

Standardizing Whiteness: the Essential Racism of Standardized Testing

October 26, 2016 stevenmsinger #BlackLivesMatter, Accountability, Charter Schools, Civil Rights, Common Core, Corporate Education "Reform", Education, ESEA, Eugenics, Every Student Succeeds Act, Junk science, No Child Left Behind, Opt Out, Parents, Politics, Poverty, Prejudice, privatization, Propaganda, Racism, School Choice, School Funding, school segregation, Schools, segregation, Social Justice, Standardized Testing, standards, Teach for America, Teachers, Toxic Testing, Value Added Measures, VAM, White Privilege, Whiteness charter schools, common core, culture, education, normalization, Race, racism, standardization, standardized testing, Students, Teach for America, teacher shortage, teachers, teaching



“As a method of social production, as well as social reproduction, standardized testing has had serious cultural implications, not the least of which has been the eternal question of American identity. Consistent with notions of American identity, standardized testing, as an opposition to a cultural other, represents the normalization of whiteness, richness, and maleness.”

-Andrew Hartman

“In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.”

-Toni Morrison

We talk about standardized testing as if we don't really understand what it is.

We say we want *No child left behind!*

And then we pass a law named after that very sentiment that ensures some students **MUST** be left behind.

We say we want *Every student to succeed!*

And then we pass a law named after that very sentiment that ensures every student will **NOT** succeed.

It would be absurd if not for the millions of children being forced to endure the harsh reality behind our pretty words.

It's not these ideals that are the problem. It's standardized testing.

Researchers, statisticians, and academics of every stripe have called for an end to high stakes testing in education policy. Parents, students and teachers have written letters, testified before congressional committees, protested in the streets, even refused to take or give the tests. All to deaf ears.

The federal government still requires all students in 3-8th grade and once in high school to take standardized tests.

But these assessments are graded on a curve. A certain amount of students are at the bottom, a certain amount are at the top, and most are clustered in the middle. This would be true if you were testing all geniuses or all people with traumatic brain injuries.

It doesn't matter how smart your test takers are. There will always be this bell curve distribution. That's how the tests are designed. So to talk about raising test scores is nonsensical. You can raise scores at school A or School B, but the total set of all test takers will always be the same. And some students will always fail.

But that isn't even the worst part.

Standardization, itself, has certain consequences. We seem to have forgotten what the term even means. It's defined as the act of evaluating someone or something

by reference to a standard.

This socket wrench is a good socket wrench because it most closely resembles some ideal socket wrench. This McDonald's Big Mac is good because it resembles the ideal McDonald's Big Mac.

That's what we're doing to people – children in fact. We're evaluating them based on their resemblance to some ideal definition of what a child should know and what a child should be.

But children are not socket wrenches nor are they Big Macs. It is not so easy to reduce them to their component parts and say this is good and that is bad.

When you try to abstract them to that point, it is impossible to remove various essential factors of their identity – race, gender, socio-economic status, etc. Nor would it be admirable if you could, because you would have abstracted to the point where the individual is no longer visible or valued. [A child raised in poverty](#) is simply not the same as a child from a privileged upbringing. A child from a [culture that values cooperation is not the same as a child from a culture that values individual achievement](#). And that's often a good thing.

But when you define a standard, an ideal, you make certain choices – you privilege some attributes and denigrate others. Since the people creating the tests are almost exclusively upper middle class white people, it should come as no surprise that that is the measure by which they assess success.

Is it any wonder then that [poor kids and children of color don't score as well on these tests](#)? Is it any wonder that upper middle class white kids score so well?

[We've known this for almost a century](#). Standardized tests do a poor job of assessing intelligence or knowledge. Those things are too complex and the tests are too simple. If you're evaluating something equally simple like basic addition and subtraction, these tests can work alright. But if you're trying to get at something complex like critical thinking or creativity, they end up doing little more than prizing the way some people think and not others. In short, they elevate the thought processes most associated with rich white kids.

It [doesn't mean poor and/or black children are any less intelligent](#). It just means rich white kids have the things for which the test designers are looking. Some of this is due to economic factors like greater access to private tutoring, books in the home, parents with more time to read to their kids, coming to school healthy and more focused. However, a large portion is due to the very act of taking tests that are created to reflect white upper class values and norms.

Think about it. [Almost all the questions are field tested](#) before they become a permanent part of the exam. Students are given a question that doesn't count to their final score, but test makers tabulate how many kids get it right or wrong. So when most white kids answer a field tested question correctly and most black kids get it wrong, it still becomes a permanent test question because there are so few blacks relative to whites. Maybe it's a question that references sun tan lotion, something with which darker skinned people don't have as much experience. Imagine if a question referencing the hair care practices of black people became a test item. White people would have difficulty with it because they can't easily relate. But the field testing process doesn't allow that because [it normalizes whiteness](#).

So black kids stumble while white kids have an easier time. We even have a name for it: the [racial proficiency gap](#).

Many well-intentioned progressive voices have bemoaned this problem and [wondered how to solve it](#). But it's not the scores that are the problem. It's the assessments. [They are doing exactly what they were designed to do](#).

That's right. You cannot have such obvious, historical problems perpetuated year-after-year, decade-after-decade, and still think they are mere unintended consequences.

This is how the system was designed to work. This is how it's always been designed to work.

If you were going to create a racist and classist school system from scratch, what would you do? How would you go about it?

You'd need the lower classes to have **SOME** mediocre education so they are able to do the menial work that keeps society running. But only so much. Education as a social ladder is all well and good as propaganda. But you don't want that ladder to lead out of the basement for more than a few.

You need [something that will create a hierarchy with people of color at the bottom and poor whites only slightly better off](#) so they can feel ennobled compared to their darker subordinates.

You need [a biased sorting mechanism](#) – something that allows you to put students into privileged and unprivileged categories but that will look to all the world like it was doing so fairly. It would have to appear like you were choosing students based on merit.

You'd need something like standardized test scores.

This is how these assessments have functioned from their very beginnings.

When [Carl Brigham](#) and [Robert Yerkes](#), U.S. Army psychologists during WWI, designed the alpha and beta intelligence tests to determine which soldiers deserved to be officers, they were creating a pseudoscientific justification for white privilege. They used biased and unfair assessments to “prove” that rich white folks were best suited to give orders, and the rest of us belonged in the trenches.

Brigham and Yerkes were drawing upon [eugenics](#), also called “[racial hygiene](#)” or “[scientific racism](#).” This was a [radical misreading of Gregor Mendel and Charles Darwin](#). Eugenecists thought positive traits such as intelligence were widespread in Northwestern European races and almost nonexistent in others. Moreover, negative traits such as laziness and criminality were common in nonwhites and almost absent in those same Northwestern Europeans.

“We should not work primarily for the exclusion of intellectual defectives but rather for the classification of men in order that they may be properly placed,” wrote Yerkes.

THIS is the basis of standardized testing.

After the war, Brigham took the same principles to create the [Scholastic Aptitude Test](#) or S.A.T. – in principle the same exam still taken by 2.1 million teenagers every year to ensure they get into their chosen college.

The test was further refined by fellow eugenicist [Lewis Terman](#), Professor of Education at Stanford University and originator of the Stanford-Binet intelligence test. Together these three men created the foundations for the modern field of standardized testing. And make no mistake – its axiomatic principle is still that some races are genetically superior and others are inferior.

Or as [Terman](#) put it:

“A low level of intelligence is very common among Spanish-Indian and Mexican families of the Southwest and also among Negroes. Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come... They constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding.”

After WWII, [the eugenicist brand](#) suffered from comparison to the Nazis who had been inspired by the findings of Brigham, Yerkes and Terman among others. In

the post war years, we've discarded the overtly racist language but kept the assessments. Yet they still function the same way – sorting out blacks and the poor while prizing the rich and white.

This information is not secret. It is not kept under lock and key in some hidden military base somewhere. It's accessible to anyone with Internet access or a library card.

We ignore it, because otherwise it would destabilize the current power structure – the corporate education policies that drive school practices in our country. We close our eyes and pretend it isn't happening.

But it is.

“Standardized tests are the last form of legalized discrimination in the US,” said Education and Psychology Prof. [Phil Harris](#).

With them you can give rich and middle class whites every advantage while withholding the same from students of color. And we don't call it racism or classism because we pretend the whites earned their privileges by their test scores.

“We are using the testocracy as a proxy for privilege,” said civil rights theorist [Lanni Guinier](#). Test scores are the excuse for [prejudicial and unjust practices that would be impossible without them](#).

For instance, if you really wanted to help someone who's struggling, you might offer extra help. But low test scores are used as the reason for withholding that help. [We actually use these invalid scores as a means of demeaning and firing poor black kids' teachers](#) – as if anything they could do [could completely overcome biased assessments and poverty](#). In this way, we not only remove those already in place to help these kids, we ensure few people will volunteer to take their place.

And [when you have a teacher shortage](#) in these poor urban neighborhoods, you can use that to justify further deprivations. Instead of teachers with 4-year education degrees, you can hire lightly trained [Teach for America temps](#) – college grads who've taken no coursework in education beyond a six weeks cram session.

And if the parents of these children complain, you can [open charter schools to pull a quick bait and switch](#). Make them [feel like they have a choice](#) when really you're pulling the rug out from under them. You provide them with a school with none of the safeguards of a traditional public institution – no elected school board, no transparency on how tax dollars are spent, little oversight, a right to refuse any student they wish, etc. And when the school goes belly up, these kids will be pushed back to their former traditional public school that has had to make due