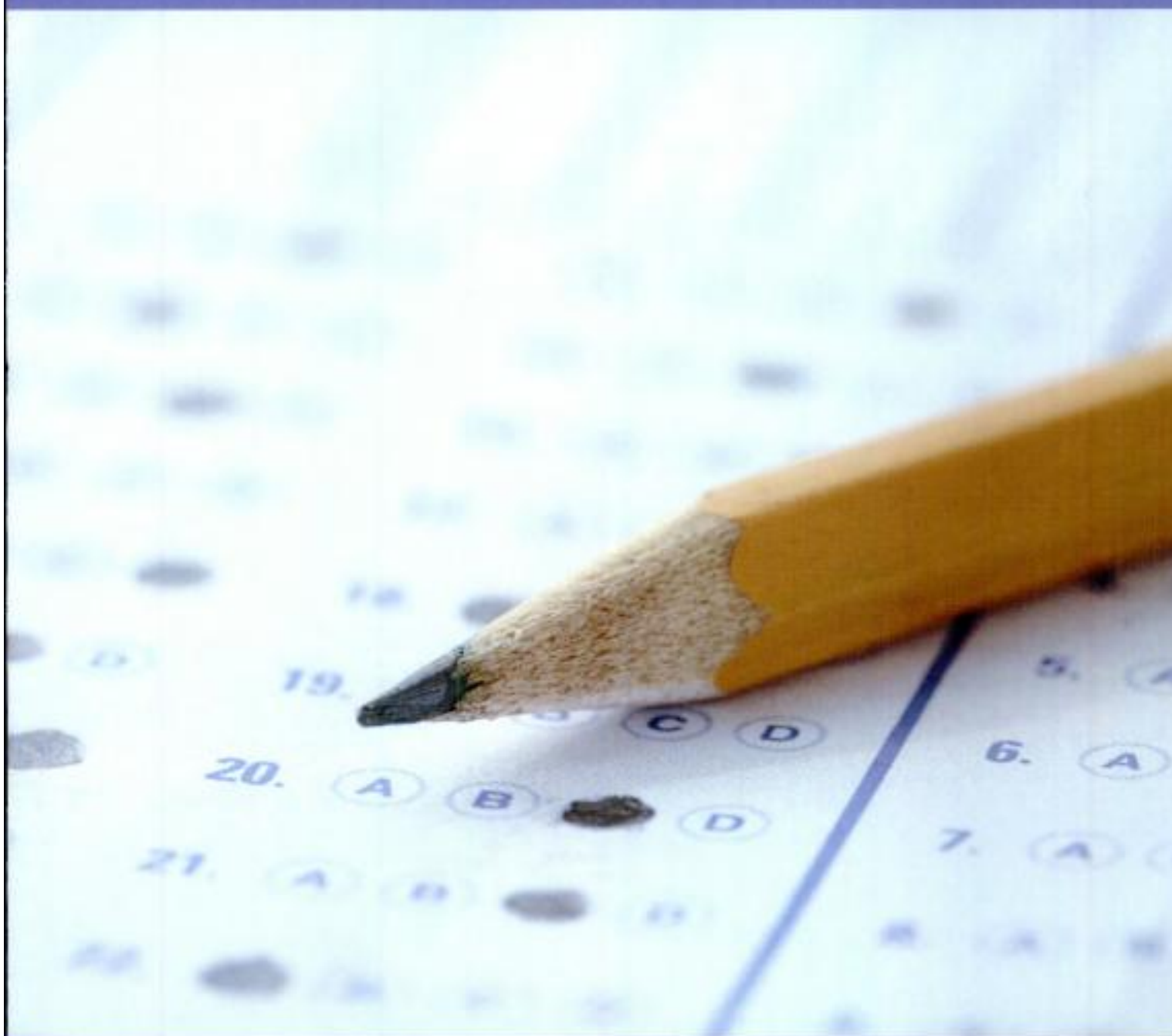


A Measure of Failure

The Political Origins of Standardized Testing



A Measure of Failure: The Political Origins of Standardized Testing, Mark J. Garrison, SUNY Press, 2009, 1438427786, 9781438427782, 140 pages. How did standardized tests become the measure of performance in our public schools? In this compelling work, Mark J. Garrison attempts to answer this question by analyzing the development of standardized testing, from the days of Horace Mann and Alfred Binet to the current scene. Approaching the issue from a sociohistorical perspective, the author demonstrates the ways standardized testing has been used to serve the interests of the governing class by attaching a performance-based value to people and upholding inequality in American society. The book also discusses the implications that a restructuring of standardized testing would have on the future of education, specifically what it could do to eliminate the measure of individual worth based on performance..

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Against schooling toward an education that matters, Stanley Aronowitz, Sep 1, 2008, , 196 pages. In Against Schooling, Stanley Aronowitz passionately raises an alarm about the current state of education in our country. Discipline and control over students, Aronowitz argues

The Big Test The Secret History of the American Meritocracy, , Nov 16, 2000, Education, 406 pages. Surveys the history of educational testing in the United States, and discusses the ideas, the people, and the politics behind the system..

Making the Grades My Misadventures in the Standardized Testing Industry, Todd Farley, Jan 1, 2011, Education, 272 pages. In this alternately amusing and appalling exposé of the standardized test industry, fifteen-year veteran Todd Farley describes statisticians who make decisions about students

The case against standardized testing raising the scores, ruining the schools, Alfie Kohn, Sep 8, 2000, Education, 94 pages. Kohn's central message is that standardized tests are "not a force of nature but a force of politics and political decisions can be questioned, challenged, and ultimately reversed."

Essentials of individual achievement assessment , Douglas K. Smith, Sep 5, 2001, , 245 pages. Quickly acquire the knowledge and skills you need to confidently administer, score, and interpret individual achievement tests Essentials of Individual Achievement Assessment

Affective Measures and Personality Tests , Educational Testing Service, Dec 1, 1996, Study Aids, 176 pages. "The major source of information on the availability of standardized tests". -- Wilson Library Bulletin Covers commercially available standardized tests and hard-to-locate

Capitalizing on disaster taking and breaking public schools, Kenneth J. Saltman, 2007, Business & Economics, 175 pages. Breaking new ground in studies of business involvement in schooling, Capitalizing on Disaster dissects the most powerful educational reforms and highlights their relationship

Standardized Testing , Cynthia A. Bily, Feb 25, 2011, , 144 pages. Several articles discuss the issues surrounding standardized testing..

Constructing and using achievement tests in the classroom a competency based text, Fred M. Smith, 1984, Education, 164 pages. .

Market Movements African American Involvement in School Voucher Reform, Thomas C. Pedroni, May 23, 2007, Education, 192 pages. Winner of the 2009 Critics Choice Book Award of the American Educational Studies Association (AESA) Through careful ethnographic research, Market Movements represents community

From forge to fast food: a history of child labor in New York State, Volume 1 a history of child labor in New York State, New York Labor Legacy Project, Russell Sage College. Council for Citizenship

Education, 1995, Social Science, . .

Achievement Testing in U.S. Elementary and Secondary Schools , Joan Maureen Baker, 2006, Education, 125 pages. Achievement Testing explains the complicated concepts in a clear and user-friendly way to beginning teachers and students, as well as to experienced teachers who are looking

Achievement Testing: Recent Advances, Issue 36 Recent Advances, Isaac I. Bejar, Sep 1, 1983, Education, 88 pages. A book which summarizes many of the recent advances in the theory and practice of achievement testing, in the light of technological developments, and developments in

Assessing Pupils' Performance Using the P Levels , Val Davis, Di Buck, Sep 1, 2001, Study Aids, 168 pages. This book has been designed to provide guidance for special and mainstream schools in the assessment of pupils' learning from Level P1 up to and including National Curriculum

How did standardized tests become the measure of performance in our public schools? In this compelling work, Mark J. Garrison attempts to answer this question by analyzing the development of standardized testing, from the days of Horace Mann and Alfred Binet to the current scene. Approaching the issue from a sociohistorical perspective, the author demonstrates the ways standardized testing has been used to serve the interests of the governing class by attaching a performance-based value to people and upholding inequality in American society. The book also discusses the implications that a restructuring of standardized testing would have on the future of education, specifically what it could do to eliminate the measure of individual worth based on performance.

"Both original and provocative, A Measure of Failure is a compelling account of the historical and contemporary relationship between standardized testing in education and processes of state formation." -- Thomas C. Pedroni, author of Market Movements: African American Involvement in School Voucher Reform --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The Latin term, *deus ex machina*, often represents a technological sleight of hand used by playwrights to extricate actors and scripts out of sticky positions. Visualise Johnny Depp's fantastic escapes in "Pirates of the Caribbean"! In our lives, we have been conditioned to believe in the precision of numbers. The fact that I scored 17 in a test has less credibility than a score of 20.37. The point being made by Garrison, although not in these words, is that the community has been conned by the *deus ex machina*, an implied precision and purpose, which is not what it seems.

The essay begins: "True or false: Proponents of standardized testing are, unintentionally or otherwise, pushing an agenda that intrinsically advocates racism and socioeconomic oppression. Intrigued? Then read on. It really is an understatement to claim that standardized testing permeates every aspect of our culture. Testing is employed in a variety of settings and affects our lives in ways that most of us do not even realize. Nowhere, however, is its influence more evident than in our educational institutions. Testing has become the driving force behind current efforts to reform our public schools. Unfortunately, it has a sinister dimension that has been beyond the comprehension of most of the general public" until now.

In September I was asked, by the editor of a New Zealand magazine Education Today, to interpret the book "A Measure of Failure: The Political Origins of Standardized Testing" By Mark J Garrison, in light of the politically imposed national standards achievement agenda in New Zealand primary schools.

As this magazine has now been published I am able to publish the article on this blog. While I've looked at the New Zealand situation, the book is actually written for the USA education scene, and is extremely relevant and pertinent in explaining, in Garrison's view, what underpins the relentless focus on standardized testing.

Mark Garrison is Associate Professor and Director of Doctoral Programs at D'Youville College, Buffalo, New York State, with a particular interest in the political functions of education reforms. This gives him a different perspective on the school reform movement. He delivers as the title promises, and makes a very powerful case indeed. Naturally the book has an American focus, but the links to the current situation in New Zealand are very easy to draw.

His focus isn't a review of whether standards, in any form, have a role in education, but instead an analysis of how and why they have become such a pivotal player. His view, which is developed at times through the book, is that some kind of professionally developed standards are essential; it is the political nature of imposed standards that is his concern.

The expression of standards through testing programmes underpins his writing. However it is a simple task to view the National Standards and accompanying use of Overall Teacher Judgements (OTJs) through the same filter. The possibility of a nationwide testing programme being instituted in New Zealand at some future time also adds extra relevance to this book.

The consistent thread running through the book is that standards originated as political tools and that this continues to this day. While that may not be surprising, it is the depth (and deviousness?) of the use of standards in manipulating education that Garrison highlights in this well-referenced book.

He commences by remarking on the growing use of standardized testing, regardless of the consistently expressed concerns held by a wide range of educational experts. New Zealand is no different in this regard, attempting to turn subjective teacher evaluations of children's learning progress into objective judgements of achievement through the OTJ process.

His contention is that standardized tests were developed, not to assess 'achievement' but to prove that schools are failing. This has been taken to an extreme in the USA to justify the elimination of public education 'as we know it'. He suggests that the increasing emphasis on testing is political, a fight between 'factions of elite' and social classes, to gain control over the purpose and nature of schooling.

While his emphasis is on testing to monitor 'achievement against standards' the New Zealand use of OTJs is merely a different vehicle to get to the same destination. Garrison takes this further, concluding that standards are used to justify school reform through identifying 'failing schools'. Setting the bar at an 'aspirational level' (which is common to USA, Australia and now New Zealand) increases the odds of failure, rather than 'raising achievement'.

Garrison queries why students are labelled 'good' and 'bad' based on their academic prowess (or lack of prowess). He contends that surely this alone delineates the real aim of psychometry (the application of measures of measurement to the various branches of psychology) as the determination of social value. He extends this concept of social value further. Ascertaining 'social value' of individuals make possible the practice of 'giving more to those who already have, for those who are of most value also 'deserve' the most'.

It is the definition of social value in education that is crucial here. It is his contention that the 'good/bad', 'success/failure', high/low talent labels (we could add achieved/not achieved to this list) are used to reflect social value in schools. Further, the value of the education that is offered is dependent on the child's social value.

Standards therefore are used as a system of vertical classification. It is an easy step to use this to consider the introduction of National Standards in New Zealand. Regardless of the 'raising achievement/improving student outcomes' rhetoric, it is clear that children who effortlessly 'achieve the standards' each year, will then have the opportunities for a rich and full educational experience. Those who 'fail to achieve the standards' each year will be doomed to an endless cycle of chasing their literacy and numeracy tails, and so be denied the same educational opportunities as more fortunate peers.

Factoring in known relationships between poverty and lack of "achievement"™ brings the obvious conclusion that children who were fortunate enough to be born into higher socio-economic households will be greatly advantaged educationally over their less fortunate peers. This conclusion is mirrored by Garrison:

Garrison then examines standardized tests as markers of value. Again, we need to include OTJs as a standardized assessment process – it's the methodology that is different, not the purpose. Some cherished beliefs about testing are challenged, and one of these is the use of the word "assessment"™, which Garrison defines as:

Continuing his focus on social value, Garrison finds that "assessment"™ is linked to judging human value and includes "social hierarchy as a variable." In a very strong link to National Standards, he also observes that "assessment"™ is connected to "professional judgement, a notion that is connected to authority." OTJs, in other words.

The links to OTJs grow stronger still, with the intent of assessment being to rank children into categories, assisted by numbers to provide validity. As he points out, standards assessment of this type are relative only, not an absolute or universal property. This sends a clear warning that placing undue reliance on OTJs is not a reliable tool for "assessing achievement"™. The importance of this section as a window on New Zealand developments cannot be overstated.

Garrison goes on to discuss the difference between measurement and assessment, a confusion of which can lead to the error of "rendering the ranking of individuals as a measurement of their ability" and even more graphically, "designating some human beings as more valuable than others." There is little that can be written in response to that.

Reviewing the political origins of testing, Garrison concludes that standards were, and still are, implicated in establishing and maintaining a political agenda, and in entrenching the value system of the school reform movement. This highlights the concerns raised by many New Zealand educators, providing support for the foreboding that National Standards are much more than a tool to "raise achievement."

"Far from being able to "close the achievement gap"™ and promote opportunities for minorities, "standards based"™ reforms have so far resulted in the opposite of the rhetoric that supports the practice; more and more children are "left behind"™ as drop outs appear to be increasing and curriculums have narrowed as (mostly) working class and minority youth are condemned to a regime of test prep and little more. Standards based reform has failed to bring about fair, educational opportunities and even failed to provide accurate information on the state of public schools." (Supported by a list of 12 references.)

Garrison then sets about dismantling the claims that "raising achievement"™ will address the growing gaps in social inequality. He maintains that it is irrational to think that standards (designed to differentiate between learners) can then be used as tools to close equality gaps. Garrison highlights the socio-economic background of learners as the dominant factor, noting the contradiction of the "closing the gaps through raising achievement"™ rhetoric with the other political and financial decisions that exacerbate the inequality.

In a section that has extremely high relevance to New Zealand, he discusses the way political agencies in the USA work to establish a "non-rational basis for policy formation"™ through repeatedly using assertions as though they were facts. That shines a different light on the "one in child in five is failing" mantra, which is not supported by evidence.

Garrison observes that this is leading to a centralisation of educational power in the USA. Simultaneously, the government is shirking responsibility for the provision of education, and shifting this to "market forces" (school privatisation). The introduction and extension of standardized testing is a key tool in this process. Attacks on public education and on those who attend and work in public schools, are aimed at "assimilating Americans to a lower standard of education" with

the accompanying notion being that only those who "perform well"™ deserve an education.

Garrison counters with his own belief, the "need for assessment in education to establish a new starting point, one predicated on the equal worth, dignity and rights of human beings and human cultures." All members of the community need to be fully involved in the political and philosophical discussions around standards and education. The voices of all groups of society need to be heard, not just the narrow vision of those representing a particular social class.

Garrison has written this book for the USA market, yet, with the exception of the specific references to USA, so much of what he writes could so easily be about New Zealand, the introduction of National Standards, and the supporting rhetoric. Two things are immediately very clear from this. First, the ideology behind standards is being imported as a package from elsewhere, and second, it will fail to achieve all that is claimed and in fact will create much greater problems.

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