

## Present Day Students a.k.a. Victims of Standardized Testing

Ashley Aaron  
Undergraduate Student  
Georgia College & State University

Mercy Tsiwo-Chigubu  
Assistant Professor  
Georgia College & State University

---

### ABSTRACT

**Standardized tests are formal assessment measures. Many formal tests are norm-referenced, or standardized. By formal tests, we mean commercially and formally prepared instruments. When norm-referenced tests are utilized, student' scores can be compared with those of the sample of students who were used to standardize the test (norm sample). In order to ensure that students' scores are compared fairly with the student scores from the norm sample, strict procedures for test administration, scoring, and interpretation must be followed by the test administrators (Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, & Lerner; 2002). Quite the contrary to authentic or informal assessment, the teacher cannot adapt or change formal testing procedures. If we were to use layman's language, we would humbly wind up this equation by stating that: "Standardized tests somehow or somewhat corner the teacher and the students in a tightly closed, remote controlled locked box whose keys are nowhere to be found, hence disallowing both the teacher and the student to work outside of the box" (Tsiwo-Chigubu, 2005).**

---

### **What standardized tests actually do in the classroom?**

This article highlights how standardized testing is currently being put into effect in childhood education classrooms, and its impact on students' learning as well as teachers' teaching, learning, curriculum planning, implementation, and assessment strategies. The paper also affirms that "...right now, it is a given notion that some students will learn and some will not. ...nonetheless,..the reality of American education today is that some students are embarked upon a trip to nowhere" (NASSP, 1996). In this article, the reader is reminded how of late, the education system has placed enormous emphasis on standardized testing on learning and teaching at the expense of what Piaget (1979) describes as "constructivist children's work through play", or what Montessori (1957) cautions "...the adult has not understood the child or the adolescent, and is therefore in continual strife unknown error that prevents him/her seeing the child as he/she is".

### **A Look at Maria Montessori's School of Thought**

According to Dr. Maria Montessori, the real problem is that globally, in every social stratum, (not least among the rich), there is an ongoing disastrous oppression of the weak by the strong – an oppression none the less real and yet devastating in its negative impact because it is exercised "unconsciously", and therefore "unintentionally". Montessori went on to state that it is indeed the strangest kind of oppression, due to the fact that those who exercise it, love those whom they oppress, and sincerely wish rather to help them than to block/hinder them. Paradoxically, the oppressed, for the most part, love their oppressors with all their might and hearts. Let us face it. Parents, care-givers, para-professionals, teachers, superintendents, principals, teachers, business entrepreneurs who are profiting from standardized testing, politicians – in fact all those who have to deal with children's educational lives – are the "guilty ones". Yet, on second thoughts, they are not guilty, because guess what? It is all a tragedy of "misunderstanding" the child, as well as the naivety to what Montessori describes as the "clearest evidence of the ubiquity of this oppression of the misunderstood child". Based on Montessori's contribution to the educational community, there is a conspicuous evidence that everywhere her ideas, on being put into practice, have clearly acted as a liberating force, setting free a new type of child, substituting the one "hitherto oppressed and misunderstood" (Montessori, 1957). One might wonder why she chose to describe young children as "oppressed", nonetheless, there is need to highlight the fact that she identified her name and her movement as "an active social campaign to make *the child understood*". Montessori argued that "a multitude of weak creatures living amongst the strong, without being understood, must be an abyss of unsuspecting evil". If we could take a deep breath, and ask ourselves for a minute what exactly standardized tests do to the young unsuspecting child's mind, we would definitely agree as adults that

“standardized tests must be an abyss of unsuspecting evil” because these tests definitely demoralize those unsuspecting growing children who fail them, and their self-esteem becomes battered for life; leaving permanent scars that might have serious repercussions in the future, especially when the wrath of the test results define that the unsuspecting child who supposedly failed, should be detained in the same class for the next full year ahead of him/her. What a waste of the child’s effort and time! If educators were to revisit the works of Montessori, they would be amazed at the ways that she advocates for children in an “effort to bring about a great social revolution on behalf of the ‘forgotten citizen’ (*il cittadino dimenticato* in Italian) or (in Portuguese expressed as: “*povo Zimbabweano*” meaning “*forgotten Zimbabwean citizen*”) or (*tsuro/shuro yemunhu* in Zimbabwe’s Shona language) whose children’s rights have hitherto never been properly recognized by society” (Chigubu, 2000).

### **Pedagogy of the Oppressed: Montessori’s Version:**

One might ask how we as society would examine more closely the nature of this unique oppression that Montessori discusses, and/or one might wonder who exactly is Montessori (1870 – 1952), and why her? Briefly, Montessori was a peacemaker, whose life was interested in the “underdog”. At age 14, she was very much interested in mathematics, took up a career in engineering (despite being meant for boys only), changed to biology, and after studying it for a while, she changed to study medicine – a move that would be described as “jumping from a frying pan into burning fire”. How could that be to have a woman attend medical school? All the same, after completion of her studies, she began her work with mentally challenged children, and her ideas about child development still prevail! Montessori not only offers us a truly rewarding set of interdisciplinary elements as necessary pedagogy, but also as an outstanding role model whose legacy affirms the idea that it is alright to make drastic changes in our journey through life. Getting to know more about the history of Maria Montessori has empowered some of us prone to change, that the art of “taking-the-drastic-risk-of-dynamic-change” should not be viewed as a negative, but a positive force to reckon on!

### **Education as Armament for Peace**

Montessori was an advocate for young children, and her philosophy has bequeathed to us educators the notion of “prepared environments” and the “normalized child” or “education as armament for peace” and many others. Our responsibility is to come up with definitive rubrics and standards that simultaneously view children as an experimental touchstone of both educational elevation and an empowering human experience as a whole. One might ask: “How do we come up with this creative rubric

for a developmental framework that is not so child-disempowering? Bearing in mind that Montessori seeks the goal of freeing the inner life of the child as well as propagating the relationship existing between the highest activities of the mind and body, we must come up with a kind of rubric that point toward the direction where adults join hands in the liberation of “these enslaved masses”. An approach more humble, more elevating, more reverent, more fulfilling of faith in the inner God-given creative energies within Him that would be! All in all, standardized tests are repressive to the young developing mind! Let us not forget that whenever one section of society is deprived of its rights by another, there always is a ripple effect of tension, and flashback of struggle against the injustice felt by the oppressed that goes on. The oppression of the child has come to be in place due to the phenomenal mental discord between the adult and the child, which has been going on “undisturbed for thousands of years”. In the digital era of today, we find that standardized tests are turning the child into a miniature adult – of no economic or social value in himself. Instead of investing more time in “play”, the child of today is now being asked to spend hours upon hours drilling and rote learning in order to pass the standardized tests. In this era of “No Child left Behind Act” (2001), it is amazing that teachers are having to minimize recess to fifteen minutes only, that is if the children are lucky, thus depriving children their play time, forgetting that for the growing child, “play” enhances the child’s social, cognitive, psychological, physical, intellectual, cultural and linguistic domains!

### **Teachers Eliminating Recess and Child’s Play Time:**

Bear in mind that in worst-case scenario, overwhelmed teachers are eliminating recess totally to make more time for rote learning in preparation for standardized tests instead. What is so depressing is that standardized tests have deplorable and negative impact on low-income neighborhoods that obviously might be in abject poverty and lacking the basic resources, while high income neighborhoods would obviously have schools that are filthy rich in school supplies. Ironically, the standardized tests are all the same whether a child is learning in a deprived learning environment or a child is learning in a mentally nourishing environment. Those are the discrepancies that would leave a lot of “Poor Children Behind”. Further, what happens if children in these under-privileged communities fail those tests? Teachers from these low-income schools might lose their jobs, or the school might lose funding, or the school might receive a warning that bears a stigma which itself is extremely stressful. From this action research’s point of view, the best rubric would be to re-visit and re-think what standardized tests do to childhood education, and we will be surprised that the “negatives” outweigh the “positives”.

### **Authentic Assessment Is Student-Centered, Not Standardized Testing!**

While authentic assessment is developmentally appropriate and student-centered, standardized tests are crafted by adults, who in some peculiar cases might not have a single clue on the various theories of child growth and development, theories behind brain research, let alone the appropriate degrees in the related field of childhood education. What a tragedy! I am sure if Montessori were to come back to life today, she would definitely nod her head in disdain and tell the education policy decision makers the following: “The child is not merely a potential adult, not a being of no constructive social value in himself; not a mere ‘passage’ from nonentity to future citizenship. He/she is a social entity of the highest constructive value, here and now! The child is in fact the other pole of humanity. He/she is also a producer, not a mere testing object! He/she is in fact a constructive part to play in the building up of civilization just as important – if not more so – than that played by the adult who might also be unaware of the stresses experienced by children who have to be constantly subjected to standardized tests”. It is amazing how Montessori’s school of thinking that dates back to 1923, vividly shades light on the way some child advocates view young children in terms of standardized testing today. For instance, when I took my action research class on ethnography that was instructed by Dr. Mercy Tsiwo-Chigubu at Georgia College & State University in 2005, I decided to anchor my research based on Montessori’s philosophy on education. After conducting a series of participatory clinical observations of young children pre-k through 5<sup>th</sup> grade in various early childhood and elementary schools in Middle Georgia, I reached the conclusion that our current education system had various outstanding merits and de-merits, as well as excellent and weak practices that enmesh. Besides Montessori, my research was also grounded on the principles of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and especially its statement of commitment which states: “...ensure that programs for young children are based on current knowledge of child development and early childhood education;” and/or “...serve as an advocate for children, their families, and their teachers in community and society”.

### **Advocates for Children We Are**

As advocates for children, when we look at the big picture presented by standardized testing and endeavor to demythologize the words of Erik Erikson about children, we find that the contrasts existing between these two camps do not cease to haunt us on that regard. Erikson (1950) makes it vividly clear that: “There is in every child at every stage a new miracle of vigorous unfolding, which constitutes a new hope and a new responsibility for all, including you and me.” Speaking from the point of view of a pre-service student teacher (Aaron 2005), who witnessed on numerous occasions, young children pre-K through 5<sup>th</sup> grade, toiling in their individualized cubicles or working strenuously on rote learning in preparation for the standardized testing, I have

become very convinced that standardized testing is a mismatch for the growing child in the early childhood and elementary school settings. I was a participating observer for twelve weeks and what I found during my action research is that children as well as teachers exhibit stress when it comes to standardized testing in childhood settings. Based on what Montessori (1923), Piaget (1926 & 1952), Vygotsky (1934 & 1962), and others, I strongly believe that anyone who wishes to respect the developing interior of the child must therefore respect certain elementary rights. Amongst these, one could single out the right to “play”, the right to independence, the right to activity, the right to explore the world for him/her, and the right to construct new ideas. Unfortunately, these rights are constantly being eroded in the wake of commercialized standardized tests! Here is the experience and exposure I had that opened my eyes to the point of not resting until my professor and I collaborated in weaving the research findings into this article!

### **My Action Research Class with Dr. Mercy Tsiwo-Chigubu**

When Dr. Tsiwo-Chigubu (2005) taught the class about the differences that existed between note making and note-taking in action research-cum-practicum, I did not realize that this was the beginning of my breath-taking journey on ethnography. Further, when I was first told that my field placement was going to be at a low-income school X, I did not know what to expect. As a White student from a middle class environment and who had never been exposed to a low income predominantly Black neighborhood school, I tried to fight the stereotypes that kept creeping into my mind. One might ask: “What are some of the stereotypes you had prior to ethnography?” Well, I could make a list, however for the sake of this article, I would mention just a few! What my mind entertained included the following stereotypes: a) that low-income Black children would misbehave continuously, b) that they had dirty bathrooms, c) that the school would be very poor to the extent of lacking school supplies, d) that students would use old tattered books, e) that Black teachers in this low income school did not care, and the list goes on!

### **A Rude Shock I Got Upon My Arrival at School X**

When I arrived at school X carrying my emotional baggage loaded with all sorts of stereotypes, I started unpacking my baggage sooner than later. Guess what, soon I became rapidly disillusioned! Yes, I proved myself wrong. What I actually found was that while it is a stinging and painful reality that this particular low-income school “X” lacked in basic school supplies and that students used somewhat worn-out textbooks, amazingly these students and teachers were exactly the opposite of all the negative stereotypical characteristics I had envisioned before going there for my placement. I met several children that were well behaved and were serious and excited about learning. I

met several teachers who were completely dedicated to their students' progress despite the poverty that was conspicuous in that learning environment, compared to predominantly White and affluent schools I am used to. Both the faculty and the students tried their best to make their school a good place to be. However, there will always be challenges here and there. Sometimes one can only do so much when the school operates on extremely limited funds. While the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was supposed to be the biggest reform for early childhood education, I think the politicians and policy decision makers forgot a few key aspects of the hidden curricula in education; and this could lead to serious problems for schools especially low-income schools. This kind of reflection is echoed by scholars who speak of the stigmatized child as the "forgotten citizen" ((Montessori, 1957, & Chigubu, 2000). As an ethnographer of 2005, I discovered that children, due to the excruciating demands of standardized testing are no longer given time to be children and do the things that children are supposed to do like to play independently with their friends and to promote the use of their unique imaginations. Montessori cites this kind of adult behavior as "ignorance". She goes on to state: "It is ignorance that deprives the child of these more spiritual rights, play rights, independence rights, constructivism and self-talk rights; as it was ignorance a hundred years ago which denied him his rights as a physical organism".

### **Poverty That Is Pervasive in Low-Income Communities in the USA**

For instance, the children at school X did not have a playground at all, not by choice but due to lack of funds. To imagine that in the United States of America we have a school that does not have a playground is incomprehensible. What the young children had were a few makeshift broken items. If the children were fortunate enough to get recess, they had to play in the parking lot full of cars. Montessori (1957) comments: "Any adult who deprives the child of the elementary rights to "play" is laying up trouble for the child and for himself/herself too. I totally agree with Montessori. It is through play that children develop socially, cognitively, intellectually, psychologically, and physically and not through impoverished learning environments plus standardized testing. I fondly grew attached to my students and for my "exit gift" six weeks later, I brought a basket of toys which I thought they could use outside to help stimulate their outside free play time (Aaron, 2005). This is the extent to which I stand out to what I see myself as a child advocate, and child activist who should speak out to give voice to young children. One should have seen the broad smiles on their faces when I gave them the toys, versus the long miserable faces one would see when the children get subjected to standardized tests! Children need free play time to learn and explore this should be included in early childhood education curriculum. Children also need resources to facilitate their free time play. "According to Piaget, as children engage in symbolic play (making cake out of sand, using a water hose to be a firefighter) they make sense of the objects and activities surrounding them" (Mooney, 2000), unlike giving them paper, pencil, and timed standardized test as measure for success. The problem with tests is on how one could

measure success on results gotten from rote learning? Standardized tests negate the reality that Howard Gardner's (1983b) multiple intelligences theory advocates.

### **Dedicated Teachers Amidst Physical Learning Environments**

During my observations one of the first things that stuck out to me was that the walls were very plain especially for an elementary school. "In most elementary schools there are bright colorful murals painted on the walls and the student's artwork is displayed down the halls" (Aaron, 2005). Maria Montessori believed a bright engaging environment stimulated children's learning because it kept them in a good mood and from becoming bored. At my field placement school "The few decorations displayed in the classroom appeared old and outdated, to a point where I thought the children subjected to such impoverished learning environments would be missing the visual stimulation" (Aaron, 2005). What I really admired about my caring host teacher was that despite the tight budget beyond her control, she kept holding onto her faith in trying to make the classroom a little more decorative by recycling and using old posters that could have been more appealing to the students if the budget allowed her to get the more durable and colorful ones, especially that children like bright colors that stand out to look exciting.

### **Play Makes the Childhood Education Curriculum Whole**

On the question of "play" and its importance in child development, the reasons most teachers gave for cutting playtime were mostly grounded on the pressure to pass tests. Standardized testing has become the "bear in the tub" from how I see it, and it has almost become the main goal of the classroom, at the expense of student-centered learning. Teachers are becoming so focused on their students passing scores, and one could see how they now been forced to worry more about the grade than if the student is actually learning. One example I witnessed was after grading a test that many of the students had failed, my host teacher replied to me "I will test them again on Thursday and write all the possible answers on the board. I tend to get more 100's that way (Aaron, 2005). I was outraged she did not care if they had mastered the skill she just wanted 100s to write down in her grade book. This however seems to be a trend for all schools in the United States not just low-income schools trying to get funding. "Our students have been taking more tests more often than any nation on the face of the earth . . ." (Meier, 2000). I think that standardized testing has become "a torturing tool" especially when it becomes the standard used to determine teachers' promotion, child's promotion to the next grade, graduation to the next class, or that the school loses its funding and reputation. Many teachers base their entire curriculum around the standardized testing content. "When



teaching to the test, the test does not become an assessment of a student's mastery of content; instead it becomes a fully charged disempowering curricular tool. The teacher is forced to make instructional decisions that are not based on prior professional experience, or what is of academic importance, or what is in the best interest of the student; instead, decisions are based on what is most likely to be included on the standardized test (Shepard, 1991), which then makes it a business enterprise for profit to those companies preparing the tests, and not an educational empowering tool for the students and teachers.

### **Teachers Are Not to Blame, It is The Standardized Testing to Blame:**

One should not blame the teacher if children do not do well on the tests. What should be borne in mind is that some children might have subtle to invisible learning disabilities, or some might have parents who are illiterate and never get assistance with homework. However, today the results of the standardized tests are way too powerful, and yet deceiving. Unfortunately, in many school systems today, a teacher's job relies on the standardized results of the test. It is ludicrous that we put so much emphasis on one test. Nobody is benefiting from the developing child's point of view, especially when research tells us that each child is unique, and each child develops at a different pace from everybody else. The question is: "How do we assess in a way that can better assist students' learning?" It is intriguing to find that there other scholars like Steeves, Hodgson and Peterson (2002) who also present an interesting insight on standardized testing by stating: "As the curriculum becomes more narrow, content and skills that are not on the standardized assessment are eliminated. In fact, teachers feel pressure to make sure classroom activities correspond to material on the assessment even though they may know other materials will better prepare students for success in the world". I do agree with them. We find that today the school has been narrowed to reading and mathematics at the expense of art, music, physical education, home economics, dance, debate, and many other creative subjects that help the child to become "whole" (Kamii, 1992). I strongly propose that learning and teaching should be fulfilling and leave the child "whole". Further, from the exposure that I had to do clinical field studies in low-income communities, I now believe that it is more important, especially for children in low-income schools, to learn skills they will need to survive in life amidst the pervasive poverty, than rote learning what will be on a standardized test! That is the recipe we need to adopt if we want our students to do more for them, and to become dedicated, hardworking, and loyal citizens.

## **Unpacking My Stereotypes and Facing Reality**

Talk of intrusive lack of supplies; there was an incident that surprised me as I continued to unpack my stereotypes, which I brought along with me to the field placement focusing on observing the developing child in both early childhood and elementary school settings. I was mesmerized when I noticed that on several occasions my host teacher made her own worksheets and that she had to purchase her own teaching manuals. What a defining moment it was for me! The experience surprised me because I expected that all public education teachers would at least receive free teaching manuals regardless of their geographical location (Aaron, 2005). I would have imagined that if the state holds teachers accountable for how well their students do on a standardized test, it would be a given that the teaching manuals would be bought for the teachers in public education.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, I should indicate that present day early childhood, elementary, or middle school students, whether they are in low-income neighborhoods or not, they all seem to be negatively impacted by standardized testing. The placement in a low-income neighborhood school definitely convinced me that students from poverty stricken neighborhoods are hit a far harder than children from affluent communities due to the disparities that exist between them in terms of availability in resources. I think time is now for policy decision makers to consider seriously the pros and cons of the topic in question, and channel all energies into what is needed to focus on as far as education is concerned!

**Question:**

“Do you want free advice from an undergraduate student teacher and ethnographer?”

**Answer:**

“Forget about all the standardized testing!”

**Question:**

“Why?”

**Answer:**

We need to teach our children what they need to know in terms of survival skills, and how to lead successful happy school lives by at least providing them with adequate resources such as well equipped playgrounds, music equipment, dance opportunities, home economics laboratories, wood work classes, physical education facilities and an abundance in art supplies to assist them in eradicating the build-up of stress that leads to

gun violence in some of the American schoolyards. In my opinion, standardized testing robs young students of their joy, and violates freethinking, an acquisition of independent life skills. Instead of having children eat in the absence of physical activities, sit for long hours rote learning in order to excel and/or just make it in the standardized testing sessions, worrying about failing, getting stressed out, and becoming obese due to absence of play and physical education, let us re-visit, re-think, and revamp the learning environment by taking a holistic approach in negating standardized tests! There are simply are a killer! Think of it, what will happen to all those children who fail the test? They might resent the school system. They might resort to picking up fights on the school bus, hallways, or on the way home. In extreme cases they might even bring to school some loaded guns to use them to shoot to kill, or others might bring pseudo-guns to use as a way to vent their frustrations on their classmates. On the other hand, a good number with battered self-esteem might wind up carrying the stigmatized label that every child hates in American schools and that label is: "Special Needs". It is not surprising to hear either a pre-K student or a 5<sup>th</sup> grader blurt out these words: "I'm not special" or "Ha! Ha! She is special. She goes to the special needs classroom. Special means you are dumb!" While a few might be brave enough to walk around the school premises with wounded dignity, others might give in and drop out of school to evade the stigma that is coined with failure to pass the standardized tests. All in all, standardized testing is a good recipe of what could be termed: "*A killer of the voiceless in the US classrooms of today*".

## References

- Aaron, A. (2005). An ethnographic clinical research using "*narratives*" that I carried out in Middle Georgia as a part of Developmental Learning: Theory into Practice Course instructed and supervised by Dr. Mercy Tsiwo-Chigubu: Assistant Professor at Georgia College & State University, Milledgeville, Georgia. USA.
- Chigubu, M. (2000). Exploring self-esteem of orphans whose parents died of HIV/AIDS; examined through the extended family/kinship caregivers' economic well-being, social support networks, and child rearing practices in Zimbabwe. Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. UMI: Dissertation Services, ProQuest Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Erikson, E. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: W. W. Norton
- Gardner, H. (1983b). Artistic Intelligences. In S. Dobbs (Ed.), Art and the mind (special issue). Art Education, 36 (2), 47-49.
- Kamii, C. (1992). Autonomy as the aim of constructivist education: How can it be fostered? In D. G. Murphy & S. G. Goffin (Eds.), *Project Construct, a curriculum guide: Understanding the possibilities*, pp. 9 – 14. Jefferson City, MO: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

- Montessori, M. (1957). The story of a great educator whose revolutionary approach to teaching changed the course of modern education. Hollis & Carter Limited.
- Meier, D. (2000). Will standards save public education? Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mooney, C. 2000. Theories of Childhood: An Introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget & Vygotsky. St.Paul: Red leaf Press.
- National Association of Secondary School Principals. (1996). Breaking ranks: Changing an American institution. Reston, VA: Author.
- Piaget, J. (1926). The language and thought of the child. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Piaget, J. (1952). The origins of intelligence in children. New York: International Universities Press.
- Richek, M. A; Caldwell J. S.; Jennings, J. H. & Lerner, J. W. (2002). Reading problems: Assessment and teaching strategies. Allyn & Bacon. A Pearson Education Co.
- Shepard, L. 1991. Will national tests improve student learning? Phi Delta Kappan
- Steeves, K., Hodgson, J. & Peterson, P. (2002). Are we measuring student success with high-stakes testing? Kappa Delta Pi
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1934/1962). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.