

EDUCATION AND COMING OF AGE

More than a Test Score

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During the latter part of autumn in 2001, I was encouraged by my senior English teacher to finalize my decision on which colleges I wanted to apply to and be diligent to get all the applications done and mailed. For the most part this was not a difficult task. I knew my address well, had all my admissions essays completed, and my mom had all of the fee checks prepared for me, but there was that one dreaded blank I had “accidentally” skipped over: SAT or ACT score. I did not have horrible scores on either of the tests, but my scores were not something that I was proud of and were not impressive enough to gain me any sort of extra scholarship at my institution of choice. I kept asking myself a series of questions. Why did those scores matter? Why did colleges require them? Did my score on one test matter when I had a list of extra curricular activities longer than a page, a class schedule that consisted of all advanced placement, honors, or college preparatory and a grade point average hovering around 4.1 on a 4.0 scale? Did those scores

really show anything about me beyond how I answered a random set of questions that a “special” board of people believed to be important on a certain day during a three hour specified testing period? For the life of me, I could not see the importance of these tests, what bearing they had on who I was as a person or what I could do with my life, or what sort of further education I would be capable of pursuing. I had serious issues with standardized testing and the amount of prestige they held in the educational system. Mike Rose mirrored my opinion and further explained it in his book, *Lives on the Boundary*. Rose had put a magnifying glass on the major foibles of the American educational system, especially when it came to national standardized testing, and how it was truly impractical.

While I was used to being labeled at the top of the class, best in the vast majority of my academic pursuits, my test scores did not demonstrate the talent that I had seemingly possessed in academics. “They did not want to be marked as different. Students that were placed in Remedial English would ask us to go look at their tests, hoping there had been a mistake” (Rose 173). Like the students Rose talked about, I did not want to be labeled as something I did not see myself as based solely on my results of one test. An article stated, “...in the fall of 1976 the *Los Angeles Times* declared a ‘Drop in Student Skills Unequaled in History.’

...one of the most pronounced drops in achievement of all” (186). Such results are not figured by the grades that students post in classes, but are measured by tests that are proctored by the nation or the state to make a type of overall judgment of the quality of education that enrolled children were receiving.

Due to not only state-by-state, but also district-to-district variance of curriculums and set beliefs of the knowledge students are expected to acquire, a national test like the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) is not an accurate measure of the knowledge students possess. “Local assessments-studies of math or writing skills conducted by specific campuses or systems-were more specific and, in some ways, more legitimate” (200). With certain areas of the country, and even specific parts of states, demanding a greater amount of knowledge in certain areas over others, it just makes sense that a local test would post better results. The students are taught in their school systems the information that is expected to be known for the tests, and when it comes time to use that knowledge, they are prepared. Most state and localized tests are achievement tests, “intended to *reflect* what you have learned,” and are not a projection of what a person might be able to learn (Myers 401). With the topics and overall lingo of the nationalized tests not being a part of school curriculums, it

should be expected for the scores to be lower on those types of tests, and the hefty weight that is placed on such tests' validity would be better placed on an assessment more specific to the child's area of residence. The SAT is also a specific aptitude test, and aptitude, "intended to *predict* your ability to learn a new skill," should not be a gauge of college admission, for it measures what a person may possibly be able to achieve, not what a person already possesses as learned knowledge (Myers 401). "The fairness of the test (SAT), its legitimacy as a measure of literacy and academic potential, its use as a prerequisite for admission to college and as an indicator of the performance of public schools have been seriously challenged, at times by Educational Testing Service researchers themselves" (Rose 199). For students who have spent most of their lives trudging through classes that do not demand as much as an entire paper from them cannot be expected to when "...given the word 'kilometer' and the following list of possible answers: a. thousand b. hundred c. distance d. speed" to pick out the correct meaning of the prefix which is underlined in that word (218). People learn at different levels, and consequently are placed in educational systems accordingly. Those people are then judged by their test score, and not for the mere fact that they hold within themselves one difference: "...the difference is now being located in the

nature of the way they think and use language” (221). Students should not be punished for the way they think. Instead, their unique and individual thoughts should be maximized.

“More often than we admit, a failed education is social more than intellectual. And the challenge that has always faced American education...is how to create both the social and cognitive means to enable a diverse citizenry to develop their ability” (225). The United States is driven by image, how it appears to other nations, and statistically how it ranks up to the rest of the world. Instead of looking to improve the nation against itself, government big wigs seek a sort of high intelligence to solve the nation from the outside in. Nevertheless, if those “brilliant” old men in charge were to see the plethora of knowledge students possess just from living and growing up in a nation that spans cultures, everyone could benefit.

Education must start from what the people seeking it can offer and then try to build from that, not drive to meet a set standard. My father runs an alternative high school that is known for its unique educational opportunity called Walk-About. The Walk-About program is built on the principle that students should take an interest they have and pursue it. If a child wants to study the cassava plant, then during the second semester of the student’s senior year,

they are set up with a job that sends them to Costa Rica to work on a cassava farm and go after that interest. This allows students to get out into the world and experience what else there is, and not be confined to meeting the demands of requirements and guidelines.

Education had become an evil that strangled me and left me wanting to find some way to prove to the world that I was much more than a 27 or a 1280. I thought I was much more than any college admissions counselor could judge from a score, but the system had me locked and I had to fill in the blank. It was a blank that I was not happy to fill, but a blank that I was prepared to prove wrong. I was more than a test score, and I hoped that my post-secondary education would open more doors than those scores ushered me towards. "Education can be a desperate, smothering embrace, an embrace that denies the needs of the other. But education can also be an encouraging, communal embrace-at its best an invitation, an opening" (225). This is what I hoped for myself, but is this now an invitation I am willing to accept?