

The standards movement, in the wrong direction

This idea of standard is the problem with the education system. We struggle to find a test to accurately determine pedagogical efficacy, but we will never obtain success. Standardized testing forces curriculum to the lowest common denominator, leeching out of students the very ingredient that the education system is in charge of nurturing: the creative individuality that strengthens the societal fabric. Diversity is a strong fiber, required for healthy economy, rich political discourse and lives interesting enough to enjoy, not simply endure. To achieve pedagogical efficacy we need assessment, but we fail our students when we rely on a test, a single measure logistically incapable of qualifying the output of an education system.

Students know that out of a universe of possibilities, what is valuable is what is on the test (Wiggins, 1999). We are sending them the message that rote and regurgitate is valued; global perspectives are qualified through a narrow lens and reduced, categorized and returned truth or heresy. We send them the message that their world view is inadequate (unless they come from a homogenized all-American Rockwell or assimilated how to act like they did) and should be hard-returned to a center agreed upon by an isolated academia and their faithful followers in middle management in the front offices of schools. We are generous enough to allow students to take a break from guessing which mindless bubbles to populate and ask for complete sentences in unimpassioned essays, but we send them the message that we value inorganic and audience-repelling structure more than prose or personal perspective.

There is a deeper more profound message we are sending our students with standardized testing: they are their track. Standardized testing is used to track students in the theory that separate is equal and low-performing students should be held to lower expectations. By giving

them less challenging texts and programmed writing exercises, avoiding essay assignments and having them work quietly and alone, we were telling them that they are not thinkers, readers and writers; that their behavior needs to be controlled; they are not ready for exciting, challenging curriculum; that they need to be separated from students who want to learn. We see from their low attendance rate, disruptive classroom behavior and poor school work ethic that they understood our messages and have learned to fulfill our expectations (Cone, 2002). The environment in low-performing tracks, where the highest cost education is required, is not conducive to learning. Students who do want to better their scholastic performance are deterred by aggressive classroom behavior and a paradoxical belief that the education system is a prison, and students have to do their time until they are set free. Standardized testing and tracking imprisons low-performing students instead of assessing them and empowering them to improve their performance.

The indicated purpose of standardized testing is to better serve under-served populations. In theory, the remedy within NCLB is to allow students who are deemed to be denied an adequate education a chance to receive one through a voucher system that allows them access, transportation and assistance into a better performing school. These provisions should encourage economic school integration; in fact, the early experience with NCLB suggests that very few families are taking advantage of the opportunity to transfer (Kahlenberg, 2004). NCLB's primary purpose, armed with its weapon of mass deconstruction – the standardized test – is failing, only punishing the wounded with fatal lashes. The low-income schools' major offence is being wounded, lacking the necessary resources. They are being forced to fight for their dinner: teaching to a test in hopes of progressive achievement to receive the funding required to properly educate their students. They are forced to further deny the students' needs in any holistic, locally

defined manner, to revolve curriculum not around students' needs, but on an external definition of competency, in order to get any resources at all out of the already deficient pool. This system penalizes the target beneficiaries with the very limitation that impedes their achievement in the first place.

Testing can provide essential feedback. Like any inventory, an understanding of how we obtain our goals is only achieved with knowledge of where we have been and where we are now. Like any inventory, our assessment must be accurate. In the case of standardized testing, we can not ensure that the results are valid. We can not ensure that the test sample of relatively few and generic questions accurately represents the vast and highly specialized domain. We can not be certain that inferences about student, teacher and school yield a clear map to progressive achievement (Merrow, 2001).

There is a politics of testing drowning any valuable results. Politicians can impose tests without getting into the messy details of the classroom. Tests can offer the illusion of solution without tending to the societal, behavioral and environmental causation for low-performance. The political benefits are many. Test results are quantifiable, cheap and administratively convenient. But standardized tests neglect two important factors: why are students performing poorly and how do we improve their performance?

There are two ways to test students, to evaluate their assimilation of prescribed content and gauge their progress. One way is to ask them to provide an answer, a performance or product. The other method is to select an answer. Standardized testing primarily relies on the latter, to facilitate the unrealistic logistics of taking a sweeping inventory of all students in the nation and use the data to design a homogeneous curriculum that addresses all of their needs. All singular assessments have an intrinsic standard error of measurement. Testing is a technology,

and like all technology is fallible. The duration of the test, environment of the testing center, potential for mis-keyed answers and mis-read results, ambiguity in questions and the myriad of students' personal issues all effect achievement. The design and complexity of the tests themselves is suspect. Three-parameter item-response theory algorithms can break down, but educators unaware of inner workings are not able to diagnose and solve problems with the test (Merrow, 2001).

There are successful models to draw from; schools with issues of poverty, minority and adversity; whom still perform high. So-called 90/90/90 schools have five key elements that are the foundation of their success: a focus on academic achievement, clear curriculum choices, frequent assessment of student progress, multiple opportunities for improvement, an emphasis on nonfiction writing, and collaborative scoring of student work. Assessment is essential to their success, but successful schools included an intensive focus on student data from multiple sources, and specifically focused on cohort data, to create a whole picture. Testing implies an end-of-year, summative, and evaluative process. Students submit to a test and typically many months later, the results are used by newspapers and policy makers to render a judgment about education and diagnose an ill, prescribing a cure. The best practice in assessment dictates that students are required to complete a task and then immediately or within days receive useful feedback designed to improve their performance (Reeves, 2003).

Focusing on teaching to the test is a widely accepted problem with standardized testing, but it has been said that knowing something is better than knowing nothing and many students would benefit even if only by learning the material that is to be tested. This concession is likened to a metaphor of deterring drivers from speeding:

It is shown that the optimal rules for high-stakes testing depend on the costs of learning and of monitoring. For high cost learners, and when monitoring technology is inefficient, it is better to announce what will be tested. For efficient learners, de-emphasizing the test itself is the right strategy. This is analogous to telling drivers where the police are posted when police are few. At least there will be no speeding on those roads. When police are abundant or when the fine is high relative to the benefit from speeding, it is better to keep police locations secret, which results in obeying the law everywhere (Lazear, 2004).

This metaphor is based on the belief that Children who are high-cost learners are less likely to learn all the material and therefore learn more when they are told what is on the exam. This is extrinsic reward by threatening consequence and reducing learning to penalties for wrong choices. This denies students their natural desire to learn, the intrinsic reward of acting responsibly in a societal system, driving the speed limit because they feel a part of a system, armed with an understanding of how that system works and that speeding jeopardizes their community.

If we standardized the test, we standardize the student. This sends them the wrong messages and takes our education system in the wrong direction. We must include diverse indices for assessment to grow diverse students and build a strong society. Reducing curriculum to achieve a homogenized student, who conforms to the lowest common denominator, unable to make decisions without multiple choice achieves our standard, and that standard is low.

References

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