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A Piece of the Educational Puzzle

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Fall Semester 2006

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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Abstract

The quality of education in America has not paralleled her vast achievements. In an effort to lessen mediocrity within the educational system, the standards-based education movement has begun to establish levels of information taught at each grade level. This educational reform which attempts to raise the quality of education across the nation has been implemented locally through the Virginia Standards of Learning. The Standards of Learning framework highlights the necessity of proficient communication for the sake of the future ambitions of students. Such an objective has been attained through grammatical instruction of Standard English integrated within the language arts. Although in the midst of such progress, fears are still prevalent that the nation is regressing towards instructional methodologies which have historically stifled America's educational system. These fears arise from the movement's reliance on high stakes testing. An examination of these high stakes testing reveals various aspects of teaching towards the test which indirectly emphasize practices regressing back towards rote-memorization.

A Piece of the Educational Puzzle

Amid the hustle and bustle of American city streets, the realization that the country is the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world is daily proclaimed. For example, while Americans effortlessly spend five dollars on a single meal, Anup Shah (2006), the author of *Poverty Facts and Statistics*, states that approximately three billion individuals around the globe are surviving daily on nothing more than two dollars. Educationally, six years ago an estimated billion individuals in the world lacked the ability to write their own signature or to read. This statistic seems inconceivable in the USA whose third grade children yearly accomplish such feats (Shah, 2006). However, such evident prosperity within the United States can foster a false sense of American superiority. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk* which fervently notified the population of the following:

Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world . . . the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable . . . has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments (1).

This statement is not an unsubstantiated opinion, but rather a summary of credible data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Standardized Assessment Test (SAT), and the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Buttram and Waters, 1997). For instance, the TIMSS which has assessed a “half-million students in 41 countries. . . includ[ing] primarily the industrialized countries

of Europe but also the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Asia” found the following: “U.S. fourth-graders performing poorly, middle school students worse, and high school students [being] unable to compete” (Poor U.S. Test Results Tied To Weak Curriculum, 2001, 5). Complimenting this report the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development states that the “U.S. has fallen to ninth in the developed world in high school graduation rates among young adults” (Higher Education for Competitive World, 3). Although faculty at Harvard University recognized such mediocrity as early as 1874, it was not until the late 1980s that a significant alteration in educational practices began to occur, thereby, initiating the standard-based education movement (Nagin, 2003; Buttram and Walters, 1997).

Currently, this educational reform targets mediocrity at the heart of education, curriculum and instruction. The sole aim of education is to equip children with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to prosper as adults; therefore, mediocrity in curriculum and instruction not only hinders a child for a moment but for life. To ensure that the curriculum and instruction is indeed meeting the needs of the students, the standard-based education movement initiated an essential nationwide “switch in emphasis (from inputs to results) set the stage for the delineation of standards, or what students should know and be able to do” (Buttram and Walters, 1997, 3). Such action was first employed by the State of Virginia during the summer of 1995 with the adoption of the Standards of Learning (Thayer, 2000). According to Yvonne Thayer, the author of *Virginia's Standards Make All Students Stars*, this “change of the educational policies and practices in Virginia’s public schools” led to the development of a “framework for instructional programs designed to raise the academic achievement of all students”

through the establishment of “challenging educational programs” (2000; English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, 2002, i). The framework originated from a succession of civic meetings with of fathers and mothers, educational instructors and administrators, and spokespersons of commerce and manufacturing. Formatted into “goals and objectives,” this outline of standards penetrates into each content area for each grade level (Standards of Learning Tests in Virginia and the No Child Left Behind Act, 2005, 2). Specifically, standards-based education reveals the necessity for grammar in the English curriculum while addressing the teaching of English grammar through integrating grammar instruction in reading, writing, and speaking; however, high stakes testing which has accompanied the standard movement indirectly places the emphasis of instruction on memorization of rules. The accumulating pressure of testing must be adjusted to more adequately fit the presentation of learning material.

Language

Virginia Department of Education has acknowledged the role of language in academia. The aims of the English Standards of Learning are 1) “to teach students to read,” and 2) “to prepare students to participate in society as literate citizens, equipped with the ability to communicate effectively in their communities, in the work place, and in postsecondary education” (English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, 2002, 4). The answer of how to achieve this aim of proficient communication deals explicitly with grammar. Two professors of English, Judith Rodby at California State University and W. Ross Winterowd at the University of Southern California, have classified language and grammar as being related “power” (2005). The capacity to “speak and write in accepted ways is often a requisite for entry into a career” (Shah & Rodby,

2005). A lack of grammatical skills has often been portrayed stereotypically as ignorance in the professional world. Brian Wienholt, a supervisor of a junior high's reading and language arts, acknowledges that "[i]f students have poor grammatical skills on resumes or applications, people will judge them as lacking intelligence" (Grammar is Imperative, 2004, 4). While Paul Lazarus (2004) testifies that "[i]n subsequent years, whether as an agent, a producer, or a studio executive, I always viewed sloppy screenplays as unworthy of serious consideration, the signature of an amateur . . . An errant typo or two, okay. But more, coupled with format problems or grammatical errors, is totally unprofessional" (3). Grammar instruction is necessary within the school system in order to equip students' with the skills to prosper later in society; however, Rodby and Winterowd (2005) warn that grammar is not a "magical elixir for the problems of communication" (13). Rather, grammar instruction is one of a multiple of aids to cultivate higher quality academic achievement within the classroom.

Grammar

Grammar, however, is not easily defined. Martha Kolln, the keynote speaker of the 1990 National Council of Teachers of English conference, testified to "what a can of worms the word itself opens up-- the word 'grammar'. . . some years ago I heard a paper . . . outlining fourteen definitions for grammar. I'm more accustomed to differentiating maybe three or four or five" (1990, 4). Simply recognizing that grammatical concepts were derived from the Greeks organizes this disarray of definitions, explanations, and opinions into two distinct overarching groups. First, grammar may be perceived as an aesthetic device. Within "The Role of Grammar in the Language Arts Curriculum" Cheryl Glenn asserts that descriptively, the function of Greek grammar lessons were

merely to provide “fluid, flexible, lively, ever-changing, emotional, beautiful, stylish, graceful language performance[s]” (qt. by Patterson, 1999). Conversely, grammar may be seen as a regulation mechanism. James D. Williams, author of “The Teacher’s Grammar Book,” informs that the “prescriptive stance” is derived from the act of preserving a standard. Rather than lavishing the language, grammar is considered to be more of a “description of . . . language . . . describ[ing] the *forms* of a language that are actually used by native speakers . . . explain[ing] how the forms of language function in units we call sentences . . . learn[ing] what language is appropriate in given situations and what is inappropriate (or even taboo)”, according to Rodby and Winterowd (2005). This stance is the dominate grammatical mindset in America’s educational facilities. The Greeks aimed at “preserve[ing] the ‘purity’ of Homeric Greek,” while the typical American classroom aims at preserving the standard dialect of the English language. This latter form of grammar instruction has become known as School Grammar, Prescriptive Grammar, or Traditional Grammar (Patterson, 1999). Such an explanation provides a solid foundation on which educators may build.

Grammar, as a “description” of language, must enable students to converse competently in English. Rodby and Winterowd”, however, relate that even a straightforward explanation of the English language would constitute an enormous assortment of dialects (The Uses of Grammar, 2005). According to Barbara L. Speicher and Jessica R. Bielanski, the authors of “Critical Thoughts on Teaching Standard English”, “[e]ach dialect displays lexical, phonological, and grammatical features that vary somewhat from those of other dialects.” Thus, even if all individuals theoretically spoke grammatically correct, frustration and miscommunication would occur. Any

society would become divided and not prosper if its inhabitants lacked the ability to communicate with each other. Although linguists have fervently appealed to uniform significance amongst all vernaculars for years, other dialects besides the standard have developed a stigma of “stupidity or laziness” even among their native speakers. As a result, the standard vernacular has transformed into a “gatekeeping” register (Speicher and Bielanski, 2000). For instance, Linguist Charles E. Fries has associated Standard English as strictly “the particular type of English which is used in the conduct of the important affairs of our people” rather than a vernacular used by all. Jesse Jackson also acknowledged this same concept during the Ebonics dispute. He declared that speakers of Ebonics would be able neither to “get in the University of California” nor “get a job at NBC or CBS or ABC unless they can master this language” (Jesse Jackson quoted in Lewis, 1996) ((Perez, 2000; Speicher and Bielanski, 2000). Standard English is, therefore, referred to as the prestige dialect, common currency, power code, language of wider communication, and more formerly known as either Mainstream American English or Standard Edited Academic English (Haussamen, Perez, 2000; Rodby, 2005). This one dialect is specifically taught in order to provide common ground on which all individuals may coherently communicate and learn from each other. Standard English is the dialect which meets the criterion set forth by the English Standards of learning as being applicable for grammar instruction.

Methodology

Quality education, however, hinges on more than simply recognizing the need of grammar within the curriculum but also on the implementation of grammar instruction. For a number of years the sole method chosen to implement grammatical knowledge

within American school's curriculum has been through rote memorization. Rote memorization is simply the continual exercising of syntax through worksheets, workbooks, and grammar books; thus, these resources only offered exercises isolated from applicable situations. Such a teaching approach concentrated heavily on errors rather than on the comprehension of language. The end result was repetitive failure to unite knowledge and application. When Holdaway, whose cited in the "The Role of Grammar within the Classroom," recognized this relationship between "productive" and "abstract" knowledge, he concluded that "it is far more important that students know how to use language effectively. It is less important that they know the analytical terms that relate to language and syntax." The formulation of such a conclusion, however, was not a swift process; rather it took until nearly the beginning of the twentieth century for suspicions to arise as to whether "direct and isolated Prescriptive Grammar instruction was meeting the needs of students." By the 1950's research had been gathered by NCTE's Commission on the English Curriculum demonstrating the failure of isolated grammar instruction to produce quality writing; however, this data was dismissed by the justification that 'an intelligent student can be assisted in the revision of his writing and in the self-analysis of recordings of his speech' (cited in Ross 75)" (Patterson, 1999). Not until thirty-five years later did this "cult of correctness" provoke the NCTE's 1985 proclamation that "ample evidence from 50 years of research" concluded that the "teaching of grammar in isolation . . . hinders development of students' oral and written language"; therefore, the commission began to "urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction" (Patterson, 1999; On Grammar Exercises to Teach Speaking and Writing).

Consequently, such statements have fostered doubt concerning grammatical instruction's position within the classroom.

The retraction of grammar instruction from the curriculum, however, has not been the appropriate reaction. Although individuals contributing to "The Role of Grammar in the Classroom" keenly "liken the teaching of large doses of Prescriptive or School Grammar to the practice physicians used when they bled the sick." They "claim that truly effective means of teaching writing were not available to teachers in the past, and so teachers resorted to 'superstition, alchemy, charlatanism, and other grabbing-at-straws methods'" (qtd. in Patterson, 1999). Notice the contributing factor to the ineffectiveness of grammar instruction was not directed towards the subject matter of grammar itself, but rather towards the methodology chosen to teach the concept. This methodology which characterized the twentieth century resembles the behaviorist instructional theory discussed by the Foundation of Christian School Education.

Behaviorism has its roots within B.F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning which holds that humans can "self-correct" only when prompted by positive or negative reinforcement; consequently, this philosophy emphasizes the environment over the learner. Accentuating the environment compels teachers to provide outside stimuli in order to achieve learning rather than the integration of the environment and the learner through techniques which "arouses thinking related to a problem to be solved . . . issue to be examined." Therefore, absorption replaces the mental activities of the learner resulting in the learner regurgitating "...encyclopedic responses (facts) or memorized notes in the exact form given" (Braley et al, 2003). The *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* further supports such a claim through the reference of "[d]iagramming

sentences . . . teach[es] nothing beyond the ability to diagram” (On the Teaching of Grammar, 2005). Thus, over emphasis on behaviorism and not grammar has proven to be the contributing factor that has so long plagued American schools.

Grammar’s current position in the curriculum, however, has been undergoing a reformation of instructional methodology. No longer should grammatical instruction be merely never ending lectures defining and diagramming prefixes, suffixes, contractions, and sentence structures. Children already have a natural comprehension of grammar; therefore, they are never initially introduced to grammar on the first day they enter into a classroom. Patterson testifies that the “rules of phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics” comprising grammar is “internalized, usually by the age of 5”. She further informs “[c]hildren by the ages of five or six are usually fluent in their language. They use it confidently without knowing the names of the parts and structures they speak By the time children reach school age they are competent in the use of all five basic sentence patterns . . . are able to use negatives, passives, ellipses, and imperatives . . . and they can use present, past, and future tenses” (The Role of Grammar in the Classroom, 1999). Thus, instruction would be futile to try and reiterate a concept that has already been grasped. So in reality educators “do not really teach grammar at all,” but rather instruct “students *about* grammar,” as Brock Haussamen relates within “Some Questions and Answers about Grammar.” He states that instructing “students *about* grammar . . . bring[s] them the added confidence and clarity that go with any knowledge that strengthens skills and deepens understanding” (1998). As a result, teaching “about” grammar eradicates grammatical rules being taught directly as a portion of the core curriculum (Grammar is Imperative under the NCLB, 2004) Thus, the resulting

methodology is the integration of grammatical concepts within the larger perspective of the language arts curriculum. An accurate visualization of this relationship is supplied by the Standards of Learning. The English Standards of Learning framework from kindergarten through sixth grade pivot around the contexts of reading, writing, and speaking (English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools). Nestled amongst these content areas are key concepts of grammatical instruction which the state of Virginia deems as beneficial.

The disarming of the behaviorist theory, however, not only alters where grammar is instructed but also how grammar is instructed. Learning, defined by Braley, is “...the insight gained when new relationships are identified, resulting in meaningful configurations.” An “insight gained when new relationships are identified” acknowledges the association that the learner has with the environment. The learner is “neither a passive receiver of knowledge nor an autonomous creator of knowledge;” therefore, gaining knowledge “involves the student, the curriculum, and the teacher in dynamic interplay” (Braley et al, 2003). Traditionally, students’ only interaction with grammatical concepts within the classroom was solely through lists of redundant sentences written on the board or on worksheets, which is far from the vibrant interchange recognized by Braley. Although workbooks do “have their place and their purpose,” “Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers” classifies them as containing significant restrictions (Haussamen, Benjamin, Kolln, and Wheeler, 2004). Worksheets, simply, lack the ability to produce “meaningful language-rich classroom activities that place students in situations where they build upon their knowledge” as described by Patterson (The Role of Grammar, 1999). Withdrawing dependency from these classic

staples through a transition towards more purposeful applications, however, has not left teachers destitute.

Reading

One key resource easily accessible to teachers is authentic texts. Authentic texts facilitate the integration of grammatical concepts within the context of reading. Through the use of the “fast, persuasive, and memorable” language of marketing, “Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers” suggests allowing students to look for the following grammatical concepts:

“phrases (“Like a Rock,” “Easy as Dell”), questions (“Do You Yahoo?”) “Got Milk?”), imperatives (“Do It”), exclamations (“50% Off!”), and parallelism (“We’ve never had more. You’ll never pay less.”). They can also look for different sorts of wordplay, sharpening their sense of both word meaning and word arrangement: variations on familiar phrases (“This is Cloud Ten. Ford Expedition”), rhymes (“Power Hours”), graphic devices (“cholesterol”)
(Haussame, Benjamin, Kolln, and Wheeler, 2004).

Utilization of magazine and newspaper articles provides educators with the means to increase children’s familiarity with non-fictional literature, while introducing them to key configurations which identify specific grammatical terminology. Further, there are grammar activities available which incorporate “everyday genres” as “Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers” classifies them. The inspection of instruction manuals and recipes often uncover the employment of imperatives. Menus and greeting cards implement participles, while passive verbs can be found among park brochures (Haussamen, Benjamin, Kolln, and Wheeler, 2004). Even amongst these quite nontraditional methods,

one should never overlook the value found in classic literature genres such as poetry, fiction, and nonfiction texts in discussions of sentence and word patterns or sentence variations” (Roe al. 393; Haussamen, Benjamin, Kolln, and Wheeler, 2004).

Consequently, an extensive range of literature is an ample source of manipulative material due to its varying range of complexity.

The utilization of authentic text supports brain-based research. For instance, brain-based research has concluded that the frontal lobes of children under the age of ten have not fully matured, thereby restricting their comprehension of complex questions and necessitating more simplified forms of literature. Authentic texts also recognize the brain’s natural tendency to “organize information by constantly making connections on many levels simultaneously” (Braley). Activities which do not emphasize relations fail. A teacher within the NCTE article of “Grammar Hearing from Teachers” stated that portions of a school directed course book provided grammatical instruction which lacked any correlation with the children’s reading assignments. Through time the teacher has begun to recognize “that the difficulty my students are having, in their writing, comprehension and trying to do the workbook sheets, is in great part due to this disconnection” (Grammar Hearing From Teachers, 2003). Therefore, the utilization of authentic texts provides instructors with the ability to meet children’s needs by varying the range of complexity and providing a medium needed to unite grammatical concepts with the usage of language in practical ways.

Writing

Grammatical skills supply the format for proficient communication within the context of writing. Such competent communication is correlated with student’s success

within the Board of Education's policy statement (Grammar is Imperative, 2004; Standards of Learning). Although grammatical instruction can be communicated either verbally or through visualizations, the integration of these concepts is "more effectively in writing itself when studied and discussed in the context of writing" according to the NCTE publication of "On the Teaching of Grammar" (2005). Simply, an activity requiring students to reword a reading assignment into their own adaptation requires a working knowledge of syntax. The documentation of third, fifth, and sixth grade writing Standards of Learning directly corresponding to such an activity reveals substantial evidence of the integration of grammatical concepts (English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools). "Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers" further rationally "[w]hen we ask students to write from one genre to another, we require them to compare and contrast grammatical choices . . . students would then analyze *why* these changes were appropriate to a given genre" (Haussamen, Benjamin, Kolln, and Wheeler, 2004). Therefore, such an activity generates children's thinking skills through urging them to go beyond simple recall.

Editing, such as depicted in the writing SOL of 2.12, also offers another activity integrating grammatical instruction (English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools). Within the implementation of this strategy, Lucy McComrick Calkins, the author of "Basic Skills Remain in Context," cites that instructors need to utilize editing to emphasize a few grammatical concepts at a time (1980). An expansion of this activity incorporates reflection upon students' work. With examples of permitted students' work, the instructor may exemplify "examples of smooth style, confusing writing, humor, beautiful description, ordinary error, effective punctuation-anything to raise student

awareness of sentences” in order “to engage the class in a discussion of language, and to use grammatical terminology” (English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, Haussamen, Roe et al. 396). Therefore, educators can utilize grammatical discussions when providing instruction for writing.

Speaking

One of the most essential assets within the development of the language arts is the students’ own vernacular. Although the home languages of children are considered appropriate for the majority of social situations, *Integrating Language Arts through Literature and Thematic Units* informs that “students need to know Standard English as an alternative for those situations that call for it” (Roe et al. 391). However, Samuel A. Perez, an author within Contemporary Education, warns instructors not to perceive this pursuit as a “rejection or replacement of one language and culture with another” because “one’s dialect is tied to one’s identity” according to a group of teachers within Whales (Using Ebonics or Black English as a Bridge to Teaching Standard English, 2000; Speicher and Bielanski). Rather such methodology must be “viewed as language expansion and enrichment of the student's home language to include Standard English” (Using Ebonics or Black English as a Bridge to Teaching Standard English, 2000). The brainstorming behind the execution of this methodology is cited by Perez in the context of the home vernacular of Ebonics. He states the usage of “ebonics as a bridge to teaching Standard English requires that teachers become familiar with the features of Black English, identifying them in the language of their students, then designing and implementing instruction” (Using Ebonics or Black English as a Bridge to Teaching Standard English, 2000). Application, therefore, can be implemented through

Hassamen's ideas of having bulletin boards or discussions "contrast[ing] the patterns of home speech to the patterns of school speech" (Some Questions and Answers about Grammar, 1998). Such an integration of grammatical concepts with the students' home language acknowledges many key aspects of a language arts program. First, the employment of the "[s]tudent's home and cultural language" as a foundation for other language education is in concordance with the English Standards of Language. Next, these activities meet Seafross and Readence, the co-authors of *Helping Children Learn to Read*, criterion for "utiliz[ing] real experiences children have both in and out of school" essential for language curriculum, while also providing for "daily speaking opportunities, both formal and informal" required by the state's standards (qtd. in Baer, 1991; English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools). However, despite support from both national and state organizations alike, the degree in which this methodology is pursued must be taken into consideration. Not only is Standard English the accepted criterion within the academic and professional realm, but it is also deemed appropriate within these contexts by the society. Barbara Speicher and Jessica Bielanski, authors of "Critical thoughts on teaching Standard English," related that the Oakland School Board isolated Ebonics into a language of its own in order to facilitate better application of Standard English among their students. However, such an implication of this simple methodology was deemed to be stepping over its boundaries in 1996 due to the "fervor that stemmed from that decision typifies social attitudes regarding Standard English and other American dialects" (2000). Consequently, the utilization of student's own vernacular within the classroom is rewarding; however, such a methodology needs to be handled carefully.

Accountability

Theoretically, the implementation of these instructional strategies resides solely in the hands of educators. Thus, the Standards of Learning have avoided utilizing terminology which invokes “prescrib[ing] how the content should be taught” and has rather explicitly stated the freedom of educators to “select instructional strategies and assessment methods appropriate for their students” (English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, 2002). However, the standard-based education movement’s inability to directly dictate how the curriculum should be taught has not restricted them from subtly discouraging the practice which potentially may stifle the progress of education. This stance is evident through a comparison of the Standards of Learning with Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). With the usage of such words as *demonstrate*, *use*, *edit*, and *utilize* the Standards of Learning reach beyond knowledge and comprehension towards higher levels of critical thinking, thereby, supporting methodologies which go beyond rote memorization (English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, 2002). .

The summation of such evidence dismisses any grounds for accusing the outlining Standards of Learning for imposing rote memorization; however, the fear of “grammar in its most reactionary and ineffective form—the monotonous drilling on errors and parts of speech” being dragged back into the class room still lingers in the air (Haussamen, 2005). If the origin of these fears is not due to the Standards themselves, then the anxiety may arise from accountability’s utilization of assessments. Nationally, accountability reached its epitome with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Through “higher

standards and greater accountability” NCLB has become the “most sweeping reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) . . . redefin[ing] the federal role in K-12 education” (The No Child Left Behind Act: Ensuring that Students with Disabilities Receive a High-Quality Education, 2002; Overview Fact Sheet). No longer does the government perceive educational progress being merely facilitated through words of politicians but through “stronger accountability” involving state governments, local districts, and the teachers themselves (Four Pillars of the NCLB).

Further, this philosophy of educational facilities being held legally responsible for their output was initially employed in Virginia on October of 1997 with the Standards of Accreditation (Thayer, 2000). These Standards of Accreditation operate off the accompanying assessments of the Standards of Learning for third, fifth and eighth grades. Test scores are predominately characterized solely as the measurement of a student’s acquisition of the material; however, in acknowledgement that the learning process is a dynamic interaction between the learner, the teacher and the environment, these measurements assess more than simply a child’s efforts. For instance, the degree of learning is dependent upon personal motivation as well as whether the material was adequately presented by the school administration. Hence, the Standards of Accreditation are overall designed to eradicate mediocrity in two key areas: the students’ acquisition of the standards and the educational facilities execution of the standards.

Accountability is facilitated through repercussions inclusive for both students and the educational facilities. Currently, these assessments have limited immediate influence on the elementary students due to their inability to mandate that a student be held back if he or she performs poorly; however, they are associated with severe repercussions from

the educational facilities' stand point. The United States Department of State relates the following outcomes for the Standards of Learning assessments:

“the pass rate is the determining factor of whether or not a school attains or retains its accreditation status. It forms the basis for assessment of school, teacher, and student performance. The results are widely publicized in the media.

Standardized test scores are also a factor in determining local real estate values as homebuyers seek to purchase homes in neighborhoods with high achieving students” (Standards of Learning Tests in Virginia and the No Child Left Behind Act ,2005).

Tension, then, originates from the government and moves to the community, to the education facility, and finally, on to the backs of the instructors. The NCTE have distinctively classified such examinations as “[h]igh stakes testing” due to the use of “a single assessment measure in making an important decision” (High Stakes Testing). Regardless of the overall good intentions of these assessments, James Popham, a UCLA professor emeritus and former designer of standardized tests, expresses that these examinations “stifle creativity and problem-solving skills in kids, force rote memorization and encourage teachers to ‘teach to the test’”(Schindehette, Rozsa, Harmel, Frey, Russell, and Bresnahan,2004). Hence, the public’s fears are placed upon the pressures being forced on educators due specifically to the “stakes” of testing.

The effects which the Standards of Learning have had throughout Virginia have been widespread. For instance, Thayer’s view that the “assessment component” of these Standards is a tool to keep parental and educational figures “alert” aligns with A. Winkler, the author of ‘Division in the Ranks: Standardized Testing Draws Lines

Between New and Veteran Teachers, perspective of “1) it demonstrate[ing] to parents that their children were really learning something, 2) it provid[ing] a way to get teachers organized and focused, and 3) it g[iving] tangible proof to administrators that teachers were “playing by the rules”” (Virginia's Standards, 2000; Winkler 2002). Butler’s account in *U.S. News & World Report* of Ocean View Elementary offers a visualization of both these testimonies. She reports “four oversize, candy-colored charts sit[ting] outside every classroom, waiting to map the children's progress . . . on a variety of short monthly tests as well as statewide ones” (Butler, 2005). However, such alertness has also been accompanied by educational facilities “realigning their curriculums” while “teachers have refocused their instructional programs” according to Thayer (Thayer, 2000). In retrospect to the condition of the country’s educational programs as stated within *A Nation at Risk*, such renovation seems progressive. These aspirations, however, are dashed when one is confronted with what realignment actually means. Kevin Bushweller relates that ““curriculum alignment” is actually a pseudonym for "teaching to the test" and that this now-conventional term has essentially "destigmatized" a once disdained and politically incorrect practice’ (Winkler, 2002). The ambiguity surrounding the refocusing of Virginia’s public schools has been particularly displayed within Northside Middle School depicted by Butler as follows:

“Data driven . . . a dozen teachers and administrators . . . huddle together and pore over the question-by-question result sheets for all those who did not pass, analyzing incorrect responses by every possible differential, from gender and race to specific instructor, and looking for patterns. One is immediately clear: "This double negatives thing is really killing them," says a teacher . . . the group agrees

that merely correcting "I ain't never"s in class isn't good enough. "We need to look at some kind of buildingwide push," says Principal Andrea Tottossy, who then suggests that poor grammar in student essays is another glaring problem and wonders aloud whether teachers are correcting misplaced commas and apostrophes or focusing more on content in a new schoolwide writing program. "We definitely need to take baby steps to include grammar--we're ready for the next step," she advises, and a social studies teacher tells her colleagues that in her class she's introduced a related exercise in which students edit each other's papers, with great success"(Butler, 2005).

In the administrations' discernment of the data, three grammar instructional methodologies are mentioned.

First, *correcting* insinuates methodologies stemming from behaviorism, the educational philosophy "supported by positive (and, perhaps, negative) reinforcement" as indicated by Braley (Foundations, 2003). Rote memorization is a derivative of practicing behaviorism within the classroom. The only rationale for the utilization of rote memorization within the classroom would hinge on teaching to the test. If the test material emphasized the memorization of syntax rules then isolated instruction would be required; however, the review of six years of test released by the Virginia Department of Education renders grammatical concepts only being identifiable within the context of reading and writing. For example, the 2000 released English test for third grade analyzes subject and verb agreement by posing questions referencing to a story previously provided. This trend continues further with the 2001 released English test for fifth grade. The writing assessment asks for the student to recall verb tenses by asking, "Here is the

next part of Sarah's rough draft. 3) He help should be written" (Standards of Learning Released Test). Also, if rote memorization is being implemented within language arts, the disunity of separate grammatical instruction and writing would result in the poor quality of the essays. However, the situation at Northside Middle School, according to Principal Andrea Tottossy, was correlated to an overemphasis of "content." rather than dependency upon rote memorization.

Secondly, too much concentration in a solitary area of instruction will directly cause a deficiency in another instructional area. For instance, within Northfolk Middle School grammar is identified as a portion of the curriculum; however, too much emphasis on essay content could result in a de-emphasis of grammar instruction. A retraction of grammar instruction would allow instructors more time to focus on other areas which their grades are specifically tested on. Ruth Tyree, an eight-year experienced teacher at Woodrow Wilson Elementary in Danville, Virginia, communicated that the Standards expectations seems at times more than she can teach her third graders with the amount of time she is given. Due to time restrictions, she cannot remain on a single topic for too long; therefore, she must attempt to review the maximum amount of information and hope the Standards of Learning assessments do not ask many questions pertaining to the information which the children did not readily grasp (Tyree, personal communication, September 10, 2006). Tyree, however, has not been the only individual to express such a claim. Winkler relates the frustrations of an instructor whose class is having difficulty comprehending the material. The teacher exclaims "I have to adjust pacing, or they will be left behind. But there is no room for re-teaching". Time restraints formed by "curriculum pacing guide[s]" have not only adversely affected the students but also the

teachers. An educator conveyed within “Division in the Ranks: Standardized Testing Draws Lines between New and Veteran Teachers” that the “team is held back when I’m not doing my part; there is peer pressure not to hold everyone else back.” The teachers needed to test within a day or two of one another to maintain departmental pacing” (Winkler, 2002). Thus, the pressures of assessments transform time into a precious commodity which could lead to the neglect of grammar instruction.

Thirdly, the methodology wisely characterized with “great success” was simply the integration of grammar instruction within the applicable context of editing. These activities effectively acknowledge Braley’s assumption that the “context of knowledge” is the “[h]uman beings environment” (Braley, 2003). Although Winkler’s “[o]bservations revealed a mixture of creative, hands-on strategies and drill-and-skill approaches” within the classroom, a host of “experienced” educators indicate “less flexibility, less freedom, less critical thinking, and less hands-on activity” now within the classroom (Division, 2002). Emmet Rosenfeld cried out, “I can trace my evolution--from a creative young teacher to one straight jacketed by SOLs” (The Weakly Standards: One Teacher's Losing Fight with High-stakes, Low-logic Testing, 2004). Ivy Main, a lawyer and freelance writer with two children attending public school in Fairfax County, has personally experienced such differentiations between classrooms. She testified that her eldest daughter’s fourth grade year was characterized by “a discouraging amount of fact drilling” while her youngest daughter who was in third grade was more actively involved in projects. Main attributed the differentiation solely towards the difference in the educators’ disposition, “When teachers understand what is expected of them, they may not be so overwhelmed . . . Engaging the students creatively may bring them to a better

mastery of the facts than drills do” (Whose Afraid of Standards, 2005). Yecke has positively cited that either the director, programs, or statistics of the Science Museum of Virginia, Frontier Culture Museum, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and Jamestown/Yorktown relate a rise in “hands-on activities” since the Standards of Learning for children (Fact or Fiction, 1999). However, since neither stance can out-inform the other, ambiguity still exists.

Within this standard-based education movement the Standards of Learning are among a multitude of government educational programs reaching towards quality education through the accountability of assessment. According to the assessments recorded over the past five years, Virginia has shown improvement as stated by Alan Richard in “More Virginia Schools Earn State Accreditation”. Documentation shows that during 2004 only two hundred seventy educational facilities did not reach “test-score goals” compared to the ninety-eight percent who failed the Standards of Learning in 1999 (Richard, 2004). Despite such evaluations, Abrams and Madaus state that “research shows that high-stakes tests affect teaching and learning in predictable, often harmful ways . . . test scores are linked to high-stakes consequences” that “weaken the learning experiences of students, transform teaching into test preparation, and taint the test itself” (The Lesson of High-stakes Testing, 2003). P.L. Thomas, contributor to the *English Journal* specifically identifies writing and reading instruction being non-constructively influenced by high-stakes testing due to “inauthentic purposes for both reading and writing in classrooms at all grade levels” (Standards, Standards Everywhere, and Not a Spot to Think, 2001). Such augmentation of information reached the ears of those

formulating the NCTE. During their annual business meeting in 2000, the counsel decreed the following:

“The efforts to improve the quality of education, especially in underachieving schools, are laudable, and the desire for accountability is understandable.

However, high stakes tests often fail to assess accurately students’ knowledge, understanding, and capability. . . Therefore, the use of any single test in making important decisions—such as graduation, promotion, funding of schools, or employment and compensation of administrators and teachers—is educationally unsound and unethical. High stakes testing often harms students’ daily experience of learning, displaces more thoughtful and creative curriculum . . . NCTE invite other organizations to support, publicize, and promote a reconsideration of high stakes testing” (On Urging Reconsideration of High Stakes Testing).

Within the various aspects of teaching towards the test, high stakes testing has seen to indirectly emphasize practices regressing towards rote-memorization.

Answers to clarify such assumptions may be sought but they are not easily found. For instance, over the past forty-one years the government has invested an estimated two billion dollars simply towards educational reform; however, in spite of such efforts, President George W. Bush still entered the presidential office concerned about the “soft bigotry of low expectations” which has allowed “too many of our neediest children [to be] left behind” (The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; Virginia Implements No Child Left Behind, Act of 2001). Although O’Neil, a contributing author of *Educational Leadership*, declares that “[m]any educators have criticized the state’s Standards of Learning and accompanying tests. . . [for] overemphasiz[ing] factual material and

promot[ing] rote learning,” only time will ever validate such assumptions (O’Neil, 2006). Fifty years alone was needed for the nation to become well informed about the presence of negative consequences from the utilization of rote memorization.

Consequently, such a time length is needed to gather a true analysis of this “testing craze” which the nation has begun to find itself within (Schindehette, Rozsa, Harmel, Frey, Russell, and Bresnahan, 2004).

After coming to an acknowledgement of the decreasing quality of education within classrooms across the nation, the USA is currently trying to reestablish its footing within the educational realm. The country has progressed from a haunted past to a present emphasis on standard-based education facilitated through accountability. For instance, the Virginia English Standards of Learning have parallel quality education with the ability to instruct students to speak proficiently. Such an aim is achieved through the utilization of English grammar instruction through integrating grammar instruction in reading, writing, and speaking. Fears, however, concerning the nation reverting to instructional methodologies which have been perceived as unprofitable still remain despite such progress. These fears do not arise from the process of holding students and schools accountable, since these assessments do not reference memorization of syntax. Rather the favorability toward rote memorization is derived from the pressures accumulating behind such tests. Therefore, the state of Virginia must resolve to reduce overwhelming stresses and eradicate pressures which are derailing their intended purpose.

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