

Disillusioning the Youth: How Standardized Testing Reduces Learning Opportunity

Robert Pantano

Within us all there is a compulsion to learn and placate the deeply inquisitive conscious facet of the human mind. Starting as a child, it seems as though we cannot refrain from asking something about everything and igniting the flame of perpetual inquest. Arguably, it is formal education's role and responsibility to aid in the fostering and fulfillment of this inquisitive nature. Modern American education is comprised of individuals of immensely diverse backgrounds, skillsets, intellectual capacities, and social positions. It is, therefore, essential that the educational infrastructure reflects and supports such diversity. In its current form, education does not attend fully to the spirit of inquiry, creativity, and diversity that children and society so need and deserve.

The current education system is composed of high-stakes standardized testing-based curriculums that reduce the educational process to levels beneath its potential. Standardized tests are tests that require all test takers to answer the same questions in the same way and then be scored in a consistent and standard fashion in order to compare relative performance across a large body of test takers (The Glossary of Education Reform). This type of testing permeates through the entire hierarchal infrastructure of education, K through 12th grade. It pushes creativity, critical thinking, diversity, and integrity to the wayside of the classroom and in its place, prioritizes the objectification of students through memorization and narrow curriculum regurgitation. As a result, students are treated as performers, polarized towards a narrow center, rather than as a diverse group of learners. The high stakes accountability role of standardized testing should be reduced and the format and content should be reformed. In doing so, schooling can work towards fueling

the flame of human spirit with inquiry, creativity, and diversity, rather than working to put it out.

Since the conception of the United States of America, education has been upheld as a priority for the purpose of creating and sustaining an effectively functioning society composed of happy and prosperous individuals. Starting in the mid-20th century, federal involvement in education significantly increased. In the article, "Telling Schools What To Do, Not How To Do It: Reimagining The Federal Government's Role In Public Education," by Jason Miller, Miller argues that a major historical instance that caused an increase of federal involvement in education was the Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*. On a federal level, this case determined that segregated public education was unconstitutional. This ruling, in favor of *Brown*, referred to the 14th Amendment, which protects all natural born citizens of the United States from being denied, "life, liberty or property, without due process of law" (US Const. amend. XIII). It is this notion of equal education for all citizens that sparked federal interest in providing and ensuring the carrying out of an inclusive and standardized quality of education across the nation.

This standardized approach was propelled by America's foreign relationship with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Following the Soviet Union's victory in the "Race to Space" with the successful launch of Sputnik, "lawmakers began to consider the quality of education a national security issue" (609). This sense of fear, stemming from early anticommunist organizations and the general Cold War consensus, caused federal officials to pass the National Defense Education Act of 1958 which directed educational funding almost entirely towards the practical arts, such as math, science, and reading. In order to ensure this redirection and the proper funding, the need for narrowly constructed standardized testing became even more pertinent in education.

In the twenty-first century, in a continued attempt to standardize education across the nation, the federal No Child Left Behind Act was passed. Under the act, the first major standardized accountability testing was applied to schools in order to

regulate federal funding. The act suggested that high scoring schools would receive greater funding and low scoring schools would receive varying penalties, upwards of school shut downs (Miller 611). This high stakes accountability was a widespread application of administrative pressure in education, forcing schools to further reform curriculums in order to meet specific standardized ideals.

Specifically, as a result of the introduction of NCLB, schools have narrowed curriculums further towards only core competencies in the practical arts, focusing far more on what will likely be on a standardized test, rather than what might be engaging and intrinsically valuable. This narrowing resulted in the Taylorization, or a Scientific Management approach, of education. Scientific Management was a concept founded by Frederick W. Taylor, designed to increase work productivity by minimizing or eliminating facets of an institution that do not provide an equal or greater output in relation to their required work input. Professor John Hunter of The Adelaide Institute of TAFE, South Australia, when considering Scientific Management's effectiveness for an entity like education, states that the applications of Scientific Management onto labor companies can result in a "need for coordination, [an] alienation of employees, and [a difficulty in balancing] quality against the dominant theme of quantity" (4). He goes on to argue that an infrastructure based on input-simplification is especially hazardous to education because it ignores the qualitative aspect and neglects major areas of skill and knowledge. By marginalizing a curriculum to a minute standardized form, education narrows opportunity for diverse and valuable learning and instead yields a product-like output of homogenous students.

If the purpose of education is to prepare individuals for successful lives, intrinsically and extrinsically, as well as to facilitate a successfully functioning collective societal and economic state, ultimately cycling back to the opportunity and happiness of the individuals, then education must attend to both the individual and collective. In the article "Modern Education: A Tragedy of The Commons," by San José State University Education Professors Smith Grinell and Colette Rabin, they argue for the

essential focus of education and how it has been deprived by the application of standardized testing. Grinell and Rabin claim that the “primary reason for getting an education is to become happy, healthy, well-adjusted, and fulfilled people who understand how to live balanced lives in the context of our families, communities, cultures and ecosystems” (748). The very nature of the term standardized testing appears to counter the purpose of education. Grinell and Rabin claim that schools have stopped considering “children as whole people with rich and complex interests, desires, and skills” (749). In order to fulfill the interests of standardized testing, schools must fulfill standardized curriculums. In order to fulfill standardized curriculums, students must be polarized towards manageable centers.

In the article, “Standardized testing and the construction of governable persons” by Cameron Graham, when referring to the governmental function of standardized testing, Graham cites French philosopher and social theorist, Michel Foucault, in his argument that the structure of standardized testing “combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish” (300). It is the objective examination process in which standardized testing imposes on students, that reconstructs student individuals as “cases.” An individual can then “be described, judged, measured, compared with others in his individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, normalized, excluded, etc.” (300). In other words, standardized testing functions as a disciplinary measure that objectifies students. In Foucault’s book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he states that the disciplinary function of standardization in education “imposes homogeneity,” in support of maintaining the power for the observing hierarchy. As a result, educational curriculums are narrowed towards the white male archetype and classrooms are polarized toward manageable and homogeneous centers.

The fundamental problem with the standardized structure in education is illustrated by the means of conducting, allocating, and interpreting standardized test data. Standardized tests

are based upon the principles of quantitative data assessment. Quantitative data assessment examines and defines the functions, or malfunctions, of a system in terms of numeric figures. For many systems, quantitative assessment can provide clarity through the objective and numerical analysis of the conditions of reality and the subsequent groups within said reality. Mills College Professor of Education Anna Richert defends the process of quantitative assessment in education. Richert claims that quantitative assessments are:

The same sorts of careful, methodical, objective investigative techniques that have proven so stunningly effective in helping us understand so much of the natural universe... if we follow the same rationalist investigative path as natural scientists, we will be rewarded with an equally robust and detailed understanding of our systems of education, and perhaps even the processes of education itself. (Richert)

For Richert and others alike, numbers are the backbone of reality and in order to understand reality, one must assess and define it using numbers. This approach holds valid within the context of understanding logistical systemic infrastructure, but is insufficient in fulfilling an accurate assessment of the diverse student body within education.

Education must be fluid in its support for innovation and progression rather than confined to quantitatively assessable systems. Grinell and Rabin counter Richert's argument by stating:

Numbers are useful to answer certain narrowly proscribed questions in certain contexts, [but] it is well understood that such quantitative representations of systems as complex as public schools do not capture everything that needs to be captured and to use them outside these narrowly proscribed contexts is to overly simplify what is inherently complex, which is inherently unwise (752).

The process of assessment carried out by standardized testing is too one-dimensional as it neglects the depth of the student beneath his or her standardized test performances. Standardized testing is bound by its own format. The very nature of both terms, *standardized* and *testing*, allude to its own limita-

tions. Testing of this sort works well in assessing basic memorization, recall, and certain math skills, but brushes away other educational subjects such as those associated with business, technology, art, creative writing, epistemology, history, and many others.

What standardized testing tests more closely than anything else is wealth and circumstance, polarized towards the ideal white male archetype. In the article, "The Construction of 'Illiterate' and 'Literate' Youth: The Effects of High-Stakes Standardized Literacy Testing" by Laura-Lee Kearns, Kearns claims that standardized testing lacks any real neutrality necessary for the blanket application onto an institution. Standardized testing is polarized towards the ideal white male citizen in that it focuses on practical fields of quantitative-based studies and neglects not only many other layers of the educational process, but also the accommodation, exploration, and rewarding of various races, cultural conditions, and social positions. In "The Theory and Practice of Culturally Relevant Education: A Synthesis of Research Across Content Areas," Brittany Aronson cites two university professors of Education, Na'ilah Nasir and Paul Cobb, in stating that

Recent analyses of school achievement, course-taking patterns, and standardized-test data have revealed prevalent patterns of social inequity. The marginal performance in mathematics of minority students, language-minority students, poor students, and to some extent, girls, have led several scholars to raise concerns about the opportunities for members of these groups to compete in an increasingly technological world. (179)

Standardized testing works to mold and manipulate the arrangements of students into ones limited by the material on standardized tests, marginalizing those with interests and skills outside of such tests. The survival of a diverse and socially valuable student body is dependent on education's ability to facilitate such diversity. Therefore, the current system is unacceptable in that it marginalizes students outside the confines of

standardized test material. In a study conducted by Kearns', she concluded through qualitative research that in many cases, minority students who are hardworking, fully literate, and achieving are still deemed as beneath the curve by standardized tests as a result of the narrowly proscribed material on said tests. This material often does not attend fully to the cultural positions and unique skillsets that may come with students of minority backgrounds. This below-average labeling causes said students to face feelings of embarrassment, self-doubt, and defeat (127). These feelings associated with the educational process can become immensely inhibitory to students' desire and self-belief in their intellectual abilities. If standardized testing does not support the unique and diverse arrangements of students within the system it seeks to enrich, then its function is ill contrived as it pushes back on individuals who bring unique value to the social spectrum.

Much of a student's ability is determined by his or her belief in it. Certainly it is not belief alone that provides ability, but it is belief that facilitates it. When students believe in themselves they are motivated and engaged in their work, fueled by the desire to fulfill their self-vision and thrive amongst their peers. In a longitudinal study Krystal McCutchen examines the effects of students' mindsets on standardized test performance. Within the study, 419 students were given assessments throughout three semesters in 28 different classrooms, at seven schools. Students' academic abilities improved, regressed, or remained. The study showed that students who show signs of a growth mindset (positive self-belief) statistically have greater test performances and capacities than students who demonstrate decline mindsets (negative self-belief). McCutchen claims, "Academic achievement is related to a student's self-belief in their ability to achieve for that domain" (209). Therefore, it is crucial that students learn not only academic information, but also how to believe in and motivate themselves. McCutchen argues that the environment in which students learn influences self-belief, and more specifically, that the environment created by standardized testing often influences it negatively.

Students, although young and inexperienced, are still hu-

mans equipped with basic levels of rationality, able to dissect a set of environmental conditions and respond accordingly. Students are able to feel the vitality, or lack thereof, in a classroom and naturally respond by valuing education in proportion to the degree in which they feel valued by education. Standardized testing has “transformed schools into places characterized not by excitement and learning, but all too often by student disengagement, apathy, and in many cases, even active resistance to the lessons and experiences made available to them by their teachers” (Grinell and Rabin 749). Grinell and Rabin argue that students retain the ability to “decide to engage in learning” and that they do so based on their interpretations of their classroom experience in terms of their sense of intrinsic and extrinsic value (749). Standardized testing and more specifically, intensive preparation for standardized testing, devalues the student on an individual level, reducing the likeliness for academic interest. Standardized testing not only deprives students of educational opportunity, but also reframes schooling as a performance based institution rather than a learning one.

Standardized testing, in the high-stakes form that it is currently in, creates an environment that represses positive self-belief. The preparation teachers are forced to take for standardized testing takes students and “transforms them from children with idiosyncratic interests, individualized skills and abilities and complex needs, goals and desires into narrowly conceived test takers whose primary task is relentlessly to produce the widgets of quantitative data that market-based educational system reformers crave” (Smith 754). Being deprived of unique personal value does not aid in the formation of an intellectually equipped, happy, fulfilled, self-believing individual; an engaging, creative, immersive, and inquisitive learning environment does. The value of creativity and personal uniqueness in the classroom is crucial to the learning experience in that it promotes personal value and in turn, fosters motivation and intellectual ability, which can then be contributed to collective society. American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, argues “that human dignity and progress are rooted in each individual’s capabilities, including those that are central to creativity: be-

ing able to use the senses, imagine, think, and reason, and to have the educational opportunities necessary to realize these capacities" (qtd. in Collard and Looney 348). It is the abilities associated with creativity that are crucial in the advancement of students' intelligence as well as collective society, yet it is these same abilities that receive no attention on standardized tests. Professor of Human Development at Cornell University, Robert Sternberg, claims that standardized tests "actually encourage noncreative thinking, in that thinking creatively on such tests is not likely to result in an enhancement of score but is likely to hurt one's performance, given that there is little place for creativity in a typical multiple-choice test" (116). Teachers cannot prepare students for tests that do not require any creativity, yet also teach creativity. Teachers' jobs and schools' reputations are at risk based on standardized test scores, making it difficult for teachers to alter educational methods and execute a solution from the inside.

Standardized testing does not need to be removed entirely; it needs to be reformed. There are two specific methods in which it can and should be reformed: First, standardized tests should be detached from their role as high-stakes accountability assessments. Standardized test scores should not be the sole determination for the degree of funding, or lack thereof, for a school. And certainly should not determine whether a teacher or school remains. By reducing the pressure that standardized tests put on school systems, schools can become empowered to produce and execute new and valuable curriculums that facilitate diverse and imaginative learning. In doing so, students can escape their roles as quantitatively objectified performers and instead, be treated as what they are, creative and complex learners. Secondly, the content of tests must adapt so teachers and schools can adapt. Creative teaching methods are not new, but at this point, their presence in education is scarce. It is important that teachers and school systems are able and willing to move past ineffective and outdated traditions. By changing the format and substance of standardized tests to integrate creativity and diversity, or supplementing existing tests with equally weighted creative-based project assessments, teachers will be

able to teach accordingly to a diverse and complex student body. New methods of education that facilitate cultural and racial diversity, unique and creative individualism, and relevant yet open subject matter must not merely be applied to the classroom, but also be treated as an equal and valued component of education in relation to the practical arts. We live in a new cultural era, and it serves no purpose to move forward as a culture and as a species if our educational system is going to lag behind. Education must provide proportionally to the demands of culture and culture demands creativity, diversity, and integrity. The current era is one fueled by self-made, idea based, and technological innovations and therefore it only makes sense that education promotes the same.

When institutional conditions become dysfunctional and out of step with the culture, institutions lose membership commitment and systemic legitimacy and either collapse or reform. Collapse is not an option, so education must face reform. With the reformation, reduction, and redistribution of standardized testing, school systems will have the opportunity to begin incorporating new educational methods as well as new and more comprehensive accountability assessments. Aronson states that “[i]f we truly seek to teach our diverse student populations effectively, we need to invest in quality teachers, prepared and equipped with necessary tools to promote student success, and counter educational reforms that consider a students’ education secondary to return on investment” (199). True return on investment will come from providing the opportunity for education to break the mold of the narrow white-male archetype, and treating students as individuals, not quantitative commodity cases. Students are complex, diverse, and ever-changing individuals, working through a process of intellectual development that must provide for both their individual well-being as well as collective societal function. Sufficient education reform starts in the proper reformation of standardized testing.

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