

BALANCING THE SCALES: HOW CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY MITIGATES THE HARMFUL IMPACTS OF STANDARDIZED TESTING

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This literature review examined the detrimental effects of standardized testing on students from marginalized and culturally diverse backgrounds. While such assessments were initially designed to promote educational equity (Linn et al., 2002), they have instead exacerbated achievement gaps, narrowed curricular scope, and constrained teachers' ability to differentiate instruction. These consequences are particularly acute in underresourced schools where educators are pressured to "teach to the test." In contrast, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) presents a more responsive and effective educational framework. Drawing on case studies, this review demonstrates how CRP can enhance student engagement and academic performance even within high-stakes testing environments. Ultimately, the review argues that although systemic reform of assessment policies is necessary, the integration of CRP can help foster more equitable and culturally affirming learning experiences.

The growing tension between standardized testing and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) has become a defining issue in contemporary education, particularly in schools serving immigrant and culturally diverse students (Ataide-Pinheiro et al., 2025; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020). As educational policies continue to prioritize test scores as the primary measure of academic success and school accountability, they often overlook the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of the students they aim to support. This can generate a disconnection in education where the students who are already marginalized feel dislocated, underrepresented, and unsupported. Although the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002) aimed to ensure equitable education for all, it ironically left many behind. These tests became high stakes once consequences like teacher performance, student graduation, or promotion were attached to test results (Popham, 2001).

Standardized testing has shaped the educational landscape, but its impact is far from beneficial. Rather than improving schools, these tests have deepened segregation, widened disparities, and drained resources from already underfunded communities (Anyon, 1981; Green et al., 2024; Knoester & Au, 2017). What was intended as a tool for accountability has instead become a justification for budget cuts and a way to diminish the professionalization of educators. The current educational system's emphasis on regulated assessments has created an inequitable learning experience. While standardized tests create significant obstacles for students and teachers who are required to "teach to the test," CRP offers a powerful counterbalance (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Duncheon et al., 2023; Froese-Germain, 2011). This literature review will explore

the root issue of standardized testing and the potential that CRP offers to help mitigate its negative effects.

The Role of Policy in Standardized Testing

To understand how we arrived at this disconnect, it is necessary to examine the policies that embedded standardized testing so deeply into public education. The debate is not new; various perspectives have emerged regarding managing the pressures these assessments place on students and teachers. At the beginning of the last century, the two most important theorists in the history of American education Edward Thorndike and John Dewey formulated radically different visions of how the art of teaching could be transformed into a science (Tomlinson, 1997). More recent perspectives have emerged such as Phelps (2008) who advocated for standardized testing while Darling-Hammond (1995) was a prominent critic. The overemphasis on testing began to take shape with the passage of the NCLB Act (2002). While the NCLB Act was a well-meaning effort to make sure all students, not only those from privileged economic backgrounds, benefited from quality education, it provided a misguided framework where schools receive funding based on test performance.

These penalties included loss of Title I funding, replacement of school staff, and even school closures (Hayes, 2015). Additionally, if schools do not meet the required adequate yearly progress, parents have the option to transfer their children to a “better” performing school, known as a school voucher program (Green et al., 2024; Rowley & Wright, 2011). In effect, the voucher system reallocates public education funds to private institutions, undermining the financial foundation of traditional public schools (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2015; Garnett, 2021). Over time, this shift has weakened the financial stability of public education systems, particularly in low-income districts where school improvement is most needed.

Unintended Consequences of School Choice and Testing Labels

Despite the intentions behind the NCLB Act, the policy decisions rooted in standardized test performance have led to harmful and often unexpected outcomes. Evidence from the Louisiana scholarship program, a significant school choice initiative providing private school vouchers to poor students attending low-performing public schools, revealed troubling outcomes (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2015). Research showed that academic achievement dropped in the year following participation with test scores declining across subjects such as math and reading. The likelihood of failing these subjects increased by 24% to 50%, shifting the distribution of scores downward in all areas. Parallel to the issue, research by Bogin and Nguyen-Hoang (2014) showed that schools labeled as failing under the NCLB Act experienced significant drops in property values, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. House prices dropped by approximately 6% immediately after a school received this designation. The effect was magnified in the case of houses close to Title I schools or to several school zones where prices dropped by as much as 7.5%. In the longer run, the effect remains consistent with repeat-sales data indicating an even more striking 11% drop. These findings reveal a lasting stigma associated with low-performing schools that can depress property values and destabilize communities.

Notably, Title I schools must meet adequate yearly progress benchmarks for 2 consecutive years to remove the failing designation. Even if a school meets adequate yearly progress in the second year, it still retains the label under NCLB Act guidelines (Bogin & Nguyen-Hoang, 2014).

Prolonged exposure to the failing school label can destabilize communities, specifically since research by Figlio and Lucas (2004) showed that moving up a school grade increment can increase property values by roughly 10%. This is apparent in low-income, racially diverse communities where underresourced schools are labeled as underperforming due to poor test results (Knoester & Au, 2017). As these institutions face increasing penalties and cuts to funding, families with financial means often move their children to higher-performing schools, further isolating low-income students of color.

Beyond housing and funding effects, standardized testing has contributed to increasing educational segregation and widening opportunity gaps within the classroom itself. This is particularly visible in high-stakes testing environments where low-income students are disproportionately subjected to a test-driven curriculum. In contrast, students in predominantly White, affluent, high-performing schools often benefit from a broader, more enriched educational experience (Knoester & Au, 2017; McNeil, 2000). These patterns are seen in earlier findings by Anyon (1981) who observed that students in working-class schools were typically taught through mechanical, rule-based procedures while those in elite schools engaged in conceptual thinking and problem-solving. As Anyon explained, “by situating school knowledge in its particular social location, we can see how it may contribute to contradictory social processes of conservation and transformation” (p. 38). Such inequalities perpetuate a cycle of structural disadvantage wherein chronically underfunded schools are burdened by both limited resources and persistently low-test performance.

Current educational policies have further widened the divide by continuing to prioritize standardized testing as the primary measure of success. These policies result in an overemphasis on test performance rather than a more meaningful learning experience (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Franco et al., 2024; Knoester & Au, 2017). The obsessive focus on testing and proficiency growth is an outcome of a deliberate effort to initiate measurable standards of accountability and ensure that all students achieve at least the minimum level of schooling. The intent is to identify areas where schools or students are underperforming and allocate resources accordingly. Sadly, this method usually fails to achieve what it is supposed to because of the unrealistic expectations it creates (Froese-Germain, 2011). Such overemphasis on test outcomes provides little incentive for teachers and students to engage deeply with subjects in ways that foster critical thinking, communication, and creativity (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020; Turnipseed & Darling-Hammond, 2015).

In addition to these pedagogical consequences, the emphasis on measurable outcomes has also transformed the way schools are funded and evaluated. The shift to a business-incentive model now directly links test scores to financial support, fostering competition rather than collaboration (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2015; Epple & Figlio, 2004). This change benefited resource-rich schools, which can better support test preparation, while underfunded schools struggle to meet performance demands. As a result, performance metrics often take precedence over equitable resource distribution.

Corporate Interests and Unequal Accountability

Another critical outcome of test-based reform is the unequal accountability between schools and the financial gains of private interests. These inequities are not accidental; they are embedded in systemic structures that prioritize compliance and profitability over educational equity (Au, 2009; Lipman, 2004). Government officials use standardized testing to incentivize performance in

districts and consolidate control over schools. They force rigid testing benchmarks and a top-down governance structure, guiding how schools operate while simultaneously ignoring local input. This governance model was institutionalized through federal legislation—most notably the NCLB Act (2002) and continued under the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2025)—that required states to administer annual standardized tests in reading and math, tie school funding and accountability to adequate yearly progress, and impose sanctions on schools that failed to meet state-determined benchmarks (Mehta, 2013; Ravitch, 2010). These mandates centralized decision-making authority and pressured schools to align their instruction to testing outcomes.

By so doing, this allows the policymakers to take credit for educational reforms while shifting blame for systemic inequities onto schools and educators with private companies reaping financial rewards in the process (Au, 2009; Leistyna, 2007). According to AccountabilityWorks (2012), 45 states that adopted the common core state standards and joined one of two federally sponsored assessment consortia were projected to spend approximately \$1.24 billion on new testing costs over a 7-year period. This estimate was part of a larger \$15.8 billion national implementation cost, which also included \$5.26 billion for professional development, \$2.47 billion for textbooks and instructional materials, and \$6.87 billion for technology infrastructure and support. Test preparation companies generate significant revenue by selling materials and services; for example, “Educate Inc., owner of Sylvan Learning Centers, saw its revenues grow from \$180 million to \$250 million over three years, with profits increasing by 250% in just one year” (Clarke, 2004, p. 1). Harcourt Brace, a major player in the testing industry, saw a 30% sales increase in its educational division, contributing to over \$5 billion in annual revenue (Leistyna, 2007).

These trends reveal how standardized testing serves as a tool for policymakers to maintain control while private companies profit, often at the cost of meaningful educational reform. The effects trickle down to schools with higher socioeconomic status (SES), which have more resources to excel in standardized testing. These schools perform well, secure additional funding, and reinforce their advantages. In contrast, students in underserved communities are marginalized by the hyper-focus on test scores, further deepening educational inequities. These tests are not a genuine tool for accountability but instead a way to divert public funding away from schools that need it the most (Lam & Bordignon, 2001). While policymakers and corporations benefit from testing frameworks, educators and students face the consequences of immense pressure to meet unrealistic benchmarks.

The same cannot be said for private schools as they are exempt from the same level of accountability and testing (Garnett, 2021). Returning to the earlier discussion of voucher programs, states are providing financial aid to students attending low-performing schools only to send them to private institutions that are not held to the same accountability standards. As Garnett argued, the reliance on standardized tests to measure educational quality fails to capture many important aspects of school performance such as noncognitive skills. While public schools in underserved areas face intense scrutiny to improve test scores, private schools often operate with less oversight.

The resulting imbalance also narrows the curriculum in public schools where the focus on tested subjects like math and reading comes at the expense of a well-rounded education. Important areas that include the arts, social studies, and science are often sidelined in the race to boost standardized test performance (Knoester & Au, 2017; Ravitch, 2010). This narrow focus particularly disadvantages students who excel in nontested subjects or whose learning styles do not align with standardized formats. As Brady (2000) and Turnipseed and Darling-Hammond (2015) argued, relying heavily on test scores limits opportunities to build critical and creative thinking skills; they asserted that concentration on multiple-choice tests discourages problem-

solving and collaboration skills needed most in the workforce. A test-oriented system neglects the broader development of students as workers who need to be prepared to do jobs that require innovation and adaptability rather than finding the right answer on the test.

The Limits of Test-Based Accountability

While standardized testing is often used to evaluate student and teacher performance, it fails to account for key socioeconomic and systemic factors that shape learning outcomes. Magnuson and Duncan (2006) further proved that socioeconomic disparities significantly influence academic performance. Their research showed that Black children scored two-thirds of a standard deviation lower than White children on early math assessments, which is also parallel to the SES gap. Magnuson and Duncan linked factors such as parental education where they found that Black kindergarteners' parents, on average, have lower levels of educational attainment compared to White parents. Such disparities partially explain early academic achievement gaps. These findings reveal how standardized tests fail to account for broader socioeconomic contexts and instead offer an incomplete and often misleading picture of students' overall potential (Magnuson & Duncan, 2006).

Meanwhile, educators continue to be evaluated based on student growth in standardized testing, a practice introduced through policies like the NCLB Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act. Known as value-added measures, this approach aims to measure teacher effectiveness through test score gains. While well-intentioned—to ensure accountability and improve instruction—it has reshaped the teaching profession. Teachers are often given resources solely to help students meet specific academic benchmarks, which takes away from the joy of teaching and limits instructional flexibility. These pressures prevent educators from connecting with students or using culturally responsive methods. In such cases, both students and teachers are confined to a system driven by test performance rather than authentic growth and development (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Youn (2018) further highlighted these issues, showing that testing pressure significantly diminishes the power of teachers as professionals by reducing their control over curriculum content and pedagogy. Using a sample of 2,762 schools with approximately six teachers per school, Youn found that teachers' professional commitment and sense of community were negatively correlated with testing pressure. Specifically, in low-SES schools, testing pressure significantly lowered the sense of community (standardized coefficient = -0.34) while in mid-SES schools, it negatively impacted both empowerment (-0.30) and professional commitment (-0.29). In contrast, testing pressure had little effect in high-SES schools. This study emphasized that teachers in underresourced schools experience more stress and have fewer tools to buffer the negative impacts of standardized testing. Test-based evaluation has not only altered instructional priorities but also contributed to a loss of professional autonomy, particularly for those serving the most vulnerable student populations.

As noted earlier, standardized testing was introduced as a tool to inform instruction, but it has since evolved into a high-stakes accountability mechanism with far-reaching consequences. As test results became tied to funding, teacher evaluations, and student promotion, the pressure on educators intensified (Brady, 2008; Cimbricz, 2002). This shift has led to a loss of professional autonomy, constraining teachers' ability to address diverse student needs and diminishing their instructional confidence (Brady, 2008; Jeffrey & Woods, 1996). Despite over two decades of research documenting the harms of high-stakes testing, policymakers continue to support these frameworks, raising critical questions about whose interests such policies truly serve.

Reframing Accountability and Advancing Equity

While these challenges are documented, other researchers support the idea that standardized testing has a place in education. According to proponents, it is a necessary tool for guaranteeing accountability and offering a consistent measurement of student performance from school to school (Finn, 2022; Phelps, 2008). For instance, Linn et al. (2002) argued that standardized tests, part of the accountability systems, track student progress over time and offer signals that help in the identification of achievement gaps. These tests are supposed to present policymakers with objective information about where interventions may be necessary and about the ways to allocate resources effectively by making performance data more transparent. Schmoker (2000) further emphasized that these assessments focus instruction across classrooms and encourage the abandonment of ineffective practices that do not enhance student proficiency. By utilizing these data, schools can implement targeted interventions that improve both teaching quality and student outcomes, ensuring that instruction is aligned with measurable improvements in student learning.

An interesting perspective on the role of standardized tests in addressing racial disparities can be found in Jencks and Phillips (1998). They discussed how standardized tests have historically been used to expose the gaps in achievement between different racial groups within education and give useful data to help formulate policies that reduce achievement gaps. Jencks and Phillips argued that narrowing the test score gap is necessary and sufficient to reduce racial inequality in education. These assessments can point to systemic inequities that persistently affect disadvantaged groups.

However, while these arguments present standardized testing as a tool for accountability, it is important to recognize the limitations of using test scores as the primary measure of school effectiveness. This emphasis on accountability through standardized testing often does not account for various socioeconomic factors that have a significant bearing on student performance (Magnuson & Duncan, 2006). For example, schools in poorer areas usually face a shortage of resources, large class sizes, and teacher turnover. At times of such wide disparities, making them all equally accountable is an unfair load on educators working in these communities (Brady, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Youn, 2018). Moreover, research has shown that standardized testing can perpetuate systemic biases (Green & Griffore, 1980). Testing questions may inadvertently favor certain cultural or linguistic backgrounds of the student that will then yield biased results of what they were intended to measure: the student's academic performance. Rather than ensuring schools provide a fair education, these systems may reinforce existing inequalities, leaving the most vulnerable students disadvantaged (Knoester & Au, 2017).

Ladson-Billings (2006) extended this critique by challenging the focus on the achievement gap, arguing that the real issue is not simply disparities in test scores but the larger educational debt. Ladson-Billings argued that the achievement gap is a narrow, short-term focus that obscures the systemic issues that have long prevented communities of color from accessing equitable education. By addressing the educational debt, we confront the cumulative effects of decades, if not centuries, of underfunding, segregation, and discrimination that standardized tests alone cannot account for. Ladson-Billings declared that accurate equity cannot be achieved by measuring student performance through standardized tests without also addressing the societal structures that create and perpetuate inequality in the first place.

The current educational system's emphasis on standardized testing has, thus, perpetuated a narrow, inequitable learning experience. It limits both student engagement and teacher autonomy, disproportionately affecting schools and communities that are already disadvantaged.

It is necessary to acknowledge the importance of accountability measures, but one that fosters creativity, collaboration, and deeper learning could alleviate some of the challenges of standardized testing (Turnipseed & Darling-Hammond, 2015). That cannot happen while policies like the NCLB Act are in place. However, other strategies can serve as a short-term mitigation strategy to relieve the worst effects of standardized testing on diverse students. Schooling becomes more inclusive when CRP is included, focusing on the unique needs of students from all walks of life.

Bridging the Gap: Addressing Standardized Testing Through CRP

Ladson-Billings first coined the phrase *culturally relevant pedagogy* in 1994 by exploring how education could validate students' cultural backgrounds while helping them achieve academic goals and develop critical thinking skills. When applied to education, Ladson-Billings (1995) defined CRP through three central tenets: (a) academic success, (b) cultural competence, and (c) sociopolitical consciousness. The concept triggered extensive research and practice that focused on replacing deficit-based models with classrooms that both affirm culture and foster critical inquiry. Ladson-Billings marked a significant departure from traditional models that ignored or devalued students' cultural identities and insisted that educators should not view culture and academic success as separate but rather as deeply interconnected. As Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote, "culturally relevant teaching requires that students maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence" (p. 160). For Ladson-Billings, this meant designing curricula that respond to students' cultural experiences and also leverage those experiences as assets in the learning process.

Studies have emerged placing culture at the forefront of academic success across disciplines that include science, technology, engineering, and mathematics content areas (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Yu, 2018). Among these findings, CRP has been shown to increase test scores and literacy outcomes, highlighting a direct correlation between the integration of students' cultural identities and improved academic performance (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gutstein, 2003; Mustafaa, 2023). When students have a greater interest in cultural content, it increases their participation that then leads to higher performance outcomes (Long & Wilburn, 2025). Mustafaa's study found that applying culturally responsive teaching, especially when tied to a strong racial identity and commitment to cultural integrity, helps create more equitable outcomes for students from marginalized racial groups.

Such practices align with broader research emphasizing how CRP helps marginalized students engage more deeply with the curriculum and develop a critical consciousness, which is essential for personal growth (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and increasing academic achievement. By centering students' lived experiences, languages, and cultures, CRP creates an environment where students and teachers feel seen, valued, and empowered (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Long & Wilburn, 2025; Mustafaa, 2023). Evidence from this approach is visible in programs like Mexican American studies where because of courses "based on students' culture of origin [that] helped develop an academic identity, they develop the skills to navigate racist systems" (Hector, 2021, p. 10). The program exemplifies the significant improvements in standardized tests among students taking ethnic studies classes, and the graduation rate among these students averaged 93% (Palos et al., 2011). These outcomes underscore the importance that curriculum should serve as "mirrors, windows and sliding doors" so students see themselves, understand others, and explore new perspectives (Bishop, 1990, p. ix).

Mitton and Murray-Orr (2021) further expanded on these findings, introducing the concept of academic risk-taking to demonstrate how CRP can create classroom environments where students marginalized by inequitable systems feel empowered to take intellectual risks. The study stressed that teachers who implement CRP foster safe, supportive environments that allow students to engage in learning without fear of failure, which is critical for their academic success. Teachers encourage a sense of belonging and relevance by using culturally responsive content and practices, such as incorporating local community issues into lessons or recognizing and celebrating cultural backgrounds (Houchen, 2013; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021). However, with the overwhelming focus on standardized testing, many teachers lack the time, resources, and flexibility necessary to fully integrate CRP into their classrooms.

Yet, a range of teaching practices demonstrates how educators can meaningfully integrate culture into the curriculum when given the opportunity, beginning with the foundational step of getting to know students beyond surface-level racial categories (Nash, 2018). Nash illustrated how in-service teachers first learn from their students and then design lessons grounded in their unique cultural knowledge. For example, some teachers used authentic children's literature featuring African American characters (e.g., *Bright Eyes, Brown Skin*) to reflect and affirm students lived experiences. Gay (2000) reinforced this approach, emphasizing that "students' existing knowledge is the best starting point for the introduction of new knowledge" (p. 149). In an analysis of the Webster Groves writing project, Gay highlighted how teachers deliberately aligned their instruction with African American cultural values and performance traditions; these educators drew on students' oral traditions, communal values, and expressive identities to make writing instruction more relevant and empowering, and their strategies included affirming African American dialects, incorporating call-and-response and storytelling, integrating performance and role-play, encouraging peer collaboration, and linking cultural expression to academic writing.

These culturally responsive strategies translate into measurable academic and personal gains for students. Students demonstrated notable growth in writing ability with samples showing "more details and clearer explanations" and teachers observing stronger focus in student thinking (Gay, 2000, p. 157). In addition, students' writing scores increased by an average of 2.0 percentage points—surpassing the district average—and 67% of eighth-grade participants later scored above the state average on the Missouri writing assessment. These results demonstrate that culturally responsive instruction can help mitigate the harmful impacts of standardized testing by supporting both skill development and student engagement. By purposefully placing students' culture at the forefront of education, teachers in the Webster Groves writing project created instructional environments in which students felt affirmed and capable. This approach strategically improved writing outcomes and increased students' confidence, which are normally factors diminished by culturally disconnected assessments. CRP helps reduce the disconnect between students' lived experiences and standardized expectations thereby lessening the inequities such assessments often reinforce.

Similarly, Houchen (2013) documented how CRP led to significant academic improvement for African American students facing high school exit exams. In the study conducted in Houchen's classroom, 84% of students who participated in a CRP-informed intensive reading class passed the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test retake exam, which was 190% higher than the state average of 29%. Houchen attributed this success to integrating students' cultural backgrounds that involved meaningful classroom activities and creating a supportive classroom environment. The findings highlight the power of CRP in increasing student engagement and driving tangible academic success. Further supporting this, Yu (2018) found that CRP significantly improved

student attitudes and academic achievement in math and science for multicultural students in an urban school setting. Yu showed how CRP can enhance academic performance across diverse subjects by linking subject matter to students' cultural backgrounds and creating more expressive learning experiences.

The findings throughout this literature review have confirmed that while standardized testing has caused barriers to success, CRP can provide a realistic strategy to counteract these challenges. CRP can allow educators to bridge the gap between test-centric instruction and meaningful learning by capitalizing on the students' cultural knowledge and experiences to improve their academic outcomes. As Gay (2000), Houchen (2013), and Yu (2018) demonstrated, CRP not only mitigates the harmful impact of standardized testing by increasing student engagement but also promotes higher academic achievement.

Despite CRP's benefits, standardized testing continues to impose structural limitations that only policy reform can fully address. As Popham (1999) stated, "employing standardized achievement tests to ascertain educational quality is like measuring temperature with a tablespoon" (p. 10). Popham's analogy perfectly captured the inadequacy of standardized testing in reflecting the true quality of education. While the systemic issues caused by standardized testing require major policy reforms to be fully resolved, educators can still take proactive steps in the classroom as we continue to advocate for broader change. Thus, CRP offers a powerful tool for educators aspiring to navigate the pressures of standardized testing while ensuring equitable, meaningful learning experiences for all students, particularly those from marginalized and culturally diverse backgrounds.

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