Finding the Student in a High-Stakes World: A Challenge for Teachers and Test Makers

Let's give high-stakes test makers the benefit of the doubt they probably deserve. Their intentions are honorable, but like so many grand schemes conceived in distant isolation, their plans fall victim to the law of unintended consequences. In this essay, Glenda Moss examines some of these consequences and how she confronted them.

Glenda Moss

I want to tell the story of two students I taught during my ten years of teaching in a public middle school in East Texas. The stories are important because they bring into focus the dilemma of teaching in a system that made me do things that hurt students about whom I cared. Of course, it is people who are responsible for systems, and I am not saying that those folks who developed the system that is the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) have deliberately set out to hurt students. I am saying that these people seem ignorant of the negative implications of much that they are doing.

First, I will tell the story of Caleb Johnson. His is a story representative of many of my African-American students who struggled with the TAAS test. Caleb was growing up in a crowded home that included brothers, sisters, stepbrothers, half-sisters, and cousins. After school, Caleb's grandmother was the primary caretaker for him and the other nine children who walked to her home, where they were sometimes picked up by a parent and sometimes spent the night. It was in this setting that Caleb learned to speak what I usually referred to with my African-American students as a Black English.

Most of my students, like Caleb, were African-American and spoke a dialect of English learned and reinforced in their homes. I had learned to get my African-American students' best effort by respecting their language while demanding that they work to learn tested English, standardized by the TAAS. I would talk to my students at the beginning of the year about the task before us. The TAAS test was a reality that my students and I had to deal with. I explained to my students how they learned to speak English from infancy up to age three or four surrounded by people who spoke Black English. I told them that there was nothing inherently wrong with the way they spoke. I asked them if any of them ever had trouble communicating what they wanted at home or with their friends. They didn't. They noted that sometimes teachers would hassle them a little, but most of the time they didn't even have trouble communicating with their teachers.

I talked to my students about Spanish as a foreign language. This they could understand because we had a growing population of Spanish-speaking people in our city, and some of the students in our school were bilingual. It wasn't hard for the students to understand that Spanish-speakers had to learn to recognize Standard English in order to pass the TAAS. That made it easier for my students who had learned a Black English dialect, common to most of them, to understand the necessity for them to also master the language that was the standard of academic measurement for the TAAS and for high-stakes communication situations.

I told them then how I used Standard English during job interviews but often used informal English at home and with friends. I stressed to my students that I had been hired to teach them Standard English, and that this was the language that would be tested on the TAAS. I was honest with them in pointing out the ways that the test might appear tricky by employing usage that sounded correct to them. I owed it to my students to tell them everything that I
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knew that would help them compensate for not growing up with the language usage of the dominant culture that determined the content of the test.

To be assured that my students would pass the test, I knew I could not teach to the high standards that I wanted to teach. If the students were going to master the code they would need to pass the test, the core of what I believe is most important in my teaching would necessarily be neglected. Although this is hard to explain to the public, to academicians, and to politicians, teaching in a way that fosters critical thinking and writing about literature does not necessarily mean that my students will be able to pass a language test that dissects sentences for Standard English grammar knowledge. Giving my students the opportunity to critically examine important topics and write analytical papers that foster higher-level thinking does not always result in mastery of the TAAS, a technical test of cultural literacy. Preparing Caleb for this test did not allow much time for higher level thinking skills.

Caleb had a hard time when it came to double negatives. "Hardly never" was a frequently used phrase in his home. He told me more than once that his mom "hardly never" picked him up since he had been going to his grandmother's after school. I also learned from him that he "didn't never have supper except for bread and peanut butter" when he stayed at his grandmother's. He was glad for the free school breakfast and lunch.

Caleb worked hard in my class. He memorized all the negatives, including hardly, barely, and scarcely. He learned to recognize questions testing his knowledge of the grammar rule that restricts the use of two negatives in one sentence. It was always the one that had negative words in the answer choices. He could look at the underlined section of the sentence and identify the negatives. If there was only one negative word in the sentence, then the answer was "D: No Mistakes." But, Caleb knew to always double-check his answer just as he did in math. He would circle all the negatives in the answer choices to make sure they each had two negatives. If an answer choice had only one negative, then Caleb knew he needed to look at the underlined sentence again. This was the time to remember those tricky words like hardly, barely, and scarcely that are negative even though they don't have no or not in them.

This process and others like it were the strategies that my Black English speakers, like Caleb, had to use to increase their chances of passing the TAAS test. Many of my students who had not grown up learning Standard English grammar patterns were able to pass the TAAS test using these kinds of processes to analyze test questions and answers. Was I teaching the test? In my estimation, I was doing what I learned would make the difference between passing and failing for many of my students. I felt obligated to do whatever necessary to give my students the advantages that others had by simply being born into the privilege of learning Standard English as a cultural norm.

My students who were born into homes privileged by the use of Standard English did not have to think when they answered many usage questions. They simply answered based on what sounded right. Here lay the critical disparities of the TAAS test. Students raised with the dominant cultural norms, especially language patterns, have a leg up on achieving passing scores on a test. Students raised outside the dominant cultural norms, especially language pattern norms, often fail on a socially-constructed test based on dominant language patterns rather than critical communication abilities. But there's an irony here. The fostering of critical thinking abilities is claimed as an almost universal goal of our educational system. But who here is doing the critical thinking? Is it the student who correctly answers the question because from an early age he has learned that this form "sounds right" or Caleb who must think through all of his answers? It was Caleb who demonstrated his ability to learn and think critically when he answered the double negative question correctly after he thought about why the one that sounded right (to him) was incorrect, and then reasoned his way to the correct answer. Explicitly, the test gave greater credit to speakers of Standard English who passed with a minimal score than to Caleb whose score fell short by the difference of one incorrect answer. The skills that Caleb was applying do not show up on multiple-choice tests provided by the state. I would venture that the people who constructed this test have never thought about the exam in the way I am detailing here.

The test makers are also unlikely to have thought much of the dilemma posed by
the case of Raylon Jones, who was in my seventh grade language arts class. He was labeled “at risk” and a slow learner but was required to take the TAAS test. Based on his Individual Education Plan (IEP), Raylon could go to the Tyler Academic Support Center (TASC). The center was a room in our school where supposedly academically deficient students could go for academic support whenever they requested to be sent. This particular year, the TAAS test was to be administered in October, and Raylon was going to have to take it without modifications. This was my problem. I was required by law to prove that I was “modifying instruction and assessment” for Raylon, so I was required to send him to the TASC Room if he requested. But I knew that if I didn’t have Raylon in my class everyday, there was no way that I could attempt to teach him what he needed to know to be successful on the TAAS.

Caring is sometimes very hard and complicated work. I did not let Raylon go to the TASC room; rather I made Raylon do the same work as the other students. In less than two weeks I got a call from Raylon’s mother who knew her son’s rights. I thought that I knew what Raylon needed from me as a teacher, but I listened to Mrs. Jones’ concerns and realized that the thing she feared most was Raylon receiving a failing grade on his report card. I negotiated a solution with Mrs. Jones that required a lot of trust on both our parts. I guaranteed her that Raylon would receive a passing grade on his report card no matter what his performance during the six-week period. (She promised to not tell Raylon.) In return, she also promised to support me by insisting to her son that he had to do whatever I said was best. She agreed that she would not show anger toward him when he whined and complained about me not sending him to TASC or modifying his work but would instead firmly tell him that he had to do whatever I said.

An interesting thing happened: Raylon’s performance improved. He quit asking to go to TASC and quit whining about the work being too hard. Of course the work was still hard for him, and he failed the test, but his mother and I both knew that he did much better than he would have done if I had followed the letter of the law that put Raylon and me in a no-win situation.

These two stories, different as they may seem, make a similar point. The TAAS test is not a good indicator of what I was accomplishing with my students, and often the test and the regulations that accompany it get in the way of student learning. During my ten years in public schools, I became more and more conscious of the dilemma I was forced into by standardized curriculums driven by the TAAS testing system. The only legitimate rationale that teachers could use to motivate students was that passing the TAAS was the avenue to successfully jumping through all the hoops between where they were and a good job someday. More and more, I realized that many of my students, after successfully mastering the TAAS in middle school, were still not accessing college and good jobs. For them, education, at least education of the type represented by the TAAS test, was not an avenue for social mobility.

My teaching practice became subversive pedagogy, creative and critical. I attempted to raise the standard of education for my students in spite of the TAAS system. My goal in writing this essay is to challenge educators to think critically about the implications of TAAS and other legislated tests and mandates. Have the people who create these tests considered the test’s role as one that does not promote critical thinking but rather reinforces educational practices that support socioeconomic privilege? Have they considered the Calebs who fail the test while bringing to it the critical thinking skills the test architects would presumably endorse? Have they thought about the students who grow up around standard English and are, therefore, not being tested on anything they have learned in school? Has it occurred to them that the experienced classroom teacher who knows a Raylon Jones might be in better place to supervise his learning than a legislator or educationist who has never met him?

We need to focus on issues such as this as TAAS tests and other forms of top-down mandates, exams, and assessments will not be going away soon. I hope that the stories I have told here will help advance this discussion.

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Editors’ Note:

Even though the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) had, since its inception in 1991, included a writing component, the writing part of the test called not for writing but for multiple-choice responses. It was this test for which Moss was preparing her students. In 2003 the TAAS test was replaced by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skill (TAKS), which will require students to respond in writing to many of the exam’s challenges.