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Education 270

10/11/14

Standardized Testing

   No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is an Act of Congress to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind in their education (4). This act is more or less a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which emphasized equal opportunities and access to education and included the government's flagship aid program for disadvantage students of primary and secondary education.  Title I, a provision of the ESEA and the NCLB, is a program created by the United States Department of Education to fund and give priority to low-achieving schools and school districts that are in need of funding to improve their education standards. These standards are measured through students’ performances on test scores, but what does it really mean to measure educational success through tests? What about when it comes to test scores among different individuals from different identity groups? Standardized tests are not equipped to rate a person’s overall academic potential because they contain inherent structural flaws in their implementation, lack consideration for their subject’s individual educational experience and negatively impact the very schools and students they should be helping.

      The NCLB requires states to set high standards and establish measurable goals that can improve an individual's access in education. Such standards and goals revolve around the requirement of all public schools to receive federal funding to administer a state-wide standardized test annually to all students, in which students take the same test under the same conditions. These annual standardized tests are the means used to determine whether schools fulfill their required standards of improvement. If required improvements are not met, the schools face decreased funding and other consequences that contribute to increased accountability. This kind of discipline may help schools realize the significance of the educational system as a while, but this concept of increased accountability does not contribute to the improvement of each student’s education or one's access to education.

      In the educational system, tests scores have become the central tool that schools use to make decisions on curriculum, decisions, and practices. The state of Pennsylvania has even proposed binding teacher's salaries to test scores. This means that if a district's students perform poorly on standardized tests, the district’s budget and teachers’ salaries will be cut. How would the reduction of an underachieving school’s financial assets and its teacher’s salaries help academic improvement? There is clearly something wrong with this approach. A school’s funding has a direct impact on its ability to provide its students with a good education. Schools need funding to afford quality teachers for students, up to date classroom technology and a myriad of diverse after school programs that enrich the overall quality of a student’s personal education. With this reduction of funding many of these examples become subpar. How can we expect students to improve if we deny them access to these basic necessities? Unless if schools can lower their achievement goals and standards, there will be no signs of improvement and the achievement gap for disadvantaged and disabled students is only going to get wider.

      Over the years, test scores in reading and math have shown to improve according to the data released by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2005 with America's nine-year-olds earning the best scores in reading (since 1971) and math (since 1973) in the history of the report and America's 13-year-olds earning the highest math scores the test ever recorded (3). These statistics, however, held no statistical significance because the increase in score between 2000 and 2003 was around the same as the increase between 2003 and 2005. The statistics raises the question of whether or not improvement is actually being made. Standardized tests have also been evolving over time in terms of difficulty. Because states can produce its own standardized tests, makers of the standardized tests have been blamed for making tests easier so that schools can easily improve by lowering its standard. If so, how can students be compared to other students of the same grade level on an intelligence/ skill scale on a national level?

      On a more positive note, the NCLB increases the quality of education by requiring school to improve their student performance and improves the quality of academic in terms of requiring schools to implement scientifically based researched practices in the classroom with reading, language, math and science as core subjects, and activities centered on character and professional development. While this may be true, NCLB pressures school to require all students meet the minimum skill required in reading, writing, and arithmetic. How is every child expected to perform and test well on standardized tests if they're all different from one another? Everyone's scales are different in terms of where they are at intelligently, academically, cognitively, socially, etc. Not every child is going to perform at the proficient level or at least perform on an average scale. Some students are simply unable to perform at the level for their age, no matter how good of an education they are getting.

      Students who have learning disabilities are required to take the same tests as those who do not, but they also receive certain accommodations. These students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or individual curriculum which allows them to extend test time period, testing in a different room, translation of tests into native language, etc (5). While these accommodations are met, they do not change the nature of the assessment and how their scores are counted. Students with learning disabilities are required to learn the same material and are expected to perform as good as non-disabled students. This really affects one's access to education because as mentioned earlier, everyone is at a different level intelligently, cognitively, etc. Schools should take this into consideration and do what it takes to ensure that everyone really gets equal treatment even if it means coming up with a system to measure these kind of scores for different groups of individuals. How should standardized tests be really measured among different groups of identities?

      The NCLB focuses way too much time on standardized testing and not enough on individual students. This conflicts with provisions of equitable services from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which suggests that students be taught and tested according to ability (6).  For example, under NCLB, a disabled eighth grader working at a sixth grade level must take examinations for eight graders. Another example includes those ESL learners belonging in major racial and ethnic groups be required to take the same English-language assessment as students whose native language is English. It is unrealistic that the NCLB requires that 90% of students with disabilities and minority students or non-native English speakers achieve grade level proficiency. Students in these groups generally perform below grade level because of the lack in skills and knowledge.

      The NCLB  is built on top a "one-size-fits-all method" that measures how one performs. There should be more of an individualized method or a case-to-case method for a more accurate measuring of individual growth and improvement rather than group growth and improvement because everyone is built different biologically. Let’s take for example, the case of Joseph Harris.  Harris struggled through his freshman year at the Hotchkiss School in Litchfield Country. He spent two-three hours on assignments that should have taken no more than 30 minutes to complete because he is dyslexic (1). Dyslexia is a learning disorders that involve difficulty in learning to read or interpret words, letters, and symbols. This disorder, however, does not affect one's intelligence but rather slows one down in academically in a fast-paced learning environment. Dr. Sally Shaywitz, co-director of the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, states that dyslexia is more than just a condition in which people have trouble reading (2). Instead, it is a "reading difficulty that is unexpected given a person's level of intelligence and education" that affects 1 in 5 students and more than 10 million children nationwide. Controversy, others like Harry Belafonte Jr, singer, believe that dyslexia should not be viewed as a disorder while dyslexia advocates wants more accommodations when it comes to standardized tests such as extra time.

       A dyslexic individual, Will Powers who took the extended time option to take his SAT test, He stressed to me how he had 8 hours to take the test, but he still did poorly on it because he was not understanding the material cognitively. He was upset that his score was measured the same way as his peers who have no learning disabilities. According to Shaywitz, dyslexic students are often frustrated or confused as to why certain assignments take them longer to complete than their peers and it is often devastating that one has to be the first to realize that he or she cannot do what those around him or her are doing.

      An epidemiologic longitudinal research study conducted on a large sample population of Connecticut students by Shaywitz suggests that IQ and reading diverge (2). This means that a highly intelligent dyslexic student can have a low reading score. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) was used to record images of dyslexic and typical children and adolescent. The images showed differences in brain regions responsible for articulation and word analysis and ultimately, dyslexic individuals are wired biologically to read slowly, something beyond their control. How can standardized tests judge different individual’s performance on the same scale?

        While not without any merit, NCLB and the culture of standardized testing it espoused needed several changes to be truly effective in the educational playing field. Student performance should be measured according to ability rather than grade level. The act should also take in consideration of the differences among rural, suburban and urban schools in term of the kinds of access they have in education.  Schools need a more sophisticated and reliable and accurate system that measures student growth. NCLB needs to recognize different challenges in different individuals from disabled students to English Second Language students.

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