The Standardized Testing Influence: Exploring the Impact of Standardized Testing on Classroom Collaboration and Student Voice

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Abstract

This study will examine how standardized testing contributes to decreased collaborative learning within the K-12 classroom. The study features an optional survey created and ran through Qualtrics to gain perspective from teachers across different levels of the K-12 education system. Through these surveys, we were able to gain a perspective on how the pressures of achieving high marks on standardized testing have created a reactive approach in learning environments, which has eliminated collaboration within the classroom. Though educators may feel pressured to teach in an effort to produce satisfactory test scores, this study shows that collaborative teaching methods do not hinder a student’s ability to perform successfully on standardized tests. This paper aims to objectively determine the influence of standardized testing on implementation of collaborative learning environments and encouraging student voice or multi-directional communication efforts in the classroom.

*Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Student Voice, Standardized Testing, Retention, Educational Development, Public Schools, Elementary Education, Secondary Education, Achievement Gap*
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INTRODUCTION

(LC) The problem addressed is that standardized testing reduces the opportunity for collaboration within the K-12 classroom settings. Through the pressure of the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers are graded on their classroom performance. This performance shown leads to further funding for the school districts, which leads to more opportunities for the students and higher teacher salaries. Due to the "teaching to take a test" mentality, many teachers have a reactive teaching approach. This approach restricts a collaborative learning experience within the classroom, as a good part of learning is not measurable through test scores.

(LG) Barriers in the educational system come in many facets and they are often even disguised or misrepresented for what they truly are. Standardized testing was designed and implemented to break down barriers. These high-stake tests are to ensure accountability that a child is receiving their right to an equal education, displaying academic growth, and a measure of obligation that teachers have taught the curriculum effectively (Gonzalez et al., 2017). The negative impact of high stakes testing has only inflated due to the implementation of policies such as the “No Child Left Behind Act” of 2001 which left some teachers feeling defeated. As a result, teachers find themselves at a crossroads in which they have no choice but to gradually, possibly unknowingly, reduce or even erase collaboration from their learning environment due to the overwhelming stress that standardized testing places on an individual teacher (Gonzales et al., 2017). Some may question what correlation or impact collaboration, empowerment, and student voice has on the learning environment, a child's social success, and standardized testing
score, as some may have the view that children are expected to sit, face forward, and learn what
is being taught with no questions asked. Scholastic Children’s Dictionary (2019) defines what it
means to collaborate with a very matter of fact definition stating “to work together to do
something” (p. 142). A child must be able to work with their teacher in order to effectively learn,
retain, and thrive. Each child is an individual who receives, processes, and does or does not
comprehend curriculum in their own way. If a teacher is not given the knowledge, opportunity, or
support necessary to teach in an inclusive manner that entails various approaches and methods
that embrace all children, we then leave a child behind (Murray & Moore, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to identify ways in which standardized testing
influences classroom collaboration or lack thereof and ultimately impedes student voice. This
study seeks to inform educators and schools on the importance of encouraging student voice and
two-way communication between child and educator. Student voice is shown to be a significant
indicator of future civic engagement and decision-making competencies (Bron & Veugelers,
2014). Often the rigidity of standardized testing has been shown to influence the way educators
manage their classrooms and focus on “teaching to the test” rather than focusing on “student
interest” (Scogin et al., 2017, p. 41). To further this perspective, Scogin et al. (2017) cite a study
that showed, “…59% to 64% of teachers in a sample agreed they “omit certain information
because there is not enough time to fit it in because of the state tests,” (p. 41, as cited in Moon,
Brighton, & Callahan, 2002). This practice effectively hinders student voice and classroom
collaboration opportunities. Existing research has found that teachers can utilize collaborative
and experiential learning methods while ensuring that test scores are not negatively impacted,
and students continue to effectively progress in their development (Scogin et al., 2017). The
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results of this study will expand research on standardized testing and its influence on classroom collaboration, and student voice initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Summaries of Existing Literature

Student Voice. (LC) Researching classroom collaboration yielded a common discussion regarding Student Voice. Student voice is defined by Mayes, Finneran and Black (2019) as “…children and young people’s expression of views: “the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the view of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child,” (pp. 157-158, as cited in United Nations, 1989). Providing a student the opportunity to voice their views has been seen to positively impact them in a number of areas such as, “engagement and motivation, peer relationships, leadership and citizenship,” (Mayes et al., 2019, p. 158). Mayes et al. (2019) offer that not only is a student’s voice a critical aspect of collaboration, but they also encourage students, parents, and teachers to hear each other out regularly and be responsive to one another. In a study of student voice among fifth graders who are rarely relied upon as decision makers and critical thinkers, Mitra and Serriere (2012) argue that engaging student voice in these early years cultivates a desire for civic engagement. Mitra and Serriere (2012) employ the concepts of “agency, belonging, competence, discourse, and efficacy (ABCDEs)” in their study of fifth graders who lobby to enact change in their school cafeteria offerings. Using the ABCDEs, Mitra and Serriere (2012) propose that student voice capitalizes on the development of each of these traits in youth by allowing students to have a voice in civic issues directly affecting them (p. 745). Similarly, students of all ages are entitled to
express their voice as Bron and Veugelers (2014) explain, “…Students are citizens with rights and responsibilities in their own right and not simply citizens-in-waiting,” (p. 127, as cited in Huddleston, 2007, p. 8). Bron and Veugelers (2014) also concur that student voice enables democratic participation from an early age and helps to give voice to otherwise marginalized groups and bridges inequitable distributions of power. (LC)

**Classroom Collaboration.** (LC) Collaboration seemingly accompanies student voice by enhancing the collective experience of students, parents and teachers. Bron and Veugelers (2014) argue that involving students in curriculum design means to, “…see the curriculum not as a product or a fixed set of requirements, but as a process wherein external aims give direction but also where teachers and students influence what is actually experienced in a class,” (p. 134). This influence is conducive to student success in progressing decision-making autonomy (Bron & Veugelers, 2014). Collaboration can be utilized with defined purpose in a classroom. Cooper, Cox, Nammouz, and Case (2008) provide the following example, “Female students who are classified as pre-formal on a test of logical thinking improve by almost 20% when paired with concrete students; however if two students at the concrete level are paired together no improvement is seen,” (p. 866). Cooper et al. (2008) found in conclusion to their study of small-group collaborative learning that students were required to openly discuss their strategy for problem-solving which led them to “retain” problem-solving skills and develop them more sharply even in their independent work (p. 871). In their study of “Experiential” learning programs in contrast to more traditional programs, Scogin et al. (2017) found collaborative environments helped students to mature and recognize the benefits of collaboration while still scoring adequately if not slightly higher on standardized tests compared to students in traditional
instructor-led programs. Another non-cognitive capability that is strengthened by collaboration is that of belonging and positive relationships children and youth can form with their peers and adults (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Researchers have encountered children who have disrupted or disjointed relationships with adults outside of school and when given the opportunity to collaborate with teachers and staff at school, they are exposed to positive relationships with adults (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). (LC)

(TK) A common question that arose throughout the literature was, how effective is collaborative learning within the classroom? Group work falls into three types of learning – tutoring, cooperative, and collaborative (Tolmie et al., 2010, p. 177). Many studies based on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development have found value in peer interaction, as collaboration helped children understand and view perspectives other than their own (Mercer, 1996, pp. 359-360). A collaborative work environment can have a dual impact on cognitive and social skills (Tolmie et al., 2010, p. 188).

Tolmie et al. (2010) was able to gain insight into the school system in Scotland by learning how children interact across the country and how adapting to a collaborative learning environment can change how the students learn. Surveys were issued across eight school districts throughout Scotland, totaling 221 surveys. Out of these surveys, they received 85 responses back. They narrowed their sample down to 24 teachers and divided the sample between rural and urban schools. Through this study, teachers were put through a three-day professional development training spread out over a few months. This training went over the benefits of group work and how collaboration affects relational and collaboration skills. The second day went over utilizing collaboration within their curriculum and teaching. The third day was time for the
teachers to reflect on their own experiences. Improvements were measured within the classrooms to see the effects of the implementation of collaboration.

Mercer (1996) focused on the SLANT (Spoken Language and New Technology) project to help understand how technology stimulated collaboration and talk amongst children. Mercer (1996) used collaborative talk from a session that lasted somewhere between 35-90 minutes in length. These sessions were with 9-10-year-olds, and the point was to observe them solving a problem while talking. Throughout this project, Mercer (1996) found three types of talk occurred – disputational, cumulative, and exploratory. (TK)

(LG) Through existing research, it is shown that standardized testing is the stand-alone variable that intertwines and affects many other factors that decide a child’s educational opportunities, success, and is the common cause for lack of collaboration within a learning environment. Standardized testing is seen as an added stress rather than an accountability measure (Gonzalez et al., 2017). The added stress holds teachers back from developing inclusive practices that make an environment collaborative. Lacking a collaborative environment can not only lower a student's self-esteem, but also a teacher’s ability to foster any potential growth of empowerment in the classroom. (LG)

Comparison of the Literature

Comparing Collaboration Outcomes. (LG) There are many norm labels readily available as to why a child is left behind in the educational system or not meeting the mark in standardized testing. These are things such as, learning disabilities, socioeconomic status, lack of social/emotional skills, or that a child needs grade retention. While these things add on another layer to the higher probability of failure, they are not the root. Collaborative learning
environments create an inclusive learning environment, they are key drivers that affect a child's overall success throughout their time in the educational system. Teachers prepare and educate students to take a test. These policies and standards come from the top down creating an added stress while leaving behind or placing less value on other key factors that are beneficial to a student's well-being and discovery in things such as art, music, social studies, and physical education (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Standardized testing not only defines the student's success, but the teacher's own success or failure so naturally there is a heightened pressure placed on both to deliver the necessary scores, leaving invaluable skills on the table such as learning to collaborate, debate, and compromise. These things can directly affect the student and teachers perceived self-worth while deflecting from evaluating a teacher’s technique (Renaud, 2013). If students are not given the opportunity to thrive, and consistently feel less-than due to under-performing standardized test results, students begin to lack motivation, engagement, and positive self-thoughts that one is capable and enough.

This overwhelming requirement places limits on a teacher and interferes with their ability to accommodate a collaborative learning environment that reaches and engages all students, creating a disconnect between teacher and student, which in turn hinders an effective balance of power between the two in the classroom. As Kirk et al. (2016) explains, “The way in which teachers choose to use their power in the classroom opens the door of possibilities for students to either participate or disengage,” (p. 590). If a teacher is empowered to create an inclusive learning environment through knowledge and training on multiple intelligence, rather than teaching to the requirements of a test, they are then able to adapt and adjust accordingly to the students versus expecting the students to adapt to a one-size fits all teaching approach (Murray &
Moore, 2012). This builds empowerment in the student, as well as trust and relationship between the teacher and student. Empowering a student furthers them in finding their footing and creates a solid foundation to find their voice in the classroom. It also offers the ability for the student to get excited and become engaged with what they are learning because they do not feel left behind or as if they do not belong. (LG)

(TK) There are somewhat conflicting results on whether collaborative group work leads to improved learning within the classroom. Tolmie et al. (2010) discovered that collaborative group work increased both cognitive and social impact. Mercer (1996) concluded that through research, collaboration is not necessarily beneficial when not monitored.

In Tolmie et al.’s (2010) study, teachers were given the tools to learn how to engage their students in collaborative learning. By educating the educators, they were able to implement boundaries and help guide the conversations with their students. Through this practice, the teachers could see gains within their students on both a social and cognitive level.

Mercer (1996) did not conclude that collaboration was unhelpful but discovered that his research did not support it when this type of learning was left only to the students without guidance. Students often are unaware of what is expected of them during educational activities and are left to figure it out independently (Mercer, 1996). (TK)

(LC) In comparing literature from researchers on student voice and collaboration, it is evident that cognitive capabilities like problem-solving and non-cognitive capabilities such as leadership and relationship management are a result of engaging student voice and collaborative environment approaches. Student voice and collaboration share the resulting student interest in civic and democratic participation. Bron and Veugelers (2014) explain that civic participation
and interest should be available for students to experiment with in and out of school settings. These approaches to learning are categorized as types of experiential learning which is defined as, “...an active pedagogy emphasizing concrete experience and abstract conceptualization,” (Scogin et al., 2017, as cited in Kolb, 1984). Scogin et al. (2017) further expands on this definition by noting that freedom is an imperative aspect of experiential learning noting that, “students should experience failure as well as success,” (p. 53, as cited in James, 1990, p. 8). Bron and Veugelers echo this sentiment as well, providing, “…if we are serious about providing students experiences with skills like decision making, we must enable them to make decisions, all the while accepting that they might make mistakes along the way,” (p.136). However, experiential learning is not leaving students to fend for themselves but facilitating groups in which students can operate, provided with the necessary support from teachers who offer, “scaffolding for the development of collaborative capacity, primarily through relational support,” (p. 54). Mitra and Serriere (2012) also show how scaffolding can support a group's autonomy but also lead them to achieve their desired results in their study of a group of elementary students looking to enact change in the offerings of their school cafeteria. Mitra and Serriere (2012) provide the following example of scaffolding that occurred in their study, “…helping them to reframe their project from being a protest to an inquiry and coaching them on how to present their ideas to adults in power in a manner that their voices would be heard,” (pp. 766-767). (LC) 

**Synthesis/Integration of the Literature**

**Collaboration is Impact.** (LG) There are many gauges and tell-tale norms in the educational system that define what it means to be considered a successful student, yet we as the United States are, “in the midst of an educational crisis,” (Kirk et al., 2016). There are
inconsistencies to methods and approach in the educational system, as well as no clear measure of collaboration and empowerment even though these are seen as predictors to a child’s success (Kirk et al., 2016). Rather than implement a collaborative learning environment that promotes inclusion and requires a proactive approach versus reactive, paths such as retention are chosen. This is because teachers often feel that retention improves student success and self-esteem and is misused for what it really should be, which is, curriculum that is repetitive with the intent and hope that it sticks the second time (Renaud, 2013). This is what some may find to be insanity, the same approach expecting different results, or to be insane, which is defined by Scholastic Children’s Dictionary (2019) as “very foolish,” (p. 378). (LG)

(TK) In today's world, with the focus on standardized testing to gain perspective in the performance of our students, teachers are quick to glaze over collaboration entirely. Teachers are being pushed by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to teach content on a test and take away curiosity by compartmentalizing learning (Harwick, 2020). Children are disengaged, as learning is not personally meaningful. Diane Ravitch said, "Sometimes the most brilliant and intelligent minds do not shine in standardized tests because they do not have standardized minds."

Collaboration plays a role in critical thinking skills and teaches compassion (Harwick, 2020). These children's jobs will require creativity, flexibility, and adaptability. Schools are cutting back on programs like art, music, and even history and science classes to teach more math and reading, which these subjects alone play a huge role in cognitive development (Phelps, 2011, p. 38).

Collaborative learning brings so much to the development of a child. Studies have shown that children who do more verbal planning and negotiation are more successful in working
together (Mercer, 1996, p. 361). Collaboration helps build a shared understanding and helps students generalize what is learned (Mercer, 1996; Tolmie et al., 2010). Teachers must guide this experience and teach students to think critically and collaboratively. Being clear on what is expected is key to driving a collaborative experience that is beneficial for students. By setting the groundwork, collaboration can bring a learning experience that drives student growth and achievement. (TK)

**Questions Emerging from the Literature**

*Avoiding another achievement gap.* (LC) Though student voice is emphasized throughout the literature in collaborative classrooms, the challenge becomes ensuring that all students get a voice, and all voices are heard. Mayes et al. (2019) provides that there are issues of “speaking for students” and “speaking about students” brought on by teachers and researchers and the possibility that they only speak for those already advantaged in their educational endeavors (p. 159). Similarly, students can easily succumb to their own “interpersonal relations of power” as Mayes et al. (2019) explains, “student who are already confident, high achieving, popular, and articulate (which often align with white and middle-class markers of privilege) to be chosen and/or elected for student voice activities,” (p. 159, as cited in Schafer & Yarwood, 2008, Whitty & Wisby, 2007). If standardized testing has widened the achievement gap for non-white students, how can we ensure that collaboration and student voice are inclusive of all students in their respective educational needs? (LG) If positive results are shown from a collaborative, inclusive environment why are these practices not implemented and required in conjunction with standardized testing for maximum effectiveness? (TK) How do individual states reward or
reprimand schools and educators for test scores? Is standardized testing a factor when considering passing or failing a regular education student?

References


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