A Reading into the Public Education Standards:

Reimagining Learning for Elementary Students

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Abstract:

The effects of standardized testing on how elementary schooled children learn, and more specifically, on how they interact with their interests are becoming more noticeable and problematic. When reading a given text, students learn to look for specific information, define certain terms, and understand themes; yet, they are not encouraged to find meaning, connection, and application. Education has become a checklist of required thoughts and ideas rather than a springboard for imagination and an understanding of the world. The standards that have been adopted by most school systems in the United States are effective in making sure each generation learns what is of value to the policymakers, but they can hardly encourage creative thinking and imaginative learning. I will discuss the Montessori, social-learning, and literature-based approaches. I will then try to imagine how standardized testing could be implemented effectively while still allowing for less educational restrictions. I will discuss various ideas for how to achieve this balance. Finally, I will begin to look at how new methods could be implemented into local public-school systems.

Keywords: standardized testing, reading ability, elementary school, education reform, child development and elementary education.

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  As a third grader in elementary school, I was hungry to read books that genuinely interested me. I delved into the world of the <u>Magic Tree House </u>series, learned the secrets of the natural world through biology books, and found role models in various biographies of influential people. Not only was I able to read these books, but I looked forward to thinking about and discussing them as well. Teachers had me present book reports, have conversations with my classmates about what I learned, and encouraged me to read the books in new and exciting ways. When I entered the fourth grade, reading education shifted dramatically. My school district in Indiana implemented high-stakes standardized testing, which meant that AR (Accelerated Reading) testing was the primary way to make sure students read the desired amount and understood key facts. The teachers still encouraged reading, but online tests evaluated the students' skill level. This meant that teachers lost much of their ability to have students creatively engage with the books they were reading. As a fourth grader, I quickly rose to the top of the class for AR points. The issue with this came when I no longer saw reading as a way to learn, grow, or converse. Rather, I saw reading as a competition. When I reached my "quota," I would stop reading and start filling my mind with distractions. As I look back on my elementary

school experience, I deeply resent this change in how students were forced to learn in a standardized manner.

The problems with standardized testing are more noticeable each year as elementary students are not given opportunities within the classroom to interact with their creative sides and their personal interests. Teachers are trying to help children to meet specific standards, and the students realize that only when specific standards are met, they are worthy of the school's approval. When students are doing well and have time left over after classroom criteria is met, they do not want to do more school work. Instead, the students are wanting to either interact with their friends who may still be trying to meet the standards or get online to play games. Rather than encourage true learning, policy makers demand a certain set of standards that seem to limit, rather than express noticeable growth and achievement. Elementary-aged children are not being taught to think critically, solve problems, and actively engage in a world that is only becoming more complex. Numerous education styles and learning methods are applied in private and charter schools that seem to raise thoughtful, motivated, and creative students. A few specific methods foster creative, useful learning. These include the Montessori, social-learning, and literature-based approaches. Students, parents, and teachers are overburdened by the strict regulations set in place in the public-school systems, and a call to transform education around the country is becoming urgent. Reimagining the implementation of standards in elementary schools and engaging with alternative education styles is vital and necessary to the elementary students who desperately need to learn their potential to grow into useful and intelligent young adults.

In the public education model, teachers are tied to a strict curriculum that aims to teach students the knowledge and skillsets that are deemed necessary and valuable by the educators and policy-makers. This system has proven itself quite consistent, and it assures that all students

are on the same level regarding educational achievement. This system can be imagined by thinking of a factory that is manufacturing a vehicle. Each piece is crafted, tested for quality, and then added to the previous pieces to create the whole machine. Educational methodology requires steps, and each grade similarly adds new knowledge to the students' minds. This is a process called scaffolding, and it is effective in ensuring growth as students progress through school. In order to assure that no child is left behind, which is an actual law passed in 2002, high-stakes testing is implemented. This testing is not only used to measure student knowledge level, but the teachers' and schools' ability to produce a certain amount of progress (Jackson, 2015). Students are measured on their knowledge that is based on their teachers' or schools' valued knowledge. In turn, teachers and schools are assessed on these students' ability to perform well on assessments. Because teachers do not always teach exactly what is on the state-mandated curriculum, presumably because the requirements are so numerous, it is only necessary for outside educational programs to intervene. Programs such as Pearson, Scholastic, and McGraw-Hill Education provide textbooks, assignments, tests, and even preparations for tests like the SAT, which is highly influenced by many of these groups (The Biggest, 2016). This means that these groups that have their own special interests are deeply influential to teaching methods, curriculum, content, and the personal lives of the students that are subject to them. Standardized testing has significantly shaped traditional education by implementing standards that hold schools, teachers, and students accountable for learning what educational corporations value.

Standardized testing does offer many positive outcomes, such as reliability in student achievement, concrete evidence of school performance, and the students who take the tests are taught real knowledge and skills that can be used in higher education. These are all things that align with the educational values in the United States. Furthermore, the general understanding of

standardized testing is that it is comforting to know that students are being taught consistent information and skills. Parents seem to be content with their children all learning the same content in the exact same manner, despite the various ways that children learn. One definition of standardized testing, according to Ross Traub, who used to work for the Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning department at the University of Toronto is that

> Generically, an achievement test is designed to assess the knowledge and understanding a student has acquired of a school subject. A standardized achievement test is further defined by its being given and being scored in the same way, whenever and wherever it is used. (Moll, 2004, p. 12)

In this context, standardized testing seems necessary for educational progression. Many believe that without standardized testing, education in the United States will become a chaotic mess where teachers teach according to their own agenda. When it comes to educational reform, it seems that most of the arguments are highly polarized. One side wishes for full-on standardized testing implementation where every detail of school curriculum and teaching is regulated and one side demands complete rejection of standardized testing altogether. But these polar opposite views are preventing any actual progress in educational progress. A middle-ground must be located, and this must be done through analysis of various methods.

The issues that arise from standardized testing do not necessarily involve having expectations for students, wanting children to learn practical skills, or holding teachers and schools accountable for achievement and progress. Rather, the problems come with the excessive, strict implications that involve the consequences, emotional distress, and general lack of choice for teacher and students. Education has become an institution that is deeply political, and much too often, money and influence are why people get involved. Every perspective and

side to this debate declares to have the child's best interest in mind. According to Richard Phelps, the author of *Kill the Messenger*, there are legitimate issues that come along with standardized testing, as well as legitimate reasons for implementing it. Some of the real issues involve: "teaching to the test," push for new curriculum, "induce test preparation" (Phelps, 2003, pp. 78-79). When teachers are having to ensure that students are adequately prepared for these high-stakes achievement tests, they have to sacrifice quality time for teaching other important content. Rather than working for the needs of the students, teachers have to work for their school system to be grade-A. The classroom curriculum revolves around test content and preparation, and much is lost this way. The standardized testing significantly limits what can be taught, and therefore, what can and should be learned. Yet, other teaching models could provide insight into a stronger "middle" path for public school education. Three styles in particular, the Montessori method, the social-learning approach, and the literature-based approach, offer many accessible and affordable strategies that could help strengthen the public-school approach. T

The Montessori method was created to help children learn by promoting "choice, concentration, collaboration, community, curiosity, and real-world application" in ways that do not involve constant testing (Shaw, 2012). Over 4,000 Montessori schools have been opened and certified in the United States, and the students that come out of these schools have stronger academic and social skills than students of traditional schooling (Montessori, n.d.). These schools tend to be found in south-eastern and west coast states in the United States, but private and public Montessori schools can be found around the country. This schooling method is special because the learning and teaching is based on the students' interests and drive. Having a student-based learning environment is beneficial because these students are learning skills that will be not only applicable to the real world, but preferred. A close sense of community within

the classroom setting prepares students for working along with an entire class, despite major differences, to achieve social harmony, a common goal, or simply a closer community. Likewise, with collaboration, students learn specifically how to work with a partner to share responsibilities and use each other's talents. Not just allowing, but encouraging students to be curious is another crucial element to this schooling method. Elementary-aged students desperately need to be allowed and encouraged to be curious. When curiosity is not only tolerated in a school, but a part of its mission statement, students will find more motivational drive, develop more interests, and become well-rounded citizens. When the students have the choice to learn what they wish to learn, the classroom discussions not only cover more content, but there is a zest for intellectual show-and-tell (Flavin, 2017). Though Montessori school seem attractive, it is important to point out some reasons to hesitate. These schools value beauty and art; therefore, the schools themselves are expensive to construct and maintain. Also, some of their mission statement values are difficult to maintain and teach while still making sure students obtain practical knowledge. Giving children a lot of choice and independence can quickly lead to behavioral or social problems. Finally, having little structure in a classroom could potentially prevent children from learning how to be orderly and structured in their own lives.

The social-learning approach was created by Alfred Bandura, a well-known psychologist. His research found that humans, especially children, are deeply influenced by others' words and actions. With this in mind, he created an educational style that would involve attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. This style of teaching involves getting students to interact with each other as well as the teacher in order to learn how to communicate properly, work together, and use others' different perspectives to enhance learning as a whole. The main focus here is the community feeling and creation. Students learn real life skills that include making and

strengthening relationships in order to have connections for the future (Lazarevska, n.d.). As with any approach to education, there are valid concerns regarding the social-learning approach. Through communities of learners can be beneficial, not every child can benefit equally from social learning. This approach would place an emphasis on the children who are more extraverted than those who are more contemplative and drawn away from social situations. Also, as Erica Loop states, there would be more emphasis on learning from the environment than from self-directed student learning (2018). Children with behavioral or intellectual issues could divert responsibility for their behavior from themselves to their environment. Rather than trying to help the child, the teachers will attempt to change the environment or get the other students to treat this particular student in a certain manner. The social learning approach helps students to develop into empathetic and sociable people, and this could help to create stronger bonds between the generations in the future.

One of the major debates going on in the educational realm is how much literacy is necessary and how to teach it to students. The literature-based approach to learning literacy values "authentic literature in a natural setting" (Perles, 2019). Rather than using textbooks and programs that offer cliché stories and values, the literature-based approach uses "authentic" literature that fosters thoughtful discussion and reflection (Perles, 2019). Much of the real value in reading great literature is found in its ability to open a person's mind to new perspectives, world-views, and experiences. When schools use literature that has been set as a standard, the students may tend to learn about virtues, values, vices, and themes that are already deeply ingrained in their own perspectives and lifestyles. Along with the discussion and reflection of the "authentic" literature, students achieve the skills of critical thinking and empathy. Students are encouraged to discuss meaning and potentially application in a plot, character, or theme when

they are reading thought-provoking literature. This approach to teaching would be implemented in specific classes that are required in traditional education rather than applying it as an education system. For a similar reason to the implementation of standardized testing, the literature-based approach causes people to hesitate because teachers could easily push their own agendas. When choosing which books are deemed respectable and authentic, teachers may have specific books they wish to avoid or promote. This could easily become dangerous to students who are forming the foundation of their futures. Additionally, it is difficult to make sure there is a true progression of academic achievement in the students. The topics that are read and reflected would surely overlap as students mature and develop (Perles, 2019). This makes the approach extremely difficult, because progression and growth are so vital to American culture.

Standardized testing does not need to go away completely, but the implementation and weight of the testing have gone too far. Teachers in public schools used to have the freedom to teach the required content creatively. They could hold classroom plays, conduct science experiments, teach state history, etc., but now there is not time to do these. The teachers have to worry about what their teaching grade is according on the students' success on these tests rather than progress. According to a fourth-grade teacher in Mooresville, Indiana, all the fun and excitement of teaching is gone (L. Caudill, personal interview, November 20, 2019). Dockterman and Weber reveal that "when teachers believe they can help all students learn well, they tend to get better student outcome than when they have little confidence in their own efficacy" (2017). The levels of stress on the teachers surely affects their teaching, and therefore, the students' comprehension and ability to learn. Student test anxiety has grown, the classroom curriculum is tightly regulated, and important life skills are being lost. Skills such as teamwork, typewriting, reading, and even the various forms of art are of less value to the public standards.

Rather than using standardized testing multiple times at the beginning, middle, and end of a schoolyear, they should be used to actually track student progress. This would allow teachers to focus on growing the knowledge and skills of the students while still being able to teach to the students' needs. The children would also be able to enjoy school, learn more effectively, and most importantly, improve as they progress through elementary school. Reducing the number of tests given would aslo benefit the people who are grading the tests, as they will not have to constantly grade tests from students who they have no connection or personal care for. Students would be relieved from the intense levels of stress that come along with testing. When a student learns that their performance reflects the abilities of the teacher, even more unneeded stress is added. When the teachers tell the students to just worry about personal improvement rather than comparison with the other students, the teachers are attempting to destress the students. But students cannot help competing and comparing with each other, and this could cause the students who are behind to quickly fall behind due to lack of self-esteem. Many of the students who are constantly tested know that their parents do not care about the tests and the teachers are frustrated with the number of tests. This realization leads to students who are just as apathetic towards the tests, and their results reflect the lack of care. Standardized testing has its place in public education, but it has dominated the school systems that are under its influence. If the number of standardized tests could be reduced to a beginning of the year assessment and an end-of-year follow-up assessment, teachers could find a new love for their career and students would grow to be self-assured and less stressed.

In order to educate students and foster their interests, a variety of opportunities should be offered within the public education system. Methods such as STEAM, which teach science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math, allow for students to creatively engage their

imaginations with real world skills and tools. Teaching students how to use science to compliment the arts, and vice versa, not only gives students the ability to use their minds for real projects, but it gives teachers innumerable options to teach in exciting and meaningful ways. Similarly, Project Lead the Way is implemented around the country to engage students with hands-on experiences that actively teach students real-world skills. Public education ought to find as many ways to get students to participate together for a greater purpose. Children need direction. Allowing them to find a meaningful direction through real experience seems much more beneficial than learning to test well. Learning to work as a team, think critically, develop relationships are all skills that college students try to develop, and elementary-aged students would certainly benefit from learning these skills early on. Group activities allow for students to engage with each other, and learning to work with other people is a skill that is highly valued by employers. Critical thinking can be taught by giving students real world situations and scenarios to work out, and the students will mature into adults who can effectively solve problems. Learning how to build and maintain interpersonal skills would also serve the interest of the students for their own futures. They can be taught how to deal with relational conflicts, make meaningful friendships, and help others who are in need. These are all real skills that could be better implemented in the public education system, but not while standardized testing is the main focus.

It is clear that standardized testing sets boundaries for what should and should not be learned in schools. It does not seem that teachers should just teach or encourage a substantial amount of time or energy to any topic students propose. There has to be a standard for what can be expected out of students when they graduate. But how can policy makers ensure that students are not just being moved on a conveyer belt that creates a single type of human being? In a

culture that strongly values individualism, students ought to be provided with an education that allows for differences in thought, perspective, and goals. No single type of schooling method will work for all students. If students who demonstrate special interest in the arts and languages are going to a school that is constantly teaching and testing on mathematics and textual analysis, they potentially lose a future that would foster flourishing and creativity. If students who are especially introverted are constantly being bombarded by information and then told to speak quickly and clearly, they may withdraw even more from people in the future. There is a balance to how education should be implemented. It is unfortunate that so many incredible private school education styles are limited to those who are blessed enough to be able to afford such education for their children. Authentic literature ought to be offered to every student, and there should not be special interest groups who promote mediocre literature to students who have all the potential in the world to use literature as a personal asset.

Although I lost my motivation to pursue my academic interests as an elementary school student, I was blessed to find that third grade love for reading once again. I now read whatever I can get my hands on whenever time permits. I did not just choose to do this though. My parents had to step into my life at a certain point and point me in the right direction. They showed me that I had lost direction, and they helped me find my love for learning once again. But this is most definitely not the case for everyone. Many children do not have parents or role models who care enough to step into their lives and help. Many parents do not value freedom of thought or self-expression. Children have unlimited potential, and they are just waiting for someone to help them realize it. What if the public education system valued the potential in the children rather than their academic achievements? The importance of being a creative, motivated, and independent student who can work well with others is obvious. Policy makers have made

standardized testing a way to make each child the same, like machines coming out of a factory

for the use of people who can buy them for personal use. I am calling out for a reimagination of

the education system to where individuals can emerge as responsible, interactive world-changers.

This can be done by spreading the conversation to those who are involved in education and by

supporting teachers and students who are forming the future generations. A change is necessary;

therefore, action must be encouraged to cause a true reformation of the public education system.

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