# Teaching to the Test and Beyond: 

# Finding Academic Value in a Test Prep Curriculum 

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Teaching to the test is a frequently heard term among educators in the current test-driven culture. Standardized tests have become a driving force behind what and how teachers teach. What if teaching to the test did not mean teaching to simply raise scores but teaching the knowledge and skills that the test sought to measure? What if students could apply this learning after the test was over? In my classroom I researched whether a test prep curriculum could have value for my students beyond taking the test.

## Background and Questions

I teach in an urban elementary school which has historically done well in standardized tests but had seen a drop of about ! $0 \%$ in last year's scores. Of particular concern was the fourth grade English Language Arts test, a three day examination which consists of multiple choice questions, written short answers, and essays. There was considerable pressure on both the administration and teaching staff to do everything in their power to raise these scores. Therefore, last June my principal asked the upper grade reading teacher to design a test preparation curriculum for each grade level from three through six that focused on twelve comprehension strategies. The fourth grade curriculum would be taught by two to three teachers in each classroom for one hour daily from September to January (the month in which the test was administered). This curriculum required an investment of $25 \%$ of the classroom instructional time. I would be part of the teaching team in one of the fourth grade classrooms, but I would not teach students I normally work with..

I am a teacher of Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS), formerly known as a resource room teacher. As part of my assignment, I teach a group of four fourth graders and one third grader for 45 minutes a day in my own classroom. My students have been diagnosed as learning disabled and have all repeated one grade. I have worked with these students for two
to three years previously which has given me the opportunity to understand the way they learn. I have always been given the freedom to design my instruction to meet their needs and interests.

When I met with my students in September, I quickly became aware of the tremendous overt pressure that was being placed on them both in school and at home to succeed on their standardized tests. My fourth graders knew that this year's test was longer, harder, and involved a great deal of writing,- an area of insecurity for all of them. My third grader was repeating her current grade and had scored a level one (on a scoring rubric of one to four) on both of last year's tests. She was extremely nervous about the possibility of failing again. I was concerned about how all of my students would respond to this new curriculum. I would not be in any of their classrooms while it was being taught so the only time I could help them was during our 45 minute periods.

When I took a copy of the curriculum home, I studied it, thought about the tone and focus of our school for the coming year and developed two questions. My first was: How could I give my students the extra support they needed to succeed on the test? I have always told my students (and their parents) that any test was a small sample of behavior regarding a certain subject or skill. It was important to study and do their best, but whatever the score was, it was not a final judgment of their knowledge or abilities. The most important factors in their academic success were the effort and progress they demonstrated daily in their class work and homework from September to June.

Moreover, part of each of my student's Individual Educational Plan (IEP) contained modified promotional criteria. This provided a means for promoting a student who has failed a standardized test by proving that he has mastered a certain percentage of the subject's standards. In other words, none of my students would be held back another year simply for failing the test.

However, my students desperately wanted not only to pass (scoring a level two) but do well on their upcoming tests (scoring levels three or four). The students' scores on practice tests (which were given weekly) were posted on the classroom wall and teachers and administrators were doing everything in their power to encourage them to succeed. If I could adapt or review this curriculum in order to help them raise their scores, this would give them the confidence they needed to face the challenges of the next grade.

My second question which became the primary question of my action research was: What aspects of this test prep curriculum could support my students in becoming better readers and writers? If a large amount of instructional time and teaching was going to be invested in this curriculum, it should have value in addition to teaching the students how to succeed on a particular test. Since this curriculum was focused on specific comprehension skills, the students should be able to apply these skills in their daily reading and writing.

## Research and Rationale for Study

Test preparation has steadily taken over a larger portion of instructional time in most New York City public schools. In a January 2005 survey of 3,000 elementary school teachers conducted by the United Federation of Teachers, $51 \%$ reported that five hours or more of instructional time was devoted to test preparation on a weekly basis. In addition, there are afterschool and Saturday test preparation programs targeted for specific grades. Summer school which used to consist of enrichment programs in the early ' 90 s is now only available to students whose promotion is in doubt due to their standardized test scores. They are given five weeks of intensive small group instruction in order to take another test.

In Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do
To Change It, journalist Peter Sachs critically examines our country's obsession with
standardized testing. In case studies he shows how intelligence tests and achievement tests can predetermine a person's career choice and lifestyle from the day he enters kindergarten. In response to the intense pressure to raise scores, "Schools and teachers have discovered the dubious practice of teaching to the tests...This has had a dumbing effect on teaching and learning, as worksheets, drills, practice tests, and similar rote practices consume greater amounts of teaching time.

In researching standardized testing, I wondered: What is the objective of standardized testing? In his book, Testing! Testing! What Every Parent Should Know About School Tests, Dr W. James Popham discusses the pressure to improve test scores and presents Education Defensibility Guidelines. He states that "an educational test represents a body of knowledge and/or skills that we'd like students to possess... No test-preparation practice should increase student's test scores without simultaneously increasing students' mastery of the content represented by the test." If scores are artificially increased by test preparation practices, the students who have not actually mastered the content will not receive the long-term help they need. Use of materials which mirror the actual tests "may run afoul of the Education Defensibility Guidelines." Thus educators and parents must decide if increasing test scores by any legal means necessary is truly in the best interests of their children.

In my situation I wanted to transfer the skills taught from context of the test and put them into the daily tasks of reading and writing. By sampling the students' class work during and after the test, I would be able to determine if their mastery of content increased at a proportionate amount to that of their test scores.

## Data and Data Analysis

My first tool was the school's test preparation curriculum. The curriculum was divided into
twelve sections each based on a different skill:

| 1. Finding the Main Idea | 7. Finding Word Meaning in Context |
| :--- | :--- |
| 2. Recalling Facts and Details | 8. Drawing Conclusions and <br> Making Inferences |
| 3. Understanding Sequence | 9. Distinguishing Between Fact <br> And Opinion |
| 4. Recognizing Cause and Effect | 10. Identifying Author's Purpose |
| 5. Comparing and Contrasting | 11. Interpreting Figurative Language <br> Make-Believe |
| 6. Making Predictions |  |
|  |  |

Each skill would be taught for one week following this schedule:
Day One: Direct Instruction: Student practices the skill with the teacher.
Day Two: Application of the Skill: Students practice independently using short passages.
Day Three: Teachers complete a writing task with the students based on the test. Students begin independent writing.
begin independent writing.
Day Four: Students complete and revise their writing and share their results. The skill is highlighted in their work.

Day Five: Students take multiple choice tests on the strategy which are scored on a four point rubric.

Since two to three teachers would be in the rooms with classes of 25 to 29 students, a increased amount of individual attention could be given.

In terms of my students' mastery, the initial problem I noted was that each skill was taught in an isolated form using charts that highlighted key words and or strategies for answering the questions. For example in the third week students are given types and examples of key words that signal sequence:

Time Order: first, third, before, after, then, next, last, finally
Dates: Saturday, 1939,October, April 1, 2000,
Time of Day: morning, afternoon, evening, dawn, sunset, 12:32 A.M.

After several skills had been taught my students could easily forget these types of words or mix them up with key works from a different skill. They might also become too dependent on these words and would panic if sequence was shown using different language. When learning key
words that signal certain operations in math problems, they had had similar difficulties.
The second problem was that the comprehension passages used for practice were a series of unrelated fiction and non-fiction texts of a variety of lengths. The teachers did not elicit prior knowledge or build interest in reading the passages, since they would not be able to do so during the actual test. The students were trained to do the following steps in exact order for each passage: read the directions, look at the illustration, scan the questions and underline key words, read the passage, answer the questions, and prove the answers by finding evidence in the text. This method would help my students raise their test scores but it would not make them better readers, since their only purpose in reading was to find the answers.

I thought about what a good reader does. When I read a book for pleasure or information, I do not continually stop and ask myself: What is the main idea? How would I sequence the events? What cause and effect relationships do I notice? Yet when I examine my response, I can find many of these strategies seamlessly interwoven into my thoughts. If my students could learn to do this, they would have mastered the content of this curriculum.

In order for my students’ mastery of the skills to increase along with their test scores, I needed to contextualize these strategies in reading and writing that was meaningful to them. I developed my lessons using these guidelines:
A. Students would explicitly and repeatedly use the strategies without an emphasis on key words and rules.
B. These strategies would be spiraled and contextualized in the extended use of selected texts.
C. Mostly non-fiction texts would be used in order to connect learning to studies from previous years and to broaden the students’ knowledge of social studies and science.
D. Students would have frequent practice in note-taking with the use of graphic organizers when listening to presentations from each other and me.

My second tool was a chart I developed showing the scope and sequence of my lessons over the four months:
\(\left.$$
\begin{array}{|l|l|l|l|l|l|}\hline \text { Strategy } & \begin{array}{l}\text { Dates } \\
\text { Taught in } \\
\text { Class }\end{array} & \begin{array}{l}\text { Date } \\
\text { Introduced } \\
\text { In My } \\
\text { Lessons }\end{array} & \text { Texts Used } & \begin{array}{l}\text { Reading and } \\
\text { Listening } \\
\text { Activities }\end{array} & \begin{array}{l}\text { Writing and } \\
\text { Speaking } \\
\text { Activities }\end{array} \\
\hline \begin{array}{l}\text { Finding the } \\
\text { Main Idea* }\end{array} & 9 / 19-9 / 24 & 9 / 21 & \begin{array}{l}\text { Arf! Beg! } \\
\text { Catch! A Book } \\
\text { on Dogs }\end{array} & \begin{array}{l}\text {-Read Aloud } \\
\text {-Practicing } \\
\text { Listening } \\
\text { Strategies }\end{array} & \begin{array}{l}\text {-Note-Taking } \\
\text {-Writing and } \\
\text { Illustrating a } \\
\text { Response: Dogs } \\
\text { are Fun } \\
\text { Because... }\end{array} \\
\hline \begin{array}{l}\text { Recalling } \\
\text { Facts and } \\
\text { Details* }\end{array} & 9 / 26-10 / 1 & 9 / 22 & \begin{array}{l}\text { Newspaper } \\
\text { Articles on the } \\
\text { Presidential } \\
\text { Debate }\end{array} & \begin{array}{l}\text {-Shared } \\
\text { Reading } \\
\text {-Highlighting } \\
\text { Facts and Details } \\
\text { in the text }\end{array} & \begin{array}{l}\text {-Note-Taking } \\
\text { - Group } \\
\text { Discussion } \\
\text { Using Notes to } \\
\text { Support } \\
\text { Opinions }\end{array} \\
\hline \begin{array}{l}\text { Understanding } \\
\text { Sequence* }\end{array} & 10 / 3-10 / 8 & 10 / 4 & \begin{array}{l}\text { Biography: The } \\
\text { Life of Martin } \\
\text { Luther King Jr. }\end{array} & \begin{array}{l}\text {-Shared Reading } \\
\text {-Identifying } \\
\text { Important } \\
\text { Events }\end{array} & \begin{array}{l}\text {-Personal } \\
\text { timelines } \\
\text {-Note-taking }\end{array}
$$ <br>

-Timelines on\end{array}\right]\)| Dr. King |
| :--- |


| Making Predictions | 10/26-11/1 | Not introduced | Same Texts | -Rereading of materials with a specific focus -Read-aloud of primary source materials | -Note-taking to prepare oral presentations -Rehearsal with a partner |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Strategy | Dates <br> Taught in Class | Date <br> Introduced <br> in my <br> Lesson | Texts Used | Reading and Listening Activities | Writing and Speaking Activities |
| Finding Word Meaning in Context | 11/3-11/9 | Not formally introduced but practiced in reading | Same texts | -Independent Reading -Listening to presentations | -Summarizing the text <br> -Oral <br> Presentation by each student -Note-taking on each other's presentations |
| Drawing Conclusions* | $\begin{aligned} & \hline 11 / 10- \\ & 11 / 17 \end{aligned}$ | 11/22 | Same Texts | Review of text in order to respond to questions | Response to evaluative questions on person studied |
| Distinguishing between Fact and Opinion | $\begin{aligned} & 11 / 18- \\ & 11 / 24 \end{aligned}$ | 11/23 | Frederick <br> Douglass: A <br> Biography; <br> Related texts <br> and articles | Guided Reading; Independent Rereading with focus on identifying the importance of primary sources. | -Note-taking <br> -Timelines <br> -Cause and effect <br> Comparison of primary to secondary sources in order to identify facts and opinions |
| Identifying the Author’s Purpose | 11/29-12/3 | 12/9 | The Story of Hanukkah; Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins | Read aloud; Shared Reading | -Recall prior knowledge <br> -Note-taking <br> -Compare and Contrast texts |
| Interpreting Figurative Language | 12/5-12/10 | 12/10 | Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins | Read aloud | -Illustrations of Figurative Language examples |


| Distinguishing <br> Between Real <br> and Make <br> Believe | $12 / 10-$ | $12 / 9$ | Both Hanukkah <br> texts | Independent <br> and/or Partner <br> Reading | -Compare and <br> Contrast Texts <br> for Real and <br> Make Believe <br> Elements |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |

*practiced repeatedly in small group and individual instruction
I often introduced the strategy nine to ten days after it was taught in class. This was not planned intentionally, but was unavoidable because of the significant disruption of instruction due to schedule changes, interim and practice assessments, and absenteeism. However, the interval between classroom instruction and my group instruction gave time for the students to process each strategy, and they were immediately familiar with it when I introduced it.

As the chart indicates, I did not use every strategy and I gave heavy emphasis to the ones I starred. I felt these strategies were the most crucial in helping the students make sense of the text. It was better to give extended practice with selected strategies than to cover them all on a superficial level.

As the lessons progressed, I was surprised at how easily one strategy flowed into the next.
In October, the students each selected a biography of a famous person. Two of them choose Helen Keller, two of them chose George Washington, and one chose Florence Nightingale. As each student read, he or she identified facts and details in order to write a series of sequenced events using a numbered chart. This was turned into an illustrated time line of the person's life. The students used the events charts to identify cause and effect relationships. For example: because Helen Keller was accepted at every university except Radcliffe, she became determined to go no other place except there. The class then created an expanded time line which contained the life spans of their biographical subjects, people we had studied in the past, as well as themselves. When student gave oral presentations on their subjects, the others took notes and
used them to compare and contrast the characters. They used triple Venn diagrams to do so and then wrote comparisons in essay form. As they explored other texts, they continued to use the same skills.

When I examined their notes from their regular classes, I saw evidence that the students were applying these strategies without prompting. The principal who observed the students both in my group and in their regular classes confirmed this. When I told my students to take notes on a read-aloud, they were able to do so independently using by creating their own organizers.

I was particularly concerned with two of the students who tended to remain quiet during group discussions and work at a much slower rate. Fortunately I was able to arrange a significant amount of individual instructional time with each of them. My third grader worked slowly, deliberately, but with a great deal of thought and effort. She needed to reread a passage several times and discuss with me before she was comfortable writing about it. But when she was ready, her writing flowed and she took great pride in her accomplishments. One of my fourth grade boys was a very reluctant learner and was easily upset if pressured. Yet he had always loved George Washington and his interest in him got him through tasks he would not have completed otherwise. When I gave a biography of Washington for a Christmas present, he was so excited I thought he had mistaken it for a video game.

In their classroom my students' weekly test scores were twos and threes with the exception of my Washington fan who was scoring ones. I took extra time to review the test with him individually, and particularly worked with him on the writing section of the simulated exams. What truly encouraged me was the enthusiasm everyone showed for our work. I never assigned homework, but two students went to the library to find further information on their historical
subjects. One even found out how to have a book sent to her from another library in the city.
The testing days finally came for fourth graders and it was a traumatic time for all of us. The students had additional time as indicated on their IEP's, and I made sure that they used it. Two students cried at the end of each day, and we were all relieved when it was over. Now it was time to prepare for the math test (which would take place for third grade in April and for fourth grade in May). I thought we would leave behind the twelve comprehension strategies but the students began to apply them as they tackled multi-step word problems. The graphic organizers were used to sort information, and the students sequenced their steps or looked for cause and effect relationships depending on the particular problem. In May we began work on magnetism and electricity and the students continued to apply selected strategies independently. They were able to take notes on each other's oral presentations using an organized format and recording key ideas. This was clear evidence that they had increased their mastery of strategies and were able to transfer their learning to other subject areas as needed.

The final data were the standardized English Language Arts test results. The following chart compares the ELA scores from 2004 to the scores from 2005. Even though the test was different, the scale score ranges for each level were within five points of being the same for each year. The scale score ranges for this year's third grade test were about 20 points lower than for the fourth grade test.

|  | '04 Scale <br> Score | '04 Level | '05 Scale <br> Score | '05 Level | Scale Score <br> Increase |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Increase |  |  |  |  |  |$|$|  |  |
| :--- | :--- |


| Student B | 608 | 2 | 641 | 2 | 33 points |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Student C | 591 | 2 | 638 | 2 | 47 points |
| Student D | 598 | 2 | 649 | 3 | 51 points |
| Student E* | 572 | 1 | 629 | 3 | 57 points |

*third grader
Even though two of the fourth graders scored at level two, they were within six points in their scale scores of scoring a level three. All students showed a significant gain in their scale scores. Moreover on the performance reports, three of the fourth graders received higher scores in the writing section, the area each of them considered the greatest challenge.

## Conclusions

The test prep curriculum taught by the teaching staff in the classroom combined with the activities done with me in the resource room definitely contributed to the success of the students on the standardized test. The students used the strategies taught in order to succeed. Although taking the test was a stressful experience, it ultimately gave them the satisfaction of accomplishing their goals. The students who scored at level two were somewhat disappointed, but when I showed them on bar graphs how much they had improved on last year's scale scores they were pleased. Most importantly everyone was being promoted to the next grade, since their math scores had improved too.

The evidence I saw in the students' class participation and written work proved that their mastery of the content had increased along with their scores. I was able to design adaptations to the curriculum that met the students' needs, because I had worked with them since they were in first or second grade. I knew how my students learned, and what their strengths and challenge areas were. The ability to pull them out in small groups or individually when necessary gave
them the opportunity to learn at their own pace in a quiet, private environment.
The comprehensions strategies that were the focus of the classroom curriculum were made accessible to my students by contextualizing them in material that was of interest to them. Although answering questions in short unrelated passages prepared them for the real test, this was not enough to make them better readers and writers. By giving them repeated practicing using these strategies in all four strands of the English Language Art curriculum (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), they were able to integrate some of them into their repertoire of learning skills.

## Policy Implications

As long the government continues to use standardized test scores as the primary criterion for assessing the effectiveness of schools, teaching to the test is going to take place in some way, shape, or form. However, test preparation can foster valuable learning if it focuses on the knowledge and skills assessed, rather than tricks and shortcuts to artificially raise scores. Test preparation curricula and materials should be evaluated according to the established guidelines of professional ethics and educational defensibility. Moreover, the curriculum should have skills and objectives that go beyond success on the test.

Students identified as having learning disabilities can succeed on standardized tests with the combination of quality classroom instruction, resource room services, and appropriate testing accommodations. The option to see students in a separate location and to service them over a number of grades is critical in the resource room teacher's ability to deliver instruction that meets individual needs.

