The Undemocratic Effects and Underlying Racism of Standardized Testing in the United States

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The scholarly literature regarding standardized testing in the United States since the implementation of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top has been nearly unanimous in its condemnation of the effects of these tests. This article specifically analyses the multifold ways that standardized testing disadvantages students of colour and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The stated policy objectives of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are to decrease disparities in educational achievement nationwide. However, study after study demonstrate widening chasms in educational achievement, shrinking and standardization of the curriculum, along with the elimination of effective teaching methods. Standardized testing as introduced by these legislative acts nevertheless continues unabated. Because of this contradiction, it is argued, using Henry and Tator’s theory of democratic racism, that the goals of these programs and their concomitant standardized testing are actually meant to maintain the status quo and in fact increase the power of dominant groups and ruling elites.

Keywords: Standardized Testing; Democracy; Racism; No Child Left Behind; Race to the Top


Introduction

Standardized testing as we know it today in the United States was implemented in practice as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) enacted by the George Bush administration and then continued by the Race to the Top Act (RTTT) put in place by the Obama administration. The media as well as those policy makers who have either created or have come to support these programs and their accompanying standardized tests continue to frame and tout them as a way to identify underperforming schools and students so that achievement disparities in education can be addressed and remedied (Karp, 2010). Economically marginalized students and students of colour have been the main target of these programs since they are identified as the groups most in need of assistance and improvement (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2003). Despite the laudable basis of these programs, the effects of standardized testing have almost exclusively served to exacerbate issues of uneven educational attainment among students of colour and those from economically disadvantaged communities (Berliner, 2006).

This paper will first highlight the many ways that standardized tests serve to further oppress, marginalize, and thwart students of colour in their quest for quality education as well as prevent educators from employing diverse multicultural and/or anti-racist teaching methods and content. In so doing, standardized tests function as a form of colonialism in the way they force a dominant, one-size-fits-all epistemology, worldview, and value system upon all students irrespective of particular needs or difference (Portelli & Vibert, 2013). I will then argue that the practice of submitting students to standardized tests falls squarely under the rubric of democratic racism by furthering the interests, and increasing the power, of the dominant group while maintaining a veneer of democracy (Henry & Tator, 1994). This paper will identify some of the most prevalent, long-standing issues responsible for the current educational disparities among students of colour and students of low socio-economic status. It will be demonstrated that standardized testing only exacerbates these preexisting conditions. As will be delineated below, standardized testing presents a number of specific disadvantages for these students, which are contrary to the stated objectives of official education policy.

Shrinking and standardization of the curriculum

The standardized tests mandated by NCLB and RTTT focus only on the assessment of mathematics and language arts (Onosko, 2011). As a result, educators and administrators will limit or exclude other subjects from the curriculum such as physical education, music, art, natural sciences, social sciences, geography, and history because these subjects are not assessed. This is especially pronounced in low-performing schools where the need to perform is so great that a majority of classroom time is dedicated to “teaching to the test”, resulting in the exclusion of all other relevant and beneficial subject matter. In a survey of 299 schools taken from across the U.S., 71% reported decreasing time spent on other subjects in order to focus on math and reading because of the pressure to perform well on standardized tests (Au, 2009; Hollingworth, 2009). Students in under performing schools have had to take additional classes in math and reading thereby eliminating the possibility of including other courses into their curriculum (Au, 2009). These constraints serve to limit educators’ ability to use proven and successful multicultural, antiracist, or other teaching
strategies in the classroom (Laguna-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Darling-Hammond (2007) found that in many states, schools have replaced “instructionally rich, improvement-oriented systems with more rote-oriented, punishment-driven approaches” (p. 246), resulting in negative overall effects.

Standardized testing mandated by NCLB and RTTT requires that students be assessed on a rigid and constrained set of topics focused on low-level skills defined through standards set at the state level (Mulholland, 2015). In order to perform well, many schools will adhere to this narrowly defined set of learning goals in order to avoid the negative sanctions resulting from low performance. This often effectively and completely eliminates multicultural and antiracist education from the curriculum. This hierarchical delivery of, and compliance with, content standards de-professionalizes teachers by robbing them of the freedom they once had in relation to method of teaching and of the materials they are able to utilize. As Hursh (2006, p. 22) noted, “it’s especially ironic, at a time when we know more about how to successfully teach low-income students and students of color, that schools have implemented regimented curriculums required by the standardized tests” (p.22). Regrettably, but not surprisingly, the narrowing of the curriculum is more pronounced at schools comprised mostly of students of colour (Au, 2009). “Diversity itself has become a threat to survival and success within the systems of high-stakes testing because it is antithetical to the process of standardization” (Au, 2009, p. 67).

As a result of the pressures of standardized testing, teachers have had to shape the “content norms of their curriculum to match that of the tests” (Au, 2009, p. 66). As a consequence, “current events, long-term projects, or creative group/corporate” work is not incorporated into classroom activities because it is not useful in meeting the end goals of the test (Au, 2009, p. 66). Because multicultural and antiracist perspectives and themes are deemed illegitimate by the tests, they are also excluded from the curriculum (Au, 2009). Research shows that in standardized testing influenced environments, multiculturalism is denigrated and being pushed out of the curriculum in favor of a Western nation/Eurocentric view and understanding of the world (Au, 2009). The result is that the tests end up being the driver of curriculum and instruction in schools (Au, 2007).

**Impacts on ELL students and their teachers**

English Language Learners (ELL) and teachers are negatively affected in a variety of ways. NCLB has, according to Harper, Jong and Platt (2008), “operationalized a de facto language policy” (p. 268) of English-only education through a standardized testing process that is conducted strictly in English. Given that ELL students are a diverse group with uneven and varying levels of academic level English attainment, it is known that conducting instruction solely in English will have detrimental effects on their performance (Marshall, 2002).

Since the implementation of standardized testing under NCLB, educators holding further education certificates or degrees in this field have been devalued and relegated to positions of lesser relevance (Harper et al., 2008). Despite the advanced education and unique skills needed to teach ELLs, these instructors do not qualify for Highly Qualified Teacher status under NCLB. Instead they are increasingly demoted to an instructional support role, which consists of merely assisting teachers in mainstreaming ELL students into other content areas despite the fact that there is ample research to demonstrate that this
course of action impedes students’ academic progress (Harper et al., 2008; Marshall, 2002). Similarly, when ELL students receive low scores on standardized tests, they are placed in remedial reading classes with native English speakers whose needs are markedly different from their own, further delaying their academic progress (Harper et al., 2008).

**Cultural insensitivities inherent in standardized tests**

Within Hispanic culture there are some deeply embedded cultural traits that are antithetical to standardized tests. One of these traits is relationality, which emphasizes “interdependence, mutual help, and group process” over autonomous action, while another is the closely related concept of allocentrism, which involves defining “one’s self-concept in relation to others, emphasizing interdependence” (Altshuler & Shmautz, 2006, p. 10). Because standardized tests are a strictly individual process, these otherwise commendable traits place Hispanics at a disadvantage. Additionally, research suggests that guessing is a culturally discouraged practice among Hispanics that may affect test scores since there is no negative penalty for guessing on the tests (Altshuler & Shmautz, 2006). As a result of standardized testing, Hispanic students often suffer discouraging oppression and resentment at having to shed their culture in order to perform well in a setting that is standardized for the dominant group. This can result in students defending themselves from this oppression by resisting classroom instruction, an obviously undesirable outcome (Altshuler & Shmautz, 2006). “Standardized assessment of diverse peoples is, arguably, an oxymoron” is the way Altshuler and Shmautz (2006, p. 11) have summarized the problem.

Due to cultural values specific to the Hispanic community, students from this group are particularly prone to suffer from low academic self-concept and low perceptions of self-efficacy if they score poorly on standardized tests (Altshuler and Shmautz, 2006). The end result is that these students often suffer from oppression-induced frustrations causing them to lose interest in academia and faith in the educational system as a path to a better future (Altshuler & Shmautz, 2006).

**Pushing students out, holding them back, or classifying them as special needs**

In a desperate attempt to obtain the highest test scores possible, many schools will resort to tactics, which not only negatively impact the student academically and personally, but also directly oppose the purported goals of NCLB/RTTT. Possibly the most devastating method used is pushing students out of school. This is accomplished by way of pressuring the student to drop out, unfairly disciplining the student to the point of expulsion, or using administrative trickery (Johnson, 2009). For example, Black students are disproportionately expelled or suspended from school for supposedly violating dress code rules (Hollingworth, 2009). In other cases, students are counseled improperly or are denied information and, as a result, end up not taking the appropriate coursework required to proceed or graduate (Johnson, 2009).

Holding students back, otherwise known as grade retention, can be used to raise the overall score of a school so that the student who is held back cannot bring down the scores

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1 The author is aware of, and sensitive to, the debates surrounding identity and has chosen to use Hispanic over other possible terms because it is the official descriptor used by the U.S. government. It is also the term used by authors cited in this work. In this way, clarity and consistency are maintained.
of the next grade level to which they would normally be advancing. Holding a student back may also be used as a form of discouragement in the hope that students who do not perform well will drop out of school. This is an effective method as research shows that holding a student back increased the likelihood that he or she will eventually drop out (Riordan & Aguilar, 2009).

Darling-Hammond (2007) vividly illustrates how effective it can be for schools to push out students when they want to demonstrate an increase in Adequate Yearly Progress. In her example, if a school simply expels its lowest performing students in a given academic year, it then demonstrates an improvement in test scores the following year even if every single one of the remaining students performs at a lower level than they did the year before. This is not an improvement by any stretch of the imagination; it is simply a way of artificially creating a sense of increasing scores at the expense of students’ futures.

Standardized testing creates incentives for placing students into special education classes, who may not necessarily belong there, so that their scores will not be tallied in the official results (Darling-Hammond, 2007). The U.S. has a worrying history of arbitrarily placing students of colour into special education classes and it appears this practice is once again on the rise (Marshall, 2002).

**Impact on student/teacher relations**

Teachers under pressure from having to achieve high scores can develop negative feelings towards students they believe will perform poorly on the test, especially when pay and promotion are tied to student performance. In some cases, teachers will classify certain students as hopeless and focus on more promising students who are more likely to perform well on the test. This effect is particularly pronounced at lower performing schools which are often comprised of students of colour (Laguna-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009).

The pressure put on students to perform well on tests can be overwhelming. Knowing that the results of standardized tests have life-altering consequences, students often suffer very high levels of anxiety and psychological distress (Johnson, 2009). These effects can be extreme; in some cases students have been known to vomit, break out in hives, suffer anxiety attacks, and have complete breakdowns from the stress induced (Johnson, 2009; Mulholland, 2015). It must be remembered that these tests can change the outcome of one’s entire life path, determining whether one is successful or will end up as a statistic in the school-to-prison pipeline (Winn, Behizadeh, Duncan, Fine, & Gadsden, 2011).

Teachers, understandably, would rather not work at schools labeled as failing or where salaries and working conditions are poor. They leave to work at higher paying or higher quality schools with better facilities. This further deprives at-risk schools and their students of the high quality educators that are necessary for success (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hollingworth, 2009; Laguna-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Students of colour in economically disadvantaged schools are in many instances taught by untrained teachers and student aides (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Teacher quality is among the most important indicators of student success, and as a resource, high quality teachers are one of the most inequitably distributed (Darling-Hammond, 2007). There needs to be increased incentives to bring them to low-income schools, not disincentives.
Standardized testing as democratic racism

Henry and Tator (1994) define democratic racism as:

An ideology in which two conflicting sets of values are made congruent to each other. Commitments to democratic principles, with their egalitarian notions of justice, equality and fairness, are valued positively. These are in conflict, however, with those attitudes and behaviors that include negative feelings about minority groups and the potential for differential treatment or discrimination against them (p. 8).

Standardized tests function as democratic racism in largely two ways. The first is that “while lip service is paid to the need to ensure equality in a pluralistic society, in reality individuals, organizations and institutions are far more committed to the maintenance of the status quo in order to maintain or increase their power” (Henry & Tator, 1994, p. 2). The standardized testing model of assessment that has been imposed on the entirety of the U.S. educational system was implemented with prior knowledge of the effects it might have. There was evidence from at least a few very similar programs that had been implemented in highly populated and well-known areas such as Massachusetts, New York and England, UK that demonstrated the same negative and, often, devastating results as explained in the preceding passages being visited upon students in those locations (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Even though there is very strong evidence to demonstrate that standardized testing is detrimental to our purported educational goals, it nevertheless continues unabated and without question. Perhaps this is because these tests produce such healthy profits for the private education companies that have emerged support of the testing industry (Koyama, 2010) and due to the strong links between politicians and the corporations that produce and sell testing materials (Scher & Burchard, 2010). NCLB and RTTT have contributed towards widening inequality between socio-economic classes and racial/ethnic groups within the United States. Students from at-risk groups continue to underperform, and in some cases the gap is widening (Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Again, despite evidence that this model is failing students from low-income families and students of colour, it continues unabated in a way that benefits the dominant group which is consistent with democratic racism. Given the evidence cited in this short paper by academics in the field of education, it is easy to understand why Henry and Tator write in a frustrated tone, “academics produce important empirical studies documenting the ways in which people of colour are denied power and status, access and equality, rights and rewards, that are then buried” (1994, p. 1).

The second way that the culture of standardized testing functions as democratic racism is that it unfairly blames teachers and students instead of taking into account systemic, and I would add intended failures. It refuses to acknowledge some of the most fundamental problems facing education in the U.S., the most glaring and significant being the unequal funding provided to schools. The U.S. is one of the few countries that do not centrally fund schools so that resources are more fairly and equally distributed. (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Instead, schools are made reliant upon local property tax revenues, which vary greatly, for their funding. Reliance upon local tax revenues results
in some of the most unequally funded schools in the world. Within individual states the difference between funding for schools can exceed a ratio of three to one. Nationwide, the difference is even more staggering, in some cases reaching levels as high as ten to one, a difference of $30,000 to $3,000 per student (Darling-Hammond, 2007). These imbalances in funding contribute to “a wider achievement gap than in virtually any other industrialized country” (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 247). Making matters worse, existing inequalities are currently being compounded as a result of the continuing trend towards historically high levels of income and wealth inequality between segments of the population within the United States (Kishore, 2013, 2014).

The ruling class has put up heavy resistance to reforming the way schools are funded as doing so could significantly affect the advantages afforded to them by the current arrangement. Among some of the arguments put forth by the dominant group in defense of the status quo are the beliefs that: “racism cannot exist within a democratic society”; “minority groups refuse to fit in and adapt”; “they [minority groups] have cultural problems, it has nothing to do with race”; “non-whites lack the skills to succeed”; “anti-racism initiatives are racism in reverse” (Henry & Tator, 1994, p. 9-12). Although the preceding arguments were made in reference to beliefs held by the dominant group in Canada, they apply equally in the United States. As Henry and Tator put it, “there is a lack of support for policies and practices designed to ameliorate the low status of people of colour. Policies and practices such as these tend to require changes in the existing social, economic and political order and state interventions to achieve it” (Henry & Tator, 1994, p. 7). These interventions, however, “are perceived as being in conflict with and a threat to the liberal notions of democracy” (Henry & Tator, 1994, p. 8-9). In this way, racism and democracy, two values that are inherently at odds with one another are made congruent in order to benefit one group over another.

**Conclusion**

U.S. media fawns over standardized testing and the legislative acts that brought them into existence. The public is presented with strong-minded political personalities making difficult, “tough love” decisions, and the seeming good will of philanthropists who support what is being done in pursuit of a better future for our youth. A considered, deeper searching, facts-based approach reveals the irreparable harm these racist, marginalizing, and undemocratic policies are inflicting on our schools and students. The research clearly shows that in every respect these policies are doing the opposite of what they supposedly were intended to do. Even in the rare instance when there is a glimmer of hope and the statistics show an improvement, it comes at a great loss to the many students who were somehow excluded or “disappeared” so that, as they say, the books could be cooked. The real shame is that those groups who were already economically marginalized and oppressed, are the ones who are suffering most.

The public needs to reassess the current situation posthaste and go back to instructional and assessment methods that work for all students. This is not to suggest that the system previously in place could not be improved upon, however, it is greatly preferable to the educational system we have in operation today. It is imperative that the U.S. value its diversity and teach in ways that reflect this diversity in the instructional methods used and in the content that we teach. Standardization is antithetical and
oppressive to diverse cultures and only serves to strengthen the position and power of the dominant group. Structural and societal inequalities need to be addressed as a first priority in order for any real substantive improvement to occur. Students cannot be expected to achieve comparable results if presented with vastly unequal material resources and social conditions, which are then compounded when their histories, cultures and ways of learning are devalued and deemed superfluous. Poverty, unequal funding of schools and distribution of resources need to be remedied and a newfound respect for cultural diversity and equality, or indeed equity, need to be emphasized.

References


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