Repairing the Mis-measuring of Identity

The 40 minutes that would forever change my life . . .

Capshaw Middle School, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Eighth-grade advanced reading, Tuesday, second period, late February, 1982. The dreaded words that changed my life course were delivered without emotion by my reading teacher, Mrs. Alesi: “Please clear your desks. Today we have a standardized test on reading comprehension.”

For the next 40 minutes, I panicked. I stared at the wall. I twirled my pencil. My brain and body dissociated. All I could think was that I couldn’t think. Scary thoughts entered my head—I couldn’t focus. Waves of fear flooded my body. I saw my peers with their heads down, filling in bubbles. I took a cue, looked up at the clock; I’d already lost 10 precious minutes. With 30 minutes left, I started the test. The next thing I heard was “Pencils down. Pass in your tests.” And that was it. Fate sealed.

“Mrs. Treshan, this is Mrs. Alesi. We have the results of Stacy’s reading test.”

“Oh?” questioned my mom.

“Stacy scored in the lowest percentile possible of the test. We need to move her (sic) to remedial reading.”

“Excuse me?” probed my mom.

“Yes, I’ve already spoken to Carol Nickel, a reading specialist, and explained the circumstances. We are aware this is an unusual circumstance and it is late in the year, but our hands are tied. Stacy must be moved classes because of her test score. Carol has agreed that she can be moved into her ‘special’ class for struggling readers.”

My mom did not protest. She didn’t know she could. And in spite of having a 4.0 GPA, being student council representative, honor society vice president, recent Bat Mitzvah, and stand-out volleyball, swimmer, and soccer player, my schedule was changed. Fate sealed. Scarred. Shamed.

—sj Miller

When a teacher forgets what counts . . .

It’s like a reflex, a tap on the knee that sends my leg jerking forward. It happens when the check circulates at the end of the meal, or when I divide my students into small groups. “Forgive me,” I plead, “I’m bad at math.” The request is rooted in a painful memory.

St. Peter’s Grade School, suburban Chicago, Illinois. I am eight years old and sitting between my parents at a conference as my teacher discusses my math scores. She circles the numbers in red pen, highlights how many of my multiplication numbers I know by heart, and then leans forward to whisper, “I am particularly concerned about Ellie’s ability to solve word problems. It just seems as though she cannot untangle the story to produce a correct answer.” I feel ashamed. Even when my dad jokes on the ride home, “We’re not a math family, just a bunch of English majors,” I still feel my deficiency. I swallow this information so that it is inside of my body, so it can mingle with my blood and my cells and reproduce until it becomes a strand of my DNA. My identity is encoded—a circle drawn around “writer and reader,” with math planted far on the periphery.

I will use this information to make decisions for the rest of my academic career, steering my high school counselor away from difficult science courses after disclosing my numeric disability. I refuse courses, find loopholes in graduation requirements, bob and weave through high school coursework hoping no one will notice what I lack and, more importantly, where I am lacking. Eventually, my avoidance tactics fail me, and I am forced to take a challenging math course during the spring of my senior year of high school.
To cope, I meet with Mr. Peak in the math tutoring office every morning, and though he always arrives a little winded from his early-morning basketball game, still wearing athletic clothes, he always enthusiastically greets me, “What do we have today, Ellie?” Despite the increasingly more complex math concepts, he rubs his hands together and smiles, “Oh. This will be fun.”

To my utter amazement, it is. —Ellie Haberl

Uprooting Trauma

As guest editor for this issue, sj invited Ellie, sj’s graduate assistant, to read submissions and to help determine their potential fit. We discovered through our time reading manuscripts that we’d both incurred deep trauma related to standardized testing. Evidenced in our stories are multiple traumas rooted in systemic oppression and deficit beliefs of youth and families. Neither sj nor sj’s teachers or family were prepared for the onslaught of standardized testing. Then, the education system was barely at the beginning of what has become a monstrous testing industry that has positioned teachers as messengers delivering mandated sanctions. In 1982, many weren’t looking at the full child’s abilities, at asset abilities, portfolios, or even prior achievement; but we were testing for giftedness and special education. During this time, teachers were just coming to terms with mandates that would forever change the course of schooling for many youth. sj often wonders had Mrs. Alesi known what the potential consequences of the test would be, she might have fought back against the test results. sj often wonders, too, about the long-term emotional, social, and psychological effects of standardized testing on youth. Unlike sj, Ellie recalls feeling deeply cared for and nurtured by her second-grade teacher, but perceives a mismatch between her teacher’s supportive intentions and the long-term effect that testing had on her identity, and her parent’s perception of their child. She wonders why educators haven’t shifted the intention of testing to reflect the goal of supporting students and perhaps locating the places where they may need extra encouragement. What we do instead is measure how students score to find classes that are an academic “fit.” Such mismeasurements become predictors for low self-esteem, incarceration, dropping out, truancy, and even poverty. We wonder whether, in our attempts to remedy equitable schooling practices through measurement, we are also noticing the ways testing funnels students into certain life trajectories while potentially foreclosing the development of new talents, interests, and goals. Our students would deeply benefit from deep critical reflection about how the damage and trauma incurred by mismeasurement sets them on a life course that disadvantages, positions, and makes them vulnerable for future setbacks.

IQ Origins and Its Dangerous Uptake

To disrupt a continuation of the deep racist legacy of the test (see Gould for a lengthier history of how the IQ evolved from a bastardization of culturally biased and tampered-with research), this issue of English Journal is grounded in the research of The Mismeasure of Man by Stephen Jay Gould. Gould reveals the historicity of the once “beneficent-intended” Binet scale developed to identify young struggling learners, and how subsequent research was misappropriated by Lewis Terman of Stanford to create the insensitive IQ test. The decisions made by Terman have been enduring and the labels he created influenced the new generation of IQ classification. Research has documented how the IQ test has been used to weed out Blacks and Latinos/Latinas from passing entrance tests and serving in particular roles in the military, how it was used to enforce compulsory sterilization of some women and prostitutes because they would produce offspring who were simple or feeble-minded, and how it provided a pseudo-scientific approach to legitimizing racism and barring entry into the United States for potential immigrants with no “worth” as US citizens (as a result, many were deported). Coupled with the appropriation of this flawed research is Claude M. Steele’s work on stereotype threat, which suggests that people experience anxiety about confirming a negative stereotype about one’s group and typically perform worse than others as a result. Such phenomena can be viewed as a conscious or unconscious strategy perpetuating the IQ test’s enduring, deleterious impact. Although the IQ test is only part of the testing that
determines how students are targeted for gifted or special education, its social acceptance as a metric of intelligence is widespread.

Teachers Disrupting Mismeasurement
This issue interrogates how the inheritance of these deficit models and beliefs influences teachers who teach gifted, special education, and/or twice exceptional (2e) students in language arts classrooms. In addition, articles seek to reveal how current educators challenge the legacy of an overly simplistic, one-dimensional, static approach to understanding intelligence. Authors were encouraged to consider how they challenge these labels and engage all students equitably. Across a range of questions related to the call, they answered: Which initial deficit models about giftedness or special education have contributed to your beliefs, and how did you later come to adopt a different level of self-awareness? How does the school’s social environment contribute to attitudes about special education and giftedness and how have you worked to disrupt those beliefs in your school and classroom? How have you disrupted students from experiencing internalized oppression because of these labels and sought to reposition them as self-agentive? And, how has stereotype threat affected the students in your classroom? Collectively, these critical manuscripts raised several themes about how the mismeasuring of students not only perpetuates damaging personal and social deficit mindsets but also how deeply rooted in our collective DNA such mindsets still are. Regardless of the great diversity in the schools’ locations, student populations, and classroom contexts, contributing educators were troubled by how they had been conditioned to believe that the IQ and other testing measurements were somehow infallible. Collectively, they were concerned how certain students opted out of courses labeled “advanced” because of how they reflected potential stereotype threats. They were also distressed by how students expressed personal and social shame when they were moved into courses that were either covertly or publicly labeled “special.” Perhaps most touching is how these stories demonstrate a collective of compassionate praxis. Teachers drew upon a pivotal moment with a student or group, and in various ways shifted their approaches toward (all) students who’d been labeled gifted, special education, and/or 2e. Authors noted how they are practicing identity repair, and in this repair they become agents of healing.

Identity Repair
Thirteen years after sj’s mismeasurement, sj came face-to-face with Mrs. Alesi, who was an instructor and supervisor in sj’s teacher preparation program. sj approached her with the story above and described the enduring scars. sj told her about a public fear of reading aloud, often stumbling over well-rehearsed words, and a lasting fear of timed tests. sj recalls tears welling up in Mrs. Alesi’s eyes as she pulled sj into her chest: I remember her release of my stiff body as I pulled back. I looked her straight in the eyes and said, “I became a teacher, in part, so no student of mine would go through such school-based trauma.” Remember Carol’s benevolence? That care has remained embodied all these years.

Carol Nickell had helped sj heal. She was the teacher who’d taken sj in, made sj a teacher’s aide, and let sj grade papers, participate in some co-teaching, and run school errands. Somewhere deep inside, Carol had understood that the schooling system was flawed. The temporal identity repair enacted by Carol has never been forgotten, and is retained as a sustainable and embodied memory sj often draws upon when engaging students who’ve been traumatized by testing.

For Ellie, healing occurred by proxy, as often happens when later teachers repair damage incurred in younger years. During one of those morning tutoring sessions my senior year of high school, I realize I can use stories to remember the relationships among elements in a math formula. One afternoon, Mr. Peak watches me as I share the plot of a numeric narrative with another student. He suddenly has an enormous grin on his face and tells me, “You would make an excellent math teacher, Ellie.” I now see the wonderful circularity in this moment, the perfect return to my initial math trauma, my failure to understand math as story. Now, 18 years later, story is my greatest tool and I, the writer, have learned how to compose my way to understanding—but only because Mr. Peak knew that while the tools we use to measure students are sometimes broken, students never are. Though this moment of repair could not fully undo the identity
Ellie had accepted as true, it did illustrate for her that many of the tools we use to measure students are flawed, and she would have to remain vigilant when believing how someone else was labeled.

While practices for determining and identifying students with special needs have only slightly shifted from the 1963 and 1975 federal guidelines, the regulations for identifying students with learning disabilities are still in place. More recent change came in 2004 when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stated that schools must permit the use of multiple processes for determining special needs and services, and could now opt out of using IQ tests as a measurement to determine if a student has a learning disability. Furthermore, in the last decade 24 states have changed their definition of gifted to be more expansive and inclusive. Currently, states are moving away from using IQ measures and instead are adopting frameworks with multiple measures to determine necessary interventions that will support progress in school. Examples of these include combinations of assessments that determine cognitive abilities, persistence, creativity, motivation, self-control, mindset, self-regulation strategies, classroom practices, teacher design and delivery of curriculum and instruction, school demographics, climate, politics and practices, home and community environment, school and district organization and governance (see Gould).3

All teachers have potential to be agentive healers: All teachers can disrupt damaging mindsets and antiquated beliefs that contribute to marginalizing schooling practices. In her manuscript in this issue, Katie Wheeler attests to this healing potential: “Students enter our doors with a swarm of labels buzzing around them. The great thing about being a teacher is that in many ways we are revisionists, able to fix and change some of the problems we encountered as students. My work as a teacher has reaffirmed my belief that labels are rarely an accurate measure of students, and yet I found myself hesitant to share the labels I’d been assigned.” But sj often wonders, how many other testing survivors have been traumatized by the testing industry, and because the trauma is so normalized, live and also embody its consequences, as sj, Ellie, and even Katie have? In fact, we see dangerous intelligence practices persist, such as with potential Mensans who have been cast aside for failing to score in the 98th percentile of an intelligence test, or evidenced that only 26 states have policies for identifying culturally diverse students for gifted, special education, or as 2e (Gould). I wonder how we can support teachers to see such consequences of mismeasurement? Future research about how the testing industry has affected student’s lifelong emotional, social, and psychological well-being could move us toward developing critical skills to enact identity repair and to be teacher revisionists.

Imagining how such identity repair could happen, if sj could say one more thing to Mrs. Alesi it would be: Thank you. I am the teacher educator today, in part, because of what happened in those 40 minutes in your class, and over time, I listened and responded to my own pain. Ellie’s message to Mr. Peak is one of gratitude as well: I am so thankful to you, Mr. Peak, not just for helping me see myself as capable, but for encouraging me to show you using the methods for measurement that made sense to me. I never forgot this when I saw my own students struggle with their writing, and so your legacy continues to extend.

For now, teacher educators, preservice and in-service teachers, parents, support staff, and youth advocates must engage in identity repair, for if we ignore how our youth are being positioned and traumatized by the testing industry, we share culpability for furthering structural and systemic violence. We must all be vigilant in pushing back and disrupting, through our teaching and practice, how the testing industry remains loyal to dangerous beliefs that are deeply embedded by “time trusted” pseudo-scientific racist research and its enduring legacy (Gould). We believe that teachers care deeply and truly want students to shine in all of their myriad ways. We echo a hope similar to what Petra Lange shares in her piece: “My hope is that every student finds a way to meet challenges unfettered by insecurities created by undervalued difference with that same deliberateness, the certainty that the truth they hold will be heard and their brilliance will shine.” And to make that wish realized, we invite you to read this exciting group of manuscripts, which collectively demonstrate the power of teachers who are actively disrupting the mismeasurement of students in the English language arts.
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Notes

1. Stacy was sj’s assigned name, prior to sj’s name change.
2. When sj was an adolescent, sj was identified with the assigned gender female and, subsequently, with female pronouns.
3. Performing arts and motivation are left out of these measures.

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Drive Home October

That moment is always every moment. Standing like a silhouette Heavy arms Tightly-wrapped scarf Clutching my school bag like An old woman’s purse at church.

I am in a staring contest with a stack of papers: Beady semicolons’ unblinking eyes, White margins’ open mouths swallow each paragraph as if they all read All work no play All work no play All work no play

I tear off into the afternoon instead. Avoid all highways. Thread through the lolling back-roads Until I am far away enough to Let the fall baptize me: The roll of old stone walls, Mopey horses gnashing grass

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Hay bales fat and charming. The inky pavement cuts through Like a poem of a road not taken Flanked by farm shacks selling eggs, Pumpkins punctuating grassy knolls.

I use my relinquished moments well: Instead of a pen at a desk I pull over, Press my boots to the pavement, Participate in gravity. Count my steps. Pay attention.

I pick up a perfect red leaf Trace its red leaf veins with a finger Wind into the atmosphere Dissipate into the afternoon Like the flapping of wings.

—Kelly Nichols
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