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Dewey, Bruner and "Seas of Stories" in the High Stakes Testing Debate

Kristen Campbell Wilcox

"...the educator cannot start with knowledge already organized and proceed to ladle it out in doses" (Dewey, 1938, p. 82).

"All the standards in the world will not, like a helping hand, achieve the goal of making our multicultural, our threatened society come alive again, not alive just as a competitor in the world's markets, but as a nation worth living in and living for" (Bruner, 1996, p.118).

Studies and papers examining the effects of high-stakes testing on students, teachers, curricula, schools, and on American democratic ideals have become more and more prevalent in academic journals and local newspapers alike. The high-stakes testing debate continues to heat up as new and increasingly high stakes are attached to state standardized tests like Texas' TAAS which has become a model for other states standardized tests. Much of the current debate involves questions regarding the proper use of test scores, biases toward subgroups in testing, and effects on teachers, children, and curricula.

This paper presents multiple perspectives on the currently popular rationales for high stakes tests and the effects of high stakes tests on the scope of curricula and the way learners are approached in the classroom. To better understand the high stakes testing debate, this paper begins with placing testing in a historical context. This context helps clarify how tests have been used throughout time and for what social, economic, or political purpose they serve. Ideas from John Dewey's "Experience and Education" and Jerome Bruner's "The Culture of Education" shed light on ways high stakes tests affect learners, teachers, curricula and democratic ideals.

This paper proposes that many of the questions surrounding high stakes testing being debated today are important, yet fall short of moving teachers, parents, students, administrators and legislators to think deeply about how optimal teaching and learning can be achieved in a high stakes testing environment. Finally, the high stakes testing debate is viewed, to borrow a term from Bruner, as a "sea of stories" in which the stakeholders see the same things, but come away with remarkably differing stories of what is happening (1996, p. 147). The principles of learning espoused by Dewey and

Bruner put these "seas of stories" into a different light by offering alternative ways of perceiving learning and teaching.

Historical, Political Context of High Stakes Tests

Change is constant and this can be said of education as much as anything else. Human history is rich with experiments in teaching, learning, and assessing learning. According to Madaus & O'Dwyer, tests used as policy instruments in education have long roots; they were first introduced in China as long ago as 210 B.C.E (1999, p. 689). Since that time there have been four main ways to test. These methods of testing include providing oral or written answers to a series of questions (e.g., short answer), producing a product (e.g., a portfolio), performing an act to be evaluated (e.g., a chemistry experiment) and finally selecting an answer to a question from among several options (e.g., multiple choice) (Madaus & O'Dwyer, 1999, p. 689). According to Bruner, differing beliefs and assumptions about the learner affects the type of tests that are used to assess learning (Bruner, 1996, p. 50).

Taken a step further, the social, economic and political climate both reflect and produce differing beliefs and assumptions about learners which then have an effect on testing choices. Therefore, in order to understand the multiple perspectives in the testing debate it is helpful to reflect on the social, economic and political climate in which testing choices are made. In fact, Kliebard (1995) attributes "curriculum fashions" to the wide and shifting swings in the social and economic culture of a country (p. 178). World conflict, for example, typically produces the educational equivalent of a "hold down the fort" position in which guarding tradition and promoting patriotism reign supreme while at times of relative social, economic and political security, individual freedom and experimentation are more important (Kliebard, 1995, p. 178). When social, economic and political conditions change, choices about education and testing also change (Kliebard, 1995, p. 178). As Linn (1998) points out, when culture shifts in one direction or another, tests are a popular choice for educational reform because they are a quick fix: they "can be implemented within the term of office of elected officials" (p. 2).

These cultural shifts impact decisions about education as the more powerful group attempts to assert their beliefs and assumptions on the system as a whole. For many centuries, the reigning belief was that the teacher was a transmitter of knowledge to the learner who practiced that knowledge; a system that was rooted in the guilds of the Middle Ages (Madaus & O'Dwyer, 1999, p. 689). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries John Dewey came upon the scene and was part of an effort to establish a different conception of learning in which the student learns to develop and execute actions based on their own ideas (Kliebard, 1995, p. 69). However, the dawning of the twentieth century brought with it the rise of standardized achievement tests which accelerated the focus on teaching the three R's (Kliebard, 1995, p. 68). The mid-1980's brought another model of the mind that emphasized the "socio-cultural" construction of knowledge that was best measured with authentic assessment, such as portfolios (Madaus & O'Dwyer, 1999, p. 689). Proponents of authentic assessments argued that they provided insight into the "higher-order" thinking skills of learners. However, authentic assessments are not easily graded by computers and have since become supplanted, in many cases, by machine-readable multiple-choice type tests.

As stakes rise and schools are required to provide assessment systems to prove their results or face retribution, multiple-choice tests have provided an affordable and efficient alternative to controversial and less "objective" authentic assessments. Moreover, as Kohn (2000) argues, they have successfully promoted a more traditional, "back to basics" approach to learning in the name of providing equal educational opportunity and higher standards; a powerful politically popular combination (p. 316). The idea that high stakes testing actually provides equal educational opportunity and higher standards constitute part of the debate.

The High Stakes Testing Debate

"What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?" (Dewey, 1938, p. 49)

"... (human learning) is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing of meanings rather than receiving them..." (Bruner, 1996, p. 84)

Ideas about the role of the learner and the process of learning found in both Dewey and Bruner collide with the ideas proponents of high stakes testing hold and it is in these differing perspectives that the argument ensues. There is little argument that these tests effect change in curricula (Madaus & O'Dwyer, 1999, p. 689), but there is a great deal of argument as to whether the result is positive or negative.

Proponents of high stakes testing maintain that the tests provide "vital information about patterns of strength and weakness among students in a classroom, a school, or a district" and help guide curricula toward "establishing respectable levels of literacy and knowledge in the middle range" (Schmoker, 2000, p. 63). Furthermore, proponents argue that tests and accountability systems will reveal measurable annual progress and areas that need improvement; making clear what needs to be improved; therefore, focusing resources on areas that need the most improvement (Schmoker, 2000, p. 65). They point to the controversy concerning what to measure in authentic assessments and how to measure it and see standardized tests as offering a solution to this controversy (Madaus & O'Dwyer, 2000, p. 694). In addition, critics point to the testing industry's relative lack of experience in providing performance, portfolio, and product assessments as another compelling reason to rely on standardized tests (Madaus & O'Dwyer, 2000, p. 694). So, tests are viewed as a practical means by which a "respectable" level of education can be insured, ultimately benefiting all learners.

The high stakes part of the testing equation, proponents reason, is necessary to provide the pressure needed for schools and teachers to improve the quality of their teaching (Perkins-Gough, 2000, p. 5). Achieve Inc., an organization of business and state leaders, for example argues that "[Test scores] have to be at the center of accountability policies. They are one of the only reliable indicators of what students are learning" (Perkins-Gough, 2000, p. 5). From this perspective high stakes tests provide the necessary data by which outcomes may be measured, adjustments may be made resulting finally in a bolstering of public trust in education (Schmoker, 2000, p. 65).

Under constant attack, most proponents of high stakes tests have acknowledged the pitfalls of tests. They concede that multiple indicators are preferable to one for increasing "the validity of inferences based upon observed gains in achievement" (Linn, 1998, p. 29), but maintain that one test is still better than none. They are also aware of the need for "new high-quality assessments each year that are equated to previous years", not school to school comparisons (Linn, 1998, p. 29). Finally, proponents of high stakes testing recognize the importance of making clear the degree of uncertainty inherent in results when they are offered to the

public (Linn, 1998, p. 29). Regardless of these pitfalls proponents view high stakes testing as a necessary check on an educational system that has lost the public's trust and a curriculum that seems to deliver less than acceptable results.

Although proponents view the tests as providing more positive than negative effects on curricula, teachers and students, the critics see otherwise. From the critics' perspective curricular guidelines correlated to the formats of tests equals a disastrous movement from high-order thinking to low-order thinking, from an emphasis on process to product, and from collaborative teaching and learning to alienating teaching and learning.

Alfie Kohn, an outspoken critic of high stakes testing provides a salient example of the effect teaching to the tests has on learners high-order thinking skills.

Consider a fifth-grade boy who, researchers found, could flawlessly march through the steps of subtracting $2\frac{5}{8}$ from $3\frac{1}{3}$, ending up quite correctly with $\frac{3}{6}$ and then reducing that to $\frac{1}{2}$. Unfortunately, successful performance of this final reduction does not imply understanding that the two fractions are equivalent. In fact, this student remarked in an interview that $\frac{1}{2}$ was larger than $\frac{3}{6}$ because "the denominator is smaller so the pieces are larger" (2000, p. 317).

Kohn (2000), like most critics of high stakes testing, believes that tests measure what is least significant about learning. Critics of high stakes tests find scenarios like this fifth-grade boy's to be indicators of a lack of learning how to think due to an overemphasis on completing lower-order tasks in preparation for tests (p. 317).

Critics such as McNeil (2000) argue that high stakes tests reduce the teacher's and student's role as collaborators in learning also.

When ... student's learning is represented by the narrow indicators of a test like the TAAS, the teachers lose the capacity to bring into the discussion of the school program their knowledge of what children are learning (p. 237).

The critics argue that as a result of the high stakes, one-size fits all testing climate, teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to attend to the diversity of needs in their classrooms. To the critics, high stakes tests offer no less than an assault on social justice. Airasian (1987) attributes the disagreements over how to nurture social justice to a lack of social consensus about what social justice means (p. 407). He argues that until there is consensus, the testing debate will continue to be about "issues and ends, not problems and means" (Airasian, 1987, p. 407).

Finally, according to critics, not only do high stakes tests constitute an assault on a democratic, participatory and collaborative climate, but are unreliable means to gage

learning. Kohn (2000) argues that many tests used in high stakes accountability systems are norm-referenced tests which "were never designed to assess the adequacy of instruction or the capabilities of students" (p.318).

The differing views of what comprises a socially just education result in a talking past each other in which proponents of tests point to the ends of increased scores while the critics of tests point to the importance of the means. The avenues of argument have become habitual and automatic in a continuing polarization of perspectives.

Conclusion

According to Bruner (1996), "narrativized realities" are too "ubiquitous, their construction too habitual or automatic to be accessible to easy inspection" (p. 147). The high stakes testing debate can be viewed as a "narrativized reality," a "sea of stories" in which participants have difficulty grasping its meaning just as the fish who is "the last to discover water" (Bruner, 1996, p. 147). Viewing the high stakes testing debate as a "narrativized reality" reveals not a lack of competence in creating an account of the testing reality, but rather an outward sign of how adept human beings are at creating narrative accounts. Ultimately, however, a debate is only useful when it helps move participants toward a higher level of consciousness of the issues involved.

To Bruner (1996) there are three antidotes to achieving consciousness of the automatic and ubiquitous: contrast, confrontation, and metacognition (p. 148). The high stakes testing debate is a fine example of contrast and confrontation in action, but metacognition will require stepping out of our "sea of stories". Stepping out of our "sea of stories" and viewing the fifth-grader answering questions, but not knowing why or what the answer really means, reveals the that child, not as a passive object in an accountability system, but as a growing consciousness trying to make sense of his world.

Stepping out of our "sea of stories" we see parents fighting with children over test scores, children lying asleep at night worried about the upcoming tests and teachers struggling with trying to raise test scores, oftentimes at the expense of helping children learn how to think for themselves. In this regard, Dewey (1938) believed that every theory that imposed external control resulting in limiting the freedom of individuals "rests finally upon the notion that experience is truly experience only when objective conditions are subordinated to what goes on within the individuals having the experience" (p. 41). It is clear that high stakes tests subordinate what goes on with individuals, in effect denying human freedom and moving toward the undemocratic end of external control in the name of guaranteeing educational excellence- which no test can honestly do.

Questions remain as to whether the American public will step out of the "sea of stories" to grasp alternative ways of conceiving learning than through high stakes tests. Several factors may help this process including awareness of alternatives and a clearer vision of the future. In fact, many European countries have maintained the essay test as the technology of managing assessment and perhaps, alternative "narratives" regarding testing may play an important role in gaining a broader perspective on assessing learning (Madaus & O'Dwyer, 1999, p. 694). Also, according to Bruner (1996), education can and must include vision of the future: "a surer sense of what to teach to whom and how to go about teaching it in such a way that it will make those taught more effective, less alienated, and better human beings" (p. 118).

Stepping out of our "sea of stories" also requires a willingness to trust teachers, schools, and administrators in providing good teaching and learning. It requires placing more importance on the development of learners' and teachers' abilities to think proactively, collaboratively, and morally, than on a test score. The high stakes testing debate is nothing less than the outward sign of the tension-filled dynamic of individual freedom versus social control and the direction it takes in the future tells much about the future of democratic ideals.

Stepping out of our "sea of stories" we see that the wave of high stakes testing will breed passivity, receptivity, and in the end pollute the American ideal of democracy. An alternative "narrativized reality" of assessing learning other than high stakes tests must be part of making certain that the United States will continue to be "a nation worth living in and living for" (Bruner, 1996, p. 118).

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