

Accounting for Context: Rethinking Accountability Policy Pedagogically

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I contribute to the critical discussion of current test-based accountability policies in schooling. Based on Daniel Koretz' analysis of standardised testing as a basis for accountability, I argue that standardised testing can be viable tools for school development if used correctly. These tests carry no information on the causes of low test results since they cannot take into account the contexts in which these results were measured. In order to implement meaningful change, knowledge of schools' contexts is paramount. I conclude, therefore, that while standardised tests may be useful to identify schools in need of support, it is vital to determine exactly how this support should look like, in immediate cooperation with the people involved in those schools.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will provide a conceptual alternative to the current use of standardised testing in accountability policies. I will first analyse why standardised testing is not suited to achieve the goals of said policies and how such tests are detrimental to schooling. I will then argue that test-based accountability is built on what I call the economic fallacy. In a third step, I will demonstrate that standardised tests fail to provide the contextual information needed to implement meaningful change in schooling. Based on that, I will suggest an approach to school development that draws on the strengths of standardised tests and combines them with a pedagogical perspective. Thus, it is my contention; standardised testing can be transformed into a fruitful instrument of change.

TEST-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY

The basic idea of current accountability policies is commendable. They purport to hold schools and teachers accountable for the quality of their work. This, their proponents claim, will lead to a higher extrinsic motivation for teachers to do well. Thereby, accountability policies are supposed to help improve student performance through better teaching.¹ However, this is not as simple as it is made out to be, because accountability policies are based on a false assumption of linearity between teaching and student performance.

This problematic assumption shows itself in the means accountability policies employ to achieve their goal of improving education quality. Their method of choice is standardised

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¹ Daniel Koretz, *The Testing Charade. Pretending to Make Schools Better* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5-6.

testing of student proficiency. Daniel Koretz has deconstructed the notion of accountability through testing.² I will revisit some of the points he made and develop them further. Most centrally, I will build on his observation that standardised tests can be a useful tool if applied appropriately.³

Standardised testing in schools is problematic for various reasons, one being that it reduces schooling and its complexity to test scores. As a result, student performance in standardised tests becomes the sole measure of the quality of both teaching and learning. This is a far too simplistic view of what education quality is for several reasons. I shall elaborate on two. The first one pertains to the scope of what schooling is. The second one is what I call the *economic fallacy*.

ON THE SCOPE OF SCHOOLING

The simplistic view of schooling underlying current accountability policies ignores that schooling is about more than what is commonly described as a qualification. This is indeed an important function of schooling. It means that students are supposed to acquire basic skills in various subject areas, such as mathematics, languages, science, and more. However, there are other, equally essential functions that schooling is supposed to fulfil that Biesta describes as socialisation and subjectivation⁴, for instance, but there are different terms in use. Schooling is tasked with helping students to become members of society as well as independent individuals, who can act purposefully and think critically, thus contributing to and holding the ideal of democracy aloft.

This is something that standardised tests cannot take into account because it is not measurable in that way. According to Biesta, not even the qualification function of schooling can be fully measured. Hence, what is being tested under the guise of accountability is not even the full scope of what qualification can and should be.⁵ While aiming for excellent proficiency of all students is a commendable goal, doing so to the detriment of other aspects of schooling is highly problematic. Within the framework of accountability, however, there seems to be no room for those. Thus, making test scores the central and often only measure

² Most recently Koretz, *The Testing Charade*.

³ Koretz, *The Testing Charade*, 15

⁴ Gert J. J. Biesta, "Good Education in an Age of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect with the Question of Purpose in Education," *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21, no. 1 (2009): 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

reduces schooling to a fraction of what it is.

Worse even, there seems to be a clear tendency by policymakers to turn that which is – allegedly – measured into that which schooling ought to do, but in accordance with Hume’s law, “what ought to be done can never be logically *derived* from what is.”⁶ The Austrian education standards of 2008 were a reaction to the dissatisfactory results of the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA). In their conception, they follow the literacy logic of the PISA tests and, thereby, were supposed to contribute to a rise in education quality – as defined by PISA. Germany has followed a comparable path as well. This again shows how standardised testing – even with the goal of improving schooling – contributes to the reduction of its scope.

THE ECONOMIC FALLACY

Assuming that test scores are clear and linear indicators of teaching quality is based on a very specific view of what education is. Existing accountability policies approach education with systems of thought from economics. They view student performance as the product – the so-called output – of an education process. And they presume that teachers are responsible for this product because they are responsible for the teaching input that supposedly facilitated the output. Hence, if the product is proved to be dissatisfactory employing standardised tests, teachers and schools are alleged to be failing.

This is what I call the economic fallacy: to assume that education follows an economic production logic. Education is *not* an economic production process and measuring the so-called output of this process is therefore not suited to evaluate either the quality of the process or the quality of teaching.

THE RELEVANCE OF CONTEXT

Accountability policies assume that student proficiency measured by standardised tests is a direct result of teaching, ignoring the fact that student learning is influenced by a variety of factors beyond the scope of teaching or schooling. While good teaching is more likely to result in good student performance, and bad teaching runs the risk of below-average proficiency, low test scores do not necessarily mean that teaching was at fault. David Berliner, for instance, identified income-

⁶ Ibid., 35.

inequality, or poverty, to be one of the major factors impacting student performance.⁷ This is a societal issue that translates into low test scores, which are nonetheless interpreted to be caused by insufficient teaching or school quality and attributed accordingly. This example shows that while standardised tests might be able to point towards low student proficiency in a descriptive way, they carry no information whatsoever as to how and under which circumstances these low test scores came to pass.

Standardised tests cannot account for the fact that inner-city schools serve students from very low-income families. They cannot account for the clustering of students who are being taught in a second language. These issues are a simple reality of schooling and are affecting what happens in classrooms. However, they do not show up as what they are in standardised tests, but rather as a failure to achieve proficiency in the domain tested. Therefore, holding teachers responsible for student performance or judging teaching quality by test scores is a problematic shortcut. Any intervention to improve schooling based on a faulty interpretation of test results thus cannot succeed. It cannot succeed because it cannot be directed at the causes of the issue at hand since those remain unknown. If the assumption prevails that low student proficiency by default means low-quality teaching, meaningful change cannot be expected.

The issue, however, does not lie with standardised tests themselves, but rather with how proponents of accountability view and use their results. As Koretz points out, “used sensibly, tests can be tremendously informative, and they can be powerful tools for improving education.”⁸ Based on this remark, I will outline how to rethink test-based accountability in education in a way that acknowledges the potential of standardised tests whilst avoiding their tempting pitfalls. I will focus less on the tests themselves but rather on how other approaches might complement them. While Koretz’ implication seems to be that standardised tests can be useful primarily from a policy design perspective⁹, I will do this from a pedagogical

⁷ David C. Berliner, “Effects of Inequality and Poverty vs. Teachers and Schooling in America’s Youth,” *Teachers College Record*, 116, no. 1 (2014).

⁸ Koretz, *The Testing Charade*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*

perspective because school, after all, is a pedagogical institution.

ENTER: PEDAGOGY

The essence of pedagogy, as I see it, is the teaching and educating of people. This means that, at its centre, pedagogy is always about people. For an institution (like school) or an activity (such as teaching) to be pedagogical, it must always be primarily designed towards and concerned with the benefit for students. And in order to do so, it is paramount to pay heed to the contexts they find themselves in. If that is the benchmark for a pedagogic approach, it becomes clear that standardised testing simply does not suffice as an instrument of evaluation of quality in education. By reducing education to test scores, these tests fail to consider the complexity of the contexts that teachers and students face in schools.

Standardised tests, by design, cannot provide insight into those complexities. They can, however, and this is what I think Koretz means, provide information that may not be useful by itself, but that might be viewed as a starting point of effecting change. What these tests can do is to point out which schools struggle to achieve satisfactory student proficiency. Granted, a question that needs answering first and that I have brought up earlier is the question of which domains should be tested in the first place.¹⁰ This is not a pedagogical question but a societal one. Existing tests focus on a very select number of domains, typically mathematics, reading, and the sciences. While I have pointed out that those domains are not the full scope of schooling, they undeniably are part of it. Hence, low proficiency in these domains, which standardised tests can show, is still a pedagogical problem.

What current test-based accountability policies tend to do in a case where student proficiency is deemed low (based on test scores) is to implement a policy-based intervention, which is supposed to provide incentives to do better next time. The issue is, that a policy-based intervention must always be a generalised one, for policies are general. It follows that the attempted improvement again cannot take into account the specific context of the school it is supposed to help. Also, as a direct result of this, the intervention cannot be designed towards the causes of said low test scores at that particular school, for those remain unknown. It is my contention that knowing these causes is the prerequisite of helping schools and

¹⁰ Biesta, "Good Education", 43-44

students to do better.

Since these causes cannot be identified by means of standardised testing, another, complementary step is needed. And since the assumption is that said causes are contextual rather than systemic, this step needs to involve the people who know an individual school's context best, that is, teachers, principals, and students. In addition to providing unique insights into potential causes of low performance, it stands to hope that giving them agency in the development of *their* school, will be a strong incentive to promote meaningful change.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the implementation of test-based accountability policies as well as through large-scale international testing of student proficiency, education has been approached with systems of thought that are not pedagogical but economical. This is apparent in the language used to discuss issues of education and schooling. Teachers' responsibility is no longer teaching but classroom management. Schooling is no longer about critical citizenship but about generating human capital. Some of the results of this change in perspective have been discussed here. Moreover, even though reformers set out with the best intention, all empirical evidence speaks to the fact that test-based accountability has done more harm than good. It is my contention that an approach to school policies based on education theories and expertise might yield more agreeable results in the future.

Knowing that standardised tests shape the reality of schooling today and accepting that they will not be rescinded based on conceptual critique, I set out to argue for a way of using standardised test in the manner they were designed to be used. That is, to use them as descriptive tools to identify those schools that need more support. However, rather than applying policy-mandated interventions on schools, which are unable to consider those schools' specific contexts, I argue for finding hands-on, practical solutions developed together with the people who are experts of their contexts.

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