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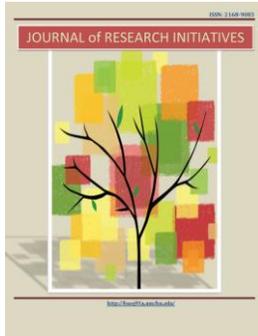
Rethinking Standardized Testing From An Access, Equity And Achievement Perspective: Has Anything Changed For African American Students?

Keywords
Standardized testing, African Americans, Access, Equity, Achievement, Secondary Education, Post-Secondary Education

RETHINKING STANDARDIZED TESTING FROM AN ACCESS, EQUITY AND ACHIEVEMENT PERSPECTIVE: HAS ANYTHING CHANGED FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS?

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Abstract

This study examined standardized testing and its effects on African American students. The authors focused on three perspectives: access, equity, and achievement about students' academic success in their K-12 educational experiences and how the quality of their education and test scores impacted their college acceptance rate, respectively. The three perspectives are specific to the works of Dr. Asa G. Hilliard and Dr. Barbara A. Sizemore, both of whom were passionate about the academic success and progression of students of African descent. Their many works embody a fight against standardized testing for students, especially those of color, and work toward a more sophisticated knowledge assessment. This chapter further explores the possible success of dual achievement in promoting fairness for all students regarding standardized testing.

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Introduction

Retired professor and independent researcher Dr. Harold Berlak (2001) states standardized testing is a form of racism:

> Standardized testing perpetuates institutionalized racism and contributes to the achievement gap between whites and minorities. For instance, the deeply embedded stereotype that African Americans perform poorly on standardized tests hinders many African Americans' testing ability. Also, research has shown that minorities statistically have lower standardized test scores than whites because of existing, hidden biases in the development and administration of standardized tests and interpretation of their scores. Therefore, the achievement gap will not begin to close until current standards and assessment tests are significantly reformed (p.29).

As a result of standardized testing, statistics continue to show only small gains in African American student test scores compared to other races.

The idea of standardized testing came from Horace Mann in 1845. He suggested that instead of annual oral exams, school children should prove their knowledge through written tests. According to Gallagher (2003), Mann's goal was to find and replicate the best teaching methods so that all children could have equal opportunities. Initially, this was a sound reason to perform tests to see where children tested, where they were not learning the material, which, in turn, helped the teacher better prepare and focus on areas where students were struggling. This

information was helpful to teachers because they now have results showing areas of strengths and weaknesses.

However, this original purpose of standardized testing changed over time, and now more than ever, students are measured and ranked by these tests. The original purpose of standardized testing was to evaluate the teachers to see if students were being taught well. Then the purpose of the tests moved from evaluation of teachers to a tool for assessing students, eventually transitioning to a means of ranking students. Moving forward, these test scores then became intrinsically tied to funding for education, which only created more tests to demonstrate whether schools were doing well based on these test scores.

Standardized testing continued to evolve, with every state having some type of standardized test and even mandating testing due to the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Now, most students have some sort of standardized test every year, starting as early as grade school. In a study by Hart et al. (2015), "…a typical student takes 112 mandated standardized tests between pre-kindergarten classes and 12 grades" (p. 9). Some states, such as Florida, Indiana, Virginia, and Ohio, have a graduation test that students must pass to graduate from high school. Other states use more of an achievement standardized test to see how well a student is doing in that school system. States such as Michigan, Georgia, and Illinois do not have exit exams but, instead, have a formal standardized test that looks at a student's aptitude and achievement levels. Tests such as the ACT and SAT are examined for admission into two- and four-year post-secondary institutions on the federal and national levels. Tests such as the GRE, MCAT, GMAT, and LSAT are used for admission to graduate school. Again, looking at scores from all the state testing data from pre-college and post-college standardized test data over the years, they continually show African Americans still falling behind.

Since the creation of standardized testing, many factors have contributed to why African Americans do not do well on these tests. External factors were shown to affect Latino and African American student test scores include poverty, racial segregation, inadequate funding for schools, cultural bias (i.e., test questions that often require specific, upper-middle-class white, cultural knowledge), and stereotype threat. (Aronson, Lustina, Good, et al., 1999; Duran, 1994; Hacker, 1992; Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Phillips et al.,1998; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat combines discrimination and racism. Steele (1997) defines stereotype threat as follows:

> The social-psychological threat arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies. This predicament threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, judged, or treated stereotypically or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype. Called stereotype threat, it is a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists (p.614)

Other factors that impede successful testing for African American students include health issues due to inadequate access to medical care and unstable housing or food. As a result, African American students tend to focus more on these external obstacles than what's going on inside the classroom, causing a disadvantage of not being well prepared for these tests. Berlak and others also feel racism becomes an issue because students are ranked, which helps create or maintain a level of segregation in high school (with advanced placement courses) and in college (with admissions criteria), creating barriers to African advancement American students. Low test

scores mean less funding for high school students, so school leaders cannot hire quality teachers to serve African American students better.

Over time the conversation of standardized tests continues to grow, with people supporting testing or those who feel it is unfair. Fleming and Garcia (1998) state, "Proponents of standardized tests argue that they offer an objective, common yardstick that helps identify capable students who come from various backgrounds and grading systems." Thus, they prevent discrimination against able minority candidates (College Board, 1983). The National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences reports that SAT scores predict performance as accurately for blacks as they do for most applicants. Though the report acknowledges that average scores for whites are higher than those for blacks, just as they are for men compared to women, the averages do not reveal the different abilities of individuals within these groups, which is what the test is intended to identify. Opponents of standardized tests allege that they are inherently unfair to disadvantaged minorities because they are culturally and educationally inappropriate (Hilliard, 1990; Carty-Bennia, 1989), because such tests are frequently wrong in assessing the potential of minorities (Crouse & Trusheim, 1988), and because wide variation in predictive validity suggests unfairness (see Wilson, 1981; Houston,1983; Temp, 1971) (pg. 471).

Procon.org (2017) shares with us the top pros and cons of standardized testing. Listed below are the top three, respectively:

Pros

1. 93% of studies on student testing, including the use of large-scale and high-stakes standardized tests, found a "positive effect" on student achievement, according to a peer-reviewed, 100-year analysis of testing research completed in 2011 by testing scholar Richard P. Phelps.

2. Standardized tests are reliable and objective measures of student achievement. Without them, policymakers would have to rely on tests scored by individual schools and teachers, who are vested in producing favorable results. Multiple-choice tests are graded by machines and, therefore, are not subject to human subjectivity or bias.

3. 20 countries studied "have achieved significant, sustained, and widespread gains" on national and international assessments had used "proficiency targets for each school" and "frequent, standardized testing to monitor system progress," according to a Nov. 2010 report by McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm.

Cons

1. Standardized testing has not improved student achievement. After No Child Left behind (NCLB) passed in 2002, the U.S. slipped from 18th in the world in math on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to 31st place in 2009, with a similar drop in science and no change in reading. May 26, 2011, the National Research Council report found no evidence test-based incentive programs are working: "Despite using them for several decades, policymakers and educators do not yet know how to use test-based incentives to generate positive effects on consistently achievement and to improve education."

2. Standardized tests are an unreliable measure of student performance. A 2001 study published by the Brookings Institution found that 50-80% of year-over-year test score improvements were temporary and "caused by fluctuations that had nothing to do with long-term changes in learning…."

3. Standardized tests are unfair and discriminatory against non-English speakers and students with special needs. English language learners take tests in English before they have mastered the language. Special education students take the same tests as other children, receiving few of the accommodations usually provided to them as part of their Individualized Education Plans (IEP).

As one can see, the purpose of the test versus the outcome is indeed debatable. However, Fairtest (National Center for Fair and Open Testing (2008) states, "Decades of research demonstrate that African Americans experience problems with high-stakes testing, from early childhood through college entrance exams" (pg.1).

Negative Effects of Standardized Testing on African Americans

The writings of Drs. Hilliard and Sizemore have offered insights into issues of standardized testing, including racism. Hilliard and Sizemore's work also moved the discussions forward on how standardized testing relates to access, equity, and achievement of students of African descent in K-12 schools and post-secondary education. Additionally, the level of impact that standardized testing has is related to educational opportunities, school choice, having the same experiences on the test as peers and determining the level of achievement based on test scores. The adverse effects of standardized testing on students of African descent have impacted access, equity, and achievement for African Americans in higher education and K-12 education.

As early as ten years old, children have an awareness of how society views them stereotypically. This includes awareness of academic stereotypes (McKown & Weinstein, 2003). For example, Wasserberg (2014) gave an example of a black student taking a standardized test and the student being paralyzed by fear at the thought of performing worse than a white peer on the exam. This example demonstrates just a small perspective of the negative effects standardized testing has on African American students in educational settings.

Access

In 2014, former U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan released a letter that noted "all students—regardless of race, color, national origin or zip code—deserve a high-quality education." (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, para 1). The letter took a firm stance on access to education and equal access to educational resources. The statement was delivered to all states and school districts across the United States. Duncan's letter was termed a "guidance" and was included in President Obama's equity agenda. The sheer magnitude of Duncan's letter made clear the importance of accessible education. More specifically, it was clear that accessibility was important because it came from the highest authority in the United States and the highest educational institution. However, there is still a concern of access for students of African American descent due to the issues of standardized testing.

The word access has been defined in several ways. Access to education also has different meanings because the U.S. education system is split between K-12 and higher education. For this chapter, the Office of Civil Rights guides how access is defined, which includes: school districts and institutions of higher learning are obligated to give students of every race, color, and national

origin equal entry to academic courses and programs, extracurricular activities, and other educational opportunities (OCR, 2017).

Often, standardized testing, based on scores, can either give students "access" to the next grade in K-12, allow students to graduate from K-12, or enter institutions of higher education at the graduate and undergraduate levels. However, due to cultural biases of standardized tests, access for African American students has been egregious. Historically, students of color have scored lower on standardized exams than their peers (Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1998). Achieving lower on these types of exams has become challenging for students of African descent to pursue higher education, specifically for those from lower-income and inner-city areas (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kane, 1998. Yeung, 2012). Allen (1992) wrote, "African-American students' relative lack of access to and success in U.S. higher education is not shrouded in mystery. It is the result of the same historical, political, economic, social, cultural, and psychological patterns that have perpetuated black subjugation and oppression since blacks arrived on these shores in 1619" (p.41-42). Allen's statement still holds today; however, this is not only a higher education issue but also an issue within the U.S. K-12 system. The direct impact of negative effects that standardized testing has on education is students miss out on opportunities.

From a K-12 perspective, there have been examples of students being placed in remedial courses that assist in preparing for standardized exams or students' placement in lower-level classes because of how they scored on exams. In higher education, standardized testing has contributed to African American student's exclusion from top institutions. According to Bowen and Bok (1998), top-rated colleges and universities command significant resources compared to other institutions. Suppose African American students are not entering top-rated institutions because of lower standardized test scores. In that case, African American students are not benefiting from those significant resources that top colleges and universities command. Also, students may get admitted into an institution but may require taking remedial courses to assist in the student's academic development. So, although access has improved over the years, there is still an opportunity to improve because giving students access to educational opportunities contributes to the development of an informed citizenry.

Equity

Along with access is the idea of equity. Equity, at its most elementary form, is concerned with being equal. Specifically, in education, equity is involved with equal opportunities to all. "All" includes but is not limited to race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, region, or religion. Nevertheless, "all" is not equal when it comes to standardized testing. Walpole et al. (2005) wrote that African American and Latino students historically and currently score lower on standardized tests. According to Ford and Helms, "such racial-group test-score disparities mean that typically more than half of African Americans are excluded from a variety of academic and vocational experiences and domains in society beginning when tests first enter their lives" (2012, p.187). When it comes to standardized testing, it is clear that "all" are not created equal. All are not equal in scores, and all are not equal from the benefits received from passing standardized tests. Standardized testing, if anything, diminishes the equal opportunity of students of African descent.

Further, Ford and Helms (2012) discussed qualitative and quantitative studies that have been conducted by researchers who are either for or against standardized testing. Those researchers conducted studies to determine if the structures of tests and explore if the content

items are embedded in cultural bias. Furthermore, many researchers believe that students of African descent earn lower scores on the tests (Hacker, 1992; Jencks, 1998). Cultural or test bias is defined as given an unfair advantage to one subgroup over another (Clauser & Mazor, 1998). Therefore, equity should be concerned if one group benefits based on test items relating to their cultural upbringing. Thus, standardized testing not only influences accessibility but also equity for African American students.

Achievement

One of the most talked-about questions in higher education circles is the discussion on scores of standardized tests and the scores being an indicator for a student's level of academic achievement at institutions of higher education. Geiser and Santelices wrote that "standardized tests such as the SAT were originally developed to assist admissions officers in identifying applicants who will perform well in college, and they are widely perceived as a more accurate, methodologically rigorous and reliable indicator high-school grades" (2007, p.24). However, Geiser and Santelices (2007) study found that "high-school grades in college-preparatory subjects are consistently the best indicator of how students are likely to perform in college." (p.24). Although there is clear evidence that standardized tests do not indicate academic achievement, the test continues as a requirement for admission into colleges and universities. Conversely, Ford and Helms (2012) contended that "using standardized test scores to determine African American potential when issues of test bias and unfairness abound" (p.186). Moreover, using standardized testing to determine if African American students are academically prepared for college coursework is the opposite of current research.

As previously stated, standardized testing is most popularly used for grade-to-grade promotion and college admissions. However, despite national attention, they continue to generate gender and race gaps in
achievement (Aronson, Good, and Inzlicht, 2003). High standards may not be connected to high stakes standardized testing at all. An argument can be made that some standardized high stakes testing content reflects low standards (Hilliard, 2000). The issue isn't necessarily the standardized exams—it's the quality of the teachers preparing students for such examinations and the perceived norms of these exams, which typically favor one population over another (Anatasi, 1954).

Dual achievement is one way in which standardized test scores impact the lives of students, especially and significantly those of color. Dual achievement alludes to joint accomplishments caused by a singular academic success. For example, students who test well on standardized tests, such as the American College Test (ACT) and the SAT, commonly referred to (until 1997) the Scholastic Aptitude Test and then the Scholastic Assessment Test . Based on their test scores, the latter is afforded opportunities, such as college acceptance and scholarship awards. The consequences of testing have been subjected to few empirical investigations than has the nature of tests, particularly their content, construct, and predictive validity. The extent to which testing contributes to the inequities of life is far from clear, as is the enhancement of teaching and learning (Kelleghan, Madaus, and Airasian (2012).

Leveling the Playing Field

To promote dual achievement and level the playing field for African American students, districts and policymakers must convene to discuss, implement and evaluate sophisticated tools of assessment, culturally relevant testing, and alternative methods for measuring achievement. Sophisticated assessment tools would be flexible and offer immediate

in-class use. They would also be suitable for multiple contexts and consistently work to improve assessment practices. Assessment tools should serve as only part of a competency measure rather than a singular or stand-alone tool (Shriberg, 2002). For example, essay-type examinations and teacher-based evaluative assessments are other assessment options. Additionally, dual achievement can be promoted through culturally relevant testing. To do so, perceived normalcies must be removed from standardized testing. Much of the the current controversy about testing in schools focuses on the use of norm-referenced standardized tests—that is, tests in which the procedure, materials, and scoring have been fixed, and an individual's performance is interpreted in terms of the "normal" or average performance of a preferred reference group (Kelleghan, Madaus, & Airasian, 2012). Moreover, the restructuring of the test to include alternative measurements for achievement is necessary. A formidable array of criticism ranged from charges of bias in test content (Clark, 1963) to criticisms of the functions for which the tests were used, particularly the selection of measuring and labeling students (Kelleghan, Madaus, &Airasian, 2012). The effect of tests on the general education environment has been regarded as unsatisfactory.

Measurements of the exams are often rigid and poorly positioned (Gronlund, 1968). The persistent overrepresentation of African American students in special education classes shows the invalidity of the current standardized testing measurement (Schulz, Kolen, &Nicewander, 1999). Despite general agreement that student performance should be routinely assessed for outcomes of instruction, general agreement regarding how to do this does not exist. Commercially distributed achievement tests are not always congruent with curriculum objectives , and teachers tend not to value the information obtained from standardized tests (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1985). Alternative approaches to measuring standardized tests are few and far between but ideally include reliability and validity. Unfortunately, the reliability of teachers' informal observation of students in academic performance is unknown (Deno, 1985).

An emerging alternative to commercial standardized tests and informal observations is a curriculum-based measurement (CBM) that combines the advantages of both. By standardizing observation performance in the curriculum, CBM generates reliable, valid data concerning widely used indicators of achievement such as test scores, age, program placement, and teachers' judgment of competence (Deno, 1985). This data is now supposedly being used to make the screening, referral, IEP planning, pupil progress, and program outcome decisions, resulting in more efficient measurements of students and shared responsibility among districts, teachers, parents, and students. However, there doesn't seem to be any measurable improvement. In 2017, Reeves and Halikias reported that the SAT is "an American rite of passage" and that the continued race gap hinders black students' upward mobility. Disappointingly, the black-white achievement gap for SAT scores has remained virtually unchanged over the last fifteen years (Reeves and Halikias, 2017). It is indeed apparent that a change is needed. One includes the academic components and cultural inclusivity necessary to forge closure to this ongoing and unequal achievement cycle.

Positioning Dual Achievement in Afrocentric Education

The prevailing assumption among many educators is that the task of achievement for African Americans as a group are the same as it is for any other group. African American children must be able to do what all other children should be capable of doing to achieve in American schools (Perry, Steele, &Hilliard, 2003). These individuals proceed on the assumption that beyond individual differences—which they usually willingly concede the task

of learning—if you know what works for the white child, then you know what will work for the black child (Kelleghan, Madaus & Airasian, 2012). Indeed, generalizable competencies are required of and embedded in the learning tasks students are asked to perform in school. But since learning is fundamentally contextual, one could argue that additional social, emotional, cognitive, and political competencies are required of African American youth, precisely because they are African American, if they can commit themselves over time, to perform at high levels in school. The task of academic achievement for African Americans in the context of school in the United States of America is distinctive. However, the challenges that African American students face regarding academia make achievement unique (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003).

It is understood that there is an achievement gap between Black students and their white counterparts. Many individuals, black and white practitioners, activists, educational leaders, and policymakers—situated in urban school districts; in progressive college towns; in upper-income, multiracial, liberal communities; in statehouses and federal levels—are engaged in a conversation about black school achievement. *The more things change, the more they stay the same*—which is to say that the contemporary public conversations about black school achievement, like virtually all past conversations about African American school performance, remain focused on underachievement and is the achievement gap today (Perry, Steele &Hilliard, 2003).

However, this has not always been so. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, community groups in African American neighborhoods across the United States asserted their right to define and establish educational standards for their children. Some groups, such as those in New York City, chose to struggle for community control within public schools (Kifano & McLeod-Bethune, 1996). These institutions defined educational standards as the exclusive achievement of academic excellence or stressed academic excellence and a culturally relevant curriculum. In 1989, according to the institute for independent education (IIE), the 284 independent schools located in predominantly African American neighborhoods throughout the nation was serving approximately 53,000 African American students, or 7.9% of the total African American public-school enrollment of 6.7 million (Institute for Independent Education, 1990). Research has shown that African Americans have a unique learning experience a wealth of knowledge to the prepared curriculum. Further and perhaps more important, evidence from history and the African American narrative tradition suggests that African Americans have understood the distinct nature of task achievement. Out of their lived experience, slavery to the dismantling of segregated schools, they have developed and enacted a philosophy of education that was freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship, and leadership (Perry, Steele, &Hilliard, 2003).

Schools such as the Nairobi Day School in East Palo Alto (1966); the Afro-American School of Culture founded in LA (1967); Omawale Ujamaa of Pasedena (1973), and a handful of others were responsible for educating, developing, and cultivating a class of young, educated learners, who despite their part-time status and expansive range of students and low socioeconomic status of its students and parents, succeeded in teaching and creating an effective culture of learning and instruction, implementing a culture of success within the community (Kifano, 1992). Thus, though the independent Afrocentric community schools are no longer standing, the communities they serve are ever-present and ever-growing (Kifano, 1992).

The academic under-performance of Black students has long troubled people concerned with educational inequities (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003). Though this is a well-researched

area, data has hardly changed over the past decade. To support dual achievement within an Afrocentric framework, districts, educators, parents, and communities must request, as they've done before, to be more involved and to strive to understand better the standardized curriculum their children are expected to learn and master. There should also be an effort to situate and prepare black students for standardized tests culturally. This context of high-pressure "make or break" testing has given rise to even more urgent pleas for restructuring schooling for African American children and youth (Townsend, 2002). Townsend went on to say:

"Current school-reform initiatives that employ high-stakes testing as vehicles for accountability are sorely missing the mark, however. In fact, as a result of standards-based school reform, as we currently know, it is even more evident that the educational process must be re-engineered in a culturally responsive manner to improve outcomes for African American learners. Ironically, the federal proposal to "leave no child behind" will have the opposite effect. With high stakes testing as its cornerstone, it will guarantee that the very child, who gets left behind academically, is African American."

Conclusion

To create spaces and opportunities for dual achievement within Afrocentric education, cultural reform is needed. The cultural reform requires a shift from current academic normalcies—strictly European curriculums and testing standards, inadequate educational practices, and learning materials, all of which are predominantly situated in diversely excluded classrooms and schools. Looking at the intent of Horace Mann brought the idea of public education for all to the forefront with the idea of it not focusing on income or ability but focused on education for all students. His intent focused on examining learning in the major subjects. The goal at that time was correct because it was an idea it did not consider the people administering these exams.

Concerning all the various issues around access, equity, and achievement Mann's original idea to test begs the question, Should administrators look at the students to whom the exams are administered or look at the teachers who are teaching the students? The suggested reform of dual achievement—inclusive cultural standards, learning outcomes, and teaching tools—will result in more efficient schools, achievement equality across races, and increased opportunities for minority students.

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