

Standardized Testing: What Cannot Be Measured

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If I were to be completely honest, I barely knew what I agreed to when I accepted my first teaching job. Like many first-year teachers, I started the job without a true understanding of what would be expected of me. As my first adrenaline filled year began, I made my best attempt at growing a community of readers. I surveyed my students for their interests and suggested books I believed they would truly enjoy. I poured over their reading notebooks and carefully responded to them.

Although far from perfect, things were going well. I ensured that our classroom library had a variety of books and ordered any genres of books that were missing. Slowly, our classroom became alive with rich conversations and readers that were excited to share with one another. Students began making book recommendations as reading partnerships organically evolved. Everything was going so well that I never expected this feeling to be taken away from me at a faculty meeting in January. I would have never dreamt that I would be robbed of my professionalism in ways I could not anticipate. At the end of the meeting, my principal asked for third, fourth and fifth grade teachers to remain while everyone else was excused. My principal explained, we were only to teach

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subjects which would be assessed at the end of the year. According to this plan, math would be taught the first half of the day and reading the second half. This was a nonnegotiable. Our schedules had been set, and we were expected to comply. This was the moment that I learned what a top down mandate felt like. I was new and felt trapped.

As I questioned my new reality, coworkers proved to be of little help as they adopted the new schedule and mandates. One veteran team member explained to me, “I’ve been in education long enough to know the pendulum will swing back the other way. You just have to give it time.” I wished more than anything that I knew what to do as these words provided little comfort to me. I’m embarrassed to admit it, but I went along with this plan knowing it went against everything I believed to be developmentally appropriate for third graders. By the end of the first month, my classroom which was once alive with literature was completely transformed. Feeling the pressure of high-stakes testing, I watched as my students’ shoulders slouched over their desk when I placed pages of passages and comprehension questions in front of them. Their misery became more evident as they slowly picked up their number two pencil and obediently worked through the schoolwide test taking strategies. This went on simply because I felt pressured to be a part of the schoolwide plan and felt powerless.

I watched my once bright eyed and inquisitive third graders disconnect from school and become more comfortable with multiple choice assessments that removed any critical thinking, imagination and curiosity from their day. They began to ask only one

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question when learning new material, “Will this be on the test?” Eventually, my students became comfortable with the lack of thinking they had to do. Some simply began guessing, knowing they would eventually choose the correct answer.

Then one day a student said to me, “Will I pass third grade if I fail the test at the end of the year?” My heart immediately sank as I realized the incredible amount of pressure he was feeling at such a young age. This was the moment I was confronted with the reality that I had to choose between teaching to the test or teaching the whole child. The decision to ignore my administrations wishes was a deliberate choice made with my students in mind. Ultimately, I decided to truly address their needs. I had to advocate for them and create a space in which together we could take back our classroom. I could no longer be a silent participant as my principal replaced best practices with worksheets, rote memorization and tutorials.

First, I needed to confront the collective fears felt by both myself and my third graders. To begin this critical conversation, I turned to children’s literature. I chose *Testing Miss Malarkey* by Judy Finchler and *A Fine, Fine School* by Shannon Creech. These texts helped us examine the hysteria within a fictional school community. After reading both, I asked my students how they were feeling about the end of year test. This question was met with blank stares. Wanting to please their teacher, they couldn’t possibly admit to disliking test preparation, the test centered pep rally or the incentives being dangled in front of them. I knew I would have to be the one to break the silence. I nervously confessed, “I don’t care how you do on the end of year test. I want you to love

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school and learning. That's it." My students stared at me in disbelief. Slowly, they began to share their lack of enthusiasm with a student sharing, "I didn't want to leave second grade and become a third grader because I knew there was a big test." Upon hearing this, other students wanted to know why they had to take a test at all. Another student asked, "Do we have to take this test again next year?"

Narrow test preparation had sucked the love of learning out of our classroom. As students shared their concerns, I realized that helping them simply wouldn't come from listening. I needed to respond through action. Their fears and anxieties proved to be what I needed to pushback. In order to do so, I had to tap back into student interests and create an action plan with my students. Through listening, I discovered their desire for developing friendships with younger students through reading. Several students had siblings and cousins within the first-grade class across the hall. They wanted to create a reading buddy program using high interest, high quality literature. This plan also involved trading in pages of reading passages and questions in exchange for this partnership.

Instead of analyzing possible answer choices, we spent time developing friendships over literature and having meaningful conversations. The excitement my students displayed when they snuggled up next to their reading buddy and presented the book they had selected just for them was in stark contrast to the gloom which hung over our classroom when we were disconnected from enjoyable reading. Not only had we discovered a means to take back our classroom, but we found a method to do it in a meaningful way which brought us together with a younger community of learners.

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As the year marched on, the anxiety surrounding the end of year test slowly went away. Although always hanging in the air, it was something I learned to ignore. I had the power to let it control my classroom as it had, or I could choose to embrace sociocultural teaching practices. Instead of test taking skills dominating our reading, I learned to treat it as a genre. To place it back into the curriculum where it should have been all along.

Finally, the end of year arrived which meant it was time to take *the test*. As I paced around my silent classroom watching them work through pages of reading passages, I was reminded of the roadblocks and detours along the way that brought us to this moment. Instead of being filled with dread, I chose to look at each student and think of the many areas of their life that the test couldn't measure. For example, the test could not measure the sense of community uniquely developed over a school year. It did not show the skills children display in their treatment of others. A test did not show the sense of pride felt by a student who is recognized by others as the resident shark expert or the pure joy felt when a tooth is finally lost and the entire classroom circles around it to take a look. A test score did not highlight, the compassion a student displays when standing up for others when they have been mistreated or the sense of pride felt when a child is recognized and celebrated by their classmates.

When I reflect on my first year, although riddled with frustration, it allows me to focus on why I was inspired to become a teacher. My understanding of my role as a teacher drastically changed over the course of a very short year. Although cliché, I learned more from my students that year than they could have ever learned from me. More importantly, I learned that educators must focus on the whole child and not just

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academics. I thrived for my students to grow as learners, to learn how to use their voice, and to recognize the power in doing so.

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References

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