Voices of Reform

Educational Research to Inform and Reform

A Journal from the Nina B. Hollis Institute for Educational Reform

Volume 8 • November 2026

MISSION STATEMENT

Bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners through actionable outcomes to improve equitable teaching and learning for today's students.

VISION STATEMENT

Strategically reimagine how teaching and learning can look across preK-20 educational settings.

Article Title
When Culture Does Not Count: The Incompatibility of Standardized Testing and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
Author Names
Marijayne McMahon
DOI
10.32623/8.00003

Abstract

Decades of research demonstrate that high-stakes assessments disproportionately privilege dominant cultural norms while marginalizing the linguistic, cultural, and experiential knowledge of marginalized students. Culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies offer an alternative vision of schooling grounded in cultural integrity, critical consciousness, and democratic participation. However, these pedagogical commitments remain largely incompatible with contemporary standardized testing regimes. This article advances a framework of structural incompatibility that clarifies why assessment reforms have repeatedly failed to support culturally responsive and sustaining practices. Drawing on critical scholarship in curriculum theory, accountability policy, and political economy, the framework identifies three interrelated levels at which incompatibility operates: assessment design, implementation, and governance. At each level, standardized testing reproduces logics of standardization, control, and compliance that undermine pedagogical responsiveness and cultural sustainability. By making these structural tensions explicit, the framework offers a diagnostic tool for reform advocates and policymakers seeking to distinguish between surface-level assessment adjustments and deeper structural barriers to equity.

When Culture Does Not Count: The Incompatibility of Standardized Testing and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Marijayne McMahon
Florida Atlantic University
mmcmahon2019@fau.edu

Standardized testing has been a central component of American public education for decades, serving as a means to measure learning and hold schools accountable (Darling-Hammond, 2004). It has been a central force in public education by shaping what students learn and whose knowledge is valued. Yet this narrative of accountability masks a far more troubling system. Instead of leveling the playing field, these assessments privilege dominant cultural norms and frame the knowledge, language, and lived experiences of marginalized students as deficits (Au, 2020; Sleeter, 2015). These inequities intensified during the accountability era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which Darling-Hammond (2007) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2016) emphasizes disproportionately penalized schools serving marginalized communities while narrowing curriculum focus to skills that do not allow for deeper learning.

Culturally relevant pedagogies (CRP) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP) offer a different vision of teaching and learning. Ladson-Billings's (1995a) foundational work on CRP emphasizes that students must be able to "maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence," challenging framings that position minority students as lacking (p. 160). Paris (2012) extends this work through CSP, arguing that educators must not only respond to students' cultural knowledge but also actively support "young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (p. 95). CSP recognizes that students' cultural ways of being are not deficits to overcome but assets that are an essential part of schooling.

These two areas of scholarship are frequently treated as separate conversations, one centered on assessment policy and the other on pedagogy. Yet this separation obscures a deeper problem: reform efforts that address testing without engaging CRP, or that advocate for CRP without confronting the structural constraints of high-stakes accountability systems, are unlikely to produce meaningful change. High-stakes assessments narrow curriculum and define achievement through tests that rarely reflect the realities of diverse learners (Au, 2022; Barrett, 2025; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Sleeter, 2015). Even when framed as a measure of equity, standardized tests are discriminatory, reproduce inequity, and cannot coexist with culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies.

This article advances that argument by introducing a Framework of Structural Incompatibility that clarifies why standardized testing reforms have repeatedly failed to support CRP. While existing literature highlights the inequitable outcomes of high-stakes testing, the Framework of Structural Incompatibility specifies how incompatibility operates structurally across assessment design, classroom implementation, and educational governance. By making these incompatibilities explicit, the framework serves as a tool for reform advocates and policymakers seeking to distinguish between surface-level adjustments and the deeper barriers to equity.

The Structure and Design of Standardized Testing

Standardized testing in modern U.S. schooling operates within a policy environment shaped by neoliberalism (Rasco, 2020). Although these systems are often framed as ways to promote equity and improve instruction, the logic embedded within them often operates from a different perspective. Standardized tests function not as neutral evaluators of learning but as mechanisms of control that narrow the curriculum and reinforce educational power structures (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; Horn, 2016).

Neoliberal policy shifts beginning in the late 20th century transformed public education by incorporating economic principles into schooling. Under this framework, schools are viewed as competitive enterprises, students as outputs, and learning as a quantifiable product. Au (2022) explains how the accountability movement positioned standardized tests as managerial tools used to monitor efficiency and measure institutional performance rather than to support student learning. Similarly, Darling-Hammond (2007) argues that high-stakes accountability systems reduce teaching and learning to data points, creating incentives that prioritize test scores over deep understanding. Within neoliberal logic, tests serve as a quality control mechanism. They are used to evaluate teachers, rank schools, and determine resource allocation, which creates a system where compliance with state directives is more important than responsiveness to student needs. This approach fundamentally changes the purpose of learning and assessment. Instead of informing instruction, standardized tests became a way of enforcing top-down governance.

Neoliberal testing practices also reinforce existing power structures by organizing students into hierarchies that reflect broader social inequities. Standardized tests create labels that carry significant implications for both students and teachers. As Au (2022) argues, these labels are not objective reflections of ability but products of a system that is unequal by design. Students from nondominant racial backgrounds are disproportionately labeled as low performing, reflecting both the cultural bias of the tests and the systemic inequities that shape educational opportunities (Au, 2015; Smith & Reeves, 2020). When test outcomes are interpreted as evidence of individual deficits rather than structural barriers, biased narratives about students' intelligence are reinforced and racial power structures remain unchanged.

The design of standardized tests further highlights their incompatibility with culturally relevant pedagogy. Test items are written from the perspective of dominant cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic norms (Kempf, 2016; Sleeter, 2015). As a result, the knowledge and language practices of marginalized students are often overlooked or undervalued. As Kempf argues, "an equity approach would never ask students to run a race when some have shoes and others are barefoot, or demand students with mobility impairments participate in a foot race against those who have no mobility impairments" (p. 129). When tests privilege one cultural worldview as the norm, students who lack access to this entry point are at an inherent disadvantage. Kempf's metaphor emphasizes that the issue is not effort or ability but the design itself. These disadvantages are not because the students know less but because the tests are designed to mirror a single cultural perspective.

The Incompatibility of Standardized Testing and Culturally Responsive Pedagogies

The structure and logic of standardized testing reveal that it was never designed to support equitable learning. These roots directly contradict the commitments of culturally responsive pedagogies, which require educational environments that affirm students' cultural identities, nurture their intellectual agency, and challenge structures of inequity (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Paris, 2012). While CRP centers the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students as the foundation for meaningful learning, standardized testing systems privilege dominant cultural norms.

This misalignment makes the goals of CRP impossible to obtain within the constraints of high-stakes testing.

The Commitments of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings's (1995a) model of culturally relevant pedagogy is built on three interconnected commitments: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

Access to academic success is the first criteria of culturally relevant teaching, as described by Ladson-Billings (1995a). Ladson-Billings argues that academic success must be accessible to every student as "all students need literacy, numeracy, technological, social, and political skills in order to be active participants in a democracy" (p. 160). Standardized testing, however, narrows academic success to test performance rather than meaningful learning. High-stakes tests emphasize decontextualized skills and procedural knowledge that do not foster critical thinking or the complex knowledge needed for democratic participation (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Supovitz, 2009). By reducing learning to what can be measured by standardized instruments, test-driven systems constrain the academic development that Ladson-Billings positions as essential.

Ladson-Billings (1995a) states that "culturally relevant teaching requires that students maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence" (p. 160). This commitment is central to CRP, as it frames students' cultural identities as essential for learning. Yet standardized tests overwhelmingly privilege linguistic patterns, cultural reference, and ways of knowing associated with dominant White middle-class norms (Au, 2020; Kempf, 2016; Sleeter, 2015). These tests are constructed by, and designed for, those who hold cultural power. As a result, instead of affirming cultural integrity, standardized testing systems pressure students to conform to dominant cultural norms (Au, 2022; McNeil, 2000). This assimilation contradicts the CRP framework of honoring culture and identity.

The third component of CRP, critical consciousness, emphasizes the importance of helping students develop the sociopolitical awareness necessary to critically examine the world around them. Ladson-Billings (1995a) explains that "students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms … and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (p. 162). The development of these skills takes time and requires engagement with students' lived realities. These practices are incompatible with high-stakes accountability systems that require teachers to focus on teaching to the test, leaving little room for incorporating meaningful, differentiated instruction (Au, 2011; Au, 2022; McNeil, 2000). By narrowing instruction to what will be on standardized tests, accountability systems suppress the justice-oriented learning that CRP requires.

Paris (2012) highlights the incompatibility of standardized testing and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Paris states that "culturally sustaining pedagogy … has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers" (p. 95). These commitments extend Ladson-Billings's (1995a, 1995b) pillars of culturally relevant pedagogy and stand in contrast to standardized testing systems, which frame cultural diversity as an obstacle (Au, 2015; Au, 2020). Under high-stakes testing, "teachers are much less apt to emphasize material not covered on high-stakes tests," which results in students' culture being devalued as it is not tested material (Madaus, 1988, p. 39). In this way, testing systems function as assimilation mechanisms that reinforce deficit-based perspectives on cultural diversity while also undermining the central goals of CSP.

The contradiction between standardized testing and culturally responsive pedagogies is stark. Standardization requires uniformity and assimilation, while CRP requires responsiveness and affirmation. Standardized tests are designed to sort and rank, while CRP is designed to empower and sustain. Recognizing this incompatibility is crucial for understanding why standardized testing fails to

promote equity and why it actively hinders culturally responsive educational practices.

Winners and Losers in the Standardized Testing Regime

Whom the System Privileges

While standardized tests are often promoted as neutral measures of academic success, the structure of test-based accountability disproportionately benefits students aligned with Whiteness (Au, 2020; Au, 2022; Kempf, 2016; Knoester & Au, 2017). Students who align with predominantly White middle-class schools' cultural norms frequently have the background knowledge that is embedded in standardized assessments. Sleeter (2015) explains that this is no accident but an intentional design that is a consequence of factory-model schooling, which is rooted in White middle-class values. The factory model of schooling is rooted in the ideologies of Taylorism and social-efficiency educators. Kliebard (2004) explains that the social-efficiency educators focused on efficiency and quantifiable results, which ultimately transformed curriculum thinking. They valued behavioral objectives and standardized testing, which signaled a shift toward a system-driven model of education as proposed by Bobbitt (1918). These ideas form the earliest foundations of modern accountability systems as seen through pacing guides, performance frameworks, and data-driven instruction. Sleeter argues that this approach "limits perspectives, funds of knowledge, and intellectual inquiry, and bores the diverse students in schools," signaling how standardized systems privilege biased ways of knowing (p. 113). This factory model of education has led to the application of social-efficiency ideologies to modern schooling that undermine the complexity and individuality that exist within learning.

Furthermore, private testing corporations and educational vendors form a multibillion-dollar industry that profits from assessment contracts, standardized testing, and prepackaged curriculum. For example, 38% of students in the United States take their assessments using the Cambium Assessment platform (Cambium Learning Group, 2025). This same corporation is used in the state of Florida for standardized assessments and has been granted a $196,423,004.83 total contract amount spanning from the 2022–2023 school year through June 2026 (Florida Department of Financial Services, n.d.). Furthermore, as of 2023, the state of Florida contracted over $6 million to corporations, including College Board and ACT Inc. (Florida Department of Financial Services, 2023). These investments highlight how deeply states rely on private corporations and how standardized testing functions as a political and economic tool. As Au (2011) argues, high-stakes testing is an extension of the "New Taylorism" in which corporate curricula and testing systems shift authority away from teachers. When states contract hundreds of millions of dollars to private corporations, they are not just purchasing assessments; they are outsourcing major decisions about what success is and how learning should be measured. The political economy of standardized testing ensures that corporate interests are the primary force in shaping the conditions of schools.

Whom the System Harms

The burden of standardized testing falls mostly on students from marginalized communities. Because these assessments are created based on dominant cultural norms, students whose experiences do not align with these expectations are disadvantaged. Sleeter (2015) explains that standardized tests reflect White middle-class assumptions and ways of knowing that leave the cultural and linguistic practices of nondominant students invisible. As a result, these differences are often penalized on assessments. Smith and Reeves (2020) found that average SAT scores for African American and Latinx students are significantly lower than those of European American and Asian American students, with fewer than one quarter of African American students and fewer than one third of Latinx students meeting college-readiness benchmarks. These score gaps do more than signal differential performance;

they reveal a system that is designed to reward students whose cultural backgrounds align with dominant norms. These outcomes emphasize that racial disparities in standardized test performance reflect a broader system that aligns Whiteness with academic success.

Socioeconomic disparities produce similar outcomes. A 2015 study found that students from families earning under $20,000 per year had the lowest average SAT scores, while those from families earning over $200,000 per year had the highest (Jaschik, 2015). These disparities have been recognized in the courts as well. In *Smith v. Regents of the University of California* (2021), students challenged the SAT and ACT as discriminatory by race, wealth, and disability. This lawsuit resulted in the University of California being barred from using the tests through 2025. Together, these findings illustrate that standardized testing does not operate in neutrality but instead reproduces racial and socioeconomic hierarchies.

Another site where the harms of standardization are visible is the schools serving minority communities. Darling-Hammond (2007) explains NCLB "does not provide substantial investments in the under-resourced schools where many students are currently struggling to learn, nor does it require that states demonstrate progress toward equitable and adequate funding or greater opportunities to learn," but it makes sure to place heavy focus on test scores as indicators of school quality (p. 248). Essentially, schools that face the greatest structural barriers are held to the highest standards without being provided with the necessary conditions for students to thrive. Au (2020) further supports this argument by emphasizing that low test scores lead schools, which typically serve marginalized communities, to be labeled as failing. Au states that "schools that are labeled as failing are regularly targeted by policymakers for closure as punishment for low performance" (p. 107). Because of this, schools that already struggle with limited funding and resource inequities are placed under pressure to produce higher test results to avoid closure. These measures cause teaching to the test to become less of a choice and more a necessity.

A Framework of Structural Incompatibility

While existing literature has documented the inequitable outcomes and cultural bias of standardized testing, less attention has been given to how incompatibility between standardized testing and culturally responsive pedagogies operates across different levels of educational systems. To address this gap, this paper introduces a framework of structural incompatibility, which conceptualizes the conflict between standardized testing and CRP as operating across three distinct yet interconnected levels: design, implementation, and governance. What the framework reveals, and what existing analyses have not fully articulated, is that these incompatibilities are not isolated flaws to be corrected through better test design or more culturally sensitive items. They are structural conditions that reinforce one another across levels, which is why reform efforts that create change at only one level fail to produce equitable outcomes.

Design-Level Incompatibility

At the design level, standardized tests are constructed based on dominant cultural, linguistic, and epistemological norms that privilege Whiteness and middle-class ways of knowing (Au, 2022; Kempf, 2016; Knoester & Au, 2017; Sleeter, 2015). Test items that rely on shared background knowledge, language patterns, and cultural references that are not universally accessible position marginalized students at an inherent disadvantage. In contrast, CRP requires assessments that recognize multiple ways of knowing, value cultural specificity, and allow students to demonstrate understanding through diverse forms. This fundamental misalignment in epistemological assumptions makes standardized testing structurally incompatible with pedagogies centered on cultural integrity.

Implementation-Level Incompatibility

At the implementation level, standardized testing reshapes classroom practice through curriculum narrowing, instruction-pacing mandates, and the prioritization of test-aligned content. Teachers who operate under the pressure of high-stakes accountability are incentivized to privilege test preparation over content that is culturally grounded, relational, and inquiry-based. However, CRP requires instructional flexibility, responsiveness to lived experiences, and time for critical engagement. The implementation demands of standardized testing actively constrain the conditions necessary for CRP to be enacted in practice.

Governance-Level Incompatibility

At the governance level, standardized testing serves as a mechanism of neoliberal control, shifting authority away from educators and communities toward state agencies and private corporations. High-stakes accountability systems utilize test data to rank schools, allocate resources, and justify punitive interventions, which disproportionately affect schools serving marginalized communities. By contrast, CRP depends on local knowledge, teacher professional judgment, and community-rooted definitions of success. The outsourcing of assessment and accountability to corporate entities further entrenches this incompatibility by prioritizing efficiency, scalability, and profit over equity and cultural sustainability.

The Framework Applied: ESSA-Era Schools Serving Marginalized Students

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 did not resolve the structural incompatibility between standardized testing and culturally responsive pedagogy; it redistributed it. For teachers and students in schools serving African American and Latinx communities, this redistribution is not abstract. As Table 1 illustrates, the incompatibility operates across all three levels simultaneously, which is why modest reforms have fallen short. Although ESSA replaced NCLB and eliminated its most punitive federal sanctions, it preserved annual standardized testing requirements and shifted accountability authority to individual states (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016).

At the design level, as shown in Table 1, state-administered assessments under ESSA continue to be built around decontextualized content that reflects dominant cultural norms, disadvantaging students whose cultural practices fall outside those norms.

At the implementation level, as illustrated in row three of Table 1, schools serving African American and Latinx communities continue to face pressure to prioritize test performance over culturally grounded instruction. Ramsay-Jordan (2020) examined four preservice secondary mathematics teachers attempting to enact culturally responsive practices in schools operating under accountability mandates and found that, despite their preparation, these teachers were consistently pulled away from CRP by the structural pressure to align instruction with standardized testing expectations. Their experience aligns with what Youn (2018) documented across a sample of 2,762 schools: testing pressure significantly reduced teachers' professional commitment and sense of community, with the most profound negative effects observed in schools of low socioeconomic status that are more likely to serve African American and Latinx students. When teachers are structurally constrained from enacting CRP, students from nondominant cultural backgrounds are denied the culturally affirming learning environments that CRP requires and are instead subjected to instruction narrowed to dominant cultural norms (Au, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

At the governance level, shown in the fourth row of Table 1, ESSA's decentralization of accountability has introduced new equity risks. Civil rights organizations raised concerns that giving

states discretion over proficiency goals and definitions of low performing schools could lead to greater inequity (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Fusarelli and Ayscue (2019) examined key provisions of ESSA and found that the return to state and local control introduced serious equity risks, with many states treating their ESSA plans as compliance exercises rather than as genuine reform opportunities. Some states took steps to circumvent the law's equity guardrails entirely, and rather than holding them accountable, the Department of Education approved plans that failed to comply with the law's own equity provisions. As Fusarelli and Ayscue warn, "guardrails are effective only insofar as federal and state leaders engage in appropriate oversight" (p. 36).

Together, these three levels demonstrate that the conflict between standardized testing and culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies is not merely a matter of flawed assessment instruments or poor implementation; it is a structural incompatibility rooted in opposing theories of learning, culture, and educational purpose.

For reform advocates and policymakers, the framework offers a lens for assessing reform proposals. Efforts that focus solely on modifying test formats, reducing testing time, or introducing culturally responsive items without addressing broader implementation structures are unlikely to produce meaningful change. By distinguishing between surface-level adjustments and structural conditions, the framework helps explain why well-intentioned reforms often fail to address inequitable outcomes. Meaningful reform requires attention not only to what is being assessed but also to how assessment shapes instructional practice and redistributes power.

Table 1

Framework of Structural Incompatibility

Framework of Structural Incompatibility			
Level	**What Standardized Testing Does**	**What CRP Requires**	**The Incompatibility**
Design	Narrow, decontextualized content aligned to dominant cultural norms.	Assessments that honor multiple ways of knowing and allow diverse demonstrations.	Test design structurally disadvantages students outside dominant norms and requires a single way of representing knowledge.
Implementation	Scripted curricula and pacing guides displace culturally grounded instruction and teacher professional judgement.	Instructional flexibility, responsiveness to lived experience, and time for critical engagement.	Accountability pressure constrains the conditions necessary for CRP to be enacted.
Governance	Punitive testing systems rank schools and entrench corporate control over testing.	Local knowledge, teacher professionalism, and community-rooted definitions of success.	Punitive governance displaces educator and community agency, which reproduces compliance over cultural responsiveness.

Implications and Recommendations

Acknowledging the incompatibility between standardized testing and culturally responsive pedagogy requires a rethinking of how assessments function in U.S. public education. With the current system rooted in neoliberal accountability and aligned with narrow, biased standards of achievement, meaningful change cannot be accomplished through menial policy reforms or adjustments to test formats. Instead, the shift needs to take place at a more fundamental level. Efforts to align assessment with culturally responsive pedagogy must address all three levels of incompatibility identified in the Framework of Structural Incompatibility. Design-level reforms alone are insufficient if implementation and governance structures remain unchanged.

The first and most fundamental recommendation is to replace high-stakes standardized testing with culturally grounded alternatives at the design level. Two research-backed assessment approaches offer a meaningful path forward. First, dynamic assessment measures students' learning potential rather than a fixed snapshot of knowledge, making it particularly suited to culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Gutierrez-Clellen & Pena, 2001). Unlike standardized assessments, dynamic assessment uses a test-teach-retest model that accounts for how students respond to instruction, which reduces the cultural bias inherent in static assessments and offers a more accurate picture of student achievement. Second, performance-based assessment asks students to demonstrate understanding through authentic, higher-order tasks grounded in students' lived experiences, cultures, and communities (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Darling-Hammond (1994) argued that performance-based assessments hold promise for equity by allowing students to demonstrate understanding through tasks more closely connected to their lived experiences and cultural knowledge, offering a more accurate and holistic approach to measuring student learning. These assessment approaches share a commitment to honoring multiple ways of knowing and allow students to demonstrate competence on their own terms, a key issue the Framework of Structural Incompatibility identifies as absent from current assessment systems.

The second recommendation is to restore funding policies to create the conditions under which culturally responsive teaching can be enacted. Darling-Hammond (2004) emphasizes how "funding systems and tax policies leave most urban districts with fewer resources" and "schools with high concentrations of low-income and 'minority' students receive fewer resources than other schools within these districts" (p. 246). The case of Texas illustrates how difficult it is to achieve genuine funding equity, even when redistribution mechanisms are put in place. Texas's recapture system, widely known as Robin Hood, redistributes property tax revenue from wealthier districts to poorer ones (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). Yet despite its equity intentions, the system has still fallen short. Rather than raising the funding threshold for all districts, the legislature used recapture to bring the top down rather than the bottom up, Large urban districts such as Austin ISD, Houston ISD, and Dallas ISD, which serve predominantly low-income students and diverse student populations, are among those making the largest recapture payments to the state (Villanueva, 2022). This case demonstrates that funding redistribution alone, without adequate and sustained state-level investment, does not create the conditions for equitable education. Redirecting funding to provide equitable access to resources, culturally relevant curricula, and experienced teachers would help create equitable learning environments where the conditions for CRP can thrive (Darling-Hammond, 2013), but it is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

The third recommendation is to eliminate the governance structures that have outsourced educational decision making to private corporations with no vested interest in equity. Ultimately, policymakers must acknowledge that for-profit corporations play a significant role in shaping educational priorities. 2012 analysis found that states spend $1.7 billion annually on standardized testing contracts, and experts say the total has risen over the years (Chingos, 2012; Strauss et al., 2023). Florida's multimillion-dollar contract with Cambium Assessment (Florida Department of Financial Services, n.d.) is one example of how deeply accountability systems have been outsourced to private entities with no interest in students' educational success. Shifting away from standardized testing requires separating assessment policy from corporate profit and, instead, reallocating educational decision making to communities and educators. Moving toward more equitable assessment practices demands structural changes that abandon high stakes and resist corporate privatization that benefits from standardized tests.

Finally, future research should focus on the classroom-level realities that this conceptual framework cannot fully capture. Specifically, studies examining how teachers in schools serving African American and Latinx students navigate the tensions between CRP commitments and high-stakes

accountability demands. Such research could identify the conditions, both institutional and instructional, under which culturally responsive teaching survives and even thrives despite structural constraints, offering a foundation for the targeted policy changes this paper calls for.

Conclusion

The use of standardized testing is neither neutral nor equitable. Their development, design, and implementation highlight a system deeply rooted in cultural biases and patterns of racial sorting. Instead of leveling the playing field, these assessments reproduce and legitimize existing power structures that privilege Whiteness and penalize those from historically marginalized communities. Without naming this as a structural incompatibility rather than a collection of fixable flaws, reform efforts will continue to fall short. Policymakers will keep adjusting test formats. Teachers will continue to be taught culturally responsive practices that are structurally prevented from being practiced. Students from marginalized communities will continue to be assessed in ways that were never designed to reflect their knowledge, language, or lived experiences. Without addressing the structural role of standardized testing in shaping curriculum, instruction, and school evaluation, reform efforts risk perpetuating the very inequities they aim to address.

The goals of culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies present a radically different perspective of what education should look like when compared to standardized systems. CRP and CSP call for a system centered around cultural identity, sociopolitical consciousness, and engagement with the lived experiences of diverse students. These practices are wholly incompatible with the narrow, biased system of standardized testing.

The Framework of Structural Incompatibility makes visible that the conflict between standardized testing and culturally responsive pedagogy is not a matter of misalignment but a structural condition that is reproduced through design, implementation, and governance. Understanding this incompatibility is essential for reimagining what equitable education and assessment could be. Policymakers, educators, and communities must advocate for culturally grounded practices, or risk perpetuating the systemic inequities that exist today. Taking down the system of standardization is not a simple task. Only by moving beyond test-based accountability can schools fulfill their democratic responsibility to provide equitable and culturally sustaining experiences for all students.

References

Au, W. (2015). Meritocracy 2.0: High-Stakes, Standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*, *30*(1), 39–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815614916

Au, W. (2020). Testing for whiteness? How high-stakes, standardized tests promote racism, undercut diversity, and undermine multicultural education. In H. P. Baptiste & J. H. Writer (Eds.), *Visioning Multicultural Education: Past, Present, Future* (pp. 99–113). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003095644

Au, W. (2022). *Unequal by design: High-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003005179

Barrett, M. (2025). Balancing the scales: How culturally relevant pedagogy mitigates the harmful impacts of standardized testing. *Literature Reviews in Education and Human Services*, *4*(2), 55–67. https://tinyurl.com/dykyje96

Bobbitt, F. (1918). *The Curriculum*. Houghton Mifflin. https://archive.org/details/curriculum008619mbp/mode/2up

Cambium Learning Group. (2025). *Cambium Assessment*. https://www.cambiumlearning.com/brands/cambium-assessment

Chingos, M. M. (2012). *Strength in numbers: State spending on K-12 assessments*. Brookings Institution. https://tinyurl.com/psf9yj9z

Darling-Hammond, L. (1994). Performance-based assessment and educational equity. *Harvard Educational Review*, *64*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.64.1.j57n353226536276

Darling-Hammond, L. (2004). Standards, accountability, and school reform. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, *106*(6), 1047–1085. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2004.00372.x

Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). Race, inequality and educational accountability: the irony of 'No Child Left Behind.' *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *10*(3), 245–260. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320701503207

Darling-Hammond, L. (2013). Inequity and School Resources: What it Will Take to Close the Opportunity Gap. In P. L. Carter & K. G. Welner (Eds.), *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance* (pp. 77–97). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199982981.001.0001

Darling-Hammond, L., Bae, S., Cook-Harvey, C. M., Lam, L., Mercer, C., Podolsky, A., & Stosich, E. L. (2016). *Pathways to new accountability through the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/966.414

Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub. L. No. 114-95, 129 Stat. 1802 (2015). https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177

Villanueva, C. K. (2022). *Understanding recapture: The most misunderstood aspect of Texas school finance.* Every Texan. https://everytexan.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Recapture_July2022_final.pdf

Florida Department of Financial Services. (n.d.). *Contract detail: Contract #22679*. FACTS Florida Accountability Contract Tracking System. https://tinyurl.com/2p9ssd8b

Florida Department of Financial Services. (2023). *Transparency report (July 1, 2022–June 30, 2023).* https://www.myfloridacfo.com/docs-sf/accounting-and-auditing-libraries/audits/contract-grant-reviews/transparency-report-(22-07-01-thru-23-06-30).pdf

Fusarelli, L. D., & Ayscue, J. B. (2019). Is ESSA a retreat from equity? *Phi Delta Kappan*, *101*(2), 32–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721719879152

Gutierrez-Clellen, V. F., & Pena, E. (2001). Dynamic assessment of diverse children: A tutorial. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, *32*(4), 212–224. https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461(2001/019)

Horn, I. S. (2016). Accountability as a design for teacher learning: Sensemaking about mathematics and equity in the NCLB era. *Urban Education*, *53*(3), 382–408. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916646625

Jaschik, S. (2015, September 2). *SAT scores drop and racial gaps remain large*. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/09/03/sat-scores-drop-and-racial-gaps-remain-large

Kempf, A. (2016). *The pedagogy of standardized testing.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137486653_7

Kliebard, H.M. (2004). *The struggle for the American curriculum*, 1893–1958 (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203339985

Knoester, M., & Au, W. (2017). Standardized testing and school segregation: Like tinder for fire? *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *20*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1121474

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995a). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, *34*(3), 159–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849509543675

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995b). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465–491. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher, 35*(7), 3–12. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x035007003

Madaus, G. F. (1988) The distortion of teaching and testing: High-stakes testing and instruction. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *65*(3), 29–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/01619568809538611

McNeil, L. M. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203900451

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, *41*(3), 93–97. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244

Ramsay-Jordan, N. (2020). Preparation and the real world of education: How prospective teachers grapple with using culturally responsive teaching practices in the age of standardized testing. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, *29*(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056787919877142

Rasco, A. (2020). Standardization in education: A device of neoliberalism. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, *18*(2), 227–255.

Sleeter, C. (2015). Multicultural education vs. factory model schooling. In H. P. Baptiste, A. Ryan, B. Arajuo, & R. Duhon-Sells (Eds.), *Multicultural education: A renewed paradigm of transformation and call to action* (pp. 115–136). Caddo Gap Press. https://www.academia.edu/16483957/Multicultural_Education_vs_Factory_Model_Schooling

Smith, E., & Reeves, R. (2020). *SAT math scores mirror and maintain racial inequity*. Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sat-math-scores-mirror-and-maintain-racial-inequity

Smith v. Regents of the University of California, No. 19STCV45718 (Cal. Super. Ct. 2021).

Strauss, V., Berliner, D. C., Gibbs, N. P., & Pivovarova, M. (2023). How public schools can stop wasting millions of dollars. *National Education Policy Center.* https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/how-public-schools-can-stop

Supovitz, J. (2009). Can high stakes testing leverage educational improvement? Prospects from the last decade of testing and accountability reform. *Journal of Educational Change*, *10*(2), 211–227. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-009-9105-2

Texas Education Agency. (n.d.). *Excess local revenue*. https://tea.texas.gov/finance-and-grants/state-funding/excess-local-revenue

Youn, M. (2018). The influence of standardized testing pressure on teachers' working environment. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, *15*(2), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.22804/kjep.2018.15.2.001

Marijayne McMahon is a K-12 classroom educator and doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at Florida Atlantic University. Her scholarship centers on teacher autonomy, curriculum policy, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Drawing from her experience in K-12 education, she is passionate about connecting research to classroom practice and supporting teachers as curriculum professionals. Her current work explores how educators experience autonomy, navigate policy contexts, and make instructional decisions that support meaningful student learning.