

ARLO KEMPF

THE PEDAGOGY OF STANDARDIZED TESTING

The Radical Impacts of Educational
Standardization in the US and Canada

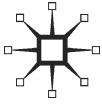


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For Meghan McKee, the finest teacher.

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Abbreviations

Academic Performance Index (API)
American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)
Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)
California Standards Test (CST)
Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI)
Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC)
Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP)
Culturally Relevant and Responsive Teaching (CRRT)
Differentiated Instruction (DI)
Education, Quality and Accountability Office of Ontario (EQAO)
Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)
Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
English as a Second Language (ESL)
Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM)
High-Stakes Standardized Testing (HSST)
Human Capital Theory of Education (HCTE)
Independent Education Plan (IEP)
Law School Admission Test (LSAT)
Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)
Medical College Application Test (MCAT)
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
National Defense Education Act (NDEA)
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP)
Physical Health Education (PHE)
Professional Development (PD)
Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)
Program Improvement (PI)
Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)
Race to the Top (RTTT)

Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organizations (RICO)

School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP)

Standardized Testing (ST)

Test-Oriented Teaching and Learning (TOTL)

Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

United States Department of Education (DOE)

Value-Added Measures (VAM)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Introduction

Standardized Testing and the Changing Form of US and Canadian Education

Few activities are more riddled with metaphor than education. Learning is a gift, a search, a path, an adventure, a blossoming, and a light bulb turning on. To teach is to conduct, to garden, to act as tour guide and custodian of the future, and, of course, to love. Students training to be teachers are often asked to identify metaphors that represent their philosophy of education. Some examples from students in a recent Masters course I teach include teaching as farming, dancing, storytelling, rain, metamorphosis, and reproduction. While there are many who may find it hard not to roll their eyes at the sometimes cutesy and oversimplified representations of education, these metaphors, indeed the most stereotypical of them all (learning as a journey, teaching as inspiration) reflect specific understandings of education that are embodied in twentieth- and twenty-first-century schools.

New educators know much more about teaching and learning than their professional forebearers. For the most part, the past 50 years have seen students gain access to not only better information (more accurate and holistic content in our schools) but better teaching as well (more inclusive, student-centered, and pedagogically sound practice), thanks in large part to education research and increasingly comprehensive teacher training. It has been a century since the revolutionary work of philosopher John Dewey argued that schools should reflect the social, democratic, and interactive potential and nature of teaching and learning; and nearly a half century since Brazilian popular educator and theorist Paulo Freire warned against the banking model in education (wherein the teacher is the only knower in the room), suggesting instead that authentic education emerges from conversation rather than monologue, and that learning occurs most powerfully when linked to

the daily experiences and struggles of students. Although student teachers may not always know it, they have Dewey and Freire (and others) to thank for the daily and unrelenting call to reflect on their teaching and learning, as well as for the constant demand to consider their own identity in relation to their work as future teachers. Psychologists such as Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and others provided us with constructivist theories of learning, arguing that knowledge and indeed meaning are produced through the interaction of experiences and ideas. Technology has increased teachers' access to teaching and learning resources, and has opened up new possibilities for collaboration among students, teachers, administrators, and communities.

The works of Dewey, Freire, Vygotsky, Piaget, and other radicals-cum-mainstream-education-mainstays have indeed given us the sometimes-cheesy metaphors and idioms that dominate twenty-first-century school corridors and staffrooms in the United States and Canada. That we might take for granted that education is a journey—an act of joy, a dialogue—speaks to how far we have come, how embedded these ideas are, and how much teaching and learning have come to be defined through these concepts. The ubiquity of these metaphors speaks to a widespread acceptance of something that is increasingly at risk of slipping away. Educational standardization offers another vision of education, one perhaps not yet articulated in trickle-down metaphors, in which students and teachers are represented by related and competing numbers and scores, inputs and outputs, revenues and expenses.

Teaching and schooling are being fundamentally transformed in the United States, and to a lesser but nonetheless significant degree in Canada. The nature and experience of public education (for parents, students, and teachers) is changing radically and at a pace not seen since school desegregation by virtue of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.¹ While many factors contribute to educational change, the key driver of current education reform is a radical new blanket call for standardization and data-driven accountability—with standardized testing as the vanguard initiative across K-12 education, within teacher professional development, and in the evaluation of teachers and schools.

This book is based primarily on results of the Teachers and Testing Study, a three-year project on teachers and teaching in the United States and Canada. The study looks at the effects of standardized testing on teaching and learning, based on interviews with over 100 teachers in urban schools in Los Angeles and Toronto, as well as a survey of thousands of teachers in Illinois, Ontario, California, and New York. On the one hand, the results point to teaching as an art, a love, a passion, and a

profession. On the other hand, the interviews and survey results paint a picture of institutional siege; of teachers doing more with less; of teachers teaching to the test; and of teachers' lives and work having changed profoundly as they fight to serve their students against wave after wave of downloaded initiatives, pressure to raise scores, professional instability, and scapegoating. Indeed, if the current program of educational standardization continues, a similar study conducted 25 years from now in the United States will be little more than an autopsy of a system that was, with researchers confronting a teacher-proof education system with students-cum-widgets navigating high-stakes assessments; a corporate education dystopia best described by Paulo Freire's notion of necrophilia, in which there is no dialogue and where, guided by profit-driven ideological tools, children are constructed as both consumer and commodity.²

While there is no single opt-out movement, tens of thousands of families have found a variety of ways to opt their children out of standardized testing. Indeed, some suggest that parents' decisions are increasingly framed as whether or not to opt in to, rather than out of, testing.³ This comes in response to not only the increased use of standardized testing but also the increasingly high-stakes nature of these tests. In various Canadian contexts, a slow resistance to standardized testing is growing among parents and teachers—arguably in direct proportion to how much high-stakes testing is used. Canadian provinces and territories use far fewer standardized tests than most US jurisdictions, and have no national standards such as the US Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSI). In some cases, opting out means individual parents keeping their children home for the testing period, while in others, parents have organized boycotts against standardized tests (and even the field-testing of standardized tests). Opt-out parents are diverse, particularly in the United States, and include libertarians, liberals, and hard core progressives.

Although parents' motivations are diverse, as detailed in Chapter 7, one primary reason folks are opting out is the negative experience of their children with standardized tests. Many test invigilators wear disposable rubber gloves when handing out and collecting standardized tests in the classroom. This on-the-job bit of learning arose due to the frequency of children vomiting before, during, and after (and on) standardized tests—a precaution that has been codified in at least one testing manual.⁴ The anxiety that accompanies testing can be severe for students, and obviously more so for some than others. Although students who suffer from anxiety (especially test anxiety) may fare

particularly poorly in this regard, the stress of high-stakes tests is not reserved for nervous children. Countless opt-out parents have made their decision based on their children's academic disengagement and frustration with and around the culture of high-stakes standardized testing (HSST). Opting out is not simply a rejection of test taking but also of the increasingly central place of testing within life in schools: within pedagogy, within local and federal curricula, and within the hierarchy of what is considered important in and out of the classroom.

Teachers understand the impact of HSST on the classroom better than most. Specifically, many feel pressure to gear their teaching toward improved test results, rather than toward learning and/or toward other forms of student work and alternate methods of assessment. Teacher time and attention are increasingly taken away from a variety of important tasks in order to teach to and for standardized tests (including attention to student diversity in the classroom, student well-being, and the use of rich and varied texts and approaches that may not apply to a standardized test). This is impacting the profession itself, and brings to mind Marshall McLuhan's suggestion that "the more data banks record about us, the less we exist."⁵ A career generally understood as a calling, an art, and something done "for the love of it" is increasingly a routinized, stressful, and constrained activity, with teachers pigeon-holed into a classroom-focus on improved test scores. Following the lead of many families, teachers are increasingly resisting standardization (of their work, their students, and their schools) by refusing to administer tests, by organizing against standardized testing and curriculum, and by supporting opt-out families and movements. Perhaps the best-known case came in January, 2013, in Seattle, Washington, when teachers at Garfield High School refused to administer the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) standardized test. Garfield teachers were supported by their 600 students and the test was eventually deemed optional at the secondary level in Seattle. The Garfield example is just one among many across the United States. In Canada, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has been highly active in promoting academic alternatives to standardized testing, as well as in promoting activist organizing and responses to standardized testing.

Despite the widespread controversy surrounding testing, the voices of teachers are often absent from the conversation when it comes to large-scale assessment. With this absence we lose a central perspective on the daily effects of testing in and out of the classroom. With that in mind, this book centers on the voice of teachers in an attempt to better understand the impacts of high-stakes standardized testing in Canadian and

US education with a specific focus on the effects of HSST on teacher practice; on teachers' work; and on the consequences for our most vulnerable students, schools, and communities. It would be disingenuous to suggest the discussion undertaken here is apolitical. To be quite clear, I begin and end with the premise that high-stakes standardized testing is mostly very bad, most of the time. The HSST movement is one that in my view serves a neoliberal agenda in education. In the United States, the standardization movement has courted corporate input at every step of the way, with private interests playing a key role in education policy. Achieve, for example, is an education reform organization that has been instrumental in the development and dissemination of the CCSI. Its board members include former and current presidents and vice presidents of Chase Manhattan Bank, Prudential, Intel, IBM, and other corporations. Another big player in the drive for Common Core is the Business Roundtable group whose members include leaders from big oil, big pharma, agribusiness, finance, tech, the gambling industry, and other sectors. As Ruth Powers Silverberg and I have noted elsewhere, "Business Roundtable produces policy papers on a variety of issues but appears to devote special attention to labor relations and education (fighting unions and promoting standardized testing, respectively)."⁶ Another example of invited corporate interference is the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a contentious organization that "brings together business and political leaders for their mutual benefit, produces an annual education report card ranking states based on their education policies including standards, choice, and charters."⁷ Educational standardization is thus not simply bad education policy; it is politics at play in our classrooms as an expression of a specific corporate vision of teaching and learning.

I came across the politics of standardized testing somewhat by accident. In 2011, I was fortunate to be awarded a Banting Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of California, Los Angeles, based on my proposed research on race and racism in teaching and teachers' work in the United States in Canada. I had designed a comparative study of the way race was addressed (or not addressed) in urban schools in the United States and Canada. I began my research talking to teachers in South Los Angeles. It was quickly evident that teachers in these schools were, for the most part, critical folks, committed to transformative teaching and learning in their schools and school communities (some of the most economically and racially marginalized urban neighborhoods in the United States). Teachers had excellent ideas for critical work around race and racism, but every one of them reported feeling

increasingly unable to put their ideas into place, or for that matter, to engage in other critical forms of teaching and learning. As I detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, their time and attention were instead focused on teaching to, for, and around standardized tests. In many cases, seemingly core subjects such as history, physical health education, and social studies were cast aside in order to prepare for the literacy-, math-, and science-focused standardized tests—leaving little or no time for critical teaching around race and racism. As a Canadian, I had stumbled onto the worst-kept secret in US education: the radical impacts of standardized testing on teaching and learning. To my surprise, early interviews with teachers in Toronto, Ontario, were different from my conversations with their US peers only by degree. While Canadian teachers were not impacted as much by testing, they were responsible for administering relatively fewer tests, and school cultural was reported as relatively less test focused.

So, what was originally designed as a comparative study of teachers' work and multicultural education quickly shifted focus when, in conversation with teachers, all roads led back to the negative impacts of standardized testing. Further, teachers in both countries felt their labor, their classrooms, and indeed the education system as a whole were changing radically as a result. In two very distinct urban schooling contexts, teachers reported a changing landscape of school culture, and a move toward test-focused teaching, learning, professional development, and school–community relationships. The notion of HSST thus emerges from, and in part describes, this culture shift in education. Referring not to one test or another (even though many individual tests might be make-or-break for students), HSST refers instead to standardized testing as a governing principle in education, the high-stakes referring to the impact of specific standardized tests as well as to the overall shift that is taking place in classrooms, schools, and the educational experience of children as a result of test-oriented teaching and learning (TOTL).

The voices that guide the coming chapters come from one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, and written comments offered in survey responses by teachers from Ontario, Illinois, California, and New York. Additionally, this book draws on quantitative results from a survey of teachers in Illinois and Ontario. The analysis here is also informed by five years of paying attention to the issue of standardized testing in K-12 education: from reading everything I could on the subject, to reading and teaching on standardized testing at my university, to presenting preliminary portions of this work at academic

conferences, to speaking with teachers and academics about the issue at every opportunity, to listening closely and critically to the parents and children known to me personally when they spoke about their experiences with standardized testing, to speaking and listening at parent councils and PTA meetings in Los Angeles and Toronto, and to reading daily Google alerts on standardized testing for the past four years as a survey of popular media and reporting.

By drawing on the Teachers and Testing Study as well as other large-scale research, this book seeks to understand how HSST functions. The comparative analysis herein seeks to deepen contemporary understandings of HSST as a multinational phenomenon, with qualitatively similar effects on two distinct systems. Beyond the well-worn questions of work intensification, and a general distaste for treating students (and teachers) as numbers, the daily and holistic impact of HSST on teachers and their classrooms is yet to be researched in significant detail. Taking up this challenge, this book seeks to offer a rich and accessible analysis of these phenomena, interpreted through the looking glass of schools, learning, and teachers' professional lives.

Overview

The book begins with an introduction to standardized testing, its use, and some common arguments for and against it. Chapter 1, *The School as Factory Farm: All Testing All the Time*, details the current use of HSST in Canada and the United States, with a look at frequency, duration, financial cost, and types of tests used. Many teachers in the United States are spending 10 to 30 percent of class time preparing students for, and/or administering, standardized tests. This chapter also traces the increase in the use of HSST over the past 15 years in the United States and Canada, and situates these practices internationally in comparison to the use of standardized testing globally. Using data from national and international studies on student achievement, the chapter dives in to some of the connections between standardized testing, equity, student achievement, and public satisfaction with education. The chapter argues that increased standardized testing does not positively correlate with significant improvements in student achievement generally, nor does it correlate positively with the closing of gender, class, or race gaps in education.

Chapter 2, *The History, Logic, and Push for Standardized Testing*, sketches the century-long historical trajectory of standardized testing in the United States and Canada, including recent policy initiatives

such as *Race to the Top*, *Common Core*, and *No Child Left Behind*. For over a century, standardized testing has fit neatly within the logic of schools as a site of production, with students as products (and more recently with schools as consumers of for-profit educational products and services). On the basis of education policy historiography, we find that standardized tests rely on a specific set of behaviorist/economic presumptions about student learning and achievement, which now, as a century ago, fail to recognize the inherently social nature and purposes of teaching and learning. While the past three decades have seen the integration of more social constructivist perspectives across and within teacher education, standardized testing and its behaviorist/economic underpinnings have become the key metric guiding organizational life for students, teachers, parents, and schools in the United States.

Guided by the *Teachers and Testing Study*, as well as by relevant secondary studies, Chapter 3, *Testing at the Tipping Point: HSST as a Governing Education Principle In and Out of the Classroom*, details the distinction between high-stakes and low-stakes standardized testing. Typically less frequent, low-stakes standardized tests are used to improve particular strengths and weaknesses of a program or curriculum and may or may not be linked to grades or the formal evaluation of individual students. HSST, as articulated here, however, refers not simply to tests or testing regimes that evaluate students and that make or break chances for advancement, but also more broadly, to the emergence of a new governing principle for understanding student, teacher, and school achievement based on standardized testing—a radical and unprecedented transformation in the United States and Canada. In the context of the emergence of this HSST dynamic, the very meaning of student ability and school performance, and with it public as well as professional perceptions of them, are radically transformed.

Chapter 4, *Revising the Pedagogical Form: Test-Oriented Teaching and Learning*, applies the basic criticisms and conceptual HSST framework developed in Chapter 3 to detail the interactive ways in which the manic pursuit of higher test scores is affecting the classroom and teacher practice. Beginning with a detailed look at the time challenges posed by increased standardized testing and its significance (institutionally and beyond), teachers report a radical transformation of both the depth and breadth of the curriculum, fundamentally new levels of pressure on students, and new relations between teachers and school administration. Among other things, we see evidence for how standardized testing profoundly impacts teachers' capacity to teach effectively as entire sets of pedagogical practices, theories, and tools come to be jettisoned.

It follows that as classrooms and pedagogy change, so too do the teaching occupation and the functional meaning of being a teacher. Chapter Five, *Not What I Signed up for: The Changing Meaning of Being a Teacher*, presents evidence of significant changes in teachers' capacity to use professional judgment, authority and latitude. Looking beyond the classroom, this chapter investigates teacher occupational satisfaction, autonomy, and fulfilment as these relate to standardized testing. Chapter Five describes the changing public perceptions of teachers in relation to the emergence of HSST, as well as teacher understandings of this shift. Teachers are increasingly alienated from the moral rewards of teaching and they note that the decline of the profession correlates to the under-servicing of students. The chapter also takes up teachers' concerns about the developmentally inappropriate use of testing with young children, as well as teacher calls for a more robust professional accountability that serves students and improves teaching. The impacts of HSST vary by virtue of context, with for the most part, low standardized test scores associated with high pressure for teachers and students, and high standardized test scores associated with low pressure for teachers and students.

US and Canadian classrooms are increasingly diverse as far as race, culture, ability, and language. Additionally, the percentage of low-income students has increased in recent years. Chapter 6, *A Lack of Accountability: Teacher Perspectives on Equity, Accuracy and Standardized Testing*, focuses on the impact of high-stakes testing for these equity-seeking student populations. While educational standardization has failed to close the educational achievement gaps across lines of race, language, dis/ability, gender and social class, this chapter presents findings from the *Teachers and Testing* study illustrating the ways in which HSST interferes and at times even prevents teachers from doing the very work needed to support students facing the greatest challenges. These professional practices include inclusive curriculum development and delivery, differentiated instruction, extracurricular activities, bilingual resource use, universal design for learning, and project-based learning led by inquiry and exploration. Questions of cultural bias as well as widespread student test-anxiety raise concerns around the limitations of standardized testing (ST) as far as understanding student and teacher ability. This chapter also looks closely at the ways in which HSST makes the introduction of critical approaches incredibly difficult for many teachers (approaches such as critical pedagogy, anti-racism, feminism, etc); HSST is a tacit assault on multicultural education in urban schools. This chapter also takes up questions

of workplace equity for teachers, noting the differential impact of HSST on teachers based on where and whom they teach, in many cases punishing teachers for working with marginalized students and communities. This chapter frames the ways in which teachers in high-pressure teaching situations feel pushed to boost students' scores using a variety of methods—some ethical and some not, the latter including various subtle forms of cheating.

Chapter 7, *Implications: Synthesis of Findings, Resistance, and Alternatives*, begins with a summary of key findings and implications from Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6. It then turns to an examination of the ways in which teachers are pushing back against HSST, and a discussion of alternatives to HSST in the United States and Canada, emerging from the voices of teachers in both contexts. This chapter details teacher strategies ranging from the use of critical pedagogy to problematize the test with students (including analyses of cultural bias), to advocacy for test sabotage. This resistance (intentional and unintentional) is then contextualized within regional and national movements of students, parents, and administrators who are working against HSST (movements that include radical activists, suburban soccer moms and dads, and even former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch). Informed by additional research and teacher visions of accountability, the chapter sets forth a series of alternatives both for assessment policy and for teacher practice in the United States and Canada, based on a vision of assessment articulated by teachers in both contexts. It concludes by offering specific comments on the future of the Common Core in the United States, and on the Education, Quality and Accountability Office of Ontario (EQAO) in Ontario.

* * *

I have been fortunate to do a lot of writing and teaching within antiracist education studies, and among the many offerings of that field is the demand that authors and speakers who wish to be heard are required to let their readers and listeners know just who they are and where they are coming from. With that in mind, it may be worth mentioning that I have never taken a standardized test in a school setting. I have never been traumatized by the specter I spend the next seven chapters taking apart in this work. Further, my daughter wrote her third and sixth grade, week-long, standardized tests without incident in Ontario; she survived with neither physical nor psychological scars. In the ninth grade, she chose to opt out of that year's one-day standardized test (with