

What's Wrong With Education Today?

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

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**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

April 2014

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2014

Abstract

Many would suggest that today's education system is in a state of peril, yet many people still choose to enter the profession regardless of warnings from a variety of sources. I conducted a study to determine what is actually wrong with education, from the viewpoint of various stakeholders in education. Through the results gathered from my survey, I was able to determine two root causes of the degradation of American education: government involvement and standardized testing. I discuss the background of these issues and the implications they have on education. I close with a brief sentiment, suggesting one step to take in redefining education for the future.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Eva Zygmunt for her continued support, encouragement, guidance and friendship throughout my college career. Her willingness and dedication to help me realize the layers of who I am as an educator and as an individual astound me.

Also, thank you to those who participated in my study. Your input has been invaluable to developing my research and influencing my personal beliefs about education today.

Lastly, thank you to my family who instilled in me the value of a strong work ethic. Without it, I would not be where I am today.

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Introduction	4
Methodology	6
Results	9
Discussion	11
Conclusion	22
Works Cited	24

Introduction

I decided in high school that pursuing a degree in education would be the best route for me. I enjoy working with children, I have a passion for making a positive impact on the lives of others, and I had been one of the lucky ones, who had received an exceptional education from a cohort of dedicated, high quality teachers. They made me believe that teachers were some of the best people on earth, and I wanted to be one of them someday.

As I paraded around telling others of my proud decision to become a teacher I was unexpectedly stopped in my tracks and told that I should reconsider. I didn't understand why people would look down on such an honorable career choice. What was more startling than all the negativity, though, was the fact that the majority of the people, who had such strong opinions, played no active role in the education system. As a result, I brushed off their comments and made my way to college to get my degree in elementary education.

Throughout my college career I found myself surrounded by people who supported my decision to become an educator. I was told daily about the joys, triumphs, and thrills that would become my daily experience as a teacher. I was also warned of the disappointment, struggles, and heartache that would make me question my dedication to the career. Through all of this, I was still sure that I had made the right choice, yet I still had the voices of those who challenged my decision in my head. I still couldn't figure out why so many people had so little

confidence in today's education system. Then I walked in a classroom, this time as a teacher.

The room was full of color and environmental print. The desks were arranged in small groups, with a focus towards the front board where the classroom teacher had written the daily objectives and a warm-up problem that students were to complete upon entering the classroom. An agenda was posted on the sideboard along with the homework assignment and important upcoming dates. The teacher's desk was strategically placed in the back of the classroom, next to a small group table and a row of computers. Everything looked perfect without students filling the seats.

Then the students filed in and it became a new world. There was something going on in every direction- students struggling to get their materials out, students having conversations about a girl they dislike from their bus route, students breaking and re-sharpening their pencils, students beginning to work on their warm-up, and students entering the beginning stages of daydreaming.

After only a few minutes the teacher gained control of the classroom and proceeded to go through the mind-numbing task of discussing how the day's warm-up was important because it is very similar to what they would see later in the year on the state test. If that wasn't enough to make a good portion of the students mentally check out, the rest of the lesson was sure to. It became apparent that there was a striking similarity between the work students were

being asked to complete and the state tests that few can forget after experiencing them for years as a child.

After one semester of this district-required monotony, I finally started realizing what the warnings I had received years ago were about. What I was experiencing was not what I envisioned my life as a teacher would be like. I had hoped to engage my students in hands-on learning activities that would not only develop their understanding of the necessary content, but that would also instill in them a love of learning. Instead, I was responsible for administering a myriad of practice tests and assessments over material that I had barely even found time to teach. I started wondering how it was possible that this way of 'educating' had become the norm. This led to my question, what is wrong with education today?

Methodology

In order to find the answer to this burning question, I decided it was necessary to seek answers from those same people who warned me of the profession I chose; that is, to gather opinions from a variety of people who consider themselves stakeholders in education. This would include students, teachers, parents, administrators, community members, college students, pre-service teachers, academic figures, and political figures.

The study I conducted was a computer-based survey, named "Education Today", containing ten questions, seven of which were open ended. The question

sequence was designed in a manner that would produce least biased answers to the most vital questions of the survey. The first three questions were as follows:

1. What role do you most closely identify with?
2. Do you think there are any problems with the American educational system?
3. What is the biggest problem in education today?

Placing these questions first allowed the respondents to identify themselves, make a general claim about education, and then support their claim without the influence of any suggested problems in education.

The fourth question of the survey was designed to offer a wide range of possible problems in today's educational system. The respondents were asked, 'To what degree do you consider each aspect of education a problem?' to which the respondents would choose between four options ranging from 'Not an issue at all' to 'A major issue'. The list of educational aspects came from personal experience and suggestions from an academic advisor. This list included the following aspects: funding, legislation, standardized testing, teacher preparation programs, student motivation, parent involvement, lack of instructional time, teacher burnout, class sizes, high curriculum expectations, high poverty rates, school zoning, teacher associations, and other.

The remainder of the questions served as an opportunity to gain further insight into respondents' perception of education. These questions were as follows:

- What causes schools to fail?
- What causes students to fail?
- What makes a good school?

- What makes a good teacher?
- What are schools already good at?
- What could make schools better?

Each of these questions were open-ended, in order to allow the respondent to reflect on their experiences with education, without the possibility of any pre-selected response bias.

Lastly, the respondents were given the opportunity to declare willingness to participate in a personal interview, if deemed necessary. After consideration of the project goals, no interviews were conducted.

After designing the online survey, the link was sent to a variety of audiences through social media outlets such as Facebook and email. Of those who the survey was originally sent to, a large majority were fellow classmates who would refer to themselves as college students, pre-service teachers, or teachers. Another primary outlet was sent through email to colleagues of an academic advisor, who would most likely refer to themselves as academic figures. A snowball sampling method was employed through which participants were encouraged to share the link with friends and family, in order to gather a wide range of people who might identify themselves in different roles.

The survey was posted for respondents to complete for one month during the period of March 20 through April 20 – 2014.

Results

After a month of gathering responses, there were a total of 60 participants. Of those participants, about 33% identified as college students, 22% as teachers, 18% as pre-service teachers, 13% as academic figures, 7% as elementary or middle school students, 3% as school administrators, and parents and community members which comprised 2% each. No responses were gathered from high school students or political figures. It is important to note that all 60 participants reside in the state of Indiana, or have a background of education within Indiana.

Although the participants of the study identified among a variety of roles, 100% of respondents stated that 'Yes' there are problems with the American educational system. When asked to openly respond to the question 'What is the biggest problem in education today?' there was a variety of responses, as to be expected from an open-ended question. Although the responses were varied, there were common threads throughout. Specifically, about 22% of responses included statements suggesting that the biggest problem is related to government involvement or policy. Additionally, an astounding 47% of respondents suggested that standardized testing and its effects on students and teachers have become the biggest problem in education.

Given that such a high percentage of respondents noted government involvement and standardized testing as the biggest problem in education, I assumed that these would also be the most commonly cited 'major issues' in the

fourth question of the survey, 'To what degree do you consider each aspect of education a problem?' When answering this question, respondents were asked to choose between four levels of severity for each aspect of education. My suspicions were correct – 85.4% of respondents believe that standardized testing is a major issue, and 62.5% suggested that legislation is a major issue. Other notable figures of major issues include funding, with 60.4%, high poverty rates, with 45.8%, and teacher burnout tied with parent involvement, both having 41.7%. The results found here conclude in a ranking of the most cited 'major issues', which is:

1. Standardized Testing
2. Legislation
3. Funding
4. High Poverty Rates
5. Teacher Burnout and Parent Involvement

After considering the results from both the open-ended question and the ranked response question, I concluded that there is a definite agreement among the majority of participants in my study that the problem with education today comes down to government involvement and standardized testing.

Although the results of questions 1 through 4 already provided a definitive direction to my study, it is important to note some of the significant trends among the results of the remaining questions. There were three questions, which provided some interesting insight into the perspectives of education today. Those include results to the following questions:

- What causes students to fail?
- What makes a good school?

- What could make schools better?

Interestingly enough, the results found in these three questions continue to relate to the overwhelming opinion that standardized testing is negatively impacting education. For example, when asked what could make schools better, about 44% conveyed the need for a decrease in standardized testing, accompanied by an increase in teacher autonomy in regard to classroom instruction. Additionally, 18% of respondents suggested that student failure is due to a lack of motivation among students and teachers. This result correlates with the expressed opinions of standardized testing because many students and teachers have reduced the school day to learning and practicing skills that will increase test scores. Lastly, when considering what makes a good school, 59% indicated that communication and collaboration among stakeholders, particularly parents and teachers, is the key to quality education. When collaboration occurs, it is more likely that the education of each student will be enhanced due to the guiding forces of those who recognize students need engaging educational experiences rather than high scores on standardized tests.

Discussion

The results from the survey speak very definitively to the question of what is wrong with education today. The conclusion that government involvement and standardized testing have had negative impacts on education aligns with the

views of many educational experts including highly esteemed leaders such as Diane Ravitch and Linda Darling-Hammond, among many others. Diane Ravitch, former secretary of education and author, stated, "Future historians will no doubt consider this era to be a time when public education was subjected to an unending series of bad policies, an era in which the quality of education was sacrificed to an unquenchable passion for testing and accountability" ("Obama Grants" 3). After realizing what the most critical problems in education are, one might wonder – how did we, as a nation, get this way?

Throughout history, there has been a push by the American government to aim higher and achieve more than other nations. The issue of mediocre performance in comparison to other countries in education is no different. As a result, many political figures have made it their mission to 'fix' education through a variety of reforms. The most notable among those reforms include President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which was signed into law in January 2002, and President Barack Obama's Race to the Top Program, which began in January of 2009.

The first major reform, which drastically changed the role of federal government in education, was No Child Left Behind. Under NCLB, schools would now be responsible for assessing each student on basic skills in grades three through eight, using a standardized testing method that would occur once each school year. Additionally, the new legislation required that 100 percent of students become proficient in both reading and math by the year 2014. According

to Ravitch, "The theory behind NCLB was that teachers and schools would try harder and see rapid test score gains if their test scores were made public" ("American Schools" 4). What happened after the implementation of No Child Left Behind was an alarming new face of education, which focused more on testing and accountability than quality curriculum and professional support.

One of the most incriminating issues with NCLB was the lack of direction in regard to what exactly students should know. This meant that each state was responsible for determining their curriculum and at what level of performance students would need to reach in order to be considered 'proficient'. As schools were being challenged to reach the unrealistic goal of 100 percent proficiency, they were finding new ways to manipulate test scores and lower standards in order to show gains in overall achievement, all in an attempt to avoid government sanctions that were outlined in the new law. Although many districts have seemingly increased their scores, federal tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, suggest otherwise, showing little to no growth in student performance, nationwide. One specific example of this was noted in Ravitch's book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, where she chronicled the story of the New York City public schools. In 2007 the district claimed "remarkable transformations" from tests administered in 2003 with increased levels of proficiency, up to 74.1%, however, the NAEP results showed that "students in New York City made no significant gains in reading or mathematics between 2003 and 2007" (*Death and Life* 88).

In general, many educational stakeholders have considered NCLB a failure. Although the overall ideas behind the legislation, such as high levels of achievement and accountability, are important to people on both sides of political realms, there is no doubt that there were numerous fundamental inadequacies in the legislation. As stated in Ravitch's book, for the first time educational reform was "not merely a devoutly desired wish, but a federal mandate, with real consequences for schools whose students did not meet it" (*Death and Life* 150). As a result of NCLB, at least half of all public schools in the nation have been stigmatized as "failing", and schools have turned into "testing factories" (Ravitch, "Obama Grants" 1).

As mentioned previously, another reform program has made its way into American education, called Race to the Top. In 2009, President Obama and new Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, launched a new plan for educational reform, which included federally funded aid to schools that agreed to follow through with a variety of requirements laid out by Duncan. Those requirements that deemed schools eligible to receive funding included agreeing to, "open more privately managed charter schools, to evaluate their teachers by student test scores, to offer bonuses to teachers if their students got higher test scores, and to fire the staff and close schools that didn't make progress" (Ravitch, "American Schools" 5). Although Obama and Duncan suggested that teachers should no longer 'teach to the test', they had actually created a system which encouraged such practices even more than the NCLB legislation did.

In addition to the basic requirements set forth to receive more funding, President Obama also endorsed merit pay, which incentivized teachers to put an even greater emphasis on standardized tests. What is more troubling about this situation are the implications of the suggested merit pay. If teachers are evaluated on student scores, few will voluntarily work with students who have disabilities, who are English language learners, or who reside in areas with high poverty rates. As stated by Ravitch, "Those who teach children with the greatest needs are likeliest to get a bad evaluation and eventually fired. This will add to the already high level of teacher turnover in the neediest districts" ("Obama Grants" 3).

Aside from the very obvious issues with the Race to the Top program, there seems to be a variety of inconsistencies within the views of the politicians leading the reform. In his State of the Union speech, president Obama suggested that the waivers to NCLB created by his program "were necessary because the law was 'driving the wrong behaviors, from teaching to the test to federally determined, one-size-fits-all interventions" (Ravitch, "Obama Grants" 2). He also recommended that teachers adopt a way of teaching with "creativity and passion" (Ravitch, "Obama Grants" 3). What he failed to recognize, was that the Race to the Top program directly contradicts his idea of what teaching should be and instead encourages the behaviors that he wants to abolish in education. In addition to President Obama's conflicting statements, is a seemingly promising statement made by Arne Duncan in an "open letter" to teachers. In this letter he

stated that teachers should not be blamed for “broken families, unsafe communities, misguided reforms, and underfunded school systems” (Ravitch, “Teachers Furious” 3). The trouble with that statement is that, as pointed out by a teacher-blogger named Ken Bernstein, “nothing in the Obama administration’s policies address those critical issues” (Ravitch, “Teachers Furious” 3). Instead, teachers are being evaluated on test scores, in spite of the factors for which Duncan recognized teachers should not be held responsible for.

With the most recent reforms that have been passed down by legislators, the nation has undoubtedly seen a massive increase in use and emphasis on standardized testing. Although standardized testing has developed an intensely negative connotation, the use of testing is not entirely bad. Sir Ken Robinson, creativity expert and educational advocate, stated, “Standardized tests have a place. But they should not be the dominant culture of education. They should be diagnostic. They should help” (Robinson). Similarly, Columbia University Teachers College professor Madhabi Chatterji suggested, “Sound educational testing and assessment are integral to good teaching and learning in classrooms and necessary for evaluating school performance and assuring quality in education” (1). I would suggest that, in general, Americans understand that testing can be useful and beneficial when making decisions pertaining to the education of all students. So if we understand this, what is the problem?

There is no easy answer to this question, primarily because the problem has become so large and seemingly untouchable due to the expansive negative

effects across the nation's education system. However, three of the most detrimental aspects of standardized testing may include: the inability of results to help teachers make decisions based on continued diagnostics, the wide overuse of test results, particularly to evaluate schools and educators, and the changes in pedagogical approaches to educating students.

Firstly, we must consider the purpose of conducting standardized tests, which is to gather diagnostic information in order to produce more effective teaching. Currently, standardized tests are administered during the spring semester of each school year, typically towards the end of the year. The results of the test are shared with teachers during the summer months, as they prepare for an entirely new group of students. The problem with this practice of testing is that teachers are not actually benefitting from the information they receive, as the students who performed poorly on a topic are no longer within reach of the teacher. Education reformer Geoffrey Canada spoke on this issue saying:

"The results have great data. They'll tell you Raheem really struggled, couldn't do two-digit multiplication -- so great data, but you're getting it back after school is over. And so, what do you do? You go on vacation. You come back from vacation. Now you've got all this test data from last year. You don't look at it. Why would you look at it? You're going to go and teach this year. So how much money did we just spend on all of that? Billions and billions of dollars for data that it's too late to use. I need that data in September. I need that data in November. I need to know you're

struggling, and I need to know whether or not what I did corrected that. I need to know that this week. I don't need to know that at the end of the year when it's too late" (Canada).

When we realize that is the reality of the tool that is supposed to help teachers master the skills of their profession, we must ask ourselves – Why do we continue using these same, ineffective techniques to guide instruction?

It seems that some stakeholders in education are beginning to realize the issue and are considering possible avenues to return standardized testing to a genuinely useful diagnostic tool, with fewer high stakes implications. One example of this is in Indiana, where parents and officials are discussing the use of more frequent, but shorter assessments of student learning. In an interview with The Associated Press, Indiana State Teachers Association Vice President Keith Gambill said, "[shorter tests gauging progress throughout the year] provides teachers and schools with diagnostics as they progress through the year as to where students' weaknesses are if any are falling behind" ("Indiana Mulls" 1). Member Brad Oliver added to this saying, "We're seeing a culture of a lot of schools centered on testing and focusing on compliance rather than learning. We've really got to get the culture back on learning, ability, and skills" ("Indiana Mulls" 1). With these recent discussions happening, there seems to be a small ray of hope in at least one aspect of standardized test use.

Unfortunately, the other problems associated with standardized tests still remain, with little movement towards realistic solutions. As suggested previously,

standardized tests have become an overly applied diagnostic tool. Instead of focusing on assessing student learning, they have become a tool for policymakers to assess individual teachers' skills. As mentioned in the discussion of Race to the Top, some teachers are even being subjected to the use of merit pay, which bases teacher salary off of standardized test scores. It is very interesting that standardized testing of students has led to stringent teacher evaluations, which have no research-based evidence of being successful. In fact, many researchers and testing experts have cautioned against evaluating teachers by the test scores of their students (Ravitch, "Holding Education" 3). The evaluation of teachers based on test scores, suggested Stanford University scholar Linda Darling-Hammond, "say more about which students are in the classroom than about the competence of the teacher" (Ravitch, "Holding Education" 3). The issues that arise from the use of test scores to evaluate teachers lead directly to one of the most troubling conditions of American education today, which has been commonly referred to "teaching to the test."

Although it was not intended, teaching to the test has become one of the most widely used approaches to education since the rise of high-stakes testing used in schools. Numerous groups of people have come to recognize the correlation between testing, teacher evaluations, and classroom instruction. Together, these components of today's education system have changed the way schools function. As suggested by the results of my survey, students and teachers are lacking in motivation, which is no surprise considering that teachers

are no longer encouraged to use creative and innovative approaches to educate students. In light of this, Ravitch said, "Piece by piece, our entire public education system is being redesigned in the service of increasing scores on standardized tests of basic skills. That's not good policy, and it won't improve education. Twelve years of rewarding children for picking the right answer on multiple-choice tests is bad education. It will penalize the creativity, innovativeness, and imaginativeness that has made this country great" ("American Schools" 5).

Sir Ken Robinson expounded on the issue of reduced creativity in schools, in a compelling speech through TED. In his speech, Robinson discussed the human nature in relation to education. He said there are three principles on which human life flourishes, which are: human beings are naturally different and diverse, human life flourishes through curiosity, and human life is inherently creative (Robinson). Given that these are the basic principles of the nature of human beings, it is shocking to realize that "they are contradicted by the culture of education under which most teachers have to labor and most students have to endure" (Robinson). Unfortunately, the reality of the situation is that teachers cannot afford to teach using the creative, innovative, and curiosity inducing strategies that they were encouraged to develop during their preparation programs. So much emphasis has been placed on the test results of reading and writing, that teachers are essentially forced to submit to their own fear of poor evaluations, by subduing the creative and meaningful portion of their profession.

If teachers can no longer practice creative teaching techniques that motivate students to learn, then how can they be expected to be motivated educators?

What the increased government involvement and standardized testing have come down to is an overarching issue that has infiltrated the culture of American education. A system that was once considered one of the greatest achievements of our nation has been overtaken by people who believe education can be run like a business. We have seen various examples where public education has been put in the hands of wealthy bureaucrats who push their own political and pedagogical agenda, especially from private foundations such as the Gates, Walton, and Broad foundations (Ravitch, *Death and Life* 200). Although these foundations do not have the right to pass reform legislation, the funding that they provide to advance their own agendas, is enough to maintain a high level of influence over the education system. There is no question that the funding provided by these foundations is in good intention, but the problem is that much of the reform taking place is not grounded in research-based methods. In an attempt to 'fix' schools, Americans have allowed public education to be taken over by politicians and businessmen, who desperately want to have their name attached to positive reform. Unfortunately, many of these attempts have, in fact, negatively impacted the way schools function, de-professionalized teachers, and diminished the potential of developing students who love learning.

Conclusion

Sir Ken Robinson says it best- “central governments [or] state governments decide they know best and they’re going to tell you what to do. The trouble is that education doesn’t go on in the committee rooms of our legislative buildings. It happens in classrooms and schools, and the people who do it are the teachers and the students, and if you remove their discretion, it stops working. You have to put it back to the people (Robinson).

This is the solution; the government needs to give public education back to the people. They need to not only listen, but also *hear* what people are saying. Rather than buying into programs that make lofty promises and looking to figures willing to offer their wealth, the government needs to work with teachers, students, parents, and educational academics, in order to improve education.

Instead of designing and implementing quick fixes that contain little validation and offer minimal results, why not allow teachers to use their experience and expertise to create innovative, engaging curriculum that encourages students to think creatively and critically in order to become productive citizens of our society? Rather than demoralizing teachers, why not provide support, professional development opportunities, and recognition that they are doing incredible things within their extraordinarily challenging and ever-changing career?

As a future educator, this is my plea. I love what I do, and hope that I will not become a statistic of yet another teacher who left the profession after only a

short time. I dream of the day when I walk into my own classroom- a place where genuine learning takes place, where students are encouraged to engage in meaningful exploration of a variety of subjects, and where I am fully entrusted to use my professional capabilities to motivate, educate, and inspire. As I approach the beginning of my teaching career I will continue to hear those voices full of caution from years ago. Rather than pushing those voices aside, I will listen to them and remember that they are around me everywhere, and that I too am one of those voices. So what's the next step? – To use that voice, not just for myself, but for the future of education.

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