

## Documentary Review. “Testing Mrs. Grube” and “A Different Standard”. Films by Ondine Rarey.

Tim Loreman and Randy Ritz

‘Testing Mrs. Grube’ and ‘A Different Standard’ are linked documentaries from filmmaker Ondine Rarey examining two very different New York school scenarios in the wake of the controversial US ‘No Child Left Behind’ (NCLB) legislation.

‘Testing Mrs. Grube’ follows one teacher (Mrs. Grube) and her Grade 5 class through a school year spent in the shadow of standardized tests. In the preceding year the school had been placed on a list of 99 ‘failing’ New York schools, the result of which saw the school administration and half of the teaching staff replaced. The pressure was now clearly on the school to raise standardized tests scores in order to get off the ‘failing schools’ list.

An obsession with tests permeated the school. From the banner on the wall reading ‘PS 161 is on the road to acing the tests,’ to the highly structured curriculum and learning environment in which time spent on any task was timed to the minute—indeed the insistent and inhuman whine of the timer punctuates the drama played before the viewer. Teachers became managers, and instruction was clearly teacher-centered, expository, and not responsive to individual developmental levels or pedagogic approaches and ideas such as constructivism and catering to ‘multiple intelligences’. Clearly the joy had been taken out of learning, and as time progressed the children clearly showed signs of test fatigue thanks to regular practice testing and re-testing.

This documentary concludes with Mrs. Grube’s doubts on the value of her teaching under these conditions, and the negative impact it had on her students. Many in her class do pass the end of year tests, but at a cost. Some have to take summer school in order to progress to the next grade level, and four students who have failed (and therefore do not progress to the next grade level) are told so publicly. Their reaction is heartbreaking.

On the end of year field trip we see the children exploring a local park, playing, and asking questions. Things they should have been doing all year. Mrs. Grube admits she is trying to make up for the whole year in a single field trip, and a sad and remorseful admission it is.

The second documentary, ‘A Different Standard’, acts as a corrective to the bleak picture painted by ‘Testing Mrs. Grube’. This documentary explores an alternative New York school, Central Park East 1. At this school there is talk of ‘wonder’ and ‘passion’. Learning is inquiry-based and children are clearly engaged, involved, and excited by learning. A constructivist approach to teaching and learning is used throughout the school, with students learning from peers and experiencing cognitive dissonance in order to generate further questions for inquiry. This documentary clearly presents this picture of learning as being ‘richer’ and more relevant to the lives of children.

Central Park East 1 is not, however, without its tensions. The school must still participate in the standardized tests at year end so prevalent in the teaching of Mrs. Grube, and it struggles to reconcile its pedagogical approaches with the reality of these tests. Staff and administration are tempted to dismiss the tests, but know that they can not. Instead, we are presented with a picture of a strong administration resisting a district ‘top down’ approach to leadership, and confident teachers who can defend their pedagogical and philosophical positions in the face of the ‘standards’ movement.

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These documentaries, viewed as a set, are unashamedly biased against Bush's policy of standardized testing in order to evaluate the 'worth' of schools and penalize those that fail accordingly. Rarey makes no apologies for this, and neither does she claim to be 'fair and balanced' in her depiction of the issues. The unnerving picture painted in 'Testing Mrs. Grube' is counterbalanced by the hope seen in 'A Different Standard'. Rarey shows us that it is possible, although by no means easy, to resist political policy based more on ideology than an understanding of how children learn. These documentaries demonstrate that there are two quite clear paths schools can follow in the face of NCLB; the path of teacher-centered instruction and teaching to the test, or the path of engagement and active inquiry.

This is not a static DVD. The use of visual color and animated sounds of the classroom combined with thoughtful and intentional editing keep the story moving. The viewer is captured by the unfolding struggles and successes of students and the candid revelations of the teachers.

We highly recommend these documentaries to university professors teaching education students, school and district administrators, politicians, or anyone interested in seeing the negative impact ill-conceived laws and practices in education can have on children. These documentaries are also useful to those schools wishing to break the cycle of 'teaching to the test' and who are looking for alternatives and inspiration to change.

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