The Effect of Standardized Testing on Historical Literacy and Educational Reform in the U.S.

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Public education in America has an impressive history of success in equipping students with literacy that extends back to the earliest days of our nation. Education was a high priority for the original settlers in America who, motivated by their religious convictions, eagerly sought mastery and dissemination of literacy skills throughout the population. For most of the Protestant settlers, their beliefs derived from the doctrines of the Reformation and they considered the ability to read as a fundamental necessity for grounding citizens in the tenets of their faith as well as their government.

The first law in the colonies pertaining to education was passed by the Massachusetts General Court to instill literacy, religion, and civic responsibility in students. The law, passed in 1642, instructed that children must be able to "read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of the country" and, in addition, addressed the negligence and lack of concern they felt many parents showed toward the education of their children (Good, 1962, p. 29). Local officials, known as selectmen, were assigned the duty of seeing that the law was obeyed. In the event that they came upon a child not being taught adequately, the selectmen had the authority to establish an apprenticeship for the child with someone who would assume that responsibility (Good, 1962).

Many of those in leadership, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Noah Webster, considered education, particularly in preparation for "civic duty," as essential to the maintenance of the newly formed republic. In his first address to Congress, Washington urged a "general diffusion of knowledge" among the citizens and recommended the founding of a national university system (Good, 1962, p. 92). Jefferson believed that it was "the business of the state to provide" education and that those who could not read should not be allowed to vote (Good, 1962, p. 91). Rush felt so strongly about the need for a system of public education that he considered it "madness" to "introduce a republican form of government where the people are not prepared for it by virtue and knowledge" (Holder, 1988, p. 416). He held that Americans now had "a new class of duties" which required they "adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our government" (Holder, 1988, p. 416). Noah Webster, who helped standardized America spelling and word usage with his dictionary, wholeheartedly supported the development of a public school system (Good, 1962). In his essay, "On the Education of Youth in America," Webster remarked that, in addition to basic literacy skills, this education should have a particular focus on national history.

> But every child in America should be acquainted with his own country. . . . As soon as he opens his lips, he should rehearse the history of his own country; he should lisp the praise of liberty, and of those illustrious heroes and statesmen, who have wrought a revolution in her favor (as cited in Koganzon, 2012, p. 425).

Calls for educational reform in the United States began almost as soon as the public school system became an established American institution. Many believed that schools had degenerated from their original mission through a disregard of "standards" (Good, 1962). Others decried the brief school terms, lax attendance, and poorly trained teachers. In response to public concerns about the educational system, nineteenth century education reformer, Horace Mann, designed and administered the first standardized test in the Boston public school system in 1845 (Gallagher, 2003).

When Mann released the test results to the public, parents and school officials reacted with alarm as it showed that students, on average, had answered only 35.5 percent of the questions correctly (Cureton, 1971, U.S. Congress, 1992). The poor showing on

the tests also raised the concern that students were memorizing facts without gaining any understanding. The effectiveness of the testing method was not called into question, however, as “it was taken as an article of faith that test-based information could inject the needed adrenalin into a rapidly bureaucratizing school system” (U.S. Congress, 1992, p. 104).

Standardized testing grew in acceptance and popularity within the education community over the decades, but truly came into vogue after it was used during World War I to determine and categorize the abilities of large numbers of military recruits (Giordano, 2005). Under the direction of psychologist Robert Yerkes, millions of soldiers were tested and moved into positions based upon their test results (Giordano, 2005). However, the results caused great concern when released to the public, as it was revealed that almost one-fourth of the recruits had obtained only a fifth grade education and could not read a newspaper or compose a letter (Giordano, 2005). These disheartening findings among the pool of young men destined for military service helped to convince citizens that “education was a vital component of national security” (Giordano, 2005, p. 56). This same concern resurfaced in the early days of World War II, following a similar report printed in the New York Times by columnist Benjamin Fine (Halvorsen, 2012).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the issue of testing, as a primary method in the evaluation of students and schools on a national level, took center stage for educational researchers. The National Education Association (NEA) endorsed achievement testing in 1914, and between 1918 and 1932 the number of standardized tests available for school use grew from 100 to more than 1,300 (U.S. Congress, 1992). As the multiple choice format became the accepted test structure, technological advances made scoring machines available in 1935, which had a dramatic effect on the efficiency and cost of the tests and further bolstered their popularity with researchers (Davidson, 2011, U.S. Congress, 1992).

Through the years, education remained high on the list of public concerns and received a great deal of attention from both citizens and politicians, but the national interest in reform grew into a bipartisan demand for intervention following the release of the 1983 report, “A Nation at Risk,” by the Reagan administration. The report stated alarmingly “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity” that would be considered “an act of war” if it had been deliberately inflicted upon the United States by a foreign country (Education, 1983, p. 12). In the “Recommendations” section of the report, standardized tests were endorsed as one of the most critical steps for “diagnosing” and “evaluating” the progress of students in order to remedy the situation (Education, 1983, p. 35). Although the report listed “social studies” as an area that should receive attention, “language, science and mathematics” were the subject areas viewed as most essential to “confidently launch[ing] . . . children into today’s world” (Education, 1983, pp. 41-42). The release of this report and the ensuing attention it received proved to be the decisive moment at which data collection, almost exclusively in the disciplines of math and reading, became the driving force behind education reform and the study of history was quickly relegated to a distant secondary status.

Following the publication of “A Nation at Risk,” each subsequent president presented his own version of school reform. President George H.W. Bush hoped for “systemic reform” through America 2000, but it was not passed by Congress during his single term in office (Nelson, Adam & Weinbaum, 2009). President Clinton introduced GOALS 2000, President G.W. Bush signed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) into law in 2002, and President Obama implemented Race to the Top (RTT). While each program had its own signature design, one constant throughout all of them was the reliance upon standardized testing in math and reading to gauge success. By the second term of President Obama, standardized testing had become such a fixture in the reform movement. Researchers Tienken and Orlich (2013) assert, “the national test frameworks and the released test items . . . become the actual local curriculum due to the stakes attached to the test results” (p. 4).

The concentrated focus on math and reading scores intensified during the 2002-2003 school year when the NCLB act instituted the measurement of “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) for schools and imposed “inflexible accountability mandates and penalties” which were solely based on this limited data (Iorio, 2011, p. 26). Allocation of Title I funds, critical to inner city and low-income schools, is tied to student scores, which makes it easy to understand how limited resources are, therefore, concentrated on only those subjects for which scores are taken into consideration in the distribution of federal funds. Obviously, time spent on teaching social studies cannot be justified when only math and reading scores determine funding levels, and ultimately, the fate of

individual schools. While NCLB requirements were well intended, entire communities often faced upheaval in the event that their local schools did not meet AYP and were forced to close.

Score Comparisons

Although civics and history are not tested as frequently or as routinely as other subjects are, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) does have statistics beginning in 1969 and continuing sporadically through 2010. The 1969 civics score chart for twelfth graders showed a “citizenship knowledge” average score of 73 percent which declined to 65 percent in the final 1976 measurement (Stedman, 2009, p. 15). The twelfth grade “civics proficiency” scores declined from the earliest measurement of 61.7 percent to 51 percent by 2006 (Stedman, 2009, p. 15). The eighth grade chart showed a “citizenship knowledge” score of 65 percent that declined to 62 percent in 1976 and was not included in later measurements (Stedman, 2009, p. 15). The eighth grade “civics proficiency” score remained almost the same at 49.1 percent from its first measurement in 1976, until the most recent 2006 showing of 50 percent (Stedman, 2009, p. 15). Results from both the 1988 and 1998 NAEP assessments revealed that overall students maintained a 67 percent average, but eighth grade scores did decline (Weiss, Lutkus, Grigg, & Neimi, 2001, p. vii).

While test scores from 1994 until 2010 have risen slightly, more than 75 percent of students at all levels are still unable to achieve a score of “proficient” (Nation’s Report Card, 2011). Between 1994 and 2010, fourth grade history scores rose by 4 percent, but there has been no statistically significant change since 2001 (Nation’s Report Card, 2011). During that same 16-year period, eighth grade scores only rose by 3 percent while twelfth grade scores saw an inconsequential 0.7 percent increase (Nation’s Report Card, 2011). Ideally, the years between fourth and twelfth grades should provide students with the building blocks of greater and greater knowledge, but sadly, it appears that our citizens are losing ground.

The 2006 NAEP results¬ showed a tiny increment of improvement in the “basic knowledge” of high school seniors (Rabb, 2007). The 2001 score was 43 percent as opposed to the 2006 score of 47 percent (Rabb, 2007). Fourth grade scores also rose by only 4 percent–from 66 percent to 70 percent–however, those who had achieved a level of “proficient” did not change from the previous level of a meager 18 percent (Rabb, 2007). Alarmingly, the “proficient” score for both eighth and twelfth grades went down by four percent (Rabb, 2007). This is especially troubling considering that these students have had more exposure to American history and civics than their fourth grade counterparts (Rabb, 2007).

The 2010 NAEP test results in United States history provide the most current statistics for review. This assessment is given in the fourth, eighth and twelfth grades and differs from those of other subjects because it reflects scores on a national basis only and does not identify scores on a state or district level (Nation’s Report Card, 2011). It is disturbing that, even in 2010, after years of reform and testing movements, less than one-fourth of all students scored at or above the “proficient level” and those capable of achieving the “advanced level” remained statistically minute (Nation’s Report Card, 2011). One of the most heralded statistics claimed by the 2010 evaluation was that the greatest improvements in scores since 1994 were made by students at the lowest end of the performance scale (Nation’s Report Card, 2011). This is certainly an encouraging development, but it hardly seems enough to validate the widespread and exclusive use of standardized testing or the success of reform efforts.

Effects on Curriculum

Princeton history professor, Theodore Rabb (2007), addressed the seriousness of what he labeled a “narrowing” of curriculum that has drastically reduced the time devoted to the study of history due to the increased emphasis on math and reading. Across the nation, history courses have either been eliminated from the schedule or condensed to a negligible allotment of class time. Rabb (2007) mourned this lack of emphasis on history and believed that if we allowed “talented teachers” the freedom to teach history in depth, their enthusiasm would allow their students to

> gain a sense of perspective about themselves and their world, and learn to analyze the news that surrounds them.

> Instead, we put the teaching of history into ever narrower straitjackets, and spin test results that demonstrate profound ignorance into symptoms of a brighter future (p 20). Additionally, Rabb (2004) lamented the fact that schools, which once communicated information and helped students develop intellectual abilities, are now forced to "train" students rather than "educate" them in order to meet state imposed accountability standards (p. 20).

In the article, "Knuckling Under," Abe Feuerstein (2013) observed that, "the belief in the primacy of testing and accountability to educational improvement is so enmeshed in the public's understanding of education that it is nearly impossible to consider an alternative perspective" (p. 873). Teachers expressed concern that the process entailed dispensing with proven pedagogical methods in favor of a highly restricted and prescribed curriculum. It was Feuerstein's (2013) contention that superintendents have largely capitulated to the accountability measures, not because they agree, but because it has become the only acceptable option.

Feuerstein (2013) noted that superintendents often substituted "the quality of school facilities, the student: teacher ratio and the qualifications of faculty" merely as "potent symbols that act as proxies for the quality of education being provided" (p. 876). In Feuerstein's (2013) opinion, the focus of education policy has gone from "verifying the quality of the inputs" to "verifying the quality of outputs" (p. 877), or as educator and political scientist Frederick Hess (2009) stated, this approach has simply served to prove the business management principle of "what you measure is what you get" (p. 17).

Education researcher, Yong Zhao (2009), analyzed the effects of the nationwide emphasis on standardized testing as a basis for educational policy decisions. Not only are individual student scores evaluated, but, as previously mentioned, each school must validate its continued existence through evidence of AYP. In the state of Texas, for example, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) reported that fifty-six percent of schools had not met AYP goals for 2012 and attributed this poor showing to a dramatic increase in the levels set for acceptable scores (AYP Requirements Rise, 2012). In addition to increased scores, schools also had to document either a graduation rate of 75 percent or an attendance rate of 90 percent. Seventy-two percent of Texas schools did not achieve these standards (AYP Requirements Rise, 2012).

Failure to consistently achieve AYP standards has harsh consequences for a school district that can include replacement of the entire staff and closure of the school (AYP Requirements Rise, 2012). Title 1 funded, or "low-income" schools that do not achieve AYP for two consecutive years are immediately placed into a program that progresses through five distinct stages designed to address issues in need of improvement. Higher income schools, however, are required to "revise their already existing campus improvement plans" (AYP Requirements Rise, 2012). Tragically, the stakes in educational reform are so high that Title I districts, in particular, feel expenditures on subjects other than the critical areas of math and reading are unjustified.

Opposition

In their article, "The Goals of Education," Rothstein and Jacobsen (2006) found that NCLB's efforts to "narrow the achievement gap in math and reading" had the "unintended consequence" of "widen[ing] the gap in other curricular areas," although the increased decline did not originate, nor end, with the NCLB reforms (p. 265). Rothstein and Jacobsen (2006) characterized the current focus on basic skills, resulting in the neglect of other areas of instruction, as "a historical aberration" (p. 267).

Rothstein and Jacobsen (2006) point out that the motivation behind the Founders' calls for public education during the Colonial era was both political and moral, and that a good education should "develop such character traits as honesty, integrity and compassion" (p. 267). The Founders saw literacy as a vital "means toward helping citizens make wise political decisions" (Rothstein & Jacobsen, 2006, p. 267). In particular, Thomas Jefferson felt that schools should "prepare voters to think crucially about candidates and their positions and then choose wisely" (Rothstein & Jacobsen, 2006, p. 267). Benjamin Franklin advocated that education not be solely focused on academics, but should include "invigorating" physical activity as well to keep both the mind and the body fit (Rothstein & Jacobsen, 2006, p. 267). Not surprisingly, a 2001 University of Colorado study found that higher scores in math and reading, "were offset by losses in other areas, especially in activities that developed citizenship"

(Rothstein & Jacobsen, 2006, p. 265).

Education researcher, Diane Ravitch (2010), although originally a vocal supporter of school reform, began to have doubts about the efficacy of the law by 2006. Ravitch (2010) was particularly concerned with the requirement that all students, without exception, must attain proficiency in math and reading by 2014 and warned that it would become a "timetable for the demolition of public education in America" (p. 27). Ravitch (2010) further expressed concern about the restricted curriculum focus that the "culture of testing" has created (p. 27). As an historian, Ravitch (2010) was particularly troubled by the diminished emphasis on the study of history and civics and lamented the "disappearance of historical and cultural content" from the curriculum (p. 29). In addition to her concern that schools and teachers were being overwhelmed with new government-imposed regulations and bureaucracy, she could find no evidence that any of the new requirements were even effective (Ravitch, 2010). Stanford University professor and historian, Sam Wineburg (2004), concurred with Ravitch and asserted that: We use these tests and will do so in the future not because they are historically sound or because they predict future engagement with historical study, but because they can be read by machines that produce
easy-to-read graphs and bar charts (p. 1413).

Test Design Issues

Alfie Kohn (2000), a writer and education researcher, studied the mechanism and method of standardized testing and concluded that their use wreaked havoc on the American public school system. Kohn (2000) stated that American students are tested to an "unprecedented" and "unparalleled" degree and that this excessive amount of testing is damaging (p. 60). Kohn's (2001) primary objection to the tests, however, was that they actually reward a "superficially engaged" student who skims information and answers quickly as opposed to "actively engaged" students who contemplate and analyze their answers more carefully (p. 349). For this reason, tests such as these are incapable of determining the level of student understanding and reasoning underlying their answer choices, which is critical to pinpointing areas for remediation. Rather, these tests simply categorize students into achievement groups so that school districts can be rated in an effort to manipulate financial subsidies and assure state certification (Kohn, 2002).

Conclusion

For most of our nation's past, the task of education was undertaken as a responsibility and an opportunity to impart fundamental knowledge of American culture, traditions and Constitutional ideals to young citizens and to prepare them for their roles as contributing members of a free society. Over the recent decades, however, there has been a shift toward regarding education at the K-12 levels as merely a vehicle for career and college success while the deeper connotations of education are looked upon as outdated (Pondiscio, Sewall & Stotsky, 2013). The goal of a "liberal education," in its original sense, was to "free", or "liberate" the human mind. Teachers were expected to communicate scientific, mathematical and historical information while fostering in their students an understanding and appreciation of classic literature, philosophy, art and music. Historically, education was not considered as a simplistic route to achieve only the most rudimentary of skills, but was valued as a critical facet of a well-rounded and competent adult, and necessary for the proper functioning of society and its citizens.

History, when taught properly, and by instructors who are well grounded in the subject matter, is engaging and enlightening. Presently, through insipid curriculum and lack of class time, generations of students are being deprived of a grasp of American history that gives meaning and depth to the concept of citizenship. Walter McDougall, history professor and author, described history as "the grandest vehicle for vicarious experience" which "if taught well, trains young minds in the rules of evidence and logic [and] teaches them how to approximate truth through the patient exposure of falsehood" (Cited in Pondiscio, Sewall & Stotsky, 2013, p. ii). Without a proper regard for the history of our nation, instilled in students and maintained through civic involvement, our country faces an uncertain future. Almost three hundred years ago, philosopher and political theorist, Edmund Burke (1999) wrote, "In history, a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind." The study of history has been neglected for too long and become dangerously politicized. It is

essential for the maintenance and continuation of our Republic that it be returned to its rightful and respected place in the education of all Americans.

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