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"From the Diane Ravitch's blog

Gerri K. Songer Explains Why Common Core Tests Are Actually Harmful to Students

by dianeravitch

Gerri K. Songer, a literacy specialist in Illinois, here explains what is wrong with the Common Core tests:

I was asked by my EA President and the Superintendent of IL HS Township Dist. 214 to review Smarter Balanced, ACT, SAT, and PARCC. The following is a portion of my review:

“In terms of text complexity, ACT, SAT, and PARCC all use excessively high level text. PARCC is by far the worst assessment for many reasons, some of them including the use of multiple passages between which comparisons and contrasts are made; finite detail-oriented questions; and multi-step cognitive analysis. Yet, the ACT disseminated last March resembled PARCC in reading and mathematics, with the exception of multiple passage comparison/contrast. If the agenda of both ACT and SAT is to become more like PARCC, then one, in essence, wouldn't be any better than another.

I'm still going through the SAT materials, so I'm not able to make any conclusions about this assessment yet. I don't see anything strikingly different in Smarter Balanced, other than the listening portion of this assessment. Like PARCC, it contains multi-passage comparison/contrast, but at least the text used in these comparisons is shorter. Text is still excessively high. One significant difference ACT has over other assessments is the use of the following scaffolding: <http://www.act.org/standard/planact/english/index.html> This format is easier for teachers to work with, and it helps them target individual skills on which to focus in different level courses and grade levels.

There is no research I have come across that supports the use of archaic vocabulary used in primary source documents such as the Declaration of Independence to “level the playing field” in terms of comprehension. In fact, research supports the opposite. The single most important component of reading comprehension is background knowledge. Even when students cannot understand vocabulary terms used in a reading passage, they can still glean meaning from text using context to compensate for words they don't understand.

Using archaic vocabulary only favors high achieving, high socio-economic students who have the fortitude and patience to weed through confusing, complex, and unfamiliar text. To understand this from the students' point of view, I have to ask myself, how intelligent would I appear if I were assessed using text

written in Spanish? I know some Spanish, but I'm not fluent in it, and such an assessment certainly wouldn't appropriately or adequately assess my ability to compare, contrast, synthesize, apply, etc., information for purpose of extracting meaning.

Not only do these assessments not assess what they claim to assess, but I'm also convinced, based on brain research, they are actually harmful to students. The brain only has so much neural support. If the brain is trained through repetition to narrow this neural support to a specific region of the brain, then neural activity will supply less support, or perhaps no longer support, other very important areas of the brain, specifically those areas allowing for the ability to think conceptually and creatively.

Ray Charles was born with sight, but lost his sight early on in his childhood. Once he lost his sight, his senses of hearing and touch became more acute. This happened because neural activity once supporting sight was redirected to support other senses – hearing and touch. Without sight, there was no need for neural activity in this region of the brain, so neurons travelled to other areas that did need support. Fortunately, genius for Ray Charles evolved through his auditory modality in the form of musical, artistic expression.

It is exceedingly concerning that our assessment practices could likely be obstructing the natural development of human thought processes, and my heartfelt message is that this isn't a question of what test is better or worse – this is an issue of morality and calls for careful consideration as to what we as educators are doing to our students in our effort to neatly package their performance into statistical boxes that are misleading, at best, and that lie, at worst. We are using quantitative assessment to evaluate qualitative data – it simply cannot be done. We, as mature adults, are far more advanced than what our cognitive abilities indicated as adolescents.

Unfortunately, government is dictating educational practice, but perhaps it's time to evaluate the government's ability to determine what sound educational practice is. The original intent behind the use of standardized assessment was a noble one, but it has spun out of control, and current research suggests it may actually be detrimental to student learning and damaging to the neurology of the brain.

My best advice is to “take the path less traveled by;” Robert Frost claims it “made all the difference.”

I've always believed students were the educators top priority, even if this means making very difficult decisions with which many may disagree. Funding is not a priority if it comes at the expense of our students' well-being. They are in our care, and we, as adults and as educators, are supposed to know and do what is “educationally” sound for them.

We make mistakes, we learn from them, and then we adjust accordingly. We aren't perfect, but when there is strong evidence indicating our assessment practices are very likely damaging to the natural development of neural activity in the human brain, we should stop what we are doing until this evidence is analyzed through appropriate research. My bet is this could be as simple as speaking with doctors specializing in the neurology of the brain."