

Books

One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards

BY SUSAN OHANIAN

Defending Access: A Critique of Higher Education

BY TOM FOX

REVIEWED BY JAYNE MARLINK

A memory from first grade stays with me. My mother, an elementary school teacher, was tutoring Tim, an eighth grade student who was having problems with his reading. I eavesdropped on their sessions frequently because I couldn't figure out why Tim was struggling so much with the words in the reader. One day I just had to know, and I asked my mom why Tim, who was so much older than I was, could not read the words in a book that I could read so easily. My mother took great care to explain to me how Tim was smart with electricity and woodworking, and I was smart with words. She pointed out the times Tim had helped out my father with electronic repairs around the house. She asked me if I could have helped. That was the first of many times my mother told me, "There are many ways to be smart. It just takes more time to see some of the ways, and some people won't take the time."

I have never forgotten what she taught me that day. This memory has everything to do with how I see students, as smart and capable, and how I see teaching, as discovering the many ways students demonstrate their learning. This memory also has a great deal to do with my reactions to the two books that are the subject of this review. Both books are, at least in part, about the ways people forget, in this standards-driven environment, that there are many ways to be smart.

Susan Ohanian's polemic, *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards*, is a wide-ranging discussion of the thorny

issues around standards. She considers standards and standards documents across many disciplines from many states, educational policy and policymakers, standardized tests and standards-driven accountability. The writing is smart and funny, acerbic at times and acidic at others. The titles and subtitles of chapters preview the author's pointed style: "Standard Timetables for Nonstandard Kids"; "Standard Fare: The Rich Get Richer, the Poor Get Ignored"; and "Who Put *Education Week* in Charge of the World?"

In the introduction, Ohanian writes that it is her "moral duty to offer a counterargument to people who would try to streamline, sanitize, and standardize education" (ix). "Standardistos," the term coined by Ohanian to describe such people, are those who put students "on a conveyor belt to the future" (19). In an interview for the April 1999 issue of *Curriculum Administrator*, Ohanian further describes Standardistos as the kind of policymakers who don't see teachers, principals, or students, who "keep their eye only on the government's pot of Goals 2000 gold." Ohanian challenges these policy makers "who know our children by their number-two pencils." She "turns pedagogy into narratives" (3) about teachers and students and their encounters with the absurdities found in some of the standards documents developed in response to Goals 2000.

Many of the most powerful stories are about her students and what they achieve—Carol, a foster child, who had to

learn to smile before she could learn to read; Jack, who learned his language skills playing Scrabble against himself; and Billy, who ate his pencils to avoid filling in phonics worksheets but scored 100 percent on the Stanford reading test. Ohanian's point: these students could never have been taught on an assembly line, but they learned.

Ohanian draws on her wit and indignation to deftly skewer wrong-headed policy makers, but her own solutions come across as pretty fuzzy. She likes to remind us of truisms. For instance, we'd be better off if we showed compassion for our students. Instead, I wanted some specific suggestions about how, for instance, to "set minimum standards for making sure our nation's children are cared for" (150). On the whole, however, it is difficult to ignore Ohanian's assessment that for teachers to just wait for the pendulum to swing back "is to condemn thousands of students to the academic refuse bin," and that it is "morally wrong and practically nonsensical to throw our students away" (x). One reason, I think, that Ohanian's book resonates with so many teachers in public schools is that her stories about students echo their own.

I connected with Ohanian's book because of the stories. However, I learned more from Tom Fox's book, *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education* because it brought back so many memories of my students—Andre, Xue, Trang, Angelica—and their struggles in preparing for the work of college. Because I saw my

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students in Fox's book, I was taken by his reminders to remember the particular challenges urban and second-language students face. "Often these refrains of falling standards implicitly or explicitly refer to immigrant students or students of color whose difference—cultural and/or linguistic—is more at issue than their performance" (iv).

To analyze how that happens, Fox "builds a critique of standards in higher education by demonstrating how they have been—and still are — used less as a way of raising expectations for students than as a means of excluding students new to higher education" (iv). He gives us a historical look at standards and access in higher education and then analyzes what that has meant for curriculum and teaching. He then concludes the book with a lengthy section concentrating on the ways writing programs and writing teachers can work for access. Though the book focuses on the issue of standards and access in higher education, I readily made connections to my experience in K-12 schools.

It would be a mistake, however, to think Fox is arguing against teaching with high expectations for all students. Early in the book he asserts:

It is impossible to teach without standards, and teaching without challenging standards is usually bad teaching.

The distinction I want to make is between the standards a teacher holds, which develop out of and are modified by interactions in context, and bureaucratic standards that almost always emerge out of a context of crisis. (10)

Fox reminds me that excellent teachers hold high standards and that those standards are very context- and student-specific.

Fox also urges me to question a long-held belief of mine: preparing students for college reading and writing opens the doors to higher education. For Fox, such a belief is a bit simplistic and idealistic. "If we tell ourselves and our students that they will achieve access if they master writing standards, we are obscuring and underestimating the powerful forces of racism, elitism, and heterosexism that continue to operate despite the students' mastery of standards" (6). Fox instead offers his own writing standards and then suggests classroom practices that offer students writing opportunities to explore, critique, interrogate, and resist "the social forces that prevent access" (92) so that "learning to write becomes a means of access" (111).

What I so appreciate is that Fox describes these teaching practices in his context and in light of his students. He stitches the chapters and the arguments together with vignettes about his students in basic writing courses and examples of their writing. The students' writing gives voice to their challenges, their persistence, and above all, their intelligence: Leon, who writes to reflect on and analyze the forces he encountered growing up in the communities of Compton and Hawthorne, California; and Tina, who researches the literary and intellectual traditions of African-American women and claims a place within those traditions. As Fox argues, the achievements of these students are both academic and intellectual, and they are also "examples of student critical writing, the conscious and careful actions of intellectual

students designed to resist the limiting and damaging practices that reduce the numbers of students of color in the university" (109). To see Fox's or my students only in terms of the writing skills they need to improve often means forgetting the analytic, academic talents they already have in place.

These students stay with me, and there is a section of Fox's introduction that also stays with me. "We suffer from a destructive forgetfulness. While an event such as the Los Angeles riots may provoke a storm of concern for the state of urban education and the broken promises of justice, this storm is a summer shower, briefly drenching the soil, but not ending the drought" (v).

Reminders of the damage forgetting can do brings me back to remembering and the ways writing can help us remember. Toward the end of her book, Ohanian challenges us to tell our classroom stories about the students who are too often forgotten. Fox reminds us to provide the same opportunities for students to write their stories and critiques. Though these stories may not have persuasive value for everyone, at the very least they begin to contextualize the debate over standards and standards-based reform. Alongside Ohanian's and Fox's books, I would like to see a flood of classroom stories and student writing that illustrates the countless ways our students are smart and the innumerable ways excellent teachers foster the achievement of all of those students. There are so very many ways to be smart.

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