

Standardized Testing and Student Learning

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I am studying to become an elementary school teacher once I graduate from college and it is because of my future career choice that I have decided to focus my research project on standardized testing. Mainly, I am concerned about in what ways it affects students' learning. My research question is: does standardized testing negatively or positively impact student learning? Standardized testing has become more prevalent within the last twenty years when the No Child Left Behind Act was passed. Its purpose was to establish a way to measure student and teacher accountability in order to make sure that students were meeting the general standards of learning within the United States. Ever since standardized testing was reintroduced it has stirred up all kinds of controversy. Some find that it is a good way to measure students' performance in schools while others strongly believe that it is hindering children's academic achievement. Many teachers have come forward to talk about how standardized testing has limited the content that they are able to teach, forcing them to 'teach to the test'. As a future teacher, I am not only worried for myself but also for the wellbeing of my students. Throughout this process I would like to learn more about how standardized testing has changed the way teachers teach, how it impacts students of low socioeconomic status, and whether or not it causes test anxiety in children and teachers.

When researching to find sources relating to my topic, I used two databases: the Greenwood Library database at Longwood University and Google Scholar. At the beginning of this process I had little experience with the library database and found myself struggling to find adequate sources. Thankfully, our class spent two class periods in the library learning tips and tricks to using the database like putting phrases in quotations in order for the database to search the terms together instead of separately. I started out by brainstorming words and phrases that

relate to my topic and later spent time combining those words and phrases into things I could search within the databases. In order to narrow down my sources, I combined search terms like “standardized testing” AND k-12 as well as “standardized testing” AND “socioeconomic status”. Both of these searches came up with several good results that helped answer some of my questions on my research topic. To further narrow my search results, I also added some filters such as peer reviewed, full text, and sources written within the last ten years. While the source selection went down significantly, it allowed me to find materials that better fit what I was looking for. Both the librarians and my peers were very helpful throughout this process and I am very thankful for their input and advice.

When searching for sources, sometimes thousands of options come up at one time and it is necessary to figure out which ones may actually be helpful and which ones are completely unrelated to your topic. Before starting this project, I may have simply read the abstract of an article to see if it was relevant to what I was looking for but the librarians gave us a better way to test if a source is good or not. They told us to use the C.R.A.A.P. test which proved very helpful in sifting through both good and bad sources. I first checked the currency of the source by looking at the year in which it was published. Usually, the more recent the source the better so I tried to only use sources from the last ten years. Next, I read through the abstract and skimmed some of the beginning paragraphs to see whether the source was relevant to my topic or not; if it was, then I would take a more in-depth look at its content and try to find pieces I could refer back to in my paper. Then, I checked the authority of the source by seeing if it was peer review or not or, if it came from Google Scholar, if the source came from a credible webpage. Later, I looked at the accuracy of the source by comparing it to others to see if the information was

widely accepted or if it seemed to contradict the others in any way. Finally, I looked more closely at the source to figure out its purpose; what might the author's motive be. This is important because this can account for author bias and inaccurate information within a source. The sources I found most useful were those I found in the library database because it was easy to locate peer reviewed sources and because I could set filters for a specific time frame. While all of the sources I found were helpful in some way, the ones from Google Scholar were a little more difficult to navigate because it's harder to determine their authority.

Throughout the research process, I chose several sources all relating to how standardized testing affects learning; however, each source focusses on a specific topic that I wanted to learn more about in order to answer my research question as stated previously. According to Moon, Brighton, & Callahan (2002), "Numerous reports suggest that the increased emphasis placed on [standardized] test scores results in an increased classroom emphasis on strategies such as basic skills instruction and drill and recitation to assure student success" (para. 3). This becomes a major problem for students learning because teachers are forced to teach to the lowest level in the classroom. Teachers spend so much time and energy preparing the struggling students to do well on the tests that the average and advanced students in the classes are being neglected and are turning away from learning (Moon, 2002). Bhattacharyya, Junot, & Clark (2013) agreed with this when they said, "...standardized testing is insensitive to individual students' learning style" (p. 634). Students must be allowed to learn in a way that best fits their needs. Learning style is not 'one size fits all'.

One of the main reasons for all of the pressure that comes from standardized tests is that they are often a means of rating schools based on how high or low students' scores are. This is

important because the highest ranking schools often get more funding as a reward for doing so well. Unfortunately, these extra funds usually go to schools in higher income areas rather than those in lower income areas where the money is needed the most. I found it very interesting when Fairtest (2007) said that, “[Students of low socioeconomic status (SES)] are more likely to receive a “dumbed-down” curriculum, based heavily on rote drill and test practice” (para. 3). Instead of actually teaching these students, teachers feel the need to continually drill in the information that will appear on a standardized test because higher scores mean more money and opportunities for the school. It is an endless circle of setting students up to fail. In their research, White, Stepney, Hatchimonji, Mocerri, Linsky, Reyes-Portillo, & Elias (2016) found similar results that stated that, “...family SES at the student level was one of the strongest correlates of academic performance, although correlations at the school level were even stronger” (para. 4). It is unfair for students and schools with low SES to be continually pushed aside and forgotten simply because their test scores are not high enough.

Throughout my research, what I found most interesting is that when reading a source discussing anxiety in students as a result of standardized testing, one point made was that teachers also feel anxiety over these tests. According to Segool, Carlson, Goforth, von der Embse, & Barterian (2013), “Teachers also reported that they experienced significantly more anxiety about their students’ performance on the NCLB assessment than on classroom testing” (para. 22). This is because there is so much pressure put on teachers to raise their students’ scores so that their schools can get more funding. I found this interesting because up until this point, I had not thought about the stress that standardized testing puts on teachers. This

information is important to me because one day I will be a teacher that may feel the pressure that comes from standardized testing.

All of the information that I found in my sources has been very eye opening for me. I have learned so much about standardized testing and how it affects not only students, but teachers as well. Based on the information within my sources, I am able to conclude that while standardized testing is a means of measuring accountability in students and teachers it also hinders students' learning in the classroom, discriminates against students and schools of lower SES, and puts a great deal of unnecessary pressure on teachers to raise scores; limiting their ability to teach to all learning styles. I believe that audiences would be interested to know just how much the standardized testing system is affecting their children's ability to think critically and how "[These tests] do not promote the knowledge, skills and habits needed for success in college or skilled work" (Fairtest, 2007, para. 2). The skills children learn in elementary through high school will stay with them throughout their life and help them in their future careers. They will have difficulty succeeding in the future if all they remember from school is how to regurgitate facts instead of contributing their own thoughts and ideas.

As stated earlier, I have concluded that standardized testing negatively impacts students' learning and I do not believe that it is the best way to determine a student's intelligence; there are too many factors that allow for inaccurate data like SES and different learning styles. While I did learn more about things like how SES affects standardized test scores and how high-stakes tests impact teachers teaching styles, I was not surprised by the results I found. My initial views on the subject of standardized testing were that they were not beneficial to students' learning. After researching the subject my views have not changed but I have gained new insight as to just

how damaging these tests are to students and the school system. The issue is that in order to change how standardized testing affects schools, there needs to be a new way to measure accountability in teachers and students. Some solutions that I find interesting include hands-on assessments, group projects, open-ended questions, and individual submissions of student portfolios. All of these options would allow administrators to see how well each student is doing in the classroom year round. Another solution would be to assess all other class grades to determine if the student adequately knows the material instead of relying on one high-stakes test that only focuses on specific content from the course. Through my research, I would like my audience to think about how standardized tests may affect their own children and perhaps start discussing other solutions for the future.

My research has been a big help in answering my research question and it has also allowed me to ask more questions about what solutions can be made to correct the misfortunes of standardized testing. I believe that the within my audience, parents and those involved with the school system would most benefit from my research; specifically teachers and administrators. Both teachers and administrators work in schools and deal directly with the effects that standardized testing has. The content of my research is relevant to their jobs and would most likely tell them what they already suspect or know first hand; that standardized tests are harming students' learning. What is most important to my research is the personal accounts and interviews with real teachers who can say from experience how standardized testing affects schools. It is these human elements that drive this kind of research and force people to ask questions about how we are testing our children in school. Other than educators, as already mentioned, parents of elementary through high school students would find my research most

helpful because it is their children who are being affected everyday by the pressures of standardized tests. My goal for my audience is to inform them of the detrimental effects of standardized testing and to get them talking in the hopes of figuring out solutions to improve our school system.

The research that I have found has taught me a lot about the impacts of standardized testing on learning and teaching, but I know that there is so much more I could find through further searching. I have already discussed some potential solutions in regards to replacing standardized testing. Although, I would like to explore the success rate of these proposed solutions. To do this I would research and compare the teaching styles of the United States to other successful European countries, many of which do not rely so heavily on standardized testing. Another area I would like to research more is how standardized tests impact college preparedness. To do this I would compare the assessments used in the college classroom to those in elementary, middle, and high schools. College professors tend to place importance on group projects, verbal presentations, and creativity. These things are not heavily taught in K-12 schools due to the importance of standardized testing. In my previous research I barely scratched the surface on this subject and I would like to find more information on how high-stakes tests impact college preparedness because it affects students' academic wellbeing while in college and their future career. In order to conduct this further research, my previous sources may push me towards more peer reviewed articles and personal accounts as well as other research papers with statistics regarding my topics of interest. In order to find these sources, I could use the library database and apply filters and keywords not previously used to narrow down my searches. I



could also look online to find videos and journal articles with personal accounts from students and teachers.

## References

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