Preparing Students to Take a Test: Principles

The aim of test preparation is to ensure that students are well prepared to face the test and that student performance is not affected by extraneous factors.

Being 'well prepared to face the test' means having *opportunity to learn* the knowledge and skills being tested. There is professional judgement involved in deciding *how much is enough*. For the student, the test is just a *point in time* in a stream of ongoing development so it should not be built up as a do-or-die occasion.

'Extraneous factors' are factors that prevent students from demonstrating what they know and can do. These include emotional barriers, such as anxiety and self-doubt, as well as skill barriers, such as lack of appropriate test-taking strategies (test-wiseness).

Three research-based principles

1. Test preparation should be relatively invisible, that is, embedded in normal teaching and learning activities rather than made into a separate 'big deal'.
2. Test preparation is optimised through broad and deep curriculum-based learning rather than through narrow drill and practice on specific test-items.
3. Test preparation includes developing familiarity with test forms and confidence in using appropriate test-taking strategies.

Comments and Guidelines on The Principles

1. **Test preparation should be relatively invisible, that is, embedded in normal teaching and learning activities rather than made into a separate 'big deal'.**

Elevating the importance of upcoming tests is known to have potentially negative effects on students, particularly on students who expect to perform poorly. Students who feel anxious or threatened by the test are unlikely to approach it positively or perform at their best. Many such students simply give up. Suggesting that the student's own future or the school's reputation is at stake makes these effects worse.

Some useful practices:

- Plan test preparation well in advance of the test.
- Distribute test preparation over time throughout your teaching.
- Test preparation does not have to be featured as such.
- Small segments (mini-lessons) are better than whole lessons (for example, mini-lessons on test-taking strategies, test genres, test formats, test language as part of literacy and numeracy activities).
- Depict tests as special occasions offering challenge, interest and fun.
- Frame learning as resulting from personal effort not innate ability, and experiencing difficulty as a normal aspect of working something out.[1]
- Encourage students to have-a-go even when uncertain.
- Encourage students to try for their personal best.
- Be sensitive to student differences—adapt your approach according to individual characteristics and needs.

[1]In a recent study, Autin and Croiset (2012) showed that when students are helped to believe that experiencing difficulty is not a sign of intellectual incompetence (thereby removing an anxiety-making threat to their self-image), their capacity to store and process information is enhanced.

2. Test preparation is optimised through broad-and-deep curriculum-based learning, rather than through narrow drill-and-practice on specific test-items.

It has been shown that students perform better on tests if they have 'gone beyond' the specific test, both in scope and depth. The knowledge and skills assessed by the test can be covered in the process of teaching the broader curriculum. Students who have broader knowledge, ideas, vocabulary, ways of thinking, analytical methods, and problem solving skills have developed greater cognitive flexibility to handle the challenges of previously unseen test items. Students who are restricted to drill-and-practice directed at a particular test are disadvantaged in two ways: they will perform worse on the test; and they are deprived of a more general and useful education.

Some useful practices:
- Implement a broad and deep curriculum for all students.
- Make learning and assessment authentic and meaningful.
- Develop general cognitive and metacognitive skills (thinking and reflecting).
- Develop both declarative knowledge (knowing about) and procedural knowledge (knowing how to).

3. Test preparation includes developing familiarity with test-forms and confidence in using appropriate test-taking strategies.

Some whole-test experience is useful for building confidence, persistence, stamina and pacing, but over-practice is counterproductive (because it becomes boring and builds anxiety). The aim is to develop student confidence and reduce any fear of the unknown.

> **Some useful practices:**
> * Create familiarity with the test: its purpose; its form; what it does and does not do; when it will be taken; how results will be used.
> * Develop familiarity with the test: what it looks like; following directions; response strategies; time management.
> * Teach test vocabulary and how to read and understand what is being asked.
> * Model meta-cognitive thinking: strategies for analysing the question and for problem solving.
> * Teach test-taking strategies (test-wiseness, see separate Brief on this).

Informing literature:

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