Meghan Sanchez

Education 266: Schools in American Cities

Professor Jody Cohen

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**Engaging Students in the Classroom: Balancing Standardized Testing and Extracurricular Learning**

Student engagement is a crucial piece to any classroom. In order for students to learn more easily and to allow for better classroom discussions, the teacher should present the curriculum in a way that is engaging and interesting for the students. In today's classrooms, however, the majority of class time is spent preparing for state standardized tests. Whether America uses these tests because "our culture places an exceedingly high value on the notion of *potential* to achieve," or to try and come up with a system that measures success, standardized tests have become the make-it or break-it test for schools across America.[[1]](#footnote-1) How, then, can teachers try to find a way to incorporate strategies for students' to take these tests and still ensure students are engaged with the coursework? My praxis placement at Westside Elementary has found supplemental programs outside of the classroom to ensure students receive a well-rounded education and are often engaged in both types of learning environments.

Over the past semester, I have been at Westside Elementary for my praxis placement.[[2]](#footnote-2) Westside is located on the outskirts of the city of Philadelphia. It caters to students from pre-kindergarten to 6th grade and houses around 270 students. In terms of student demographics, 94.8% of students are black, 0.4% white, 0.7% Hispanic, and 4.1% listed as "other".[[3]](#footnote-3) Over half of the students qualify for reduced lunches and it is about an equal split between male and female students.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The school building itself is comprised of three floors, the lowest houses bathrooms and the cafeteria, and the other two floors are where the students' classes are held. It is located at the end of a street filled with small houses. At the other end of the street is the end of a trolley route. The principal is Mrs. Gomez, and the host teacher I was with is Mrs. Smith. The majority of teachers at this school are women. I have only seen two male teachers during my semester there. Mrs. Smith is the only teacher for the 5th grade class. At the beginning of the year, there were two teachers, but by November, 31 students were put into one classroom for the rest of the school year.

Due to the time of day that I came into the classroom, and perhaps because of the teacher's personal preference, I did not get to talk and interact with the students that much. The one day that I joined them for lunch (they had standardized testing earlier in the day), I was able to hear two students' opinions about their school. One student, Elisa, loved to doodle and draw. She told me she was sad that her school did not have an art program and was hoping that the school she planned to attend next year would offer such a program for her to develop her interest in art. The other student, Lana, said, "I gotta get outta here."[[5]](#footnote-5) She was appalled by the amount of fighting that occurred between the students. She also said, "Students say things they shouldn't say," and they "Know things they shouldn't know."[[6]](#footnote-6) She excitedly told me about her new school that she was going to attend next year, an Episcopalian school not far from Westside Elementary.

A large part Mrs. Smith's classroom focused on students learning and preparing for the standardized test at the end of the year: the PSSA's. Mrs. Smith is extremely explicit and upfront with her class in regards to standardized testing. By my third day in the classroom, she was telling me what she does with her students to help prepare them for the test. She told me that as a teacher, she must "be explicit with [lesson] objectives."[[7]](#footnote-7) This way, the students know how each lesson correlates to the standardized test. She said that the "year should be about providing skills so students will be confident" on the test."[[8]](#footnote-8) She talks about the test a lot in class in order to make the students comfortable with the setup of the test and so they know what strategies they learn in class to use on the test. Mrs. Smith also told me that during the test, she couldn’t be with her students while they are testing. During the test, no teacher can tell the students to "use whatever strategies we used in class," and if she does answer a students' question, she must address the entire classroom when responding.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is just one of the many reasons why she keeps her students in the know about what to expect for the test.

When the class is given a reading assignment, Mrs. Smith gives the students some strategies to help them tackle the assignment and provide them with take-away strategies for the test. When the students read an assignment in class they should first, read the passage together, then read it again quietly to yourself, and time yourself while doing it. Students "need to create your own mental clock" in preparation for the timed exam.[[10]](#footnote-10) When she mentions that students pulled out dictionaries for their in-class quiz the day before, Mrs. Smith reminds her students that they will not be able to use these resources on test day. She reminds them, "We don't use dictionaries. We use context clues."[[11]](#footnote-11) By reminding students of their backpack of strategies that they have readily available to them, they can still tackle a question or a passage by using context clues. Mrs. Smith even goes as far as to tell the students that if they try to use a dictionary or outside source during the exam, "your test will be taken away from you. You will get a new book and have to redo it all over."[[12]](#footnote-12) The students learn from these words of wisdom in class and now have a better idea of how to approach the exam when they finally take it.

The next week in class, Mrs. Smith continued to dish out these helpful hints and strategies for the test. After discussing a writing prompt they had been working on, she tells the students on how they can improve their writing. She tells them, "Don't copy straight from the text. Give specific details in your own words."[[13]](#footnote-13) When she notes how some students write in run-on sentences, she reminds them, "Don't use "50 'ands'. Do we talk in that manner?"[[14]](#footnote-14) The students reply with no. She tells them that there should be no run-on sentences. The students know transitional words to use in place of the word "and". Mrs. Smith also reminds students to "be concise and clear and detailed" in their writing.[[15]](#footnote-15)

For math lessons, Mrs. Smith is just as persistent in terms of helping students remember the content that they need for the test, as well as making sure that they retain this information past the 5th grade. When going over acute, right, and obtuse triangles, Mrs. Smith uses her both of her arms to explain which triangle is which. When she asks the students what they think the correct answer is to a problem, she allows the students to vote on their answer, allowing representatives for each answer come to the board to explain their reasoning. By giving students agency in the classroom, she is able to assess what information they are taking in from the lesson and the students have a chance to explain their reasoning behind their answers.

On my last day in class, the students were dealing with orders of operation in an algebraic problem, especially when there are brackets within the equation. Once again, Mrs. Smith uses an acronym that the students know from previous years of schooling to remind them what order of operation to use first. PEMDAS stands for Parentheses, Exponents, Multiply, Divide, Add, and Subtract. When the students begin an equation, Mrs. Smith reminds the students to "solve everything in brackets and parentheses first," before performing any other operations.[[16]](#footnote-16) In order to prepare the students for math tests at any level, she tells students that they "need to show the steps. Those of you that have scored not so great, this is why. You need to show your steps even if you know it."[[17]](#footnote-17) By incorporating trends she sees in the classroom, the teacher is able to highlight why students may not be performing so well on tests. The teacher can only grade on the work that is shown on paper and in order for students to see improvements, they must show their work and the steps they took to get to their final answer.

One class session, Mrs. Smith gave me the opportunity to work with 9 of the students in the classroom on an assignment. We went over a reading packet they had completed the day before in class. I started the session by having the students take turns reading the first passage. The passage was on snakes and discusses how dangerous a snakebite may or may not be**.** I have learned from the students' previous class assignments what they are being tested on in these reading passages. For the most part, students are assessed on what that passage mainly discusses, spelling or grammar errors within the text, what sentence does not fit or best fits within a passage, and specific detail recall. With this in mind, I tried to ask questions throughout the reading to see what they understood about the text.

The next passage in the packet consisted of two short paragraphs outlining the story of two friends who started their own detective business. Most of the questions following the short story consisted of questions like: "Which sentence would be a good conclusion for this passage?" or "Which sentence should be removed from the passage because it does not go with the rest of the paragraph?"[[18]](#footnote-18)Before we finished reading the passage, I saw a word that was misspelled in this sentence: "Mr. Miles announced that he could not locate his breifcase."[[19]](#footnote-19) I asked the students if they saw something odd or strange in the sentence. They all began to say "breifcase" was misspelled and told me that there was a question coming up that asked about that sentence and the misspelled word.

I thought that this exercise was more beneficial for me than the students. Many students did not want to explain why they came to the correct answer of a question. They would yell out the question that they got without giving an explanation. I tried to combat this by asking students why they thought that was the right answer or asked them to show me in the passage where they found this information. Mrs. Smith taught the students to number each paragraph in a passage and when answering questions, to write the number of the paragraph where they found their answer. This way, if any person was grading the students' work, they would be able to see the students' thought processes that helped them come to their conclusion. By using strategies that Mrs. Smith had implemented in class already, I tried to build up the skills they acquired and encouraged them to use these strategies as ways of explaining their answers.

While writer Alfie Kohn says that standardized tests "tend to measure the temporary acquisition of facts and skills, including the skill of test-taking itself," and that "skill-based instruction, the type to which most children of color are subjected, tends to foster low-level uniformity and subvert academic potential," I have found that Mrs. Smith works against this notion and tries to teach her students skills that they can take with them past the test.[[20]](#footnote-20) She tries to provide the students with knowledge that will be helpful to them in the years to come for reading, writing, and math. While I may not agree with the use of standardized testing in schools as a way to determine academic achievement, it is important to try and prepare students for these tests as well as for life after the test.

I was impressed as to the amount of learning that occurred outside of standardized testing within the classroom. I saw the most creative lesson on my first day in Mrs. Smith's classroom. Mrs. Smith made use of the Smartboard in the classroom and pulled up an interactive game on a website for the students to play during their reading section of class that day. The games tested past verb tenses, synonyms, vocabulary, and spelling. The students stood in a line and went up one at a time to answer a question. The students had to be quick in their responses, however, because they had to answer a certain number of questions correctly before the timer on the game went off. After a few rounds, the students sat back in their desks and listened to Mrs. Smith's next prompt. She started a game called "story starter".[[21]](#footnote-21) In this game, students would respond to Mrs. Smith's prompt and begin to write a sentence or two. After 30 seconds, Mrs. Smith would direct the students to pass the paper to the person next to them and they would have to continue the story from the previous sentence. Mrs. Smith began with the prompt," For lunch today..."[[22]](#footnote-22) Before they began, she reminded them to "keep it G" and to not include "blood gushing" details in the story.[[23]](#footnote-23) In this simple exercise, I saw the students remain extremely engaged, waiting patiently for their turn to add their personal spin on the story and talk about their favorite or grossest foods. It also allowed the students to respond to a prompt, like they would have to do on a standardized test, and the assignment gave the students a chance to think and write creatively in the classroom.

During my third visit to the school, Mrs. Smith informed the students and I that they would have an assembly later on in the day. The Red Cross came to their school and held an assembly for each grade at Westside Elementary. At the beginning of the assembly, two women from the Red Cross introduced themselves and asked the students if they knew what the Red Cross did. One of the first responses was donating blood. The students also noted that they were there to help with emergencies. The Red Cross team and the students worked together to name some natural disasters or emergencies that may require the assistance of the Red Cross. The students named fire, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes as some of the disasters that may occur that require the help of the Red Cross.[[24]](#footnote-24) Then the two women began to talk about a project that the Red Cross and Disney have teamed up together to promote: The Pillowcase Project. They showed students that a pillowcase is a great place for the students to store their important and essential belongings so if an emergency does occur, the students can grab these and have all of their necessities in the pillowcase. After learning about the project, the Red Cross team began to teach the students about the four different winter storms that can occur during the cold months. Maybe this was not news to some students, but as a native to Louisiana, I was intrigued that students were learning about their environment at such a young age. Many of them knew some of the storms that can occur during the cold, winter months. They named: "snowstorm, sleet, blizzard, and freezing rain."[[25]](#footnote-25) The students listened as the Red Cross recruits talked about the various storms. For instance, freezing rain occurs when rain "hits the ground and it freezes."[[26]](#footnote-26) They even discussed what frostbite and hypothermia were and gave them helpful information on how to detect and combat the two. Finally, the students gathered into groups and were quizzed on the information they had just learned. It was fun to watch the students work collaboratively to determine an answer. At the end of the assembly, each student was given their own pillowcase to store their emergency stash in case of a natural disaster.

After a week of testing, I came in late on a Friday afternoon to see the students working on worksheets silently. They had just finished part of their test that day and Mrs. Smith had given them an assignment to work on. As the students worked at their desks, Mrs. Smith tells me she would like her students to participate in "enrichment activities after testing."[[27]](#footnote-27) She told me she saw an article about another school in Pennsylvania doing various activities like dancing, building or making things, or other "enriching activities" that allowed the students to wind down from a long week of testing. I was somewhat confused as to why although she wanted this for her students, she had them working silently on worksheets. Perhaps it had something to do with school funding? I am not really sure why, but I did agree that allowing the students to actively and physically engage after taking tests all week would be a great idea.

After taking this course and visiting Westside Elementary for a semester, I have realized the ever-growing importance of standardized testing in public schools in America. From my interactions with Mrs. Smith's 5th grade class, I have also realized that the tests do not have to be a drag for the teacher or the students in the classroom. By providing long-lasting strategies for students and engaging them with games and activities to learn, students can be prepared for the standardized test and take away information for the future. It is also important to balance this type of learning with extra-curricular learning that teaches students about knowledge not on the test. While it may take more time, energy, and resources to provide enriched activities to students, it allows them to stay mentally sharp and gives them an outlet to de-stress and focus on other kinds of learning outside the standardized test.

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1. Sacks, Peter. Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do to Change It. Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 1999. Print. P.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. School, teachers, superintendent, and students all have pseudonyms. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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5. Field Notes, April 17, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Field Notes, March 27, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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16. Field Notes, May 1, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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21. Field Notes, February 20, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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25. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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