment which compares the performance of students to standards will continue to be grading criteria. The standards movement provides specific criteria determining the systematic assessment of student performance. Academic standards describe what students should know and be able to do and how well they must perform (Kniess, 2008) ^[15]. Assessment refers to the process of obtaining information concerning the academic performance and learning outcomes of the students. Methods for performing assessment includes both formal and

informal observation, knowledge and skill demonstration, high-stakes testing and assessments through commercially and teacher-developed testing (Impara, Plake & Merwin, 1997) ^[14].

In this paper, the author will provide his thoughts on standards-based assessments. Reporting tools, reporting forms and grading criteria will be analyzed. Suggested ways to improve on current practices will also be discussed.

3.1 Reporting Tools

High-stakes tests and other standardized exams serve as reporting tools. Results of standardized tests must be effectively evaluated for fairness when assessing student performance. If the report tools are not relevant, then exam purpose becomes corrupted. The use of reporting tools provides a reference for curriculum improvements. Reporting tools are under constant scrutiny as the results of high stakes testing has a profound impact on the academic future of the student as well parents and educators.

Standards-based assessments are centered on performance outcomes making reporting tools crucial for determining student academic skill. Under NCLB legislation, schools are required to demonstrate that students have met standards requirements through benchmark and high-stakes testing. School, educator and student accountability are enforced through standards.

Standards-based assessments use holistic grading practices which compare student academic performance to specific standards that are exempt from artificial ranking methods such as a *bell curve* that rates students inclusively. Standards-based assessments maintain a focus on closing achievement gap as students are graded on the same criteria regardless of instructor or demographics; however, student performance as described through reporting tools indicates that student ability according to standards is occasionally unpredictable (Burger, 1998) ^[3]. Students remain the capricious element that prevents any single system from being absolute.

3.2 Reporting Forms

Methods of reporting grades are important for making test results known to stakeholders. Reporting forms should be comprehensive and easy for teachers, students and parents to understand. Reporting forms which use a combination of both graphic and text formats are the most legible (Burger, 1998) ^[3]. Parents and students prefer not to have reports that are complicated to read and analyze. Report cards may measure students through traditional methods as well as through academic performance according to standards. Student achievement with reference to the performance of other students in basic skills according to national standards enables students and parents visualize what they have achieved and what they need to learn.

Use of technology is an asset for reporting scores. Technology has reduced the delay in making test result data available and provides a way for parents and students to view assessment results on-demand. Communicating student achievement based on standards through student report cards provides reference to the accountability of the teachers and the school. A variety of programs are available for reporting grades online. *WebGrader*, *TeacherEase*, *GradeWorks*, *RedikerSoft*,

GradeQuick, *TeacherTools* represent a few of such programs.

3.3 Grading Criteria

Before the standards movement, student performance was based on the performance of students as a collective instead of comparing the performance of each student to established standards to create assessments. Student academic work and results of testing determines the grade of the student based on the each student's individual academic performance as rated by standards. Grades represent the level of student achievement based on the standard not on the performance of other students. A rubric is often used to define measurements to standards. Student work is graded according to criteria as mentioned in the rubrics.

4. Ethics in Academic Assessments

One of the purposes of high-stakes testing under NCLB is to make communities aware of area schools' performance in educating students. Schools should be held accountable to their community, and if they are under-performing, members of the community have the right to move their children to other schools. The media reports standardized test results to the public when the scores are released each year and often run articles about the purpose and fairness of high-stakes assessments. The author would like to examine di Gennaro's publication titled *Fairness and Test Us: The Case of the SAT and Writing Placement for ESL Students*, which analyzes the use of SAT scores as placement tests in universities.

4.1 Purpose

SAT testing as a measure of student ability is a widely accepted standard for university admissions throughout the United States. The SAT test is similar to the ACT test and is generally offered to high school students in the U.S. during their junior year for potential college placement. Some school districts offer the PSAT/NMSQT (Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test) as tests which prepare students for SAT/ACT testing (College Board, 2008)^[6].

The author is avid about making the disputed purpose of the SAT test understood. According to di Gennaro (2006)^[8], the SAT test as a standard for university enrollment and program placement is misusing the initial purpose of the exam. The original purpose of the SAT test is to help test users, such as university admissions officers, to make comparisons of students tested to predict which students are most likely to succeed if admitted to a university. The SAT is not correlated to a specific curriculum and was not designed to determine where in a specific program potential students should begin their studies (di Gennaro, 2006)^[8]. University administrators have resorted to using the SAT test for admission and placement purposes in an effort to save time and money. By eliminating the need for additional placement tests, time and costs can be reduced. Di Gennaro (2006)^[8], states that "...extending SAT scores beyond the purpose of admissions decisions to placement within a specific program is just one example of how tests may be inadvertently misused" (p. 3)^[8]. The SAT test becomes debatably unfair to native English speakers; therefore, the SAT test is even more alienating to a student from another language and culture. Such standards

were largely implemented to test student academic performance and to compare students educated in the United States (Ramírez, 2008)^[26]. Although the effort to promote and assess student performance is noble, the standards applied to students serve to generalize student ability and potentially discriminate students for whom English is a second language (ESL) or for whom English is a foreign language (EFL). Criticism against high-stakes assessments such as the SAT test includes that such evaluation maintains a focus on implementation of standards instead of the actual content of the standards (Miller, 2001)^[19]. Creating tests that are fair to all students becomes a concern. Considering ESL students, a "one-size-fits-all" standard for testing is potentially unfair and unethical. The SAT test, as a high-stakes test, is limiting the student by labeling the student based on a one-time *snapshot* assessment of ability and knowledge (UOP, 2006)^[29].

4.2 Fairness

Most students, teachers, and parents will argue that a single test should not be the only measurement to assess a student's ability. Furthermore, arguments against high-stakes testing can be reasonably made for students who have a physical disability, a learning disability, and those that are not native English speakers. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "students who have been in U.S. schools for three consecutive years will be assessed in English" (2004)^[30]. These second language students are expected to be proficient in the English language once they pass the three year mark. In fairness to these students, and those with physical or learning disabilities, schools should be able to tailor tests to fit the needs of these students, such as simplifying the academic language written in the test. Tailoring the test is not intended to dismiss grade level standards, but rather to make the grade level standard comprehensible to those with special needs. Since the *SAT Reasoning Test* is never adapted for students who are not native English speakers, using these tests for placement purposes is an egregious misuse of the test results and is a prime example of the unfair use of test data.

4.3 Misuse of Data Results

The main focus of di Gennaro's article (2006)^[8] is the misuse of the data gleaned from the results of the *SAT Reasoning Test*. The use of the test data by university and college admission committees is debatably valid; however, this test includes a writing portion unlike the former SAT tests—this writing portion data has been misused for placement purposes. The test results were never designed to be used by individual post-secondary institutions as placement tests to determine which level of writing proficiency each student has attained before he or she begins university level academic work. Di Gennaro (2006)^[8] calls attention to the misuse of the SAT test and identifies practicality as the main motive for taking this shortcut. Since the writers of the SAT added the writing portion of the standardized test, a proposal has made that local institutions could save money and time by not creating a unique writing placement test; rather placement decisions could be made by simply using the *SAT Reasoning Test* writing results.

Di Gennaro's concern was that the SAT is too broad of a test that does not elicit specific enough information to determine

an individual's true writing ability. At special risk are English language learners. This misuse of test data could be prevented by setting practicality aside. Instead, placement tests that are unique to each institution would better serve all stakeholders if the stakeholders are able to interpret the data correctly. Popham (2001) ^[25] labeled this ability as *assessment literacy*. "Every relevant constituency's assessment literacy must be bolstered. I refer not only to educators—heaven knows they need it—but also to educational policymakers, media representatives, and citizens" (Popham, p. 31) ^[25]. If care is not taken to interpret test results correctly, the consequences for the stakeholders can be critical.

4.4 Consequences

"But, when test results are used inappropriately or as a single measure of performance, they can have unintended adverse consequences" (APA, 2001) ^[1]. Negative consequences are plentiful for students and schools with low test scores. Students may be placed in remedial classes and experience stigmas associated with low test scores. Additionally, poor scores may be used as one of the factors to retain a student, or prevent the student from graduating from high school.

Negative consequences following misuse of test data for low performing elementary and secondary schools may include replacement of administrators or teachers, and school takeover by the state. Positive outcomes of low scores on high-stakes testing may include the following: informing parents a problem exists; receiving additional funds from the state and federal offices of education; receiving outside intervention and guidance by consulting services. The negative consequences inherent in the misuse of the SAT data for placement into writing courses at the university level affect the students most adversely. Di Gennaro (2006) ^[8] suggested that these students will either have to pay for classes they don't need, or they will be placed incorrectly in higher level classes where they will become frustrated.

4.5 Author's Thoughts

This author believes that a place in education for high-stakes tests such as the SAT does exist. This test is useful in determining college admissions, but using the writing portion for placement purposes is unethical. It saves money for the universities, but students, especially ESL/EFL students, could end up misplaced. Although customized placement tests are more costly and time intensive, universities need to administer their own placement exams to be fair to all students. The SAT is a snapshot from one day of a student's academic career, and using it to determine placement in university courses could misdirect the student's entire college education.

5. A Critical Look at Standards-Based Assessments

Academic standards are divided into four groups: *developmental standards*, *content-specific standards*, *grade-level objectives*, and *performance objectives* (UOP, 2006) ^[29]. In these standards, the word *assessment* means the process of obtaining information concerning the academic performance and learning outcomes of the students (Impara, Plake & Merwin, 1997) ^[14]. The outcome of assessment data is used to guide students, inform parents and teachers about weaknesses and strengths in order to determine curricular adequacy.

Methods for performing assessment includes both formal and informal observation, knowledge and skill demonstration, high-stakes testing and assessments through commercially and teacher-developed testing (Impara, Plake & Merwin, 1997) ^[14].

High-stakes testing as a reporting tool for standards can be effectively debated as either effective or discriminating. High-stakes testing has been accepted as a standard for a genuine measure of student performance. High-stakes testing provides a point for reference and are easy to grade, assess and manufacture. The results of tests are "generalizable and replicable" (Kuncel & Hezlett, 2007) ^[16]. Criticism against high-stake assessments includes that such evaluation maintains a focus on implementation of standards instead of the actual content of the standards (Miller, 2001) ^[19]. As a method of measuring performance and confirming applied standards, testing has become a common reporting tool. The benefits of standardized testing are that they provide a point for reference and are relatively easy to make, grade and assess. However, high-stakes testing might not be fair to all students when one considers the needs of ESL/EFL students and students with disabilities. Such students do not meet well with the established standards and special consideration is a growing debate and a common argument against high-stakes testing standards.

When considering standards-based assessments, one must also consider that not all intelligence is "testable." Skills such as creativity, artistic ability, emotional intelligence, practical and analytical knowledge as well as common sense are not properly represented through standardized exams. Testing standards should take into account different intelligences. Standardized tests can be debated as a method to assess how well people take tests not necessarily define the intelligence of the individual. According to ETS and the Princeton Review, speaking on the GRE exam, "...the GRE does not measure your intelligence, nor does it measure how well you will do in graduate school...it is a test of how well you handle standardized tests" (Lurie, Pecsénye & Robinson, 2007, p. 18) ^[17]. According to Helen Bee (2002) ^[2], creativity, insight, and social cues are cognitive tasks that are not measured well by tests. Such aspects of intelligence do not test well since such cognitive skills are difficult to assess. Moreover, environment, race, and social status create differences which might alter the validity of test evaluation (Bee, 2002) ^[2].

As much is determined through testing to confirm that standards are being met, the validity of standardized tests must be kept under constant scrutiny. Testing is a big business and has a potential for becoming corrupt. The amount spent on testing in the United States is stunning—estimated to be billions of dollars each year (Gallagher, 2005) ^[12]. Americans may be taking as many as 600 million standardized tests annually, or more than two tests per year for every person in the United States (Gallagher, 2005) ^[12]. Testing companies are making a profit through the standards movement further changing education into a business.

6. Conclusions

Ways to Improve on Current Practices

As educators in the United States are required to comply with both local and national standards, there may be confusion

concerning how to address both sets of standards. Although both national and local standards share similar goals, possible discrepancies and inconsistencies may exist between standards. State and local exams are not necessarily consistent with the tests that are developed at the national level. National standards tend to be focused on skills and content knowledge whereas local standards reflect general grade-level expectations (UOP, 2006)^[29].

This author is currently employed as a high school instructor in Japan and as a part-time facilitator of university English classes. Education standards in Japan are determined only on a national level by the Ministry of Education, making an end to local variations or individual interpretations. However, private schools K-12 and otherwise have their own standards concerning entrance and graduation requirements. Having only one set of national standards to comply with maintains a level of simplicity and makes work as an educator possibly less stressful. Such a practice of having only a national standard might also be beneficial to schools in the United States.

The United States could possibly improve on current practices through a careful cross-cultural comparative study on education standards and curriculum around the world. International standards such as those established by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures the academic abilities of 15-year-olds' throughout the world. A total of 41 nations and territories participate in PISA assessments. PISA focuses on abilities and skills considered universal such as math and science (OECD/PISA, 2006)^[22]. Assessments designed by PISA rate how well students apply learned skills and knowledge rather than merely testing for knowledge. The philosophy of PISA is that if students are merely studying to pass an exam, they will not retain what they have studied once the exam is taken. Knowledge must be maintained to be considered *owned* by the student.

Finland, a country that gives no tests to students until the age of 16, rated among the highest according to PISA standards until 2012. Finland remains as the best performing country overall in Europe. The United States rates at 29th which falls behind even much lesser developed countries (OECD/PISA, 2006)^[22]. The education system in Finland is designed to instill students with a desire to learn not by motivation through competition nor to pass an exam, but rather to study merely for the intrinsic value and joy of studying. NCLB legislation which focuses on testing and standards fosters a policy of "naming and shaming" that is opposite of countries such as Finland which rate the highest according to PISA standards. Cultural variations might not make altering educational program paradigms feasible; however, an understanding of education systems around the world would further promote and re-establish the United States standing in the global community.

In a 2003 PISA exam, Japanese children ranked sixth in mathematics and second in science compared with first and second, respectively, in 2000. Although the mathematical skills of Japanese children have declined, the Ministry of Education in Japan maintains they are still among the best in the world.

Reading skills of Japanese children have dropped to 14th from eighth in the year 2000, making a fall from the top-ranking group. This means that 15-year olds in Japan are close to the OECD average in reading comprehension and acquiring knowledge. The percentage of Japanese students ranking lowest in reading skill exceeds the OECD average. Japan also has fallen behind Oceania, major European nations, South Korea and some other countries in the percentage of highest achievers in reading ability.

According to the December 8, 2004 edition of *The Daily Yomiuri*,^[28] the cause for the decline in the reading skills of Japanese children is a debate, but the Education, Science and Technology Ministry claims that students read less than in the previous years, and that there are few classes designed to encourage children to express their opinions. To promote improvement in the quality of classwork, the ministry intends to ensure teachers encourage students to read books in the morning. The author's institute of tenure also observes "asa no dokusho jikan" or "morning reading" in response to this initiative.

It is also necessary to look at the education systems of OECD nations that ranked highest on the PISA assessments. In Finland, one must have a master's degree to become a K-12 educator. Educators in Finland also enjoy a higher social status. The government of Finland uses a wide variety of means to encourage its people to read.

In South Korea and Hong Kong, schools are encouraging children to work hard under the new governmentally endorsed curriculum system that fosters academic development to compete in international assessments such as PISA. PISA 2015 results were presented on December 6, 2016 with results for around 540,000 participating students in 72 countries, with Singapore emerging as the top performer in all categories. Hong Kong and Taiwan were also among the top performing countries (Wikipedia, 2017)^[33].

According to *The Daily Yomiuri* (2004)^[28], the PISA test showed that Japanese children study for only six and a half hours a week outside school, compared with the OECD average of eight and a half hours. Japanese students also are among those spending the least amount of time on homework with only 3.8 hours per week. The decline in the reading skills of Japanese children may be attributed to the small amount of time they spend reading and thinking. With this in mind, perhaps the ministry-endorsed morning reading program is a commendable effort to promote student interest in reading.

Standards state clear objectives in order to provide direction. Standards in education are to address the academic, physical, and social-emotional development of students (NIEER, 2004)^[21]. The standards movement has reformed education through changes in curriculum, student assessment, high-stakes testing, and promoting accountability in schools. Standards are expressed through high-stake assessments, when properly used to monitor student progress and performance, serve to promote higher achievement among students. Standards, although not absolute, continue to provide direction, function, and purpose to the organization of education systems.

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