Testing for What?

Part II

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Before beginning Part II of my article about standardized testing in our schools, I want to state as I do every June that this is my last website column until September. As I have expressed each June, I continue to be very appreciative of the feedback, questions, and insights received from my readers. My main goal in writing these articles continues to be to convey information and ideas that might serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and self-change.

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In my May article I discussed a thoughtful paper authored by Susan Engel, a developmental psychologist on the faculty at Williams College. It was titled "7 Things Every Kid Should Master" and originally published in *The Boston Globe Magazine* in February, 2015. Engel explored 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."

Significant Abilities and Dispositions to Assess

Engel identified "seven abilities and dispositions that kids should acquire or improve upon—and therefore should be measured—while in school." I wrote in last month's article that my June column would examine these seven abilities, which I do below. I emphasized the importance of assessing not only academic skills but also variables that might be understood as non-academic such as those housed in Howard Gardner's concept of "multiple intelligences" and Daniel Goleman's concept of "emotional intelligence."

In her *Boston Globe* article, Engel advocated that we consider the following seven skills. While some are certainly academic in nature, she questioned our understanding of these skills and whether current assessment techniques were adequate. The skills include:

Reading. Engel observed, "When children can and do read, their language and thinking are different." Consequently, her approach is to measure a child's language and thinking. "For example, using recordings of children's everyday speech, developmental psychologists can calculate two important indicators of intellectual functioning: the grammatical complexity of their sentences and the size of their working vocabularies." Engel wondered why this kind of assessment could not be undertaken in schools and suggested adding a written version of this measure by reviewing children's essays and stories.

Inquiry. According to Engel there is an inborn need to discover things, but she believes that schools have not cultivated this need, observing, "When children get to school, they ask fewer questions, explore less often and with less intensity, and become less curious." In a criticism of many schools, Engel argued, "One of the great ironies of

our educational system is that it seems to squelch the impulse most essential to learning new things and to pursuing scientific discovery and intervention."

Engel wrote that there are ways to assess a child's capacity to inquire, but those are not necessarily found in standardized tests. For example, "We can easily record the number of questions the child asks during a given stretch of time. We can also rate those questions: Does the child ask questions that can be answered with data? Does the child persist in asking questions when he or she doesn't get the right answer? Does the child seem to use a range of techniques to get answers (such as asking someone else or manipulating objects)?"

Flexible Thinking and the Use of Evidence. At several conferences I have attended in the past couple of years, the importance of flexibility in thinking has been highlighted as a crucial dimension of the learning process. Engel wrote, "One of the most important capacities to be gained by going to school is the ability to think about a situation in several different ways." She noted that this capacity has been measured in college students, and it should also be examined with younger students.

Engels proposed several strategies for assessing this skill. "Students could write essays in response to a prompt such as 'Choose something you are good at and describe to your reader how you do it.' That would allow each student to draw on an area of expertise, assess his or her ability, describe a task logically, and convey real information and substance.'"

Given my keen interest in the theme of empathy and its importance in emotional intelligence, I was intrigued by another question put forth by Engel for students to answer. "Write a description of yourself from a friend's (or enemy's) point of view." Engel believes a student's response to this question would help to assess his or her ability to appreciate the perspective of others.

Conversation. Engel tied conversational skills to the other skills she described but noted that they are important in and of themselves. She also felt that they are not difficult to measure and that detailed methods that researchers have been employing for years, including such factors as "how many sentences are uttered, how many words are used, how many topics are discussed, and how full the coverage of a topic is," could be applied with students.

Engel also emphasized the importance of the teacher's input in a conversation, noting "many studies have shown that adults play a crucial role in the acquisition of conversational skills." She added, "Teachers are given scant training about how to encourage, expand, and deepen children's conversations. Schools of education offer lots of courses on curriculum planning, reading strategies, assessment, and classroom management, but I have seen few places where teachers deliberately reflect on or practice ways to have real conversations with their students."

As I read these words, I could not help thinking that in many of my workshops for educators, mental health and healthcare providers, lawyers, and financial advisors, one of the more popular topics I cover falls under the rubric of "empathic communication." I explore specific things we can say and do to engage other people in a meaningful interaction.

Collaborations. Engel introduces this skill by sharing a story about Vida, who had two young sons in a neighborhood school. Her nine-year-old son Quinn was short, wore thick-rimmed glasses that looked like swimming goggles, was not very athletic, and had difficulty with social skills. He complained that he had few friends and that lunchtime was especially problematic. There was a popular boy named Sean and kids referred to his table as "Sean's Table." One could only sit there by invitation, which Quinn did not receive.

Engel observed, "Teachers can help children like Quinn learn how to navigate their social settings, and helping children with this skill is surely just as valuable as teaching them to subtract and spell." She also stated that Sean could be assisted to "resist the natural but undesirable impulse to exclude others in social settings."

When I have advanced a similar viewpoint in some of my workshops, an often-heard reply is, "We would love to help kids with their social skills and their relationships, but we just don't have the time or training." However, it is my position that when students interact comfortably, when they display compassion and kindness towards each other, when they don't feel isolated or bullied, they will be in a much more receptive mood to learn. When students are more receptive to learning, teachers will have more time, not less, to teach.

Engel made another very important point, namely, "Kids learn how to treat one another by watching the way adults treat them and treat each other." Similar to Engel's observation, I continue to be impressed with how perceptive children are in this area. That is one reason I ask teachers to think about how they hoped their students would describe them and how their students would actually describe them. Engel added, "Just as it's important to assess whether children seem to be getting more skilled at helping each other and working together and are more inclined to do so, it's important to assess the ways in which teachers are making such collaboration possible."

Engagement. In describing this activity, Engel proposed that we must examine "whether children are regularly absorbed in what they are learning. . . . The important thing to find out is whether children are provided with opportunities to become fully absorbed in various kinds of activity. It is also essential to assess whether, given those opportunities, they concentrate on what they are doing and are energized by it."

Engel explained that assessments can identify the activities in which each child in a classroom becomes immersed and "whether the classroom is providing enough opportunities for immersion."

In considering the concept of engagement, I thought about Gardner's notion of "multiple intelligences" that I discussed in last month's article and my metaphor of "islands of competence" in which I emphasize the need to identify and reinforce each child's strengths. In my workshops and writings I have often shared the view that the strengths, interests, and passions of students should be listed at the very top of their educational plan, accompanied by specific strategies for using this information to develop their school program and to promote their engagement and intrinsic motivation.

Well-Being. This area resonates with much of my work related to the emotional culture of a school and to the importance of addressing the social-emotional well-being of students and staff alike. Engel eloquently described this dimension by articulating the questions she would pose for students:

> I have argued that first and foremost children should be acquiring a sense of well-being in school. So why not ask them periodically how they feel? Questions might probe what they are working on that they care about, how often they like being there, whether they feel known by adults in the school, and how much of

the time they feel interested in at least some of what they are doing. Economists and psychologists have shown that people are pretty reliable when it comes to telling us how happy they are. Why not use this metric in evaluating our schools?

Concluding Thoughts

Much more can be written about each of these seven variables. I believe what Engel has recommended we do is to identify those "skills" and "dispositions" that are most associated with effective learning, comfortable relationships, intrinsic motivation, happiness, emotional well-being, and resilience and then ask ourselves, "How do we assess these dimensions so that we can implement strategies in our schools that will strengthen these qualities?"

And we must remember that addressing what some may interpret as non-academic domains need not take time or energy away from the assessment and teaching of academic content. If anything, the more we assess the "whole child," the more we will raise children who are eager to learn and who display inquisitiveness, caring, empathy, and responsibility—all essential characteristics of a meaningful life.

Until September, I hope the following couple of months provide opportunities for relaxation and satisfaction in your lives.

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