

“Just Another Brick in the Wall”: Standardization and the Devaluing of Education

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Abstract

Standardization and curriculum alignment are the dominant curricular forces in education today. Due in part to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, education has become singularly focused on teaching towards the test in order to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), yet data has shown that using standardized testing does not result in increased student learning or development. This article discusses the current state of education in this country as well as the detrimental effects that standardization and strict curriculum alignment have, not only on students, but on educators as well.

Standardization and curriculum alignment (also called curriculum narrowing) can be defined as a method of educational quality control (Wraga, 1999) where the “process of teaching and learning is predetermined, pre-paced, and pre-structured. There is little room for originality or creativity on the part of teachers or students [and] specific, correct answers are elicited to specific, direct questions” (Mahiri, 2005, p. 82). Therefore, in order to pass the required yearly “high stakes” standardized exams required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), the process of teaching is increasingly becoming “teacher proof” (Crocco & Costigan, 2007) in school districts across the country.

This educational practice continues to destroy the notion of a critical, engaging, and self-reflective education in this country (Giroux, 2010). There is decreasing potential for individuality and creativity in education today since, “Increasingly, classrooms are places in which teachers and students act out the script given to them by someone else, neither teachers nor students ask the questions that matter, and learning is equated with passing a test” (Hursh, 2008, p. 3). Due to NCLB (2001), both students and teachers end up losing in this era of teaching to the test (Hampton, 2005; McNeil, 2005). Students are treated like little automatons expected to spit out information at will, as their enjoyment for learning continues to diminish (Berry, 2009). They are seen as nothing more than “empty vessels to fill with prescribed knowledge” (Sleeter, 2005, p. 21), which will be tested at a later date. This model of learning does not help students acquire knowledge and become more independent and critical human beings; it only sets them up to become the next generation of unquestioning capitalist workers (Bauman, 2010; Giroux, 2009a; Hill, 2005, 2006; Leonardo, 2004; Lugg, 2007). Furthermore, teachers often become frustrated and disillusioned with their decreasing

autonomy in the classroom (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Day, 2003; Rogers, 1980) since they are treated like simple office clerks and technicians (Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Giroux, 2010; Mahiri, 2005; McLaren, 1988) or “McTeachers” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001, p. 5).

Standardization, curriculum alignment, and scripted curriculum all take from the process of schooling but give nothing in return. Even though standardization and the use of high stakes standardized testing does not appear to result in any increase in actual student learning (Horn, 2003; Wraga, 1999), this trend has been growing since the mid-1990s (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006). According to the expansive research study completed by Amrein and Berliner (2003):

Based on data from twenty-eight states, there is scant evidence to support the proposition that high-stakes tests--including high-stake high school graduation exams--increase student achievement...The study concludes from the data that the implementation of high school graduation exams results in a *decrease* in academic achievement (p. 31). (Italics added by authors)

For the sake of lock-step uniformity, we are sacrificing independent, critical thought as well as teachers’ abilities to craft curriculum as they see fit. As will be shown in this article, the current trend of standardization and curriculum alignment in this country has detrimental, pernicious consequences for the craft of teaching, individual student learning, and the future of our society as a whole.

Historical Perspective

At the beginning of the twentieth century, theorists such as Edward A. Ross and Franklin Bobbitt began their push for a “social efficiency model” of learning (Kliebard, 2005) in which there would be no inefficiency (no waste of learning time); students would only be taught what they would need for their eventual role in life (Kliebard, 2005). All academic material was to be focused on what one might potentially do in their adult lives, whatever that may be. This system of school specialization was created as a means to serve the professional spheres of the market (Gramsci, 1971). The education policy that seeks social efficiency trains students to one day form professional and specialized units in the modern world. By teaching a narrowed curriculum in public schools, students would be more prepared for their future lives since they would be only learning the skills necessary to be successful in the workplace.

In modern times, “the assumption [is] that any given standardized test appropriately serves as the principal source of curriculum content...the test simply becomes the curriculum” (Wraga, 1999, p. 3). This is very similar to what theorists like Bobbitt were espousing over a hundred years ago. Now, instead of a particular trade dictating the skills to be learned in school (e.g., farming, bricklaying), it is the

standardized test which dictates what should be taught in our schools. It is quite evident that we are still enmeshed in the same educational model of social efficiency as we were back in the early twentieth century. According to Sleeter and Stillman (2009), "Like a century ago, curriculum is being organized scientifically for efficiency, deriving learning objectives from social and economic needs and casting teachers as managers of the process of producing student achievement scores" (p. 316).

Due to NCLB (2008), every public school student in this country, no matter the socioeconomic background, home language, or disability, must be able to pass standardized tests in order to prove that they are actually learning (and, in many states, to qualify for high school graduation), which is then reflected in the school's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) results. If AYP is not met, teachers are at risk of losing their jobs, and it is also possible that their schools might be taken over by the State (called restructuring) (Hursh, 2008; Lugg, 2007; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006; Nichols & Berliner, 2008). Therefore, the current system of accountability created by NCLB flexes its muscle as a method for centralizing state and federal authority (McNeil, 2005) over our educational system. McNeil (2005) stated that school districts are rated on account of all of their schools' performance scores. The rating system has been:

Set up as a hierarchical system, each layer of the bureaucracy is held accountable to the one above it. The rules are set at the top and there can be no variations in their implementation, nor can schools or districts opt out if they prefer a different method of evaluating children's learning or assessing the quality of their schools. (p. 59)

Although there are select educators and theorists who feel that standardization and curriculum alignment are beneficial for our students today (Anderson, 2002), there is little, if any, actual data which proves that standardization and curriculum alignment lead to any actual, meaningful student learning (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Day, 2002; Wraga, 1999). Standardization's effectiveness is based on efficiency through the presentation of statistics in order to form any real basis as "truth." However, according to Fromm (1955) "if one had decided the value of an idea on the basis of numbers, we would still be dwelling in caves" (p. 340).

Negative Effects of Standardization on People of Color

The standardization of academic content and curriculum in our nation's schools is fueled by the perpetuation of racist and sexist knowledge (Fischman & McLaren, 2000; Giroux & McLaren, 1986) taught from the perspective of the White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant majority (McLaren, 1988; McLaren, Martin, Farahmandpur, & Jaramillo, 2004). The forms of "knowledge" taught in our schools today "function and legitimate Anglocentric values and meaning and at the same time negate the history, culture, and language practices of minority students...[which] has its roots in Europe's demonization

of dark-skinned populations” (McLaren, 1991, p. 13). Unfortunately, “the use of standards-based reform as a way of eliminating inequity has resulted in homogenizing the curriculum, even while classrooms in the United States have become more diverse” (Sleeter, 2005, p. 6).

Standardization and curriculum alignment have taken their toll on the student population in this country, especially those of color who live in poorer communities (Hill, 2006; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006). Leonardo (2004) explained that, “It is indeed the case that middle-class students receive curricular matter fashioned in their image. Their linguistic capital and cultural codes form the basis of pedagogical knowledge and legitimate interactions in the classroom” (p. 486). Therefore, standardized tests are greatly biased against students of color and tend to be an unreliable method of assessing actual student learning (Hursh, 2007).

Furthermore, public schools, in accordance with NCLB require that English Language Learners (ELLs) take grade-level assessments even if they have little fluency in English. This puts ELLs at an incredibly unfair disadvantage (Pascopella, 2007). For these students, learning English and having to perform well on a high stakes test in English proves to be overtaxing to both the student and their home (Pascopella, 2007). Furthermore, the schools are also harshly penalized due to the low test scores of students of color, with negative consequences such as schools being publicly labeled in the media as “failing” (Lugg, 2007; Yatvin, 2008) to teachers being afraid of losing their jobs (Hill, 2005, 2006). This supports the notion that schools, like standardized tests, “are not ‘neutral’ or ‘fair’ or ‘inevitable’, but sites of economic, cultural and ideological domination, of class domination” (Hill, 2002, p. 10).

Curriculum Narrowing and Limiting Thought

We find today that, since “instructional time is spent practicing for the test, while important and challenging topics and activities are dropped from the curriculum” (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006, p. 310), students are supplied with a material in a “drill and kill” fashion, which ruins their academic experience (Berry, 2009). According to Fitzgerald (2008), almost 88% of surveyed teachers believe that NCLB has led them to ignore important parts of their curriculum. It appears that, in the eyes of legislators, school board members, and other supporters of standardization at the district or state level, it is essential that skills be drilled incessantly at the expense of curricular content as well as recess, gym, music, and the arts (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006). Therefore, school is not supposed to be pleasurable, thought-provoking, and fulfilling; rather, in the name of efficiency, schools are beginning to be run like large corporations (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006). The individual student is lost while the good of the collective whole (the school, district, etc.) is pushed to the forefront.

Furthermore, it is also becoming increasingly difficult to be a critical thinker in today's high-stakes standardized classroom (Massa & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009), and according to Giroux (2010), "This is a pedagogy that sabotages any attempt at self-reflection and quality education, all the while providing an excuse for producing moral comas and a flight from responsibility" (p. 4). Receiving an education that is standardized and aligned also makes it quite difficult to help students create a critical consciousness (McLaren, Martin, Farahmandpur, & Jaramillo, 2004). If students are no longer asked to ponder, question, and critique, then how are they to become independent, critical thinkers as adults? Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2006) stated that, "The goal of instruction is to produce lifelong learners, not test takers" (p. 311), yet more and more, the purpose of modern schooling appears to be the production of workers that will fit into the capitalist marketplace (Hursh, 2008). In other words, by use of standardization, we are creating non-questioning workers that will fit right into the American workforce.

Public education in this country is increasingly being used to "produce and reproduce a work force and citizenry and set of consumers fit for capital" (Hill, 2005, p. 259) who can contribute to our capitalist marketplace and economy (Hursh, 2008). It appears that NCLB supports this end by justifying standardization as a means to compete for the global economic top spot (Giroux, 2009c). The system becomes cyclical and autonomous by engendering students with certain qualities to be understood as commodities. Every aspect of the students has been commodified; their lives have been defined for them as well as their relations to others by market forces (Giroux, 2009b).

Many theorists believe that the capitalist agenda for education is to produce and maintain a tiered work force that reinforces and reproduces class inequality (Fischman & McLaren, 2000; Hill, 2004, 2006, 2009; Leonardo, 2004). McLaren and Farahmandpur (2006) have posited that in schools, lower-class students and those of color are still placed in vocational tracks that will only prepare them for jobs in the retail and service industries. It has also been found that, "in the context of the disproportionately high rates of failure among African Americans, Hispanics, limited English proficient students, and students with disabilities...an increasingly diverse workforce may not be ready for what it will be asked to do" (Horn, 2003, p. 38). In other words, due to the narrowed curriculum caused by standardization, a large segment of our future workforce is being targeted for low-level or low-pay work, and they may not even be prepared for that. Leonardo (2004) has affirmed that, "Like a factory, schools welcome students as inputs to the juggernaut of capitalism, where they learn dispositions necessary for the reproduction of capital, then leave the school site 12 years or so later as outputs of the system" (p. 484). Students are not allowed to participate in this system and select their own personal goals, curricular material, or educative methods; rather, they are chosen for them by those in positions of power (Rogers, 1980).

Qualities once valued by humans, such as courtesy, friendliness, and kindness, have now become viewed as assets in their “personality package” (Fromm, 1955, p. 142). In other words, public education replicates the corporate sector by inculcating students with personality traits that are in demand in the marketplace, such as hypercompetitiveness (Giroux, 2009c). Not only do the education and corporate systems value these traits, but the students begin to do so as well. Where standardization has become the determinate of success in school, students seek to compete for the best scores to attain honors, as well as scholarships and admissions in competitive schools. The scores students obtain on standardized tests are gatekeepers to individual successes and opportunities; the same competitive nature is required for high paying jobs and notoriety in the job market. The internal aspects of this indoctrination begin to synthesize with the students’ own identity and self-perception. Fromm (1955) stated that “if the individual fails in a profitable investment of himself, he feels that *he* is a failure; if he succeeds, *he* is a success” (p. 142; italics in original text).

Negative Effect on Teachers

In schools today, educators are finding it increasingly difficult to be creative and autonomous in their classroom instruction (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Day, 2002; Hursh, 2008). With the increasing use of scripted curriculum, in particular, teachers are often left with very little opportunity to be creative or break from the script (literally and metaphorically). Many teachers also feel that they are being devalued and constantly scrutinized and evaluated by their school administrators and communities (Berry, 2009) for not meeting the mandated Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals. According to Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2006), it is due to this “present climate of accountability [that] most schools see no alternative other than to work towards meeting the states’ standards and legislative mandates” (p. 318). If the schools are unable to meet their yearly increasing AYP goals, they will encounter both negative publicity in the local media and may ultimately be closed down (Sleeter, 2005). This fear of not reaching AYP has also held the threat of dismissal over teachers’ heads as well as created a mentality of fear and silent acceptance (Hill, 2005, 2006).

Unfortunately, the current trend in standardization and alignment has been widely supported by the public due to misleading terminology that appears harmless in its verbiage. McNeil (2005) explained this logic, when he stated that:

‘Accountability’ sounds benign. It sounds like ‘responsibility.’ ‘Testing’ sounds educational. It brings to mind ‘achievement’ and ‘learning.’ ‘Standardization’ is very close to ‘standards.’ And haven’t we as a country been trying over the past two decades to raise academic standards? (p. 57)

The need for teachers to consistently show “growth” in students’ test scores has caused an increase in teacher stress and feelings of pressure at all grade levels (Ballet,

Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; Maisuria, 2005; McCarthey, 2008), low teacher morale (Byrd-Blake, Afolayan, Hunt, Fabunmi, Pryor, & Leander, 2010; Finnigan & Gross, 2007), decreasing teacher autonomy (Day, 2002; Giroux, 2010; Hill, 2005), and higher rates of teacher attrition (Scherff & Hahs-Vaughn, 2008) in schools across the country. A study conducted in Minnesota found that almost 90 percent of teachers said that they were under unfair pressure to raise their student test scores (Fitzgerald, 2008). Furthermore, research conducted by Amrein and Berliner (2003) found that an increasing number of teachers are leaving their public school positions for private schools that are not bound by the same state testing requirements. Researchers also assert that curriculum narrowing has a very negative effect on new teachers' abilities to create a positive teaching practice (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). A "teachers' sense of professional, personal identity is a key variable in their motivation, job fulfillment, commitment, and efficacy; and these will themselves be affected by the extent to which teachers' own needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met" (Day, 2002, p. 683).

In the twenty-first century school, teachers are now evaluated not on whether they engaged students in positive and enriching learning experiences, but rather, whether they raised their students' standardized test scores (Hursh, 2008). The United States education system is dominated by professionals (teachers, curricularists, administrators, textbook publishers, etc.) trained to educate children with only essential knowledge needed to keep our capitalist society functioning. Teachers, thereby, are highly dissuaded from teaching children to reach critical elaboration (or consciousness) (Gramsci, 1971; Maslow, 1971). The education system in this country works to produce and perform, rather than question, the very ideas and practices that they have been perpetuating for so long in this country. Hampton (2005) posited that, "Diversity is limited; monotony prevails. The saline environment has poisoned the growth of interactive, relevant, student-centered learning experiences. The schools have become stark, dry, and uninviting. They have become standardized and sterilized" (p. 196). Those in the system of education must first stop talking *to* students and start talking *with* them as they begin to carry on education collectively (Chomsky, 2000; Gramsci, 1971) if we hope to nurture independent and critical-thinking adults.

Purpose of Education

The issue of standardization and curriculum alignment comes down to the notion of what purpose education serves in this country. For many, public education is intended to be socially responsible in its purpose of establishing the well-being of people and preparing of citizens for the continuing function/new possibilities of democracy (Mourad, 2001). Public education must be identified as a democratic institution which offers youth essential training to become critically engaged and autonomous agents within our society (Giroux, 2009c). Is education meant to create individual and spirited thinkers who can solve complex problems, or is it intended for our

youth to simply grasp “the basics” according to policymakers’ beliefs in the continuance of a stratified and unequal society? If we are to go by our current trend in standardization and the goal of all students in all schools across the country reaching 100% proficiency on state-mandated assessments by 2014, then we are moving towards a society in which all students are treated like proverbial “bricks in the wall” (Pink Floyd, 1979) – mechanical parts used to push forth the wheel of capitalism. Giroux (2010) fervently supports “a vision of schooling dedicated to the cultivation of an informed, critical citizenry capable of actively participating and governing in a democratic society” (p. 2), yet standardization and curriculum narrowing do nothing to help create critical thought or elaboration for the individual student nor does it facilitate separation from their capitalistic society (Fromm, 1955). We teach our students to sit down, shut up, and listen to the teacher, and that the teachers hold all of the knowledge which is important for their so called “education.” Hursh (2008) has a completely opposite perspective of what education in this country should look like. He theorized that:

The classroom should be a place in which we raise questions about complicated issues (such as global warming, war, economics, and language), engage in debates, and to come to tentative conclusions; a place where we can assess and appreciate not only what we know but also what others know, a place in which we learn how to live together democratically in the interests of the common good. Schools can and should contribute to creating a more equal, inclusive, and socially just world. (p. 3)

In addition, Massa and Pinhasi-Vittorio (2009) believe that we “need to create a classroom as a safe space...where...learners are encouraged to risk decoding unfamiliar codes and hidden power dynamics. Only then can students develop the power to transform oneself, along with the possibility to transform society” (p. 57).

Conclusion

There is little argument that the education system in this country has become increasingly regimented and regulated over the past few decades, while “[disparaging] any pedagogy that encourages criticism, critical dialogue and thoughtful exchange” (Giroux, 2010, p. 15). With standardization, curriculum alignment, high stakes testing, and scripted curriculum, there has been a drastic increase in “the circumscription, the attempt to straightjacket students’, teachers’ and professors’ practices – their curricula, their pedagogy, [and] their use of time in class and for homework” (Hill, 2006, p. 12) in schools today. Many educators and educational theorists have grave concerns about where this new model of education is taking us as learned citizens and as a democratic society. It is a bleak picture indeed. Notions of citizenship and democracy come under the pretense of high-stakes testing and standardization and where the learning of these

values is scientifically measured. This very real scenario is not only market driven, but legitimates the corporate policies adopted by schooling (Giroux, 2009c).

Students are asked to memorize information without the opportunity to thoroughly analyze and question, with their sole purpose being able to pass a biased and inequitable exam at the end of the school year. Students are learning isolated skills, but not the ability to think independently, so that they can eventually take their rightful place as an unquestioning and compliant mechanistic automaton of capitalistic society (one which would make George Orwell quite proud).

The success of students becomes greatly determined by the society in which they live. If they are able to perform a certain function which is desirable in the marketplace, then they will become successful in capitalistic society. Once desired as elements of humanity have now become capital for the purpose of profit and personal advancement.

School is no longer meant to be enjoyed; finding classrooms full of camaraderie, warmth, and excitement are decreasing each and every year. There is no more time for fun, as evidenced by many schools eliminating recess, gym classes, as well as music and art classes (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006), so that our children can spend all of their time soaking up “knowledge” that their teachers have to offer, in order to pass their yearly standardized exam(s). Learning for the sake of learning does not “show what you know” in twenty-first century America. Today, the assumption is that knowledge that has any real value can only be assessed by a standardized test (Sleeter, 2005).

Teachers are no longer seen or treated as professionals trained in their craft. They are often relegated to reading scripted curriculum, which does not allow for individuality and creativity, no less spontaneity, nor does it help meet the individual needs of the students. Teachers are no longer entrusted with the responsibility of educating our nation’s youth; that is now the duty of the school boards, textbook manufacturers, and state and national politicians. Due to increasing stress over their students passing their tests, teachers have become increasingly dissatisfied with their jobs and their sense of autonomy. When those teachers who have had enough of being dictated to decide to “protest, [and] stick their heads above the parapet... sometimes it gets blown off – in dramatic or in undramatic but effective ways” (Hill, 2004, p. 515). Teachers who speak out against our system of high stakes testing then become targets for disciplinary action and are often seen as malcontents. The unfortunate truth of the matter is that teachers are now expendable and can be easily replaced.

Although this country (and much of the world) has embraced the notion of standardization as the panacea to all of our educational ills, it has not proven to actually increase student learning or knowledge acquisition. In certain countries, such as England, “there is a widespread readiness emerging from within the profession to

depart from the script” (Berry, 2009, p. 39). One can only hope that we are getting close to this point as well, for the sakes of our students, educators, and society as a whole.

Implications

If there is to be any change in this modern age of teaching to the test, there must be a revolution of varying degrees in this country. The reforms must be radical, by targeting the roots, rather than just treating symptoms and not the causes of our educational ills. From revolution, we may tap into the greatest resource of all - the individual person (Rogers, 1980). There must be a focus, not on exploitation, but of enrichment and understanding of all persons engaged in a learning experience. However, authorities are uneasy when learning takes place without standardization and structure (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). This type of thinking must be challenged as teachers realize how political teaching is in actuality (Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005) and how much power teachers can have as agents of positive change (Hill, 2002, 2009). According to Moll and Arnot-Hopffer (2005), “schools are not fixed or immutable entities, they are built environments, socially produced and recreated through the actions of human beings” (p. 246).

Teachers must seek ways of participation to gain agency and action within constraints of governmental regulations, school board policies, and so on. Whether these constraints are federal, state, local, or even cultural, teachers must seek out possibilities for participation in the construction of the greater education policy and practice. Giroux (2009c) warned that what the Obama administration “must understand is that the crisis in education is not only an economic problem that requires funds to rebuild old and new schools but also a political and ethical crisis about the very nature of citizenship and democracy” (p. 262). Lastly, teaching organizations, such as the National Education Association (NEA), must take a more aggressive stance against the de-intellectualization of education today. Teachers must also mobilize and educate each other as to the possibilities of teaching without the burden of standardized tests hovering over our heads. The bottom line is this: there is more at risk here than just unhappy teachers and over-programmed children. There is a battle looming on the horizon as to what type of society we want to live in and what type of citizens will comprise that society.

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