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## 5. Teaching through the Test: Building Life-Changing Academic Achievement and Critical Capacity

VICTOR H. DIAZ

*Teachers who see themselves as allies of their working-class students see that literacy and school knowledge could be potent weapons in their struggle for a better deal by connecting school knowledge with the reality of working class lives... not just a bunch of sissy stuff for which they have no use—Patrick J. FINN (1999).*

This chapter shares the work of secondary English/Language Arts teachers who have sought to turn Finn's vision into reality through our work in low-income communities. As a Program Director and Learning Team Leader in Teach For America (TFA), I have worked with many first- and second-year teachers on a concept I call "teaching through the test." People in Teach For America<sup>1</sup> tend to join the teaching profession with a motivation to offer poor and working-class youth an educational experience that will lead to increased life opportunities. We believe that all children should have the opportunity to attain an excellent education and we seek to close the achievement gap that exists between our students and their more privileged peers.

We also understand that academic achievement, in and of itself, will not ensure that our students will have the tools, resources, and support to participate meaningfully in a democracy. Good grades and high test scores may grant young people access to new spaces in schools, but more is needed to broker a better deal in the broader society. Thus, we try to offer our students an education that bridges the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and aligns increased academic achievement to the development of a critical capacity that aids students in their struggle for liberation (Freire, 1998). We seek to make academic achievement life changing, a sword and a shield for students

as they progress through a school system that has been historically structured to disadvantage them. To do this, we engage in a curriculum and pedagogy that “teaches through the test” en route to critical consciousness and participation in a democratic society.

To teach through the test, we create units in our English/Language Arts classes that are both relevant and rigorous. These units are aligned to state standards and high-stakes tests, while their content is grounded in critical pedagogy and our students’ experiences growing up in poor and working-class communities. I first started planning and implementing such units as a high school English and English Language Development (ELD) teacher in the barrio of East San Jose<sup>2</sup>, California, where I was placed as a corps member in TFA. After working in this predominately Latino and Vietnamese immigrant community for five years, I have worked in a variety of roles with TFA, supporting new teachers in both California and Arizona while also teaching middle-school language arts for the past four years. I work with middle and high school English/Language Arts teachers in metropolitan Phoenix to plan and implement the units described in this chapter. As participants in TFA, we all work in Title I schools with a history of underperformance on measures of academic achievement, located in working-class Latino communities.

In this chapter, I will share a framework for and some examples of this work. Although I am proud of what we’ve accomplished with our students, I will also share critical reflections, demonstrating the complexity of the tensions between critical pedagogy and increasingly stringent accountability measures placed on teachers and students.

### **Achievement by any measure necessary**

Many social justice educators hold a “by any means necessary” disposition towards their work, no doubt inspired by Malcolm X’s most famous quote. Yet, as they do so, many fail to demonstrate how their methods lead students to higher levels of critical awareness or actions related to social justice. Nor do they demonstrate correlation between their methods and increased academic achievement. This lack of evidence has contributed to a devaluation of social justice education in this time of testing and accountability.

In the real world, social justice educators cannot drop their weapons and pick up a standardized, scripted curriculum whose only goal is to prepare students for a test. Rather, they need to be equipped with tools that assist them in creating a curriculum that leads to achievement by any *measure* necessary, teaching through and beyond high-stakes tests. Achievement on these tests can serve as both a sword and a shield for social justice educators, who can use student achievement results to advocate for their pedagogical project as well as defend it against the attacks of those who seek to maintain the status quo of schools.

### **UbD and aligning instruction to assessments**

State standards, performance objectives, and standardized assessments can and should be part of a strong social justice curriculum. While this may be a debatable assertion, tighter measures of accountability offer teachers little choice in teaching towards a test. There is a human cost to failure in schools, and the stakes around tests are often highest for minoritized students. Social justice educators must use methods that have been shown to work in increasing student achievement across many different demographics. One particular approach applies the work of Wiggins and McTighe (2005), who created the curriculum planning process titled “Understanding by Design” (UbD). While many educators work to align their instruction to standards, UbD provides a framework for aligning instruction to assessments, and the distinction is profound. While I can easily align reading Corky Gonzalez’s poem “I Am Joaquin” to state standards by analyzing its use of figurative language or its theme, it is more difficult to ensure that my students’ learning with this poem will appear on a standardized test that measures their reading skills using out-of-context and often irrelevant texts.

In order to align instruction to assessments, Wiggins and McTighe advocate for a process of deconstructing high-stakes assessments. Analyzing items on high-stakes tests provides teachers with an insight into the knowledge and skills needed to complete the item successfully, and a sequenced list of objectives. More important, these items provide question frames that teachers can use on diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments they create.

Consider the following example from Arizona’s state standards for 6th grade reading. Standard 1.4.1. states that students must be able to determine the effect of affixes on root words. The following question from a sample AIMS<sup>3</sup> test posted on the Arizona Department of Education website is used to measure mastery of this standard:

21. Adding the prefix bi- to the word annual makes a new word that means:
- A. Two times each year
  - B. More than two times
  - C. Three times each year
  - D. More than three years

Surely, not every AIMS test will have this same question, as any affix or any root word could be used to measure mastery. However the frame created by the question can be used to create similar items on assessments given to students throughout the year. Thus, teachers can use UbD to ensure the curriculum they plan is aligned not only to standards but also to high-stakes tests. The power of teaching through the test lies in using such question frames with

texts that are grounded in students' critical understanding of the world around them.

The assessment item on the released AIMS test is connected to a letter that a student council has written to the school principal, proposing new activities for spirit week. During an expository text unit I conducted about the Development, Relief, and Education of Alien Minors (DREAM) Act<sup>4</sup>, I used the same and similar assessment items after students read an op-ed from a local newspaper advocating for the passage of the DREAM Act. The article included the sentence, "Proponents of the DREAM Act hope to host a biannual conference aimed at providing information and support to undocumented students and their families." In reading this article, not only are students learning about the prefixes bi-, pro-, and un-, they are also learning about the DREAM Act and how they and others can advocate for this important legislation. Using the question frames, they are also practicing for the AIMS test they will take later in the year, which will be used by the state to assess their mastery of 6th grade content and our school's overall effectiveness. Later, students will have to pass this test in order to graduate from high school.

#### *The cultural capital of academic achievement*

Of course, there are critiques of this form of curriculum development, ranging from accusations of narrowing curriculum to disempowering other knowledge bases. A UbD-influenced curriculum surely runs the risk of promoting the status quo of schools in the hands of an uncritical educator who teaches to the test. Yet, social justice educators who see academic achievement infused with critical capacity as cultural and social capital can avoid such a pitfall.

Hong and Youngs (2008) argue that achievement on high-stakes tests can serve as both institutional and embodied cultural capital. Derived from Bourdieu's (1973, 1986) cultural capital theory, Olneck (2000) describes institutional capital as the markers provided by institutions of academic competence, including degrees, diplomas, and test scores. Alternatively, embodied capital is demonstrated by cultural behaviors and dispositions that reinforce dominant cultural knowledge. If schools are truly meritocratic institutions, achievement on high-stakes tests should foster the development of both institutional and embodied cultural capital that will serve poor and working class students as they progress through the educational system and engage in social systems. Although educational meritocracy has been debated by those who see it as the heart of the system (Ravitch, 1996; Hirsch, 1995), and those who see it as nothing more than a fantasy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Finn, 1999), the development of academic achievement by poor and working-class youth would force the hand of the public education system to either demonstrate how such academic achievement results in the development of cultural capital, or pull back the veil on the meritocratic promise of public education. In other words,

academic achievement will allow poor and working-class communities to beat the public education system at its own game, or expose the game as nothing more than a hegemonic illusion.

#### **Education for critical capacity**

The example of using standard 1.4.1. and released AIMS items within an expository unit about the DREAM Act reflects both the academic side of "teaching through the test" as well as its more critical components. When teaching through the test, it is important to consider the world beyond assessments of student academic achievement. To this end, curriculum should not focus solely on outcomes like achievement on high-stakes tests, but rather the development of students' critical capacity for understanding what forces impact how their social world functions as well as the willingness and courage to take action to transform the structures causing oppressive situations (Freire, 1998). The group of students who engaged in the DREAM Act unit was predominately Latino, and most of the students were either undocumented or had family members who were. It was important for them to understand how immigration status affects educational opportunity, and more important, what could be done to change this relationship in order to broker a better deal for them in the broader society. This aligns to Freire's (1998) description of critical capacity: a relentless state of curiosity moving towards the revelation of hidden roots of oppressive situations. In addition, critical capacity includes one's willingness to take action and engage in risks that lead to the altering of an oppressive situation. Thus, critical capacity includes a cycle of praxis, where one's critical thinking and critical actions lead them to higher levels of critical consciousness and meaningful social action en route to less oppressive situations (Freire, 1973). In the English/Language Arts classroom, teachers can guide students through a curriculum that leads students towards critical consciousness and engaging in transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001).

#### *Critical consciousness*

Freire (1973) describes critical consciousness as a consciousness that is integrated with reality, as people use empirical facts to understand causal and circumstantial relationships, particularly those that are at the root of oppressive situations. He differentiates between critical consciousness and other forms of consciousness that are created by and strengthen oppressive relationships. In a state of magic consciousness, people see facts as superior and arbitrary, and are thus controlled by them. Freire explains magic consciousness leads people to adapt to reality with a sense of fatalism and impossibility, in particular when considering their oppression. In between critical consciousness and magic consciousness is the state of naïve consciousness, where people find

themselves superior or completely in control of facts, and thus superimpose themselves over reality. This limits people's ability to truly understand their oppression in a way that allows them to work towards their freedom, as naïve consciousness can lead a person to ignoring any set of facts, including the facts that describe their own oppression.

Too often, poor and working-class students resign themselves to magic and naïve consciousness. In their understanding of the relationship between immigration status and educational opportunity, many students see its oppressive nature, yet cannot conceive of how to take actions that will lead to any kind of meaningful transformation of the situation. This leads to feelings of helplessness for those students who are undocumented, as they cannot change their situation. It also leads to feelings of powerlessness for those who are citizens, including students and teachers, as they cannot help others who lack their own privileges. Ultimately, English/Language Arts curriculum must develop the critical consciousness of both students and teachers, as it furthers their critical capacity and ability to take part in transformative actions that will lead to the practice of education as freedom.

### *Transformational resistance*

The realization of human agency, described by Solorzano and Solorzano (1995) as the possession of skills and confidence to act on one's own behalf, is an important outcome for any curriculum that seeks to develop critical capacity. When people realize their sense of human agency, they can begin to engage in acts of resistance. Giroux (1983a, 1983b) explains that resistance consists of the level of critique of social oppression as well as the level of motivation experienced from an interest in social justice. Using these dimensions, Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) explain that students who engage in transformational resistance have both a strong critique of social oppression and a strong interest in and motivation from social justice (see Figure 1). They argue that transformational resistance offers students the best chance at creating meaningful social change.

In the DREAM Act unit, students were not simply guided to increase their literacy skills with regard to expository text. Rather, they were led to use those skills in their engagement with transformational resistance, by learning more about the actions they could take to advocate and fight for the passage of the DREAM Act. Students wrote letters to friends and family that described the DREAM Act and encouraged others to become involved in advocating for it. They also wrote persuasive letters to elected leaders demanding support for the legislation. These letters were aligned to state standards as well as state writing assessments, and reflected the students' use of their academic achievement to struggle for liberation. It is not enough for students to merely achieve academic success. However, academic success is a vital part of the struggle for a better deal.

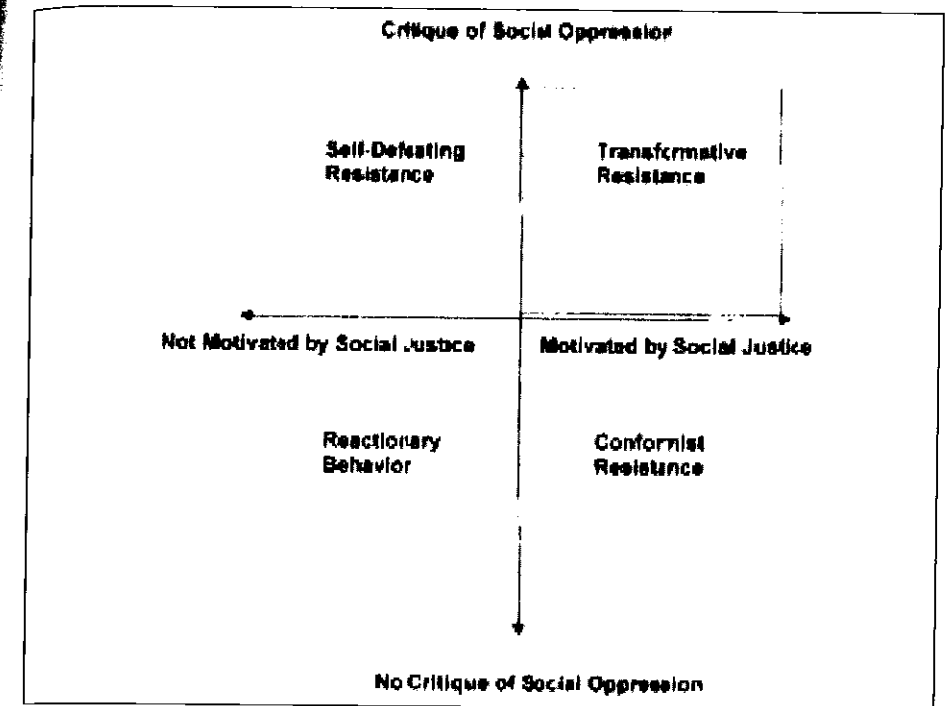


Figure 1. Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal's (2001) model for transformational resistance

### Teaching through the test in practice

Academic achievement does not have to exist as precursor to the fostering of critical capacity and acts of transformational resistance. Both processes must occur simultaneously and are ultimately mutually constitutive. I will now turn our attention to sample units that engage in teaching through the test via their alignment to high-stakes tests and their explicit use of critical pedagogy. In our context in Arizona, where we teach in predominately Latino communities, issues related to labor, gangs, and immigration policies, the criminal justice system tend to occupy our students' worries as they represent just some of the forces that most deeply affect their lives and well-being (Syme, 2004).

### *Farm worker injustice*

The same 6th graders who engaged in the DREAM Act unit took part in another unit that focused on both expository and literary text and an analysis of the injustices experienced historically and contemporarily by farm workers. Francisco Jimenez' (1997) memoir *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* inspired the farm worker injustice unit, which was organized

around the following *essential questions*, another concept for planning curriculum outlined by UbD: (1) What are the current injustices farm workers face? (2) How do farm workers use the community to solve their problems? (3) How can we stand in solidarity with farm workers? (4) Who is the UFW and how do they fight injustice? This unit included reading “The Circuit” as well as a series of recent articles from periodicals found on the United Farm Workers’ website that highlighted current injustices experienced by farm workers.

At the end of the unit, students wrote an expository essay describing how people can stand in solidarity with farm workers, which was used to create pamphlets intended to inform the public about injustices experienced by farm workers. The pamphlets were displayed at the school, and students had the option of distributing them in the community in whatever method they chose. Students also circulated an online petition organized by the UFW that pressured states to hold farm owners accountable in the deaths of workers. The students enthusiastically collected hundreds of signatures over the course of the four-week unit. Essays, pamphlets, and the petition all stand as examples of students taking acts of transformational resistance, armed with a critical consciousness about farm worker injustice.

Like the DREAM Act unit, this unit sought to develop literacy skills through reading and writing non-fiction text. In addition, the inclusion of Francisco Jimenez’s memoir allowed the incorporation of literary analysis standards. As students read *The Circuit*, they learned and practiced the state standards for comprehending literary text. Students were instructed to describe the plot and characters of stories, identify the narrative point of view and theme, and analyze the setting, mood, and author’s word choice: all in accordance to Arizona’s 6th grade reading standards. Instruction and assessments were aligned to released AIMS items intended to measure mastery of these standards. Standards were spiraled throughout the unit, and progress towards them was measured on quizzes given at the end of each week.

At the end of the year, these students demonstrated incredible academic gains on the AIMS test when compared to their peers in the district. The students at this school passed the reading and writing AIMS tests at a higher rate than any other school in the district. The reliability of this demonstration of academic achievement will be discussed later in the chapter.

### *The history and effects of gangs*

In his first year of teaching middle school language arts, Kurtis Indorf recognized his 8th graders’ academic success was inhibited by a variety of social forces that made school seem unimportant, such as poverty, immigration reform, institutional racism, and a strong presence of gang activity in the community surrounding his school. Recognizing high levels of gang affiliation by students in his 8th grade classes, Mr. Indorf created a unit intended to study the his-

tory and effects of gangs. The unit used two essential questions: (1) Why were gangs created? and (2) What are gangs’ effects on society? The unit’s goals were to master writing logically organized expository essays and critically analyze the influences of gangs on their community.

Students analyzed several non-fiction texts, including informational articles on Prohibition-era gangs and contemporary gangs such as the Bloods, Crips, and Mexican Mafia. Students studied the connection between gangs and drugs, violence, and the victimization of community members. At the end of the unit, students considered how gangs could be good for a community, using a powerful editorial from the *Los Angeles Times* that explained how gangs give people a sense of community and identification that could be re-cast in a more positive way. Students engaged in the critical analysis of non-fiction text, developing standards-aligned skills like finding the main idea and summarizing the main points of the article, as well as broader notions of critical literacy such as understanding the power relationships and historical foundations of the topics of study. As students deconstructed the texts, they re-presented the information found in the articles by producing constructed responses. These responses demonstrated understanding of the text and explained their own reflections and ideas about gangs.

Mr. Indorf explains that the impact of this unit was seen in his students’ sense of identity and belonging, which is an important part of critical consciousness. In his words, the unit led students to

feeling not oppressed, marginalized and powerless. In the class culture, everyone felt like they belonged and the students knew where everyone was coming from. They all had hardships, they all endured a common struggle and they felt together. The gang unit brought the class together with a common understanding. They had a sense that they had all gone through a struggle together and all came through it successfully. (personal communication, March 30, 2011)

He explains that those students who had personally experienced the effects of gangs in their own lives felt this most poignantly. He says,

There were students in class who joined gangs. Being able to name the psychology and the thinking behind that decision made everyone more understandable. They saw it was not really their fault, as there are huge structural and societal instances of violence. The understanding also made gangs less desirable. They connected gangs to social marginalization and poverty and the seeking of belonging. They grew in their understanding and analysis of society, and people became less attracted to it. They saw that joining a gang was less about an “I’m tough” mentality, but rather a feeling of “I don’t belong.” What they needed was a place where they belonged, and that is what the classroom became.

In addition, Mr. Indorf reports that his students’ increased sense of belonging and critical consciousness, via this and other units that incorporated a similar pedagogy, led them to increased academic achievement. While he has no

data to demonstrate the effectiveness of this unit in particular (an issue that will be discussed later), by the end of the year, he reports that his students grew an average of 2.78 years in reading, based on the Basic Reading Inventory (BRI) administered by his school throughout the year. He firmly believes that such an incredible growth in achievement would not be possible were it not for his students' engagement with a curriculum that was aimed at increasing their sense of belonging and critical consciousness.

### *The criminal justice system*

The importance of teaching through the test and leading students to life-changing academic achievement is not lost on David Hall, a first-year high school teacher who works with students who are not on track to graduate. In Mr. Hall's English classes, these students are making up credits so that they earn enough to graduate, as they prepare to take the exit exam they have already failed, in the hopes that they will pass and complete that requirement for graduation. Yet, Mr. Hall recognizes that many of these students are not in his class just because they find reading and writing difficult. Rather, many of them are unmotivated by and disinvested in academic success and struggle to see the relevance and importance of school. With this in mind, Mr. Hall strives to create units that will prepare students for both the high school exit exam and the end of course exam, as well as help them to see the relevance of literacy in understanding and responding to the world around them, moving them away from magic and naïve consciousness and towards critical consciousness.

One of Mr. Hall's units is focused on the novel *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (2001), a story about a 16-year-old young man who is being tried for murder. Mr. Hall has expanded the scope of the unit to consider the context of the criminal justice system, and its role in society. Students engage in understanding both the fictitious representation of crime and punishment in *Monster* as well as non-fiction case studies of recent high-profile murders in the Greater Phoenix area. In these case studies, students read articles and opinion pieces from the local newspaper about these crimes.

During this four-week unit, Mr. Hall leads his students in the consideration of "big questions" about crime and punishment: Why do people commit crimes and how does the criminal justice system operate? What role does racism play in the justice system? Is the prison system meant to punish or rehabilitate? Students engage in these questions with the literary and non-fiction texts provided by Mr. Hall, and are asked to reflect on these questions using examples of people from their own lives who have committed crimes and have been through the criminal justice system.

As students engage with texts, they are led through instruction and practice tied to the state standards in understanding both literary and non-fiction tests. At different points of the unit, students take standards-aligned and

high-stakes assessment-aligned reading tests, and create timed essays that are scored on a writing rubric provided by the state. At the end of the unit, students write a persuasive essay, debating whether or not a society can exist without crime, using examples from *Monster*, the non-fiction case studies, and their own experiences.

At the culmination of the unit, Mr. Hall reported success in, using his words, both "student-focused," and "number-focused" terms. In describing student success, he writes in an e-mail:

This was BY FAR the most engaging unit I had all year. Working in a largely Hispanic, low-income area where many students have relatives in prison (or in some cases been to prison themselves), this was about as applicable as books can get to their lives. Discussion was lively and students DIDN'T WANT TO PUT THE BOOK DOWN, a first in my classroom. Calls to stop for the day were often met with groans of "Let us read more!" (personal communication, February 2, 2011)

In explaining numbers-oriented success, Mr. Hall reports that while only a third of students usually pass the end of unit tests needed for recovering credits, following this unit, more than two-thirds of students passed the assessment.

### *The MCSO's immigration enforcement policies*

Ryan Booms teaches at a school in the Greater Phoenix area whose student population is 97% Latino, and where 94% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Among the most important issues this community faces is the ever-present threat of the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office (MCSO), which has increasingly exercised its right to enforce federal immigration laws throughout the county. Led by Sheriff Joe Arpaio, this unit's actions have been well documented in both the local and national media and have resulted in the arrest of more than 40,000 suspected undocumented immigrants over the past few years. Not surprisingly, Mr. Booms's students hold a well-founded anger and frustration towards the MCSO, as well as a sense of helplessness against the immigration policies of the law enforcement unit.

Knowing this, Mr. Booms has taught a four-week non-fiction text unit to his middle school students for the past two years that examines the issue of the MCSO's immigration enforcement policies. The unit is led by the following essential questions: What are the immigration enforcement policies of the MCSO? What are the effects of these policies? Are the policies of the MCSO good policies? In the unit, students read a variety of expository and persuasive articles from local newspapers, which they summarize and use for the culminating assignment of the unit: writing a letter to their local state senator stating their beliefs as to whether or not the MCSO should be allowed to enforce immigration policies. This letter stands as a powerful example of transformational resistance that deepens students' critical capacity.

Each day during this unit, students complete an exit ticket with two sentence frames: "I learned . . ." and "I will use this knowledge to . . ." Not only are students learning academic literacy skills such as finding and restating the main idea and inferring the meaning of new vocabulary words, they are learning about the effects of the MCSO's policies detailed in the texts they read and comparing them to their own feelings and reflections about the MCSO. In a letter to her state senator, one student writes,

My uncle was caught by Sherrif Arpaio. Joe's deputies arrested my uncle, and he was in jail for 6 months before he was sent back to Mexico. I felt like the world was going to end because he was a very good man. I hate to see other pople suffer the way I did because their family or friends have been arrested or sent back to Mexico. (personal communication, April 6, 2011)

Mr. Booms reports dramatic gains in writing as a result of this unit. He explains,

On our diagnostic [a recycled prompt from a released state test], only a handful of sixth graders wrote more than one paragraph for a persuasive essay. Very few used facts. Most just begged the reader with phrases like "pretty pretty pleeecease." In their letters, nearly every student was able to write a well-organized five-paragraph essay that contained an introduction, three body paragraphs containing three distinct reasons, and a satisfying conclusion using a concession/rebuttal. Students were able to develop arguments based on facts from the articles rather than their personal opinions. (personal communication, April 6, 2011)

### **SB1070**

In April 2010, the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act (SB1070) was signed into law in Arizona. Commonly recognized as the broadest and most strict anti-illegal immigration legislation in the United States, SB1070 makes it a crime for an immigrant to not carry their immigration documents at all times and expands the enforcement of immigration laws by state and local authorities. From the minute the bill was passed, significant demonstrations of opposition to the law were held across the nation. First-year teacher Regina Mills could see the force of the debate over SB1070 in her 9th and 10th grade English classes, and decided to use it to spearhead a unit on activism.

Over two weeks, her students read the law in its entirety, as well as articles discussing the court proceedings that followed constitutional challenges to it. Students also read commentaries in support of and in opposition to SB1070 in local and national newspapers. As students read these texts, they were instructed in finding the main idea and supporting details, and created summaries of the texts, which was particularly difficult with official legal doc-

uments. Students used these summaries to write a letter to a local leader of their choice, explaining their stance on SB1070.

As the students prepared their letter, they were instructed in using persuasive strategies in their writing, as well as properly formatting a business letter and an envelope, skills that Mrs. Mills was surprised her students did not have. They were also taught to use sources to defend their arguments, using the texts they read earlier in the unit. After the letters were completed, Mrs. Mills sent them in bundles to the local and state legislators and elected officials students had written to, in order to maximize the opportunity for students to receive a response from the leaders. As they awaited responses to their letters, students took a formative assessment on non-fiction reading standards, aligned to the AIMS test. On previous assessments, students had mastered a class average of 62% of the items related to finding the main idea of an article, while on this test (which featured out of context texts not related to SB1070), students mastered the objective at 82%. Similar growth was seen in distinguishing fact and opinion (74% to 85%), determining author's purpose (62% to 71%), and analyzing text features (68% to 81%)

In addition to the academic growth demonstrated at the end of the unit, several students received responses to their letter from, among others, Governor Jan Brewer, U.S. Representative Raul Grijalva, and County Sherriff Joe Arpaio. One student who received a reply from Sherriff Arpaio was surprised to see a letter from him, and reflected that the contents of the sheriff's reply only made the student less supportive of the sheriff. The student says,

It was cool getting a letter from Sheriff Joe, though my mom almost smacked me when she saw my name and the Sheriff's address. Now that I have this mean-sounding letter from Sheriff Joe, I can show it to other people so they won't vote for him next time. (personal communication, April 7, 2011)

Another student says that receiving a reply from an elected leader has led to several conversations in her house about the current debate over immigration. She says,

The biggest thing I remember about the SB1070 project was that my family and I discussed it a lot. We spent a lot of time focusing on the part of the Pledge of Allegiance, which said, "and liberty and justice or all." This means *everyone*, not just whites.

In both of these students' experiences, the demonstration of the power of academic achievement infused with critical capacity is profound. It is doubtful that students' letters would have been taken seriously, were they not well written. At the same time, it is doubtful that they would have been able to create such powerful letters and engage in such meaningful discussions were it not for an increased sense of critical capacity.

### Reflections and recommendations

Teaching through the test and towards critical capacity can result in empowered students who conceive of themselves as active agents of change. Still, in teaching through the test, there are several issues that remain unresolved and need to be explored further. First, in this model, the role of assessments is critical, as they stand as the pivot between life-changing academic achievement and the development of critical capacity. Yet, creating assessments is an incredibly complex, time-consuming task that all of the teachers in this chapter struggle with. This includes both standards-aligned assessments as well as assessments of critical capacity. In order to improve our work, we recognize we must become better at understanding effective and efficient ways to create standards-aligned assessments, as well as ways to collect data that demonstrate the growth of students' critical capacity.

Given our challenges with assessments, it is important to note that the data collected from these units are only as good as the instruments used to collect them. The dramatic gains seen in these examples calls into questions the reliability of data gained from "official" assessments as well as teacher-created assessments. Such dramatic growth on measures such as AIMS and BRI suggests not only that students achieved at high levels after engaging in a pedagogy that teaches through the test, but also that they achieved at incredibly low levels before such an experience. If we look at the growth reported by Mr. Indorf, we need to ask ourselves if such dramatic growth (2.78 years of growth in one school year) is an effect of not just increased skills but increased motivation. For example, some of his students could have bombed the pre-test or previous year's test consciously by not trying or not caring about the assessment. Perhaps they were *always* capable of scoring at such a high level on the assessment, but chose not to put forth any effort in demonstrating this. Thus, the curriculum that teaches through the test may not lead students to anything they did not already possess in an academic sense, but rather made school seem more relevant and worthy of students' attention. While this calls into question claims of "growth" it still demonstrates the power of teaching through the test when, at the end of the day, increased achievement measured by official assessments allows students access to increased academic capital inside of school systems.

A second growth area in our teaching through the test is using student-generated topics for units. In the examples provided in this chapter, topics for study were generated by teachers' understandings of students and their social situations, as opposed to student understanding of their own social situations. While issues such as immigration reform and the criminal justice system are

clearly important in the lives of the students described in this chapter, there are surely other social issues that students perceive to be important that are under-recognized by their teachers. Yet, allowing students to take more control and generate their own themes is challenging for several reasons. First, planning units such as these is a time-intensive task that is completed far in advance of the teaching of the units. Using student-generated topics to guide units would be very difficult in terms of the time required for designing units such as these. Also, teachers must work in a delicate balance of ensuring that students are engaged in understanding topics they find important while keeping track of all of the concepts students are required to learn and expected to understand in a given year.

In addition, the initiation of a pedagogical project which values critical capacity will always struggle with the need to measure critical capacity, and demonstrate correlation between increased levels of critical capacity and a given curricular intervention. Sadly, our project lacks this vital element, yet this speaks to the challenge of engaging in a curriculum that teaches through the test. When having to prioritize whether to focus on quantifiable outputs that measure academic achievement, or qualitative outputs that measure critical capacity, we have chosen to dedicate our limited time and resources to the former, given the consequences of such academic measures. If our students were able to demonstrate an increase in critical capacity and not increased academic achievement, the consequences within school systems would be far more drastic than the inverse. Yet, these measures are not mutually exclusive, and we must move towards incorporating more accurate and valid measures of student critical capacity.

Finally, more analysis must be made in understanding the privileges that are in play when a teacher finds that he or she is capable of creating such a curriculum. Not only can this be examined structurally (by looking at the differences between schools that use strict scripted curriculum versus schools that give teachers the ability to modify the curriculum), but this can also be viewed through a lens of race, class, and gender. It is important to recognize that most of the examples of teaching through the test in this chapter come from male teachers, something that was done neither unconsciously nor purposely. While I asked both male and female teachers to offer examples for this chapter, one of the females I asked declined to participate because she felt her work did not fit well within the framework I described to them, while another did not respond to the request. I feel very strongly that the examples discussed in this chapter best represent a framework of teaching through the test, yet it is important to consider how privilege may play a role in teachers' abilities to take such actions or be open to sharing their work with others.



## Conclusion

Teaching through the test offers an example of how teachers can turn their critique of school systems and policies into a pedagogical project that seeks to address their analyses of the problem. Duncan-Andrade (2009) refers to this effort as an example of "critical hope," where teachers offer students the means with which to struggle for their liberation.

In the tension between critical pedagogy and the increasing presence of accountability measures centered on high-stakes and standardized assessments, three paths are commonly seen for social justice educators (Eversman & Diaz, 2010). They can abandon critical pedagogy and offer their students a curriculum devoid of critical capacity; they can shun accountability policies and risk losing their jobs to someone who will do what they are told; and they can leave teaching altogether due to their inability to navigate this tension. We must forge a fourth path, where the goals of critical pedagogy and accountability policies are not seen as a false binary, but rather a dialectic that offers hope and casts school success as a potent weapon in our students' struggle for liberation. Teaching through the test offers an example of such a path, which is increasingly needed as the accountability noose tightens on social justice educators worldwide.

## Notes

1. Teach For America is a program for recent college graduates to commit two years to teaching in low-income rural and urban communities in an effort to close the achievement gap that exists between youth in low-income communities and their more affluent peers. Since its inception in 1990, the program has sparked controversy and heated debate over its role in education reform and teacher preparation, a full discussion of which lies outside the scope of this chapter. For additional discussion, see Labaree (2010) and Koerner, Lynch, and Martin (2008).
2. Attending workshops offered by the California State University Expository Reading and Writing Task Force was very influential in this work. These workshops are part of the CSU's efforts to professionally develop high school teachers in expository reading and writing instruction, grounded in critical literacy. My idea of "teaching through the test" is different from their work, mostly in its use of assessments, data collection, and unit topics.
3. Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards, Arizona's testing system for accountability.
4. If passed, the DREAM Act would allow undocumented students under the age of 18 who have spent at least three years in the country and have graduated high school the opportunity to join the military and qualify for federal and state financial aid, rights that are currently restricted from them. It also includes a measure that would allow undocumented youth the opportunity to adjust their immigration status after completion of a higher education degree or military service.

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