

## **Testing for What? Part I**

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My January, 2006 article was devoted to the commencement speech offered at Stanford University by the late Steven Jobs, founder of Apple Computers. I addressed several of his main points, including his advising the graduates of the importance of “connecting the dots looking backwards.” He noted, “You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.”

I explained my interpretation of Jobs’ viewpoint, noting that as we experience different events in our lives some may seem important and some may not at the time they occur, but at some point we will come to recognize that if these events had not transpired, we might not be who we are today—that in fact they play a noteworthy role in deciding our trajectory in life. As an example, I shared how when I was considering switching my major to psychology following my junior year in college, an invitation by John Bauer, one of my psychology professors, changed my life. John asked me to join him for lunch to discuss majoring in psychology. I would have been happy to have a half-hour with John, but the lunch lasted two hours. When it ended I knew that I was going to declare a new major even if it meant staying in college at least an extra semester in order to meet all of my psychology course requirements.

As I reflected upon Jobs’ words “connecting the dots looking backwards,” I could not help but wonder what would have happened if John not invited a rather anxious undergraduate to have lunch with him and answered with insight and patience the many questions posed about a career in psychology. Jobs recounted similar events in his life, including sitting in on a calligraphy class at Reed College after he had dropped out of the college and finding the subject fascinating. At the time he did not believe it would have “any practical application” in his life but reflecting back he observed:

Ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts.

Those of us who used the first Mac can recall how impressed we were with the many different features of that computer, including the different fonts.

In my workshops for professional audiences the initial slide on my PowerPoint outline cites Jobs' description of connecting the dots backwards. While showing that slide I share some key moments from my professional journey that contributed to the strength-based approach I use in all facets of my work and to my interest in the concept of resilience.

Relatedly, at my presentations for parents I often recount several memorable moments I had with my parents that were to influence my interaction with my sons and to strengthen my appreciation of the significance of empathy, empathic communication, unconditional love, and learning to accept our children for who they are and not what we necessarily want them to be.

### **What Is the Purpose of Standardized Tests?**

I often find myself connecting the dots backwards, most recently after I read an article by Susan Engel, a developmental psychologist on the faculty at Williams College. It was titled "7 Things Every Kid Should Master" and published in *The Boston Globe Magazine* in February 2015—somehow I missed this *Globe* piece when it originally appeared. Engel examined the debates taking place about the use of standardized tests in our schools—for instance, should these tests determine whether students are promoted or kept back, whether teachers and administrators are retained or let go, or even whether to bring in outside agencies to manage schools.

Engel proposed, "But almost no one has publicly questioned a fundamental assumption—that the tests measure something meaningful or predict something significant beyond themselves." She continued:

I have reviewed more than 300 studies of K-12 academic tests. What I have discovered is startling. Most tests used to evaluate students, teachers, and school districts predict almost nothing except the likelihood of achieving similar scores on subsequent tests. I have found virtually no research demonstrating a relationship between those tests and measures of thinking or life outcomes.

Engel made clear that she was not suggesting that tests no longer be used by schools. "Ideally, everyone would benefit from objective measures of children's learning

in schools. The answer is not to abandon testing, but to measure the things we most value, and find ways to do that.”

Continuing her argument, Engel wrote, “How silly to measure a child’s ability to parse a sentence or solve certain kinds of math problems if in fact those measures don’t predict anything important about the child or lead to better teaching practices.” She questioned what it is that we truly learn from what children can do in the testing situation, which she characterized as “constrained circumstances after the most constrained test preparation.”

Engel identified “seven abilities and dispositions that kids should acquire or improve upon—and therefore should be measured—while in school.” In next month’s article I plan to examine those abilities she outlined. In setting the stage for doing so, my goal at this time is to describe the “dots” from my career that were triggered as I read her article and the ways in which her ideas resonated with significant experiences in my life.

I should begin by noting that I continue to struggle with questions about the benefits and drawbacks of standardized testing, asking what are we measuring with any test, what decisions should be based on test results, how often should tests be administered, and what, if anything, do they tell us about the probable trajectory of a child or adolescent’s life? Please know that not only have I used test procedures and interviews with hundreds of children and adolescents (and adults as well), but I have authored articles and chapters about cognitive, educational, intellectual, and projective (personality) testing.

Similar to Engel, I am not “against” testing, but I believe we must be careful not to place test findings on a pedestal, assigning tests a more prominent role than is warranted. As I have often stated, the higher one places someone or something on a pedestal, the longer the fall should the pedestal begin to crumble.

### **Testing: Assuming a More Flexible Approach**

A first dot I thought about while reading Engel’s article was a paper I published in 1979 titled “Psychoeducational Assessment: A Broader Perspective.” The catalyst for writing the article occurred when a pediatrician asked me to review, with the parents’ permission, a test report about a child he had referred to a learning clinic at a large general hospital. As I noted in my article, the report was approximately 25 pages in

length, describing in detail the findings from the many tests that were administered. However, almost lost at the bottom of one paragraph was a lone sentence noting that while taking a particular achievement test the girl became very frustrated and the examiner had to discontinue the testing. Nothing else was mentioned about this behavior in the report.

I had several concerns about the testing and the report that was issued; perhaps the most important was the seeming lack of attention paid to the child's emotional reaction when confronted with an apparently difficult learning problem. The report was dedicated almost exclusively to test scores, but somewhere among all of these scores the child became lost, buried under an avalanche of numbers. Also, I wondered if this plethora of numbers actually provided guidelines for implementing strategies that might be helpful in addressing the child's learning and emotional needs.

In researching my article about assessment, I found that other practitioners were considering questions similar to mine. Some, disillusioned by what they considered to be the rigidity of the testing process, decided to go beyond what was dictated in the test manual. Some were teaching a child strategies during an evaluation to assess how well the child could learn and benefit from these strategies; others were modifying evaluation procedures after standardized administration had taken place to gain additional information about the child's ability to learn.

I incorporated these modifications in the assessments I conducted and gained invaluable insights about the kinds of input and interventions that facilitated a child's capacity to learn. In what has been labeled in the fields of psychology and education as the duality of "process vs. achievement," I found that understanding the process by which each child learned proved to be more beneficial than the test score achieved.

I also paid increasing attention to non-test score variables or what I referred in my article as "affective variables" that often were not accorded the recognition they deserved in assessments. I placed these variables under the following subheadings: "what testing means to the child"; "the child's sense of competence, coping style, and level of 'resistance' when confronted with different test procedures"; and "the child's ability to form an alliance with the person doing the testing."

I recognized that as a clinical psychologist seeing one child at a time for an evaluation, I often had the flexibility and time to implement modifications in test procedures as long as I appreciated the impact of these modifications on the data I obtained. However, such flexibility does not exist when testing hundreds of children at the same time in a school setting. Such group testing does not allow us to gain an appreciation of how a child understood and arrived at certain answers or what emotions were elicited when the child was taking a test. And in my discussion with many school psychologists who have a long list of students to test, they typically do not have the time to focus as much as they would like on “process” rather than “achievement” variables.

### **Multiple Intelligences and Emotional Intelligence**

As I read Engel’s article, another theme filled with many dots emerged. These dots called forth the question of what do tests measure. The dots represented those children and adolescents whom I had met and whose test scores and school performance were below average. Yet, as adults they were doing very well in life (e.g., satisfying jobs, accomplishments in different areas, close friendships). I have long advocated that when we assess youngsters, it is essential that we identify and reinforce their “islands of competence.” These islands are not often part of or measured by standardized tests and consequently, they do not find their way into a child’s educational plan or program.

Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner in his often referenced book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* that was published in 1983, advanced the position that we all have different intelligences, but many schools primarily honor (my word) two of them, logical-mathematical and verbal-linguistic skills. Other forms of intelligences such as interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical-rhythmic, and visual-spatial are often relegated to the background. One can ask what happens to students when their islands of competence or particular areas of intelligence are not honored or displayed.

A couple of answers: A carpenter told me how proud he was of the work he did, adding, “I never felt that kind of satisfaction in school.” A youngster described school as “the place where my deficits rather than my strengths are highlighted.”

Similar to the perspective of this carpenter and child, other dots that were elicited from Engel’s piece were not only related to standardized testing but also to the issue of grades in school. I recalled reading Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence*

published in 1994, in which he cited research findings that questioned the accuracy of test scores and grade point averages to predict a student's life beyond school. Goleman wrote:

The brightest among us can founder on the shoals of unbridled passions and unruly impulses; people with high IQs can be stunningly poor pilots of their private lives. . . . One of psychology's open secrets is the relative inability of grades, IQ, or SAT scores, despite their popular mystique, to predict unerringly who will succeed in life. . . . There are widespread exceptions to the rule that IQ predicts success—many (or more) exceptions than cases that fit the rule.

More recently, thought-provoking books such as Todd Rose's *Square Peg* and *The End of Average*, Mark Katz's *Children Who Fail at School but Succeed in Life*, Vicki Abeles' *Beyond Measure*, and David Gleason's *At What Cost?* encourage us as Gardner and Goleman did to consider the purpose of standardized tests and the inordinate amount of pressure felt by many students to achieve high test scores and high grades, believing that if one does not obtain such scores or grades, one will not be admitted to a "top" college, which will then close off avenues to future success.

It is little wonder that when students possess a mindset that envisions a life filled with unhappiness if their test scores or grades fall short of their and others' expectations that anxiety and depression will begin to permeate their lives. It is also not surprising, given the dominance of this mindset in many youth, to understand the research findings of Harvard psychologist Richard Weissbourd that I reported in my September, 2014 article. Weissbourd found that middle and high school students rated "high achievement" as being more important than "caring for others."

### **You Aren't Graded for Being Kind**

I will always remember what the mother of a child with learning problems told me after attending one of my presentations. Her son was struggling in school. His grades as well as his scores on standardized tests were well below the class average. His mother said that she empathized with how she perceived her son was feeling, but also reminded him of his strengths, including the empathy and kindness he displayed towards both his peers and adults.

He responded, “But you don’t get a score on a test or better grades for being kind. You only get better grades if you’re smart.” As the mother reported her son’s comment, she teared up. In fact, her son was “smart” in ways that were not captured by standardized tests or grades.

However, there was a happier ending to this story than might have been predicted based on his test scores and grades. Years later this mother wrote to me shortly after her son graduated from college. She reminded me of our conversation years earlier, which I had not forgotten. She said that with much support her son had graduated from college, had a good job, and, very importantly, a girlfriend and a close set of friends who enriched his life and happiness.

She ended, “And he continues to be a very kind, empathic young man even though the tests and grades he was given never recognized these qualities.”

As noted earlier, Engel’s article evoked many dots or past experiences from my journey as a psychologist. Next month I will examine the attributes that Engel emphasized children require for success in life; several capture what this mother and many others have learned first-hand in their parenting roles.

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