***A Standardized Frenzy:***

*Is Standardized Testing an Accurate Representation of a Student’s Learning Abilities and Cognitive Development in a Course or Objective?*

Standardized testing has become a highly debated topic in relation to the educational system in this day and age. Some feel that it is pointless while others feel as if it is a significant addition to the educational system. However, in my opinion, standardized testing is nothing more than a high stakes labeling and number game that is imposed upon students from the time that they are young to the time that they exit school. This hunch that I possess as far as standardized testing is concerned leads me into the basis of my inquiry; is standardized testing the right solution in evaluating student’s abilities and understanding in a course or objective?

Alfie Kohn, a renowned author and advocate on behalf of parenting, human behavior and, most importantly, education also feels as if standardized testing serves a negative purpose in the school system, that is, if it serves any purpose at all. In his very informative piece, The Case Against Standardized Testing, Kohn examines some of the “shortcomings” of the standardized testing method, which, in turn, come together to support my argument against the effectiveness of standardized tests. In support of my argument, Kohn states that testing has now evolved into an institution that is used to judge children, teachers and schools while serving as the basis for failing students and deciding where money should be spent, whereas, according to research, testing was, in the past, only used to place children and to pinpoint what help it was that they needed in the classroom (Kohn 2). However, now school is a place where the students are subjected to more standardized testing and stress than learning and the purpose of this testing is nothing more than a labeling fiasco. For example, in his writing, Kohn suggests that testing has become nothing more than a mere commercialized issue in which test scores are used to track, calculate and define success or failure (Kohn 3).

So, then, why is something as complex and universal as the process of learning and application simply measured by bubbling in answers on a Scantron sheet? Also, how can these sheets be used to define a student’s potential success and failure? Some individuals, such as Herbert Walberg, who avidly support standardized testing, may greatly disagree with the viewpoint on standardized testing shared by myself and Alfie Kohn. Walberg insists that standardized testing holds teachers and students responsible for their performance in the classroom as either the educators or the educated. He seems to believe that standardized testing allows for the progress in both teaching and learning to be measured. Also, Walberg thinks that, in some miraculous way, standardized testing throughout one’s school career will better prepare them for future educational, occupational and professional goals (Walberg, par. 15). I guess, then, that in Walberg’s opinion this is one way that standardized testing can be used to define a student’s success and failure in both school and life. From a broad standpoint, assuming that at least thirteen years of testing will be able to prepare an individual for future success is something that I just do not understand nor agree with because I do not see how a life of testing can have any hand in one’s future success or failure at all. However, on the other hand, when considering the aspect of an SAT or ACT aptitude test that, ultimately, determines a student’s potential college future, I can see how standardized testing can indirectly contribute to the students potential success and failure in school and life. For example, if a student does not test well enough to attend the school that he or she would like to attend then one could conclude that this could possibly contribute to the student’s performance in the school as a whole whether it is good or bad. This could then go on to affect the student’s life goals and fulfillments as he or she begins to make decisions concerning their future, which will ultimately be affected by their either good or bad performance throughout their college career.

However, according to Alfie Kohn, the tests are not the only problem when it comes to standardized testing; it is also the stress and the standards on which the tests, themselves, are built upon (Kohn 47). Alfie Kohn suggests that in an effort to create teacher proof curriculums, the system is creating more mechanical learning plans and, in turn, taking all of the personality, interest and inclusion out of the classroom and learning (Kohn 47-48). Moreover, in an effort to prepare students for these outlandish tests, the entire process of teaching has become a race to cover a large amount of information in a short amount of time, which, in turn, has a negative impact on students testing performance. Collectively, as a result these standards have consequently dumbed down the classrooms, teachers and students and made education into a drill and practice approach (Kohn 48). Unfortunately, in this approach students are forced to remember and rehearse information that they will ineffably “dump” out of their minds after the tests. This popular drill and practice approach that is being used in schools heavily correlates with Paulo Freire’s ideas on the “banking model of education” of which he insists turns students into creatively inhibited and virtually unconscious beings who are not afforded the right to think critically in order to solve problems but rather to just memorize and rehearse the information that is given to them (Freire, par. 41). This information, alone, could challenge those who think that standardized testing is the “right solution”. How can the system evaluate a student’s progress in learning and understanding if the student really is not learning at all? If all that has become of the standardized testing premise today is remembering and rehearsing then who is to say that high scores aren’t just a mirage and the product of some fantastic rehearsal and that low test scores are the product of the exact opposite? Also, could we go farther to imply that students and teachers from poverty stricken, disadvantaged backgrounds don’t earn test scores as high as the more fortunate because of their lack of resources both inside and out of school ranging from the schools lack of funding for after school tutoring programs and quality enrichment materials to the students’ parents lack of money and time to either get their children extra help or to help them themselves? To sum it all up, in my opinion, standardized testing only can test how well students remember and rehearse and not what they actually know, understand or learn in a course nor the extenuating circumstances that influence the outcome of the test scores.

Stress is also a large contributing factor that can negatively affect a student’s performance on a test supporting my argument that standardized testing is not the “right solution to evaluation”. On this matter I am sure that Derrick Meador would agree. According to Meader, an unfortunate con of standardized tests is that they can create a lot of stress on, not only the students, but also the educators even causing some to quit because of the amount of stress that is imposed upon them to teach students the test material (Meador, par. 10).Therefore if standardized tests stress out the educators who don’t even have to take the tests, imagine the amount of stress that it inflicts upon the students! Based upon a survey that I composed of fifteen students, all fifteen of them answered “yes” to the question “Did you experience any form of testing anxiety or stress before taking a standardized test?” (Bradley, 2013). This survey alone, illustrates just how much stress and standardized testing performance go hand and hand. According to the survey, of the fifteen students who all answered yes to experiencing testing anxiety and stress, ten of them admitted that they were not pleased with their performance or felt that they could have done better. From this evidence, it could be concluded that stress does in fact have some effect on a student’s testing performance, which could, in turn, affects their scores. With that said, standardized testing cannot be used to evaluate a student’s full capabilities and understanding in a course or objective because it does not capture all of these aspects in a multiple choice exam that is being taken by anxiety stricken and stressed out students who are not testing to their full potential or capability.

According to Daniel Dawer, things have hit an all time worse in the educational community and they will only get worse. He claims that, instead of helping, excessive testing has transformed schools into “factories” where testing strategies and rote skills have begin to override the need for deeper learning (Dawer, par. 3). This means that instead of worrying about teaching students material that they can apply in the real world, the school system is focusing on teaching students how to test better through memorization using repetition. However, Derrick Meador and Herbert Walberg would probably disagree with Dawer’s opinion that standardized testing has become the unhelpful source of commotion in the educational system. Meader would argue that standardized testing has its benefits just as much as it has its drawbacks. He suggests that standardized testing allows for student’s test performances around the world to be compared in order to gather data to help develop programs and services directed in improving scores (Meader, par. 6). In agreement with Meador, Walberg suggests that standardized tests can provide a great deal of information on how schools function and what can be done to improve them (Walberg, par. 4). Walberg also argues that standardized testing does not only measure facts that can easily be memorized; but that they, also, are able to assess advanced understanding and judgment. This is done through questions placed on these tests that require students to select the best idea from a group of different choices- not the correct- but the best choice (Walberg, par. 14).

Unfortunately, the truth is that most students do not like standardized tests, however, because that is mostly all that is made available to them, it seems they do not really have a say nor do they have in influence in the ongoing debate of the effectiveness of standardized testing. According to my survey, all fifteen of the surveyed students expressed a form of hatred or dislike for standardized testing mostly because they feel that they are a waste of time or that they do not reflect how well they are doing in a particular class or course topic. However, some students also pointed out that even though they do hate standardized tests, they know that they have to take them so they really have no choice (Bradley, 2013). This is a sad realization because, in a figurative manner, we have backed our students into a corner of multiple choice, stress, repetition and silence. They don’t even feel as if standardized tests are the correct way to evaluate their understanding, however, we are still subjecting them to this testing because, as Walberg would argue, the tests are cheap and time efficient (Walberg, par. 8). However, in the process, we are torturing our students and treating them like figureheads in the eye of education- silencing them- as if they do not have a say in what works best for them.

So if standardized testing is, debatably, not the “right solution” what would be the best alternative to standardized testing? Sharon Nichols proposes that the best alternatives to standardized testing would be portfolio-based assessments as well as performance exams and end-of course examinations compiled by the teachers themselves (Nichols and Berliner 192-195). I believe, as I am sure that Kohn, Dawer and Meader would agree and that Walberg would disagree that these types of assessments are suitable alternatives because they not only focus on what the students have learned, but also on what they are being taught. Portfolio based assessments involve the collecting of samples of a student’s work over a school year in order to assess their improvement in a course. This type of assessment could shed more light on a student’s learning in course. Moreover, performance exams are things such as projects and science fairs where the students are forced to merge learned material and application together in order to create a product. This type of learning will illustrate just how well the students can take what they have learned and apply it to real life situations. And finally, end of course examinations that are compiled by the teachers themselves will allow for more discussion amongst teachers about curriculum content and student capabilities and how to further improve these factors in the classroom, not to mention that it puts teachers back in control of what they teach and test upon instead of leaving the decision to anonymous standardized test makers (Nichols and Berliner 193).

In closing, if I had to offer up possible solutions that could potentially repair the testing frenzy that is striking our schools today I would suggest finding new and effective testing methods to measure students cognition and understanding such as using simulations to test students’ real-world application of concepts in order to grasp an overview of their problem solving methods. Also, I suggest that the drill and practice, fast and ineffective standards that the system is operating off of now be revised. We do not want to teach our students how to simply memorize facts and bubble in answer sheets; we want to engineer young, thinking minds and that type of engineering begins in the classrooms, therefore, standards that require students to actually work their way through problems instead of having to simply remember a song or acronym for the answer could prove to be a beneficial addition to the system of evaluation in the long run.

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