

Standardized Tests, Standardized Students

TEACHING TO THE TEST IN MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS (ELA)
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RESEARCH QUESTION

How does language use in an ELA classroom expose the comprehensive impact of "teaching to the test" on students of color who learn "school English," their teachers, and the classroom habitus?

METHOD

1. Observe classroom, take notes, audio record
2. Transcribe audio
3. Code data according to the dimensions of the classroom outlined in the findings section.
4. Analyze data further with a critical sociolinguistic lens.

THE COMPREHENSIVE IMPACT

Standardized English **constrains content, restricts social role development/definition, produces specific performances** of those social roles, and **incentives** the adoption of these norms **with neoliberal tools**.

WORD WALL

Standardized English

The language of standardized tests and related materials and pedagogies, very narrow definitions of English words.

Trigger Terms

Terms in standardized English meant to "trigger" or prompt highly specific response scaffolds from students.

Scaffold

Frameworks that provide the basic structure of a students' classroom work, ostensibly allowing students to focus on the content.

Standardized Tests

Used in this research to refer to the end-of-year tests mandated in 3rd-8th grades for most students and associated classroom tests. Tests are supposedly taken and scored in a consistent manner for all test-takers.

High Stakes Testing

Tests that have associated rewards or sanctions-- i.e. if students do not score well, teachers can lose their jobs.

"Teaching to the test"

Colloquially: focusing classroom content on the topics that will appear on the standardized test. In this research: focusing the entire classroom, even school, experience, on teaching students how to score well on standardized tests.

EngageNY

The curriculum Johnson IB Middle School used to dictate the vast majority of their content.

Critical Literacy

Flexible definitions, mostly revolves around the ability to critique texts for one's self rather than just regurgitating taught interpretations.

Neoliberal Education Reform

Education reform based on the neoliberal ideals of free-market supremacy and the concurrent emphasis on accountability and metrics.

Content
Roles
Performance
Incentives

FINDINGS

- Students only learned **very narrow definitions of words**-- specifically those that appear in test question directions
- Students only engaged with provided texts; **teachers have no decision making power**.
- Students only **engaged in highly regimented ways**, even to the extent of regurgitating an expected answer rather than use language to create and communicate their own cognition.
- The **teacher**, with little autonomy, was relegated to the role of **coach, evaluator, and overseer**. She was in charge of dispersing evaluative measures of students' behaviors and academic work.
- **Students** were put into role of **subordinate**, with very little leeway to explore different roles for themselves. They were taught and expected to be the archetypal norm of "Student" that standardized tests mandate.
- The teacher's performance of her self and of her role was carefully produced to emphasize her power-- whether that was through **tone**, her **constant verbal evaluation** of students, or her **sole authority over students' engagement** with content.
- Students' performances were also highly produced by testing's norms in that their **entire day was controlled**-- from their casual language use to their academic work. There was **little sanctioned space for students to explore** the power of their own language, their own language use, or their capabilities beyond what the lesson plan demanded.
- **Points used to quantify students' behaviors/performances**. Wielded by the teacher, the students were always subject to evaluation.
- Direct praise and indirect punishment were most common for qualitative enforcement and mostly focused on **enforcing behaviors and answers that would offer students the best chance at scoring well on the test**.
- Students were always **physically subject to the teacher's whims** regarding where in the classroom the teacher taught from, and where she placed or moved students as a way to control inter-student discourse.

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS

Standardized Testing has become one primary tool for legitimizing disparities in children's educational experience. More research needs to be done on a larger scale to understand how this happens across the nation, or even the state, in order to update existing critical literacy pedagogies to work more effectively within the current test-heavy culture. We cannot avoid addressing the role of race, class, and gender in Standardized Testing and test preparation, and we will continue to do so until the people best equipped to speak are given all of the tools to create, control, and communicate their own narratives.

