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The Blue-Nosed Pit Bull and the High Stakes Test Curriculum: A Cautionary Tale

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In the first part of this paper, the author describes her experiences with the dark side of standardized testing and the dry and detached curriculum that can result. In the second she explores the cautionary message the tale delivers. The story takes place in an urban 3rd grade classroom and focuses on the test-based writing curriculum of four learners, Jamal, Emily, Danita, and most especially William.

This story details an event that occurred in an urban third grade classroom one recent spring semester. There were 15 children in the class, most of whom were African-American. The school was under the watchful eye of the city's Board of Education as well as the State Education Department since children's scores on the mandated tests in reading and writing were very, very low. This neighborhood school risked closure unless test scores improved within three years.

At the time the story takes place, I was an associate professor teaching literacy education courses at a nearby college. My presence at Bell Elementary School was voluntary. I had taught in rural systems for most of my public school teaching career, and my students were children of farmers, factory workers, and small town business owners. I knew that the population of children my preservice education majors would be teaching would look very different, and so I had come to Bell School to gain a better understanding of the urban school setting, its teachers, and the children.

This account is a reconstruction of events that took place during my second visit to Bell Elementary School. People and place names have been altered, and while the event is real, some minimal literary invention is employed to carry the tale.

The Tale of the Blue-Nosed Pit Bull

I was introduced to Sandra Robinson, a third grade teacher, during a summer-time meeting designed to initiate collaborative working relationships among the teacher educators at our college and the classroom teachers at Bell School. I asked Ms. Robinson if I might spend one day a week in her classroom beginning in mid-January. Her response was reserved and her message clear. "You can come into my classroom and watch as much as you want. You can even read stories to my children, but if you want to help, you must guarantee me that you will come regularly and not drop out when it isn't convenient. These children need help and come to rely on those giving it. My last experience with a college professor was not good, and I don't want to put these children through that again. I'll give you the materials you need to work with the children. They need writing practice for the schoolwide tests they have every two months and the districtwide language arts test in May."

I assured her that I would be there once a week and do what I could to help her, although I was uncomfortable about "teaching to the test." On the third Wednesday in January, I stood at the doorway of Ms. Robinson's classroom. She was sitting in a comfortable-looking rocking chair reading aloud from *How to Eat Fried Worms* by Thomas Rockwell. The children were spread out in the

reading corner—some on the sofa, some on the carpet and others in squat, school-desk chairs. All were listening at varying levels of intensity. I discovered early on that these children really enjoyed being read to and many preferred read-alouds or buddy reading to independent silent reading.

Ms. Robinson smiled and waved me into the room. After finishing the chapter and engaging the students in a brief conversation about the story, she introduced me. “Boys and girls, this is Mrs. Combs. Remember, I told you that she would be spending time in our class to help out with reading and writing and to learn about third graders.”

The children looked at me and several nodded as I said hello. Since Ms. Robinson and I had already set plans for this day’s work the week before, no more time was spent in introductions. Instead, she stood and announced, “It’s language arts time. Jamal, William, Emily, and Danita get your materials and go see Mrs. Combs. Kara, James, Deena, Ben, and Michael go the reading table. You’ll work with me. The rest of you know what work you need to do.”

The children gathered their materials as Ms. Robinson walked me to a cluster of four desks. Along the way she picked up the basket of materials I would be using that day. “The children need to take this practice test,” she began. “You can give them some help, but they need to do the writing on their own because I will be using a rubric to score the results. Next week, they will take a similar district test that we will use to determine growth in writing and to gain some sense of how these students will do on the 4th Grade Reading and Writing State Assessment at the end of next year.”

I took the basket and placed it on one of the student desks. Ms. Robinson smiled at me and turned her attention to the children who were waiting at the kidney shaped reading table. I gave the materials a quick glance while Jamal, William, Emily, and Danita settled in around me. According to the directions, the students were to look at the writing prompt, in this case a picture, answer several questions, complete a graphic organizer, draft a story, revise it, and prepare a final copy. The writing assignment was designed to mirror the state test that the children would take as 4th graders. The tests and accompanying workbooks collectively comprised the district’s mandated writing curriculum for Bell School.

It was a formidable assignment, one I knew could not be completed successfully in a single, 60-minute language arts session. Still, I was the visitor and had offered to do whatever Ms. Robinson needed. I gave a test booklet to each child and forged ahead. I decided first to use the picture prompt to spark a discussion. I hoped this would tell me something about the lives and interests of my new students before I guided them in responding to the questions, creating a graphic organizer, and drafting.

I quickly scanned the picture. In the foreground four white children, three boys and a girl, stood around an almost completely finished doghouse. Each child was smartly dressed in what appeared to be clothes from the *GAP for Kids*. A long-eared hound dog sat behind the children. His forehead was wrinkled and he looked sad and worried. A large, split-level home filled the background and a woman, perhaps the mother of one of the children, stood on an expansive deck just in front of a sliding glass door. Three of the children held building tools: a hammer, saw, and measuring tape. The fourth child held a long piece of wood. Each looked either puzzled or frustrated. It was difficult to tell since the picture was somewhat fuzzy.

I felt uncomfortable. The view I saw as I drove to Bell Elementary that morning had little in common with the world depicted in the picture in the test booklet. The neighborhood where Jamal, William, Emily, and Danita lived had more concrete than grass. The streets were lined with

small, paint-worn clapboard houses packed in amid 4-5 story apartment buildings; a few small corner grocery stores; and aged, brick factory buildings. An empty, grass-pocked lot enclosed by a chain link fence sat directly across from the school. This was the playground area for the children during recess since the school could not afford to build its own. The children, too, were different—African-American and Hispanic. Emily, the only white girl in Ms. Robinson's class, wore a wispy, white and pink polyester dress that clearly had not been purchased from the expensive shops in the city's mid-town mall. Suburbia looking up at us from this page in the booklet couldn't have been farther away from the lives of these children. I wondered what sorts of connections we could make. A link, I thought, might be that sad and worried dog. It was worth a try.

"Good morning. I am Ms. Combs, and I teach college students who want to be teachers. I am here because I want to learn more about 3rd graders, and how you learn to read and write. Today, Ms. Robinson asked me to help you with writing a story, but first let's talk a little bit about pets. I have a dog. Her name is Sylvia, and every night when my husband comes home, she takes his socks off and brings him his slippers. She just loves to do this. We love her very much."

After I finished, all four children began talking in unison about their cats, dogs, and guinea pigs. "Whoa," I laughed, "I want each of you to have a chance to tell your story, so you'll have to share one at a time." Emily spoke first. She told of how her guinea pig, Cuddles, would hide under her bed when he got out of the cage. Jamal said that his dog had run away, but he was hoping he could get another one soon. Danita talked about her cat. "Every night Angel curls up at the top of my pillow. In the wintertime, she keeps my head warm."

William was the last to share. He had been squirming in his seat, just barely holding his story in. "I had me a blue-nosed pit bull once. That dog was me-e-e-ean. When I'd get home from after school, I couldn't just go into the house. I had to knock and he'd come running, barking and growling and jumping at the door. If I just tried to open the door, he'd bite my hand off! First, I'd have to say, 'It's me, Willie, you stupid dog!' When he knew it was me, he'd quit barking and let me come in." I listened to William intently. I was both shocked and intrigued by the vivid tale he was weaving.

"I had to be real careful not to let him out, so I would just squeeze in the door. If he got loose, he would attack people. One day last month, a lady was walking by my house when I got home from school. When I opened the door that stupid dog just charged right past me and attacked that lady. He jumped on her and bit her. She was hurt really bad. She was having a baby and that dog just kept biting her and biting her. He bit her in the belly and they took her to the hospital but her baby died." William dropped his head and said softly, "The police came and took my dog away." He paused a moment, shook his head and said, "I sure do miss that blue-nosed pit bull."

I was dumbfounded. I truly did not know how to react. "I am sorry that happened to you," I replied meagerly. He looked up at me, shrugged his shoulders, and smiled broadly. Again I was surprised. I could not tell whether his smile was meant to signal that the story was merely a tale or that he had already moved beyond the sadness. I did not get a chance to find out since Ms. Robinson walked by just then and reminded me that we had only one hour of language arts time, and I had already used a third of it.

I turned back to the students, who were continuing to talk to each other about their pets. Reluctantly, I asked them to look at the writing packet and read the directions with me. The procedures were not new, and the children seemed to know that they would need to do some prewriting and writing. None were

enthusiastic about the task, and William sighed deeply and slumped into his chair. With Ms. Robinson's eyes on both the clock and me, I ignored his body language and pressed on.

After reading the directions together, I asked them to tell me what they saw in the picture. The children perked up a bit and immediately focused on the dog, not surprising since we had just finished sharing our pet tales. We all agreed that the kids were most likely building a doghouse, that the dog looked sad, and the woman standing on the deck was a mom who looked pretty upset. We turned next to the questions, and although we shared possible answers, I encouraged each child to respond to the test questions using her or his own words.

The next step in the test prep activity required students to fill in a graphic organizer that followed a story grammar format with three boxes for writing notes related to a beginning, middle, and end of a story. I wanted to model the process for the students, so I filled in my organizer first. I spoke aloud while writing notes for a story about a sad dog waiting anxiously for the children to finish building him a home because the boy's mother would not let the dog live in the house. Then, I asked the children to complete their own organizers and tell the story that they saw. As they filled the boxes on their pages, I was not surprised to see that each of the stories was a tale about a sad dog waiting for a doghouse. Each child did, however, add something unique about the tools they used or the way they built the house. William wrote that the doghouse needed to be finished by the end of the day or the dog would have to go to the pound!

Next, the children wrote first drafts. The stories were short with little detail, as though they had merely erased the boxes around the graphic organizers and presented their notes as a complete draft. I wanted to spend time in conference with each, asking questions and drawing out additional details that they might add, but I could see Ms. Robinson looking on and began to feel rushed. I knew that students would need to turn in a finished product at the end of the session and so made only quick comments to each that I hoped would help them during the revision process.

As they moved to the final phase of the activity, I reminded students that they could still make changes to their stories and to be sure to check for spelling and write complete sentences. They scribbled furiously to complete their final drafts. Ms. Robinson signaled that it was lunchtime, and we would have to stop. I looked at the clock. We had been working for 90 minutes! The children quickly piled up the materials and ran to join the line of classmates headed to the cafeteria. I thanked them for their hard work and told them that we would do more writing next week.

I shook my head as I tried to organize the pile of papers and booklets. Where had the time gone? The activity had not been electrifying, but the children had seemed engaged and had completed their stories. As the classroom emptied of students, I sat down with Ms. Robinson to reflect on the activity. "I'm really concerned about this prompt. I think that children write best when they have choice and a rich, authentic context from which to draw. I do not think that there is much in this photo that resonates with the lives of these children."

Ms. Robinson nodded in agreement but said, "It can't be helped. This is what the school gave me to use. They need to pass these tests to pass grade three. I know it doesn't fit, but it's what I have to do. If they don't pass they won't go on and we (the school) will be in even more trouble." She collected their papers from me and began to skim through. With a frustrated sigh she said, "None of these students will receive a good score. None of them have written more than a paragraph—not enough for third graders. And the rubric says that they're supposed to write about

the children not having enough wood to complete the doghouse. They didn't even mention that!"

I felt awful. I had not seen the rubric. In my attempt to guide the children towards some common theme in the picture, I had led them to write an unacceptable response. I immediately explained what I had done. I had guided the children to the pet stories based upon my interpretation of the picture. Ms. Robinson shook her head but smiled, "Then we will have to do another one tomorrow."

The morning was over, and I left feeling frustrated. I was frustrated because of the unwitting error I made that would result in more work for Jamal, Emily, Danita, and William. This was sure to further encourage their dislike of writing. I was frustrated because the context presented in the practice test seemed so foreign in this urban setting and frustrated because the school writing program focused too narrowly on preparation for a standardized state exam that was yet a year and a half away. In my brief time that morning I had learned that each of the children had stories to share, but the mandated test-prep curriculum would, most likely, not allow them to surface. How sad that William would not have the opportunity to share in writing the strange tale of that blue-nosed pit bull.

The Caution in the Tale

I do not share this story as a confession to shed myself of the guilt I felt for leading the children astray of the task requirements. Nor do I tell it as a tale to bring into focus the sometimes-violent experiences in the lives of children such as William. It is rather a cautionary tale detailing the negative effects of a relentless focus on high stakes testing. Such a focus can easily lead to a narrowed and ineffective curriculum. Such a tale can remind us to resist any change that moves us away from a balanced and authentic approach to instruction and assessment.

Warning: When High Stake's a Mistake

Over the last decade a great deal has been written about this issue, and so Ms. Robinson, Jamal, William, Emily, and Danita may represent any of a number of classroom teachers and students who have had to face high stakes testing fallout. As defined in a position statement of the International Reading Association (*High-stakes Test Assessments in Reading*, 1999) high stakes testing is present when one test is used to make important educational and life decisions about schools. For Ms. Robinson and her 3rd graders, the stakes could not have been higher. Students were at risk of failing 3rd grade, and for many it would be the second time they would be "held back." Bell School risked closure if the scores for the 4th grade reading/ writing test did not improve within three years. Teachers, Ms. Robinson included, would be transferred or lose their jobs, and children would most likely be bused to several other schools throughout the city.

Bell Elementary is not alone in living these accountability blues. As of 2001, school districts in at least 11 states make use of single test scores to punish or reward schools (Olson, 2001). In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandates annual testing in grades 3-8 with a threat of sanctions for non-improving schools. As noted, "school districts and schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward state proficiency goals will over time be subject to improvement, corrective action, and restructuring aimed at getting them back on course to meet state standards" (US Department of Education, 2002, ¶ 4). Such punitive measures blame the victim and mask critical issues that affect learning, such as under-funded schools that lack the materials and professional development of teachers that would make a positive difference in a child's learning:

> High-stakes testing punishes students, and often teachers, for things they

> cannot control. It drives students and teachers away from learning, and at times from school. It narrows, distorts, weakens and impoverishes the curriculum while fostering forms of instruction that fail to engage students or support high-quality learning. (*The Dangerous Consequences of High-Stakes Standardized Testing*, n.d.)

Warning: Accountability Can Backfire

I will not argue against accountability. We can expect that schools engage in practices that assure students' academic success. We can demand that schools demonstrate that teachers can teach and students do learn. However, I will argue against the implementation and overuse of a test curriculum as an appropriate means to this end. The writing curriculum that Jamal, William, Danita, and Emily worked within supports this assertion.

First, the students were expected to respond quickly and well to the assigned task of working through questions, a graphic organizer, a first draft, revisions, and a final draft in one sitting. Yet, through the work of scholars and teachers (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994; Hindley, 1996), we understand children need something very different to become confident, effective writers. They need lots of time to write each day, some control over choice of topic and genre, teacher and peer guidance, and authentic publication experiences. A contrived, albeit open-ended, response and imposed time limitations left these students with little chance to demonstrate or improve upon their skills and abilities (Kohn, 2000).

Second, the children were asked to build a story around a picture that was far removed from their own lives. As such, the prompt assessed the background knowledge as well as, or perhaps instead of, the writing ability of the students. For example, Danita had no idea what tool the girl in the picture was holding. It was a handsaw. I think Danita had few opportunities, if any, to use such tools. As noted by Cramer (2001), "Children's best writing deals with what they know and care about" (p. 62). If children are mandated to write a narrative about a world that is unfamiliar to them, a superficial or unsatisfactory response would seem inevitable. Giving Danita, Jamal, William, and Emily few opportunities to make their own choices and reveal their own interests and ideas must, in time, result in stunted, voiceless writing.

A mandated curriculum derived from fear of sanctions drove the literacy instruction in Ms. Robinson's classroom and did little to help these students improve their writing. Students received an almost daily dose of writing practice from test preparation workbooks filled with prompts and activities that mirrored the district and state tests. Twice a month, she rearranged the room and gave students 45 minutes to complete a grade level writing assessment task.

For Jamal, William, Emily, and Danita, neither successful nor confident writers, it was a painful experience. The children with whom I worked took no joy in writing. For them, it was a hard task to be done for others—one far from the experience Calkins (1994) relates where children might "hold [their] lives in [their] hands and make something of it" (p. 4). Ironically, their oral stories, like that of the blue-nosed pit bull, were often filled with emotion and heart as well as rich description and colorful detail. These were not, however, the stories that they transformed into print.

Warning: Complaining Leaves Us Powerless

Ms. Robinson and I spent many lunch times together shaking our heads and bemoaning the testing shadow we were living under. While our commiserating brought brief comfort, our talk did nothing to help the children. As Graves (2002)

notes, we need to stop complaining and offer alternative approaches that demand accountability with authenticity. As an example, he offers an alternative to standardized tests of writing that more closely mirrors what we expect children to do as writers. He accepts the current practice of a one time, year-end exam, but suggests it be based upon a child's area of interest and expertise. The child from September to May explores areas of interest, building his knowledge base and expertise over time and, with guidance from the teacher, produces a list of 5-7 topics he feels qualified to write about. In May, the teacher selects two topics and the genre in which the child will write. Graves (2002) further argues that moving from national normed assessments that result in stilted, low-level thinking and writing to more local assessments that offer the child some confidence and control will actually produce a more "perceptive and divergent thinker" (p. 47) better able to navigate the 21st Century landscape.

Calkins, Montgomery, and Santman (1998) offer a different approach in dealing with high-stakes testing. Their text, *A Teacher's Guide to Standardized Reading Tests: Knowledge is Power*, is built on the premise that the more knowledgeable we are about mandated, standardized reading tests, the less victimized we will be. The authors discuss the purposes and uses of tests, what they do and do not reveal about individual students, how to prepare students for tests without abandoning good instructional practice, and finally, challenge readers to take a more political stance towards standardized testing. Much information about standardized test uses, abuses, and flaws is now available on the internet as well. Advocacy sites like fairtest.org provide a great amount of information and a link to a host of organizations that oppose the high stakes use of standardized tests.

Final Thoughts

Wilde (2002) notes that there are very few areas in life where a single test has so much impact and these (such as law and beauty salon work) are connected to individually chosen professions, not compulsory education (p. 36). A standardized test must never be used as the single measure of success or failure of a school, a child, or a teacher. A teachers' commitment to and belief in the learner; her knowledge of the content; and her ability to employ multiple assessments and appropriate strategies are critical elements in the development of competent confident readers and writers. It is not possible for teachers to reach such an end within a high stakes test curriculum. Learners like William will bury their rich and colorful stories, and I, for one, would sorely have missed the tale of that blue-nosed pit bull.

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