

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Peddling Pedagogies: The Winners and Losers of a Standardized Testing Economy

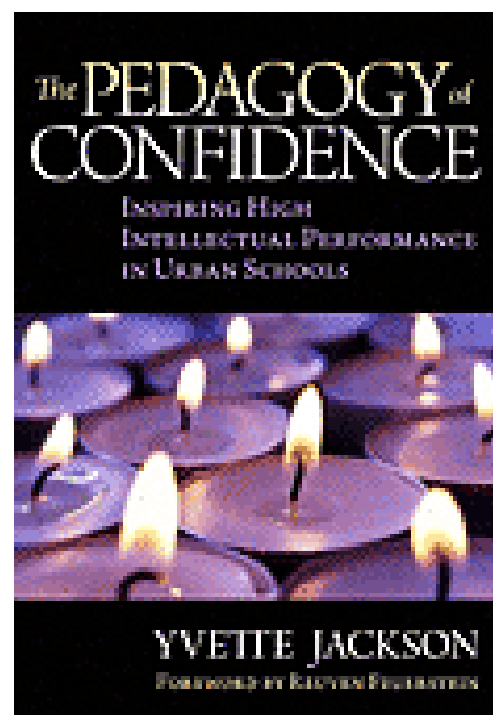
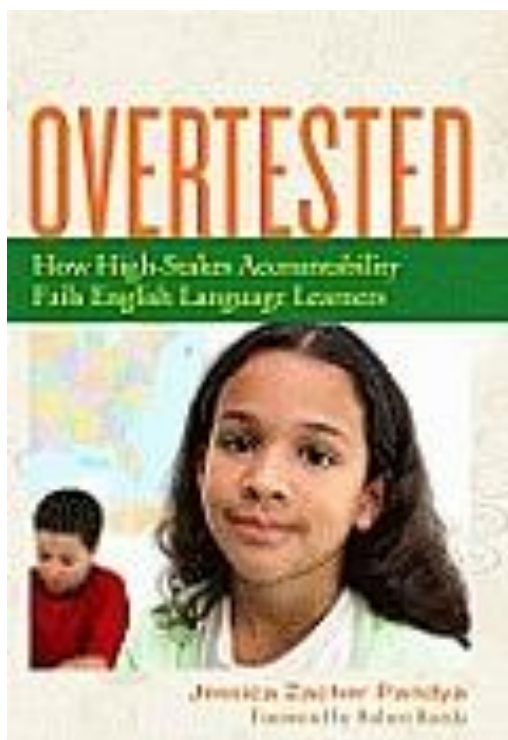
Overtested: How High-Stakes Accountability Fails English Language Learners

by Jessica Zacher Pandya

The Pedagogy of Confidence: Inspiring High Intellectual Performance in Urban Schools

by Yvette Jackson

Reviewed by Lucy Arnold Steele



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In 2014, authors writing for and about teachers and classrooms must position themselves in regards to the over-compassing specter of standardized testing. There are a myriad of possible positions from radical defiance of the testing culture to liberal attempts to work within the system while still engaging in liberatory education practices to conservative full complicity. Both of the books I discuss here have staked positions in the conversation about testing, and their differences in terms of content, research, and message have important implications for the lives of teachers and students.

Overtested: How High-Stakes Accountability Fails English Language Learners is the fruitful result of Jessica Zacher Pandya's year-long ethnographic study of a fourth-grade, predominantly English Language Learner (ELL) classroom in California. This book richly describes the requirements that students and teachers face and particularly discusses how these requirements impact ELL students. More specifically, Zacher Pandya's text focuses on a fourth-grade class at Laurel Elementary and a teacher whom Zacher Pandya refers to as "Ms. Romano". Zacher Pandya also discusses the climate created by high stakes testing; the structure of the school and the state school system; and the teacher education program in California. Situating Ms. Romano's work within a broader social context is crucial to Zacher Pandya's critique because her argument is that no single pedagogy will solve the problems created by standardized testing. Instead, she makes a case for institutional change, suggesting specific policy changes that would have better outcomes for ELL students.

One striking moment in Zacher Pandya's text occurs when Ms. Romano, having seen the negative impact of testing on her students, attempts to rebel against the system. After witnessing how a mandated, high-paced reading program stultifies her students and how she herself succumbs to a system in which the teacher becomes a "proxy ventriloquator" who "in the name of pacing and timing...shuts students off, ignores student talk, hurries students up, and glosses over obvious misunderstandings" (57), Ms. Romano adopts teaching practices that she thinks better meet the needs of her ELL students. As a result, her students do not pass district-mandated tests; their placement scores are too low to warrant their entries into the middle schools they want to attend; and administrators warn Romano that her job is in jeopardy. Not surprisingly, after this backlash, Ms. Romano returns to the mandated curriculum. This story of the disappointment of Ms. Romano is an important aspect of Zacher Pandya's work, which does not endorse a valorous, individual teacher who operates as martyr but argues for systemic change instead.

Yvette Jackson's *Pedagogy of Confidence* tells the story, not of a teacher like Ms. Romano, but of a program: The Pedagogy of Confidence™. Using language culled from various pedagogical sources (including, ironically enough, Paulo Freire himself) and anecdotal evidence from her own experience and that of her mentees, Jackson promotes a program, which she believes encourages achievement in traditionally low-achieving urban students. Her pedagogy is comprised of classroom strategies designed to engage learners along with the idea of "mediative communities," which encourage a dialogue between teachers and students about content being learned.

Reading Jackson's work generously, one might speculate that she saw a need for urban educators to have a ready-made pedagogy. But, as readers of *Radical Teacher* know, pedagogy and teaching philosophy is context dependent and cannot be gift wrapped and handed over to teachers. Just such well-meaning educators developed Open Court™, the supposedly "teacher proof" reading program that Zacher Pandya demonstrates to be unsuitable to the needs of Ms. Romano's students. In fact, the problem of Jackson's program is most evident when paired with Zacher Pandya's research on Ms. Romano's classroom. For instance, whereas Jackson recommends the teaching tool of the visual map, Zacher Pandya discovered that Thinking Maps™ (which students fill in to represent their prior knowledge before a reading) were being used in ways that did not match the teacher's expectation of the activity because the teacher had to move through the mandated curriculum so rapidly and did not have time to ensure the maps were used effectively.

Even more problematic is Jackson's stance on standardized testing. Jackson, like Zacher Pandya, is critical of deficit models of education, which focus on what students don't know and what they aren't able to do. She admits that "an appreciation of the breadth of all students' intellectual capacity should motivate us to recognize and address what is in fact the real gap school-dependent students have been relegated to experience: the gap between their potential and their achievement" (29). But Jackson, unlike Zacher Pandya, sees the problem as stemming from teachers and their practices, not from the testing agenda itself, or the privatization of public education. In fact, Jackson claims that "standardized assessments in the various disciplines are designed to alert us to the progress students are making in grasping the understandings from the disciplines and in applying knowledge and indicated skills" (146). Such support of standardized testing ignores its long history of bias, which privileges students most familiar with the dominant discourse. Of course Jackson, who in her book is selling her own trademarked pedagogical program, is in no position to critique the capitalist practices of the testing agenda, even though it is this system that is catastrophically and nearly silently maintaining, not just an achievement gap, but a possibility gap, for the very students Jackson claims to champion. Standardized testing is a multi-billion dollar industry that maintains a classist status quo by mandating a middle class set of interpretations and values. It follows that urban students, like those whom Zacher Pandya

studied, are not valued by the white, middle class discourse of standardized testing.

A pedagogy that truly seeks to educate urban students must be critical of the institutions and industries that do not value the languages, communities and discourses of urban students. At the very least, such a pedagogy should seek to analyze and deconstruct standardized assessments to understand what happens when urban students take these tests. It is notable that in the conclusion to *Overtested*, Zacher Pandya does not offer a set of classroom practices or suggestions for teachers. Instead, she suggests policy changes: to defund testing programs, change ELL identification and testing practices, and make time for learning to be a priority in classrooms. Jackson, on the other hand, cannot critique the system that makes a trademarked pedagogy possible, nor can she even provide options for beating the system that validates her own work. Her program reveals the sad fact of public education in the U.S. today where curricula and their implied ideologies are bought and sold by states and school districts, all in the name of improving student achievement. Publishing companies, testing companies, and educational consultants flourish in this system and are always on the lookout for ways to offer "improved programs" and "better tests." While companies like SRA/McGraw Hill (publisher of Open Court) and Renaissance Learning (publisher of Accelerated Reading) and individuals like Jackson disingenuously sell their products as ones that are good for democratic education, money would be far better spent on teachers, who could use the time and resources to think through their own ideologies and classroom practices and develop their own professional networks.

In *Overtested*, Zacher Pandya is able to critique the institutional constraints of teachers, whereas Jackson, in *The Pedagogy of Confidence* stacks another brick on top of an already formidable (and lucrative) testing wall. I have seen the devastating effects of standardized testing on students first-hand, in kindergarten students through college freshmen, and believe that we are ethically

compelled to speak out against practices that continue to disadvantage those who are already disadvantaged and privilege those who are already privileged. Research like that by Zacher Pandya is the kind of research that needs to be conducted and disseminated. Programs like the Pedagogy of Confidence™, however, are dangerous because they replace a teacher's hard earned wisdom with feel better formulas.

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