What Makes CBM Tests Useful for Practice When There is "Too Much Testing"

What is Curriculum-Based Measurement's (CBM) place in schools today in an era where many educators and parents alike criticize standardized testing? It is often argued, often appropriately, that there is too much testing in schools, that the amount of time students take tests comes at the cost of loss of valuable classroom instructional time , or that testing encourages teaching to the test. Where do CBM's short, basic skills test fit in an assessment world where test construction has become highly sophisticated, is often computer-delivered and adaptive to students' level of skills? I argue that CBM remains a valuable tool in the assessment toolbox because it provides a *time* and *cost efficient progress monitoring tests* that enable teachers to engage in frequent formative assessment with students at risk or with severe educational needs so they can know, with confidence, that a student is learning or that instruction needs modification. CBM also provides an authentic *time* and *cost efficient basic skills screening tests* that enable educators to identify candidates for early intervention.

For review, CBM is a label for a *type* of basic skills test (i.e., reading, language arts, mathematics) based on the original work of Stanley L. Deno (1985) and his graduate research team beginning around 1978. CBM is based on a unique combination of design features, such as being time-efficient (e.g., less than 5 min), yet scientifically sound, that makes its use extremely valuable for frequent progress monitoring. However, CBM can be used for more than frequent progress monitoring. It has a lengthy history of use in a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) or Response to Intervention (RtI) model beginning around 1980 (Germann & Tindal, 1985; Marston & Magnusson, 1985) as:

a) An *individual* or *universal screener* to identify students who may be in need of more intensive intervention
b) A relatively frequent (e.g., three times per year) *universal progress monitoring test* to ensure all students are progressing in their basic skills
c) A *component of special eligibility determination* in a dual-discrepancy RtI model for specific learning disabilities (SLD)
d) A *program evaluation tool* (Shinn, 2010)

Importantly, it remains the tool of choice for writing IEP goals and monitoring progress toward those goals for students who are determined eligible for special education (Yell & Busch, 2012).

No *single* feature, such as assessment content, test construction approach, or administration and scoring such as ease or efficiency makes CBM useful in today's assessment environment. Other tests also can evaluate basic reading, language arts or mathematics skills. Other tests may also be perceived as time efficient, especially for educators when testing is computer-administered. Other tests may be more closely aligned with state standards or *Common Core State Standards*. But few assessment tools provide the unique *combination* of features that CBM can; tests that are:

(a) *Short*, often in as short as 1 minute and usually no longer than 10 minutes per student *and* per teacher;
(b) *Simple* to learn, use, and understand by educators, parents, and the students themselves using straightforward scores and performance graphs;
(c) *Authentic*, where users can actually *see* how students perform on the tests;

(d) *Sensitive to improvement* so that when *very frequent progress monitoring* is required, the tests can be used weekly with students with severe achievement discrepancies;

(e) *Seamless*, where it is possible to use the same testing approaches and tools across grades (K-12), across Tiers in MTSS/RtI (1, 2, 3, etc.) and instructional delivery systems (general education, and special education, including special education eligibility and IEP goals, annual reviews), and academics and behavior, and

(f) *Psychometrically sound*, where the tests have been the subject of considerable peer reviewed research with respect to technical adequacy, including reliability and evidential validity, including independent reviews by panels of appropriately credential experts for use in frequent progress monitoring and screening.

In an era where just about everyone seems to be anti-testing and when educators are pressed for time, with increasing demands on nearly every dimension, it is important to recognize that some decisions need not be complicated and time-consuming. In the context of so much testing today, using CBM to make K-6 screening decisions and K-12 progress monitoring decisions when appropriate makes sense.

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