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Adult Education, Assessment and the Beginnings of the GED

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Keywords: History, General Educational Development (GED), adult education, testing

Abstract: This study examines the development and implementation of the General Educational Development (GED) examination in the United States. It examines the ways that the GED was initially conceptualized and how the notion of equivalence was popularized.

Introduction

Writing in 1956, Harry E. Tyler (p.66), then the Assistant to Assistant to the Director for Research at the United States Armed Forces Institute (USAFI) enthused, “Probably no instrument of evaluation in the history of education has been so widely used and accepted as have the tests of General Educational Development. Tyler went on to note that by 1956, over one million individuals had taken the test. It was accepted in all 48 states, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, Alaska, Hawaii, and the Panama Canal Zone. According to Tyler it gave a picture of “educational competence without focusing on content”.

Today, the test of General Educational Development (GED) has become almost synonymous with an equivalency degree. In fact, many individuals mistakenly assume that GED stands for General Equivalency Degree and that a degree is granted through the test. In fact however, the case is a bit more complicated than that. In essence, the states accept the GED examination as proof of high school equivalency. The paper will begin a discussion of the development of this examination, how it was conceptualized and what the initial policies concerning this test were. Of particular interest will be the development of a concept of equivalence (if there was one).

The Post-War Development of the GED

The GED was developed in the 1940s as a means of encouraging World War II veterans to take advantage of their G.I. Bill benefits. In planning for the veterans return to society, educators anticipated that some of these veterans would not have completed high school or if they had completed high school, they still might be interested in accelerating their college degree program. The simple premise was that veterans would return from the war with a variety of experiences that could make returning to high school difficult, if not unpalatable. The GED examinations (there were originally college and high school versions) were meant to be used as a placement tool, not as an equivalency degree.

The development of the GED examinations followed a new interest in assessment, outcomes, and testing that had been growing since World War I. While much of the testing literature has dealt with either intelligence testing or the development of such standard tests as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the development of more widely used standardized tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the GED has been less well studied. Philosophically these latter tests had a different root. They were not interested in sorting, but rather in measurement of learning. This paper will examine the thinking that went into the development of the GED and its first dissemination. While the long full length study will focus on the broader

question of how this came to be synonym with equivalency degree, this particular paper is more focused. The aim is to examine how planners envisioned the GED, its initial purpose and purview, and where it fit into broader educational issues of the day.

In October of 1941, the American Council on Education (ACE) began planning for the veterans' return the higher education. They anticipated that colleges and universities would need to make "adjustments" as they prepared for the return of veterans (presumably after returning victorious). It was felt that higher education institutions would need help in making these adjustments. ACE anticipated that the colleges would turn to it as a clearinghouse and to represent their interests and therefore proposed a policy commission to help with planning (ACE, October 15, 1941).

The planning process initially concentrated on the issue of "interrupted educations". This dealt primarily with strategies for continuing high school, but led inextricably to placement in college. After World War I, there had been a presumption that returning veterans would be able to receive advanced standing based on their war experiences alone. Many educators looked back on this postwar period as one of chaos. Some colleges such as the University of California and the University of Illinois took any veteran twenty-one years of age or older, others gave "blanket credit" for the army experience. This meant that veterans were awarded a standard number of credits for their war experience and there was no attempt to ascertain actual learning. As a result, many veterans found themselves placed in classes for which they were not prepared. In the end, this phenomenon of blanket credit was seen as counterproductive, ultimately bringing the degrees these veterans earned into question. (Batmale, 1948).

Determined not to repeat this experience, the first questions planners of the 1940s asked was what educational worth did the armed services experience have and how could this be measured? The initial recommendations for planning carried the suggestion that a testing program be developed that would allow colleges and universities to "objectively evaluate learning" and thus avoid the problems of the post-World War I era (ACE, April 6, 1942). The answer was a vast testing initiative headed by Ralph Tyler of the University of Chicago and E.F. Lindquist of the University of Iowa.

The testing program was instituted relatively quickly. By April of 1944 Tyler was able to report that 1500 tests had already been given. (This was both general educational development and specific subject matter). However, there was still little experience with the actual transfer or awarding of credit or placement. Although the exams were drafted, they were not initially accepted by the colleges. Hence the American Council, with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation set up the Commission on Accreditation of Service Experience (CASE) to handle the problems of dissemination and coordination (Minutes of the Meeting of the Advisory Committee for the United States Armed Forces Institute April 22-23, 1944).

By the 1940s, testing had made a deep impression into higher education. As an American Council on Education study noted in 1947, colleges had expanded their uses of testing in college to include: Admissions, Placement, Counseling, Measurement of outcomes, and Measurement of behavior changes. It is interesting to note the rationale presented in this study for the proliferation of testing. According to this document, testing developed in order to overcome the lock-step intellectualism that had seized colleges and universities in the early part of the twentieth century. In reiterating the history of higher education, Darley et al. (1947) note that the late nineteenth century saw a deep change in higher education. The conception of higher education in America had transformed from a

... concern for the student as a person to concern for the student as a pure intellect. There was a corresponding change in methodology from individualization to mass treatment. Students went along in lock step, and those who could not keep step dropped out or were pushed out with little consideration. The educational philosophy of this period tended to be one of intellectualism, and the methodology seemed production-line in character. (p. 1).

The twentieth century, according to this reading of history, was seeing a return to individualization or what Darley et al call "a return to personalism." For these advocates, testing offered a possibility of greater attention to the individual. "The development of the testing movement made possible quantitative evidence of individual differences in scholastic ability, achievement, vocational interests, and personality traits quite as striking as those universally recognized height, weight, coloring, and other physical characteristics." (Darley et al., 1947, pp. 1-2).

According to this view, the entire field of student personnel was tied to a desire for greater individualization, which ironically led to a greater focus on standardized testing. Additionally, this focus on testing for admission and placement was philosophically tied to a desire to individualize all student learning and learning outcomes, it was not envisioned as a means of accountability. This approach meant that it was necessary to figure out exactly what had been learned. The question of establishing the connection between what learning had occurred and high school equivalence did not seem to be paramount at this time. In the minds of Tyler and Lindquist, it was a small leap from testing to determine what had been learned to testing to determine equivalence. If an individual had gained the equivalent of high school learning through his or her life experiences, then that should be sufficient for entry into higher education.

For Tyler in particular, the development of this testing program was part of a rational plan that included: placement, the granting of credit, and ultimately the motivation of veterans to continue their educations. In recapitulating the history of the process up to that 1943, Tyler indicated that the guiding principles behind the entire equivalency effort were individualization and the notion of proficiency. It was not sufficient simply to note hours served, but rather it was imperative that educators to try to evaluate each veteran. For Tyler, "evidence of competence" lay at the heart of the testing process. This would safeguard both the institution and the individual. In his view, only those who were truly ready should accelerate and the testing process would guarantee that this occur. (Tyler, 1943a p. 166; Tyler, 1943b).

Tyler was completely committed to this ideal of individual evaluation. While he noted that it might be easier to evaluate courses rather than test individuals, he noted that it was not feasible to evaluate all courses and texts since they differed enormously. Thus the only way to measure individual competence was through an examination process. For Tyler, this individualized testing approach coincided with his own emphasis on learning itself rather than the source of learning, that is the classroom (Tyler, July, 1943a, p. 347). The development of the GED was in line with Tyler's long-term view that testing should measure learning and not be used for sorting. In his view, tests that sorted discouraged the non-elite from continuing their educations. Tyler's aim was to look for the learning, no matter how it had been gained (Tyler, 1974).

Putting the entire testing movement into perspective, George F. Zook, President of the American Council on Education, noted in 1946 that ACE had a long history of involvement in testing and comprehensive record keeping, both of which movements were substantially related

to the development of the GED. He noted that “neither the fears of critics or the hopes of visionaries” had come true. While the possibility of transforming American education had not resulted from the development of these tests, neither had the autonomy of individual institutions been lost (Zook, May 4, 1946, p. 2).

From the American Council on Education’s perspective, the proposals concerning equivalence all held the allure of a great experiment that would provide a laboratory for testing theories. The anticipated changes provided all of the partners with the opportunity of conducting “... educational experiments and to study the effect of the new programs” with the aim of deciding whether these innovations were worth continuing (ACE, nd).

All of these innovations were focused on the outcomes of education rather than the process, this was seen as the primary aim of the testing program, although it is interesting that colleges were much readier to accept an outcomes based test for high school, while hesitating on using testing as a means of giving college credit. In fact, the college level GED program never caught on and was not as widely disseminated as the high school level GED. But the developers clearly saw the movement as an attempt to reshape education in general.

The GED and the Tuttle Guides were seen as giving strength to the notion that “... the principle of measured educational achievement rather than time served...” would become the basis of awarding credit at all educational levels (ACE, 1947, p.5). But the implications for this were seen as important for adult education because the GED was seen as measuring adult educational maturity, not years of schooling.

This new testing program was seen as a way of ascertaining learning. (Williamson, 1944). Thus, put baldly, the use of the GED was seen as part of the whole emergence of outcomes based education. There was the concomitant belief that it was possible to define the outcomes of both college and high school and to construct general tests that would measure these so that diplomas or certificates of equivalence could be given. The task was to persuade the colleges and universities that they would benefit from this vision without giving up their autonomy. The task was complex even for those institutions that saw the value of testing but preferred their own tests. For these schools simply norming a single test to meet their needs did not seem as thorough as their own testing program (Williamson, 1944). Importantly, this experiment would provide the opportunity of shortening or accelerating the length of time necessary to complete college. This had been an interest among educators at least since the 1920s. Proficiency exams were consistently used for placement, but not for acceleration and it was hoped that these new tests would begin serious development of acceleration programs and a move away from the four year degree. Even as early as 1945, educators saw the possibility of extending the GED to everyone. After all, as one commentator noted, there was no evidence that more is gained from military training than other training (Pressey, 1943).

Conclusion

The development of the GED is often ignored in the history of testing and yet I believe that it represents an important chapter in this narrative. It is telling that the discussions of the GED all focus on gaining acceptance and norming. There is virtually no discussion of what should be included and what high school level learning truly was. In a sense, according to this test, high school knowledge was measured by what high school seniors knew. But on another level, this test indicated a strong belief in alternative modes of learning. As such, it is one of the first attempts to measure this “non-traditional” learning and to reward it. Additionally, it is important that we realize that the roots of the testing movement, at least in this instance, lie in

individualization. While much of this effort appears to be naïve today, it was indeed an advocate of the ‘learn anytime anywhere’ logic that has taken root in much of higher education today. The fact that this rather limited tool has become part of a broad high school equivalency movement is a surprising and possibly highly political result that also needs to be explored in greater detail.

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