









Cognitive Media Analysis on Assessment

An Education Core Story Report

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Introduction

Controversies surrounding the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation have put education assessment squarely in the public discourse. Policymakers, education administrators, teachers and the general public are all engaged in a debate about how best to measure education outcomes and whether those measures are accurate indicators of student learning. The media is a primary arena for these debates; therefore, analyzing patterns in the media's presentation provides important insights into American understandings of assessment. During the time period of this study (October 1, 2010, through October 1, 2011), two major events drove media coverage of assessment issues: 1) The Obama administration provided a way for states to opt out of NCLB if they could show evidence for alternative accountability measures, and 2) reports of widespread cheating on standardized tests in Georgia, New Jersey and the District of Columbia (among others) gained national attention. These events, along with others, raised important questions about what constitutes assessment, how it occurs, and the appropriate relationship between assessment, education outcomes and accountability.

This report is part of a series that examines media coverage of education and learning issues. The compendium of media reports is designed to inform experts and advocates about the patterned ways the media commonly represent education issues, and how these patterns interact with public understanding. In order to do this, we first map the common streams of opinions, arguments and narratives that constitute "public discourses" about learning and education. We then compare findings from this media analysis to those from a report detailing American cultural understandings of education issues. This comparison examines how dominant media frames are likely to influence the cultural models (shared, patterned but implicit understandings and assumptions) the public uses to think about assessment issues.

In this report, FrameWorks maps the contours of media coverage of education assessment by examining a sample of 194 media stories that deal with assessment issues. This sample was drawn from print and broadcast media sources between October 1, 2010, and October 1, 2011. The findings presented here are based on an in-depth qualitative and cognitive analysis of these stories (for a detailed discussion of sources sampled and general methods see the Appendix). This report was sponsored by the Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, NoVo Foundation, Raikes Foundation and W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Executive Summary

The analysis revealed three common themes in the media coverage of education assessment issues:

- Assessment = Standardized Testing. Media coverage of assessment is dominated by summative measures, specifically standardized tests. While there are occasional critiques of standardized tests, journalists generally report on these tests as straightforward and unproblematic measures of student, teacher and school performance. These types of stories overlap with, and likely strengthen, a similar understanding in the minds of Americans in which "assessment" is understood to mean "standardized test," and such tests are seen as appropriate measures of education outcomes.
- Education assessment is closely tied to teachers and teacher accountability. Media discussions of education assessment overwhelmingly focus on teachers. Such discussions take two forms: 1) assessments hamper the effectiveness of caring and creative teachers, and 2) assessments are necessary to keep self-interested and "burnt-out" teachers focused on student learning. What is missing from both of these discussions is the idea that effective assessment is a valuable pedagogical tool that can improve learning processes and outcomes. Furthermore, discussions that activate the dominant American cultural model in which teacher quality is defined narrowly by teacher caring lead to difficulty in thinking about many of the policies that would improve teacher effectiveness, such as training, access to resources, and connection to colleagues and institutional supports.² On the other side, public discourse that cues understandings of individuals as self-interested feeds a powerful sense of futility that shapes Americans' views about the possibility of actually improving education and its outcomes.
- The goal of education reform is improved scores. Assessment measures (specifically standardized test scores) are described as the outcome of education reform. This type of coverage is likely to limit the public's understanding of the many purposes and goals of education reform that move beyond scores and measurement of individual achievement.

On the positive side, the analysis shows that education advocates and experts have a presence in the media discourse about assessment. With strategic framing, this messenger platform can be leveraged to expand the media story of assessment to include its role in improving learning and a wider set of education outcomes.

Below, we report the major findings from the media analysis and then compare these results to the way members of the public think about education assessment issues.

Findings

Media Patterns

1. Media discussions of assessment focus on summative tests, specifically standardized tests, which are depicted as unproblematic measures of education outcomes.

The Assessment = Standardized Test frame: Over 90 percent of media in this sample focused on summative assessments, with 60 percent of all stories covering standardized testing. Graduation rates (7 percent) and grades (7 percent) were the next most common types of summative assessments mentioned. Assessment experts typically define summative assessments as occuring after the learning event, measuring whether, and to what extent, learning has happened, while formative assessments provide teachers with information during the learning process. The summative assessment bent in the media is likely driven by the prominence of NCLB and Race to the Top initiatives during the sample window (44 percent of assessment stories addressed these pieces of legislation). On the other hand, only 4 percent of the stories in the sample touched upon issues that could be classified as formative assessment, such as ongoing classroom observations and student portfolios. In short, media coverage focuses on assessments as accountability measures of education outcomes, rather than as tools that can potentially improve learning processes.

The *Unbiased Assessment* frame: In addition to their focus on summative assessment, the media treat standardized tests as unproblematic measures of student learning and teacher effectiveness. Standardized test scores are represented as useful and objective data that can aid in evidenced-based education reform. For example, the article below argues that standardized tests offer the most objective method of measuring education performance (without distinguishing between the performance of different actors or outcomes), and that calls for alternative forms of assessment are misguided:

After schools in Atlanta and Dougherty County were found to have committed widespread cheating on the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests, or CRCT, there were calls to de-emphasize the use of standardized tests as evaluation tools. Thankfully, Georgia wants to move in the opposite direction by including more objective ways to judge schools.³

Media stories in the sample did not distinguish between specific facets of student learning that standardized tests measure (i.e., skills, abilities, competencies, knowledge), sending a message that these tests are accurate and appropriate means through which to measure all types of education achievement.

Despite the uncritical treatment of standardized tests in the media, there was a subsection of the coverage that was more critical of these instruments. More specifically, the critiques focused on how standardized tests offer a "one-size fits all" approach to assessment, and education more generally. However, even these more critical treatments failed to offer alternatives to standardized tests. The article quoted below exemplifies this tendency to criticize without offering options.

NCLB shined light on achievement gaps and increased accountability for high-need students, but it also encouraged states to lower standards and narrow curriculum, focused on absolute test scores instead of student growth and gains, and created one-size-fits-all federal mandates. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said, "We want to get out of the way and give states and districts flexibility to develop locally tailored solutions to their educational challenges while protecting children and holding schools accountable for better preparing young people for college and careers." In recent months, states have led a "quiet revolution" to move beyond NCLB's vision. States have taken the lead in pursuing reform and innovations, including widespread adoption of college- and career-ready standards, development of new assessments, and other reforms in areas including teacher and principal evaluation and support, and turning around low-performing schools.⁴

In summary, media coverage of assessment is overwhelmingly focused on summative assessment, a modality which is defined in this coverage as standardized tests. The tone with which these tests are treated is overwhelmingly positive and uncritical. When critical treatments are found, they fall short of offering productive alternatives to these types of tests.

2. Media coverage of assessment focuses on teachers and teacher accountability.

The Teacher Responsibility frame: Stories in the sample concentrated on accountability as the goal of education assessment, focusing on the role of assessment in holding both students and teachers accountable. However, the link between assessment and teacher accountability was clearly dominant, with over 50 percent of the coverage concentrating on this lens of responsibility. In fact, one article reported that, in one New York City district, schools administer standardized tests solely for the purpose of "grading the teacher." 5

The article quoted below is an excellent example of the way assessment is framed

as a tool to hold teachers responsible for student performance. The article details a debate between Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of the Washington DC school district and a critic of teachers' unions, and Diane Ravitch, an education scholar.

Rhee said accountability — ensuring that teachers are effective and that administrators are making decisions in the best interest of children — is key to improving education. Ravitch, a former assistant education secretary under President George H.W. Bush, maintained that teachers are being scapegoated.

"I have been seeing profound demoralization among teachers in America today," Ravitch said. "It is almost hard to convey. Teachers feel they are being held accountable for social conditions beyond their control. We have to have an ethos in education of encouragement, support, at the same time encourage and respect teachers and stop beating up on them."

Rhee's discussion of accountability illustrates several key aspects of the media's use of this term. First, in discussions of accountability, specific individuals bear the onus of responsibility for education outcomes. More specifically, when accountability and assessment are discussed, individual *teachers* are presented as responsible for student performance. Ravitch refutes the idea that teachers should be held solely responsible for education outcomes. Despite Ravitch's counterargument, the article does not explain how larger social issues affect teacher performance or education outcomes. Thus, teachers remain disconnected and decontextualized vis-a-vis the larger education system, which shapes their effectiveness. This article exemplifies a general tendency in the coverage. Namely, "accountability" is code for the idea that all the problems of the education system are "teacher problems."

The Teachers are Caring Individuals and Teachers are Self-Interested Actors frames: The use of the term "accountability" in this discourse also carries two frames about teacher motivation. A previous FrameWorks media analysis found that media frames oscillate between two motivational drives of teachers: Teachers were either framed as selfless and devoted individuals who work for the sake of the children and learning irrespective of pay, or teachers were characterized as fundamentally self-interested and motivated to increase wages and secure job security at the expense of their students. The current media analysis revealed that these same two concepts of teacher motivation characterize the coverage of assessment issues. Media discourse on assessment becomes the means for readers to adjudicate the motivations of teachers.

When teachers were characterized as selfless and caring, assessment measures were framed as a hindrance to teaching — as formalities that prevented teachers from being able to apply their caring and love of learning. The following passage,

describing the Education Nation summit, exemplifies this type of motivation discussion.

Mr. JARELL LEE (Excellence Boys Charter School, Brooklyn, New York): It's our job as teachers to expose them to a new world of new opportunities and give them the confidence and the skills that they need to be successful in life. ELLIS: There is growing frustration that those skills can't be measured by a test. Only 26 percent of teachers surveyed say standardized tests are an accurate reflection of a student's achievement, but 60 percent say those tests determine what they teach.

ELLIS: And a stunning reminder of how much teachers invest in their students.

WILLIAMS: Quick show of hands, how many of you of the teachers in the room spent out-of-pocket money for — this is for the benefit of folks watching at home and don't realize this. How many of you estimate you work probably a 60-hour week? OK.

Offscreen Voice: Or more.

WILLIAMS: How many of you have second jobs to make ends meet? It's extraordinary.8

This story and others like it portray teachers as necessarily sacrificing self in order to put children first. Journalists and other commentators regularly argue that standardized tests cannot measure quality of teaching because passion for, and love of, teaching cannot be quantified.

On the other hand, media coverage of assessment also portrays teachers as self-interested, benefit-maximizing actors. When this portrayal is operative, assessment measures are framed as necessary checks on the individual (primarily financial) interests of teachers. The *Teachers as Self-Interested Actors* frame was particularly dominant in the coverage about cheating scandals on standardized tests, as the following excerpts demonstrate.

Four paragraphs in the Atlanta Public Schools cheating report detail how Damany Lewis used a razor blade to slice through the plastic protection on test booklets and then photocopy exams. The Parks Middle School teacher admitted to cheating from 2006 to 2009, telling investigators he spent one to two hours a day altering tests. But three months after the report's release, Lewis and about 130 educators accused of cheating are still employed. Even with confessions to test cheating and evidence provided by a team of veteran investigators, teachers have job protection under state law that makes firing them costly and difficult.⁹

As a proud parent of three children who have found success in Atlanta Public

Schools, I am horrified after reading through all 413 pages of the CRCT investigative report. It's clear that adults behaved badly and cheated the very children we pay them to serve. When that happens, our future has been cheated as well.¹⁰

3. The media frames improved scores on standardized tests as the desired outcome of education reform.

The Standardized Tests Measure Education Reform frame: The media portray standardized tests as the most important — if not the exclusive — measure of education reform. Test scores are discussed as the only evidence of the effectiveness of a given reform policy. In this way, the media discourse equates the outcome of education reform with better student scores on standardized tests. The excerpt below illustrates this focus.

"This is such a dynamic class," Ms. Furman says of her 21st-century classroom. "I really hope it works." Hope and enthusiasm are soaring here. But not test scores. Since 2005, scores in reading and math have stagnated in Kyrene, even as statewide scores have risen. To be sure, test scores can go up or down for many reasons. But to many education experts, something is not adding up — here and across the country. In a nutshell: Schools are spending billions on technology, even as they cut budgets and lay off teachers, with little proof that this approach is improving basic learning.¹¹

Cognitive Implications

In this section, we explore the likely effects of exposure to the patterns documented above on public thinking.

- with existing American cultural models of assessment. Like the media, the public has strong default associations with concepts of assessment and standardized tests. Even when pressed to talk about different forms of assessment, FrameWorks research has shown that Americans struggle to move the conversation beyond their local standardized tests. The media's discussion of assessment draws these same links and cues this default association in the minds of Americans, strengthening existing definitions of assessment as standardized tests. The tight association between standardized tests and assessment in the media and in public understanding is likely to impede discussion of alternative forms of assessment that can improve learning and teaching.
- The Teachers Are Accountable frame cues the public's most accessible

model of educational responsibility and crowds out other ways of thinking. The media's framing of teachers as solely responsible for education outcomes aligns with existing public thinking about education responsibility. Members of the public assume that the education system is comprised of three actors: students, parents and teachers (the "tangible triad"). The media's evocation of the idea that teachers are responsible is likely to contribute to the public's difficulty in thinking *beyond* these actors. Ultimately, the activation of the tangible triad model obscures other systemic factors which shape education outcomes, and that need to be addressed in order to improve American education.

- The Teachers as Self-Interested Actors frame will tap into a deep American pessimism about the possibility of reforming the education system. FrameWorks research has shown that Americans think about assessment as a means to hold teachers responsible for student performance.¹⁴ The media's coverage of teachers as self-interested actors reinforces a similar model that Americans have for thinking about teacher motivation. Previous research demonstrated that people apply a zero-sum model to thinking about motivation, and reason that individuals can't be motivated by money and caring simultaneously. 15 The Teachers as Self-Interested Actors media frame reinforces the conclusion that if teachers are motivated by self-interest, they must not be working for student interests. In addition to structuring negative views of teachers, this type of thinking locks people into even deeper and more basic beliefs about the education system. The public imagines the system as inherently flawed and irreparably broken because it is comprised of competing, self-interested individuals and groups. In sum, the Teachers as Self-Interested Actors frame is likely to cue a cognitive cascade that starts with a way of understanding teacher motivation and ends up contributing to Americans' pessimism about education reform.
- The Good Teachers are Caring Individuals media frame contributes to the public's difficulty in realizing the impact of teacher training and continued professionalization on education outcomes. FrameWorks research has shown that Americans understand teacher caring as the most important, if not the sole, determinant of teaching quality. The presence of the Good Teachers are Caring Individuals frame creates a cognitive blindness to all the factors, other than innate caring, that shape the quality of instruction, such as teacher training, resource availability, and institutional support and connections. When this model is activated, the public evaluates teacher effectiveness by an individual's interpersonal qualities. Thinking through this model makes it difficult for the public to understand how various kinds of assessment measures can be employed to improve teacher effectiveness.

The Standardized Tests Measure Education Reform frame blocks the ability to think about non-monetary and collective goals of education. The media's positioning of standardized test scores as the criteria for measuring the success of education reform feeds individualist perspectives about the goals and ends of education. This evokes the very dominant notion among the American public and within the popular media that the purpose of education is to make individuals financially successful and independent. FrameWorks' research has found this type of thinking to have a narrowing effect on people's ability to see many of the other, non-financial purposes of sustaining a strong public education system, such as ensuring the future prosperity of the country, creating a more socially just society, encouraging civic participation and providing individuals with skills that contribute to quality of life in non-monetary ways.¹⁷

Absences

In addition to existing features of the media discourse that are likely to have cognitive implications for the American public, there are also several key absences in this coverage that are likely to affect public understanding.

The media discourse is missing discussions of formative assessments. Experts emphasize that the process of assessment can be a learning opportunity in itself, distinguishing between summative and formative assessments. While the former are designed to measure student mastery of course content, the latter are ongoing and can be used to inform instruction and pedagogy. Together, these assessment tools can improve teaching by allowing teachers to gauge how students are learning and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly. Without filling in this missing piece of the experts' account of assessment, the public will be left to fall back on their equation that Assessment = Standardized Testing.

Implication: The lack of discussion of formative assessment presents an opportunity for education experts and advocates to introduce a new thread into this discourse. FrameWorks' qualitative research has shown that Americans are open to discussions of the importance of assessing student learning in situ, and can see the value of such practices. This media absence, along with the public's receptiveness to this point, suggests that introducing discussions specifically focusing on the process and value of formative assessments can successfully expand public understanding of education assessment.

The media does not cover the multiple purposes assessment.
Assessment experts speak about a broad range of tools, from student self-

assessment to in-class observations to high-stakes standardized tests. Experts argue that each kind of assessment has important and distinct purposes in learning processes, and that their use and effectiveness depends on intended learning goals.

Implication: This absence is a challenge, as FrameWorks' research has shown the difficulty of communicating the concept of instrument validity or the alignment between the purpose and use of an assessment tool. Figuring out effective ways to communicate about assessment "validity" requires future communications research into the best way to communicate the concept of instrument validity to the public.

• Media stories are missing discussion of technological advances in assessment. Experts are optimistic about the use of new technologies in assessment practices. They explain that technology can provide teachers access to new kinds of assessment information. There is limited discussion of technology and assessment in the media. Without careful framing, attempts to fill in this absence with messages about assessment and technology will fall into serious conceptual problems as Americans struggle to think productively about the synthesis of learning and technology.¹⁹

Implication: Based on past FrameWorks research on digital media and learning, this will likely be another absence that is difficult to fill.²⁰ Merely introducing the value of technology in improving assessment will likely be insufficient to successfully communicate this expert point. Instead, such messages will have to be carefully framed so as to navigate around unproductive public understandings that attach to messages about the benefits of combining learning and technology.

Conclusion

Standardized tests loom large in media coverage of assessment. As such, there is a much greater focus on assessing learning *outcomes* than learning *processes*. Standardized test scores are represented as the only measure of the success of education reform, and the media analyzes reform efforts exclusively by their ability to improve test scores. Furthermore, the media discourse of education assessment focuses heavily on teaching and the motivation of individual teachers, leaving other important aspects of the education system unaddressed from an assessment perspective.

The findings presented here indicate that the media both creates and reinforces unproductive public understandings of assessment. Strategic communications efforts will need to broaden the kinds of tools that are associated with assessment

to include summative measures beyond standardized tests and emphasize more productive uses of the standardized testing format and the value of formative assessment approaches. One way to do this is to provide a clear explanation of what standardized tests are best designed to measure, and to situate them as one among many types of education assessments that have advantages and disadvantages in measuring and improving education outcomes. Communications should also include robust explanations of how a multimodal approach to assessing skills and learning is optimal and can be used to build more effective learning environments.

This analysis has also documented the tightly interwoven nature of assessment with unproductive models of teaching. Experts describe assessment as a critical pedagogical practice, but their ideas are based on a much more robust understanding of teaching as a profession than that represented in the media or understood by the public. Communications about assessment might be more effective if the public were able to draw on more complex models of teaching and teacher effectiveness. The idea that teachers are professionals who use evidence derived from multiple assessment tools to improve the quality of their teaching is a vital message to communicate in order to structure a more complete narrative around assessment. Along with using existing FrameWorks tools for communicating about teacher effectiveness,²¹ future research should move to develop and test strategies that can successfully communicate the connections between teaching, assessment and learning.

Appendix: Methods

This research is guided by two primary goals: (1) to examine how topics related to assessment are regularly treated in the media, and (2) to explore the likely impact of these patterns on the public's thinking on assessment. In order to address these goals, the analysis is divided into two stages: (1) a content analysis based on a qualitative and quantitative examination of media materials that reference assessment, and (2) a cognitive analysis of the media frames identified in relation to findings from previous cultural models research. Descriptions of the data and analytical techniques are provided below.

Media Content Analysis

A recent Pew Center study suggests that, by and large, Americans receive their daily news from a combination of newspapers (both print and online) and broadcast news sources.²² Sample selection in the current study was based on this assumption and included materials taken from national newspaper articles and television broadcasts, as well as three news blogs representing a span of political perspectives. Using the LexisNexis, Factiva and Google News databases, specific

news sources were selected based on circulation/viewership statistics and geographical and political diversity. The sample was drawn from the following print sources: *The Washington Post, USA Today, San Jose Mercury News, New York Post, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Houston Chronicle, The Denver Post, Chicago Sun-Times* and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Sources used to construct the sample also included national television newscasts from ABC, CBS, NBC, CNBC, MSNBC, CNN and FOX News Network, and the *Huffington Post, Hot Air, National Review* and *Daily Beast* blogs. The study sample was selected from these sources over a one-year period from October 1, 2010, to October 1, 2011.

Media stories were captured from the databases if they included at least five mentions of the words "education" or "learning." This threshold of number of mentions ensured that the sample squarely dealt with issues related to education and learning and avoided materials that mentioned education in passing, but that were not focused on education content or issues. The search strategy was also designed to be sufficiently broad so as to capture stories that covered a wide range of education issues and allow for analysis of more specific education issues including skills and learning, assessment, educational disparities, structure of the education system, and education policies and programs. The initial capture procedure yielded 1,346 stories. Each of these media stories was assigned a number and researchers used a random number generator to select 570 stories that comprised the final study sample. Of these, 194 dealt squarely with issues related to assessment and were included for analysis for this report.

The media content analysis was conducted in two stages. First, FrameWorks researchers developed a codebook based on standard coding categories utilized in previous FrameWorks content analysis research and in the framing literature more generally.²³ Those categories include:

- 1. Storytelling style (episodic vs. thematic)
- 2. Tone
- 3. Section of the newspaper
- 4. Age-group, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status of the students mentioned
- 5. Types of messengers/experts cited
- 6. Values
- 7. Mentions of specific policies and programs.

In addition to the codes above, each story was coded for whether or not it addressed the following areas of interest: skills and learning, assessment, educational disparities, structure of the education system, education policies, and programs.

After the codebook was developed, three researchers were trained in its application. To test for inter-coder reliability, each researcher coded a set of 25 randomly selected media stories from the sample. The researchers achieved an inter-coder reliability score of 0.8 using Holsti's coefficient — indicating a respectable 80 percent agreement across the coded themes.²⁴ After the reliability test, we coded the remaining stories and subjected the resulting quantitative data to statistical analysis examining the frequency of codes within each category. In addition, selected cross-tabulations were computed to examine relationships between codes.

In the second stage of analysis, the sample was divided into the areas of interest and each area was subjected to a qualitative analysis of dominant narratives. In this stage, researchers analyzed the dominant frames that structured media discussion about skills and learning, assessment, educational disparities, structure of the education system, education policies, and programs. The results of these analyses are presented in separate reports.

Cognitive Analysis

The cultural models findings referred to in this document are based on over 60 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted between 2008 and 2012 on issues related to education, including education and education reform, digital media and learning, skills and learning, and assessment. Consistent with interview methods employed in psychological anthropology, cultural models interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues.²⁵ Patterns of discourse, or common, standardized ways of talking, were identified across the sample using a basic grounded theory approach to thematic analysis. These discourses were then analyzed to reveal tacit organizational assumptions, relationships, propositions and connections that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an individual's transcript and across the sample. In short, analysis looked at patterns both in what was said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was not said (shared, but taken-for-granted, assumptions).

Finally, to examine expert messages on education and learning, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 one-on-one, one-hour phone interviews with experts from the fields of education, psychology and early childhood development. These interviews were conducted in late 2011 to early 2012 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. To locate experts, FrameWorks surveyed a group of leading foundations working on education issues.

In the cognitive component of this analysis, FrameWorks researchers compared findings from the media analysis with results from the cultural models interviews in

order to examine how media frames are likely to intersect with the cultural models that currently inform public thinking. This analysis addresses multiple patterns of intersection, including how media frames might (1) cue and strengthen existing cultural models, (2) conflict with or challenge existing models, and/or (3) fail to address a topic such that extant patterns of thinking are left to "fill in the blanks." The analysis also provides an etiological understanding of dominant media frames, as the relationship between frames in media and culture in mind is not unidirectional. ²⁶ In this way, the media analysis enables FrameWorks to identify the likely cognitive impacts of media framing and to formulate strategic recommendations for experts and advocates who communicate about education and learning.

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