

ENGLISH EDUCATION

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“Fighting the Toxic Status Quo”

Alfie Kohn on Standardized Tests and Teacher Education

By Deborah Appleman and Micheal J. Thompson

Q.: What motivates the movement for teacher testing? It sometimes seems as if it arises from a basic mistrust of teachers.

ALFIE KOHN: Well, I think we're living through a very dark period in American education where testing of students, testing of teachers, and top down state standards all reflect a desire on the part of powerful interest groups to show how tough they can get with the people in schools. Virtually all of the criticisms leveled against testing in schools also apply to the quick-and-dirty attempt to demand accountability by testing teachers. Timed tests given to children are really evaluating speed rather than thoughtfulness, and the same is true when they're given to adults. Multiple-choice tests and contrived open-response items are not meaningful ways of assessing how much students understand, and neither are they particularly effective in telling us how well educators can educate.

Q: Why this desire to insist on quick-and-dirty measures? Is it because it's difficult for lawmakers and others to handle the complexity of what it really means to measure learning and quality teaching?

A: There is a general cultural penchant for reducing everything to numbers, such that if we are speaking in quantitative terms it is assumed we are being objective and scientific, and if we are not speaking in quantitative terms then we are soft and subjective. Albert Einstein pointed out a long time ago that not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that is counted counts. Nowhere is that more true than in the field of education. But if you're a politician who only knows about counting votes, or a corporate executive who follows sales charts, then you may adopt a simplistic view that anything that seems to be getting bigger over time must represent progress. It's much more challenging to think about issues such as intrinsic motivation to teach or to learn, intellectual exploration, and so on. And that stuff doesn't fit on a bumper sticker.

There's also a tendency to assume that test results of any kind must be valuable, which is why, when a first pass at testing teachers in Massachusetts a few years ago found very low test scores, the Speaker of our House of Representatives instantly branded our state's teachers as idiots. It never occurred to him or to the newspapers to ask whether the test itself was reasonable. I mean, you or I could sit down and within half an hour fashion a test

that any group of teachers or students would fail, and then we could hold a press conference announcing the sad state of public schooling. Even though our effort should be laughed off, it would probably be taken seriously and appear in tomorrow's newspapers.

The standards movement, of which testing is just an enforcement mechanism, reflects a rather insulting view of educators, namely that they need to be told what - and, by extension, how - to teach by someone in authority because otherwise they wouldn't know. I think this whole accountability fad is just the latest example in a long sorry history of trying to devise a teacher proof curriculum. About a year ago I was speaking to a group of teacher educators and preservice students. I asked how many thought that the Praxis II teacher exams really captured what was important to know about whether people would do well in the classroom. Not a single hand went up in a very large auditorium.

Q: Right. Sometimes in our darkest moments we think that this is all a conspiracy for some folks to make money on the backs of kids and people who want to be their teachers. How far off base are we?

A: Well, far be it from me to rein in any entertaining conspiracy theories, especially when there is more than a grain of credibility to them, but I don't think that ETS alone or its sister corporations that profit off testing have the kind of clout that could account for what we're suffering through right now. I think there are a bundle of different motives that can be ascribed to a disparate group of individuals and organizations.

Q: Do you have [a] sense of what is the core force behind this? Is it the need for accountability and our penchant for understanding numbers rather than something more qualitative?

A: Yes, and there's also the desire on the part of conservative ideologues to privatize education. If my goal was to throw education to the marketplace, where what matters is not what benefits children but what brings in profit, then I would devise a series of student tests that predictably would lead to widespread failure so I could profess to be absolutely shocked at the poor quality of public education. But even that, I think, doesn't account for everything that's going on. I think a lot of well meaning, relatively liberal politicians and journalists have gotten swept away with this tide and even have allowed themselves to be persuaded that it's in the interest of equity to talk about "raising the bar" and "demanding world class standards" because they don't understand how damaging high stakes testing really is or what alternatives to standardized testing exist.

Q: And what alternatives would you suggest, especially in the preparation of teachers? How can we improve the quality of teachers without testing them?

A: Treat teachers like professionals rather than like test prep technicians who have to do the bidding of state legislators and test manufacturers. Pay them more. Provide them with the kind of support for improving their craft that can get them juiced up about doing their jobs rather than burning out. Work with them to solve problems in the classroom rather than using bullying tactics to stamp out incompetence, real or imagined. None of these solutions is brilliant or original, but the distinction between "working with" and "doing to" speaks directly to where we've gone wrong.

Q: As a teacher educator, I worry how these tests affect the pedagogical orientations of new teachers. Will these new teachers lose their critical stance toward high stakes tests because they themselves have been subjected to so many of them? We teach the way we have been taught, after all...

A: So the teacher educator's job is to say to them, "My God, you've just experienced the pointlessness and indignity of this kind of standardized testing. Let's talk about how you can redouble your opposition to that same absurdity when it's done to children." You know, in a broader sense, sometimes people do unto others as has been done unto them, whereas we would hope they would do unto others as they wanted to have had done unto them. Putting aside testing for a moment, teachers are often manipulated and coerced into attending stupid in service events and told they have to turn in lesson plans or jump through certain hoops with respect to disciplinary procedures in their classrooms. One would hope they would respond by saying, "I know what it's like to be on the receiving end of this control, so I will never act like this with my students. I will never use a behavior modification plan with them. I will try to maximize their autonomy so that they are brought into decision making in a way that I wish I had been."

Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen. Nowhere is that paradox clearer than in the case of testing. So the teacher educator's obligation is to say to the prospective teachers: "You now have experienced how silly and demeaning this top down, heavy handed approach to improving teacher education is. So what can we do to fight against doing this to children, and how can we develop more meaningful kinds of assessments that we know make more sense?"

Q: So what do you do when your revolutionaries are too busy grading papers and complying with state and district mandates to really stand up and say, "You know what, hell no, we're not going to do this"? We've seen you light hundreds of people on fire and then I say to myself, "Where does that fire go?" What do you do when your teachers are too busy to resist?

A: Well, there's never a single answer to that question. Whether we're talking about standardized testing or any number of other social and educational evils, we make the case as strongly as possible and help people construct meaning around the need to take action instead of just attempting to whip them into an agitated state. Most importantly, we expose the bag of tricks being used by the people in power, chief among which is the divide-and-conquer strategy. If I feel all alone in my classroom and believe I cannot topple the system by myself, I will allow it to continue and will keep my head down and my door closed. But if I begin to realize that many people feel the same way I do, and that by organizing we can make a difference, then suddenly I realize that my job as a classroom teacher is political. If I have to drill my kids on vowels instead of letting them become joyfully literate people, then it's already political. The only question is whether we'll get involved on the other side.

There are a few teachers here and there who have risked their jobs and said, "I cannot look at myself in the mirror if I break the shrink wrap on those awful standardized tests and hand them out to my kids." If you're forcing me to teach to the test, you've already taken my job away, as one teacher put it. And so my dream is to have a teacher in every school go

around quietly and ask each colleague whether he or she would participate in a protest if x percent of the staff was willing to do so. You ask everyone that and then if you get the magic number you bring everyone together and say, "They can't fire all of us." Have we reached a point of sufficient emergency in this country that we are willing to take a risk, albeit a reduced risk, by collective action?

Q: As we've been talking, I've realized that teacher education has to do more than simply resist teacher tests. What kinds of reforms do we need in teacher education curricula that would facilitate your vision of proactive and politically responsible teachers?

A: If we're speaking here to teacher educators, then let's focus on what they could be doing. Are we teaching our teachers the techniques they'll need to become part of a toxic status quo, as opposed to helping them understand the limits of the traditional assumptions about classroom management, about pedagogy, about assessment, and so on? As teacher educators we can have a phenomenal impact in deconstructing the assumptions of the way classrooms currently run. You know, it's one thing to teach the techniques of political organizing, but that may be premature if we as teacher educators haven't helped our students understand the need to oppose the status quo. They've been tested themselves and they've sat through lecture based instruction themselves, even in classrooms taught by progressives.

Q: What is the most important thing we can teach future teachers?

A: What does a good school look like? Unless we know what that is, we're not going to care if standardized tests are destroying it. We can explore that through explicit conversation and by modeling, by setting up university classrooms that reflect the best sort of pedagogy so our students, we hope, will reproduce it in their own classrooms.

Q: Speaking of our own classrooms, when I have to tell my students about these teacher tests, I feel that I am betraying my relationship with them, that I am setting them up and that it's a kind of personal betrayal to put them in that position. I wonder if classroom teachers often feel that way, too?

A: Yes, yes, I agree with you; the relational aspect is compromised in many other respects, too. There's not much room for relationship in a high school where a teacher has one hundred and fifty kids and forty five minutes with each group of them and so on. But the tests are certainly among the most salient and destructive aspects of the encroachment of our relationship with children.

Q: What has your experience been with legislators? Does anyone resist the public's perceived support of testing?

A: Well, Paul Wellstone (D Minnesota) is the only person in the Senate who gets it, as far as I can tell. Basically all Bush has to do is mutter the magic mantra of "accountability" and even liberal Democrats roll over. Ted Kennedy's only objection to Bush's plan to force every state to test every kid every year was to ask whether there was adequate funding. It's as though Bush had proposed to hit every child in America on the head with a hammer and Senator Kennedy bravely rose to the Senate floor to ask, "Yes, but, ah, who's going to, ah,

pay for the hammehs?”

Now I spoke to one US Congressman who was beginning to get it, and he's an illustrative case because he started off buying the usual clap trap about accountability and world class standards; what turned him around and opened him up to learning more was visiting real classrooms and listening to real teachers and students talk about how the pressure to score well was squeezing out quality education. And he called me up and asked me to brief him, which I happily did for hours, but those people you can count on the fingers of a couple of hands.

The whole accountability movement isn't something spontaneously hatched by worried parents sitting around at Starbucks, you know. This was a carefully orchestrated movement based on what we now know to be misleading claims about the failure of public schools. Parents, given only what they read in the newspaper and thinking there are no alternatives to standardized tests, will go along because they've never been invited to think about it differently. But even so, the polls reveal three things: First, by a margin of about two to one, parents oppose having a single standardized test determine whether a child can be promoted to the next grade or allowed to graduate. Second, by an even greater margin, parents will tell you that a standardized test is an inferior indicator of their child's learning, as compared with projects and assignments in the classroom and the teacher's evaluation of those assignments. Third, the more parents know about alternative assessments, the more skeptical they become about standardized tests

Q: That leads me into my last question. You mentioned that we were living in really dark times in education, and we feel that way in teacher education as well. Do you see any light at the end of the tunnel?

A: It's a hard question to answer without lapsing into platitude. I can't predict what will happen, I can only talk about what should and can happen. Each of us at various places in the education machine can point fingers to the real problem starting elsewhere and we can all have some evidence to back up our claims, but, you know, you start where you are and you network and you organize and you keep that mirror in your bathroom so you have to look at yourself before you give a multiple choice test - or before you tell teachers to “align” their teaching to the legislators' directives. Over time I think we can keep our consciences alive and prod one another and ourselves to become exactly as active as the interest of children requires us to be.

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