

Does Assessment Have to Drive the Curriculum?

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Abstract

This paper presents the differing sides to the discussion of how much assessment is too much. A teacher survey was administered to practicing teachers in the Lincoln Memorial University graduate program to determine how assessment affects classroom instruction and student learning. The research reflects more often than not that assessment does leave student learning behind. According to Bloom's Taxonomy, recalling facts is at the lower end of critical thinking skills. Test questions with only one correct answer rely on rote memorization. We can conclude, therefore, that the current emphasis on assessment, testing what the student can or cannot recall, may be doing a disservice to students. Prince Charles referred to assessment as a "straitjacket" and encouraged teachers to do what they do best: teach. British teachers, like their American counterparts, are chafing under the mandates prescribed by ECM (Every Child Matters) and NCLB (No Child Left Behind). There is an alternative way to test student learning. Is authentic assessment an answer?

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In the real estate market the key word is location, location, location. In education the key word is assessment, assessment, assessment. Do we need all the assessment? What is the purpose behind all the assessment in our schools? Assessment is a concern not only in our schools in the United States, but in British schools as well. Are teachers to teach to the test? Are the tests an accurate reflection of a level of intelligence or merely a reflection of what a student can recall or know? What about authentic assessment, does it have a place in our schools? Are we testing what our students will be able to do in the world as citizens or are we testing them to see what they can merely recall?

According to Bloom's Taxonomy, recalling facts is at the lower end of the spectrum of critical thinking skills. Application and synthesis of knowledge reside at the top of Bloom's Taxonomy. Are we doing our students a disservice in our assessment of their knowledge? Are we restricting classroom activities, projects, and other hands-on activities for the sake of the test? How do we answer these questions as teachers? As administrators? As school districts? As nations? Are we truly assessing our students' abilities in the real world in which they live?

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There is a heavy emphasis on testing to measure what students are/are not mastering in the content areas. Testing, according to Paul Ramsey, a representative of Educational Testing Service, “must provide accurate, valid, and reliable measurement of student knowledge. These tests must be aligned with the curriculum. If tests are not aligned with the curriculum, the test cannot be a valid measure for standards-based accountability” (speech, 2006).

There is a growing “concern about the fairness of external testing and the undue pressure it places on students and teachers” (Volante, 2006). Questions with only one right answer rely on rote memorization; they are fact-driven (Swope, 2000). And what about the *Limited English Proficient students*? According to Peterson (2002), many schools will find themselves on the *Needs Improvement List*. In fact, Petersen says, “some state superintendents predict that within a few years upwards of 80% of all schools will be on the list” (2002).

Students can learn so much from each other. When teachers teach to the test, time is taken from collaborative work and this limits students’ learning. No one is going to live as an isolated Gilligan on his own little island. Students need to learn and live collaboratively. Rotherham states that we need “more than a list of standards” (2006). In an interview with TheodoreSizer (2006), Rotherham agreed that there must be better ways than our present methods of assessment. The trouble with the No Child Left Behind and assessment is that it is “narrowing everything to a single score, to a test on a particular day” (2006).

Many claim that “educational standards coupled with external testing increases accountability and allows for greater instructional consistency” (Volante, 2007). Ramsey (2006) advocates “adequate opportunities for students to learn the material that will be tested and...the format of the test that will be used.” We need a balance between classroom and large scale assessment. According to Volante (2007), the most timely and relevant type of assessment data is “integrating a range of curriculum-embedded assessment measures for accountability purposes, focusing attention when it is needed most—improving reliability and validity of classroom assessment data.” Swope & Miner (2000) agree that the goal of assessment should be “to help students learn and to provide them a quality education—not to constantly compare schools and children.”

So, does teaching to the test drive the curriculum? Volante (2007) answers with an emphatic “yes”. Research has documented that teaching to the test does raise test scores, but what is the overall effect on the student population? He also asks the question, “Is there application from these tests to the real world?” However, Swope & Miner (2000) believe that “standardized tests will never answer the questions of what our children need to learn to be leaders and informed citizens in a multicultural, ever-changing world.” Standardized testing results often create a narrowly taught curriculum because these test results are considered “high stakes” measurements.

Just what is the history of standardized testing? In the past standardized testing or IQ tests were used to sort children mostly along racial and class lines. The latest form of standardized testing is getting similar results. Standardized tests can actually determine teaching and learning in ways that can harm children (Swope & Miner, 2006). Standardized tests only test factual knowledge (recall) and not aspects of thinking and learning. The more schools use standardized tests, the more the curriculum becomes standardized. According to Harold Berlak as quoted in Swope & Miner, 2006, state-mandated standards and tests “are an effort to put an end to the most valuable asset of views about what constitutes truth, knowledge, and learning....Standardized curriculum and tests insist upon one set of answers and only one.”

According to Schieble (2006), the National Curriculum in Britain has significantly narrowed what can be taught and has reinforced...a skill-and-drill approach to schooling. It is virtually impossible to avoid when there’s such an emphasis on examination results and classroom teachers are held accountable for students’ test scores. Prince Charles made headlines regarding the National Curriculum and examinations: “I want to encourage teachers to enrich their teaching despite the straitjacket of assessment.” And he continued, “More frequent exams mean that the time for learning has shrunk and that leads to defensive teaching” (Peterson, 2002). Yet, Ramsey, the Educational Testing Services representative states, “The NCLB in the US and the ECM (Every Child Matters in England) learning standards are mandated, measured, and tracked and by law require annual assessment” (2006). He even goes on to say that “Tests are a necessary component of standards-based education reform but they are not sufficient within

themselves.” He believes that teachers must have training in “appropriate methods for standards-based teaching.” There must be clear articulation between standards and standards-based testing. All stakeholders must be informed and educated about the assessment procedure. What is happening in the US and in England is that some educators are “adopting counter-productive teaching activities such as narrowing of the curriculum that were directed at increasing highly publicized scores” (Volante, 2007).

According to Swopes & Miner (2000), “Many standardized tests are norm-referenced. They are designed to compare, sort, and rank children. In a norm-referenced test, 50% of the children will always be “below average.” In other words, they will fail, no matter what they do or know. Do students get better the more tests they take? According to Dom Antony Sutch, headmaster of one of Britain’s leading Roman Catholic schools (Peterson, 2002), “People are not machines. We seem to believe that you can fatten a pig just by weighing it. The government wants to measure everything—What are they measuring?” Chris Searle, a lecturer at Godsmith College at the University of London (Peterson, 2002), states that “the educational system in Britain is a “curriculum prison.” Between the ages of four and 18 students take approximately 75 examinations. Searle says, “Examinations have ceased to examine children’s real knowledge.”

What can be done to rectify this assessment problem? The US and England are both multicultural countries. Therefore, how do we envision a marriage between standardized assessment and multicultural education? After all, testing is only one part of the educational pie. Even though standards-based reforms and external testing seem to be with us, we must remember the “relative importance of assessment OF learning (summative), assessment FOR learning (formative), and assessment AS learning (assessment) is not graded but used as a learning tool” (Volante, 2007).

What is best for students is performance-based assessments—essays, research projects, science experiments, or work that shows student progress over time such as portfolios. Many educators are confused about just how to go about all this assessment. In Georgia, teachers are required to use GPS (Georgia Performance Standards) yet in the actual testing process, standardized tests are used, which only ask for knowledge or facts that students can merely

recall, not apply. Another caveat—standardized tests are given on school days, usually taking two to three hours for each testing session. Do we really have time that we can take away from the curriculum? (Swopes & Miner, 2000). Another point to consider with the standardized-tests driven curriculum is that it often sets the bar low for achievement. Often the curriculum gets “dumbed down” to teach to the test.

In addition to the research cited in the narrative above, we conducted action research with our students at Lincoln Memorial University. We surveyed 791 teachers in the graduate education program, almost 90% of whom are classroom teachers. Each teacher is directly affected by the NCLB and the assessment it mandates. The four statements we used were answered on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being *strongly disagree* and disagree and 5 being *strongly agree*. There were two open ended questions. (See Appendix A for a copy of the survey.) The compilation of the results for the four statements may be seen in Appendix B, but for the purpose of this paper, we will summarize the results.

A majority of the teachers feel that the curriculum frameworks allow integration of research-based best practices in the classroom instruction (statement #1), but performance standards and assessment criteria affect time spent on instruction (statement #2). Answers to statements #3 and #4 were not as clearly delineated. A large number said staff development is provided for use of assessment to improve classroom instruction, but a larger number were either *neutral* or *disagreeing*. A ray of sunshine came in statement #4, where teachers said (almost triumphantly, it seems) that “yes,” students are provided opportunities for demonstrating knowledge beyond recall “through authentic assessment.” (We added the quote marks). And of course, the ones providing students with these opportunities are the classroom teachers, not NCLB. The answers to questions #5 and #6 (“In your opinion, who are the children left behind?” and “Are you able to identify and help these students in your classroom?”) do not lend themselves to simple categorization. The respondents to the survey used these questions to “vent” their frustrations and indeed hostility to NCLB and its requirements. In compiling the results, we used these categories: *special education students, below average or slow learners, average students, gifted or above average students, non-English speakers, transients or unstable families, and lower socio-economic students*. Surprisingly, other categories, such as *African Americans, students*

with disabilities, apathetic and problem students, and non-college prep students received very little mention.

Receiving the most votes (25%) was the category of *below average or slow learner*. A typical comment: “The push to move on and cover all the curriculum dictates those struggling often do not catch up...We are so focused on passing the test that the test drives our curriculum.” The *gifted student* received the next highest number (17%), surpassing the *average student* (14%), the *special education student* (11%), the *low socio-economic student* (11%), the *transient student* (9%), and the *non-English speakers* (7%). Since 25% was the highest number of votes that any category received, it is understandable that this comment is very appropriate: “**All children** are being left behind because teachers are data collectors and time for creativity and instruction are limited.” (We added the emphasis.)

Another apt comment: “All children are left behind because we are so test-driven in schools today that we do not give children the opportunity to explore their minds or to think outside the box.” The above numbers account for 94% of the total answers on question #5. The other 6% scattered their answers over the categories of *African American, students with disabilities, problem students, non-college bound, and apathetic students*. The surprising result from question #5 is that there is no clear obvious answer. Not surprising is that 25% of the teachers thought that the *slow learner* is the one being left behind, but the other 69% chose in such numbers that there is not a great deal of difference. Teachers agree that indeed children are being left behind because of the push **not** to leave any behind, but exactly who is being left behind varies from teacher to teacher.

The results for question #6 are overwhelmingly positive with 93% of the respondents saying “yes” they can identify those being left behind. This particular question received the largest number of “no answers” to the second part: “Are you able to help these students?” In other words, the teachers can identify the “left behind,” but they cannot help. If there were comments, this is representative of them: “Identifying these students is easy; having enough time or resources to help is hard.”

Only 17% said unequivocally, “Yes, I can help,” while 8% said, “No, I can’t help.” The other 75% either did not answer or said they try to help but it is difficult. The frustration with NCLB seemed to burst out on the second half of question #6. The most succinct comment was this: “Yes, I can identify and do try to help, but NCLB needs to be rethought.”

The ultimate objective for assessment should be to put authentic teaching and learning at the forefront of efforts to reform assessment policies and practice (Volante, 2007). Authentic assessment/performance assessments simulate real-life tasks. Authentic assessment tests for application and synthesis, which require higher level of thinking skills. Volante (2007) states that “Effectiveness {of assessment} should be understood as a product of authentic teaching and learning that focus on the demonstration of higher-order thinking skills and knowledge transfer.” Volante (2007) states, and we agree, that “Failure to balance our assessment methods leads to predictable negative consequences for students, teachers, and the school system in general.”

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Appendix A

Survey

What Impact Does Assessment (NCLB) Have on Classroom Instruction?

Demographics

Position:	Elementary	Middle	High School	Years of Experience
Administrative	_____	_____	_____	1—5___6—10___11-20___20+___
Teacher	_____	_____	_____	1—5___6-10___11-20___20+___
Employment State:	TN___GA___NC___KY___AL___SC___VA___			

Read each item carefully and circle your response using the Likert scale below.

1=Strongly disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neutral 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree

1. Curriculum frameworks allow integration of research based best practices in classroom instruction.

1 2 3 4 5

2. Performance standards and assessment criteria affect time spent on instruction.

1 2 3 4 5

3. Staff development is provided for use of assessment to improve classroom instruction.

1 2 3 4 5

4. Students are provided opportunities for demonstrating knowledge beyond recall through authentic assessment.

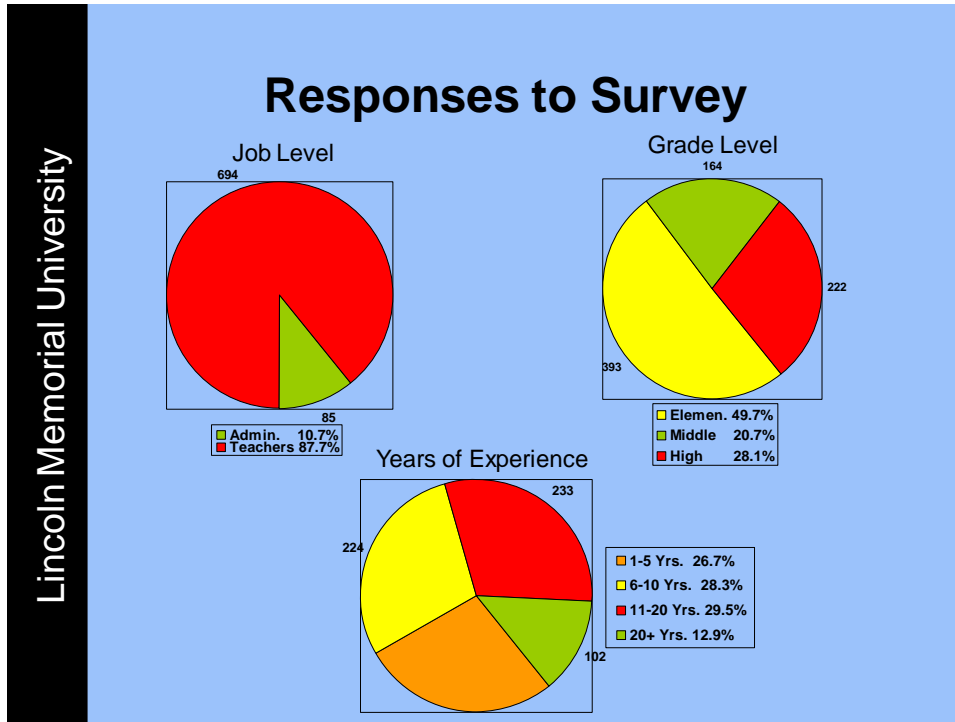
1 2 3 4 5

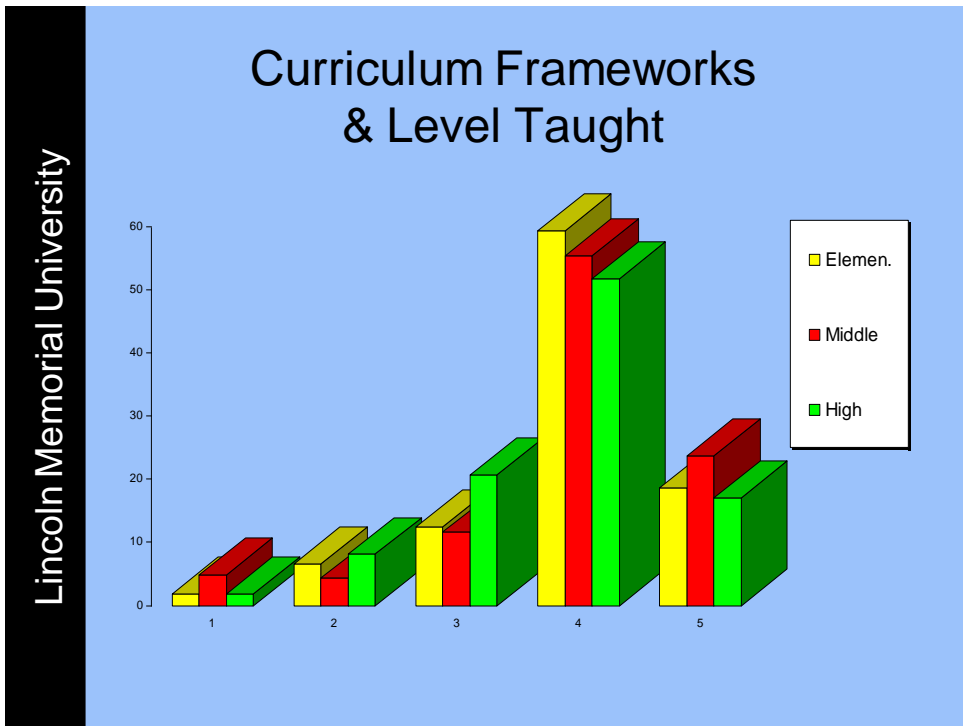
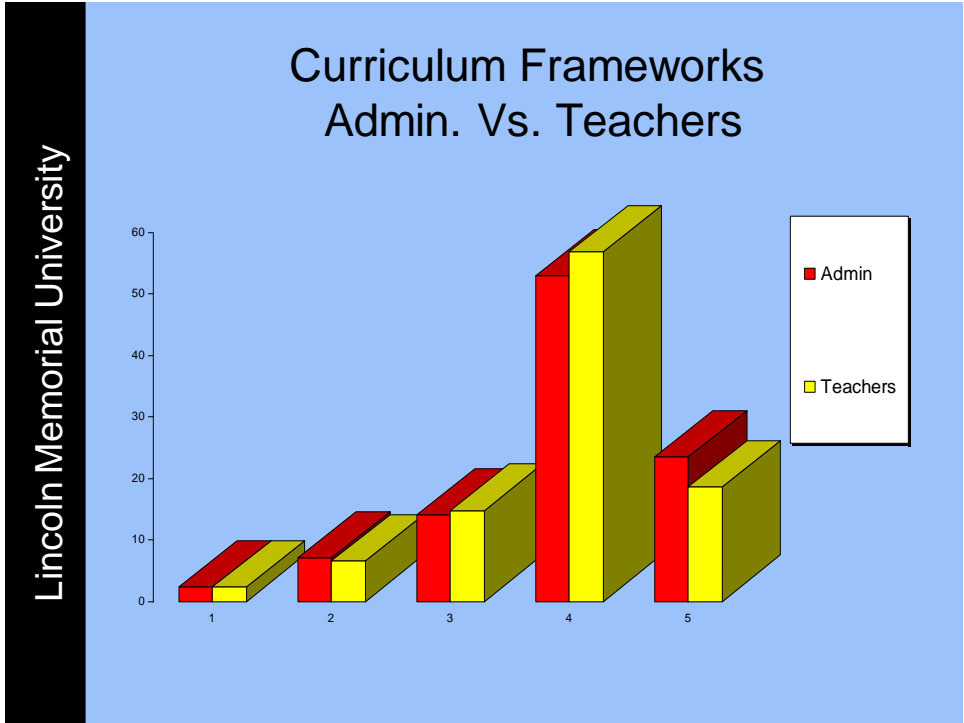
If necessary, use the back to complete the two following questions.

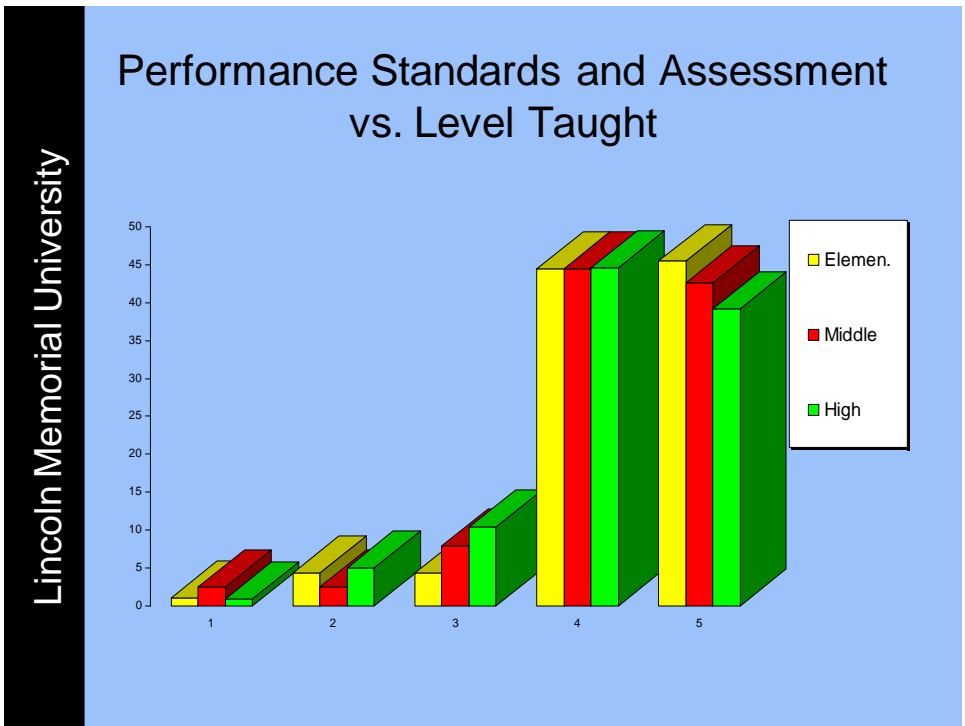
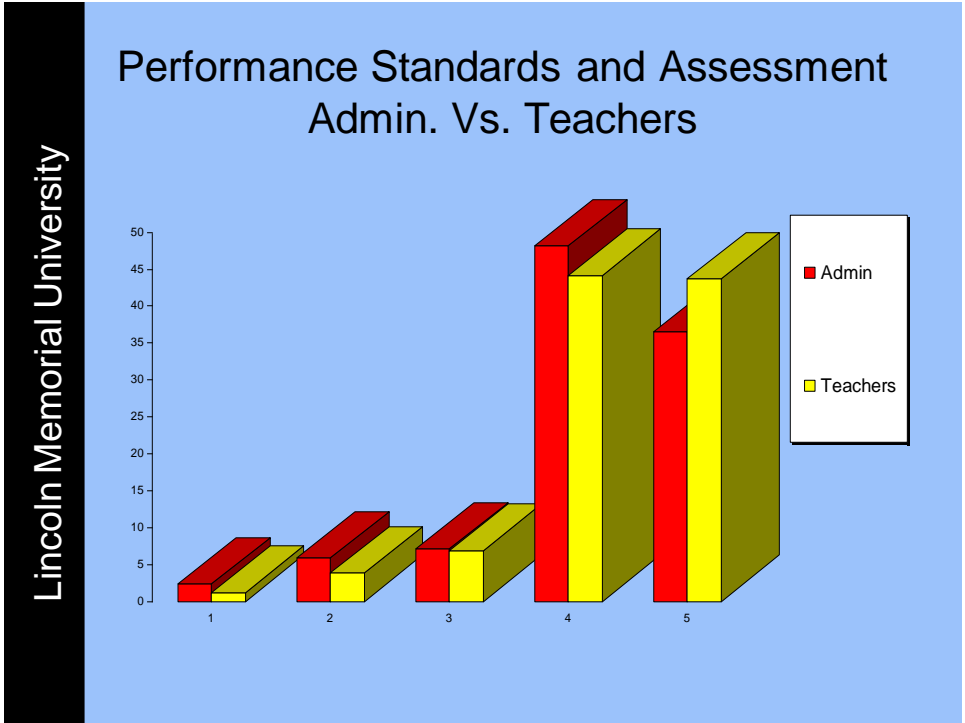
5. In your opinion, who are the children left behind?

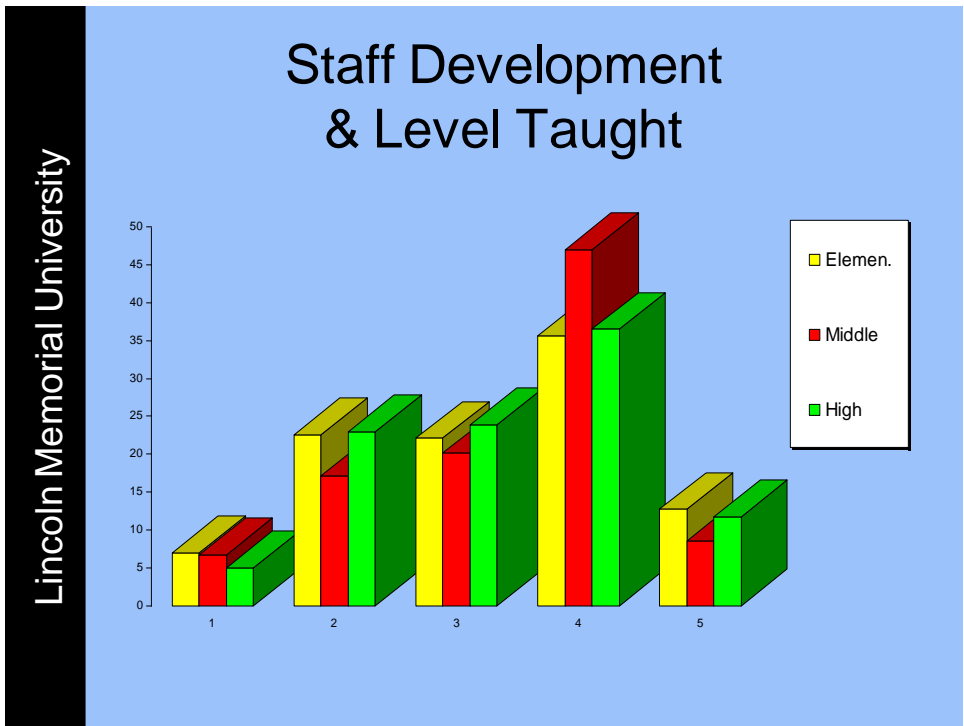
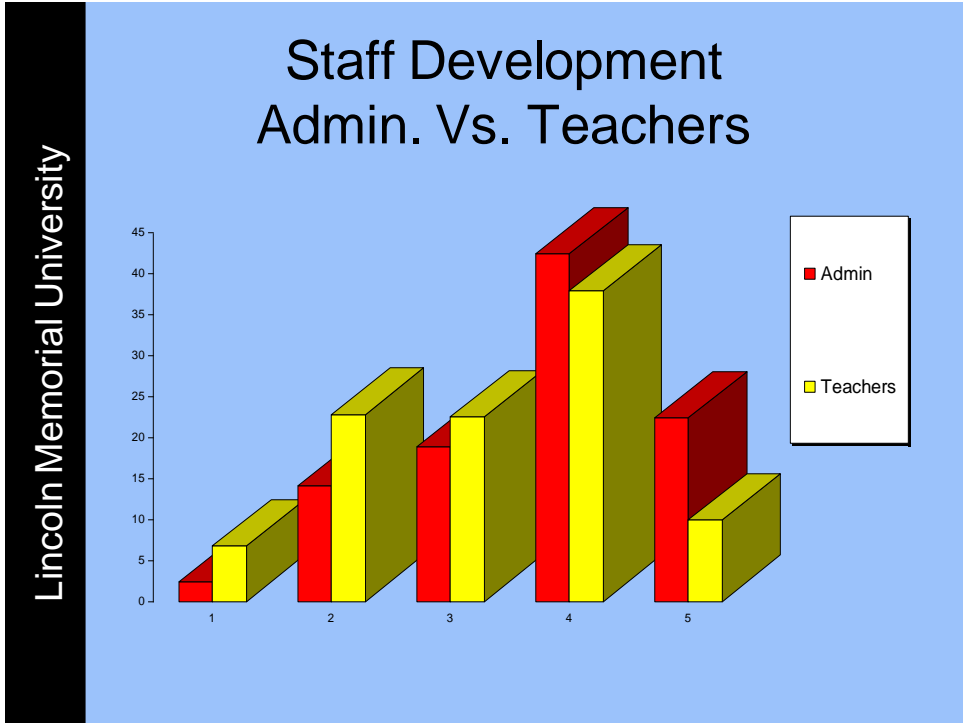
6. Are you able to identify and help these students in your classroom?

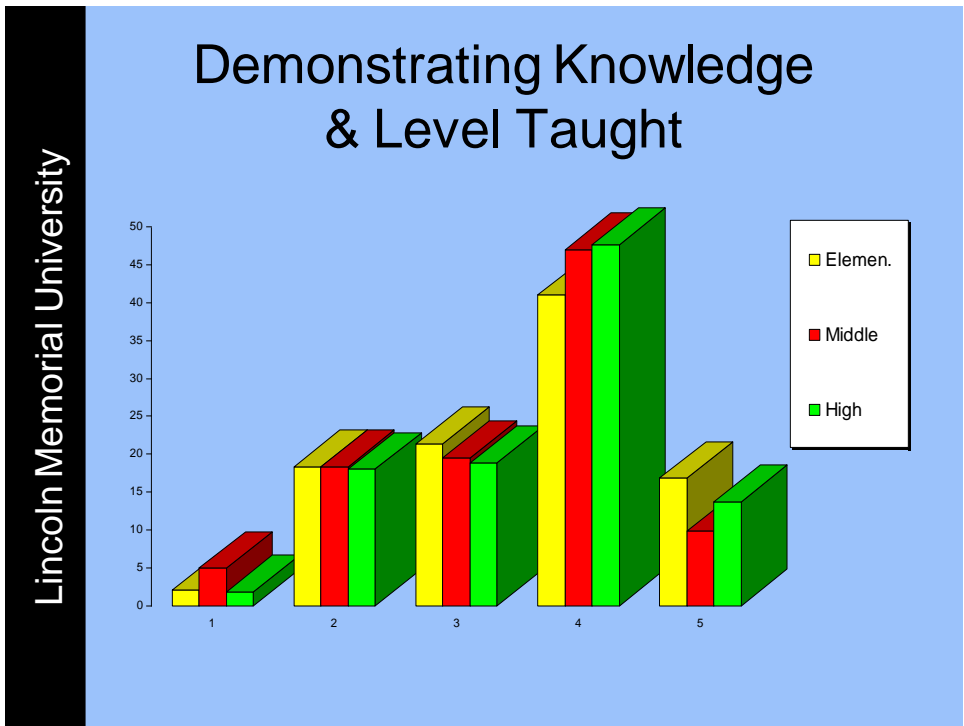
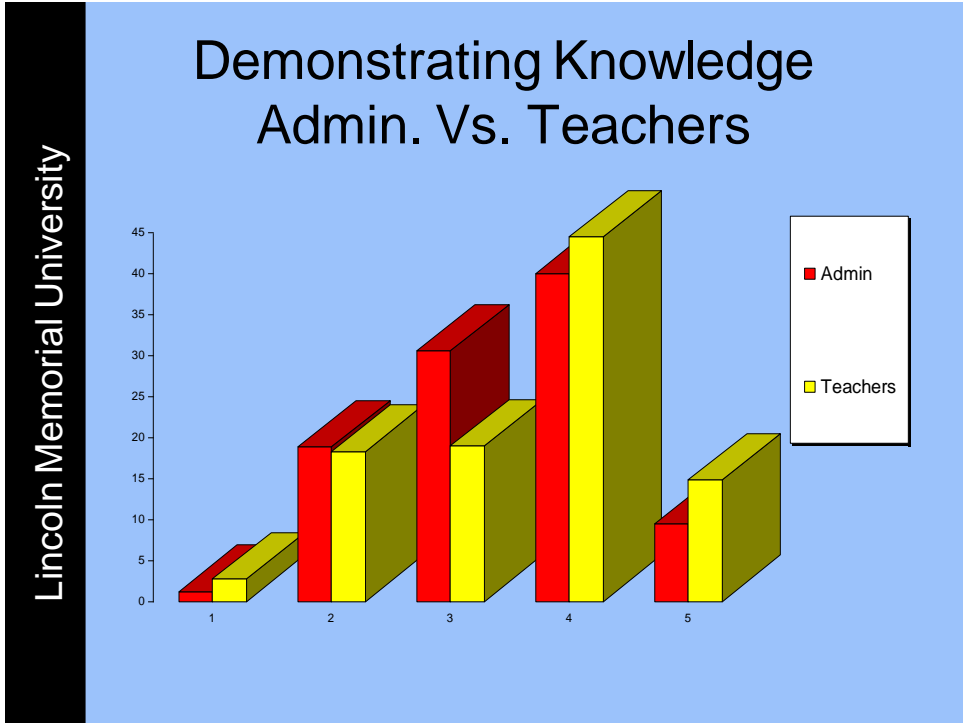
Appendix B



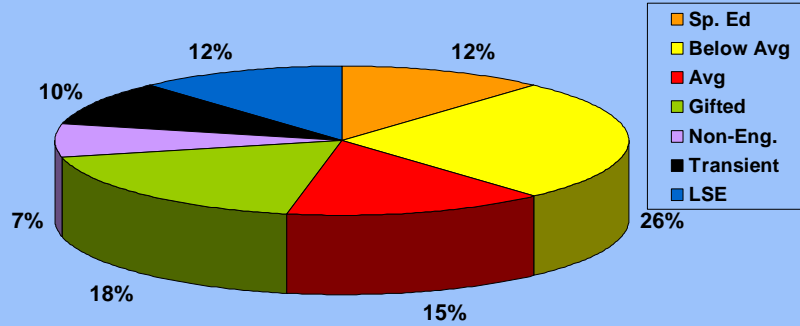






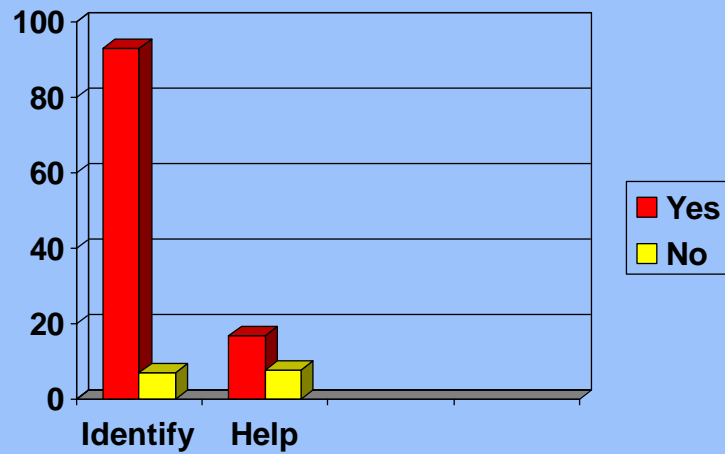


Question #5- In your opinion, who are the children left behind?



The above numbers account for 94% of the total answers on question #5. The other 6% were scattered over several different categories

Question #6 - Are you able to identify and help these students in your classroom?



In the second part of this question, the other 75% either did not answer or said they try to help but it is difficult.