

Standardized Tests Aren't Like T-Shirts: One Size Doesn't Fit All

Michele Phillips

Testing has become a way of life that starts shortly after the cradle and may end just this side of the grave. (Black, 1963)

In January of 2002, President George W. Bush with his *No Child Left Behind* Act changed testing forever. Tests aren't just tests anymore. In some states they are used to determine which students stay back a grade, which high school students get their diploma, and which teachers get bonuses (DiMarco, 2000). Testing can have a damaging effect on all parties involved. Test scores are being used as the only measure of a student's knowledge and skills. Tests are important, but should only be a portion of a student's evaluation. With these high stakes tests having so much weight on the future of the child, teacher, and school, you would hope that they would provide an accurate measure of a child's knowledge. They don't!

High stakes tests may give us a slight measure of a child's intellect, but they also measure the child's culture and language. Standardized tests are biased. Bias takes place when the test scores are influenced by irrelevant characteristics of the test-taker, such as race, sex, family, wealth, religion, and so forth (Strenio, 1981). For the most part, standardized multiple choice tests are culturally biased in favor of the culture toward which the test is directed—the mainstream White culture (Elford, 2002). Current methods of making standardized tests must be abandoned (Bormuth, 1970).

This article seeks to provide you with

a lens through which to view standardized testing and to show you the negative effects that testing may have. It will also give you a picture of how tests are biased and how student scores have very little to do with intellect and more to do with language, culture, and environment.

Language proficiency plays a large part in student performance on standardized test. In spite of differences in content, it may be that for certain test-takers language proficiency is the most important contributor to performance. The most obvious problem presented to non-native English speakers or to those who speak a nonstandard variety of English is whether they have familiarity with or knowledge of the words and linguistic structure of standard English (Gifford, 1989).

As it stands now, many non-English speakers are failing the tests and being held back a grade. This is not due to their intellect or IQ. Many students are doing poorly on our high stakes tests due to a lack of understanding of the complex English language. It is often difficult for a non-native speaker to translate the questions into their own language and be able to make meaning of them.

Perhaps if the tests were written and administered in the student's native language a truer assessment would be made. We might then be assessing students on their knowledge and not merely giving them an intense vocabulary test about the English language.

Another bias that effects students' test performance is their culture and environment. Test scores may feed back information about your cultural background instead of your ability (Gifford, 1989). According to Gifford, standardized tests

have less trouble measuring some forms of ability among those with similar upbringings than they do with rating people from very different upbringings. You must take into account the entire child when looking at his test scores. What effect does his culture and upbringing have on his test scores? Significant differences in school experiences, in prior test exposure and coaching, in motivation, in previous racial discrimination and the family background, can affect test scores (Gifford, 1989).

Another aspect that could influence students' test performance is their culture's attitude towards test and performance in school. In the United States attitudes toward schooling along with parent's ability and efforts to foster student progress seem to differ significantly across certain ethnic and socioeconomic groups. In high stakes testing, schools are being held responsible for raising the test scores of ethnic and socioeconomic groups that appear to hold deep-seated attitudes towards academic performance—attitudes that schools can do very little, perhaps nothing, to alter (Thomas, 2005).

Some cultures hold testing and academic performance to a high esteem while others are more focused on family and personal values. If a child is raised in a home where school is not important, that child's views on testing and the desire or lack of desire to pass the test will effect the resulting scores.

Tracking is another outcome of students playing the testing game. Minority students' test scores are typically lower than the scores of their peers. For this reason they are more likely to be placed in special classes. The students are labeled by their test scores and have a hard time

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escaping or changing this label. They are tracked and only allowed to take certain classes, and these classes are typically taught at the lowest level. The students are not challenged, they are basically being taught how to pass the test and nothing more. They have low expectations placed upon them and aren't expected to achieve. They continue to fall behind and increase the testing gap in student performance of minority students.

Not only are tests biased but they can also have negative consequences. Students have test anxiety and may avoid going to school during test time. Students as young as third grade are fearful of not passing the standardized tests. Students in the 8th grade drop out of school for fear that they will soon be told by someone else that their scores weren't good enough to get into high school. Kids are denied diplomas in high school for failing the exit level test even if they have done well throughout the year in their classes. Teachers are singled out to take the blame for students' failure. When families in the community find out about a school's low performance on tests they choose to have their child go to another school. Schools can be restructured or shut down due to students' poor performance on tests. All of these consequences of students having to take high stakes testing are severe and damaging.

The ultimate goal of standardized test is to give us an indication of the students' ability and intellect. As they are written now, test don't achieve this goal. We are evaluating students based on scores received on a test that has very little to do with intellect and everything to do with the norms and cultures represented by the test and policy makers.

We can not continue to take this "one size fits all" approach in regards to testing. It would be different if all kids learned the same, where taught the same, and had the same background, but none of this is the case. We cannot measure all students in a single state by one standard and expect any validity in the results of such testing. A well-balanced evaluation of students' learning and of schools' effectiveness can not result from a single set of multiple choice tests in a few subject matter fields (Thomas, 2004). We must figure out a more effective, impartial way to analyze students, teachers, and schools.

No Child Left... They've All Been Kept Behind

A Story by Michele Phillips

At the home of Mary Anne Smith:

"Mom, I think I am going to be sick tomorrow. Please don't make me go to school!"

"What's wrong Mary Anne? You usually love going to school."

"I know, Mom, but tomorrow is going to be the worst day of the rest of my life. I just know it. Tomorrow is TAKS test day. What if I don't pass it? What will happen to me in the future? Will I even have a future? If I don't pass the test I won't graduate from High School. If I don't graduate from High School I can't go to college. If I don't go to college how will I become the first woman president? Mom, please don't make me go."

"Sweetheart, you know this test is really important. Besides you are the smartest, prettiest girl in third grade. You've made A's all year long. Why are you worried? Go to bed dear. It's almost eight o'clock and you need to get your rest. You are going to do great."

At the home of Tyrone Jenkins:

"Mom I'm tired. Can I please go to bed now? My teacher says that we all need to get a good night sleep so that we can do well on our test tomorrow."

"Test, what test? I'll show you a test. Let's see if you can get these dishes done by 11:30 tonight. That's the only test you need to worry about."

"Yes mam."

"Okay mom, it's 12:15. I cleared the table, washed the dishes, and did everything you asked. Can I go to bed now?"

"Yeah go ahead. I'll wake you up at the usual time, 4:30 sharp. Remember you have to help me get breakfast ready. I don't want to have to drag you out of bed again. Son you know I love you right? Good night."

At the home of Jorge Pena:

"Jorge, Jorge, wake up. Let's go."

"All right mom, I'm up. You know I don't like it when you call me Jorge. Can't you just call me George like my teachers do."

"Whatever Jorge. Go get your brothers and sisters up also. Hurry you can't be late. Its TAKS test day. If you do good this year you won't have to be in those special classes again and your teachers won't pick on you anymore. The bus will be leaving in forty minutes Jorge. Eat your breakfast and get going."

At the home of Candice Ferrell:

"Mom, I don't want to go to school today. This is my first year doing this testing stuff. What if everyone else does better than me? What if all the kids fail? We've been getting ready and preparing for this day for so long. I can't believe it all comes down to this."

"Sweetheart, everything is going to be fine. Besides you're the teacher, you have to go to school."

Five months later ... at the school of Mary Anne, Tyrone, Jorge, and Sue... in the class of Mrs. Racey:

"Sit down and don't talk. You are all here for one reason and one reason only. You are failures. Because of you I have to stay after school and teach this TAKS reading class. Because of you our school didn't meet its AYP for the third year in a row. Because of you we may all loose our jobs. I certainly hope you do better at third grade the second time around."

"Your teachers from last year were gracious enough to provide me with a copy of your test scores and the questions that you missed. George Pena, let's start with you. Hmmm, it looks to me like you have a slight problem, you are illiterate. I can't believe the questions you missed. On your writing prompt you were supposed to write about a time that your parents embarrassed you. Instead you wrote a paragraph, in all lower case letters I might add, about your mom being pregnant. What is wrong

Personal Perspective

with you? What does that have to do with you being embarrassed? Never mind, I don't have all day to wait for your answer. Go sit down and write the word embarrassed 200 times. I am sure that will teach you what it means.

"Sue, you must be even slower than George over there. You missed the easiest question on the test! Let me refresh your memory just in case you forgot what it was: Question 6. Last night we ate _____

_____ for dinner. Your choices were (a) steak, (b) dog, (c) a house, or (d) none of the above. You chose B. Hello, the correct answer was (a) steak. Not dog. We don't eat dogs for dinner. Sue look at me when I am talking to you. I thought your people were supposed to be smart. You must be the shame of your family.

"And then we have Mary Anne. Sweetheart, what happened to you?"

You are such a smart girl. I can tell just by looking at you. You didn't even finish the test."

"Well Mrs. Racey, I started taking the test and I just got bored. It was so easy. Anyways, you know how you have to bring a book to read after you finish the test? Well I took a break from the test and started reading the *Divinci Code*, and before you know it, time was up and I didn't finish. I am sorry if I upset you. I will do better next time.

"I am sure you will Mary Anne. I'll see what I can do so that you won't have to take this class.

"And let's see who else is left. O yeah, the colored boy. I thought there would be more of your people here. O well, they probably wouldn't have shown up anyways. You failed the test but you had the highest score out of anyone else here. How did you manage

that one? You must have been copying someone and then got caught. Lets look at some of the questions you missed. Oh, this is my favorite. A picture, Tyrone, you can't even identify a picture. They showed you a picture of a tree stump and grass sticking out of the water. This is a picture of a swamp. Can you say that with me? S-W-A-M-P. All you had to do was bubble in swamp.

"This is ridiculous. I bet you if it was a picture of a rap singer you would have gotten it right. Don't just sit there. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Well, Mrs. Racey, first of all my Mom doesn't let me listen to rap music. Second of all you need to stop calling me colored. I may not have passed that stupid test but I'm smart enough to know that I'm not the only colored person in here. White is a color too."

The Problem

Obviously this was an exaggeration of a scene, one that unfortunately could take place in many of our schools. The story is fictional but the content is real. The reason these student's didn't pass the TAKS test had little or nothing to do with intelligence. Their test scores gave us information about their culture and background and not necessarily their intellect.

Case #1—Jorge Pena is an ELL student. The question he missed was a mistake of vocabulary and nothing more. The prompt asked for the student to write about an embarrassing situation and Jorge wrote about his mom being pregnant. Jorge made a mistake that many students who are not native English speakers might make. He read the word embarrassed, and assumed it had the same meaning as the Spanish word *embarazada*, which means pregnant. This false cognate caused him to miss the question.

Case #2—Sue made a cultural mistake. Dog is something that her family used to eat almost every night before they moved from Korea to the United States last year. Dog would have been the best answer if the test were created and administered in her native land.

Case #3—Mary Anne is an identified

Gifted/Talented student. She has made straight A's for the last two years in school. She didn't pass the test because it wasn't challenging enough to keep her attention. She got bored early on in the test with its easy content, and never went back to finish it.

Case #4—Tyrone is from El Paso, Texas, and has never lived or visited anywhere else. He has never seen a picture of or ever been to a swamp. The picture of a tree stump with grass sticking out of water was a completely foreign environment to him. Perhaps he would have had a better chance at getting it correct if the picture showed tumbleweed surrounded by dirt.

Whose Standard Is It Anyway?

We call these tests standardized, but according to whose standards are we judging students? Test publishers try not to include biased questions, but they almost always fail in that effort. "Bias takes place when the test scores are influenced by irrelevant characteristics of the test taker such as race, sex, family, wealth, religion, and so forth" (Strenio, 201). There are biases inherently built in, in so many aspects of testing. The test questions are written and graded based upon the norms of White middle-class America, and are graded by the same people the test caters to. Aside from the questions themselves, we also

need to take into account external factors that affect a child's performance. Did they have teachers like Mrs. Racey? Where they tired when they took the test? Is doing well in school something valued by their culture? Is the material not challenging for them?

Until reforms are made in standardized testing there will always be a gap in student test scores and bias will be present. Policymakers are quite aware of these test biases and yet schools still use scores to determine a child's intellect, the classes they are allowed to take, and now in more and more schools, whether a child will be promoted to the next grade or not. If we keep using test scores as the sole determiner for student's success we will have no children left to graduate, they would all have been kept behind.

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We're seeking submissions of creative writing on topics including diversity, multiculturalism, equity, education, social justice, environmental justice, and more specific subtopics (race, gender/sex, sexual orientation, language, (dis)ability, etc.). Do you write poetry? Short stories or flash fiction? Creative nonfiction? We will consider any style or form, but we prefer prose that is no longer than 750 words and poetry that can fit comfortably onto a single page of text.

Submissions will be reviewed on a rolling basis.

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Where to Submit: Submissions may be sent electronically or by postal mail. Electronic submissions should be sent to Paul C. Gorski at pgorski01@gw.hamline.edu with the subject line "ME Submission." Hard copy, mailed submissions should be addressed to: Paul C. Gorski, Graduate School of Education, Hamline University, 1536 Hewitt Avenue, MS-A1720, St. Paul, MN 55104.

Format: All submissions should be double-spaced, including references and any other materials. Please send one copy of your submission with the title noted at the top of the page. The title of the manuscript, name(s) of author(s), academic title(s), institutional affiliation(s), and address, telephone number, and e-mail address of the author(s) should all be included on a cover sheet separate from the manuscript. If you are a student or if you are submitting work on behalf of a student, please include age, grade level, and school name.

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