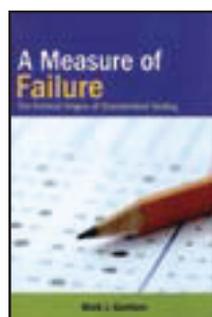




A Measure of Failure: The Political Origins of Standardized Testing

By Mark J. Garrison, 2009, State University of New York Press, 152 pages, \$60 (hardback), \$19.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4384-2777-5



True or false: Proponents of standardized testing are, unintentionally or otherwise, pushing an agenda that intrinsically advocates racism and socioeconomic oppression.

Intrigued? Then read on.

It really is an understatement to claim that standardized testing permeates every aspect of our culture. Testing is employed in a variety of settings and affects our lives in ways that most of us do not even realize. Nowhere, however, is its influence more evident than in our educational institutions. Testing has become the driving force behind current efforts to reform our public schools. Unfortunately, it has a sinister dimension that has been beyond the comprehension of most of the general public — until now.

In *A Measure of Failure: The Political Origins of Standardized Testing*, Mark J. Garrison explains, in language accessible to a broad spectrum of readers, what underlies our societal obsession with standardized testing. Garrison is associate professor and director of doctoral programs at D'Youville College. He received his doctorate in the sociology of education from the State University of New York at Buffalo. This book is based on research he conducted for his dissertation.

Standardized testing, according to Garrison, is not about “improving education,” as the mantra goes. Rather, at its core, it is about control, specifically, who gets to control our educational

systems and who gets to control our destiny. It is about who gets to dictate what knowledge and ideas our children are exposed to and who gets to provide them with that information.

Garrison argues persuasively that standardized tests are not the objective, empirical and untainted instruments that many of their supporters claim they are. In his view, standardized testing is a multibillion dollar industry that is less concerned with helping individuals and institutions make informed and conscientious decisions and more focused on helping a select few within our society perpetuate their particular ideological and economic belief system.

A Measure of Failure provides a good historical overview of the origins and evolution of U.S. educational concepts and applications, with an obvious orientation toward the political implications of intellectual measurement systems. “The original appeal of test data was that of its utility for public reasoning about school quality,” Garrison writes. “Now things have turned around: Test data mean what those in power say they mean; the merits of argument are to be determined by examining the social status of those making the argument.”

Garrison’s analysis and treatment of the problems that are in many ways indigenous to standardized testing are comprehensive and philosophical. Whereas many critics attempt to address the flaws of testing practices by focusing on questions of technique, methodology and statistical analysis, he approaches the issue from a much more fundamental perspective.

“While very important contributions to the analysis and critique of standardized testing exist,” Garrison asserts, “I think we need to move beyond what typically amounts to discrediting.” Indeed, the book is predicated on a larger framework that encompasses the political, social, cultural and economic scaffolding upon which our entire understanding of

measurement and assessment is deeply rooted.

Garrison sees exploitation of standardized tests as one of the principal injustices in the contemporary world. He describes how the tools have been deliberately developed, refined and administered as a means of social engineering. Furthermore, he demonstrates how tests such as the ACT, the SAT and the GRE increasingly are used to sort human beings according to criteria that have more to do with social desirability than with scholastic potential.

In essence, Garrison thinks standardized tests are often used to keep individuals from lower socioeconomic classes and certain racial/ethnic groups from securing positions of true influence and power in the political hierarchy. Far from leveling the playing field, tests can be (mis)used to sustain a social system that has been consciously orchestrated to favor individuals with particular backgrounds.

It is important to recognize that Garrison believes standardized testing has its place and can make a positive contribution to the collective dialogue if used in a more constructive manner by individuals whose motives are less suspect. Toward this end, he acknowledges, “(T)here is a need for assessment ... to establish a new starting point, one predicated on the equal worth, dignity and rights of human beings and human cultures.”

By most accounts, a majority of the current generation of administrators and legislators has unwittingly bought into the mythology of standardized testing. That’s why *A Measure of Failure* will be required reading in my graduate testing and assessment class next semester. Maybe, just maybe, we can prevent the next generation from succumbing to the same delusions.

As for the question posited at the

Continued on page 22

RESOURCE REVIEWS

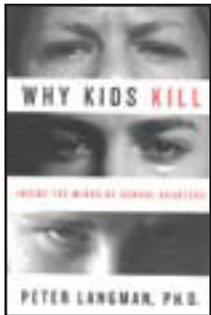
Continued from page 20

beginning of this review, take the time to read *A Measure of Failure*. Then you can determine the answer for yourself.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, professor of counseling and student affairs, Western Kentucky University. This review (adapted) originally appeared in the Bowling Green, Ky., Daily News.

Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters

By Peter Langman, 2009, Palgrave Macmillan, 256 pages, \$25, ISBN: 978-0-230-60802-3



The phrase *school shootings* became part of the cultural lexicon in the United States in the 1990s. Unforgettable, devastating acts of violence at Columbine

High School and Virginia Tech have proved to be as traumatizing as terrorist attacks. In the aftermath of these tragedies, and others like them, our society has sought to find meaning in the suffering and has searched for answers.

“The ghosts of Columbine continue to haunt the hallways of our schools,” writes Peter Langman in the preface to *Why Kids Kill*. As the director of KidsPeace, a nonprofit organization that helps adolescents in crisis, Langman has

more than 20 years’ experience working with at-risk youth. In short, he is well suited to grapple with one of society’s most perplexing mysteries — the reasons behind school massacres.

“Rampage attacks are too complex to be attributed to one cause,” Langman writes. Clearly, he feels an ethical obligation to probe for multiple answers and illuminate what he’s discovered. With clinical dexterity and precision, Langman delves into the psyches of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold of Columbine High School and Seung-Hui Cho of Virginia Tech. Overall, Langman profiles 10 school shooters who left behind incomprehensible carnage: a total of 74 deaths and 92 injuries.

The contents of this book dispel popular misconceptions about the causes of school shootings. For instance, the author challenges the notion that bullying instigates rampages or that antidepressant medications such as Prozac are the culprit. Instead, Langman develops an intricate typology of three types of school shooters: the psychopathic, the psychotic and the traumatized. Psychopathic students are narcissistic and sadistic; psychotic youths suffer from hallucinations and delusions; traumatized individuals have been abused and have experienced domestic violence.

Though these individuals do not constitute a homogeneous group, Langman has identified some commonalities among them: homicidal

rage, suicidal anguish, desire for fame, lack of empathy, envy of those with higher status, inadequate sense of identity that seeks to establish manliness through violence and fragile personalities that are highly reactive to everyday slights and frustrations.

Why Kids Kill should be required reading for school counselors and administrators. Chapter 8 (“What Can Be Done to Prevent School Shootings”) is filled with practical advice and guidance. The book no doubt will benefit parents, teachers and law enforcement workers as well. Members of the media would also be wise to read *Why Kids Kill* and consult with Langman. In sum, this work is a seminal contribution to child as well as adolescent psychology.

Reviewed by C. Brian Smith, a licensed professional counselor in Lake in the Hills, Ill. ♦

Ruth Harper is the column editor for Resource Reviews and a professor of counseling and human resource development at South Dakota State University. Contact her at Ruth.Harper@sdstate.edu.

Letters to the editor: ct@counseling.org

Show your pride in the profession.

ACA – Counselor Proud!

Your pin is available for order online in the bookstore section of ACA’s website (counseling.org) or call 800-422-2648 x222.

#80043 | \$5.00 | Shipping included

