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Review of *What Every Middle School Teacher Needs to Know about Reading Tests (From Someone Who Has Written Them)*

Furhken, C. (2012). *What every middle school teacher needs to know about reading tests (from someone who has written them)*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

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In our current “Race to the Top” era, educational testing has major consequences for both teachers and students. From New Jersey to Florida, a number of districts have implemented teacher merit pay based on standardized test scores (Pillow, 2012; Zernike, 2012). Other districts have programs that reward students with incentives for performing well on standardized tests (Kuznia, 2012; Simpson, 2012). Enter Charles Fuhrken’s new book, *What Every Middle School Teacher Needs to Know about Reading Tests (From Someone Who Has Written Them)*—a book focused on helping teachers prepare their students for standardized tests.

This practitioner-oriented book aims to give teachers more practical knowledge about the construction of standardized reading tests. Fuhrken wants teachers to avoid becoming lost in test prep and “wasting their time or their students’ time by having to take stabs at how best to prepare” (p. 4) for the inevitable tests. While this book is a test preparation manual, it also provides teachers with different ways to tackle standardized testing besides assigning worksheets and sample problems. The book is divided into four sections, and throughout each section, mini-lessons are described. Chapters conclude with a list of related classroom activities. A thick, well-organized group of appendices contains resources, including graphic organizers and game cards that promote discussion and can involve students working together.

In the book’s first section, Fuhrken advocates for developing students’ academic language around test-taking and outlines basic assumptions and generalities about standardized testing. The author focuses on building academic language in Chapter 1. Fuhrken believes that “familiarity with test-speak is critical for helping students gain access to the tasks and demands of test items” (p. 10) and explains that “every subject has a language” (p. 11). By helping students to become fluent in the language of standardized reading tests, he says teachers can help students understand what test questions are asking them to think about and do. Teachers are encouraged to explore how test questions are constructed and to help students understand how common tasks are worded on a standardized test. In Chapter 2, the focus shifts to basic assumptions and generalities about standardized testing and why teachers should address them. In this short chapter, Fuhrken tries to persuade the reader that teachers should be “doing more to talk about tests, explore them, expose them, and get smarter about them” (p. 17). The author adds that by focusing on test format and item construction, “teachers are strengthening students’ skill at negotiating the many ideas that confront them within the pages of a test booklet, all the while building their confidence and capabilities as test takers” (p. 22).

The second section of the book, encompassing Chapters 3 through 8, focuses on unpacking the contents of standardized reading tests and providing ways for teachers to prepare students for them. Fuhrken begins with the assertion “that reading tests are mostly the same” (p. 23). Then, he separates the types of reading knowledge measured on standardized reading tests into categories—such as vocabulary development, reading comprehension, literary elements, figurative language, inferences, and author’s purpose—and provides a chapter on each one of these categories. Chapter 4, for example, is entitled “Important Ideas” and essentially focuses on reading comprehension, while Chapter 7, called “Interpretations,” centers on different ways to make inferences from reading passages. Throughout this section, the author provides a multitude of specific teaching and thinking strategies that teachers can use to help students answer different kinds of standardized multiple choice test questions correctly.

Through practice passages and sample questions, the strategies and teaching ideas from the previous section are put to work in Section 3. This section, which is designed like an appendix with no chapters, contains worksheet-style test practice. The author, however, encourages teachers to use this section “as the basis of think-alouds, for mini-lessons, or for other discussions with students” (p. 104). Overall, this section meets its goal of providing “an array of test preparation materials” (p. 103) that allow students to practice various reading strategies.

In Section 4, the author provides hands-on activities that teachers can use to help students understand and explore the types of reading knowledge most often assessed on standardized reading tests. This section has a user-friendly, lesson-plan-style format so teachers can easily implement the activities. For each activity, the necessary resources are listed, activity procedures are detailed, and possible assessments and extensions are suggested. Many of the activities incorporate technology or include reading authentic texts, such as picture books and poetry.

While this book has much to offer teachers, the author—who has contributed to reading assessments in California, Georgia, Mississippi, Texas and Virginia—repeatedly focuses on the idea that teachers “deliver” instruction and information to their students (p. 4; p. 190). This limited view of student-teacher interaction leaves out important considerations about learning and teaching, such as constructivism, while privileging a “banking” model of education (Friere, 2004). Even though numerous reading passages and sample questions are provided, they seem to be based on the assumption that all or most middle school students are capable of reading on the same level. The omission of leveled resources—those tailored to students with different reading abilities—limits the usefulness of the practice materials for many teachers, myself included. As a former reading teacher, the one-size-fits-all approach of some resources, including all of Section 3, would be difficult to adapt for my students’ diverse range of reading abilities. Despite these issues, however, this book succeeds in offering teachers many tools to use when preparing middle school students for standardized reading tests—a necessity given the current prominence of student assessment in schools.

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