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“SENSITIZING” SHAKESPEARE

By PETER C. DOHERTY, Ph.D.

The education “experts” and bureaucrats have taken it upon themselves to “improve” many of the excerpts used in the reading comprehension and essay portion of the test.

Let me be honest: I am ambivalent about high stakes testing in education. I understand the reasons they have become a popular and required part of the education process. I understand that they serve as a check on what students are or are not learning, and I have no better alternative if we as a society are to require some objective standards for accountability in our schools, colleges, and universities. But yet I am ambivalent. Something about these tests bothers me, though I usually cannot tell you just what that may be. However, give me a specific case, and I know what can go wrong with them.

Take the recent case of the New York State Regents Exam. Passing this high-stakes test is a graduation requirement for all high school students. Part of the test involves reading comprehension and essay writing. Briefly stated, passages taken from the works of well-known writers are presented to the students and they are asked to write an essay on one or more of the issues a particular excerpt raises. So far so good.

But the design has fallen badly apart in New York State. There the education “experts” and bureaucrats have taken it upon themselves to “improve” many of the excerpts used in the reading comprehension and essay portion of the test. How so, you say? Well, the experts and bureaucrats have devised a set of so-called “Sensitivity Review Guidelines” (to see the guidelines

go to: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/testing/assesspubs/combinedsensitivityguide.htm>) under which every passage chosen for inclusion on the Regents Exam must be judged, and those passages or parts of passages that run afoul of them must be edited to conform. The result, in the words of the *New York Times*, yields passages that have been, “... sanitized of virtually any reference to race, religion, ethnicity, sex, nudity, alcohol, even the mildest profanity, and just about anything that might offend someone for some reason.”

Mind, now, we are not talking here about excerpts from anything that might even remotely be considered offensive or pornographic. No, we are talking about excerpts from works by renowned authors such as Anton Chekov, the 19th century Russian playwright and short story writer, and Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Jewish-American writer who spent much of his later life as a resident of Miami Beach, yet composed his works almost entirely in Yiddish and who was awarded a Nobel prize for literature. In other words, these are authors who are world renowned for both excellence and high art.

But, apparently, at least to the educational experts in New York State, they are just not as sensitive as they need to be. For example, Singer was a novelist whose core concern was Jewishness. One simply cannot

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appreciate, or even understand, his work without this factor. But the experts decided that, to be sensitive, all references to Jews or Jewishness in the passages they selected from Singer's work must be expunged if the Sensitivity Guidelines were to be satisfied. Accordingly, for example, a phrase he used which in the original read, "Most Jewish women..." was sensitively modified to read "Most women...." Now this changed the entire thrust of what Singer was saying and, even worse, the experts did not note that any change had been made.

The list of horrors here could go on for some time, but you see the point and, I hope, the lesson for us in Florida. Way down in the bureaucracy and tucked into the Colleges of Education in our state are people who, if given the chance, will impose guidelines on our state's high stakes tests equally as onerous as those in New York. And don't say it cannot happen here. It can and it might happen the same way it happened in New York—because here is the punch line: The Guidelines were developed and put into effect some time ago and drew no attention from anyone in a position to challenge them. Further, they would still be invisible and doing their damage today had it not been for a parent who, being literate and curious, began to examine past copies of the Regents Exam after she found a "sensitized" passage she knew did not read that way in its original form.

Now that is scary. Big scary. For there is no way that "Out, Out, spot!" conveys the same meaning that "Out, Out, damned spot!" does. The former refers, I think, to Dick and Jane's dog while the latter refers to something deeper in every sense possible.

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Peter C. Doherty, Ph.D. is a senior policy analyst at The James Madison Institute and may be contacted via email at peterd@jamesmadison.org.

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