

The Regulated Reader

Over the last 25 years, readers have become increasingly regulated in terms of what they experience in their literacy learning. In various countries, we have seen a rise in government-inserted controls on what is taught and how. Further, to ensure compliance with, schools are audited and students are tested on their mastery of pre-set, skill-based standards. The end result is that school efforts to build upon and bridge from the diversity of students' lived experiences are displaced by those in favour of uniformity.

Reform efforts tied to testing and standards suggest a return to a form of criterion- and referenced-based teaching and testing, where literacy learning is more akin to coaching students to march in step or unison. Such orientations to education displace goals of innovation and adaptation and access and opportunity, with set outcomes and accountability. They impose prescribed sets of skills and standards on learning and involve an ongoing monitoring of teachers and their students. Table III.7a.1 outlines the stated purposes and key elements for standards-driven assessment advocated by the U.S. National Association of School Boards of Education (NASBE). The goals of literacy in such a framework become aligned with a predetermined set of skills and tests, displacing arrays of meaningful literacy engagements such as project-based learning and the integration of reading with writing.

Table III.7a.1.

Standards-Driven Assessment Principles

National Association of School Boards of Education (NASBE) Study Group

Purpose of assessments in relation to standards

- Assessments help ensure that standards are taken seriously
- Standards and assessments guide teaching and learning
- Assessments help individual students meet standards
- Assessments help policy makers ensure that all students have access to a sound education

Elements of effective assessment systems

- An effective state assessment system is aligned with rigorous state standards
- An effective state assessment system addresses specific goals and purposes
- An effective state assessment system balances validity, reliability and efficiency
- An effective state assessment system informs instruction and has consequences
- An effective state assessment system has mechanisms to encourage schools and districts to align their instruction and evaluation with the state system
- An effective state assessment system has a clearly articulated relationship with national measures of student performance

(Source: Claycomb & Kysilko, 2000)

The consequences of such misplaced trust in literacy by regulation can be grave. Indeed, professor of literacy Kris Gutiérrez (2004), in writing about her experiences with her own son after moving to Los Angeles, offers a cautionary tale:

When my son, Scott, entered the second grade, he was a confident and fluent reader and writer. Several months after his entry to the school, I received an urgent call from his teacher requesting an immediate meeting with me. I sat nervously in his classroom trying to imagine what had prompted his urgency. I was concerned, as the school and its participants had had some difficulty adjusting to its first Latino (he is Chicano/African-American) to ever enrol in the school.

Our meeting began. Leaning forward, her voice in a whisper as if not embarrass me, the teacher shared her concern that Scott might not make it through the second grade; he didn't know phonics. I was puzzled and relieved. After all, he excelled in reading, and his literacy skills were sophisticated for his age, a fact verified by their own standardized tests. It turned out that what he didn't know how to do (or more likely didn't want to do) were the sets of repetitive phonics exercises that

he had been assigned for the past several weeks. ...I asked how she would assess my son's ability to read and, without hesitation, she replied, "Oh he's probably the best reader in the class." (pp. 101–102)

Drawing from these observations, Gutiérrez identifies a number of concerns:

What is implicated in this very brief narrative is a set of complex issues that defines schooling for so many students today.... It is an account of the consequences of narrow views of literacy and how a teacher's understanding of literacy is complicated and constrained by mandated school curriculum that was conceptualized and implemented independent of the knowledge and practices of its students. It is an account of the ways that we understand the competence across racial, ethnic and class lines. It is an account of the consequences of the ways we measure what counts as literacy, especially, if we only see it in snapshots in discrete moments in time disconnected from the laminated, multimodal reality of literacy activity. And it is an account of how parents can mediate school policy and practices.

The challenges my son faced are all too common, but they are particularly so from non-dominant groups, especially English Learners. However, unlike so many poor and immigrant parents unfamiliar with the institutions of our country, I could mediate vigilantly and persistently, the effects of discrimination and of policies gone awry. I knew that I was the school's worse nightmare: I was more than a meddling, middle-class mother; I was a meddling, middle-class, Latina mother! This is no insignificant point; however, it is a point misunderstood (or not taken up) by policy makers. (p. 102)

The teacher's behavior in Gutiérrez's description seems to fit with the lament of David Olson (2004)—that teachers are being positioned less as professionals and more as persons to implement preset programs. In other words, preset programs, either explicitly or implicitly, define (or dictate) what counts for teachers and, in turn, for students. In terms of what counts for students, many scholars have noted how standardized and regulated approaches result in the marginalization and displacement of the knowledge, language, and culture of students' from "non-dominant groups" (Gutiérrez, 2004). For instance, as Guttiérrez (2008) observes elsewhere in her paper, *Developing a Sociocritical Literacy in the Third Space*, standardized and scripted literacy frameworks—what she describes as ““marketplace reforms’... that bring the business principles of efficiency, accountability, quality, and choice to establish the

education agenda” (p. 148)—deepen divides between home/school, exclude students from exploring more critical perspectives, and fail to provide students with opportunities to collectively and critically design new social futures. She goes on to note how “such reforms employ the ‘sameness as fairness’ principle, making it easier to roll back small gains in educational equity and implement the ‘color blind’ practices of English-only, one-size-fits-all curricula and policies and practices driven by high-stakes assessment” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 148; see also Crosland, 2004; Gutiérrez & Jaramillo, 2006).

Recently critical race and scholars working through settler colonial frameworks have similarly described the inherent and entrenched forms of inequality perpetuated through literacy standards and assessments. For example, building on Au’s (2009) argument that standardized tests are “mechanism[s] for the (re)production of socioeconomic and educational inequality” (Au, 2009, p. 140), Eve Tuck and Julie Gorlewski (2016) argue that “standardized examinations have a long, well-documented history of justifying and reproducing discrimination. Although cloaked in the guise of objectivity and swathed in the myth of meritocracy, high-stakes assessments are forms of racist ordering” (p. 201). By “re-instantiat[ing] fictions associated with race and achievement” (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016, p. 207), rigid and regulated approaches to literacy disproportionately displace certain students over others.

Arguably, the notion of a one-size-fits-all test or set of teaching materials may befit a model of literacy that discounts diversity and community-based, student-centered approaches that meaningfully connect with students’ lives. Indeed, this regulated reader approach runs counter to findings by selected colleagues’ observations of successful school programs. For example, in his book *Possible Lives*, Mike Rose (1995) suggests that meaningful teaching and instruction, as a dynamic, ongoing, and contingent process, cannot be standardized:

As one teaches, one’s knowledge plays out in social space, and this is one of the things that make teaching such a complex activity. As studies of teaching cognition have shown, and as we saw in the classrooms that we visited, teaching well means knowing one’s students well and being able to read them quickly and, in turn, making decisions to slow down or speed up, to stay with a point or return to it later, to underscore certain connections, to use or forgo a particular illustration. This decision-making operates as much by feel as by reason; it involves hunch, intuition, at best, quick guess.

There is another dimension of the ability to make judgments about instruction. The teachers we observed operate with knowledge of individual student’s lives, of

local history and economy, and of social-cultural traditions and practices. They gain this knowledge in any number of ways: living in the communities in which they work; getting involved in local institutions and projects; drawing on personal and cultural histories that resemble the histories of the children they teach; educating themselves about the communities and cultures of the students before them; connecting with parents and involving parents in schooling; seeing students as resources and learning from them.

.... This quality of reflective experimentation, of trying new things, of tinkering and adjusting, sometimes with uneven results, sometimes failing, was part of the history of many of the classrooms in *Possible Lives*. (p. 419; 421)

Rather than education involving a cycle of testing, teaching, and inspection tied to external forces (a model of the regulated reader that pursues pre-set targets), reading and writing might be enlivened by a flow that connects to the students' worlds—their lived experiences, local ways of knowing, diverse literacies and interests.

In this age of reform, standards and testing have assumed more prominence. In turn, teaching practices have been realigned with testing, and reading and student learning have become increasingly regulated. We can illustrate how the orientation to preset testing often flies in the face of a diverse curriculum, teacher professionalism, and student-centered learning that is responsive to individual differences and needs. For example, tests such as Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) have become influential with their increased use throughout the U.S. DIBELS was developed to screen, monitor, and assess outcomes of the elements extrapolated from the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) report. The test developers suggest that DIBELS can be used as a means of screening students to identify those who are at risk, to monitor progress in selected areas for instructional emphasis, and to measure the outcome of students' progress as readers. In so doing, DIBELS links the means with the ends—in particular, by suggesting that it can be administered to repeatedly assess student literacy development while serving as a measure of outcomes. By using DIBELS to screen students, monitor students' progress and measure students' outcomes, DIBELS fails to separate outcomes from the means of achieving them; consequently, what DIBELS measures and what teachers teach become one and the same.

A number of problems can occur as a result. The DIBELS tests and other accountability measures define what is taught and the outcomes that are measured so that progress may *not* be much more than what was tested and taught. In other words, although

students may be performing better on tests (i.e., tests that assess phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension/ retelling), they may not be progressing in terms of larger goals for literacy (e.g., developing expanded uses of various literacies to serve a range of purposes (Pearson, 2006; Goodman, 2006; Tierney & Thome, 2006) .

In turn the mode of responding to externally prescribed reform mandates, teachers assume more the role of a technician than a professional. Gerry Duffy (1990), in his presidential address to the National Reading Conference, suggested: “Empowering teachers means creating the conditions in which teachers can make up their own minds, do their best work, and define their own context.” Quoting teacher colleague Bruce Burke, Duffy (1990) then asked: “Do we do this? Do we invest in the minds of teachers? Do we help them make up their own minds, do their own best work, define their own context? Or do we invest in our theories, programs, and procedures in the expectation that teachers will compliantly follow” (p.15)? McNeil’s report (2000) on Houston’s reform efforts in part provides an answer:

They tried to teacher-proof the curriculum with a checklist for teaching behaviors and the student minimum competency skills tests. By so doing, they have made schools exceedingly comfortable for mediocre teachers who like to teach routine lessons according to a standard sequence and format, who like working as de-skilled laborers not having to think about their work. They made being a Texas public school teacher extremely uncomfortable for those who know their subjects well, who teach in ways that engage their students, who want their teaching to reflect their own continued learning. (p.187)

With these shifts, too often the tests become the program. And what counts as literacy falls much along the lines of what Campbell’s (1976) law suggests:

The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.” (p. 46)

This should not come as any surprise, as it has happened repeatedly in cases where high stakes assessment is enlisted in schools. In past studies of the impact of testing upon teaching, George Madaus (1988; 2001), David Berliner (Nichols & Berliner, 2007) and others suggest that such testing contributes to a form of teaching to the test, whereby the curriculum begins to emulate the test and reading is regulated (in a fashion that may be quite restrictive) to

enhance performance. Forms of monitoring, such as RTI (Response to Intervention) and Value-Added Measures, only seem to perpetuate this alignment with testing, maintaining preset regimens of instruction (teaching to the test) aimed at regulating student learning rather than engaging in a diverse array of learning possibilities.

While the “one-size-fits-all” approach to reading may advance an impression of assured quality control, this regulated reader framework is in danger of displacing education that connects and is relevant to what students know and do in their everyday life. It has the potential to preserve forms of literacy that are out of step with the dynamic networking and transactions that students enlist everyday as they interact with others, including family, friends and other resource personnel. Furthermore, the pursuit of a regulated reader model does not capitalize upon the natural dynamics of engagements within and across individuals and communities in the digital age, where readers measure their success in terms such as relevance. The pursuit of “culturally free” curriculum and assessment seems flawed. In lieu of “culture free” standardized testing and curricula, it would seem preferable to aspire for experiences with literacy that are diverse and involve culturally relevant meaning making rather than rigidly-imposed, static sets of guidelines for thinking and communicating. Indeed, the notion of a “relevant reader” would seem to better fit with the engagements and exchanges offered in a digital, multifaceted, and diverse world.

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