Standardized Tests: Definition And Functions

Standardized tests are exams that are set up by the government to evaluate students and their progress while they are in the school system. Tests like these are meant to fairly evaluate all students and provide a level of understanding that all students are expected to have achieved. Standardized tests are typically used because they are assumed fair; every student gets the exact same test, and the same amount of time to write it. These tests come from older and more traditional values, and although they can be useful to some extent, they can also be detrimental to developing students' creativity and understanding in their education. To further examine this, we will explore what standardized testing is and how it originated, why these tests are used, why they can be unfavourable, and alternatives to the use of these exams. Including why the subject focus is negative when it comes to student creativity, this paper is intended to inform readers of the impacts of standardized tests, and how they can be modified to better affect students' learning.

The origin of standardized testing became a widely recognized practice in the 20th century when the College Entrance Examination Board adapted it to fairly evaluate students in nine subjects to sort out the best applicants to the top universities in America. Eventually, a French psychologist by the name of Alfred Binet adapted this examining method to create the Scholar Aptitude Tests (SAT) for graduating high school students to divulge the most intelligent, based on their success in the subjects that were decided to be of most value. Standardized tests were created in the same way that factory work was; students entered school to prepare them for a life in a factory, where everyone was expected to have the same abilities, and do the same jobs day in and day out. Ideals like these terminate the individual and unique qualities that are a large part of creativity in young people. In more modern times, courses at the college level are available to high school students, with a standardized test taken all around the world at the same time available for the students to take.

Standardized testing is used with the main idea of being fair. With the same environments created for each student, and the same amount of time available to complete the exam, standardized tests are meant to create a neutral playing ground for students to be successful. Standardized tests are meant to provide a systematic, unaltered examination of what each student knows. It is meant to be an unbiased form of assessment. In fact, a study done in 2009 by Scholastic/Gates Foundation showed that 81% of teachers found standardized tests to be somewhat important, and 23% find them to be very important. Many of these teachers find that standardized tests are essential tools used to measure the progress of their class. These tests provide a lot of useful information to teachers, while being low cost, and without taking much class time. With new technology, computers can grade these exams, freeing up time for instructors. Another advantage of these controversial exams is that they prepare students for college, as many of the exams written at the post secondary level are standardized. Standardized tests are a traditional way of testing students, and although may have their drawbacks, can be very useful tools in education.

The intentions behind standardized testing are noble, however the end result is not always as positive. One of the most compelling points that leads to this conclusion is that standardized tests are discriminatory toward English as an Additional Language students, and students with

learning disabilities. These students are let down by school systems who rely on this assessment method because their abilities are not supported by the appropriate accommodations. The purpose of these exams is to gauge whether or not the student understands the material that is being taught, not whether the student can read the question well enough to understand it. With these exams, in particular the SATs, much of the emphasis is placed on topics such as math, science, and language arts. Students that do well in these subjects are rewarded and those who struggle are not. Some of the most difficult subjects are valued the most, but are not needed by all students. Not every student will need to understand physics, calculus, or biology for the future they are aiming for. Knowing these skills can potentially be valuable, but standardized testing compares students against each other, and in the words of Albert Einstein, “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.” Many of the topics that are mandatory are important foundations for life, but there is an unnecessary amount of stress put into success in these certain subjects. A student who excels at art and wants to pursue a career in that field will not find the same benefit from a calculus class as a student that is an aspiring engineer. The value of these subjects can crush the creativity from students and their natural talents, and push them to follow a career that the world pertains to as more valuable. The future artists, musicians, carpenters, sculptures and dancers that exist in our young students are betrayed by the school system that forces them to focus on studying subjects that do not pertain to their creative abilities, and then labels them as failures when their skill sets don’t fit this narrow minded psyche. The current school system that puts too much of an emphasis on these subjects can be a culprit for killing creativity in students.

The term ‘teaching to the test’ is a very negative term that can be associated with standardized testing. *QUOTE FROM GUY IN CLASS*. The point of school is not to go and get a degree or get a diploma, the point is to get an education! The way of standardized testing employs one important skill: memorization. “When students regurgitate memorized information, they are unable to digest it.” (Hach, 2014). Instead of truly learning and developing an understanding of the information that they are taught, students instead memorize the things that they are supposed to know in order to take their exams. After the exam has passed, the memorized information fades from their mind as they memorize new information for the next unit, or the next subject. Students are not truly learning information, because they are not keeping it for later in life, they are collecting as much as they can into their brain in a short amount of time, taking their standardized tests, and then discarding the information later. Instead of being educated, they are memorizing and moving on with their lives. The only thing the students are being taught to do is memorize information for long enough to recall it on an exam. To fully educate students, we need to question what it means to fully educate students. If they take a test, pass it, but ultimately forget the information they ‘learned’, what is really the outcome? Are they truly being educated? What public school students who are forced to take these standardized tests are learning is how to pass tests. Tests are not always bad, they are just a tool used by teachers to motivate students and measure the level of understanding. However good teachers understand that testing is only a necessary evil, not the only way of evaluating their students. It can be argued that standardized testing does not require students to memorize information, in fact much of it is reading comprehension and composition. However, with the allotted time, students have moved from reading, skimming passages instead to save time. The writing that is required is putting out a rough draft of knowledge. This means that the understanding of reading and writing on these topics is in danger of becoming a lost art because of the crude form of standardized testing.

Testing in schools is a necessary tool that is purposed to help teachers measure the progress of their classrooms. It can have many negative implications, but should be used as good teachers currently use them; as a necessary evil. Anya Kamenetz has offered some alternatives to standardized testing. The first of her four substitutions for the reliance on standardized testing is a method called sampling. Sampling tests only a representative group of students, which doesn't fully eliminate the usage of standardized testing, but lessens the impact by taking less class time, and using less funding. Kamenetz's second alternative is stealth assessments. These types of assessments are Early Childhood Development based assessments that are mixed into resources such as Scholastic and Khan Academy, and make game-based evaluations that lessens the stress of standardized testing. The third and most broad of the four methods is called multiple measures. By collecting different information from students with tools like social and emotional skills and surveys, and performance or portfolio based assessments has shown to improve student success. The final method that Kamenetz has suggested is portfolio based assessments. This method is the most popular in schools today, and bases grades off of presentations, projects, reports, and papers collected over time instead of measuring students success off of one single exam given once. As technology moves forward in the education field, and as teachers begin to understand further what will best set up their students to succeed, these changes in the form of assessment will be imperative in helping students learn and grow.

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