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Finding a Balance: Navigating High-Stakes Testing and Standardized Curricula for Joyful Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

In recent decades, education legislation and policies at the federal, state, and district levels have significantly impacted urban public schools in the United States. These policies prioritize high-stakes testing and the implementation of scripted and standardized curricula (Cataldo 2021). Consequently, they have had a disruptive effect on the potential for culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students to engage in joyful teaching and learning experiences (Muhammad 2023).

Legislators and policymakers' fixation upon high-stakes testing is one of the reasons why K-12 urban teachers continue to face the challenge of creating learning environments that provide diverse students with the opportunity to "understand themselves and the power structures that influence their worlds and how these structures operate to stifle or obfuscate young people's purpose" (Emdin 2021, ix).

In this essay, we, two early career urban English Language Arts (ELA) educators from northern New Jersey, share our thoughts on how we navigated the pressure of high-stakes tests and standardized curricula while providing our students with joyful teaching and learning experiences rooted in culturally and historically responsive pedagogy.

What Is Joyful Teaching and Learning?

Reflecting on our teaching experiences, we have learned that joyful teaching can look different across classrooms and teachers, as teachers bring different lived experiences to the classroom that are influenced by our complex and intersecting identities. For us, joyful teaching and learning is:

To achieve a state of consciousness that allows one to operate in the world having mind, body, and spirit activated, validated, and whole without distortion or concession as one acquires all essential knowledge—academic knowledge, knowledge of self, knowledge of how to navigate one's immediate surroundings, knowledge of systems in which one is embedded (particularly those that are structured to disempower), and knowledge of the world (Emdin 2021, 1).

In other words, joyful teaching and learning captures a variety of emotions, ideas, and situations. It ranges from the excitement of inspiring students, seeing them grow as individuals and academics, and the incidental learning that can only exist within a school building. Joyful teaching and learning are nuanced and complex, especially in the face of systematic challenges.

American Educational Reforms Disrupt Joyful Teaching and Learning

In the 1990s and 2000s, American educational reforms focused on three main aspects: standards-based reform, standardized testing, and teacher accountability. These components were heavily debated among federal and state politicians, lobbyists, and education policymakers. The push for increased accountability stemmed from the belief that all students can achieve at higher levels and that schools must be held accountable for student learning and achievement (Cross, 2014). In fact, between the early 1990s and early 2000s, particularly during the presidencies of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, “education reformers were convinced that if states, with federal assistance, helped establish academic standards and then held schools accountable for having their students meet standards, educational performance would improve” (Cross, 2014).

This belief resulted in the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. The main aim of the standards-based reform was to guarantee that every student was making progress and that teachers were being held accountable for student achievement. Since the 1990s, classroom instruction has become closely aligned with state teaching standards and standardized tests. Still today, the debate over standards-based reform and standardized testing in American public education continues, especially with educational scholars and researchers advocating for the use of culturally and historically responsive curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning (Muhammad 2023).

Debates on what should be taught in public schools lead to a narrow focus on standardized testing and promote a “one-size fits all” approach to curriculum. What this means is “curriculum and instruction today

are still mostly, if not only, skills-driven, absent of cultural and historical responsiveness” (Muhammad 2023, 51). As a result, the needs and interests of culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students do not often get met, which can lead to disengagement and hinder students’ ability to experience joyful teaching and learning experiences.

New Jersey ELA educators and students are bound by the New Jersey Student Learning Standards for English Language Arts (NJSLS-ELA). Educators must find a balance between adhering to legislation and policies, and providing culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students with an education that values their identities, abilities, and potential and empowers them to succeed in a fast-changing world.

Finding a Balance

Without joyful teaching and learning, being a teacher will boil down to “the status of specialized technicians within the school bureaucracy, whose function then becomes one of managing and implementing curricular programs rather than developing or critically appropriating curricula to fit specific pedagogical concerns” (Giroux 1988, 122).

Simply put, the teaching profession can easily turn into a career that focuses on routines (i.e., teaching scripted curricula) rather than mutual empowerment, critical thinking, and, most notably, the sharing and creation of new knowledge between teachers, their colleagues, and students. Because of this, it is crucial to find a balance between education legislation and policies at the federal, state, and district levels, while also promoting and sustaining joyful teaching and learning.

In our experiences as urban ELA teachers, we have learned that balancing teaching standards geared towards standardized testing and joyful teaching

requires a thorough understanding of NJSLS-ELA standards for the grade level you teach. The standards provide clear, detailed expectations for what all students should know and be able to do at the end of a grade level, serving as the foundation for designing curriculum, aligning assessment and accountability, and ensuring readiness for college, career, and life.

The NJSLS-ELA standards are “non-negotiable,” and can feel like a barrier between educators and joyful experiences in education; however, we find that the more familiar a teacher is with the standards, the greater ability they have to teach them in a joyful way. In other words, to teach the concepts in a joyful way, instead of teaching to the test, educators must understand the expectation placed upon them. They cannot begin to spark joy if this is not understood; being forewarned is to be forearmed.

Once we understood our standards, we were able to provide our students with joyful teaching and learning experiences rooted in culturally and historically responsive pedagogy. That is, we began incorporating culturally relevant texts (CRTs) into our lessons that portray diverse cultures, ethnicities, races, religions, and perspectives and authentically discuss social and racial injustices. We found that incorporating CRTs into our classroom allowed for more moments of joyful teaching and learning since they enabled students to broaden their understanding and gain insights into diverse cultures, perspectives, and experiences beyond their own.

In addition to including CRTs, we expanded our definition of literature to be more inclusive of students’ prior knowledge and interests. For example, analyzing text structure can be taught utilizing the lyrics of a popular song. Playing the song and analyzing the structure of it meets the state set standards, engages the students, and allows joy to enter the learning space. Once

students are hooked and understand songs have structures similar to poems, classes can analyze other text structures using CRTs. By understanding the standards fully, teachers can better integrate joy into their lessons and create authentic, joyful learning moments in their classroom community.

Conclusion

Teaching can feel prescribed and mundane when there is an absence of joy in the classroom. The most important way to find joy in teaching and learning is understanding the policies that are being placed upon states, districts, and individual schools. By gaining knowledge of the expectations and standards schools must teach, teachers can then better meet the needs of their culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students and provide them with learning experiences that are joyful and rooted in culturally and historically responsive best practices.

Reflection Questions for Teachers

1. What are your thoughts on the current state of American education reform?
2. Do you think that throughout history, American education reformers have ever considered prioritizing joyful teaching and learning experiences in classrooms when creating and enacting legislation and policies at the federal, state, and local levels?
3. Your experiences are invaluable. How do high-stakes testing and standardized curricula impact your pedagogical approaches and learning experiences that you provide your students?
4. How have you maintained a sense of joy and creativity in teaching while navigating high-stakes testing and standardized curricula in your classroom?
5. How can you adapt your teaching practices to address students’ individual needs while still working within the

framework of standardized curricula and testing requirements?

6. Can you share an example of successful teaching methods or pedagogical approaches that you have implemented that integrate joy into the learning process while aligning with standardized curricula?

7. How do you engage with other educators or seek professional development opportunities to navigate the challenges of high-stakes testing and standardized curricula while promoting joyful teaching and learning?

8. How do you maintain your passion for teaching and learning in the face of external pressures related to high-stakes testing and standardized curricula?

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