

I.Q . Testing Damages Self -Worth of Test-takers and Reduces their Opportunity for Success

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A Massachusetts School of Law Interview

I.Q. testing not only damages the self-worth of many test-takers but it has denied millions of them the opportunity to better their educational and economic lot, a new book asserts.

The tests are being used to sort people out by intelligence when “we don’t know what intelligence is, so you don’t really know what an IQ test is measuring,” says author Stephen Murdoch, an attorney and author of “IQ: A Smart History of a Failed Idea,” published by John Wiley and Sons.

“People have been really damaged by these exams,” Murdoch said in the TV interview “Books of Our Times,” produced by the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover and distributed by Comcast. “There’s the top 10% or whatever it is and they feel great about themselves and I think that’s good. The problem are the people that score below that—with their authority figures, teachers, and principals saying to them—‘We’re able to really bore into your genetic being and tell you what you’re worth.’”

“If you’re scoring high, there’s something good going on in your mind,” Murdoch said. It’s the “false negatives” that concern Murdoch—the fourth grade student that scores a little above or below the average.

“How do you know in the fourth grade his score means in later years he’s not going to be able to learn calculus in his senior year in high school?” Murdoch asks. And, “if you don’t score in a high percentile, then you don’t get tracked into those gifted programs and your chances of taking advanced classes like calculus go way down and your chances of getting into a good university or a university at all go down, so it’s a false negative. It’s where the real crime of IQ testing is done.”

Pointing out “kids grow mentally in fits and starts”, Murdoch said the I.Q. test is a “comparative tool” by its nature and not a biological measure of intelligence but “you’d think it was a biological tool by the way they (testing companies) talk about it (when) there’s nothing biological about it.”

When asked by host Dean Lawrence Velvel of MSL if intelligence testing today in its various forms is used as an easy method of excluding people from schools, Murdoch replied: “They are certainly gatekeepers. The SAT (SAT Reasoning Test) is no better than the parents’ educational background and income. So if you control for those you might as well ask applicants how much education they’ve had and how much money does their family make, rather than study for the (test) and spend all the hundreds of millions of dollars that we

spend administering these things. Economic class matters a lot.”

Murdoch goes on to say, “There is a tension when it comes to these kinds of institutional tests and IQ tests between the individual and the institution. It’s why the IQ test has done so much damage over the generations. ..IQ exams are about promoting institutional efficiencies and not about individuals.”

Even if society wanted to get rid of I.Q. tests “we have the equivalent of (an educational) military-industrial complex behind them and it’s going to be difficult.” He named the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, an organization with an estimated \$1.1 billion annual budget to create a variety of testing instruments. One ETS contractor is the College Board, producers of the SAT and administered to about three million students each year.

I.Q. tests got their start in World War One when psychologists pitched them as “a way to process our human beings—in the military, immigration, law, and medicine,” Murdoch said. Although the Army adopted the tests reluctantly and psychologists boasted after the war the tests had helped the war effort, in fact, “it was proven they didn’t help the war effort at all. But they (psychologists) helped themselves tremendously in their PR effort,” moving from the outskirts of society into the mainstream as a result, Murdoch said.

After the war, an Army testing officer adapted the military tests for academic purposes at Princeton University and the SATs got started.

In Great Britain, Murdoch said, “a nation consumed with stratification and socioeconomic status and class,” the 11 Plus exam administered to children of 10 and 11 years of age “would decide if you went to an elite public school...or if you go to a secondary modern school,” which, he noted, were “abysmal.”

About 25 years ago, psychologist Howard Gardner, Professor of Cognition and Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education and MacArthur Prize Fellowship winner, proposed the existence of multiple intelligences, such as intra- and interpersonal intelligence, musical intelligence, etc., Murdoch noted. Gardner’s view was rejected by the psychological Establishment but found quick favor among educators and teachers who recognized “that Johnny was good at this and bad at that,” Murdoch said.

Educators such as Richard Atkinson, president of the University of California system, called the SAT a terrible predictor of college performance, according to Murdoch, and urged the time spent studying for them would be better spent studying actual subject matter.

Founded in 1988, Massachusetts School of Law is purposefully dedicated to providing a quality, affordable legal education to minorities, immigrants and students from low- and middle-income backgrounds that would not otherwise be able to attend law school. The school does not use the Law School Admission Test but admits applicants based on their undergraduate educational records and determination to become lawyers.

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