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## Is Post Traumatic *Test* Disorder Killing Your Students' Love of Literacy?

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My daughter was barely a week into middle school when she expressed apprehension about taking the STAR reading test. Coupled with her generalized anxiety about adjusting to middle school and all of the newness it entails—learning a new building, getting to know new teachers, discovering new friends, navigating a new schedule—it all bubbled up and became overwhelming. We hadn't even made it out of the car pick-up line, and Julia was already fretting about that STAR test: "I don't know why I'm so nervous about that test. It's not like I haven't taken it a hundred times. I think I have post-traumatic *test* disorder." She intentionally emphasized the word "test," as if to be sure I knew she wasn't saying "stress." Glancing in the rearview mirror, I caught a glimpse of her watery eyes. Normally cheerful and bright-eyed, her face was a canvas of anxiety. Her voice carried disappointment and defeat. "Sweet Jules," I said reassuringly, "You know that one test doesn't define you and certainly can't capture your abilities." She gave an unconvincing nod. I wanted to say more, but the words of reassurance tangled in my mind, and I felt my heart breaking for her the same way it did for my son several years ago when he started third grade.

I remember the conversation vividly. It was the beginning of the school year, and I had noticed that Carter seemed extra edgy. I asked if something was bothering him and, although he shook his head, his teary eyes told a different story. "Are you sure?" I

asked. "I can't help to make it better if I don't know what's wrong." After a moment of patiently waiting, the words came tumbling out of his mouth. "I'm worried about not passing the Milestones assessment," he confessed. His lower lip quivered as he spoke. Worry washed over him as he further explained that he was afraid he was going to fail the high-stakes test and not be able to go on to fourth grade with his friends. My heart shattered. My 9-year-old was in tears over a test that wouldn't occur for months. In an attempt to help, I asked him how many tests he had failed in his short little school life. "One," he replied. "I got a 75 on a math test last year." After explaining to him that a 75 isn't failing, I asked him how many tests he'd taken. "Too many to count." While this certainly helped me prove my point—that one bad test score out of many is something to celebrate, not something to be ashamed of—it left me feeling disillusioned. School in Carter's mind consisted of tests, tests, and more tests, from informal to formal, and all were a source of worry.

Aside from a few bumpy patches here and there over the years, both of my kids are fortunate to be strong students, especially in the area of literacy. They generally perform well on reading and writing assignments and are more than capable readers and writers. They don't however, choose to read or write in their free time, and neither would say that they love reading or writing – a fact that concerns me, considering I have spent my entire professional life

dedicating my time and energy to all things literacy. They do enjoy reading books together as a family and humor me when I read aloud and discuss books with them; but in general, I consider them to be *aliterate* (Boorstin, 1984; Mikulecky, 1978), avoiding reading and writing unless it's required. While this pains me tremendously, I am equally troubled by Julia's self-diagnosis of "post-traumatic test disorder" and Carter's unwarranted fears of failing his third grade high-stakes assessment. If my kids feel the weight of this anxiety as students who excel in the classroom, what do students who struggle feel? And if my kids, who have had every support from home, don't enjoy reading and writing, what about kids with less home exposure?

As a parent who happens to be a literacy educator, I often find myself wondering, *In the age of high-stakes testing, how can we ensure that students develop healthy relationships with reading and writing?* Don't get me wrong. I am not opposed to assessment. I recognize that it is a necessary and important part of the teaching and learning process. It's impossible to craft meaningful reading and writing experiences that meet students' needs and move students forward without assessments that provide useful data about students' strengths and weaknesses. But things have gotten out of balance, and the scale seems to be tilted in favor of testing. Peter Afflerbach's (2016) assessment credo advocates the following: "Assessment should produce information that is useful in helping students become better readers, and assessment should do no harm" (pp. 413–414). I think it would be wise for educators and administrators to apply this credo in determining the value of the assessments and instructional practices they are using in the classroom. Are they useful? Do they create harm?

Oftentimes, it feels that in an effort to prepare students for high-stakes assessments, we are testing students more than we are teaching them. And when we *are* teaching them, we are often overemphasizing skills instruction couched in comprehension and vocabulary *practice*, instead of directing energy into cultivating a culture of authentic and pleasurable reading and writing experiences (George, 2021). Or, we are giving students a lot of practice with test prep

questions only to discover that the additional practice doesn't lead to increased achievement (Shanahan, 2014). Essentially, we are inadvertently restricting students' daily engagement with reading and writing because of some type of high-stakes testing influence. In prioritizing test prep in our literacy instruction, we are sending messages to our students about what is important when it comes to reading and writing (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018). Thus, the pressure of testing and over-emphasis on the basic skills of literacy have caused students to see reading and writing as tasks or exercises rather than experiences that bring them joy and meaning (George, 2021). This is all part of an effort to raise test scores to address the public's misguided concerns about an educational "crisis" that has been found to be unsubstantiated (Huddleston & Rockwell, 2015).

To be fully literate is "to have the communicative power of language at your command – to read, write, listen, and speak with *understanding*" (Hirsch & Pondiscio, 2011, p. 50). Among other things, students must read to learn new concepts, discover the world and their place in it, and develop empathy. They must write to explain their thinking, share their stories, and create change. And they must discuss to engage in honest and informed dialogue. These literacy learning experiences should not be overlooked in the classroom. Thus, it is crucial for teachers to keep "test-centric instruction" at bay so students do not perceive test performance as the key indicator of their literacy identities (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018, p. 580). Instead, teachers should emphasize authentic reading and writing experiences embedded in a culture of literacy to ensure that students will succeed *beyond* the test. Sprinkle in some test-taking strategies if you wish—Davis & Vehabovic (2018) recommend no more than 5% of instructional time for this, only when absolutely unavoidable—but let's trust that truly engaged readers and writers will be able to "cross the bridge" from meaningful reading and writing instruction to performing well on standardized tests *and beyond*.

A teacher who truly cares about her students as readers and writers and motivates them through authentic and meaningful experiences is more effective than a teacher who emphasizes their

performance on a test. An overabundance of testing is limiting students' literacy lives as time spent on testing could be spent cultivating readers and writers who possess a love of literacy. Ally, the main character from Lynda Mullaly Hunt's (2017) *Fish in a Tree* embodies this concept perfectly when she says, "I believe that the things we put numbers on are not necessarily the things that count the most. You can't measure the stuff that makes us human" (p. 48). It's difficult to capture the "human" or affective factors that contribute to literacy development. For example, motivation to read has been linked to student engagement with reading and thus reading competency or achievement (Kavanagh, 2019; Stutz et al., 2016). Motivation and engagement should be key focal points in the literacy classroom. Instead of overpreparing students for standardized tests with an abundance of test prep and skills-based instruction, let's invest in developing students' identities as readers and writers. Let's move away from a culture

of compliance, where students read because they have to, toward a culture of engagement, where students read because they *want* to. I'll gladly sacrifice points on my kids' test scores in exchange for knowing that they see reading and writing as something that can help them see themselves and the world in a different light. Let's find ways to make reading and writing relevant, meaningful, and authentic by tapping into our students' interests and natural curiosities. And maybe, just maybe, instead of feeling the weight of post-traumatic test disorder, our students will feel the rush of finishing a good book or penning the perfect ending to their story. Isn't this what literacy learning should be all about?

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