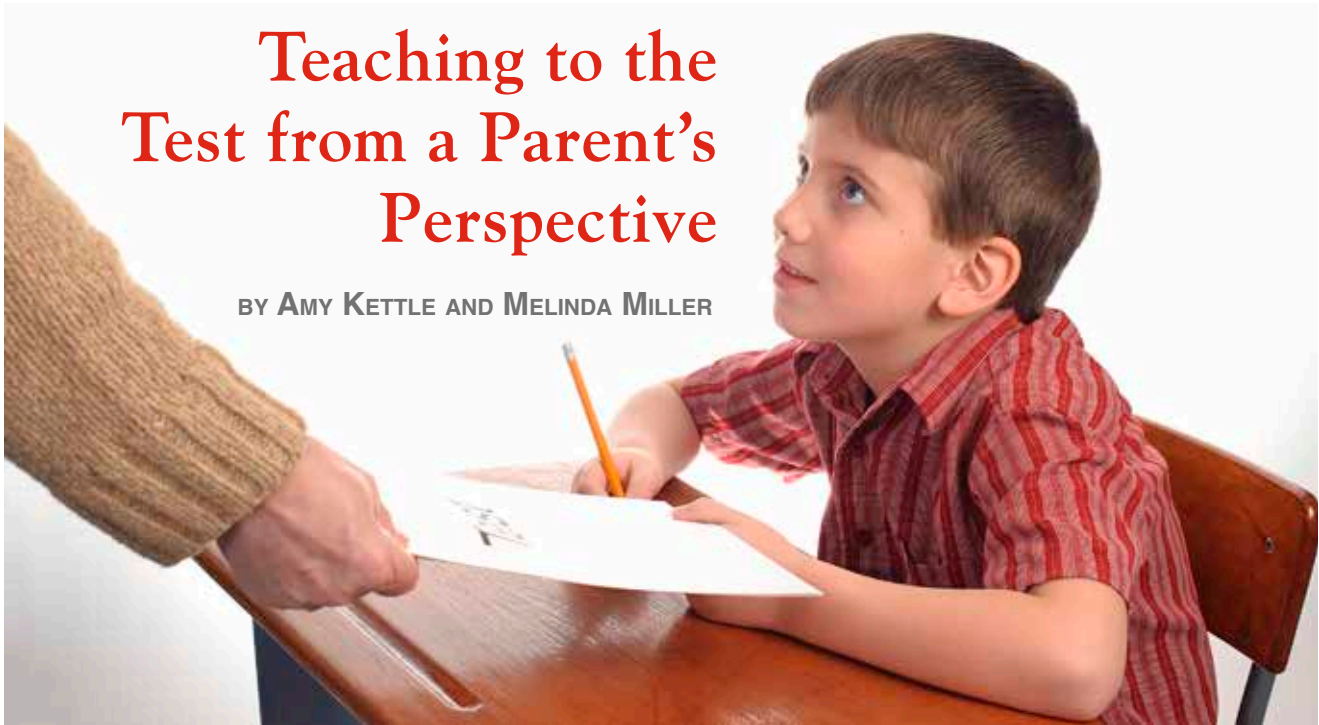


Teaching to the Test from a Parent's Perspective

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Scenario

For the first time in his school career, my son, Brennan, struggled. He went from a kid who loved school to one who didn't care about it anymore. His grades were slipping, and he really didn't care. Reading and writing practice passages would come home with failing grades and notes from his 4th grade teacher stating, "No Strategies Used" in red pen. I would ask him why he didn't use strategies, and he would shrug his shoulders and say, "I don't know." As a former teacher myself, I would look over some questions and bring to his attention ones he missed. His response was, "I'm just not as smart as the other kids." This happened repeatedly throughout the school year. It got even worse as the dreaded standardized test approached. More practice passages came home with failing grades and tears flowed from my son's eyes. It's heartbreaking watching your very smart child, whose love of learning has been squashed; call himself "stupid" all because the focus of his class is this test.

Parent's Perspective

The context surrounding struggling readers, relating I became personally more interested on the topic of high-stakes testing due to the emphasis being placed on my own child and how he has been reacting to the pressure. His grades have plummeted as it has become closer to testing dates, and he does not like to read or write anymore. The excitement of learning is

being taken away to be able to prepare for a test that is shallow at best. More and more school districts have implemented a "one size fits all" type curriculum and are holding teachers accountable for their students' scores on these tests. Teachers are changing their own teaching styles in order to prepare for these tests and losing out on valuable teaching.

When I was teaching, years ago, I strived to come up with creative ways to get the students interested in reading a certain novel, writing stories, or even learning different skills. This kept both advanced and reluctant students engaged in the learning process. In everything I taught, I tried to help the students make real-world connections. I wanted my students to read stories, novels, and expository text that interested and intrigued them and helped them begin to understand the world in which we live. I wanted to take advantage of the imaginative rehearsals that great literature provides before my students reached adulthood (Gallagher, 2009). If our emphasis as educators is testing, our students will miss out on more than just passing a test.

I recently shared my concerns about the current emphasis on teaching to the test with one of my professors from my Master's in Reading program. This article is a result of our discussions about the sense of urgency we both feel that things in our schools must

change in order for our students to become proficient readers and writers who can do much more than pass a test. It is our hope that teachers and administrators who read the article will discover meaningful ways to help their students develop as life-long learners who read and write for a variety of purposes.

Narrowing of the Curriculum

Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2007) emphasize that the current high-stakes assessment trend in the United States moves in the direction of greater standardization and uniformity, due to legislation (Campbell, 2002) such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). "Given the on-going climate of accountability," according to the authors, "most schools and districts see no alternative other than to work toward meeting the states' standards and legislative mandates" (p. 319). No Child Left Behind (2002) had two specific goals: for all students to attain proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2013-14, and by the same years, for all students to be proficient in reading by the end of third grade (Readence, Bean & Baldwin, 2008).

With the pressure created by the new legislation came the push to teach to the test, which more often than not, came in the form of one-size-fits-all test preparation activities. The problem is that each student learns at a different pace and brings different experiences to the table. Though proponents of NCLB (2002) may proclaim that higher test scores prove NCLB is working, the reality is rising test scores are primarily the result of repetitive drilling for the narrow content the exams cover, not real educational improvements. The unfortunate result is that groups that have traditionally fallen behind such as minority groups, students with special needs, and English language learners, may be falling further behind (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2007). When testing drives instruction, subject areas that are not tested are frequently not taught, and the current trend is to eliminate science, social studies and electives altogether in order to focus on reading and math. When this happens, students miss out on content-rich lessons in other subjects that would ultimately help them on a state-mandated test. Additionally, such practices remove important opportunities for students to widen and deepen knowledge that is foundational to developing readers. Without a broad knowledge base, our students stand no chance of being excellent readers

(Gallagher 2009). Students involved in massive test preparation classes receive massive amounts of shallow instruction (Gallagher, 2009).

Teaching to the Test

When the curriculum is narrowed, many teachers lose the opportunity to teach in ways that are compatible with their professional identities (Berliner, 2009).

Teachers often feel pressure from administrators to teach to the test, which results in changing of teaching styles to "better fit" teaching to the test. This type of teaching instruction sacrifices students' critical thinking. According to Miller and Higgins, (2008), "Nationwide, teachers have even departed from what they know about effective teaching and learning because the effects of low test results have strong repercussions, such as students failing to pass a specific grade or to graduate" (p.124). Administrators also hold teachers responsible for their students' test scores. Being "held responsible" really means one thing to classroom teachers—teaching to the state-mandated exams administered each spring (Gallagher, 2009). Many teachers who teach to the test tend to teach skills in isolation, and rich, meaningful curriculum instruction is replaced with kill and drill practices.

Gallagher (2009) coined the term "readicide," which he defines as "the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools" (p. 2), which can be caused by "a curriculum steeped in multiple-choice test preparation" which "drives shallow teaching and learning" (p. 8). He further states that "rather than lift up struggling readers, an emphasis on multiple choice test preparation ensures that struggling readers will continue to struggle" (p. 8). Schools spend so much more time prepping for the test that quality reading time is being taken out of schools. Read aloud time was my favorite part of the day.

My students were attentive when I read to them, and they wanted me to keep reading because they were immersed in the story. Even my reluctant readers were engaged in listening to my read aloud. On the other hand, it has been my experience that reluctant readers do not do well with test prep curriculum. According to Gallagher (2009), in recent years, test practice type reading has overshadowed the reading of novels and other authentic text, and many high

school seniors have graduated as good test takers, but not as avid readers. There is no excitement in learning reading and writing skills in isolation. If students are bored with the curriculum, they tend to lose interest in school, they are not motivated, and they grow to be nonreaders. It becomes less and less surprising that one in three high school students drops out (Gallagher, 2009). Even the students who do not drop out could experience reduction in college readiness and even future preparedness for the job market as a result of the narrow test-prep curriculum. Emphasis on “centralized curriculum, standardized testing, accountability, required courses of study—could kill creativity, the United States’ real competitive edge” (Zhao 2006). Gallagher (2009) implores teachers, literacy coaches, and administrators to recognize how our current practices are harming students and take a stand to do what is right for our students. As he puts it, “We need to find this courage. Today. Nothing less than a generation of readers hangs in the balance” (p. 118).

Fletcher (2001) posits that students perform better on standardized tests when their teachers focus on best practices, rather than teaching to the test. Frawley (2014) states “The practice of good writing development needs to be facilitated despite the demands of the high-stakes environment...” (p. 23). Manzo (2001) compares students who have been subjected to the drill and practice of isolated skills to those who have received effective writing instruction. The author reports that students in the latter category score better on standardized writing tests. According to Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2007), “High-quality, evidence-based instruction need not be sacrificed in preparing students to succeed on standardized writing assessments” (p. 310). Fortunately, there are many ways teachers can help students become proficient readers and writers who read and write for a variety of purposes without teaching to the test.

Integrating Good Teaching Methods

To integrate good teaching practices, it is important to look at strategies that have been identified as best practices over the years. Decades ago, Murray (1972) described writing as a process and emphasized the need for teachers to focus on the process of writing, rather than the finished product. Flower and Hayes (1981) and Hayes and Flower (1986) added their

thoughts when they offered that the writing process is made up of the following components: planning, translating, and reviewing. Atwell (1987) described her version of the writing process as “in the middle.” The author included prewriting and planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. For Atwell’s writing workshop, she combined the writing process with peer and teacher conferencing and mini-lessons. In addition, Giacobbe (1982) named time, ownership and response as essential for writing.

More recently, Fletcher (2017) posited that the writing workshop provides sustained time, ideally every day, for students to experiment with the written word and practice the craft of writing. As students are allowed to choose their own topics during writing workshop, they feel ownership over what they have written, and they receive response to their writing from teacher and peers through conferences. In addition, Votteler and Miller (2017) have identified the writing workshop and the writing process as best practices for writing instruction. Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2007) stated that the writing workshop and the writing process combined with the 6+1 Traits of Writing and scaffolding through different modes of writing enable students to “write creatively and communicatively” and “...pass all necessary standardized tests in writing” (p.311). The 6 + 1 Traits include: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. The traits fit naturally into the writing process as students use the traits as a tool for revision. Students are taught in mini-lessons the art of assessing their own writing through the 6 + 1 Traits and they quickly become proficient at wordsmithing and editing their masterpieces.

When considering good writing strategies, it is important for a teacher to scaffold writing instruction for students by first modeling how he/she learns and what he/she is thinking, then gradually releasing writing responsibility to students. Cooper and Kiger (2003) describe the modes of writing instructional routines, which include write-aloud, shared writing, guided writing, collaborative or cooperative writing, and independent writing. This idea is based upon Pearson’s (1985) idea of gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student. If teachers model metacognition as well skills and procedures, students will eventually emulate them and become successful writers.

According to Miller and Higgins (2008), "...effective instructional practices and mandated testing demands can coexist if teachers choose methods that not only provide authentic learning experiences, but also prepare students to pass state tests. Reading Workshop and Writing Workshop are two such methods that enable students to practice authentic reading and writing for sustained periods while honing their skills" (p.124). Reading and writing workshops go hand-in-hand. In reading workshop, students are engaged in reading and responding to a variety of texts for sustained periods of time. According to Ivey (2000), "Giving all students, especially those experiencing difficulty, more time to read in school is the most certain way to help all students become more skilled and engaged, and even to be more prepared to achieve on standardized tests." (p. 43). Gallagher (2009) stressed the importance of providing a wide variety of interesting authentic literature from which students can choose. In a typical reading workshop, the teacher provides an extensive range of books on a variety of levels, catering to many different interests and representing various genres. Classroom libraries should also include multicultural books that represent the cultures and ethnicities of all students in the classroom, as well as others. According to Leland, Harste and Huber (2005), students develop identities as cultural and literate people through interactions with others, critical literacy instruction, and multicultural literature in classrooms.

A typical reading workshop format includes sustained silent or quiet reading time, reading response activities, teacher-student conferences, mini-lessons on reading strategies, read-aloud, shared reading experiences, partner reading, literature circles, and book talks or book sharing by teacher and students. Students work at their own level and at their own pace on self-selected reading materials (Tompkins, 2015). Teachers may work with small groups of students on similar levels in a guided reading format during this time as well to listen to and observe students and to give prompting on strategy use. In addition, the teacher spends time observing and collecting anecdotal records on students as they work independently or collaborate with others.

Reading workshop stands in stark contrast with the

reading passage format typically seen in today's classrooms. When teachers hand students a passage to read and answer the questions, they are not reading for any other purpose than to simply answer the questions. If there is no purpose set before the reader before they begin, they will likely not pull out the information that was intended. Additionally, the student has had no choice in what they will read, and often the passage is likely not something the student would find interesting.

The following is an example of a mini-lesson that can be done within reading workshop to address the requirement set forth by some districts to include reading passages in reading instruction. The topic of the mini-lesson is purpose for reading.

- Students receive a one-page passage entitled, "House." The first time they read it, they are to highlight what words they felt were important to the story.
- Students are then instructed to read the story again and highlight words that a burglar would find important.
- Students are then instructed a third time to read the passage, looking for words a real estate agent would find important.
- Students and teacher then discuss the importance of having a purpose for reading.

Reading aloud is an important part of reading workshop that is often left out of the school day in order to "fit in" other requirements that have been mandated by the district or state. In some schools, reading aloud is even frowned upon or thought to be wasted instructional time (Layne, 2015). Shannon (2002) states, "The first rule of teaching literacy is to read to your kids" (p.6), and according to Routman (1991), "Reading aloud should take place daily at all grade levels, including junior high and high school" (p. 32). If a teacher brings reading to life with interesting books, there is a possibility of peaking the interest of even the most reluctant readers. Teachers serve as a model of fluent reading and expose students to a variety of genres and topics through read aloud. Layne (2015) states that reading aloud to students helps to improve their comprehension, syntactic development, vocabulary, engagement, fluency, and attitudes towards reading. The author goes on to explain that he places a "Do Not Disturb" sign on his door during read

aloud time to demonstrate to his students and others in the school that “something they might presume to be less important than ‘real instruction’ was actually just as important as everything else we did” (p. 27). Avery (2002) puts it nicely when she states, “I realized that both the literature and the way I conducted the read aloud sessions provided a foundation with written language that touched every aspect of the children’s learning—and was indeed ‘teaching’” (p. 216). Read aloud time should be part of every school day and should not be squeezed out in favor of other subjects. Trelease (2006) suggests setting aside a certain time each day that is sacred as the reading time. In addition to that, the author recommends reading as much and as often as time allows.

Reading and writing workshops offer a natural setting in which children have sustained times each day to practice reading and writing and orchestrate all of the strategies they have learned through mini-lessons, read-alouds, conferences, think-alouds and modeling done by the teacher. In addition, students are encouraged to collaborate, which brings in the social nature of language (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Higgins, Miller, and Wegmann (2007), “learning is constructed as students are given a variety of experiences, ideas, and relationships with peers and teachers” (p. 311). The authors state that the learning that occurs as a result of these experiences helps students to become better at reading and writing, and in turn, improves scores on high stakes tests.

Tompkins (2017) suggests teaching using reading and writing workshops throughout the school year to provide students with time to read and write and instruction on reading and writing strategies. She goes on to state that a couple of weeks before a standardized test, it is a good idea to familiarize students with the testing format. Other than that, reading and writing should be taught in a natural setting in which students are provided meaningful, joyful, authentic experiences with literature (Routman, 2018).

Conclusion

In this article, we have offered reading and writing workshops as alternatives for monotonous kill and drill regimens, lack luster lessons, test-like writing prompts and reading passages with benchmarking every few weeks. We believe that through reading and writing

workshops, students can experience meaningful and authentic literacy activities that excite them and help develop them as not only proficient readers and writers, but as people who love reading and writing. If students are taught to read and write well, they will perform well on mandated reading tests. But if they are only taught to be test-takers, they will never learn to read and write well (Langer, 2002). Through this article, we hope to be a voice for students and teachers to help alleviate the pressures that come with high-stakes testing. We hope Brennan and other students will grow to love reading and writing again. We further hope that they will not be anxious or scared when it is time to take the standardized test, but that they will feel self-assured and well prepared because reading and writing are something they can do well because they do them every day in meaningful ways. We hope to have reached a parent, a teacher, or an administrator who will stand up for what is right for our students so they can not only become confident at taking and passing high stakes tests, but they can grow into lifelong avid readers and writers who find joy in writing for themselves and for others.

Georgia Reading Association



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- Recognize exemplary individuals, local, and state literacy efforts.
- Achieve maximum involvement of members at the local, state, and international levels to receive maximum benefits.
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