Meghan Sanchez

Education 266: Schools in American Cities

Professor Jody Cohen

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**Looking Beyond the Standardized Test: Teaching for Students, Not the Test**

Over winter break, I had the opportunity to intern with a Bryn Mawr alumna at her job at Eastside Charter School in Washington D.C.[[1]](#footnote-1) Price taught a 5th grade classroom in the North East region of the capital. Although it was only her second year teaching there, she was heavily involved with the other teachers and vice principal in creating a new curriculum that coincided with the Common Core Standards that are now in place and mandatory for all public schools nationwide. I was intrigued with her process of making sure that her curriculum was aligned with these standards, while still finding a way to make the information she was teaching worthwhile to her students.

Now with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), standardized testing is necessary for all public and charter schools in America. Regardless of how teachers feel about these standardized tests, they are mandatory for public schools in order to remain open to the students. While there are other ways to closing the “achievement gap”, this is the method that the government has chosen to use in public schools to gauge student learning. Although teachers still have to teach the test to their students, they do not have to teach only with the test in mind. The implications of the test mean that teachers have to teach particular core standards that will be on the standardized test. From kindergarten to 12th grade, students are required to take this test. Some teachers may stick with teaching just the core standards to their students, but I want to look at the perspective of the teacher that wants his or her kids to love learning and wants them to succeed and still teach their students the standards. Our readings from class can offer an insight as to how both the teacher’s and the school district’s goals can be met and also provide students in urban education the opportunity to love what they are learning and feel like their interests are being addressed.

Before I begin discussing ways to work with the standardized test in the classroom, I want to address the implications of them and get a better sense of the big picture. In an anecdote in *City Kids, City Schools,* author and teacher, Katie Hogan, discusses the reasons why her and her colleagues protested against giving their students the Chicago Academic Standards Examination (CASE). She said, “CASE became another beast of standardized testing that measured not student progress, but the already existing inequalities of the city’s school system. Magnet school students did great. Non-magnet school students did poorly.”[[2]](#footnote-2) These test often point out the inequalities of schools in regards to funding. In another chapter of the same book, Stan Karp critically assesses No Child Left Behind’s mission and how these tests aren’t a good indicator of student progress and actually “reflect other inequalities in resources and opportunities that exists in the larger society and in schools themselves.”[[3]](#footnote-3) He also says how NCLB is a vicious cycle that takes away school funding if students do not do well on the standardized tests. This further creates a funding gap where the students that need the most attention, extra programs, and funding are denied it because they did poorly compared to other schools on the test.

Other critiques are that these tests do not provide students a chance to develop their critical thinking skills. Teachers get so caught up trying to make sure they cover everything so their students will be prepared and their school will not shut down due to low-test scores. That is why I want to look to teachers who have made an effort to not make their class just about the test. Instead, these teachers weave the core standards into their “culturally relevant teaching”, while validating students’ personal insights and providing them with a cultural competence to face the world head on.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Gloria Ladson-Billings uses the term “culturally relevant teaching” to explain how teachers should “prepare [their] students to combat inequity by being highly competent and critically conscious.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Instead of accepting the standardized tests for what they are, she encourages teachers to not let that stop them from teaching their students something that they can take with them for the rest of their lives. She also realizes that there is a way to use critical and analytical thinking in the classroom. The first thing she says to do is to “deconstruct, construct, and reconstruct the curriculum.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This means the teacher should deconstruct the original curriculum and take it apart. Then construct a new curriculum by bringing in voices, experiences, and knowledge of the students to make it more applicable and interesting to them. Finally, the teacher should reconstruct this new curriculum by working with the class and add, subtract, and re-weigh it to teach what is necessary and still make it culturally relevant. By using this “wide repertoire of teaching strategies and techniques to ensure that all students can access the curriculum,” the teacher is still teaching what is necessary, but also making the content and meaning applicable and accessible to the students.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Culturally relevant teachers also need to “think deeply about what they teach and ask themselves why students should learn particular aspects of the curriculum.”[[8]](#footnote-8) While some teachers say they are teaching in order for the students to take the standardized tests, culturally relevant teachers should push the boundaries and create their own reasons why they want to teach their students this particular content. The teacher should consider what this content can accomplish and what the students get out of it. In Philadelphia, the standardized system is called the Standards Aligned System, or SAS. Their website has a tool for assessments and lessons for teachers of every grade. While the system provides some of their own examples of texts to read and problem sheets for the students, my Praxis placement teacher, Ms. Smith, tells me that a lot of the time, the examples are not completely relevant to the core lesson that is being taught. She often prefers finding her own material that she thinks her 5th grade class will enjoy and engage in. “Ms. Smith [also] explains the process of the standardized test; giving [the students] the ins and outs [of how the test works].”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Teachers should also “speak in long-term academic goals for students.”[[10]](#footnote-10) For example, Ms. Smith tells her students information that they need to know for standardized tests, though she told me that she is working beyond the test. By teaching her students to number the paragraphs in an assigned text and when answering a question, writing the number of the paragraph where they found the answer, ensures that no matter who is reading or grading their work, that person can see where the student came to that conclusion. By teaching her students to do this on every assignment they are given, the students, teacher, and test grader can see where the student found the answer to the problem. The students gain a skill that can be used on anything, including the standardized test.

Another strategy teachers can use in their classroom to make the curriculum about more than just the standardized test is validating students’ personal insights of the world around them. Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade discuss how teachers can create a curriculum that affirms “the forms of cultural expression – TV shows, films, Web sites, graphic novels, music – that students find meaningful.”[[11]](#footnote-11) By using sources that interest students, they can become more engaged in the subject matter and add their own opinions and thoughts about sources that they know and understand. For example, both authors “utilize[d] hip-hop music and culture to forge a common and critical discourse that was centered upon the lives of the students, transcended the racial divide, and allowed [them] to tap into students’ lives in ways that promoted academic literacy and critical consciousness,” in their high school in Northern California.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although teachers have to teach this curriculum does not mean that students can’t enjoy what they are learning. It is also important for students to work in a medium that they understand. This allows an exchange of learning between the teacher and the students, where the teachers can also learn new meanings and understandings of a culture the students live in on a daily basis.

Finally, teachers should help their students develop a “cultural competence” for the world around them.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is important that students are learning about their own culture in the classroom so that their personal lives and their academic lives can co-exist. They should also have a chance to learn about the wider culture of society so that they are able to expand their knowledge through cultural capital. Lory Janelle Dance addresses this in her book *Tough Fronts: The Impact of Street Culture on Schooling.* She says “limited school-based access to social and cultural capital resources is particularly problematic for at-risk youth of color because these students are likely to lack the social class and family heritages that ensure alternative means for acquiring these types of capital.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Some students may never get exposure to this wider culture and it is important to work with what the students know and build upon it so that they may expand their knowledge and their outlook on the world.

In our class, Professor Cohen asked us to come up with an activity to give to a class of 5th grade students that was culturally relevant and covered the topic of the American Revolution. My group decided to first teach our students the textbook version of the American Revolution, including the who, what where, when and why, as well as the famous people during this time in history that we still talk about today. Next, we would divide the class into small groups to continue learning about the Revolution in the computer lab. Instead of looking for information they already know about the subject, we want the students to research information that we did not mention in class. This way the students are able to work on their researching skills and are also learning about people that are often left out of this history. Once they have compiled their research, they are to present their findings to the classroom. After the class has watched the various presentations that discuss events and people that are normally left out of this history, we ask them to do a self-reflection and write about why these figures weren’t in our initial conversation about the American Revolution. What does this have to say about the way history is told in our country? By providing the students with the basics, they are then able to learn something new all on their own and present their findings to the class. In this example, the students were able to know what they needed for the test, and are still able to critically think about the way history is portrayed in our society today.

There are several issues with standardized testing that further point out the inequalities in American education. Oftentimes, they show the issues with funding, where schools that are excelling get more resources, while leaving schools that need more help in the dust. But if the teacher can find a way to completely take apart the curriculum and build it back up with the students’ culture, values, and interests in mind, so much more can be accomplished beyond the test.

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1. Pseudonyms are used for schools, teachers, and students. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hogan, Katie. "The Curie 12: A Case for Teacher Activism." In *City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row*. New York: New Press, 2008. P.98. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Karp, Stan. "NCLB's Selective Vision of Equality: Some Gaps Count More than Others." In *City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row*. New York: New Press, 2008. P.223. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ladson-Billings, Gloria. ""Yes, But How Do We Do It?": Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." In *City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row*. New York: New Press, 2008. P.163. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., P.163, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., P.166. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., P.167. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., P.168. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Field Notes for February 20, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., P.169. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Morrell, Ernest, and Jeff Duncan-Andrade. ""Comin' from the School of Hard Knocks": Hip-Hop and the Revolution of English Classrooms in City Schools." In *City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row*. New York: New Press, 2008. P.197. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., P.198. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ladson-Billings, Gloria, P.170. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dance, Lory Janelle. "Social Capital, Cultural Capital, and Caring Teachers: The Perspectives of Street-Savvy Students and a Magical Teacher." In *Tough Fronts: The Impact of Street Culture on Schooling*. New York: Routledge, 2002. P.74. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)