



Standardized Tests and Their Impact on Students and Learning

Dale Jones

It's Friday, May 10, and the school year is effectively over. At least that's what many of my students think. The school calendar says we still have a month left, but for students who have just endured two weeks of daily testing for up to two hours each day, they feel like they're finished.

And why wouldn't they? We can say whatever we want to them about the testing – that it won't count on their grades, that it's just one snapshot (more an epic film?) of their learning, and that we don't want them to stress over it, but the zeitgeist surrounding the test reveals otherwise. Combine the secrecy, security measures, the timing towards the end of the school year, and of course the weeks-long length of CAASPP testing and the message to students that this is the most important thing they'll do this year is undeniable.

In my opinion it's also the most destructive thing that they'll do this year, and not just because they think school is over when they're finished and we've effectively lost six weeks of teaching and learning.

It's not just the kids who think school may as well be over when testing concludes. Teachers are also prone to the same thinking as students, and many of them have also been encouraged or told to compact the curriculum so that all of the standards are covered prior to the onset of testing, out of a sense of fairness to the students, no less. So many teachers cram a 36-week pacing guide into 30 weeks. The resulting acceleration is truly unfair to many students who can't keep up, and teaching is reduced to test preparation, with little time for reteaching, and no time to allow students to explore their passions and questions.

The iterative nature of effective pedagogy, including time for reflection, is dismissed as impractical when coverage of standards takes precedence. This is only one of the ways that the emphasis on testing directly effects pedagogy in a way that is counter to what we have learned about good teaching from both research and experience.

I had some hope that computerized testing that adjusts the questions based on the student's performance may lead to better alignment between the learner and the test. Then I watched English Learners who had been in our country for just over a year take a test that devastated them. Even with embedded accommodations like text-to speech, these students were overwhelmed. Even though they

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had completed a year of tremendous growth and discovery, the start *and* end of their learning journey was outside of the range of what was being tested.

I know a Moderate / Severe Special Day Class teacher who gives the California Alternative Assessment to her neuro-diverse students. Her classroom is built around learning social and pre-vocational skills. Math is taught by selling popcorn each day to the rest of the school and managing all aspects of their microbusiness. Some of their profits are taken to the grocery store where they practice shopping, and then cooking. Her students are learning to be as independent as possible, and they work very hard for many years on these life skills. Then they take the test, and since all students must be taught the standards, they are asked questions about slope, positive and negative integers, and the circumference of a circle.

Perhaps the greatest danger of standardized testing is that it takes time and political capital away from assessments that may not be quantified, but which have the ability to inform, and if used creatively and without larger stakes, even transform learning. One example is the Emergent Curriculum that grows from the intense practice of deep engagement and learning to listen to the “hundred languages of children.” Reggio Emilia is an approach to teaching that is built around assessment practices that lead to further and deeper learning that is unique to each child, and respect time and developmental readiness. In Reggio, assessment is a part of the learning process, not an external measurement.

I recently had a conversation with a doctor who asked me about CAASPP testing. I told her that the testing had no value to me as the school’s instructional leader, and that I thought it actually hurt the teaching and learning process. I explained some of the reasons why I felt this way, including that we don’t receive the results until the following school year and we can’t see how students did on individual test items. This alone reveals that CAASPP testing is really not about helping students learn or teachers teach. This doctor told me that every educator she has asked about the testing shares a similar opinion to mine. Thinking back, I can’t recall a single conversation with a teacher, principal, or superintendent who feels differently about the testing, but sadly, many have been unwilling to share those opinions publicly. And perhaps that’s why we still have a system of testing and accountability that reduces the miracle of learning to a number, and now an arrow on a gauge.

About the Author

Dale Jones has been a public school teacher and administrator for over 33 years. He co-founded the South Bay chapter of the Progressive Educators Network, and opened a K-8 parent participation school based on Reggio Emilia. He has no plans to retire!