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Children Tested Like Animals

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Children Tested Like Animals

Standardized testing recently has become a large problem in education. It has become the main focus in curriculum based teaching and is hurting students' chances to succeed in life. Curricula have been formatted to accommodate tests by providing test preparation during instructional time. This forces teachers to teach students how to take a test rather than teaching the material that is actually on the test. Therefore, testing deprives students of the opportunity to gain useful knowledge.

What is a standardized test? Stephen Sireci speaks about "The Most Frequently *Unasked* Questions About Testing" in *Defending Standardized Testing* to explain that "standardized tests are…designed to promote fairness…[and] are designed to provide a level playing field" (Sireci 113). However, although these tests are designed this way, they are not used effectively this way. Testing becomes a matter of success or failure. The test becomes a deciding factor in the lives of students. For example, the SAT determines what college a student will attend. If a student is not accepted to the college of his or her choice, it could scar him or her for life. It also determines what a student will major in and in the long-run, what career the student will pursue. In this way, standardized tests are used to compare students among other students. As a result, educational officials place a high priority on an unreliable means of measurement.

Sireci goes on to explain reliability: "reliability refers to the degree to which test scores are consistent" (116). He gives an example of a student who took a test one day and received a

score of eighty percent. The student then took the same test a few days later and received a score of fifty percent. Sireci states “the scores produced by this test are certainly not reliable” (116). However, according to Sireci, the reliability of the scores is not the problem. Very rarely will a student take the same test a few days apart and answer the questions exactly as he or she did the first time. If these standardized tests are used to determine the lives of students, should they not be reliable?

Moreover, testing centers create both national and statewide tests based on scores from previous tests. If every school across the nation uses one test, it has to be possible for slower learners to pass it. Due to the many levels of intelligence among a given population, the tests do not measure actual comprehension levels of students (Kohn 5). Brighter students are held to lower standards while slower learners are held to higher standards. Inevitably, this causes a discretion among the scores students receive.

As students approach high school graduation, they begin thinking about continuing their education in a post-secondary educational program. In order to be accepted into the program, they must take a test that will allow them entrance into a college of choice. Although this is one use for standardized testing, it is certainly not the only use. In younger children, the tests are used, as Andrew Strenio explains in *The Testing Trap*, “to sort children into reading sections and then to track them by grade and ability; to affect decisions on whether a child will be promoted, graduated, held back, or placed in a group for the mentally retarded” (Strenio 103). The manner in which a child performs on a test will determine where he or she is placed in classes for the rest of his or her life. For example, if a student becomes nervous while taking a test and accidentally answers multiple questions wrong, the student has the unfortunate chance of being placed in a

slower learning group. Therefore, this causes the child to feel a sense of failure and to feel that he or she is not capable of performing at the same level as the alleged faster learners.

Scores provided by standardized tests are generally based on percentiles, which means they are based on how every student answers the questions in comparison to other students (Sireci 115). For example, if one hundred students take a test, the score each student receives is based on how the other ninety-nine students perform. If a student receives a score of 85 on a test, he or she usually sees that as a decent grade. On the contrary, if a student receives a score of 65 on a test, he or she sees this as a horrible grade. However, a 65 on a test does not represent that a student only answered sixty-five percent of the questions correctly, it simply means that thirty-five percent of the testing population answered more questions correctly (5). In addition, these tests are supposed to be indicators of how students will perform in the future (6). However, according to Kohn, "they're not good indicators of thinking or aptitude; the verbal section is basically just a vocabulary test" (6). If this is true, what are students learning other than proper techniques to memorize and regurgitate information?

In reference to scores, administrators, school board members, and government officials expect these scores to show if schools are meeting the criterion set by the national standard. According to Kohn, "because every distribution of scores contains a bottom, it will always appear that some kids are doing terribly. This, in turn, reinforces a sense that schools are failing" (15-16). Failing schools result in teachers losing jobs, and a cut in federal funding ("Bush Administration wants to loosen NCLB rules"—CNN). In response to this, government officials show up at schools, reprimand teachers, and complain that scores are low and schools should enforce tougher standards.

Scores are supposed to represent how well students are learning information in school. To make sure all students are learning at the same paces, every state must set a proficiency level. However, there is a discrepancy in where the proficiency level should be set. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, sets a national proficiency level. State proficiency levels vary from state to state. According to Pauline Vu, in 2005, many states did not have a large percentage of students score at the national proficiency level (Vu). For example, Mississippi reported that eighty-nine percent of "students rated proficient by statewide testing standards" (Vu). However, when the NAEP measured students, only eighteen percent of "students rated proficient by NAEP testing standards" (Vu). Therefore, leaving the decision up to individual states to set the bar defeats the purpose of testing children. Children are tested with the intention of having all students learn at a designated level When testing becomes a fear and states are forced to set their standards low in order to create the façade that their children test 'above average,' testing children becomes inane. States lower standards so the government is not forced to intervene and implement tougher standards.

Tougher standards put stress on the teachers. CNN reported in "Teachers Feel Stress of High-Stakes Testing," a principle allegedly taking her life due to low test scores ("Teachers Feel Stress"). Teachers come to school everyday worrying about if they are going to lose their job due to low test scores. Teachers are blamed for low scores, even though how students answer questions is beyond their control (Odland). Teachers whose students score well on tests commonly receive bonuses, or a raise in pay. However, when a school fails to meet the standards, the government may decide to close the school, or worse, cut federal funding ("Teachers Feel Stress"). If a school is failing should the government really be cutting funding? If a school is failing, they should receive an increase in federal funds so the school can find

alternative ways of increasing scores. Instead, the cut in federal funds leaves little money to provide state of the art technology and other tools students may use.

Underprivileged schools are especially depleted of these resources. Failing scores cause already poor schools to become unable to provide resources to their students. Without many of these resources, students will continue to 'fail' the tests. As the resources lack, administrators require teachers to provide test preparation sessions during scheduled class time. The test preparation causes the curriculum to focus on making sure students pass these standardized tests instead of making sure students actually learn information they will need in the future.

Although more and more instructional time is devoted to test-preparation, the scores are not changing. According to Linda Crocker, "no one becomes a physician lawyer, teacher…or real estate broker without taking a series of tests. Caring, effective teachers should want to prepare their students for these future testing situations" (Crocker 160). If teachers are going to prepare students to perform well on a test, teachers should teach the material that will be on the test not the techniques needed to take the test. Instead, teachers are forced by government officials to teach to the test.

According to Linda McNeil who elaborates on "The Educational Costs of Standardization" in *Contradictions of Reform: The Educational Costs of Standardized Testing*, "the effects of the centralized controls over curriculum and teaching were so damaging, so limiting to the curricular content, and so de-skilling of teaching, that they seemed contrary to their own intent" (McNeil 230). The government began testing students with the intent of measuring knowledge that students learn progressively. However, the constant need to improve scores and implement tougher standards has caused the testing process to contradict its own intentions. On the other hand, Crocker explains that test-preparation benefits students and helps

to meet the standards set by schools. She quotes L.W. Wilson saying that "if a test is the only reason that students are taught concepts such as graphing data, writing hypotheses, genres in literature, or the Pythagorean theorem, then thank goodness for tests" (Crocker 166)[1]. Her logic is faulty in that students should not be taught concepts just so they can take a test. They should be taught concepts to become knowledgeable. If a test is the only reason students learn information, then the government needs to rearrange the priorities of education. Schools should be teaching children because that is their job, not because they need to be higher than the national average.

On another note, three-fourths of the time students are in a test-preparation session, they are exposed to three times more incorrect answers than correct answers (McNeil 247). In a test preparation session, students are taught to determine the correct answer by eliminating the incorrect answers. In addition, McNeil clarifies that "students…are spending enormous amounts of time and mental energy on material they are intended to forget" (247). Therefore, useless information is packed into the minds of students in hopes of preparing them to succeed. McNeil also explains that "common sense would suggest that if a teacher followed a traditional curriculum, even using the state's textbook, the teaching of regular lessons would be preparation for success on the test" (234-235). If administrators would allow teachers to teach material instead of techniques, they would find that students would become more knowledgeable. However, the scores on these tests will never change as they are based on percentiles.

Administrators do not take into account the ways standardized testing effects students. According to Kellaghan et al, "these include effects not only on the pupils scholastic performance, but also on his or her attitudes, perceptions, self-concept, and life chances"

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[1] Wilson cited by Linda Crocker "Teaching for the Test: How and Why Test Preparation is Appropriate" *Defending Standardized Testing*, 166.

(Kellaghan et al 131). Students spend the majority of their schooling career worrying about standardized tests such as the IOWA, CRCT, Graduation Exams, and most importantly, the SAT and ACT. With the constant testing, students begin to relying on scores to determine how well they are performing in school. Kellaghan et al continues to explain that "[students] may obtain information about their test performance from their teachers and thus gain a further and firmer basis for self-evaluation and comparisons with other pupils" (131-132). Students determine their performance based on scores. After scores from a major exam are released, conversations between peers consist mainly of "what did you receive?" In this situation, students are seeking the scores of their peers to see how well they did in comparison to others.

Possibly one of the largest problems with standardized testing is the age at which children are first subjected to standardized tests. Strenio explains that "branding [children] as failures in a 'meritocratic' contest can't even wait until the children reach adolescence" (Strenio 101). He continues to explain that children are subjected to standardized testing in early elementary schools and sometimes in nursery school (101). At this young an age, children are still developing not only the basic skills they need to survive the everlasting schooling process, but they are also developing social skills. From day one, children are taught to compare themselves to others and judge themselves based on other students. When children see that they did worse than other students, their self-esteem begins to cascade.

The cause of the continuous testing is an act that the United States Government instituted in 2002. The act, entitled *No Child Left Behind*, was created "to improve the achievement level of America's elementary and secondary schools and to ensure that every child in public school has equal access to a high-quality education" (Odland). R. Murray Thomas details this act in *High Stakes Testing: Coping with Collateral Damage*. He explains that "the *No Child Left*

Behind Act authorizes state officials to establish a 2002 starting point based on the performance of the state's lowest-achieving demographic group or the state's lowest-achieving schools" (Thomas 63). The act was established to progressively improve performance in schools. In order to measure progress, the government tests students every three years (63). Ironically, under-performing schools can avoid penalties if they show "a 10% reduction in the number of students that are not meeting the annual proficiency goals" (63). However, this defeats the purpose for the act in the first place. If the under-performing schools are avoiding penalties by showing a small decrease in the number of under-performing students, why are proficient schools punished for not meeting the national average? The increased number of under-performing schools is the cause of the institution of this act in the first place.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* is so adamant about testing children that "the Bush administration wants to loosen the rules so that many more disabled children can take tests" ("Bush Administration"). It seems as though the only way to measure progress is by testing children. According to the article released by CNN entitled "Bush Administration Wants to Loosen NCLB Rules, "roughly 10 percent of special education students currently can take easier, alternative tests and have the results count toward a school's annual progress goals" ("Bush Administration"). By loosening the rules, about thirty percent of disabled children will be required to test in school ("Bush Administration"). By requiring disabled children to test, the Bush administration is attempting to create equality within the student population. If disabled children are required to test, it shows that no child is given special privileges.

Administrators do not take into account the ways standardized testing effects students. According to Airasian et al, "these include effects not only on the pupils scholastic performance, but also on his or her attitudes, perceptions, self-concept, and life chances" (Airasian 131).

Students spend the majority of their schooling career worrying about standardized tests such as the IOWA, CRCT, Graduation Exams, and most importantly, the SAT and ACT. With the constant testing, students begin to relying on scores to determine how well they are performing in school. Kellaghan et al continues to explain that "[students] may obtain information about their test performance from their teachers and thus gain a further and firmer basis for self-evaluation and comparisons with other pupils" (131-132). Students determine their performance based on scores. After scores from a major exam are released, conversations between peers consist mainly of "what did you receive?" In this situation, students are seeking the scores of their peers to see how well they did compared to others.

Another controversial issue brought about by mandatory testing is the age at which children are exposed to standardized testing. Strenio explains that "branding [children] as failures in a 'meritocratic' contest can't even wait until the children reach adolescence" (Strenio 101). He continues to explain that children are subjected to standardized testing in early elementary schools and sometimes in nursery school (101). At this young an age, children are still developing not only the basic skills they need to survive the everlasting schooling process, but they are also developing social skills. From day one, children are taught to compare themselves to others and judge themselves based on other students. When children see that they did worse than other students, their self-esteem begins to cascade.

As students are forced to memorize and regurgitate information, administrators continue to find a way to instill tougher standards and improve test scores. However, they do not realize scores will never improve, as they are based on percentiles. The percentiles are established based on how the testing population performs. The scores are used to compare students within the testing population. However, this is the only purpose these tests serve, as they are unreliable

means of measurement. How can students of different intelligence levels nationwide be expected to perform at the same level? They should not be subjected to such a de-humanizing process such as standardized testing. There are other means of measuring progress such as evaluations. However, government officials only look for the easiest way out of a negative situation, and unfortunately that requires that schools test children.

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