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Why schools used to be better

By Marion Brady

You enter a checkout lane at Walmart, Target, or other big-box store and put your purchases on the counter. They’re scanned by a device that reads bar codes and translates them into data fed at the speed of light through fiber optics cables to corporate headquarters and distribution centers.

The data produced by the bar code readers keep track of inventory, determine appropriate staffing levels, provide feedback about advertising effectiveness, and much else that guides decision making.

Those in Washington now shaping education policy are certain that what data tracking does for business it can do for education.

But there’s a problem. Kids don’t come with bar codes, and teachers don’t have scanners. Nancy Creech, the Michigan kindergarten teacher who recently told her story here on The Answer Sheet, summarized a consequence of data-collecting mandates. Authorities in her state, unwilling to trust her professional judgment, require her to give more than 27,000 grades or marks to her 4- and 5-year-olds. That number, evenly distributed over the school year, would require her to take a data-related action every two minutes of every school day!

This, of course, is ridiculous — almost as ridiculous as assuming that machine-scored standardized tests produce important data about the mental ability and future potential of those who take them.

As others have pointed out, computer programmers have an appropriate acronym for irrelevant data: “GIGO”—“Garbage In, Garbage Out.” If data fed into a computer is nonsense, the data coming out will be nonsense.

The non-educators now in charge of education have the teaching profession awash in GIGO.

Scores on tests created by and for the dominant culture but given to every kid? GIGO. Scores on tests that can’t evaluate original or complex thought? GIGO. Scores on tests deliberately designed to produce a pre-determined failure rate? GIGO. Scores on life-affecting tests that ignore dozens of variables over which educators have no control? GIGO. Scores on tests that ...well, you get my point.

Put aside for the moment the data produced by commercially manufactured, machine-scored standardized tests, and consider this data (<http://www.schoolsmatter.info/2012/10/us-leads-world-in-downloading.html>):

United States: 61,361
Germany: 31,122
China: 19,826
UK: 8,066
Japan: 6,915
Canada: 6,752
Australia: 6,020
India: 5,552
France: 4,880
South Korea: 4,630

Those are the numbers, by country, of scientific articles downloaded from the internet over a 24 hour period on April 12, 2012. Do they suggest America's educational system is teetering on the edge of catastrophe? Or do they instead raise questions about the usefulness and reliability of test scores that say we're 17th in the world in science and 25th in math?

The lack of fit between our standardized test scores and our scientific productivity calls for explanations. Possibilities: Unlike at least some other countries, America tests just about every kid; educational systems differ from country to country in what's taught to whom, when, making direct comparisons impossible; an increasing number of American kids, tired of the guessing game, no longer take tests seriously.

But perhaps what's most important in international comparisons is that the published scores are country averages, and it's not a country's average kids but its high scorers who grow up to download scientific papers.

And America has a lot of high scorers.

Surely a more important question, then — one that's not being asked — is “Why does America have far more than its share of high scorers?”

Here's a theory: Up until this generation of kids — before business leaders and politicians took control of schooling, before No Child Left Behind, before Race to the Top, before high-stakes testing, before the drive to super-standardize, before the not-enough-rigor hysteria — a usefully descriptive word for America's system of education was “loose.”

In that earlier era, I taught in four high schools. They differed — rural, urban, rich, poor, big, small — but on certain measures, they were alike.

In all four, my professional judgment was respected. I was free to capitalize on what educators call “teachable moments,” free to make use of local issues, free to appropriately pace instruction, free to experiment with alternative approaches, free to adapt to a class's distinctive “personality.” And probably most importantly, I was free from mandates directing me to try to standardize kids. That meant I could deal differently with them, could, for example, know who was most likely to be reading scholarly articles 10, 20, 30 years down the road and steer them appropriately.

Second, all the schools offered more elective classes than are now available. Freedom to adapt their schedules to their interests and abilities put fewer kids in classes in which they held back those future readers of scholarly articles.

Third, no test-based, stress-creating fog of fear permeated the four schools. The usual, sometimes-stupid policies that came down from state departments of education (often stemming from some powerful state legislator's whim), could be ignored without threatening loss of professional reputation or job.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that in the good old days America's schools were great. I've written whole books about why they weren't, and what could be done to make them better. I am saying that before decisions about what's taught were made in Washington, before the attacks of the privatizers, before rigor-mania, schools were better than they now are. System looseness allowed teachers to teach, and a sufficient number of them did it well enough to turn out kids who eventually downloaded those 61,361 scholarly papers.

As the students of that "loose" era retire, replaced by standardized test-takers and test-prep teachers, kiss the creativity goose that laid the golden eggs goodbye.

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