

ABSTRACT

Literature as an Alternative to Teaching to the Test

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In response to the recent emphasis on standardized testing, teaching to the test has become a growing problem for American public education. Although educators frequently criticize this instructional method, they have been given few alternatives for test preparation, and teachers continue to practice teaching to the test in schools across the nation. While current political pressures necessitate that teachers practice effective test preparation, teaching to the test produces only short-term results and hampers long-term learning. Consequently, this thesis explores the benefits of studying literature in order to propose the adoption of a literature-based curriculum as an alternative to teaching to the test. Rather than teaching skills in isolation as occurs when teaching to the test, implementing a literature-based curriculum promotes student success on standardized assessments through embedded test preparation.

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LITERATURE AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO TEACHING TO THE TEST

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Baylor University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Program

By

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Waco, Texas

May 2018

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In recent years, teaching to the test has gained prevalence among public school teachers in secondary English classrooms. While the practice has been widely debated, few alternatives have been proposed to prepare students for standardized assessments. Consequently, this thesis argues that literature-based curricula focused on the study of canonical or other literary texts constitute a form of embedded test preparation and therefore present a viable alternative to teaching to the test. To defend literature as an alternative to direct test preparation, the following introductory chapter examines recent legislation, which places increased pressure on teachers to improve their students' performance on standardized assessments. The second chapter then demonstrates how the practice of teaching to the test that has resulted from this pressure is ultimately ineffective. This pressure necessitates an alternative means of test preparation, which can be found in literature based-curricula. Consequently, the third chapter addresses the benefits of studying literature in preparation for the fourth chapter. This final chapter explores how literature promotes embedded test preparation to improve standardized assessment performance while also promoting authentic learning.

The U.S. public school system represents a primary foundation of American society, ensuring free access to education for countless children across the nation. However, over the years, American public education has undergone numerous developments as new legislation has influenced the operation of public schools and common teaching practices. Today, a pressing issue is the growing importance of

standardized assessments as a result of federal legislation and the subsequent impact on the public school system. Since the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which required standardized testing for the reception of federal funds, several successive reauthorizations heightening the significance of standardized assessments have followed the act's passage, each version bringing unique requirements for schools and teachers. Meanwhile, as federally mandated standardized testing has gained prominence, so too has the practice of "teaching to the test." It is vital for educators to be aware of these changes as well as the challenges that current legislation may bring to the classroom. This is necessary, not only so that teachers may comply with new regulations, but also so that they may respond effectively, better equipped with a complete understanding of the political environment and pedagogical practices, in order to provide the best education possible for their students. Thus, by examining the evolution of legislation mandating standardized testing, it may be possible to gain a more thorough understanding of the political environment today, the phenomenon of teaching to the test, and how these developments have distinctly affected the Texas public school system.

While standardized assessments have taken many forms over the years, one of the earliest identified standardized achievement tests was the 1909 *Thorndike Handwriting Scale* (Klein, Zevenbergen, & Brown, 2006). Today, current testing policies use "criterion-referenced" tests, which assess how well students have mastered specifically identified concepts or skills, or the "criterion" such tests seek to evaluate (Stahlman, 2005, p. 243; Klein, et al., 2006). Because this "criterion" is often encapsulated by a number of standards, criterion-referenced assessments are also sometimes referred to as "standards-referenced tests" (Klein et al., 2006). State departments of education

determine the individual standards for their states, as well as corresponding standardized tests to assess those standards (Stahlman, 2005). Additionally, regardless of what specific standards are chosen, because of their form, contemporary standardized assessments focus on measuring two intelligences, linguistic and mathematical, as opposed to other types of intelligences, such as musical, kinesthetic, or interpersonal intelligences (Morgan, 2016).

Originally, the development of standardized testing arose from the need for teachers and principals to have a self-assessment tool to identify areas for improvement and maintain high quality of instruction (Baresic, 2001). As the federal government has incorporated mandated standardized testing into its legislation, this purpose has further expanded to become a means of evaluating student learning as a product, not only of teachers and principals, but also of schools and districts. The use of standardized testing in this manner as an evaluative tool has become known as “accountability testing” and is founded on the belief that test scores accurately reflect the quality of education (Wiliam, 2010, p. 107). In addition to identifying perceived problems in the education process, accountability testing often enacts penalties or grants rewards to schools based on the improvement of their students’ test scores (Baresic & Gilman, 2001). John C. Antush, in his article “Labor and ‘Ed Deform’: The Degradation of Teachers’ Work through Standardized Testing and the New York City Evaluation System,” asserts this accountability system may be viewed as the result of imposing the pressures of the market on teacher labor, a process he terms “Ed Deform,” which he claims consequently necessitates “a metric for measuring teacher productivity and quality” (2014, p. 34). Schools that fail to succeed according to these metrics face serious consequences. For

instance, in New York, schools receiving a rating of three “C”s faced closure under the A through F rating system instituted in 2007 under Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Similarly, although only forty percent of New York teachers’ ratings under this policy were based on student performance on state tests and “local measures of student learning,” any teacher failing this section was labeled overall as “ineffective” (Antush, 2014, p. 39).

Students are also held accountable for testing performance, for, in some states, test scores have even become the sole basis for promotion to the next grade and graduation, while poor test performance often results in mandatory remediation (Baresic & Gilman, 2016).

Historically, the creation of the American accountability system in education and its emphasis on standardized testing may be traced to a series of legislative acts. Since the beginning of standardized testing in the early twentieth century, several articles of legislation have significantly impacted the use of standardized testing in public education. The first notable piece of legislation prompting the development of our modern accountability system is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, or ESEA. Signed in April of 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act arose in response to the dissatisfaction of American society with public education during the 1960s and 1970s (Klein et al., 2006; Wiliam, 2010). Under Title I of the ESEA, school funding became distinctly linked to performance on standardized testing (Longo, 2010). The primary result of this act was an increase in funds available to public schools and the implementation of minimum competency tests, such as the “Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills,” during the 1970s and 1980s to evaluate the success of these policies and assess student comprehension of basic skills (Klein et al., 2006, p. 147). The purpose of these tests was to guarantee the responsible use of funds and quantify the success of the

federal government's financial investment (Longo, 2010). Consequently, reception of funding under the ESEA was contingent on production of high test scores. The effect of the ESEA on public education was monumental, as demonstrated by the overwhelming statistics. From 1976 to 1978 alone, 39 states mandated the use of minimum-competency tests, and most used test scores as a determinant for graduation or promotion to the next grade (Baresic & Gilman, 2001).

This effect continued with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which further heightened previous employment of high-stakes assessments as a means to facilitate educational reform. The fourth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, No Child Left Behind was a policy enacted under the George W. Bush administration on January 8, 2002. The act was intended to identify schools in need of improvement, as well as those schools successfully meeting expectations (William, 2010). Standardized assessments became mandatory for all public schools, which would receive one of four labels based on the testing performance of their students: high performing, performing, not performing, or failing (Johnson & Hanegan, 2016; Stahlman, 2005). Schools were required to publish "report cards" to increase accountability (Johnson & Hanegan, 2006, p.12). The act further mandated that any school failing to meet standards for progress provide "supplemental services" to improve their students' scores (Johnson & Hanegan, 2006, p.12).

Yet for teachers today, most significant is the recent reauthorization of the ESEA: the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA). Called the "first major overhaul to federal education policy in almost 15 years" by the commissioner of the Texas Education Agency (Morath, 2016), the act represents the culmination of standardized testing

legislation. According to the pamphlet issued online by the United States Department of Education outlining the reforms implemented by the reauthorization of the ESEA, a focal goal of the act is to develop improved assessments aligned with new “college- and career-ready standards” (2010, p. 3). States may either develop these standards in collaboration with their four-year public university system or with other states (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 8).

Additionally, the ESSA promotes standardized testing by providing funds to develop effective assessments, which are emphasized as a vital means of assessing academic growth, successful teaching, and school progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 11-12). The act renews emphasis on quantitative assessment, granting priority to “programs, projects or strategies on the strength of the evidentiary base” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 41). Similar to original legislation under the 1965 ESEA, standardized tests remain vital to procuring federal funding, as the Every Student Succeeds Act allocates resources based on quantitative success, promising to “invest in programs whose graduates are succeeding in the classroom, based on student growth and other factors” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 5). This investment reinforces the need to measure growth, placing high importance on standardized assessments.

Another component of the ESSA is the implementation of an accountability system that rewards or penalizes schools according to student growth as reflected by standardized test scores (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Every state is required to utilize a “statewide system of accountability” that “rewards schools and districts for progress and success, requires rigorous interventions in the lowest-performing schools and districts, and allows local flexibility to determine the appropriate improvement and

support strategies for most schools” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 5). One striking difference from previous legislation is that the ESSA shifts accountability from focusing on individual schools alone to also including accountability for states and districts (U. S. Department of Education, 2010). However, the ESSA’s accountability system continues NCLB’s policy of labeling schools according to performance, as the act identifies schools as either “reward schools” or “challenge schools,” and similarly classifies districts and states. Those schools placed in the category of “challenge schools” must choose from one of the four mandated “school turnaround models” while “reward schools” may gain additional funds and access to “communities of practice,” sharing methods with lower achieving schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 10). The four turnaround models include the “transformation model,” which replaces the principal and extends learning time; the “turnaround model” which replaces the principal as well as at least fifty percent of the school staff and extends learning time, the “restart model,” which requires the conversion of the failing school under the management of another education management organization; and the “school closure model,” which closes the school and displaces students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 12). Challenge schools that consistently fail to meet standards after effecting a turnaround model are “required to implement data-driven interventions” and may even undergo “significant governance or staffing changes, including replacement of the superintendent” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 10). In addition to the restrictions placed on struggling schools, challenge states will have restricted access to ESEA funds. Similarly, teachers and principals will be ranked according to state definitions as either “effective” or “highly effective” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 16). As required previously,

states and districts are required to publish “report cards” containing information including teacher qualifications, attendance, and retention rates by performance level at two-year or less intervals (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 16).

A final way that legislation has impacted standardized testing is Race to the Top (RTTP), a program authorized by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, implemented under the Obama administration (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 36). Race to the Top “provided incentives for excellence by encouraging state and local leaders to work together on ambitious reforms, make tough choices, and develop comprehensive plans that change policies and practices to improve outcomes for students” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 6). This incentive program is continued under the Every Student Succeeds Act, which provides competitive grants to states and school districts undergoing reforms (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 36). According to the White House website, since the program’s creation, “forty-six states and the District of Columbia submitted comprehensive reform plans to compete in the Race to the Top competition,” nineteen of which received funding, investing over four billion dollars overall (The White House, n.d.). Teachers whose students performed well also received merit pay, although such an approach was sometimes reported to create tension among educators (Morgan, 2016). As of 2012, the second phase began with the implementation of “Race to the Top – District,” a district-level competition investing approximately \$400 million to further reforms (The White House, n.d.).

Texas itself is commonly recognized as the “birthplace of the testing movement” and has a long history of standardized testing (Vogt, 2013). A particularly notorious event of standardized testing is the “Texas Miracle” during the years preceding No Child

Left Behind, during which Texas reported extraordinarily high scores on the standardized test used for maintaining accountability of Texas public high schools, despite low academic achievement of its students. In contrast to their high scores on the state standardized assessments, Texas students' scores were comparably low in proportion to similar assessments, such as the Stanford National Test. Furthermore, the pedagogy of Texas teachers emphasized memorization and recall, rather than the development of higher-level thinking. While this use of drills and practice resulted in many high school students achieving higher scores, many students were unable to apply their knowledge in an unfamiliar context, and some experienced difficulties upon transitioning to college (Morgan, 2016). Although, as of 2013, the number of standardized tests mandated for graduation in Texas had been reduced from 15 to 5, standardized tests maintain their position as a focal part of the Texas education system and will likely remain so under the new legislation of ESSA (Vogt, 2013). Standardized test scores assign labels to schools by both by federal legislation, currently ESSA, as well as by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), which assigns publicized ratings of either "low performing," "acceptable," "recognized," or "exemplary" (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 234). Under NCLB, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test, or TAKS, an assessment originating in 2003 during George W. Bush's term as Texas governor from 1995 to 2000 as a replacement for the previous standardized assessment Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), was used as the official standardized assessment in Texas (Jaska, Hogan, & Wen, 2009; Bernstein, 2004). This has since been replaced with the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) in 2012.

Consequently, from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2016, the increased legislative emphasis on standardized testing has prompted the creation of a new pedagogical practice known among educators as “teaching to the test.” In its simplest form, “teaching to the test” may be described as tailoring instruction to assessment. The practice typically manifests as a didactic, “decontextualized” approach to education in which teachers may employ different methods, such as giving practice tests, teaching lessons on test mechanics, and using commercially produced test preparation materials (Firestone, Monfils, & Schorr, 2004, p. 38-39). Nevertheless, teaching to the test can also encompass many different strategies for test preparation, including exposing students in advance to test format, focusing on content covered by the test, or other forms of test-driven instruction (Klein et al., 2006). For instance a survey of teachers in a New York district received repeated responses demonstrating the prevalence of teaching to the test, and all respondents mentioned using some form of test preparation within their classrooms. (Klein et al., 2006, p. 151). However, while teaching to the test was undeniably present, the form of teaching to test varied according to the teacher. Of those teachers who responded to the survey, 71% taught test content throughout the year, 33% prepared students uniquely for the standardized testing format, 14% taught test-taking strategies, and 14% reduced other demands on students to prepare them for the test (Klein et al, 2006, p. 155).

Despite this variance, several dominant results of teaching to the test can be identified. One common effect of teaching to the test is a narrowing of the curriculum and increased teacher emphasis on skills and knowledge targeted by standardized testing (Baresic & Gilman, 2001). Conversely, this narrowing of the curriculum is often

accompanied by a loss of instructional time, as those subjects covered by the standardized tests dominate the curriculum at the expense of other subjects (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2007). For instance, in one California school, a principal encouraged the use of a new curriculum focusing predominately on math and literacy in response to pressure from the school district. This narrowing of the curriculum may also occur at a school level, as schools chose to eliminate or reduce subjects such as art, music, or library research not evaluated by standardized assessments (Morgan, 2016). While the decision to reject certain subjects as irrelevant may seem overly severe, in extreme situations, the regular curriculum may even be suspended for a period of weeks as teachers provide intense test preparation in response to overwhelming pressure to produce high scores (Posner, 2004). Likewise, some schools enroll students in classes solely devoted to teaching effective test-taking techniques (Baresic & Gilman, 2001, p. 15).

In any form, the evolution of teaching to the test results from a variety of factors. Central among these factors is the existence of external accountability systems that provide incentives for teachers based on student performance, arising from the business model of education. This pressure, as well as pressure from parents, can influence strategies teachers use within the classroom (Firestone et al., 2004). Support is another important factor, including support from principals, the provision of learning opportunities regarding the state-mandated curriculum and effective teaching practices, as well as the availability of necessary materials, such as textbooks or technology (Firestone, et al., 2004, p. 74-77). Lastly, teachers' personal views of effective pedagogy and perception of their students' needs may influence what methods of teaching to the test they choose to adapt (Firestone et al., 2004, p. 67).

Even as standardized assessment holds a distinct position in the Texas public education system, as the pressure to produce high-standardized test scores continues to increase, so also has the phenomenon of teaching to the test manifested in a very unique form in Texas. Jennifer Booher-Jennings relates her experiences at Beck Elementary School (BES), a Texas urban elementary school, in her article “Below the Bubble: ‘Educational Triage’ and the Texas Accountability System,” during which she describes the practice of what she terms an “educational triage” (2005, p. 232). While practices vary from school to school, Booher-Jennings’s observations yield a striking insight into the breadth of impact teaching to the test has had on certain schools within the Texas public education system. Data-driven decision making, in particular, which uses statistics and scores to direct educational decisions, emerged in Texas during the mid-1990s, and gained popularity at the encouragement of the TEA to produce “data driven” schools (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 238). Although in theory this methodology would require educators to evaluate a variety of data, in practice for many schools, including BES, standardized tests scores have become the only standard for success (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 240).

Booher-Jennings’s study notes three prominent practices employed by the school, which together comprise the “educational triage” (2005, p. 232-233). The first component of the educational triage practiced at BES is increased attention to teaching students classified as “bubble kids”—at the expense of other students. Just as schools receive labels under NCLB and the ESSA, BES assigned each of its students to one of three labels: “safe cases, suitable cases for treatment, and hopeless cases.” Those students deemed suitable for treatment were referred to as “bubble kids,” so named because their

standardized test scores were only slightly below passing the state standards (Booher-Jennings, 2005, 233). “Bubble kids” received such advantages as “one-on-one” sessions with a teacher, extra tutoring, summer programs, and other assistance (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 233). This uneven delegation of educational resources was seen as a strategic managerial decision to raise the school’s rating, which was determined by the percentage of passing students, not necessarily the overall quality of education (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 244-247).

The second component of the educational triage at BES resulted in increased attention to “accountables,” those students selected as members of the school’s “accountability subset” whose scores contributed to determine the overall accountability rating of the school, as well as the increased placement of students in special education to remove students with low scores from this subset (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 246). As students receiving special education who tested under the State Developed Alternative Assessment were ineligible to participate in the school’s “accountability subset,” testing low-scoring students for special education became an attractive alternative for teachers (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 246-247). This caused an overwhelming increase in student referrals for special education, doubling the percentage of BES student enrollment in special education since the implementation of the TEA’s accountability system (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 249).

The last component of the triage is the negative perception of DNQs as “hopeless cases” (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 250). DNQs are students who did not qualify for special education because testing reported that their IQ was within one standard deviation of their achievement level (Booher-Jennings 2005, p. 250). The increase in testing for

special education prompted an increased identification of DNQs, to whom teachers often provided less assistance due to the prevalent belief that such students could not exceed their current achievement level (Booher-Jennings, 2005). This conclusion removed responsibility from the teacher to improve DNQ student performance on standardized assessments because it was believed that any further improvement would be impossible (Booher-Jennings, 2005, 249-250).

Together, these practices form the three components of Booher-Jennings' "educational triage." Although a joint product of the individual school environment at BES and the Texas accountability system, Booher-Jennings's triage reveals the extent of influence that the emphasis on standardized test scores may have on education. Furthermore, as the study occurred in 2005 during the legislative era of No Child Left Behind, it will be interesting to see how the situation in Texas will further progress in response to the even greater significance placed on standardized testing under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Education is not static. It is dynamic, constantly changing, developing with the introduction of new legislation and techniques. Over recent years, several legislative acts, originating with the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, have had a profound effect on the evolution of education today. Student performance on standardized test scores has been increasingly emphasized at both the state and national level. High scores grant schools and districts access to money, while low scores may result in punishment, including elimination of staff or even school closures. As a result of this high-stakes testing, a new practice of "teaching to the test" has gained prevalence, particularly in the Texas education system. "Teaching to the test" as a practice encompasses many different

techniques, but may be generally defined as the process of tailoring instruction specifically to testing. However, the question remains whether this practice is in the best interest of American students. For teachers confronted by the pressures of new legislation under the Every Student Succeeds Act, the question becomes critical as they decide whether to practice teaching to the test in their own classrooms. This question of providing the best education for American students or teaching to the test points to one central idea: all educators have a responsibility to evaluate teaching practices and the consequences they may have on our American educational system.

CHAPTER TWO

Evaluating Teaching to the Test

As demonstrated in Chapter One, recent legislation has increased the importance of standardized assessments. In response, the practice of teaching to the test has gained prominence in many American classrooms. Educators praise the benefits of the practice and argue for its inclusion in classroom instruction. However, support of teaching to the test is by no means unanimous, and many educators have raised concerns regarding the educational and social implications of the test-focused instructional approach. This division is reflected in the body of literature as many critics argue for both the benefits and the dangers of teaching to the test. Nevertheless, through a comparison of these contrasting perspectives, a number of discrepancies in the arguments for teaching to the test have become evident. This chapter demonstrates that teaching to the test, at least as it is popularly conceived today, is not an effective method for classroom instruction. An alternate form of test preparation consequently is needed in the form of a literature-based curriculum, which will be discussed in further detail during Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

As educators defend and encourage the use of teaching to the test, several arguments may be identified from among their works. A primary argument is that standardization at a national or state level guarantees the provision of quality education for all, and teaching to the test reflects efforts of educators to raise quality of their instruction to fulfill these higher standards. For instance, Anne Shaughnessy, responding

to criticism that teaching to the test limits instruction in her article “Teaching to the Test: Sometimes a Good Practice,” asserts that teaching to the test expanded the depth with which she addressed content in her classroom as she was challenged to raise her own standards to meet the standards assessed by the test (Shaughnessy, 1994). From this perspective, teaching to the test is evidence of the successful ability of state and national standards to improve the quality of public education through the provision of higher standards. These standards may be particularly useful for inexperienced or unqualified teachers, providing a guideline and goals for their instruction.

Similarly, a second proposed benefit of teaching to the test is that it prevents wasted instructional time due to the increased accountability imposed by standardized assessment. In the article “Who’s Afraid of Standards,” Ivy Main recounts how her child’s elementary school’s practice of Friday movies was eliminated as a result of rigorous standards that demanded efficient use of time for classroom instruction (2000). Activities such as watching cartoons or other movies unrelated to the curriculum are therefore eradicated through teaching through the test, which instead holds teachers accountable for their use of classroom time and encourages them to focus their instruction on the substantial amount of information assessed by standardized tests.

Additionally, educators in favor of teaching to test argue that, as passing standardized assessments is often required for progression to the following grade as well as graduation, it is important to teach test-taking skills that enable students to perform well on these assessments (Baresic & Gilman, 2016). Furthermore, some claim that test-taking skills are critical for success later in life, needed for such milestones as entrance to universities and professional certifications (Greene, 2007). For example, Richard Phelps

argues the importance of teaching test-taking strategies as a means of providing students entry into white-color professions (2005). The significance of such standardized examinations, these advocates argue, demands that test-taking strategies themselves reserve a place in the curriculum, if not a dominant role. This is further supported by the claim that, as many standardized assessments are primarily reading tests, teaching test-taking strategies is often the same as teaching good reading strategies (Greene, 2007). Therefore teaching to the test does not detract from instruction, but rather enhances learning.

Finally, teaching to the test may be viewed as a valuable tool for removing non-curricular barriers to demonstrating student knowledge on standardized examinations. Proponents of teaching to the test argue that teaching test-taking strategies allows students to demonstrate their knowledge accurately without being constrained by the format of the test (Scruggs 1992). Scruggs and Mastropieri, in their book *Teaching Test-Taking Skills*, argue that students who are “test-wise” or prepared with specific strategies for test-taking situations often score better on tests than students of the same cognitive ability (1992, p. 2). These strategies are independent of factors such as confidence or motivation, and the book identifies six central areas for test preparation: strategies for effective use of time, error avoidance, guessing, deductive reasoning, understanding of test purpose, and identification of cue words, for instance “always” or “never” (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1992, p. 2-3).

Nevertheless, in response to these proposed benefits of teaching to the test, critics have published numerous counterarguments alerting teachers to hidden dangers of the practice. To begin, although many educators agree that teaching to the test may reduce or

eliminate unnecessary activities such as watching movies, they also warn that varying definitions of what is “necessary” have resulted in a reduction of time spent on other studies, such as art, science, or physical activities. For instance, Hani Morgan references a study in 2000 by the Harvard Graduate School of Education investigating school policies during the “Texas miracle,” which found that “when test scores were low, schools decreased and even eliminated science, social studies, library research, and any curricular activities not covered in the test” (2016, p. 70). Morgan also sites another study conducted in 2015, in which a principal from a California school encouraged the use of a reduced curriculum focusing “strictly on math and literacy” in response to pressures from standardized assessment (2016, p. 70).

Additionally, critics concerned about the impact of teaching to the test remind educators and administrators that standardized test scores are not an unassailable indicator of the quality of teaching. A 2004 study by Gallagher supports this conclusion, reporting that only 25% of variance in student achievement on the Texas standardized assessment implemented in 2001, TAKS, resulted from school influence, while 75% was dependent on family and environmental influences (Jaska, Hogan, & Wen, 2009, p. 60). Still other influences affecting test scores include student attendance rate, number of economically disadvantaged students, the number of students per teacher, and teacher turnover rate (Jaska et al., 2009, p. 61-62). Similarly, Jonathan Kozol in his book *The Shame of the Nation* demonstrates the importance of economics on student testing performance. According to Kozol, schools in poor neighborhoods typically receive less money and have lower paid teachers than schools in wealthy neighborhoods. This excludes additional economic support schools may receive from wealthy parents, which

is not available to schools supporting a poor demographic. Consequently, as schools in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods have reduced access to funds, these schools provide fewer resources to their students and often exhibit poor student performance on standardized assessments. Additionally, wealthy parents have the financial means to send their children to pre-K programs, reinforcing their overall educational advantage and later academic performance. However, this advantage is not recognized by standardized tests, which, although administered equally at all schools, produce scores which do not acknowledge the advantages received by upper-class students nor the difficulties, such as inadequate facilities, disproportionate class size, and the lack of supplemental programs, experienced by many lower-class students. As a result, Kozol argues that upper-class students typically perform better on standardized examinations, but these examinations do not fairly represent student achievement or potential, regardless of individual teacher performance (Kozol, 2005).

Yet another critical deficiency of teaching to the test is that it fails to develop critical thinking skills. Teaching to the test encourages increased use of direct instruction, such as lectures, which not only decreases student motivation but also decreases independent thought by promoting a passive reliance on the teacher for knowledge (Wurdinger, 2012, p.13). This is reflected by the common student question, “Will this be on the test?” which shows a lack of interest in the learning process and instead a focus on assessment as the objective of instruction. Decreased intrinsic motivation and limited opportunities for self-directed learning as a result of increased direct instruction also reduce the likelihood that students will continue as learners after leaving school (Wurdinger, 2012, p. 16). Moreover, the article “Managing Standardized Testing in

Today's Schools" references four studies, a 1990 study by Kamii, a 2000 study by Lynd, a 2001 study by Madaus and Clarke, and a study in 2001 by Popham, which demonstrate the shift away from the development of critical thinking skills and problem-solving capabilities to an emphasis on improved standardized testing performance (Klein, Zevenbergen, & Brown, 2006, p. 148). Nevertheless, improving test scores on a particular assessment does not necessarily translate to success on similar assessments, such as the SAT, ACT, or Advancement Placement tests, as opposed to the success one might expect from students with high critical thinking abilities (Wiliam, 2010, p. 117). To the contrary, Dylan Wiliam, in his article "Standardized Testing and School Accountability," cites a study conducted by Amrein and Berliner in 2002 that found a correlation between the introduction of examinations at a high school level and lower average academic achievement (2010).

Educators also argue that teaching to the test reduces the ability to tailor instruction to students' specific needs, instead tailoring instruction to meet the needs of the test. John Antush in his article, "Labor and 'Ed Deform': The Degradation of Teachers' Work through Standardized Testing and the New York City Evaluation System," provides a compelling description of this phenomenon as he writes, "To maximize this investment opportunity teachers must be reskilled away from deciding on content, assessing students, and tailoring education to meet diverse students' needs and interests" (2014, p. 33). One example of such redirection of teacher skills occurred in New York under the Bloomberg administration, in which schools mandated use of a "workshop model," which provided a scripted lesson design that teachers were forced to follow, regardless of past success with alternative strategies (Antush, 2014).

Consequently, as teachers have less freedom in their classrooms or feel pressured to adopt certain approaches, teaching to the test reduces authentic instruction. This pedagogical trend is evidenced by a 2006 study, which found that less instruction was adapted to suit student learning styles and reported that only 4% of class time was spent on authentic instruction (Klein et al., 2006). Hani Morgan, in the article “Relying on High-Stakes Standardized Tests to Evaluate Schools and Teachers: A Bad Idea,” further states that test-centered policies increase the prevalence of rote learning methods. As these methods are founded on recall and memorization, students experience limited development of higher-order thinking skills, despite improvement of standardized test scores (Morgan, 2016). This reduction of authentic instruction is also very similar to the banking system of education criticized by Paolo Friere in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which is well known among educators. According to Friere, the banking system of education is a pedagogical approach primarily characterized by narrative instruction, an instructional technique similar to methods founded on recall and repetition. Under this system, as well as often under the practice of teaching to the test, the goal is for students to absorb information passively. However, Friere argues that information memorized in this manner becomes detached from any real context in the outside world or previous learning and therefore cannot produce true, lasting knowledge (1993). As a result, educators are also precluded from implementing instruction that is uniquely relevant to students’ environmental and cultural situations. John Antush defends this claim, arguing that teaching to the test “reduces the room for teachers to implement, for example, the demands of anti-racist advocates and concerned parents for ‘culturally relevant curriculum’ or, indeed, anything that deviates from relevant test-prep skills”

(2014, p. 33). Friere similarly addresses the issue of culturally relevant pedagogy, claiming that for education to realize its purpose as a transformative process, the content of education must reflect the views and the situation of the people for which it is intended rather than imposing a foreign perspective (Friere, 1993).

Furthermore, although progression to the next grade and graduation is important, studies indicate that teaching to the test may also have the unintended effect of producing students who are unprepared for this progression, as students learn specialized test-taking skills which are not merely unnecessary but potentially detrimental as well in a real-world environment. Critics of teaching to the test assert that the skills taught by the practice often have little or no application outside of academia. The most obvious example is teaching test-taking skills which are uniquely tailored to standardized assessment. For instance, a study by Linda McNeil found that, in Texas, much of class time was devoted to such test-centered activities as practicing filling in the “bubbles” on answer forms and learning specialized information about the test itself, such as the fact that standardized tests never have the same letter as the correct answer more than twice consecutively (McNeil, 2000; Janesick, 2001, p. 100). However, standardized assessments also fail to measure critical skills such as the ability to collaborate with others, assess information, and practice complex problem solving (Wurdinger, 2012, p. 16-17). Consequently, instruction with the primary objective of improving performance on standardized assessment also fails to develop these skills. Lastly, while teaching to the test emphasizes passive memorization of facts, increased access to technology renders memorization increasingly obsolete while heightening the need for students to be able to assess information critically (Wurdinger, 2012).

A central problem with tailoring instruction to standardized assessments is that these tests present simplified problems, which do not extend critical thinking skills nor reflect the complexity of problems that students may face outside the classroom (Posner, 2004, p. 750). Posner addresses this issue in his article “What’s Wrong with Teaching to the Test?” warning that “on a standardized test, the possible answers to a problem are limited and generally enumerated as a small multiple-choice list. For real problems, the list of possible outcomes is often enormous and at best partial. The discovery of these possibilities is essential to any meaningful analysis” (Posner, 2004, p. 75). For example, while a standardized test may act as the gateway into medical school, the possibilities for diagnosing a patient are not limited to four multiple-choice answers. Therefore, students who received a test-centered education may be less likely to succeed later in life. The lack of long-term viability and potential consequences that result from a testing mindset call into question the value of teaching test-taking skills (Kohn, 2000, p. 34). Posner further postulates that, due to the significant difference between the intellectual processes required to solve simpler, multiple choice questions and those skills needed to resolve problems in real life, which may allow for countless solutions, students prepared solely for a testing environment may not be capable of effective problem-solving and success beyond the classroom (Posner, 2004). A consequential danger is that these students may fill basic jobs requiring only rudimentary problem-solving skills, which may later be threatened by automation, rendering them unproductive members of society.

On the other hand, in response to the argument that teaching test-taking skills allows standardized assessments to reflect student knowledge accurately, opponents argue that teaching to the test actually invalidates test scores. This results from the

tendency for high scores to be primarily indicative of higher test-taking ability rather than actual knowledge (Firestone, Monfils, & Schorr, 2004). Although Scruggs and Mastropieri argue that teaching test-taking strategies improves testing validity, their example of two students with the same cognitive ability receiving different scores on the same test due to different levels of test preparation reveals that raising test scores by teaching test-taking strategies (rather than as a result of more thorough or individualized instruction) prevents the test from being a true measure of student intellect and knowledge. Instead, scores may reflect merely whether students have mastered the test-taking strategies. It is true that unfamiliarity with the general testing format and testing strategies may cause an artificial lowering of student scores on standardized assessments. Nonetheless, higher scores as a result of using testing strategies may not properly reflect students' knowledge, as strategies for analyzing the test may be used to determine correct answers without a thorough comprehension of the content (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1992, p. 1-4). Thus, in light of the other potential detriments of teaching to the test, teaching critical thinking skills rather than test-taking strategies may be a more viable—and ethical—approach to preparation for standardized assessment.

A final argument against teaching to the test is that it reduces the cannon of literature studied in English classrooms and time spent on extended writing projects. According to Will Fitzhugh in his article “High School Flight from Reading and Writing,” this reduction has manifested in the complaint by university professors that students graduating from public high schools are not adequately prepared with the reading and writing skills required for a university education. Fitzhugh refers to a survey by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2006, which found that 91% of college

professors claimed their students were inadequately prepared for college level writing, 89% believed their students were unprepared for college reading, and 91% believed their students lacked adequate research skills. Fitzhugh links these results to the reduction of reading in American public high schools, which limit most assignments to reading excerpts or passages from textbooks while failing to assign complete nonfiction books or term papers requiring extensive research and writing (2011). This also produces ramifications for businesses. Fitzhugh states that a survey by Business Roundtable of its member companies recorded over \$3 billion invested by companies annual to provide remedial writing courses for employees working in an hourly capacity as well as even those holding salaried positions (2011).

Overall, having examined both sides of the argument for teaching to the test, the case against its use proves overwhelming. Teaching to the test is not an effective pedagogical practice and may have grave implications for the productivity and success of students beyond the classroom. While the motivation of teachers to practice teaching to the test is understandable, the reasoning of educators in support of this approach nevertheless reveals several critical flaws. Choosing not to teach to the test or stopping the practice may be a difficult decision, yet the research validates that, whenever possible, it is a necessary decision. Nevertheless, as described, in some situations teachers may not have control over their practices, which necessitates a structural change. In such instances, teachers must attempt to modify their practices as much as possible to deliver instruction that is tailored to the needs of their students, to produce critical thinking skills, and to help form individuals capable of success beyond the classroom. Above all, educators must remember that learning, not test scores, is the ultimate end of instruction.

CHAPTER THREE

The Case for Literature

Having established in Chapter One the pressures that lead educators to teach to the test as well as the ineffectiveness of the practice in Chapter Two, the remainder of this thesis develops the argument to adopt a literature-based curriculum. To begin, this chapter discusses the benefits of studying literature, which prepares students to succeed academically and to participate in a democratic society. Chapter Four will further this discussion by demonstrating specifically how literature improves standardized testing performance as a form of embedded test preparation.

Literature has long held a critical position at the heart of the English curriculum. Yet as society changes and the purpose of education is questioned, so also must educators reevaluate the role of literature and why the literary canon should still be included in the high school curriculum today. As standardized testing continues to place new pressures on teachers, it becomes inevitable that the value of literature must face scrutiny from concerned educators. Although many arguments may be made for the inclusion of literature, perhaps most persuasive is the ability of literary study to help prepare students to become productive members of a democratic society. This benefit, above all, reveals the centrality of literature to forming an educated citizenry and demonstrates why literature should retain its prominent position in high school English education. Additionally, although canonical works often represent the primary source of literary

texts, other sources of literature, such as young adult literature, offer compelling arguments for their inclusion and the expansion of literary study in the classroom.

At the forefront of the defense for literature, Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration*, first published in 1938, continues to be referenced as the authority on literature studies. In her book, Rosenblatt identifies two avenues of studying literature: the personal and the analytical approach. The first avenue, the personal approach, focuses on the effect of literature on the reader and the transaction that occurs during literary study. By contrast, the analytical approach considers the format of a work itself and what writing techniques, such as figurative language, the writer uses to be effective (Rosenblatt, 1983). Both avenues are necessary for a complete study of literature and contribute to the development of students as effective citizens.

Benefits of the Personal Approach

The personal approach to literature study offers many benefits to an English education. One benefit is “the literary experience,” as termed by Rosenblatt, through which students explore elements of their own personality, interactions with others in society, moral societal ideals, and notions of ethical behavior through literary reading (Rosenblatt, 1983). As reading is an “experience,” literature allows students to interact directly with problems in a way that is more immersive than simply discussing the problems independently or reading a summary of a text. Information acquired by reading literature differs from factual information gained from non-literary approaches to study due to its unique experiential nature, the sense of having lived through the events or experiences conveyed in a work (Rosenblatt, 1983). As a result of the unique nature of

knowledge obtained through this experiential method, literature develops students who are capable of acting as effective citizens by developing the faculty of imagination and effective mental practices (Jago, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1983).

In America's diverse and multicultural society, the development of imagination constitutes a primary benefit of reading literature. Imagination develops a state of global citizenship, as described in Martha Nussbaum's powerful defense of literature and the humanities, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 7). This citizenship may be achieved as students broaden their mindsets by experiencing the lives of others through literature. Thus, by reading literature, students may develop the ability to identify with individuals from different backgrounds, a critical ability in our diverse society today (Rosenblatt, 1983; Alsup, 2015). Rosenblatt similarly emphasizes the importance of imagination, stating, "a democratic society, whose institutions and political and economic procedures are constantly being developed and remolded, needs citizens with an imagination to see what political doctrines mean for human beings" (1983, p. 185). This capacity for imagination may be developed by reading literature from foreign perspectives or situations, which widens one's worldview, allowing students to develop their ability to sympathize with others and more readily identify with foreign experiences (Jago, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1983). Reading literature removes cultural and geographical barriers, allowing students to understand the suffering of others that they may not otherwise encounter in their daily lives (Rosenblatt, 1983). Through this experience, indifference or insensitivity toward others may be lessened, encouraging empathy crucial for the effective functioning of democracy (Rosenblatt, 1983; Nussbaum 2010).

Moreover, literary texts from the English canon uniquely contribute to the development of imagination. Although some argue canonical texts are too alienated from the experiences of contemporary students, Mark. A. Pike in his article, “The Canon in the Classroom: Students’ Experiences of Texts from Other Times,” asserts that solely reading texts situated within familiar contexts actually harms students by restricting them to their own experiences (Pike, 2003, p, 357). The broadening of experiences produced by the reading unfamiliar literature allows students to participate in more complex discussion and prompts critical reflection by offering contrasts and alternatives to the state of contemporary society for students to consider (Rosenblatt, 1983). According to Pike, canonical works are so identified because they possess the quality of “indeterminacy,” which prevents the texts from being rooted in a single time period and therefore renders them applicable to all times and societies (Pike, 2003). Effective reading is an active process requiring the reader to engage by creating images and meaning, as well as reacting emotionally in response to the text (Rosenblatt, 1983). Rosenblatt describes this relationship as “a transaction between the reader and the text” (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 35). The importance of a work may be affected by the state of the reader, enabling even the same reader reading a text at different points in one’s life to find new significance at each reading (Rosenblatt, 1983). Thus, students can integrate their own experiences into the reading of the work to create new meaning, even though the superficial setting of the story itself may be unknown to them. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, the ability to empathize with foreign experience is a valuable skill, which may not be acquired from texts featuring situations with which students are familiar. These texts do not facilitate a “horizon change,” or a shift of the reader’s “horizon of expectation,” a term proposed by

Hans Robert Jauss referring to the preexisting expectations of a text located within a certain time (Pike, 2003, p.360). While familiar texts often reinforce these expectations, unfamiliar literary texts expand the reader's horizons through personal involvement and interaction with the work (Pike 2003).

Another benefit of literature is that it helps develop effective "habits of the mind" (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 226). One such mental practice is the habit of reflection as students build a deeper understanding of themselves and those around them. This understanding may be achieved by identifying with similar characters or recognizing differences in contrasting characters. For instance, students may become aware of latent biases by recognizing their preconceptions of a character at the beginning of a story in comparison to their greater understanding of certain individuals at the end of a work. Carole Jago addresses this benefit in her book *Classics in the Classroom*, as she asserts the importance of extensively studying classic literature with students of all levels. According to Jago, two types of books exist: books that act as mirrors, which provide insight into the reader's life, and books that act as windows, allowing the reader insight into the lives of others. Classics, or texts from the literary canon, Jago claims, act as windows and are therefore invaluable for helping students become aware of other cultures and perspectives (Jago, 2004). Consequently, reading literature encourages a habit of reflection on one's beliefs and ideals that may be continued beyond the classroom (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 225-26)

Additionally, studying literature in such a manner that facilitates enjoyment during high school also promotes a habit of reading later in life (La Brant, 1931). Despite the many benefits of literature, recent data demonstrates a declining reading rate in

America. This is demonstrated by the article “Reversing the Decline of Literary Reading,” in which Kenneth Lindblom cites a study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). After evaluating the number of American citizens who read one or more books a year from a survey of 17,000 adults, the study revealed a percentage decrease in quantity of books read by Americans over a ten year period, and the decline of the reading rate has accelerated over the previous twenty years (Lindblom, 2005; Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004). In 1992, the study originally determined that 60.9 percent of surveyed adults read at least one book during the preceding twelve months, while in 2002 readership decreased to 56.6 percent, and only 46.7 percent of respondents had read at least one literary work (Lindblom, 2005; Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004, p. ix-x). This troubling trend seems unlikely to reverse if literature is further removed from the curriculum, despite the increasing importance of benefits such as imagination and empathy necessary for a global society.

Yet, a final benefit of reading literature through the personal approach is the development of critical thinking skills. Edward M. Glaser in 1941 defined critical thinking as an openness to reflection, accompanied by an ability to apply knowledge of logical inquiry skillfully (Alsup, 2015, p. 57). As discussed previously, stories from the literary canon often superficially appear anachronistic; therefore, critical reading is necessary to identify universal themes and ideas still relevant to contemporary society through reflection (Rosenblatt, 1983) Additionally, by evaluating the ideas within a work, students develop critical thinking skills for logical inquiry necessary to evaluate messages they will encounter later in their lives (Rosenblatt, 1983). Studying opposing views challenges dogma commonly accepted by society and encourages students to adopt a

critical view as adults and resist blindly follow others (Rosenblatt, 1983). This ability to apply logical reasoning to evaluate claims proposed by literary texts in particular represents a significant benefit of the personal approach to studying literature for democratic citizens who play a prominent role in the selection of their leaders and should be able to respond critically to rhetoric.

Benefits of the Analytical Approach

By contrast, the second, analytical approach to reading literature studies the “formal elements” of a work which Rosenblatt defines as “style and structure, rhythmic flow” (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 7). Similar to the personal approach, the analytical approach helps build critical thinking skills as students analyze how a writer crafts his or her art. Furthermore, examining the writing of acclaimed authors enables students to learn from and incorporate elements from literary works to improve the effectiveness by which they express their own ideas in writing. Effective communication, in addition to being necessary for many positions of employment in the workforce, also proves necessary in a democracy to contribute to important political and social discussions. Rhetoric is not merely something to which citizens must respond, but something they must employ to defend many ideas at the heart of the American nation, including freedom and justice. An active citizenry, therefore, depends upon its ability to communicate effectively.

Additionally, employing an analytical approach to studying literature in what is often referred to as close reading may promote attention to detail (Sumara, 2002). Recognizing patterns of information in literature prepares students for life in the modern age in which technology allows access to an enormous amount of information and

conflicting messages. Although valuable, this wealth of information provided by technology cannot be used effectively if students do not possess the analytical skills to evaluate the messages they encounter. Likewise, learning to construct meaning from texts by identifying key pieces of information helps students learn how to create meaning to navigate their own lives (Brockman, 2013). For instance, students may apply skills developed during close reading of literary texts to understand the purpose of political rhetoric encountered while watching the news, interpret messages on social media, or participate in other daily interactions. Consequently, teaching students how to construct meaning equips them with the skills needed to understand our rapidly changing world and respond effectively.

An argument may also be made for the need to include a substantial quantity of literary texts, as increased volume of reading improves reading fluency and achievement (Allington, 2014). Therefore it is not enough to merely include literature in the curriculum, but educators must include literature in a sufficient quantity to develop capable readers. The article “How Reading Volume Affects Both Reading Fluency and Reading Achievement” by Richard Allington supports this need, proposing that increased voluntary reading allows students to develop greater automaticity, the ability to quickly recognize words, therefore enabling avid readers to engage in higher-level thinking (2014). Such an increase in automaticity results due to the development of the number of “sight words,” words that a reader can immediately identify, known by the reader (Allington, 2014). Thus, a familiarity with reading literature becomes necessary to promote the aforementioned benefits and allow students to grasp the greater meaning of texts. Furthermore, volume reading correlates with civic participation as evidenced by a

study conducted by the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) based on data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. The study found that of literary readers in 2002, 43 percent performed volunteer and charity work in comparison to 17 percent of non-literary readers. A similar trend was demonstrated for the visitation of art museums, sporting events, and other cultural activities (Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004, p. xii).

Lastly, one may argue that appreciation of art lies at the heart of what it means to be human. According to Rosenblatt, engaging in the study of literature may foster a sense of fulfillment (Rosenblatt, 1983). Just as a student learns to recognize patterns in a text, one may be able to recognize patterns throughout one's life, creating meaning through art. Reading also facilitates a developed sense of emotion, enabling students to experience life more fully through their study of literature.

Having proposed the case for studying literature, it is necessary to recognize that, although including literature in the curriculum is the first step, studying literature does not immediately guarantee these benefits. A number of factors determine the effectiveness of a literature-based curriculum. Instruction must be delivered in a manner encouraging close reading of texts by students, rather than cursory reading for factual information (Sumara 2002). Texts must be closely read, ideally reread, and then closely analyzed to facilitate learning. One may argue that quality of literature study, perhaps even more than quantity, must be maintained to promote effective learning (Sumara, 2002). The ideal quantity of literature has similarly been the subject of some debate, as Carol Jago argues for the inclusion of the greatest quantity of canonical works possible (Jago, 2004). Nevertheless quality of instruction must always be upheld, and it is critical to first include literature in the curriculum for the possible benefits to be obtained.

Young Adult Literature as a Supplement to the Canon

In addition to the traditional literary canon, educators may incorporate several other sources of literary study, including young adult literature, which can act as a powerful supplement to the canon. Although many ways of approaching literature study beyond the canon exist, one approach, young adult literature, has gained popularity among educators. Generally defined as literature addressing concerns relevant to young adults from an adolescent perspective, young adult literature may include numerous genres and forms of literature, including graphic novels (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). In addition to the benefits of literary study discussed previously, young adult literature offers many unique benefits, which support its inclusion in the high school curriculum.

The first benefit of young adult literature is increased relevance for adolescent students as a means to promote engagement. Young adult literature addresses issues specifically resulting from the changes experienced by adolescents as they grow socially, emotionally, physically, and experience other developmental changes, therefore rendering the texts more relevant to high school students. In contrast to canonical texts, the unique relevance of young adult texts counteracts alienation from reading as a result of exclusively encountering adult perspectives in classic literature (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). Consequently, increased relevance for adolescent students helps promote engagement, motivation, and connection with the text (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012 ; Glaus, 2014). Moreover, because young adult texts are more familiar to adolescents, students are more capable of creating knowledge independently, shifting instruction away from teacher centered-instruction (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 32). This heightened relevance reduces the need for scaffolding and allows students to analyze independently

some of the same ideas represented in canonical texts through the greater accessibility of young adult literature, while encouraging a positive attitude toward reading (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). As classroom instruction centers on more easily accessed texts, students become encouraged to gain confidence in their ability to understand complex literature, promoting further independent reading.

A second benefit of young adult literature lies in the promotion of social activism. Due to their contemporary nature, young adult novels also often address current political, environmental, and social issues uniquely relevant to today's interconnected global society (Glaus, 2014; Wolk, 2009). Thus, as young adult literature closely aligns with real world issues, students may be encouraged to transfer their problem-solving ability outside the classroom (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). For instance, dystopian young adult novels, although extreme, often illuminate key issues in society, and the adolescent characters depicted in these stories who attempt to overcome these problems serve as examples of social activism for adolescent readers (Wolk, 2009). Such issues range from sexual orientation and gender roles to terrorism and immigration, challenging students to confront real issues in their society (Soter & Connors, 2009). Dystopian young adult novels may help foster a critical perspective of society, and with the support of studying these novels within an educational environment, students become more likely to take action (Ames, 2013). Furthermore, young adult novels focused on ideals of freedom and democracy, such as in the context of war, defend these ideals by their analyses (Bean & Harper, 2006). In this manner, young adult literature may also nurture "critical literacy," which develops students' consciousness of messages implied by propaganda (Wolk, 2009, p. 668). Moreover, if students become aware of injustices, young adult literature,

through its development of empathy, may encourage students to take action, fostering a sense of civic responsibility (Wolk, 2009).

Additionally, young adult literature tackles themes of violence and schools and suicide to alleviate these problems and reach out to struggling students who may feel isolated or victimized in a school environment (Alsup, 2003). For example, Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak* details one girl's journey to speak out about being raped in order to encourage other students to do the same (Alsup, 2003). Discussing such issues in the context of a novel allows students critical distance for objective analysis and lessens the tension that may be felt by discussing the issue directly on a personal level (Alsup, 2003). Due to their contemporary nature, young adult novels similarly often address current issues uniquely relevant to today's interconnected global society (Glaus, 2014). In particular, the genre of "problem novels" in young adult literature has been praised as a means to expose students to good and bad aspects of society to prepare them to become effective citizens and achieve happiness (Stallworth, 2006, p. 59-60). Although it is recognized that no single novel will likely resolve these complex and multifaceted problems, they play a critical step in guiding students and helping to lessen the occurrence of these tragedies in the future (Alsup, 2003).

Fourth, young adult literature may be used to promote an inclusive classroom. Integrating young adult novels into the English curriculum enables teachers to incorporate multiple cultures beyond the predominately white, male, European viewpoint of many canonical works (Baer & Glasglow, 2010). In the article "Read This, Not That: Why and How I'll Use Young Adult Literature in My Classroom," Sarah Dyer proposes that, as many canonical texts were written during a time when only a small percentage of

the population—often white males—were literate, young adult novels today address a broader audience and are well suited for the diversity of contemporary society. Thus, Dyer asserts that young adult literature is more multicultural, helping broaden students' perspectives (2014). Such multicultural literature has been termed “counter-storytelling” by Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso, sharing the stories of minorities which are often ignored, despite the growing diversity within America, and challenges cultural myths (Hughes-Hassell, 2014, p. 214-15). Additionally, counter-storytelling offers a sense of affirmation to diverse individuals by offering experiences of solidarity with those from similar backgrounds and alleviating self-blame for marginalization (Hughes-Hassell, 2014). The vast diversity of American schools and society necessitates the inclusion of similarly diverse literature. Multicultural literature is beneficial for all racial groups, as it encourages critical analysis of existing social structures and a multiplicity of ideas among students. However, educators should use diverse literature to facilitate pluralism rather than the assimilation of foreign cultures. Reading literature from other cultures, according to the article, develops an understanding of one's personal identity, as well as empathy on a global scale and with other individuals. This aspect is particularly important because it helps students to develop into socially aware citizens capable of functioning in a democracy. Again, developing global empathy can empower students to become agents of social change through classroom activities such as writing to politicians, which teaches students how to apply literary knowledge and skills to impact real issues in their society. Similarly, just as multicultural literature benefits all types of people, so, too, can a multicultural approach be applied to analyzing all types of literature, even texts that are not inherently multicultural (Morrell & Morrell, 2016).

In addition to cultural diversity, young adult novels may incorporate characters from many different lifestyles or perspectives. For example, several young adult novels feature LGBTQ characters, promoting acceptance and expression for such students who are often negatively represented or ignored in society and in literature (Hazlett, Sweeney & Reins, 2011; Wickens, 2011). This helps creates a positive and safe school environment for LGBTQ students. Likewise, young adult literature may also develop an understanding of other perspectives through the use of features present in modern texts, such as multiple narrators, which may not be found in canonical texts (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Although teachers may use other methods to promote an inclusive classroom, the deep engagement fostered by relevant texts may promote an authentic change in students' perspectives or behaviors as they develop the faculty of imagination through reading (Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Furthermore, young adult literature may be used to enhance study of canonical literature as young adult literature may be paired with works from the literary canon to enable more thorough analysis and comprehension. According to "Connecting the Canon to Current Young Adult Literature," young adult novels should be paired with canonical works which share a "common theme, plot, character, setting, or other similar element" to render literary texts more accessible (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 34). Under this method of "pairing" literature instruction, the more familiar, young adult novel should be read first, and then applied while reading a canonical work to deepen understanding through the use of ideas already developed upon reading the young adult novel. The works may then be compared and contrasted during discussion in combination with such teaching practices as KWL charts, which prompt students to reflect on what they know,

what they want to know, and what they learned after a unit or lesson (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016). To reduce demands on class time, young adult novels may be read in small student groups as supplemental texts to canonical novels read in class (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016).

A final benefit of young adult literature is its alignment with many of the requirements for standardized testing. For instance, the article “Young Adult Literature and the Common Core: A Surprisingly Good Fit” proposes the argument that “the Common Core supports the increased use of young adult titles in the ELA classroom” (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012, p. 5). According to the article, young adult literature fulfills the three components for the selection of a text under the Common Core, which mandates that a text should demonstrate complexity in “qualitative dimensions, quantitative dimensions, and reader and tasks considerations” (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012, p. 6). These aspects are demonstrated by the high lexile score of many young adult novels, therefore fulfilling the quantitative requirement, and the complexity of language, structure, and content addressed by young adult literature fulfills the second requirement for qualitative dimensions (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). Although tailored for adolescents, young adult literature utilizes many of the same literary elements found in the classics and therefore addresses many of the same subjects as a traditional study of classic texts (Santoli & Wagner, 2004). Additionally, students may complete complex tasks due to the accessibility of young adult novels that often do not require extensive background knowledge beyond their own experiences as adolescents (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012).

However, like all approaches, young adult literature is not without its weaknesses. Before adopting young adult literature into the curriculum, educators must be aware that the practice may be initially met with resistance from school officials and parents, requiring teachers to write defenses or rationales for their use of young adult novels. Even so, the inclusion of young adult literature may often be defended by describing awards accumulated by the author, the merit of ideas addressed by the text, and the humanistic reasons for including young adult literature within the curriculum, such as increasing motivation (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016). Even if the defense of a young adult novel proves unsuccessful, it may be made available for independent reading (Alsup, 2003). For a list of recommended young adult novels, see Table 1.

Table 1

Recommended Young Adult Novels

Problem Novels

- *Speak*, Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
- *The Battle of Jericho*, Sharon M. Draper (2003)

Dystopian Novels

- *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins (2008)
- *Matched*, Allie Condie (2010)
- *Feed*, Matthew Anderson (2002)
- *Unwind*, Neil Shusterman (2007)

Inclusive Novels (LGBTQ and Disabilities)

- *The Realm of Possibility*, David Levithan (2004)
- *Pretty Things*, Sarra Manning (2005)
- *David Inside Out*, Lee Bantle (2017)
- *Shooting Monarchs*, John Halliday (2007)
- *A Small White Scar*, K. A. Nuzum (2008)

Multicultural Novels

- *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros (1991)
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie (2009)
- *Buried Onions*, Gary Soto (2006)
- *American Born Chinese*, Gene Luen Yang (2008)

In summary, while American society has changed, the need for literature in the high school English curriculum has not. Literature remains critical for the development of characteristics necessary for effective democratic citizenship, primarily imagination, empathy, critical thinking, and civic engagement. Moreover, as diversity and globalization increase, so, too, must literature change to educate students capable of participating in this increasingly diverse society, suggesting the need for the expansion, rather than reduction, of literature studied. Alternative sources of literature, particularly young adult literature, may also be used to support the shifting needs of contemporary society, bringing new relevance to the English curriculum while supporting the many benefits of studying literature. Despite external pressures such as the practice of teaching to the test encouraged by standardized testing, English teachers must continue to recognize the importance of reading and continue to preserve a place for literature in the classroom, no matter its form.

CHAPTER FOUR

Embedded Test Preparation through Literature

Finally, by placing Chapter Two and Chapter Three in conversation, the relationship between preparation for standardized assessments and literature becomes clearer. Implementing a literature-based curriculum not only benefits students but also constitutes a viable alternative to teaching to the test. While teachers may hesitate not to practice teaching to the test because of pressure from administrators, adopting a literature-based curriculum indeed provides a conscientious alternative for educators. In the current political climate, teachers cannot afford to ignore the importance of standardized assessments, which may determine school closures, teacher employment, or student graduation. However, teaching to the test must not be the only way to improve test scores. Rather, embedded test preparation via literature study teaches tested skills indirectly through authentic instruction, offering a better way for students to succeed on standardized examinations. Thus, embedded test preparation through the adoption of a literature-based curriculum promotes skills necessary to perform well on mandated assessments without teaching test-taking skills in isolation.

Above all, standardized examinations for English courses are designed to assess reading comprehension. Consequently, as students improve reading comprehension by analyzing challenging texts, students score higher on standardized assessments. Although the practice of teaching to the test emphasizes teaching reading skills in isolation, standardized assessments do not evaluate mastery of individual skills but rather the

ability to apply these skills in combination through what is generally known as reading comprehension. This is demonstrated by a study conducted in 2006 by the ACT, a nonprofit organization responsible for conducting independent research as well as producing the well-known college entrance exam. The study discovered a negative correlation of text complexity with test scores, regardless of question difficulty, while no pattern could be identified in correct answers and types of questions (Shanahan, 2014). According to Timothy Shanahan in the article “How and How Not to Prepare Students for the New Tests,” findings of the ACT indicate that “reading comprehension tests measure how well students read texts, not how well they execute particular reading skills” (Shanahan, 2014, p. 185). Therefore, a curriculum focused on developing students’ abilities to understand complex texts should produce similar improvement in testing performance, while developing tested skills in isolation adversely affects students’ reading comprehension.

In contrast to teaching to the test, effective embedded test preparation should develop student capacity to comprehend complex tests and may be accomplished in a number of ways, many of which may already be familiar to experienced teachers but may have declined in response to the recent popularity of teaching to the test. In response to the findings of the ACT, Shanahan offers suggestions for teachers seeking to improve their students’ reading comprehension. One such method proposes to increase the amount of required reading within the curriculum, including longer periods of sustained silent reading and analysis of student understanding after reading a test. While guided practice proves both useful and necessary in a classroom setting, it is also important for students to have the opportunity to read texts independently. Rather than matching texts to

students' reading levels, teachers should select challenging, higher level texts and then provide scaffolding such as vocabulary or fluency instruction to help students develop the necessary reading comprehension to access more difficult texts (Shanahan, 2014).

Teachers may also choose to include reading and writing workshops as a means of practicing embedded test preparation. These workshops offer an alternative to the product-oriented practice of teaching to the test, instead promoting process-oriented instruction that allows students to develop reading and writing skills, which may be applied to a variety of contexts, including standardized examinations (Miller & Higgins, 2008). Moreover, in contrast to the one-size-fits-all approach of teaching to the test, these workshops follow a flexible design and may be modified considerably to best meet the unique needs of students.

At its foundation, a reading workshop constitutes an instructional approach intended to help students learn how to read effectively. Melinda Miller and Betty Higgins describe the reading workshop as a practice that may be modified in terms of type of instruction, such as independent work, small groups, or full class, and often uses a combination of the three. Furthermore, teachers may choose from a variety of activities, including literature circles, journals of reading responses, read-alouds, guided reading, and mini lessons. Reading workshops differ from teaching to the test in that, instead of teaching reading skills assessed by standardized examinations in isolation, this instruction teaches students to integrate reading skills through a unified study of literature. Similarly, writing workshops may be conducted with students as young as in elementary grades but at the secondary level often consist of guiding students through the process of writing, editing, and revising. Activities may include write-alouds, mini-lessons, teacher modeling

at each step of the writing process, learning effective brainstorming techniques, and group sharing of student work (Miller & Higgins, 2008).

Reading and writing workshops also function as embedded test preparation by encouraging students to use evidence from works of literature to support written arguments. Forming arguments challenges students to apply their comprehension of literary texts at a rigorous level and may actually improve students' reading comprehension overall (Shanahan, 2014). Integrating reading and writing in this manner moves beyond the drill-based teaching to the test and emphasizes critical thinking. Rather than simply identifying rudimentary literary elements such as plot and characters, crafting an effective argument from a literary source demands a thorough mastery of content and intense interaction with the text as students practice multiple skills at once. Furthermore, students are required to combine reading and writing skills to demonstrate authentic understanding of both.

Multiple studies have demonstrated the benefits of reading and writing workshops for better student testing performance. For example, a study in 2004 found that daily silent reading during reading workshops provided many benefits, including enabling "students to gain information about the world, acquire more vocabulary, and become familiar with sentence structure, thereby enabling them to build the comprehension that is necessary to deal effectively with standardized reading tests" (Gillet, Temple, & Crawford; Miller & Higgins, 2008, p. 125). Additionally, a study of sixth grade students conducted by Kathleen Swift found that reading workshops improved student testing performance on the Gates-MacGintie Reading Test (GMRT) while also promoting student enjoyment of reading, critical for the continuation of independent reading after

graduation (1993). While the need for further research remains, these studies demonstrate the potential of reading and writing workshops to improve performance on standardized assessments and encourage the use of this instructional practice as an alternative to traditional test preparation.

Furthermore, teachers may use embedded test preparation to promote reading comprehension by using higher order critical thinking questions when discussing literature. Although many definitions of higher order questions exist, they may be broadly defined as questions requiring reasoning skills and new, productive behavior, such as those questions classified at the higher levels of Bloom's well known taxonomy of reasoning or Gallagher and Ashner's 1963 four levels of questioning: cognitive-memory, convergence, divergence, and evaluative. These questions require that students engage in problem solving, evaluation, judgment, or a combination of the three. Surpassing mere recall-based learning associated with direct test preparation, higher order thinking questions require students to access information and then apply it, either in a new format or in relationship to other knowledge, developing critical thinking skills (Smith & Syzmanski, 2013). While much of the rote learning associated with teaching to the test encourages teachers to rely on low-level questions, a study conducted by Levine in 1994 as well as a study by Uretsi, Goetz, and Bernal in 2002 reveal a strong, positive correlation between higher order thinking skills and performance on standardized assessments, demonstrating the importance of literature based preparation. Thus, asking higher order questions while studying literature allows teachers to challenge students to develop critical thinking skills, aiding students' understanding regardless of whether they are analyzing a text in class or reading a passage on a standardized exam.

Additionally, embedded test preparation through literature offers an appealing alternative to teaching to the test, granting teachers more freedom needed to increase the number of engaging and varied activities in their lessons, thereby promoting engagement and combatting the boredom. Such activities are often discontinued when teachers teach to the test and devote more instructional time to test preparation. However, including these “fun” activities is not simply a luxury in which teachers may occasionally indulge at the expense of test preparation. Rather, without such engaging activities, teaching to the test promotes the perception of school as dull or irrelevant. This perception increases boredom as well as encouraging cutting classes, dropping out of school, and disruptive behavior during the class period to the detriment of other students’ learning. Furthermore, a negative association of school with boredom fosters a similarly negative perception of college and decreases student desire to continue their schooling through higher education (Mora, 2011).

By contrast, in opposition to the drill-based practice of teaching to the test, a literature-based curriculum can take many forms. For instance, inquiry-based learning, although primarily associated with the sciences, can also be incorporated into a study of literature. Founded on the constructivist view of learning, inquiry-based instruction often requires students to conduct research independently as well as work collaboratively to solve problems and produce new knowledge, often in the form of projects. This type of instruction centers around students, where students are free to pursue their own interests within the limits of an assigned subject (Johnson & Cuevas, 2016). A study of middle school students at a public school in Georgia found that using inquiry circles to study a class novel in which students were divided by interests in common topics or questions

demonstrated an increased perception of the importance of reading after engaging in inquiry based instruction. Literature-focused inquiry learning may also involve developing creative writing responses after reading a literary text (Van Oostrum, Steadman-Jones, & Carson, 2007).

Additionally, by studying literature as embedded test preparation, teachers may continue to place learning as the ultimate end of instruction. Under teaching to the test, teachers lose this focus on student learning as they are encouraged to adopt a standards-based curriculum, which molds instruction with the singular purpose of meeting mandated standards. However, literature-based instruction enables teachers to develop a standards-embedded curriculum, which incorporates standards with the primary purpose of promoting authentic learning. While typically advocated for use with gifted learners, a standards-embedded curriculum may reasonably be used with a variety of students (Rakow, 2008). Based on the practice of “backwards design” (Graff, 2001, p. 155), when constructing a standards-embedded curriculum, teachers begin by choosing broad, subject-specific or interdisciplinary questions or topics for investigation. Teachers then assemble content that students may use to create meaning and identify relevant standards before organizing questions, content, and standards, into a cohesive unit. Lastly, teachers plan specific instruction aligned to the unique characteristics of their students. This process, which places actual learning rather than testing as the first goal of constructing a curriculum, nevertheless takes into account the knowledge and skills tested by standardized assessments in order to meet standards while also creating authentic knowledge (Rakow, 2008).

As mentioned in Chapter Two, a notable criticism of teaching to the test is that it limits instruction to only what is strictly expressed by state and national standards. Consequently, it becomes very important for teachers who choose to employ a curriculum founded on literary study that they align but do not limit the curriculum to tested standards. One opponent of teaching to the test, Louis Volante, makes a claim which lies at the heart of the argument for embedded test instruction: “Test preparation time should never come at the expense of non-tested subject matter” (2006, p. 132). Although standards provide expectations for what should be included in the curriculum, they do not encompass everything that can be taught nor regulate how educators should teach (Peery, 2013). Learning must be recognized as intrinsically valuable, not simply a means to raise scores on tests, otherwise education loses all meaning. Additionally, going beyond what is strictly required by a standards-based curriculum may foster deeper comprehension and engage students (Turner, 2009). Teachers may also mindfully combine standards to facilitate deeper learning, such as choosing passages from a newspaper or articles providing historical background related to issues within a literary work studied by the class when fulfilling standards requiring students to read informational texts. In this manner, the informational texts chosen gain significance and encourage student interest by developing ideas students encounter during their reading of the literary work (Peery, 2013).

Moreover, unlike the standards-based curriculum employed by teaching to the test, which contorts instruction to meet mandated requirements, studying literature for literature’s sake naturally aligns with many state and national standards. Evidence of this alignment can be seen in a study conducted by Van Horn in 2002 of her own classroom.

At the beginning of the year, Van Horn initially analyzed her students' test scores but then diverged from typical standards-based instruction by forming units "comprised of authentic, context-based literacy experiences in which objectives and standards will be naturally embedded or woven" (Van Horn, 2002, p. 12). During one unit, Van Horn's students chose from a list of books and participated in literature circles, maintaining response journals as they read. At the end of the unit, students demonstrated their knowledge, not through more testing, but through creative presentations. One group shared dramatic radio plays of their own creation, while other students shared a group timeline created in response to their reading of *The Devil's Arithmetic* accompanied by pictures, research, and summaries. All activities were aligned to standards and areas where students' scores revealed a need for improvement (Van Horn, 2002). As Van Horn's experience shows, "data-driven instruction" does not have to result in teaching to the test.

In addition to the specific benefits described previously, when creating a literature-centered curriculum, several practices for improving testing performance while maintaining quality of instruction may be adopted. One practice to improve test performance without teaching to the test lies in differentiation. Differentiation may be broadly defined as the adaptation of the curriculum to individual student needs, enabling students to achieve a common task in a variety of ways, and often incorporates student input when shaping instruction (Castleberry, 2007). Although most teachers recognize the importance of differentiation, the uniform instruction promoted by teaching to the test fails to meet the varied needs of students, who are becoming increasingly diverse. A literature-based curriculum allows instruction to be modified, as teachers may make

changes within a lesson based on student need, such as allowing students to read different books or demonstrate their knowledge in ways other than traditional assessments.

Nevertheless, teachers must be critical of whether the differentiation they adopt in their classrooms sets lower expectations for some students, possibly even harming performance. Expectations should be high for all students, even though these expectations may not all be the same (Ivey, 2000). Differentiation has also been shown to benefit testing performance, as one study of a middle school classroom in which curriculum was differentiated through such means as scaffolding or adjustment to individual students' learning styles experienced an increase in passing rate from 47% to 74% (Turner, 2009).

Finally, within the context of a literature-based curriculum, teachers may incorporate test preparation by using question formats found on standardized tests in addition to other forms of assessing knowledge, such as presentations, essays, or creative stories to provide students with different ways of demonstrating knowledge (Shanahan, 2014). Instructional units, including those studying a literary work, often conclude with a summative assessment. While teachers may choose to evaluate students using authentic assessment, such as a portfolio or other creative project, many teachers choose to assess students in the form of a written test. In this case, a teacher may align the format of test questions to that found on standardized assessments to familiarize students with the structure of such assessments while still assessing learning.

In light of the findings of this thesis, educators of all levels must take action to promote literature as an alternative method of test preparation. Ethical and effective, embedded test preparation through literature removes the need to practice teaching to the

test. Consequently, English teachers who are able to determine their own curriculum should increase their emphasis on literature instruction while reducing direct test preparation. Teachers who have less influence in shaping their curriculum should advocate a literature-based curriculum to instructional specialists and administrators, using the findings of this thesis to support their proposals. Similarly, administrators should encourage teachers to practice a literature-based curriculum and provide support as teachers transition away from teaching to the test while opposing scripted curricula, which compel teachers to practice teaching to the test and prevent differentiated instruction.

To conclude, test preparation does not necessitate teaching to the test. As evidenced at the beginning of this thesis, standardized assessments have become an unavoidable reality for many teachers as teaching evaluations and school performance ratings are increasingly tied to student performance on standardized assessments. Teachers may also feel obligated to engage in test preparation to assist their students pass standardized assessments required for progression to the next grade or even entry into higher education and accompanying employment opportunities, encouraging many educators to practice teaching to the test. However, the literature shows that teaching to the test seriously impairs student learning. Consequently, embedded test preparation through studying literature provides an attractive alternative for teachers seeking to help students perform well on standardized assessments as well as gain meaningful knowledge and skills that will stay with them throughout their lives.

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