

A CAUTIONARY NOTE IN RESISTING STANDARDIZATION

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In their book, *Was Someone Mean to You Today? The Impact of Standardization, Corporatization, and High Stakes Testing on Students, Teachers, Communities, Schools, and Democracy*, Poetter and Googins (2017) examine the issues and detrimental consequences of standardization, corporatization, and technologization on individuals and society. Drawing on concrete stories, they report how U.S. school reform has eviscerated subjectivity, anesthetized the profession, and de-democratized educational communities. This important book is a collection of essays by 15 graduate students in a four-week summer course at Miami University, which was a Special Topics Seminar on the Standardization and Corporatization of the Curriculum. In the course, Poetter utilized the autobiographical method of *currere* to understand educational experiences. How visceral, caring, and protective is the title, *Was Someone Mean to You Today*?! That question is the one Kimberly Cooper, a contributor, asked her daughter who had come home in tears, terrified by standardized testing.

This book reveals the concrete voices of students, teachers, and parents who have been experiencing the tyranny of the standardization of education. However, reading this book left me alarmed that the enthusiastic resistance against standardization may bring us farther than we first foresaw. When we—teachers, researchers, and professors—in education, resist the standardization of education, what exactly are we resisting? Are we advocating for abandoning standardization entirely? What are we trying to achieve with our resistance? What do we want instead of standardization? What roles in the resistance are we teachers and professors in education taking on? I submit that this book can serve as a cautionary text in thinking about these questions.

Getting to the bottom of the standardization of American education, Poetter and Googins (2017) address questions such as how the enforcement of standardization and corporatization has affected American education; the assumptions that underlie these forces; the dire consequences for students, teachers, curricula, and schools; and how we can resist and find a way to restore education. Documenting, witnessing, confessing, and criticizing what “educational genocide” has done to students, teachers, marginalized groups, and the institutions (p. 12), Poetter and Googins argue that “when we standardize children, standardize their teachers, standardize the curriculum, and standardize their schools, we get what we pay for: a very, very impersonal and ineffective system of public education, ripe for takeover” (p. 14). From the forerunners of progressive education in the early 20th century to our colleagues today, we have experientially and theoretically resisted the forces of standardization. Yet, the situation we face today does not seem to have changed for the better. American educators have experienced how the school reform rhetoric changed its coat from No Child Left Behind to Race to the Top, for example, but the underlying belief remains that the purpose of education is to achieve pre-ordained goals that can be measured by standardized tests, translating students into “numbers” (Taubman, 2009). In some areas, classroom teaching has been severely hampered by this belief. Teachers in Florida, for instance, are told to “stay to a script...to teach the exact same thing in every single classroom” (Hernandez, 2016), a practice which “consumes every moment of every day” (Solnet, 2011). *Was Someone Mean to You Today?* documents and analyzes well what is happening under the standardization of education in the U.S.

The first three chapters reveal the dire consequences of standardization on students, the teaching profession, and marginalized groups, respectively. In Chapter 4, the authors discuss how the standardization, corporatization, and technology triad controls and distorts students' learning. Chapter 5 is a theoretical elaboration on how undemocratic, oppressive, and unethical are the forces of standardization. Chapter 6 reveals the authors' expectations of parents and teachers, whom they call "pioneers and trailblazers" (p. 181). In the final chapter, they disclose their rather extensive undertaking: to "reclaim the status and power that teachers and schools have had that allowed them to function as engines for learning and becoming" (p. 13). Below are my comments on some themes from the book.

Educational genocide: The authors describe the forces of standardization, corporatization, and high-stakes testing as "tainted and tethered educational genocide" (p. 17). In fact, high-stakes testing does kill people. In South Korea, students commit suicide because of the stress caused by high-stakes tests (Jung, 2016). In Poetter and Googins' (2017) judgement, education is genocidal because it transforms students "from freethinking, creative wells of knowledge to dreary automatons, simple cogs in the machine" (p. 19). The numbers generated by standardization and high-stakes testing, they lament, "have only blinded the masses, stinging [students] into an apathetic slumber" (p. 19), into "grade mongers and point grubbers" (p. 33). It is instrumental rationality and its internalization at the expense of students' agency. I have argued in the past and still contend that, taking a Heideggerian view, the current pervasiveness of instrumental rationality is humanity's greatest threat (Jung, 2016). When it invades education, students are evaluated by the efficiency of their learning; teachers are rewarded, or blamed, according to the efficiency of their teaching. Poetter and Googins (2017) rightly observe that the system forces students "to look for the quickest route, while spending the least resources, to achieve the 'greatest' return. Eyes on the prize, eyes on the test.... Acquire the answers, plug'em in, forget the material immediately afterwards. It's cyclical, addictive, and dangerous" (p. 19). Under the mindset of instrumental rationality, what matters is the most efficient and effective way to achieve a given end, without reflecting on the value of the end.

Poetter and Googins (2017) argue that a curriculum characterized by these forces praises "essentialism and perennialism" (p. 34) and makes itself "stale" (p. 39). One problem with a stale curriculum is that it "does not aid and engage him [the student] as he moves from school to school" (p. 32). For instance, in her criticism of students' worksheets for a fieldtrip to a zoo as somewhat detrimental, dampening students' "childist thinking" (p. 38), essay contributor, Winn, points out that "children are routinely seen as pre-adults and adults-in-development whose voices are marginalized" (p. 38). In her judgement, behind the forceful imposition of knowledge on students lies "our lack of trust in children," which "has led us to put them in metaphorical boxes, standardizing their every move" (p. 36). Quoting Wall (2013), Winn argues that "childism" means acknowledging "children's agency" and welcoming "children's voices and participation in society" (p. 34). The problem with a rigid curriculum, from the viewpoint of Wall's childism, is that it calls into question the authority of knowledge—who produces it and who owns it. Under the scheme of standardization, it is certainly not students who own the authority of knowledge. Winn argues for a "self-critique" about the assumption that "learning is defined and refereed by adults" (p. 38).

Poetter and Googins (2017) recognize that "children have learned to comply" (p. 36). Googins' experiences with her students and her insights are powerful in helping us witness how instrumental rationality can be internalized in students'

understandings about learning. Students are “simply tested out” (p. 23); with the continuing permeation of the testing culture, students become more and more apathetic toward school. To make matters worse, “When the opportunity [for authentic learning] presents itself, the students are resistant” (p. 23). Googins argues that “we have created a generation of students that is increasingly focused on the ends—the recognition, the grade, the number, the decision, the result” (p. 33). Googins’ students, she states, “have been conditioned to follow directions and check off credentials all the way through school” (p. 32).

Attrition in the profession: The second chapter deals with the weakened state of teacher autonomy not only in educational policy decision-making processes, but also in their teaching, which is a result of policies created in reaction to “fears, myths, and lies that were propagated from situations such as the Russians’ launch of Sputnik” (p. 55). Discussing the history of the feminization of the profession, Poetter and Googins (2017) lament: “What other profession allows non-professionals to make decisions for them and about them?” (p. 55). Some of the contributors share experiences that exemplify how vulnerable, stressed, and frustrated teachers are due to having lost control over the curriculum and being “scapegoated for everything that’s wrong with education” (p. 65). Teaching is reduced to test preparation and administration, delivering what they call a “protocurriculum, a curriculum that emerges in place of the original curriculum, that teaches to the test” (p. 57). In this regard, they call the state of the teaching profession a “nanny state” (p. 48), in which teachers are watched at every turn under the belief that “teacher effectiveness can be measured” (p. 59), an idea they rightly rebuke. No other profession has experienced what the U.S. school reform rhetoric imposes on teachers: not doctors, not priests, and not even parents.

The double-whammy of social injustice: From the perspective of social justice, the authors argue, marginalized students are the victims of a “double-whammy” (p. 96). First is their lack of “cultural capital.” Marginalized students are disenfranchised, disengaged, and disembodied in their learning because they lack the knowledge and cultural capital that standardization values, which makes it difficult for them to show as much achievement as students from privileged white and middle-class families. The “achievement gap” produced by the marginalization (p. 83), they argue, removes from teachers “any ability we might have for a democratic and equitable education for all students” (p. 83). The students in this gap struggle to “play by the rules” (p. 90) and “the [cultural] code” (p. 91) they do not possess.

The second whammy is that the test achievement gap deprives the marginalized students access to a higher quality of educational experiences through “ability tracking” (p. 95). To fill or reduce the “gap,” the marginalized students are put on a segregated track, away from their more advantaged counterparts. Poetter and Googins (2017) explain two aspects of how this works: the expectations of teachers and those of the students themselves. They explain that students realize when they are put into a lower level group by systematic segregation of the “at risk” students. As far as the Pygmalion effect is concerned, “high achieving” students produce higher expectations; “at risk” students, lower ones. The former are “exposed to a more robust curriculum and greater teacher support. . . . Teachers ask challenging questions and provide longer wait times and additional prompts or cues” (p. 95); the latter receive a more standardized curriculum, which is “narrowed, regimented, and scripted pedagogy” (p. 96), and “teachers generally ask lower-level questions and provide less wait time” (p. 95). Poetter and Googins argue that “standardization only perpetuates inequality of education” (p. 96).

Technologization: This book strongly opposes the nonsensical belief that education with a personal presence can be not only supplemented, but replaced by virtual training. Such nonsense is reified by the marriage between standardization and technology, which risks, if not eliminates, the authentic, democratic, interactive, associative living and learning of students, assuring curriculum as a universal formula, reducing teaching to implementation, and devaluing learning as achieving test scores. Poetter and Googins (2017) argue that “the true intent [of this marriage] is to disseminate the values and knowledge of the dominant culture and ideology to maintain the status quo” (p. 104). While partly agreeing with their argument regarding knowledge and culture, I reflect that the standardized curriculum is not value-free and wonder whether standardization coupled with technology benefits those in the dominant culture. Of course, those who own the culture may be in a better position in the competition for test scores, but in terms of education for democracy, the benefit is questionable.

Poetter and Googins (2017) reject the reformers’ claim that a standardized curriculum that is married to technology dispenses “quality through equal access to the same material for all students” regardless of individuality and their circumstances (p. 107). They conclude that this process creates students who “are becoming even more decontextualized from life” as it emphasizes “developing rote skills” (Poetter & Googins, 2017, p. 110). Ellerbe, a contributor, writes that “to many students, learning becomes all about clicking buttons, locating the right answer, [and] graduating early so that they no longer have to come to the prison-like environment called school” (p. 112). Students are, in their judgment, stuck in a “virtual prison” (p. 104) where they are expected to do “endless mind-numbing rote, skill and drill activities” (p. 112). Eventually, students equate “learning to passing test scores” (p. 112). The “pernicious effects” of the whole process teach students that what they value—what they are curious about—is not important (p. 106). The marriage between standardization and technology risks the erosion of students’ subjectivity, an undeniably important educational source. With technology “as a legitimate surrogate for real teaching” (p. 115), teachers question, “Will we as teachers be replaced?” (p. 115). Poetter and Googins argue that “only when we control the technology, instead of technology controlling us, can we return our schools and society to democratic places of learning and living” (p. 106). I sense their courage in the urgency they feel for action and vigilance. Yet, I doubt whether we can control the technology. The authors seem to risk falling into another form of instrumental rationality, perhaps putting another excessive burden on teachers.

Counter-rhetoric: The authors provide a “counter-rhetoric” to the rhetoric that has produced the schism between “commonsense rhetoric and counter-rhetoric” (p. 130). The authors articulate how nonsensical the commonsense rhetoric is in terms of logic (discussing the imperative of making educational decisions based on reliable evidence), emotion (sharing their narratives revealed via *currere*), and value (from the perspective of democracy), the three components of Aristotle’s rhetoric. The commonsense rhetoric, the authors argue, is “innocent,” “white lies,” or “misleading” (p. 130), because the accusation it makes against American public education is supported by “misinformation,” “wholly unsupported by reliable evidence” (p. 130). They call it “white lies of omission and misdirection that prevent us from perceiving reality undistorted” (p. 130). One of the pernicious consequences of the commonsense rhetoric, they argue, is “framing education in terms of a consumer product rather than a democratic institution” (p. 136). In this sense, the rhetoric replaces empirical reality

with “a kind of hegemonic/normative commonsense” (p. 130). The authors try to “reframe” the language of education that is primarily dominated by standardization and corporatization toward the language of democracy. Reframing, they say, “allows us to dismantle false dichotomies and to discover the existence of alternative possibilities and narratives” (p. 130). Their participation in this rhetoric reveals not only the sordid reality behind the standardization and corporatization movements, but also an alternative rhetoric, reality, beliefs, and possibilities.

Some points the authors make stand out as particularly significant for those concerned about the impact of the standardization, corporatization, and technologization of education. Most of all, the collective *currere* approach is innovative, perhaps the greatest strength of this book. The stories the authors tell interact, intersect, and supplement one another, demonstrating that, while autobiographical inquiry fundamentally must be done by individuals, it can be supplemented by the collaborative process. It is the possibility of *currere* that makes teachers’ personal experiences “pedagogical [as well as] political practice” (Pinar, 2004, p. 38). Their experiential, intuitive, and theoretical understanding of the problems assures us that we are human subjects. Before being students, teachers, or administrators, we are humans—sons, daughters, fathers, and mothers. We breathe, feel, suffer, and imagine—characteristics of human beings that standardization neither recognizes nor values. I am reminded of one of my favorite quotes from Nel Noddings (1984), who tells us that, for the teacher, students are infinitely more important than the subject; the teacher says, “I am still the one interested in you. All of this is of variable importance and significance, but you still matter more” (p. 20).

The Answer: In the last chapter, the authors find hope and optimism from people they call “trailblazers, and pioneers” (p. 154) who are “within our ranks and roots” and who are “ready to make this paradigm shift a reality” (p. 157). The trailblazers and pioneers, they believe, are the parents who desperately resist, as Young, a contributor, points out, through the opt-out movement, which not only gains “attention from the media and policy makers,” but also brings “control of the educational experience back to the local level” (p. 157). Poetter and Googins also empathetically argue that “not all educators are complicit [with standardization]” (p. 157); many of them understand the issues, fight for children, and understand their professional, ethical responsibility to resist and defy the myths, fear, and lies. Quoting Kumashiro (2008), they argue that “we are free to be different than what the mainstream society says we ought to be” (p. 89), and “we have the opportunity to redefine the norm” (Poetter & Googins, 2017, p. 177). They further argue that redefining the norm “is not just an opportunity; it’s a duty” (p. 177).

CONCERNS

While I praise Poetter, Googins, and the contributors’ effort in arguing for just and democratic education, their enthusiasm in finding solutions or answers to rectify the situation left me concerned that the solution they suggest, a turn from state curriculum toward localized curriculum, may be an excessive turn. “The *only* [emphasis added] solution,” they suggest, is “to return control to localities” (p. 159), including “locally developed assessments customized to the learning experience with local flavor and global sophistication” (p. 178). They resist, as do I, standardizing curriculum, testing, and learning, because it ignores the individual voices, experiences, subjectivities, and circumstances of localities. Agreeing with their emphasis on the significance of place in curriculum—such as local histories, cultures, and political and economic

circumstances—and the detrimental consequences standardization of curriculum has left on individuals, schools, communities, and the society, localized curriculum can be a way to lessen the problems of state education policy (Aiken, 1942; Tienken & Mullen, 2016) or even to improve student achievement (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). However, I am left questioning how one can be so certain that locally developed curricula or assessments will not contain some of the characteristics of the Common Core Standards. Locally developed curricula could also be reductionist if it reduces individuals to groups. I do not entirely reject the idea of localized curricula. I support the idea in its emphasis on the role of the agency of teachers, students, and localities in making educational decisions. Rather, I express my concern that one cannot guarantee that local control will solve the problems of state control. Tienken and Mullen (2016) suggest finding a middle ground where the state curriculum coexists with locally developed standards, objectives, and activities. Finding a middle ground is a project not only of the institutional or local educational community, but also of the intellectual, a project that requires individual teacher's professional judgment (see Pinar, 2001). We need to remain vigilant in what we are doing and how it reduces, or strengthens, the standardization of education. The obligation of teachers, scholars, and professors is not to solve the problems, but rather to be professionally committed to studying and addressing the issues.

The authors seem to put an excessive burden on teachers when they argue for teachers' "ability to educate, not only their assigned students, but also the general public and policy makers" (p. 178) and also for "a deep understanding of the root causes of underachievement" (p. 178). It seems to me that they are arguing that teachers have the key to solving the problem. So that there can be no mistake, they argue that "we need to empower them [teachers] to be ambassadors for *effective* [emphasis added] education" and to "ensure quality education" (p. 178). Can a teacher really ensure quality learning for students who have already internalized instrumental rationality, who look for "the quickest route"? Their argument reminds me of the rhetoric advocated by The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development for the importance of teachers and teacher education: "The broad consensus is that 'teacher quality' is the single most important school variable influencing student achievement" (McKenzie, Santiago, Sliwka, & Hiroyuki, 2005, p. 2). Ostensibly, it seems that they are looking up to teachers. But, they are not. They are looking down at what teachers do by imposing the accountability for students' achievement onto teachers. Teachers are responsible neither for educational achievement nor for solving educational problems, but for incorporating students' individuality and multi-level conditions into the curriculum, teaching, and assessment. Teachers can be key interlocutors in the curriculum or in education, generally, if the conditions are enabling and students are willing. This is not an easy task, especially now. Of course, the teacher must have a firsthand understanding of the students and the circumstances in which they live. Yet, such an understanding does not mean that teachers can ensure *effective* learning or changes in certain public assumptions or certain cultures of education. The theory of the ecology of education (Bronfenbrenner, 1976) explains that individuals, agencies, and groups in multiple layers in a society affect the ecology of education. It is simply not possible for teachers to reorient it toward a certain direction. This does not mean that there is no possibility for teachers to act for change. As field theory suggests, teachers' understanding of education and how they teach might influence the educational perspectives of others or perhaps the general public (Lewin, 1946, 1951; McNiff, & Whitehead, 2002). However, there cannot be a direct causal relationship

between what teachers do and what others think about education; and neither should teachers be asked to shoulder the responsibility for solving the problems of education or society.

I submit that this book may place one in a false battle between a student-centered and a teacher-centered approach. In terms of learning, one of the reasons the authors resist standardization is that it eviscerates students' subjectivities. Thus, they advocate for "the restoration of students' voices" (Poetter & Googins, 2017, p. 173) to bring students' knowledge, prior experience, and subjectivity into learning. The argument is well justified. However, reading the authors' radical resistance to standardization, one asks, does subject matter knowledge not matter? Does knowing canonical knowledge in subject areas and crucial facts and events in American history not matter? Should we abandon memorization entirely? Would giving control to localities solve the problem? What does student-centeredness mean? Would bringing students' voices and interests into their learning solve the problem? I am reminded of the history of American education, specifically the debate over a student-centered or experience-centered curriculum versus a subject-centered curriculum. What is at stake here really has to do with how we understand the relationship between knowledge and subjectivity. "The dialectical relationship between knower and the known" is the foundation of learning (Pinar, 1976, p. 41). The great Canadian curriculum scholar Ted T. Aoki's (1992) famous concepts, "curriculum-as-planned and curriculum-as-lived," are helpful here (p. 187). It matters whether students know the word *paradigm*. It matters whether students know why and how the holocaust happened. How and when subjects get taught is left to teachers—sometimes it will be teacher-centered and other times student-centered. For Aoki (1992), teaching is a "mode of being," dwelling or negotiating between the two curriculum spheres (p. 187). If one believes that student-centeredness, alone, will solve the problem of the school reform movement, one is gravely mistaken.

That said, *Was Someone Mean to You Today?* serves as a cautionary note, helping students, teachers, parents, teacher educators, and educational scholars understand the forceful oppression of standardization, corporatization, and technologization on education and individuals. The authors tell their visceral stories, reflect on them, and critique, both individually and collectively, the concerns related to the issues their stories raise. This effort can be an arduous step in resisting the forces, and despite the concerns it raises, Poetter and Googins' (2017) authentic and passionate commitment, which is intellectually rigorous and politically strong, makes the book a significant contribution to the fields of curriculum and education in general.

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