The Brown v. Board of Education decision is often credited with dismantling racial segregation in our nation’s schools. However, many have begun to question the impact of the Brown decision on desegregation by observing that schools in the U.S. are even more segregated today than ever before. Many larger urban districts have remained segregated as a result of White flight, schools of choice, and vouchers. Often students of color, who attend more integrated schools, find themselves segregated by tracking systems where they are overrepresented in special education classes and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. Although this starting reality is often difficult for educators to understand, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides us with new ways to think about these problems and challenges us to reconsider the ways that we seek to improve educational outcomes for all children.

CRT was first developed in the mid-1970s by legal scholars Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, who were frustrated by the slow pace of meaningful racial reform in the United States following the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). These scholars used CRT to challenge the status quo of a legal system that they perceived as failing to provide justice for minorities. They continue to promote the use of CRT in hopes of facilitating system-wide change in the legal arena that will lead to more immediate justice for all.

At first glance, it might appear that the field of education has responded effectively to the unique needs of ever-increasing diverse student bodies. Many districts have included mission statements embracing diversity and multicultural education units championing equality. These efforts seek to inclusively address issues of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and socio-economic differences. However, as evidenced by the continuing trend that results in the segregation of students along racial lines, it does not appear that multicultural education offers radical change to the current order.

The application of CRT in education provides an opportunity to challenge the status quo, which has traditionally relied on court decisions and legislation such as No Child Left Behind as well as multicultural education initiatives to foster equal educational opportunities for all. It appears in education that faith in the law to create equality in schools is short-sighted given the limited impact to date. Additionally, multicultural education initiatives provided in many schools are cursory cultural celebrations and miss the mark in leveling the playing field for children of all races. Many of these initiatives only succeed in grouping cultural differences as analogous and equivalent under the umbrella of diversity without facilitating any positive outcomes.

The Basic Tenets of CRT
1. Racism is ingrained into the culture of the U.S. to the point at which it is virtually unrecognizable.
2. Narratives demonstrate the reality of racial oppression in U.S. culture by constructing a different reality using the words, stories, and silence of those who are oppressed.
3. The belief that the law can create an equitable, just society for all is abandoned.

U.S. following the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000).
If Testing Is The Answer, What's The Question?

necessitate higher education. This would be particularly true where processes involve technology. Human oversight would require heightened expertise. And so, for example, with the first of the baby boom generation about to retire, opportunities exist for considerable expansion in the products and services associated with an aging population, much of which will call for a medical or scientific knowledge base. To maximize those investment opportunities and to reap the job creation and economic potential associated with them, those companies will require a labor pool whose core knowledge and skills must be greater than they are currently.

We are told that one way to assist in this economic and societal transformation is to increase our number of college graduates and thus increase our academic expectations of high school students. The bar must be raised and recent legislation suggests as much. Associated with that is our infatuation with high-stakes testing as the assessment and accountability instrument de jour. But will such produce the kinds of graduates, workers and citizens that we seek?

Testing For What?

Since NCLB, we have become enamored of high-stakes testing as an accountability tool. It apprises us of students' abilities in reading comprehension, tells us on a given day what any student recalls factually, and may inform us as to students' abilities in the areas of computation, application and even some basic skill in logical deduction (thinking). And while these are not unimportant, most remain at the lower end of Bloom's taxonomy (lower order thinking). The larger question remains as to whether these tests, in their current form, can tell us anything about a person's future ability to identify difficult problems (ask the right questions), decipher their constituent parts (analyze), and develop creative strategies for solving them, both at work and in life (synthesis and evaluation).

Nor does the present testing regime give us any insight into students' abilities to organize themselves for such important tasks as marshalling one's time in a judicious manner. And while improving base knowledge is an important first step for the evolution of human capital, how that knowledge will be put to use by future generations—the level of thinking that engages that knowledge—will ultimately determine the successful economic transition of American society. But in Michigan, as elsewhere, we confute testing for accountability with meaningful assessment. As test expert and UCLA professor emeritus James Popham reminds us most educational policy makers, state board members, members of legislatures, are well intentioned, and install accountability measures involving these kinds of tests in the belief that good things will happen to children. But most of these policy makers are dirt-ignorant regarding what these tests should and should not be used for. And the tragedy is that they set up a system in which the primary indicator of educational quality is simply wrong.

And, we are more concerned about the cost of testing than we are about assessing effectively. We seek technological solutions (computerized tests) as cost-saving measures, when more human solutions are called for. But those human solutions come with a price, and in this bottom-line society, economics rule the day.

So will we be successful with our societal transformation in sufficient time to allow most of our students to be able to contribute to the economy in meaningful ways while reaping its financial rewards? We delude ourselves if we think that at the end of the day mere standardized testing will solve our problems and somehow create a better informed or more purposefully competent student, worker or citizen. ☺

References:


For further reading: