

## "EDUCATION REFORM IN THE SPOTLIGHT: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS"

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**ABSTRACT:** The phrase "Last hired, first fired" has haunted the job market, particularly during economic downturns, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s and the more recent Great Recession (2007-2014). This phenomenon disproportionately affects African-Americans, especially unemployed Black males. This study delves into the profound impact of standardized testing on the employment prospects of African-American individuals, shedding light on the systemic challenges they face. By examining historical trends and data, we aim to uncover the factors that perpetuate this unsettling pattern.

**Keywords:** standardized testing, unemployment, African-Americans, racial disparities, economic downturns

### INTRODUCTION

#### Why Education Should Be A Topic of Concern in 2016 US Presidential Campaign?

Ever heard of these four chilling words? "Last hired, first fired". I am talking of the immediate by-products or victims of standardized testing: "students" who; if lucky to get a job, and before long – get fired. These bitter four words dominate the labor market especially during economic downturns, example; in both the Great Depression of the 1930s and the more recent Great Recession (2007-2014). What is heart wrecking is that this double-down cliché; is so deep rooted that unfortunately; it is held particularly true for African-Americans; especially unemployed Black males.

As an entrepreneur, educator, researcher, protagonist, volunteer, author, advocate, parent, and reflective thinker; I look back 13 years ago and reflect on the first encounter of the latest news in August 2001, regarding the new Federal Law "No Child Left Behind Act (2001)". I remember vividly the faculty orientation meeting, when the news first hit my ears; I was focusing on the welcoming speech being presented for new faculty at one of the US universities in Alaska. I was not paying attention to the nuances of the speech content, as I was recovering from the nuances of the jet leg from Michigan to Alaska, and summer doldrums of the Tundra, when I thought I heard that... "...in year 2014, every student in the

USA would be proficient in reading and mathematics" (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). "Could I have heard the news well?" I quizzed myself. I definitely was completely swept off balance and nonetheless shaken out of my outlandish reverie. However, I cautiously gathered up courage to raise my hand to question the speaker if what I had simply day-dreamed, or worse still, misunderstood the queen's language. To my surprise and disbelief, I was assured that what I had heard was perfectly correct. That invited my lower jaw to drop! The only thing to do would be to move on and deal with the current education, teaching and learning issues one day at a time.

Days and months reeled by as it became reality that “No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was here in the USA education system to stay. Sooner or later, various faculty members, students and I included, started to realize that the elephant had gotten a VIP seat in the living room, right in front of our noses, and indeed it was time to smell the coffee for others as well as smell the rat for the rest! Something bizarre was going on. Strange it would look, it became huge and obvious. The buzz caption amongst educators, non-educators and learners would be: “But alas! Wait a minute. What? ... in year 2014, every student in the USA would be proficient in reading and mathematics” (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001), “That’s setting up for failure!” Why? Educators feared the notion of measures that would tie teacher pay to student test scores and performance. That would be termed: accountability based on “highstakes” standardization.

Most educators and student teachers alike, pondered that anyone in their right mind would frankly know that not every student could be proficient at one given time. It was common knowledge that at the time; 2014 seemed a long way off. However, to claim that every student would be proficient in math and reading by that deadline; sounded like an ill-gotten façade. The federal law would not only target students, but also non-certified teachers regardless of years invested in the teaching service would have to undergo re-training and become state certified by a certain specified given time period or face losing jobs in the name of “bad teachers” or politely “accountability”. That was a big knock-out for especially paraprofessionals who might have invested up to more than ten years in non-certified teaching, and would be “forced” to hurriedly go back to school as non-traditional students in the wake of “No Child Left Behind Act, 2001”.

As a reflective educator, I would reiterate that at the time, in terms of accountability of teacher evaluation and student assessment as proposed by the No Child Left Behind Act, the outcry was: “That’s set up for failure and bad fortune for the educator who would likely be laid off under the label: [bad teacher]”. It would also be bad fortune for the low achieving students who would likely face the embarrassment of repeating a grade plus having their schools labeled as failing bad-schools; and most likely to be condemned for closure.

### **Education, Students, Teachers & “Pygmalion Phenomenon”**

Rosenthal and Jacobson (2013) argue; “the Pygmalion Phenomenon is the self-fulfilling prophecy embedded in teachers' expectations. Simply put, when teachers expect students to do well and show intellectual growth, they do; when teachers do not have such expectation performance and growth are not as encouraged and may in fact be discouraged in a number of ways”. These insights remind us that education definitely needs a voice in politics. Focusing beyond 2015, we agree that 2014 is yesterday’s news, and today, most teachers in the USA are in disillusionment, especially when statistics show that on the global stage, US schoolgoing students rank 15<sup>th</sup> place in reading and mathematics. Teachers bear the brunt of drilling children to “pass” the math and reading tests at the expense of other subjects. The deep rooted pain felt by most teachers is powerlessness to become innovative, constant fear of losing their jobs, and getting punished if students they taught failed the “high-stakes” standardized tests administered by outsiders who did not design, develop, or implement that curriculum. Teachers’ frustrations poised by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, could be characterized by classroom boycotts and teachers’ protests; example carried out in Chicago in September 2012, a scene that left many families stranded without clues on what to do with their school-going children. As 2016 US Presidential elections are around the corner, yesterday’s events relating to educational boycotts, standardized

tests and cheating scandals by school officials in order to attain high educational scores for students in places like Atlanta Georgia, and others; remind us of the problems that are bred by “high-stakes” standardized testing; an educational phenomenon that should never be forgotten by every political strategist.

As 2015 ends, the future reality in terms of education detects that times are hard, budgets have shrunk, and teacher lay-offs have mushroomed. However, something strange is unfolding at state level. So far, thirty states in the USA have requested for No Child Left

Behind Act “waivers” from the adventurous goal that is far from getting unattainable in today’s educational arena. What my education colleagues and students once cited as a standardized testing outcry in the article entitled: “Present Day Students a.k.a. Victims of Standardized Testing” (2005) would still be a burning issue as of today? Evidence shows that the US Department of Education in 2012 openly stated that: “...this accountability system is flawed and sets up students, schools, and states to fail”. That phenomenon boosted my pursuit of this qualitative research study.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Materials:** Extremely cheap materials: person, paper, pen, paper and respondents

This article includes mixed investigative qualitative research (2001 – 2015) carried out using holistic approaches that sought dynamic reality changes brought about by value-bound conditions of “high-stakes standardized testing” within education community. Qualitative research generically entails ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological, field, or participant observer methodologies. Emphasis is on interaction, listening; looking, and focusing on diverse variables in their natural setting. Comprehensive and detailed data is gathered through open ended questions that provide direct quotations. Integral to the investigation; is the researcher (Jacob, 1988). Qualitative research differs from quantitative research which attempts to gather data by objective methods to provide information about relations, comparisons, and predictions and attempts to remove the investigator from the investigation (Smith, 1983). Qualitative research seeks to understand people’s viewpoints, perceptions, and interpretations. The orientation of qualitative research is anchored on exploration and discovery, which propagates theories and hypotheses as they evolve from data as collected. Further, subjective is the data. It culminates the perceptions of the people in the environment. Instrumentation for the primary data collection for this particular research design is the human person, in which case I was the primary data collector. The validity of results in qualitative research focuses on design and procedures tailored to gain "real," "rich," and "deep" data.

## **METHODS**

### **Alaska**

When I went to Alaska, this was at the height of the introduction of the “No Child Left Behind Act” - NCLBA (2001). For my qualitative research, I used triangulation, a process involved in corroboration and convergence of multiple data. (Alaska, Kuskokwim). The NCLBA news came with deadlines which required that some school teachers who had invested in years of non-credentialed teaching; would in very little time; go back to school for in-service training, take extra teaching courses by a certain deadline, and pass the examinations that would come with the courses. If not, that would mean losing their jobs, regardless of having been in the field for twenty years or so. The in-service would take place while those teachers were also employed full-

time, a process that included lesson planning, class management, grading students' papers, attending teacher-parent conferences, and so on. As a researcher, this is one of the situations where a holistic description of events, procedures, and philosophies occurred in natural settings that responded to expectations of "high-stakes" standardized testing.

### **Louisiana**

Relentlessly, I continued my quest in NCLBA qualitative research later on in Louisiana this time. As a passive participant whilst exploring the impact of high-stakes standardized testing in and around Lake Charles, Louisiana; I assumed a spectator / bystander role at the scene of action without fully participating. What I found depressing in one of the schools in Lake Charles as a passive participant, was the pain that was seen among teachers and students who were at this particular predominantly Black; "X" elementary school which had been labelled as a "failing school". I remember fully, the agony displayed on students' faces as they trickled through the school hallways and school grounds that barely had a playground, knowing full well that their school had been labelled as "poor performing" and they were called "bad students", taught by so-called "bad teachers". The untold grief from the "stigma" was deep, if not heart wrenching and contagious. I further felt the agony of removing my child from that school, after a number of friends and colleagues (educators by the way); had hinted to me that sending my child to that particular X "failing school", was simply a: "No! No!" I asked: "Why?" The answer was: "That is a failing school. Many of those students there will end up in jail. That school is an incubator for future prison / jail inmates." Those chilling words convinced me to follow the advice given. I remember vividly, the lame excuse I had to use to that "X" school principal / head; when asked why I was pulling out my daughter who had simply attended the classes there for only five days. It should be known that the stigma carried by a school that is labeled as "failing school" has unprecedented ripple effects of harsh isolation, horrendous stigma, and punishing humiliating all due to results of "high-stakes" standardization. From an educator's point of view, it denotes a "broken system" and one starts wondering what the root cause could be, especially when elementary school "X" was predominantly Black, with students from low income neighborhoods. My action research would endure breadth by learning how other parts of the specter succumbed to the changes in the education system due to "high-stakes" standardized testing. That dichotomous venture landed me in Georgia.

### **Georgia**

When it came to Milledgeville, Georgia; I decided as an NCLBA qualitative researcher to become an active participant, starting with observation(s) in order to learn rules, followed by becoming actively engaged in activities from different settings. At this particular liberal arts university in Georgia, I had the opportunity to get involved in team teaching. I was able to combine forces with a colleague and students in a project called the "Outsider Within". This project entailed total participation and as action researchers, we were the natural participants operating at the highest level of involvement. The ethnographic study allowed the students to walk in other's shoes, thus visiting with different classrooms in under-privileged communities, observe, make anecdotal notes, and document findings. Our undergraduate students in this project were all from middle to high income neighborhoods near and far from Atlanta, and had barely experienced what it was like to be in a poor school without a cute playground, or inadequate school supplies and books. From the group of up to

100 plus or minus students, 99.9% were extremely surprised that teachers from struggling neighborhoods had to bring their own school supplies from home to allow the students to use in their classes, and 100% of these students agreed that educational poor environments were not conducive to effective learning and teaching. 100% of these students expressed fear of teaching low-income Black students upon attaining their teaching certificates. It is from this tireless, adventurous, fact-finding, evidence-based project that one of the undergraduate students coauthored with me a published article entitled: “Students a.k.a. Victims of Standardized Testing” (Aaron A. & Tsiwo-Chigubu 2005). To enrich the diversity and gravity of the evidence-based qualitative research on this topic, it became necessary to include Delaware’s Historically Black University, in-order to compare and contrast the experiences garnered from different places. That meant changing from predominantly White to predominantly Black university.

### **Delaware**

In Delaware, I carried out part of the qualitative research using face-to-face interviews in the wake of the encounters realized by most students as they navigated themselves through their academic journeys. The purpose of my interviews was to find out what views the undergraduate students held in terms of the Praxis Test, a form of “high-stakes” standardized test used in Teacher Education. Unlike Georgia, here I was extremely worried and curious to know why some undergraduate students would take up to six years to graduate from a Bachelor’s Degree program in Teacher Education, or never graduate even after having spent more than four years in the university. What I found depressing at times; was that some students would keep changing their majors from education to psychology or from education to social work, etc. If the changes would take place at the beginning of their academic journeys, that would make sense to me. Unfortunately, most students would switch their majors after 3 to 5 years in education, and move to psychology or social work to start all over again. This was disturbing, very expensive, and counter-productive. When I sat down and asked them why they kept changing majors from education to other fields of study, especially when there is a great shortage of Black teachers in US schools, the answers were chillingly similar. The students’ worst obstacle and enemy was the “high-stakes” standardized test, namely PRAXIS in teacher education. Of all students asked; 100% mentioned that the questions on this test were “culturally-unresponsive”. Further, 100% of the respondents loved to become teachers, but if they failed on PRAXIS, they would never become teachers. That led many to join other fields which did not have “high-stakes” standardized testing. One of the students remarked: “It is better to end up joining Psychology or Social Work because nobody would ask me for PRAXIS results”. What I found disheartening is that many students wanted to become teachers, but “high-stakes” standardized testing short-changed their “dream(s)”. My qualitative research would be incomplete if I did not include into the melting pot, Texas and especially Dallas, which is not only predominantly Hispanic, but world class cosmopolitan effects!

### **Texas**

In Dallas, Texas; the fascinating diversity of so many cultures in this metropolitan city that makes it unique. Dallas is a huge city with many people speaking different languages. It is a city where one can meet someone from France, or Britain, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Mexico, Argentina, Jordan, California, New York, Israel, China, Indonesia, and the list is endless. For qualitative research, Dallas became the bedrock of Urie

Bronfenbrenner's principles of "home visits." The richness of this approach allowed me the researcher to look at human development across the lifespan, work with diversified respondents aged zero to 100 years old. My qualitative research included case studies; conversations, question and answer techniques, observations, detailed investigations of individuals and/or groups. Homevisiting as part of my research enabled me to analyze the variables relevant to respondents under study in a relaxed discourse. The principle difference between qualitative case studies and quantitative research studies is that the focus of attention is the individual case and not the whole population of cases. Most studies search for what is common and pervasive. However, in qualitative case study, the focus may not be on generalization; but on understanding the particulars of that case in its total complexity. What I found fascinating are the unique user-friendly attributes of qualitative research, for example; one of them being: "case study"; where one focuses on a bounded system, usually under natural conditions, thereby allowing the system to be understood in its own habitat. In terms of qualitative research on "high-stakes" standardized testing; events unravelling in Texas at the speed of lightning became my: "A- Ha-a, I-told-you-so moments!" Wonder why? Well, this would be triggered when some Texas newspapers like The Observer, entertained headlines such as this one: "*Enough is Enough: Texas Lawmakers Consider More Limits to Standardized Testing*" (Savage J.; 2015). In that newspaper, Savage wrote: "The anti-testing sentiment that drove lawmakers to scale back high school tests in 2013 was back". House Bill 743, by Rep. Dan Huberty (R-Houston), would reduce the amount of time students in grades three through eight spend taking state assessments. Introducing the bill, it was announced:

*"I have petitions from over 20,000 people who have actually said we're taking too much time on the test, we're spending too much time on the test, we're wasting our children's time on the test."* Rep. Dan Huberty (24<sup>th</sup> March, 2015).

### **North Carolina**

In 2015, I presented a paper on "best teaching practices, developmentally appropriate practices anchored on social justice in childhood education" at one of the Historically Black Universities in North Carolina. During my presentation on inclusion and creating culturally responsive learning environments, one of the faculty participants pointed out how it was becoming an increasing challenge for some faculty to convince graduating Black students to stop using Ebonics, and instead use formal English as this would affect them when writing "high-stakes" standardized tests, or getting invited to an interview, getting hired after the job interview, let alone earning sustained employability. As a question / comment that I had never expected to hear, it definitely took me off-guard. I openly admit that I love Ebonics with a passion, but to find an intelligent, convincing response to that "unexpected Ebonics comment and question," made me feel like I was walking on pins and needles. My response was not the most palatable. Know why? This is an example of a very sticky topic that would be interesting to work on qualitatively; especially that it is an extremely sensitive, taboo topic. Why is Ebonics of concern to higher institutions of higher learning, or teacher education college education; especially a Historically Black University in the midst of "highstakes" standardized testing bottlenecks?

### **Just ask as of 2015**

"By the way, how are African-Americans faring in the labor market these days?" Talking of young or old; 16 – 24 years old; with less than high school, or with high school only, or with four years college, or those

who have been released from long years of jail time for minor offenses such as possessing a few grains of marijuana, or failing to pay child support while penniless, as well as other minor offenses? Bear in mind that if one has a criminal background history, no matter how minor the offense; to get a job after your feet have been inside a jail or prison is a nightmare? Statistically, the answer is dismal, and the numbers of unemployed African Americans is stunning. (Public Broadcasting Service, 2015).

### Discrimination

According to CNN Money report of 2015 April, “Unemployment for Blacks fell below 10% in April for the first time since the financial crisis.” Report states: “Crossing that mark is a reminder of how far the economy has recovered, and how severe the recession impacted Blacks in the U.S.”. More progress needs to be made for African Americans. Education that produces good employment results is key. A good lesson to be mindful of is that despite being almost six years into an economic recovery, the employment picture for Blacks leaves a great deal to be desired if not grim in some states. Did you know that Blacks in Illinois have an unemployment rate of 12.5%? That is more than double the national average. Blacks in Michigan, Pennsylvania and California also have an unemployment rate above 12%; a true reality of the plight of especially Blacks, according to an EPI report (Economic Policy

Institute, 2015). In terms of education, some argue that: “One of the reasons the wide gap in unemployment between races can be explained by **education**. Fewer Blacks finish high school than Whites, limiting their job opportunities”. Evidence shows that education does not constitute answers to the whole picture. Blacks with same education levels as Whites still have a harder time getting a job. Despite more Blacks having college degrees than Latinos in the U.S., Latinos have a lower unemployment rate, according to Labor Department and Census data. Mystifying is that Blacks with same credentials as Whites and Latinos also earn considerably less. The median weekly paycheck for a White college graduate in 2014 was \$1,132, while a Black college graduate got \$895 which is over \$230 less a week. Overall,

Blacks earn less than Asians and Latinos as well. CNN Money Report (2015) states:

“Blacks access to employment networks and opportunities; example, job training plays a role too. Discrimination among some employers, whether conscious or not, factors into the Black employment picture as well”. This was also echoed in President Barack Obama’s eulogy speech he made in South Carolina, at the funeral of Reverend Clementa Pinckney and eight other murder victims, USA (26<sup>th</sup> June, 2015). The president spoke of better equity regrading

“haves versus have-nots”, genuine empathy that not only leads to “walking in someone’s shoes”; but to “seeing worldview through their eyes.” President Obama reiterated the fact that racism and discrimination does not only end with unshackling the physical slave chains, but it should end by not discriminating when it comes to inviting “Johnny” to the job interview; and excluding “Jamaal”; who is a Black male in my opinion, while Johnny would most likely be a White male. That analogy could be the explanation why many Black males, educated or uneducated; are roaming about the streets unemployed, which is a travesty, bearing in mind that they would have gone through a plight of thousand bottlenecks in pursuit of education and happiness; amidst all research noises ascertaining that no child should not be left behind!

In qualitative research, one is always reminded to be candid. Quality time should not be spent by the researcher attempting to keep her/his own feelings and personal reactions out of the study. If there is relevance in the researcher's feelings to the matter at hand, these feelings should be revealed in the form of tangible results, and for this study, I followed suit.

## RESULTS

### Evidence-Based Qualitative Research Results I found:

Ironically, accountability has allowed standardized testing to push US students to become the victims of the "most classroom-tested children on earth", yet unemployment is rampant as the air we breathe especially among African American students with high school diplomas or without (casualties of standardized testing). According to New York CNN Money reporting (2012): "The Black unemployment rate rose to **14.4%** in June, a sharp contrast to the White unemployment rate, which stayed put at **7.4%**. -- As the overall U.S. unemployment rate stayed at 8.2% in June, the rate among Black Americans rose nearly a full percentage point."

### What this qualitative study results reveal in terms of "high-stakes" standardized testing?

**1. High-stakes standardized tests are not user-friendly** because they do not provide any feedback on how to perform better. There is 100% deficiency in immediate provision of feedback as the results are not given back to the teachers and students until months later, and there are no instructions provided by test companies on how to improve these test scores. The frightening thing is that because teachers know that test scores may affect their salaries and job security, some are inclined to cheat. For example, in 2013, a Fulton County grand jury indicted 35 educators from the Atlanta Public Schools district, (Georgia); and more than 20 took a plea deal. Among them were teachers, principals and testing coordinators. Educators were convicted April 1, 2015 of racketeering and other lesser crimes related to inflating test scores of children from struggling schools. The cheating is believed to date back to 2001, when scores on statewide aptitude tests improved greatly, according to a 2013 indictment. The indictment also stated that for at least four years, between 2005 and 2009, test answers were altered, fabricated or falsely certified. (Ashley Fantz, CNN Breaking News, 2015). Globally, the problem is catastrophic!

**1(a). Malpractices in "high stakes" examinations and cheating scandals internationally:** Similarly, international headlines dominating the far end of the globe, stated that India's examination cheating scandals had led students to re-take the medical examinations due to cheating. In the Indian state of Bihar, it was reported that about 300 people had been arrested following reports of blatant cheating in school examinations. The huge number of those arrested was the students' parents, while at least 750 students had been expelled. Overall, an estimated 1.4 million students take their school exit examinations in India's Bihar alone.

According to the BBC's reporter Jill McGivering: "The authorities have clearly been embarrassed by the cheating, with the episode prompting ridicule on social media. Students were seen copying answers from smuggled-in note sheets, and police posted outside test centres were even seen being bribed to look the other way" (BBC World News, 9<sup>th</sup> July,

2015; New Delhi). Ask why?" Answer: "The bottom line is that 'tests' are viewed as 'extremely crucial' for the students' chances of gainful employment, successful career, and a happy life ever after". In 2008, India's

outray read: "If our country is to progress we must maintain high educational standards, and this is only possible if malpractices in examinations are curbed with an iron hand," the India's Supreme Court said (Tewary, A. 2013. BBC News, Bihar, India). Let us continue to look at what my qualitative study results.

**2. High-stakes standardized tests fail to value individual differences and creativity.** For those who value Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory, the joy of teaching is thwarted. That innovative student who writes a more creative answer in the margins of "high-stakes" standardized test, is robbed of credit from his/her creative response. This is because computers grade these "high-stakes" standardized tests, and sadly a creative response that does not follow the machine's format; is marked as a wrong response, even when that answer is authentic from a super genius perspective. Ever wondered why so many of our "right-brained", creative students end up roaming the streets jobless? Think the correct answer is: "*bad teacher, poor student, failing school?* If your answer is yes, "*Think again!*"

**3. High-stakes standardized tests negates and ridicules diversity.** A wide range of differences exists in the people who take the same "high-stakes-fits-all" standardized tests. Students subjected to these tests have different cultural backgrounds, different levels of proficiency in the English language, different learning and thinking styles, family backgrounds, past experiences, disabilities and abilities, income levels, health statuses, ways of decoding information, coping skills of working under timed examination pressure and so on. Some students thrive under pressure like tea in hot water and others will have a brain freeze the moment their examiner(s) announces: "start your examination now!" Others are excellent in rote learning such that when the examination is placed before them, their memory sets in photographic mode, while those who are not gifted with that talent will go blank in that examination room. It is an open secret that the "high-stakes" standardized tests treat students as if they were all identical to the group that took the test several years ago, and to which the test would be "normed" against any future test-takers to be compared). *See why some educators see it as set up for failure?*

**4. High-stakes standardized tests favor those who have high socio-economic advantages** at the expense of "have-nots." That fact is a no-brainer. Test companies (a multi-billion dollar a year industry) not only manufacture these tests at the exclusion of the teachers' or educators' input, and they also manufacture the courses as well as programs that are specially tailored for practice prior to the final examination, in order to "prepare for the final test." When parents have the money, they have the capacity to even get special tutors to help their off spring to do well on the test. What then happens to poor Antonio, Pedro, Esmeralda, Rosa, John, Belinda, Kevin, Muchaneta, Chamunorwa, Hamunyare, Jailin, Jamaal, and Rushnik from low income parents, poor neighborhoods and stigmatized zip codes? Those students would be doomed to fail dismally on the "high-stakes" standardized tests. If parents do not have the money, the school for their offspring would obviously be located in a low socio-economic zip code, an area that would end up getting less funding than that of rich suburban schools. Consequently, when poor parents fail to purchase for their children the preparation exam-kit for the same "high-stakes" standardized test as what those at the higher socio-economic levels do, income inequality gets propagated for generations to come.

**5. High-stakes standardized tests** place unprecedented emphasis on standardized test results; forcing teachers to spend a huge amount of targeted time "teaching to the test." If there is something that is interesting,

compelling, useful, or otherwise favorable to the development of a student's understanding of the world, but it is not going to be on the "highstakes" standardized test, there really is not any incentive to cover that material. Instead, most of classroom time consists of either drilling for tests, or taking the tests. This dismisses the possibility of innovative teaching and learning anything new or important. Example, because Common Core and the No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) only tests reading, math, and science at the expense of music, creative art, social studies, physical education, history, moral education, vocational subjects like home economics, fashion and fabrics, carpentry, painting, drawing, gymnastics, religious education, anger management, good grooming, gardening, flower arrangement, yoga, dance, nature study, geography and numerous other subjects are completely neglected. *Ever wondered why there is way too much violence and bullying in the schools these days? Education has lost its salt!*

**6. High-stakes standardized tests occur in an artificial learning environment:** The environment resembles a pressure cooker. The tests are timed, students are not allowed to talk to each other, no questions should be asked, students cannot use references or learning devices, and they cannot get up and move around. Question: "When does the real world operate likewise? Are you not persuaded to think of the prison set-up? I do." The irony of all this is the fact that when politicians and policy-decision makers talk about education, they garnish their speeches with statements like: "*education must prepare our students for the real world.*" Clearly, the results I found show that "high-stakes" standardized testing compromise and negate that notion.

**7. High-stakes standardized tests promote stress:** We know stress causes obesity, hypertension, bullying, school fights, anger, diabetes, and even stroke. Some students are blessed to have high coping skills when subjected to a high degree of stress. Others are not so lucky, and stress would consume them to a point where they would act like "zombies", and when that happens, they fall prey to peer pressure, gun violence, drug abuse, problems with law enforcement, and consequently end up filling the jail / prison cells. When school becomes one of the main sources of students' stress, education-wise, the level of the playing field becomes obscured. Brain research suggests that too much stress is psychologically and physically harmful. Cruelly, when stress becomes overwhelming, the brain shifts into a "fight or flight" response, where it is impossible to engage in the higher-order thinking processes necessary to respond correctly to the "high-stakes" standardized test questions.

**8. High-stakes standardized tests demean and degrade the richness of human experience and human learning to a number or set of numbers.** A student might be a super genius in a particular subject, for instance music or painting, but will never receive appraisals, affirmation, or room to blossom because his or her test score in math and reading might be extremely low. If that particular student were to be given a chance to thrive on her natural talents; example to draw a picture, or lead a group discussion, or create a hands-on project, or public speaking, he/she could have earned an A pertaining to those skills and knowledge. *What high-stakes standardized tests do to students of this category is to simply dehumanize, belittle and fail.*

**9. High-stakes standardized tests provide some parents and some teachers with a false sense of security:** Example; when a student scores well on a test, it is assumed that they know the material, but this might be fairly untrue. The student might have simply memorized the fact or formula or trick necessary to do well on the test because some students are naturally gifted in taking standardized tests, others are not. This

argument is supported by a research carried out on a group of Harvard graduates who were asked why it is colder in the winter and warmer in the summer. Most of them got the question wrong. They were good test-takers but they did not understand fundamental principles that required a deeper comprehension (Gardner, H. 2000). In his book, renowned psychologist argues: “K-12 education should strive for a deep understanding of three classical principles: truth, beauty, and goodness. Such an understanding requires mastery of the major disciplines that human beings have created over the centuries. As powerful examples of his approach, Gardner describes an education that illuminates the theory of evolution, the music of Mozart, and the lessons of the Holocaust” (Howard Gardner, 2000).

**10. High-stakes standardized tests do seem to augur well with some political figures, some administrators, and the test companies that make billions in financial revenues.** On the rough end of the rope, are poor educational outcomes, disadvantaged failing students, pinkslipped educators with labels which say “bad teachers” and the stigmatized failing schools. Reality is that education is usually an election gimmick which allows some politicians to get elected by promising “better education and test results”, if elected into office. To some teachers and administrators, this has become a bait to get “extra or much-needed” funding and avoid harsh the “high-stakes” penalties by embarking on unscrupulous corruption of cheating and boosting test scores. My research results strongly indicate that while adults in the education arena might be benefitting, students are persistently hurting emotionally, psychologically and otherwise. Most students confess that they dislike and dread “highstakes” standardized testing. *The only problem is that listening from concerned adults is beyond the horizon, if any.*

**11. High-stakes standardized testing** creates a culturally pervasive learning environment consisting “winners” and losers.” The losers are those students whose teachers refer to them with labels such as “my low students”, “my learning disabled kids”, “my retards or slowlearners.” Simultaneously, winners are made to become entrapped in superiority complex and belief that they are the “chosen ones, super geniuses in the making”. Once students get caught up in this pseudo tread mill of achievement, that pushes their super-ego to the limit and they will be forced to do whatever it costs, to stay at that super-imposed status, and that is what drives some students to embark on cheating during examinations, a habit that they might take on for the rest of their lives. The losers suffer loss of self-esteem, and the damage of “low expectations”. The winners suffer loss of soul, since most of them are trained seals performing for fast-track parents and may reach midlife on a pinnacle of power and achievement, yet lack any connection to their deeper selves, to ethical principles, to aesthetic feelings, to spiritual aspirations, to compassion, creativity, and/or commitment to life.

**12. High-stakes standardized testing** does not only stress out the teachers and students. Parents of the students are not spared from stress either. Example, case study of Indian state of Bihar, which reported that about 300 people had been arrested following reports of blatant cheating in school examinations, and the huge number of those arrested werestudents’ parents (BBC, 2013). For every parent out there, when it comes to their children’s education and examinations, it becomes the “David-Goliath” moment, adrenalin just shoots abnormally high, causing exceedingly high levels of stress, which may lead to stroke and heart attacks to all affected by the misery.

## DISCUSSION

Judging teachers' effectiveness solely on the basis of end-of-year test scores, without regard to where the teachers' students started at the beginning of the year, is tantamount to "highstakes" standardization. Before making judgments about individual teachers, it requires sophisticated analyses to sort out how much growth is probably caused by individual teachers. Example, students who are frequently absent tend to have lower scores regardless of the quality of their teacher, so it is vital to take into account how many days students are present in order to be fair and to provide trustworthy estimates of teacher effectiveness. The trustworthiness of a value-added measure depends on how it is defined and calculated. Value-added measures require complicated formulas that take into account as many influences on student achievement.

### Research

A growing number of researchers are studying whether value-added measures can do a good job of measuring the contribution of teachers to test score growth. Koretz (2008) argues that measuring the value added by the teacher requires knowing not only how much students have learned in a given year, but also the rates at which those particular students learn. Rothstein (2008) worries that test score gains are biased because students are not randomly assigned to teachers. For example, comparing teachers whose classrooms are treated as dumping grounds for troubled students with teachers whose classrooms contain the best-behaved students will favor the latter. For example, in recent years more school reformers, elected officials, and policy makers have been calling for the application of "value-added measures" on teacher pay (including bonuses), as well as hiring, firing, and tenure decisions, to be partly based on student test scores.

### Schools

Tests results may be used to trigger penalties for schools, including negative public ratings, the replacement of staff members, firing or transferring some or all of a school's administrators and faculty, or forcing a school to pay for additional services and transportation costs for students, assigning A-F letter grades to schools, or even closure. Fair to point out that: " high-stakes 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 the box" (Aaron A. &Tsiwo-Chigubu, M. 2005). High-stakes standardized testing is analogous to bottle-necks, no wonder this is a problem that has triggered protests in the world of academia in the USA. For example, in 2013 Grafieid High School in Seattle, Washington; teachers refused to administer (MAP) the Measures of Academic Progress (Armstrong 2013). In a study by Aaron and Tsiwo-Chigubu (2005); "Overwhelmed teachers were found to be eliminating recess totally to make more time for rote learning in preparation for standardized tests instead". No wonder obesity among US school children is rampant as standardized testing plays a part to it. Aaron and Tsiwo-Chigubu's (2005) study was conclusive to the fact that standardized tests have deplorable and negative impact on low income neighborhoods that obviously might be in abject poverty and lacking basic resources, while high income neighborhoods would obviously have schools that would be filthy rich in school supplies.

Those discrepancies would definitely leave "Poor Children Behind". The study questions:

"What happens if children in these under-privileged communities fail those tests?" Truth is: those teachers get coined as "bad teachers", then receive pink slips; followed by loss of the teaching jobs. Affected students

are further humiliated by having their school labeled as "poor performing", the school would lose funding, and in extreme case-scenarios, the school gets condemned and is shut down. This action research highlighted "stigma" as the number one stressor when a community finds itself in a situation deemed as "failing students, with bad teachers, in a failing school, within a given community and school district." What the research found is that later on in higher grades, when students get standardized tests, they are aware that test scores may affect their future lives, therefore they would do whatever it takes to pass them, including cheating and taking performance drugs (e.g. psychostimulants like Ritalin "borrowed" from their friends) (Aaron A.&Tsiwo-Chigubu, M. 2005; and Armstrong T. 2013). Further, protests around the country against standardized testing include those at Garfield High School in Seattle, Washington, where teachers refused to administer the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), as reported by Armstrong (2013). Having analyzed all these facts, it is imperative to alleviate students' plight of the endless bottlenecks including standardized testing, which by the way; has trickled down to touch the kindergarten, if not the pre-K classroom too! These bottlenecks do not only hinder success during school going years, but they actually haunt the victims into the job market, resulting in dismally high targeted unemployment figures; which become astronomically high especially among low income Blacks.

## CONCLUSIONS

Hooray! Finally, the US Department of Education has begun to smell the rat! As an author, researcher, educator, advocate, and parent; I am shocked. Flabbergasted seems too light a term! How on earth would it possibly take the Department of Education 13 years to decipher, and figure out what university faculty members, teachers and student teachers denounced as "flawed accountability that is equally an over-kill for teachers and students, plus a set up for FAILURE" for teachers and students alike? Truth of the matter is that when you and I get to walk in the shoes of teachers in terms of teacher-student ratios, performance, accountability, good teaching, bad teaching, good learning opportunities, job security; and high-stakes standardized tests; we should ask ourselves this question: "High five or chest bump?"

## Education and Politics

As preparations are under way for 2016 US presidential elections, participants embrace the notion one man, one woman, one vote; there is no better topic in question than that of Education! Badly needed is a reform in Education's glitches as those rampant in "high-stakes standardized testing", let alone with introduction of the "Common Core" in education. I would wind up by stating that this article unravels the tip of the iceberg intended to explore a persistent problem of "high-stakes" standardization testing, whose effects have been somewhat swept under the carpet with the hope that the problem would simply go away. It intends to expose to light some of those nuances, whose silence has been without challenge, for which the public and professional analysis, and school improvement efforts have been to some extent "falsely" forthcoming. *"Truth is not only violated by falsehood; it may be equally outraged by silence."* -Henri Frederic Amiel (Webster's Book of Quotations, 1992).

Given today's scrutiny of how education plays in the public domain, this article invites each and every 2016 US presidential candidate; to read and take heed. That means Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (New York), Vice President Joe Biden: (Delaware), Donald Trump, US Senator Bernie Sanders (Vermont),

Former Governor Martin O' Malley (Maryland); Former US Senator Jim Webb (Virginia), US Senator Marco Rubio (Florida), Former Governor Lincoln Chafee (Rhode Island), Former Governor Jeb Bush (Florida), Dr. Ben Carson (Florida), Governor Chris Christie (New Jersey), US Senator Ted Cruz (Texas), Former Governor Bob Ehrlich (Maryland), Former IRS Commissioner Mark Everson (Mississippi), Businesswoman Carly Fiorina (Virginia), Former Governor Jim Gilmore (Virginia), US Senator Lindsey Graham (South Carolina), Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee (Florida), Governor Bobby Jindal (Louisiana), Governor John Kasich (Ohio), Former Governor George Pataki (New York), US Senator Rand Paul (Kentucky), Former Governor Rick Perry (Texas), Former US Senator Rick Santorum (Pennsylvania), Businessman Donald Trump (New York), Governor Scott Walker (Wisconsin), according to Google, 2015.

#### Final concluding statement

Word of caution: Do not get me wrong. I love standardized tests, "low stakes" of course, and not "high-stakes", which definitely get loaded with draconian rules that tend to be an over-kill to students, teachers, parents, employers, researchers, and many; in the world of academia. I would end my story with the following: "All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them". – Galileo Galilei (1632). **Will 2016 US Presidential campaigns rescue education?**

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