

Using Standards and High-Stakes Testing for Students

EXPLOITING POWER WITH CRITICAL PEDAGOGY



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1. Introduction

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Students and teachers in the United States today, at all education levels, face a range of challenges associated with neoliberal capitalism. The social landscape is characterized by increasing disparities in income, corporate control over knowledge production, a waning political commitment to meeting the needs of citizens, and escalated accountability pressures for our students to perform as well as their global counterparts (Carr & Porfilio, 2011; Porfilio & Malott, 2008; Saltman & Gabbard, 2011). Corporate-inspired educational initiatives have come to dominate life in classrooms. The influx of standardized tests, test-prep materials, and “accountability” pressures by corporate and professional organizations have resulted in narrowed curriculum, deprofessionalization of teachers, and educational experiences that are commodified, alienating, and exploitative of student and teacher labor.

The infiltration of corporate ideologies, practices, and policies in America’s K-12 public schools ensures that the vast majority of young people in this generation who graduate from these schools will have experienced a limited standards-based curriculum. Current reform initiatives reinforce this approach above all others. And, because nearly 90% of students in the fall 2010 school year attended public schools (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, 2011), this situation is likely to have a significant effect on the practices and philosophies of future educators. If educators do not learn about the socially constructed nature of the standards-based curriculum and explore ways to get beyond promoting indoctrinating forms of education (Kincheloe, 2007), they may be inclined to embrace dominant drill and kill pedagogies, demonize students for their lack of enthusiasm or engagement in the classroom, or drop out of the profession entirely (Toppo, 2007).

Standards, themselves, are not malevolent. Like anything socially constructed, standards manifest the values and beliefs of their developers. To meet the needs of our diverse population, standards tend to be written in general terms—broad strokes intended to address knowledge and skills that are virtually unassailable in their suitability. For example, the Common Core Standards for K–5 English Language Arts (which were, as of July 2011, adopted by 44 states), state that students should be able to: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively (Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors' Association, 2010, p. 22). Few people, regardless of educational background or political ideology, would argue about whether or not this is a worthwhile aim. Moreover, standards often represent cultural commonality: who among educators would promote principles that call for *lowering* expectations for students?

However, even well-constructed, carefully written standards become problematic when they are operationalized into high-stakes assessments (Garrison, 2009). The harmful effects of such assessments are well documented. They include:

- Narrowed curricula,
- Commodification of learning,
- Alienation of students and teachers from their own labor,
- Demoralization and deprofessionalization of educators,
- Inequitable consequences (students in schools serving poor and working-class communities suffer more harmful effects of standardization than students in schools serving middle- or upper-class communities).

As resources for public education have diminished, government control has increased, specifically in the form of common standards and high-stakes assessments. This has been tolerated by the public, at least in part, because current educational reform initiatives have been presented using rhetoric that *promotes* the very opposite of their actual consequences. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (the federal legislation that is the face of the accountability-based reform movement) claim to alleviate social and economic inequities by providing all children with educational opportunities that will foster success. Supporters of standardized reform maintain, incorrectly, that accountability measures based on high-stakes assessments will improve public schools, particularly for poor and minority students. However, decades of research reveal evidence that contradicts this assertion: students in schools serving poor and working-class communities are more likely to be harmed by high-stakes assessment-based reform (Au, 2008; Hursh, 2011, Kozol, 2005; Porfilio & Malott, 2008).

As standardization begins to permeate public education from pre-K through post-secondary teacher education programs (particularly through accreditation processes), critical educators are attempting to engage in pedagogical endeavors that incorporate the regulatory requirements without alienating or marginalizing students. The challenge, then, is to construct and implement curricula and instructional activities that *exploit* the possibilities of standards (and their corollary assessments) while simultaneously fostering critical thinking and student efficacy.

One of the aims of this book is to provide a deepened awareness of how educators can alleviate the negative effects of standardization, especially for students who populate poor and working-class communities. As teachers negotiate their roles in this new environment, it is essential for them to maintain and model a critical stance toward curriculum and instruction. Educators must explicitly seek to provide transformative experiences within the constraints of high-stakes accountability measures. In the chapters that follow, critical schoolteachers, teacher educators, and scholars provide concrete examples of how to use the power embedded in standards and assessments to meet the goals of critical pedagogy, i.e., empowerment, self-efficacy, and social justice.

In addition, the editors of the volume believe it is imperative for educators to engage continually in critical scholarship and pedagogical initiatives to uncover the often hidden forces that give rise to developments inside and outside of their learning communities. This reflective process is necessary to generate dissent-oriented projects that are capable of remaking the world on the ideas of love, justice, freedom, and equity—instead of reproducing the dominant values and relationships associated with the nearly 40-year neoliberal experiment. Several contributors engage in historical analysis, tap theoretical insights, and generate empirical research in order to guide educators and their students in understanding the socially constructed nature of the accountability and standardization movement.

Content and organization of this book

In addition to this introductory chapter, the book consists of four main sections and 15 chapters. The first section, *Standards, Schools, and Society*, provides a deeper understanding of the social, economic, and political forces behind why the standards and accountability movement is supported by the two major parties in the U.S., many schoolteachers and teacher educators, and many U.S. citizens. The second section, *De-standardizing Teachers and Learning*, offers insights as to how educators can hijack dominant discourses and practices aligned with the standards and accountability movement in order to promote critical forms of pedagogy and curricula within K-12 schools.

The third section, *Leveraging Standards in Secondary Classrooms*, documents how critical educators act strategically to employ instructional strategies, develop positive relationships with students, and generate transformative experiences, while concomitantly ensuring that students perform well on high-stakes examinations. The final section, *Teacher Education: Modeling Critical Approaches*, highlights how critical educators are able to exploit corporate mandates (such as the teacher education accreditation process) to model emancipatory forms of teaching and learning, to institutionalize standards, policies, and programs linked to promoting a critical agenda, and to prepare students to understand the social nature of the standards and accountability movement invading all levels of education.

Standards, schools, and society

In the first chapter of this section, “Academic Labor as Alienated Labor: Resisting Standardized Testing,” Joshua Garrison provides a theoretical rationale for why the standards movement must be resisted by educators, students, and concerned citizens. Specifically, he draws upon the work of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Rancière to argue that “standardized tests constitute a form of alienation that breaks students’ intellectual will and forces upon them a regimen of compulsory labor” (p. 13). He also follows Chantal Mouffe, by arguing that “student opposition to those tests is a legitimate, and necessary, form of democratic expression” (p. 13). He concludes the chapter by illustrating how student organization and activism have the power to dismantle the bipartisan support in the U.S. for “a system of assessment mechanisms that alienates students, deadens their intellectual will, and forces upon them work responsibilities that should be undertaken by professionals in social, economic, and political sectors” (p. 24).

In the second chapter of this section, “Teachers as Professionals: Owning Instructional Means and Negotiating Curricular Ends,” Ted Purinton suggests that the accountability and standardization movement is narrowing the ability of progressive educators and scholars to implement subversive policies, practices, and pedagogies at all levels of education. Specifically, the author links the New Public Management (NPM) approaches to schooling, which were generated during the 1980s by neoliberal politicians and business leaders, to the forces behind progressive philosophies being unwelcomed in most educational contexts. Next, Purinton demonstrates how numerous professionals, such as educators, have witnessed an incredible erosion of their occupational powers as “neoliberal tendencies have encouraged the centralization of rewards to managers as opposed to the dispersion of rewards to a wider professional base” (p. 29). To gain power in this debilitating context, Purinton suggests that educators focus their energies on controlling the means (methods of

instruction) of their work, instead of fighting a losing battle with trying to contest the ends (curriculum and exams) supported by politicians, business leaders, and many citizens. He concludes the chapter by proposing steps that need to be taken in order to stimulate movement toward a professionalized educational system that permits and encourages progressive instructional methods.

In the next chapter of this section, “Speaking Empowerment to Crisis: Unmasking Accountability through Critical Discourse,” P. L. Thomas illustrates how the standards and accountability movement, which has come to dominate educational institutions at all levels, reinforces the power of corporate and political elite at the expense of educators and their students. Thomas begins the chapter by arguing that the political and corporate elite have historically concocted the false trope that schools are in crisis in order to control the education agenda. More important, the crisis trope has also blocked “critical calls for critique and reform of public schools” (p. 47) from larger public conversations. Next, the author documents how the elite have shifted their tactics for controlling life in schools. Over of the past decade, they have controlled mainstream media outlets to generate a “consistent (but false) narrative about failed schools, bad teachers, corrupt teachers’ unions, and the need for U.S. schools to make the country competitive internationally” (p. 49). As a result, a group of corporate education saviors, such as Duncan, Gates, Canada, and Rhee, are considered experts who have lulled many citizens into believing, incorrectly, that schools will be improved by implementing standards and accountability measures, rather than by eliminating unjust social forces and inequalities. The author concludes his chapter by not only pointing to numerous problems associated with using standards but also by capturing how critical educators must collectively raise their opposition to “the false prophets now dominating the debate over reform” (p. 58).

In the final chapter of this section, “Teaching *through* the Test: Building Life-Changing Academic Achievement and Critical Capacity,” Victor H. Diaz posits that progressive educators can “teach through the test” in order to enact a curriculum and pedagogy that fosters students’ critical consciousness and encourages their participation in a democratic society, in spite of the unjust pressures, sanctions, and alienation fueled by standards and accountability measures. As a teacher educator in Phoenix, Arizona, for the past four years, the author explains how he has mentored middle and high school English/Language Arts teachers to create units of instruction that have the power to spark students and teachers’ critical consciousness. The author acknowledges that his approach is not a magic bullet; rather, he reveals the “complexity of the tensions between critical pedagogy and increasingly stringent accountability measures placed on teachers and students” (p. 68). He concludes the chapter by providing a clear path for educators to promote critical pedagogy amid standards and accountability measures. He states: