

Introduction to the Third Edition

There is an air of desperation about curriculum and testing decisions in the schools today. That tone and the accompanying drama they produce have been the result of the publication of test scores and the inevitable comparisons they bring in the public mind. Tests are bestowed with a neutrality, perfectibility, and finality that belie their development and use in real life. They are debated and discussed in legislative halls and editorial pages without any knowledge of the motivations, assumptions, false hopes, and flaws that were part of their creation and continue to be present in their utilization. Where once tests were *means to ends*, they have now become ends in themselves. To some, it doesn't matter what they measure or if they measure anything significant at all; it only matters that they be high. Whereas *learning* used to be the purpose of education, now it is scoring well on tests no matter what they are. Today, schools are considered "good places" not because of their environments for learning and the development of human growth across the board on measures of becoming more fully human and humane, instead they are judged according to their confinement to the "core" academic subjects—not defined as the Greeks did, which included music and physical education, but as the Puritans did in their quest to eliminate sin. Testing used to be a service to the main function of education. Today, it is a business with a definitive bottom line squarely set in a "for-profit" market model.

What is lost in the testing discussion is that it is part of the larger social struggle for power in our society. Tests are not only a particular type of tool, but also they are weapons in that contestation. There are winners and losers with the employment of tests in the schools,

not only within schools but also in the larger confrontations and movement in whole societies and between nations. The putative “Father of American Public Education,” Horace Mann, found in tests a powerful weapon to advance his control of schooling. In Mann’s classic battle with the Boston schoolmasters, he devised a test in secret, had copies printed, and then would take his horse and buggy to a local school, order the teachers to bring all students to the auditorium, and administer the test. After this scenario, he would drive away and later release the test scores with a blast at the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the schools. He used this method to centralize state educational power. We are using the same method to propose decentralization and privatization today. In this scenario, tests are not diagnostic tools. They have become weapons in a test of wills. Schools whose pupil populations do not do well are assumed to be “poor,” when the fact is that many are simply organizations serving the poor.

Most practicing educators know that many tests have little to do with any local, state, or national curricula. Any cursory “eye-ball” analysis of such scores in the local media after the test results are released will inevitably show that the highest scores come from the richest areas of the state or city and the lowest from the poorest areas. The injustices meted out to poor, minority students in the name of tests are a national scandal. They are placed in double jeopardy—first because they are poor, and second because color is related to poverty. What can educators do when tests are used as weapons to punish someone for being poor, black, or Hispanic? The answer is to make sure students are prepared to take the tests. To do this well means to engage in *alignment* and to confront the cult of secrecy that surrounds many testing programs.

If a test is going to serve as a measure of accountability, there can be no secrecy. To be held accountable within the concept of *fairness and due process*, a person must know what is expected, have an opportunity to learn what is expected, and be provided an opportunity to demonstrate whether he or she can actually do the task. Keeping tests secretive violates due process. I’ve had this conversation with testing bureau personnel of many state departments of education, some of them quite heated. The logic embedded in accountability is not the same logic embedded in tests, particularly the norm-referenced standardized variety. Curiously, in private conversations, most of the representatives of the testing

companies who sell the tests on the road agree with me. If they don't, they can't say so publicly. How can the schools do better on tests if they are kept secret? If the tests don't measure any specific curriculum, how can they be used to fairly assess any local or state curricula, the ones most teachers and administrators are really accountable to teach and supervise?

I find the naïveté of some of the testing advocates appalling. When a board of education threatens contractual nonrenewal of a superintendent who somehow can't improve test scores, the idea that one should not "teach to the test" is counterintuitive. The testing advocates want to believe that tests are neutral diagnostic tools designed to "help" schools become better. They ignore 30 years of research that shows that what drives most test scores has nothing to do with what is going on in schools or who is working in them but is predicated and anchored by the socioeconomic dispositions of school clientele. They want to continue to posture that knowledge is neutral and that the tests are assessing something open and equally accessible and available to all the students who are compelled to take them. They want to continue to believe that all children have an equal start to acquire the cultural capital that is included on test content, including the linguistic skills and conceptual fields in which schools transact their main business. Tests assume that there is a cultural and linguistic homogeneity present that is defied by anyone who is now working in schools that are becoming increasingly more diverse, especially in the nation's urban school centers. Schools still reflect and reproduce larger socioeconomic group divisions. They are Bourdieu's (1993) notion of *habitus* personified, and the testing industry reinforces such divisions by enshrining the same forms of cultural capital regnant in school curricula.

Deciding What to Teach and Test opened this conversation in 1992. It's still going on. I keep working in this vineyard only because of my outrage at the false cloak of impartiality that shields the testing business from the scrutiny it deserves. Tests do not treat all children with equality, let alone equity. The fact that the constant predictors of test performance are grounded in socioeconomic class, race, and gender reveal the deep and biased fault lines that permeate the larger society are reflected in the schools and reinforced by the industry.

We are not, as some of our politically conservative critics charge, the children of John Dewey. I wish it were so. We are, rather,

the children of Frederick Winslow Taylor. The accountability movement is Taylorism personified, especially in the measurement of work, which testing represents in education. That it becomes fairer is the key to its continuation, though its recasting around more neutral forms of cultural capital is a much better solution, but one that would be stoutly resisted by the elites who now control the schools. Tests and the cultural capital they represent are not now fair, open, or equitable. They remain locked in the false scientism and genetic frauds of the 19th and early 20th centuries that, unfortunately, promise to be extended into the new century. That we should initiate the process of untangling this racist, sexist, and class-based system masquerading as meritocracy is long overdue.

Editor's Note: Fen English is one of the most insightful and creative educational scholars of our time. In this completely updated revision of his seminal work on improving student achievement he continues the journey by exploring current relationships between learning and mere scoring.

Most important, he expands the discourse with an exciting new chapter on curriculum leadership, including illustrations for the concept of organizational slack—as well as an expanded exploration of the importance of cultural capital in assessing the achievement gap.