

High Stakes Testing: Our Children at Risk

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Standardized tests are used in every school around the United States in nearly every grade level. These tests are referred to as high stakes testing and come with many names such as IOWA, CAT, and SAT; however they all serve the same purpose. All of the testing given in this manner is used to judge the performance of our nations' students and determine their proficiency amongst their peers. Teachers are also measured based on students' results on standardized tests. If a student is found to be less than average it is said to reflect on the teacher and his/her abilities. It is with these perceptions that this nation puts our students in danger.

Testing in schools is used in a wide variety of ways: placing children into learning groups, ranking schools amongst others in the region, state, and nation, and creating a visual for where our nation on the whole is heading. What surprises many is standardized testing may also be a way schools determine merit pay for teachers. Teachers in all grade levels are encouraged to shape their classroom around the upcoming test in hopes that their students outperform others. The effects of this kind of teaching are not beneficial to anyone, except potentially the teacher whose students do well. In the article *Standardized Testing and Its Victims* author Alfie Kohn states, "Schools across the country are cutting back or even eliminating programs in the arts, recess for young children, electives for high schoolers, class meetings (and other activities intended to promote social and moral learning), discussions about current events (since that material will not appear on the test), the use of literature in the early grades (if the tests are focused narrowly on decoding skills), and entire subject areas such as science (if the tests only cover language arts and math)" (Kohn 1).

Cutting back on real classroom learning is taking its toll on teachers who were genuinely interested in reaching out to the youth and helping them grow. "Many educators are leaving the field because of what is being done to schools in the name of 'accountability' and 'tougher standards'" (Kohn 1). Teachers are becoming displeased with the field and the ones who genuinely care about student growth are abdicating their roles as educators simply because it has become a twisted version of what it

used to be. Prospective educators are now second guessing their choice of careers due to the pressure that will be put upon them to produce the high test scores that matter the most to their potential employers.

With all the stress teachers and administrators are under it would be unreasonable to think it does not rub off on the students as well. Some schools go as far as putting up a visual aid to show where their students fall compared to their classmates. This allows the students to see which of their classmates are proficient, which can be embarrassing for students who fall below the given line. Teachers have many chances to attain their merit pay; a student may only have one chance to pass a test allowing them to move to the next grade level. A single test can determine the outcome of a student's entire educational career, not doing well can be a detriment to their self esteem. A fourth grader does not need to feel devalued because of a test, they are still developing at an unsteady pace and expecting them all to fall into a neat category of proficiency is simply not acceptable. "Virtually all specialists condemn the practice of giving standardized tests to children younger than 8 or 9 years old" (Kohn 1).

Students feel the pressure put upon them in a completely different way than an adult would. When asked if students feel the pressure to achieve higher scores on standardized tests educator, Ashley Grossman, states, "I don't think they fully understand it. They feel intimidated and stressed around test time but some of them are like that with any test" (Grossman). Children cannot feel pressured constantly without it having a negative impact on their emotional and potentially physical state. Stress impacts children much the same as it can an adult, sometimes more severe. According to author Josh Ska, "Symptoms of too much stress are usually very evident in children, although they might be mistaken for being rebellious or difficult. A child who frequently blows up over nothing may be having problems at school or at home which are causing chronic stress. Another possible sign of stress is jumpiness or nervousness and poor concentration, which may affect schoolwork. Children who are stressed out may also stop eating or get sick more frequently. The constant adrenaline rush can keep them awake at night and you might notice that your child seems to have insomnia, although she is exhausted. Stomachaches

are a common complaint among children suffering from this problem, as are bowel problems and headaches” (Ska 1).

Students from an underprivileged area are at a disadvantage when taking standardized tests. These areas generally lack the sufficient funding to prepare students as well as a more affluent school. Current testing materials are not attained prior to testing resulting in lower test scores, giving the false appearance that students who are in poorer areas are not as intelligent as their wealthier peers. Lack of proper preparation compounded with the tests being biased to being with seems like a more specific population of youth is being targeted for a self-esteem breakdown. “Many standardized tests are unfair because the questions require a set of knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background” (Kohn 2).

To further the bias of standardized testing, the humans who score them may very well not be scoring them accurately, fairly, or properly. Most tests have portions that require human scoring, such as essays, while others are entirely scored by humans. How a person is paid to do this job can affect how they score the tests; imagine someone scoring a child’s test poorly because they are dissatisfied with their job, it does not seem fair in any way. “For Washington State’s WASL [Washington Assessment of Student Learning], temporary employees were paid \$8.75 an hour and spent as little as 20 seconds on each math problem and 2.5 minutes on essay items which might determine if a student graduates from high school” (“Standardized Test” 1).

Machines scoring tests do not lessen the bias of testing in any way. For the multiple choice problems it is a simple right or wrong; however, computers have been used to score essay portions as well. Criterion is the name of grading software to determine the proficiency of a student’s writing abilities. The University of California was considering using this software to determine if students were eligible to skip a writing course, which the instructor was opposed to. In order to prove his point the instructor, Andy Jones, took a letter of recommendation he had written to score it. Author Alain Jehlen

notes, “[He] replaced the student’s name with a few words from a Criterion writing prompt, and substituted ‘chimpanzee’ for every ‘the.’ Criterion loved the result, calling it ‘cogent’ and ‘well-articulated’” (Jehlen 3). If changing a single word and creating a nonsensical paper was scored so well, then one can only imagine what kinds of writing samples this machine was letting through and calling “wonderful.”

Claims have been brought against standardized tests in court due to bias. The legality of a test is based on seven factors: disparate impact (unjustified adverse impact on members of a protected class), validation studies (tests must be validated), state interest, notice and implementation (due process), judicial deference (deferring to a professional educator), remediation and retakes (the amount of remediation offered and the number of retakes), and if the test is homemade. With all these things taken into account there are still several cases where a test was found to be biased and was ruled unreliable by the judicial system.

Debra P. v. Turlington is a case documented where a standardized test was challenged on the basis of racial bias. The SSAT II was claimed to be unconstitutional in the way it was able to deny the students who failed the test high school diplomas. The students in question were provided inadequate notice of the graduation requirements and not given adequate time to prepare themselves for the test. Shelly Mack notes in her research, “The court found that the SSAT II had a clear disproportionate impact on African American students, and noted that Florida intended to discriminate against African American children between 1967-1971 (when the current graduating class was in school under the dual system)” (Mack 2). The state admitted to knowingly discriminating against these children so they would not graduate.

Crump v. Gilmer Independent School District is another case in which graduation was hanging on a single test. Three students had all failed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Examination (TAAS). Two of these students had successfully completed all other graduation requirements, while the

third student had not. TAAS had only become a graduation requirement in 1991, two years before this case was presented in court, making the argument the students had insufficient time to prepare for the test, as per *Debra P. v. Turlington* stated that there be at least four to six years of preparation time from its announcement before a new process could be implemented. The two students who had successfully completed all other graduation requirements were granted their diplomas, while the third student was not. It was deemed that the third student's denial was constitutional because there seemed to be no effort on his part from an academic standpoint.

Despite the biases of standardized testing the question remains of if these tests even show actual learning or learning potential of a student. The answer seems to be a resounding "no" from all sources. The number of guesses that are marked correct do not indicate the student has mastered the skill in question; more often than not they had a one in four chance of being correct. Wrong answers are measured correctly, as the student clearly did not know the material, but the correct answers are not indicative of knowledge. A correct answer can point to two other possibilities than mastery of skill; "A correct answer can be achieved using *memorization* without any profound understanding of the underlying content or conceptual structure of the problem posed" ("Standardized Test" 2) or simply a blind guess resulting in a positive outcome.

One proponent of standardized testing is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This bill supports standards-based education reform, "the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education" ("No Child Left Behind Act" 1). NCLB is what set the testing frenzy of the United States in motion. The national government felt it had to step in and take over where state governments had been failing. All the act seemed to do in reality was set up a system of incentives for educators if test results improved. "The system of incentives and penalties sets up a strong motivation for schools, districts, and states to manipulate test results. For example, schools have been shown to employ 'creative reclassification' of drop-outs (to reduce unfavorable statistics)" ("No Child Left Behind Act" 3).

NCLB has encouraged the “teach to the test” method more and more schools have put into place, which leads to students not properly interpreting the test materials despite having been trained for them. Teachers are taught to anticipate what will be on the test and teach the students only that material, leading to students having vague, if any, understanding of any other concepts they may need. “Many teachers who practice ‘teaching to the test’ actually misinterpret the educational outcomes the tests are designed to measure. On two state tests (New York State and Michigan) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) almost two-thirds of eighth graders missed math word problems that required an application of the Pythagorean theorem to calculate the distance between two points” (“No Child Left Behind Act” 3).

Standardized testing is a detriment to students, affecting them psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually. Their self-esteem is lowered when they do not receive scores they may be aiming for, or when they do not do as well as their classmates. Students are put under undue stress to outperform, simply because teachers are put under stress to make sure their students do well. Important programs are slowly being taken from schools in order to focus on “teaching to the test.” Students should be learning the social and moral skills that come with being in particular extracurricular groups or elective classes along with their basic subjects, but with classrooms being test oriented some of the most important real world skills are being taken away from them. This sends up a very real red flag for the future about the kinds of people that will be running the United States. They may be goal oriented, but being people oriented is just as important quality to have. The breakdown of society could be looming in the future due to the testing crazed society the United States has become. Part of the blame falls to the educators, administrators, and states for not speaking out, but most of the blame lies with the government for increasing standards in a way that is unhealthy.

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