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Is it the tool or the carpenter that uses it?

Why would we read this book?

Alfie Kohn's book *The Case Against Standardized Testing* examines the impact of a trend that has been in education since industry first exercised its influence, testing. Standardized testing has come to the forefront of issues in American education. Scores on high stakes tests have real consequences for schools because of state and government regulations. In many instances scores dictate funding, curriculum, and the perception of teacher's ability. Politicians use the data, particularly the numbers, from standardized tests to manipulate voters' perceptions of schooling to their advantage.

In this book many questions are asked and answered. The author states that the message of his book is to make schools better and that requires rethinking standardized testing itself. (Kohn, 2000)

What is the reasoning behind standardized testing?

The text suggests that the aim of standardized testing is "to cast public schools in the worst possible light." (Kohn, 2000) Many groups use low test scores to their advantage. Politicians use them to call for teacher accountability, curriculum manufacturers to sell prescribed instruction materials, the government to disperse funding and grants, and probably the most questionable of all, to sell more tests. Unlike abstract concepts, most people understand numbers, test scores, and that the higher the number, except in golf, the better.

In one of his more forgiving statements, the author suggests that not everyone has ulterior motives for standardized testing; they just don't know any other way to achieve the goal of accountability. (Kohn, 2000)

But the numbers make so much sense!?! Higher test scores would mean more intelligent students right?

They do until you look below the surface. Aside from test biases such as race and geographic relevance, standardized tests, even the most objective,

don't often reflect the real world intelligence they are supposed to. (Kohn, 2000) Standardized tests are limited in their insight into the thought process of the test taker. For example, a student solving a problem figures out the answer and fills in a bubble. The test correcting machine sees a filled in circle representing an answer whether correct or incorrect, the machine does not know how the student arrived at the answer. Did they guess? Copy off a neighbor? Understand the concept but make a simple arithmetic mistake? The book argues that in real life there is more than one solution to a problem, that brainstorming, teamwork, and logic are important factors that are not reflected by a standardized multiple choice test.

What about written tests?

The book suggests that the scorers are paid for scoring the written portions of standardized tests on a per test basis. One account is provided about a scorer who claims it was common to score tests without reading them, and after 8,000 papers a \$200 dollar bonus was issued. (Kohn 2000) While this is a great idea to motivate workers to correct tests, it's not a particularly effective way to ensure that the tests are being corrected accurately.

Regardless of how individual students get the answer, why do whole schools score different than other schools?

The types of scores on standardized tests that are generally reported to the public are those from norm referenced tests (NRT), not criterion referenced tests (CRT). CRT's are tests which compare each individual to a standard, NRT's compare students to other students, schools to other schools, districts to other districts, and so on usually with a percentile ranking.

NRT's can tell where your school scored in comparison to another school. But that won't tell you how well your school or the other school did. For example, your school might score higher than another school in vocabulary, but that other school might have scored so low that both schools are not meeting standards. Imagine that the next year the same two schools scores have risen and flip-flopped rankings. The bad news is that both schools can still be below

expectation, but the lower scoring school is now higher scoring than the initially higher scoring school. The author suggests that this draws focus away from achieving standards expectations and onto inter-school competitiveness. (Kohn 2000)

Isn't competitiveness a good thing when we're talking about learning?

Yes, but what are we learning. We've already established that standardized tests are not testing content. Ask a teacher what their administration expects; countless hours of test preparation is probably what they'll answer. This is when the book claims that poverty rears its ugly head. It asks who can afford better test preparation? Those communities with higher socio-economic status score higher than other schools. (Kohn 2000) In addition to test prep materials, lower socio-economic status communities have a host of more common problems that affect school daily than their higher socio-economic status counterparts, think of the Free and Reduced Meal programs, larger class sizes, lack of technology, and so and so forth.

Funding doesn't grow on trees and the government mandates these tests so what do we do?

The author provides a number of solutions to this problem, some more high risk than others. As a parent, the author provides a template which could serve as a letter to the school board expressing concerns with hollow test preparations and a desire to see more student time engaged in quality learning. Also, the book claims that some states have an "opt-out" clause that allows parents to exempt their children from testing just by notifying the authorities. Amongst other ideas are printing up "provocative" bumper stickers, challenging politicians, and filing lawsuits. And finishing out the list, the author calls for teachers organizing and boycotting or demonstrating against the tests, opt-out option or not. (Kohn 2000)

As a teacher, what will I do if I get fired?

The book doesn't address that situation, only that it's a possibility. While I don't argue that it's not a noble cause, feeding your children and paying for your mortgage are also fairly noble causes.

So it's all or nothing?

The book does offer very briefly two considerations that are together, what I believe is the more realistic key to success in the standardized testing dominated world of education. "The first consideration to be kept in mind with respect to test preparation is to do no more than necessary. The second consideration regarding test preparation is the obligation to make it as creative and worthwhile as possible." The book uses a 40 week school cycle as an example. There were no differences between students who prepped for the test over the entire 40 weeks, and those that learned as they would've for 37 weeks and prepped for 3 weeks. (Kohn, 2000) This suggests that the combination of good teachers and curriculum can and will be able to teach the skill of test taking to students in a reasonable amount of time.

But I thought you agreed with the author?

I agree with the author to the extent of the real world application as far as content is concerned. On the other hand, I would argue that standardized tests measure something else beside the content they are designed to measure that is valuable in the real world. That is the ability to do what has become referred to as "jumping through hoops." Yes, in the real world you have to do things for job that are not necessarily worthwhile. Just ask the majority of beginning teachers that have completed the BEST program. Most would argue that it didn't test how well they taught, but instead how well they wrote up their lessons and reflections on a video that in many instances was not reality. But if you don't complete the BEST program, which is under renovation again, you don't teach here in Connecticut. Real Estate Agents, receptionists, bank tellers, book editors, and, I'm sure, a number of other professions that I don't have friends working in take standardized tests to at least certify. So in this light, I

see standardized tests in schools as very true to life representation of real world preparation.

So you are onboard with standardized testing all the time?

It is in that question the real problem behind standardized testing becomes apparent. It and, I might be so bold as to say, no other, single test or assessment method should be the entire representation of any student's learning. It is through a carefully chosen combination of assessments, observations, and standardized tests that we can accurately monitor student learning and assess our own teaching.

How do you use standardized testing?

Even though I teach kindergarten and preschool, which the book suggests should be far from the reach of standardized testing, we use the School Readiness Test (SRT) which is a norm referenced test every year. The test is only one part of the picture of the students going to first grade. But it serves as an assessment for two things that are not part of the students NRT score. As teachers, we monitor how well the students can sustain focus for an extended period of time and their test taking anxiety during the administration of the SRT. My first year of teaching the SRT administration was a nightmare full of stressed students and all that follows. Since then, I have introduced little spelling and math tests throughout the year that the students achieve success on by "trying their best". To illustrate the extent to which I mean that, some of our words, which they don't hear until the spelling tests, are "hexagon" and "amphibian." These are hardly words that a kindergartener will spell correctly but can give some fantastic insight into their emerging literacy skills. Now, the instances of test anxiety during the SRT are almost nonexistent and their scores are more representative of what they demonstrate on a daily basis. The first grade teachers have remarked that my students actually get excited about tests more often than kindergarteners from other classes.

Another set of standardized assessments that I find very useful are two that measure numeral and letter recognition. Quite simply, the child "reads"

though an array of randomly ordered letters (upper and lowercase separate) or numerals from 0-20. From these assessments I can get a glimpse (Not the whole picture!) of how many, and more importantly what, letters and numerals the students recognize. From this information, which I gather in September when they arrive, November, March, and June, I can see where to focus my recognition instruction both with regards to specific letters and numerals and which students need more direct instruction in relation to their peers.

How would you sum up your position on standardized testing?

I guess as dangerously as I would gun control. I think that standardized tests and firearms are very similar. Both are inanimate objects that are not fully understood or appreciated by the people who defend or attack them. Both are represented through numbers that are manipulated to represent the agendas of politicians, money making corporations, and those who are employed by the companies that manufacture the firearms and standardized tests, as well as the antagonists who seek to end the distribution of firearms and standardized tests. There are instances when both standardized tests and firearms are employed for the most noble of causes, and conversely, there are those instances where their use is morally reprehensible. Without the motivation and intent of an individual though, firearms and standardized tests would be no more than clouds floating through the sky. When it rains, we can put on our slickers and galoshes and walk through the foliage the rain sustains looking for a rainbow, or we can sit inside and sulk about another rainy day ruining our lives and how we need to move to the desert (where we will most likely find other things to complain about). I choose the former of the two ways to go about standardized testing, because even a rainy day at the beach is better than a sunny day inside. I appreciate standardized testing for what it is, an inanimate object that can be used for a number of things.

Kohn, A. (2000) The case against standardized testing: Raising the scores, ruining the schools. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.