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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

“We Need to Get These Scores Up”: A Narrative Examination of the Challenges of Teaching Literature in the Age of Standardized Testing

Stephanie Anne Shelton

&

Tamara Brooks

Abstract: This article begins with a historical exploration of the U.S.’s implementations and usages of K-12 standardized testing, including efforts at and failures to promote educational equity. Then, centering teachers’ voices, the authors use a dialogic narrative format to put two long-time friends and educators in conversation with one another and their teaching experiences, including the effects of standardized tests on students, classroom climates, teacher failure, and teacher morale. Specifically, they use their narratives to examine the degrees to which testing cultures have disrupted teaching literature. The reliance on text excerpts on tests fragments students’ reading experiences, and discourage schools and English language arts teachers from engaging with complete literary works, such as novels and longer plays. The authors close with a call for more teachers’ voices on the topic of testing, and a reflection on how teacher demoralization follows in part from continued national and state-level reliance on standardized tests.

Keywords: English language arts, literature, narrative, secondary education, standardized testing



Stephanie Anne Shelton is Assistant Professor of Qualitative Research in the College of Education at The University of Alabama, and affiliate faculty member in the Department of Gender and Race Studies. Research interests include examining intersections of gender identities, gender expressions, sexualities, race, and class in educational contexts. Publications have appeared in *English Education*, the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, and *Teaching and Teacher Education*. She can be reached via email at sashelton@ua.edu and on Twitter @stephshel78.



Tamara Brooks is an English/language arts teacher at Paul Duke STEM High School in Norcross, Georgia, and the chair for the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program Communicative Arts Department. She has previously published in *English Journal*. She can be reached via email at tamara_brooks@gwinnett.k12.ga.us, on Twitter @TamaraBrooksKS, and on Instagram @rubyredslippersnyc.

In the Beginning: The Origins of Standardized Testing¹

Standardized testing in the United States, particularly at the K-12 level, has a long-standing, pervasive, and controversial presence in education. Contemporary applications of standardized testing formally began in 1845, when politician and administrator Horace Mann crafted an exam to help ensure that educational access and student learning were equitable across school contexts (Gallagher, 2003; Gershon, 2015). Unlike other tests used to gauge intelligence and ability, such as IQ tests and military entrance exams, Mann intended for these tests to measure achievement and learning (Gershon, 2015). Mann believed that in doing so, the tests provided clear and objective indications of the degrees to which students in different schools, with different teachers, were or were not granted access to the same information and learning opportunities. Thus, standardized testing began as a bid for educational equity.

The philosophical underpinning of these tests, along with the ease of distribution and automated scoring, made standardized testing incredibly popular and cost-effective (Gallagher, 2003; Gershon, 2015). By 1917, there were over 200 tests used regularly nationwide, across K-12 and collegiate settings, with some test manufacturers distributing hundreds of thousands to multiple states (Alcocer, 2019; Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008;). These tests were “part of a broad, optimistic, democratic view of education. [Those creating and using the tests] wanted to educate more students, not fewer, and to use tests furthered the goal” (Lemann, 1999, p. 25; see also Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008, p. 389).

The More Recent Past: Testing and Inequalities

Understanding these historical origins helps to contextualize present-day implications of standardized testing, because the U.S.’s long-standing reliance on these tests is complex and has shifted since its beginnings. The optimistic start resulted in few critiques, but as testing became more mainstream, its implications came under more scrutiny. Though there were certainly criticisms in the preceding decades, standardized testing came under heavy fire in the 1960s, as states resisted or worked to desegregate schools. Many argued that the various tests, which had presumably been intended to support equity, had instead been weaponized against already marginalized student populations (Gershon, 2015; Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008; Rosales, 2018). A primary issue was that these efforts to “identify the brightest students as reflected by test scores did not bode well for students from communities of color” (Rosales, 2018, p. 15), or for female students, low-income students, or students facing various other societal barriers (p. 17). Specifically, school districts and various state and federal government agencies had begun to interpret test scores with an attitude that “testing promised a way to identify kids who might go on to great things while avoiding wasting resources on ‘slow children’” (Gershon, 2015, para. 4). The assumption was that student potential was measurable through testing, while the implication was that such achievement directly linked to students’ demographics, rather than abilities. In short, testing—because of the inherent biases in both test items and data interpreters—often reinforced racial, socioeconomic, and gendered inequalities (Davis & Martin, 2008; Rosales, 2018). Rather than challenging social inequities, then, schools were instead—and in many cases, unintentionally—reifying them (e.g., Fernandez,

¹ We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this

article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

2018; Rosales, 2018; Strauss, 2017). Standardized testing was ultimately “exacerbating the existing inequalities of schooling,” and the students “overwhelmingly [negatively affected were] low-income, of color, with English as a second language” (FairTest, 2019, p. 6). And despite the decades of efforts to address these inequities since the recognition of their existences, educational research consistently has demonstrated that these tests have been and remain “unavoidably biased by social-class, ethnic, regional, and other cultural differences” (Strauss, 2017, n. p.). As a result of sustained failures for standardized testing to live up to its initial promises, some stakeholders, including school districts and students’ parents/guardians have elected to opt out of these tests, meaning that they have decided their students will not take the tests, and thus not allow tests to factor into students’ assessments (Lahm, 2017; Rosales, 2018; Strauss, 2017). The issue with this presumably simple resistance, however, is related to the degrees to which multiple levels of educational funding have been inextricably tied to standardized testing.

The Present: Federal Ties to Testing and the Danger of “Opting Out”

Much like standardized testing’s utopic origins, the controversial No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into legislation in 2002 by former U.S. President George W. Bush, asserted the premise that education would work for all students (Pelsue, 2017; ProCon, 2018). U.S. students’ continued slippage in academic world rankings catalyzed the federal government to intervene for the presumed purpose of ensuring equitable educational access across the nation (Pelsue, 2017; Strauss, 2017). In a bid to hold states—which had previously been responsible for the bulk of educational administrative decisions, including testing implementations—and school districts accountable, NCLB instituted mandatory standardized testing in every state (Pelsue, 2017;

ProCon, 2018). However, the inequities that tests had previously exacerbated had not disappeared, and NCLB was quickly criticized for not taking into “account the differences between student populations” across states, districts, and schools (Pelsue, 2017, para. 15). As before, the tests seemed to penalize already-marginalized students and schools, and to reward those already well-situated within educational resources and opportunities. This new legislation officially afforded states the opportunity to opt-out of standardized tests, or to allow parents/guardians to choose to do so (Department of Education, 2019; Pelsue, 2017). The main catch was (and still is) that federal dollars—hundreds of millions of them—were still tied to maintaining standardized testing requirements (Wong, 2015). Additionally, if more than 5% of a school district opted out, the federal government mandated that states and districts report the non-scores of those students (Strauss, 2017). The effect was that many school districts begged and bullied parents/guardians and students into taking the tests, while the federal and state governments labeled schools with reportable opting out populations as “nonproficient” (Strauss, 2017).

In its contemporary implementation, ESSA continues to assert a willingness for testing opt-out, while simultaneously mandating that “states still must give yearly math and English/language arts exams to all students in grades 3-8 and high school,” which means that 95% of K-12 students across all states should be tested (Gewertz, 2018, p. 14). The contradiction is a result of a presumed willingness to replace testing conflicting with a system designed to assess learning through testing. An additional challenge for states and districts implementing ESSA is that the act leaves the entirety of testing adaptation decision-making up to the states, while continuing to expect that all states meet requirements still heavily informed by the previous

NCLB standardizations (Gewertz, 2018; O'Brien, 2016).

The Silence: Standardized Testing and Teachers

ESSA's combination of federal mandates with state-level obligations to interpret how to meet those requirements, have left nearly all states and their school districts hesitant, and even unwilling, to shift away from standardized testing (Gewertz, 2018; Guisbond, 2018). Instead, over 30 states continue to link both student success and teacher efficacy to these tests (Brasher, 2017; Iasevoli, 2017). As a result of this maintained reliance on testing, educational research has worked to keep pace and explore the implications of these assessments, with research focused primarily on *students*. Since the

implementation of ESSA, there have been hundreds of papers considering the ways that testing affects—and in many instances, hinders student learning and creativity—while testing continues to perpetuate inequities relative to students' identities and backgrounds

(Addison & McGee, 2015; Casalaspi, Hutt, & Schneider, 2018; Landry, 2006; Sundqvist, Wilkstrom, Sandlund, & Nyroos, 2018).

However, there have been far fewer explicit discussions on the ways that these tests affect teachers. Of those available, a substantial number actually focus on standardized testing outside the U.S. (Dishke-Hondzel, 2014; Macqueen, Knoch, Wigglesworth, Nordlinger, Singer, McNamara, & Brickle, 2019; Ramezaney, 2014). The few set within U.S. contexts often do not focus on standardized testing specifically; instead, they consider issues such as the teaching standards that inform the tests (Cochrane & Cuevas, 2015) or on social justice issues such as racism and heterosexism inherent in school

testing cultures (Ford & Helms, 2012; Shelton, 2019). Despite all of the voices weighing on standardized testing, then, there is a notable silence where classroom teachers are concerned.

Additionally, though English language arts and mathematics are the two most consistently tested subjects in the U.S. across all grade levels, most scholarship focuses on testing's implications in math instruction (Davis & Martin, 2018; Gabriele, Joram, & Park, 2016; Im, 2017; Lazarides, Buchholz, & Rubach, 2018). Discussions focused specifically on English education regularly consider the efficacy of various language and literacy interventions on test scores, rather than the implications of testing itself (Cohen, Tracy, & Cohen, 2017; Jensen, 2019; Union, Union, & Green, 2015). This article works to situate itself

within these important discussions, while extending extant literature to include teachers' experiences and perspectives, specifically within English language arts.

Our Beginnings: Two English Teachers

We each have over 15 years of experience teaching secondary English language arts in the U.S. at the high school level, with Tamara having over 20. We met 14 years ago, both in our first year of teaching in an accelerated summer enrichment program for gifted high school students. Since then, we have both worked in a range of settings, in various states, but have remained friends and respected peers. Presently, Stephanie is a professor at a research-intensive University whose research actively involves and supports teachers, including co-author Tamara, an English department chair in a Title I urban high school.

Through funding provided by the National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) English Language

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Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE) organization, we have had the opportunity to engage in self-directed professional development together, and with other English teachers over the past three years. During many of those interactions, we two and other participants have reflected on the state of teaching, based on our experiences and observations. Although various contexts necessarily prompt educators to prioritize issues differently, standardized testing has been central to our own and others' concerns. There have been extensive conversations in U.S. media and scholarly journals on the topic of testing, but as we found and noted, few of those have included considerations of teachers, and particularly of English teachers. Though we certainly value our co-participants' voices, their schedules have prevented them from being as involved as we two. Thus, in an effort to respect their time and to still assert many of the issues that have affected them and us, we present this *Voices from the Field* paper through our perspectives. As our goal is that this article be one that is not *about* teachers, but instead serves as a conversation *with* and *between* teachers, we present a narrative that allows us and our experiences to be in conversation with one another, and with the larger contexts of standardized testing that we laid out previously.

Conversations: Energy and Exhaustion in Teaching and Testing

As we reflected on what had brought us to teaching in the first place, we both found ourselves remembering the energy and excitement that had amped us up to teach, and to be English teachers. It was a love of literature for both of us, and the desire to bring that love to students.

Stephanie: You know, the main reason that I became an English teacher was because I was so excited about literature. I was so

pumped about seeing my students engage in books in the same ways that had brought me so much joy. I *feel* and *experience* so much of what I'm reading, and I couldn't wait to bring that to a classroom.

Tamara: Me too! Moments when that happens are so powerful. I remember the last time that I really felt that level of success. I was teaching the novel *She's Come Undone* in a class focusing on feminism. I heard stories about these students hiding under their covers, with their cell phones as flashlights, reading deep into the night, desperate to find out what happened next. I saw them in the cafeteria, in the hallways, under trees, always with their books opened, reading voraciously. When it was time to turn the books in, several of them clasped the book to their chests as if they were hugging the hero/anti-hero Delores into themselves, so they might be able to embrace her transformation as their own. It was unbridled joy. For them and for me.

Both: Moments such as these are valuable, as they remind us of what brought us to teaching and why education remains important to us. However, our long-standing relationship has afforded us opportunities to openly share our doubts and concerns, too—to explore the aspects of teaching that create frustration and doubt. As we remarked on joyful instances, Tamara shifted to her current school's culture. She valued her principal's leadership and his attempts to encourage teachers' innovation and creativity, but within the ever-present context of standardized testing, she was unsure of the degrees to which his efforts to empower her and her school peers were effective.

Tamara: In thinking about the risks that made these beautiful moments possible, I think about the high school where I work now. My principal actively encourages us to take risks and to fail, and that sounds *great*—in theory. But, it’s hard to trust that failure really is allowed, when his encouragement to take risks happens in the same meetings where we go over our testing data and are told again and again that our test scores could be better. One administrator emphasized again and again, “Our scores have got to be better; they’re below the regression line,” and that statement continues to reverberate through my head. What a depressing way to refer to kids’ learning. But, when school leaders are preaching the need to raise standardized scores, the notions of taking chances and risking failure are not just scary—they seem impossible.

Stephanie: It’s sad, but I think that you’re right. Testing definitely dampened my willingness to be innovative at times. For example, my principal had what he termed “The Data War Room,” which also served as the teacher breakroom. The walls were plastered with graphs and charts showing colleagues’ and my names alongside kids’ scores. Every time that we had a planning meeting, that I warmed up my lunch in the microwave, or that I was just taking a moment for myself, I was surrounded by data posters. The space communicated how heavily valued standardized data were. In the quiet of that break room, those various charts yelled at me constantly, emphasizing the value of test scores in the school.

Standardized Testing and Teaching Literature

As we discussed the degrees that our schools’ emphases on testing data and students’ scores had shaped out decisions as teachers, we returned to where our conversation had started—to the joys of teaching literature, specifically novel studies. Which quickly shifted to how standardized testing has shaped those efforts. Through our mutual professional development activities, we have both celebrated the ever-increasing diversities and thoughtful representations of cultures and identities available in literature, particularly in young adult novels (Derhak, 2018; Gilmore, 2015; NewsOne, 2019; Sacks, 2019). We heartily believe in the value of incorporating such representations into students’ reading experiences.

However, the fact is that we—along with most teachers and educational researchers—live in states with mandated English language arts testing, and the testing time frame does not allow for extensive reading of passages (Brasher, 2017; Iasevoli, 2017). Instead, the tests typically feature short reading passages, often excerpted from short stories, longer poems, plays, and novels. Within school contexts, given the heavy emphases on testing data and good test scores, the tendency to use class time to prepare students for these tests regularly means duplicating the shorter reading passages (Greene, 2018; Sacks, 2019). The result is what Greene (2018) referred to as a “fracturing of literature” (n. p.). Educational standards and their accompanying tests certainly encourage that students access, analyze, and evaluate literature. Simultaneously, federal guidelines for high school English language arts assert that students read stories, dramas, and poems. But at absolutely *no* moment do these standards or their complementary testing manuals “suggest that students should, at some point in their academic career, read an entire book” (2018, para. 2). Sacks (2019) emphasized that standardized testing has fostered a “movement pushing for reading shorter texts, including articles, poems, and excerpts

of novels, thus minimizing the use of whole books” (para. 4). Our experiences have consistently reflected this trend and have heavily shaped our teaching experiences and choices, rarely for the better.

Stephanie: In thinking about why we got into this profession and the joy that books always brought me and that I knew could bring my students, I can’t help but be demoralized. I remember that every time that I got observed while trying to teach a whole novel, the comment card was always along the lines of, “Focus on shorter passages and multiple choice. We need to get our reading scores up.” There was always a bitter irony in being told to improve reading—by not reading. The students and I were constantly set up to fail when teaching literature, because the joys of reading that brought Tamara and me into this profession, were sucked out by the constant threat of testing and negative teaching evaluations.

Frankenstein Falling Apart

Tamara: Yeah, I can’t remember the last time that I taught a novel. Like, a *whole* novel. The heavy pressure to get test scores up doesn’t really leave room for doing so. But I refuse to stop trying to incorporate more than snippets of literature, because I know its power—I’m a product of it. I know what books can do. Perhaps it’s because it’s been so long since I’ve been able to really teach literature rather than testing that I often find myself floundering and failing when I try to do so.

Recently I tried to teach *Frankenstein*. My district had begun to heavily emphasize classical literature as part of test preparation, since excerpts regularly appeared on state exams. There was no expectation that I teach a novel, just bits and pieces of classical texts, but I was determined. A contributing factor

for my resolve was that I had just finished a mandatory unit on narrative writing, and I believed that extending those practices from students’ own writing to an author’s writing, could be a powerful and useful application. Additionally, though it may sound shallow, I hoped to increase student motivation and buy-in if I used a book that the students were familiar with as a movie concept, but had never encountered in literature.

We started with me building it up based on what they had seen in films, cartoons, and comics, and then shifted to a think-pair-share activity where they considered the implications and reasons for trying to, like Victor Frankenstein, create life. They and I were so excited. To support their reading efforts, and to simultaneously meet the mandated standards

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and try to encourage deep, thoughtful reading, I created an analytic approach to guide our efforts.

I recognized that there were other literary analysis techniques, but they did not support the work that I hoped for my students to do. For example, TPCASTT (Huff, 2011) asks students to engage with poems.

- *Title*, considering and making predictions based on the title;
- *Paraphrase*, working to put the poem into a student’s own words;
- *Connotation*, examining the poem’s use of elements such as figurative language and alternative word meanings;
- *Tone*, attending to the poem’s speaker’s tone;
- *Shifts*, exploring shifts and changes in the poem or the poem’s speaker;

- *Title*, revisiting the title to interpret its meaning;
- *Theme*, asserting what the student understands the poem's theme to be.

However, because TPCASTT is a tool specifically intended to support students' analyses of poetry, many of these items would be inapplicable in the study of novels, or require multiple and complex responses, such as exploring shifts or themes over the course of the novel. This approach just did not make sense.

Similarly, DIDLS offered limited or ineffective strategies. DIDLS, while typically used with prose, focuses narrowly on an author's or speaker's tone (Scott, 2017). Unlike TPCASTT, the exploration of its items is more evident without explanation. Using the literary items indicated through the acronym, students identify and consider the implications of:

- Diction
- Imagery
- Details
- Language
- Structure

I wanted students to think about Mary Shelley's and her characters' tones, of course, but not exclusively, so DIDLS was not a good fit, either. I would add that besides not being good fits for my aims in reading the novel, these analyses tend to be incredibly similar to the sort required by standardized tests, in that they generally encourage students to adopt a "read for these things, put the answers in the box" response to reading. To emphasize the point of "putting answers in boxes," both TPCASTT and DIDLS regularly get represented as charts on student handouts; each letter has a literal, corresponding box. Therefore, the specific elements

that these approaches emphasized were not precisely what I expected for us to accomplish, and they risked reified the testing culture that I was hoping to challenge. So, the students and I came up with something different.

The activity was, as silly as it sounds, inspired by the movie *Shrek*. While Shrek and Donkey were talking, Shrek told him, "Ogres are like onions. . . . Ogres have layers. Onions have layers. You get it? We both have layers." Well, books have layers, too, and I wanted a way to invite the students to investigate those layers individually and together. They and I would get opportunities to review various literary terms as we were expected to, but while working as a reading community, we would consider how those various terms worked—not just individually, but collectively—within *Frankenstein*.

Using the various terms that we planned to explore, the students named the approach "FASTTPIICCS." It was not intended to serve as some magical or revolutionary way to engage with literature; it was intended to help us chop the book into its layers, appreciating each peeled-apart element, and then put them all back together to really consider how the pieces contributed to a whole; in short, to explore the craft of creating and reading a novel. The letters were:

- Figurative Language
- Action
- Symbolism
- Theme
- Tone
- Point-of-view
- Imagery
- Irony

- Characterization
- Connotation/Diction
- Structure/Syntax

We began by agreeing that they would read Chapter One, and the students divided into small groups, each group taking one of the letters. Each group would work to explore that element in the shared chapter. To use the onion metaphor, they would peel and peel and peel, attending to how a single literary element worked and mattered in that chapter. Then we would come back together and share. I envisioned using a jigsaw approach, with one student from each of the groups forming new groups in which each letter of the acronym was represented. They would share what their respective

FASTPIICS groups had discovered, and thereby get the opportunity to consider how each individual component worked independently *and* collectively to create an overall effect in the opening chapter.

The kids and I were so *pumped* about digging deep. It's something I had not had the opportunity to do in several years of teaching English, and something that they had never gotten to do with literature. To clarify, it was not that they had never read novels before. It was that their readings, within our district, were always framed within standardized test questions. Their reading skills up to that point, even if engaging with a novel or other non-excerpted longer literary text, was to be able to define a particular literary term, and then to correctly bubble in the corresponding test circle when each term appeared. This time would be different, I resolved. We would rewrite how they read and how they discussed reading. The literary terms would serve as the bases of group exploration and analysis—not of individually selecting the

appropriate test item. One group chose figurative language right off the bat, and the other groups made their choices. We really were almost like Victor Frankenstein, in that we were working to galvanize new life into both this book and what they understood about reading literature. Literature would be a newly born concept for them and me.

But it flopped. Hard.

The pressures of testing quickly eroded our efforts and squashed our enthusiasm. As many English teachers know well, because our classes are both typically mandatory and regularly measured through standardized assessments, English teachers and our students feel the heavy pressures of testing constantly. The joy and excitement that had

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One day soon after we had started our FASTTPIICCS analysis, I stood in the front of the classroom as the students trickled in from a previous class. Their body language and faces

clearly communicated exhaustion and frustration. As they slumped in the desks, I immediately considered my own tiredness. We had several upcoming high-stakes tests, which had meant multiple school-level practice tests. The testing preparation had constantly, and often unexpectedly, sabotaged my planned curriculum. Students were pulled from my class, sometimes for hours, for various testing, and that was when I wasn't expected to devote my own class time for the same purpose. And, each testing schedule inevitably mandated additional time for differentiated remediation of those test-taking skills. The time required for students to take the tests certainly intruded on our planned work with the novel, but the hours that I spent sifting through testing data to make informed

decisions about how best to support students improving their scores, was time that took away from planning, from reading, and frankly, from being energized about teaching. Several of my colleagues, who had also attempted to teach a novel had resorted to requiring students to do chapter summaries. They, the teachers, had fallen so far behind in the readings that they had assigned, because of the demands of testing, that they had had to resort to relying on the students to simply stay caught-up with the chapters. Things hadn't gotten that dire for me yet, but if looking at the students was any indication as they wilted in their desks, they were about as wiped out as my peers.

After the bell rang to start class, I channeled my best energy and started to ask questions about *Frankenstein's* Chapter 1, inviting the various FASTTPIICCS groups to chime in about the figurative language used to describe the landscape or Elizabeth, about the point-of-view used in Victor's narration, and so on. When I paused to give them the opportunity to take over and lead the discussion, I was met with dead silence. Students averted their eyes, fumbled with their books, and shuffled their feet. I felt all of the air and energy sucked from my body as I read their body language.

"So, how many of you managed to read the chapter?" Absolute quiet. None of them had. Finally, one student cleared their throat and timidly asked, "Are you mad?"

This start was indicative of the reminder of the time that we moved through the novel. It constantly felt like a slog, and I often felt guilty about assigning them *anything*, when I thought for even a moment about how much they had hanging on them in the midst of all of the school-wide preparations for state-mandated tests. A counselor commented to me, "Your students really love you, because you listen to them and adjust to what they need and what they're going through." The sentiment was

well-intentioned, and it did give me a hint of joy to know that the students knew that I cared, but I also felt near-rage at knowing that all of those adjustments, all that they were "going through," was directly related to test schedules and all of the stress that they felt because of them.

Stephanie: These are the sorts of literary moments that teachers talk about with peers whom they trust—the way you and I are right now, but that we *don't* typically hear about in faculty meetings or read about in education journals or books. Through the years, you and I have engaged in extensive research and professional development on teaching-related topics, and these are not stories that teachers generally share in public. Educators, particularly in the current high stakes era, are often terrified of that level of vulnerability. There are so many different stakeholders—politicians, administrators, colleagues—who wait in the wings to remind teachers of the ways that they have not met standardized measures.

Sitting in the Principal's Office

Stephanie: In thinking of similar experiences in my own high school classroom, I felt a similar rage to what Tamara described. During one department meeting, my fellow English teachers and I sat cramped in student desks while the curriculum facilitator went over a range of reading strategies to increase our students' English language arts test scores. The one that she and my principal most heavily emphasized was having the students read the test questions first, and then scan the passage for the answers. It was a sound suggestion—if the sole point of reading was to respond to testing items.

Internally I raged as I asked aloud, "Do you have any suggestions that encourage the students to enjoy

reading? To be transformed by reading? To use these various tested skills to engage more with the power of the text, rather than just a test bubble?" My principal's disapproval was visible. He cleared his throat. "Ms. Shelton, we need to get these scores up. If these kids don't knock these tests out of the park, none of us are gonna have jobs, and the idea of them being transformed isn't going to matter."

The threat of losing our jobs constantly hovered over us in faculty meetings, department meetings, district meetings. It was a clear message that I understood to communicate that we were either teaching specifically for tests, or we were on our way out the door. Accompanying that threat was the fact that my students all read well below grade level. To support them, they and I often read together in class. They could choose to read in small groups, or read with me, as I dramatically performed the various chapters. After this particularly dismal department meeting, I returned to my room to read S. E. Hinton's novel *Tex* (1979) with my students. The adventures of a troubled teenager bored with school and frustrated with an absent parent resonated with many of my students, and the reading level was accessible with some support.

Each year, I had had students share that the book had been a highlight of their high school years. That, yes, they had loved *Tex* and his friends, but that the reading together had been the best part. Having a time and space where they and I got lost in a novel had been magical for them, and the reason that some of them said that they even came to school at times. This year, we had arrived at the dramatic moment when *Tex* prepared to jump a giant ravine with his best friend's dirt bike. The students had always loved this part, either cheering for *Tex* or

insisting that he deserved to fail because he was being so stupid. The curriculum facilitator walked through the doorway and took a seat in the back. Internally shrugging over her sudden appearance, the students arranged themselves according to how they planned to read that day, and I began the chapter with my group.

Hearing scuffling in the back, I glanced up to see if there was a problem and faltered in my reading as I saw the facilitator talking to various students who had been reading in peer groups. All of the kids seemed aggravated, and several gestured in ways that clearly indicated that they wanted her to leave them be. I cleared my throat and asked, "Is there a problem?" She smiled and replied, "I only wanted to

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check to see if they knew what standards they were supposed to be working on and if they felt ready for the upcoming tests." Though class continued as usual for rest of the period, I found myself summoned to the principal's office that afternoon. I was told that I "need to teach so that these kids are ready.

What you're doing is fun and all, but they need to be able to crack these tests."

The implication was that I was failing my students and my profession by reading a novel. In English class. From that day on, the principal and curriculum facilitator began to mandate various standardized elements into the novel reading, including questions on contextualized vocabulary, identifying characterization elements, and correcting grammatically incorrect sentences. Certainly, these were literary elements that Tamara had worked to introduce through FASTTPICCS, but these tasks were not intended to extend students' learning or engagement; these mandates served the sole purpose of testing preparation. At the end of the novel study, for the first time in a decade,

students were *relieved* to be done reading. The constant interruptions of reading comprehension questions and word definitions sucked the joy from the literature and from the classroom. And from teaching.

Conclusion: So What? And Now What?

We want to be clear that our goal here in sharing these experiences in teaching novels is not to bash administrators. All school stakeholders face enormous pressure to ensure that students perform well on standardized tests. School districts' funding and levels of autonomy are often directly tied to how well students perform, and schools with higher

concentrations of students of color, English language learners, and students identified as being from low-income homes are disproportionately affected (Davis & Martin, 2008; Gershon, 2015; Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008; Rosales, 2018). Instead, our primary goal is to center educators' voices in relation to the ways that U.S. schooling's heavy reliance on testing affects teaching. As we pointed out earlier, despite the extensive

literature on standardized tests, there is little space for teachers' voices and experiences. Teachers are directly affected by every federal-, state-, and local-level mandate, and see the exhaustion, stress, and dejectedness on students' faces on a daily basis.

Teachers are well equipped to explore alternative ways to assess student learning and the most qualified to speak about the everyday and longitudinal effects of testing. There should be greater efforts to incorporate teachers into these discussions, rather than talking about or for them.

And, the time to hear teachers' voices is *now*. Never has it been more critical to U.S. education to explore

teachers' experiences and perspectives. Santoro (2011; 2018), who has researched teacher dissatisfaction for over a decade, found that teacher demoralization is at an all-time high, and a major reason is the influx and influence of standardized testing. In interviewing both novice and veteran educators, Santoro (2018) learned that, in accordance with both of our accounts, teachers regularly found their desires to be creative and to inspire students, were in direct conflict with administrators' expectations and government requirements. When one of Santoro's participants expressed her frustrations with her principal about being required to teach to a standardized test, the

principal and district superintendent deemed the 21-year teaching veteran "unprofessional" and ineffective (p. 5). Similarly, Stephanie got called into the principal's office and similarly chastised, before having administration enforce a test-based curriculum. Meanwhile, Tamara was left exhausted, demoralized, and angry. These very human moments are not disparate stories of individual teachers;

they are examples of the ways that testing undermines both teachers and effective teaching (Greene, 2018; Santoro, 2011; 2018).

In focusing specifically on English language arts, the implications of standardized testing and standardized teaching are dire. The subject is, alongside mathematics, the most heavily tested one in the U.S., and the time crunch of test taking does not allow for in-depth literary explorations. Sacks (2019) noted that

Literature is art. When we read a novel, we are reading an author's artistic production, which was created intentionally in a specific

“Teachers are well equipped to explore alternative ways to assess student learning and the most qualified to speak about the everyday and longitudinal effects of testing.”

form. The novel as a literary form asks readers to spend time living in a world and experiencing the story. . . . when students are reading excerpts and missing the whole picture. (n.p.)

Students and teachers miss out on meaningful analyses and joyful engagements with the text under testing regimes. Greene (2018) similarly noted that standardized testing's implications for English language arts reinforced "the idea that the business of reading a play or a story or any piece of a text, is not for the value of the text, but for the reading skills that one acquires and practices" (p. 4).

Strip mining English language arts to perpetuate a multi-*billion* dollar industry pillages the joys of reading and of teaching from U.S. classrooms (Stauffer, 2016). The perpetual pressures and fears associated with testing also effectively silence teachers from protesting or learning that their

experiences are not isolated (Santoro, 2011; 2018). As we noted in our opening narratives, literature has the power to change lives, and so do empowered teachers. Our stories work to more fully center teachers' experiences into considerations of the effects of the U.S.'s educational testing culture, while emphasizing the transformational potential of literature for teachers, students, and the nation. There is growing resistance to testing, though the pathway is tenuous and often unclear. No individuals are more qualified to lead the charge in reshaping education than the teachers who know all too well the problems with standardized high-stakes testing and the incredible potential of literature. Standardized testing began with a hope for reshaping education in powerful ways. English language arts teachers have the potential to realize that dream through the literary worlds that they and their students might inhabit together.

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