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## Understanding Resistance to Standardization in Education: The Tragedy of the Commons as a Theoretical Framework

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# Understanding Resistance to Standardization in Education: The Tragedy of the Commons as a Theoretical Framework

"When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro."  
Hunter S. Thompson

## ***1. Purpose***

The purpose of this paper is to articulate how a theory, developed in 1968 by Garrett Hardin to describe how shared resources, or “commons” can become depleted, also elucidates the mechanism by which standardization of educational outcomes and assessment have come to dominate current education discourse. We then briefly present results of a case study of a school struggling to succeed within a context of a district’s hyper-focus on standardized measures of success, and employ the theory to illustrate its usefulness to explain what we found at the school site. We believe this theoretical framework provides interesting perspectives on current trends toward standardization that threaten the quality of public education. In addition, in keeping with the theme of this year’s conference (to know is not enough), we believe it also suggests useful courses of action to mitigate against those threats.

## ***2. Theoretical Framework***

In too many schools, we have all but abandoned what many believe is the main reason for education in the first place: to become happy, healthy, and well-adjusted adults who understand how to live balanced lives in the context of our families, communities,

cultures, and ecosystems. Instead, we have set a much narrower goal: to prepare students to take their places in the global economy. This narrow conception of education has brought with it a hyper-focus on academic performance and an accompanying rise of standardization in nearly every arena of public education. As many authors have argued, however, standardizing educational outcomes and assessments represents a deeply radical epistemology that equates education and knowledge with production and commodification and has deeply deformed schooling (see for example Bowers 2001, Friere 1970, Giroux, 1981, 2001; Robinson 2004; Orr 1993; Giroux & Salzman, 2009; Richart, 2011). Too often, the move toward standardization has resulted in schools that have lost all semblance of curricular balance. Instead of places where children feel safe, cared for, and who have a right to be educated in ways other than academic, too many schools have become massive data-creation machines where students are ancillary and policy decisions and pedagogical approaches are designed to do one thing: crank out numbers that can be published in newspapers and on websites year after year as proxies for quality education. In short, when we overly-quantify what students do in school, we exploit them as a commodity.

Significantly, we exploit them as a particular class of commodity – one that we as a society hold in common – and in so doing, we give rise to a pernicious type of dilemma known as a “tragedy of the commons.” Described by the ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968, this dilemma explains how the self-interested rationality of individuals attempting to maximize personal gain can lead to actions that deplete shared resources and diminish the health of a “common” (e.g. an ocean or the atmosphere – or in this context, a school full of children) despite the fact that such depletion or diminishment ultimately harms

everyone involved, even those who benefit in the short term. Hardin described grazing land used by a community of herders: if the plot is subdivided into plots held by individuals, each individual will seek to sustain the health of his allotment by carefully managing it as a renewing resource. If, however, the land is held in common, it is in each herder's individual interest to allow as many cows as possible graze the land, even if the result is an overgrazed common, because each herder receives all of the benefits from adding an additional cow, while the damage to the common is shared by the entire community. From the perspective of the individual herder, then, adding more cows to the common is an economically rational decision, despite the fact that collectively over time, such action will deplete or even destroy the common entirely, to the detriment of all – the eponymous tragedy of the commons.

A tragedy of the commons can arise (1) whenever a commodity is held in common and (2) when externalities associated with that commodity exist and are unequally distributed such that some of the costs or benefits of a given action are incurred by parties who did not agree to the action (Hardin, 1968). We believe that Hardin's dilemma is unfolding in today's schools because modern education features the two factors necessary for a tragedy of the commons to arise. First, public education systems are by design characterized in large measure by externalities, most of which are positive and that accrue to society as well as to those being educated (Orenstien & Levine, 2008). However, when one views students as third-party participants and considers practices commonly found in today's schools, it is not at all clear that the positive externalities offered as justification for public education still exist. Weeks of instructional time given over to test-prep, for example, can be reasonably viewed as being associated with a cost

to students from which no benefit to them derives. This, then, is one of the two factors necessary for a tragedy of the commons scenario to arise: externalities that are unequally distributed such that some of the costs or benefits of a given action are incurred by parties who did not agree to the action.

The other necessary factor, commodification of a good or service that is commonly held, arises because of the way the products of standardized tests are used. Specifically, the benefits that arise from high-stakes testing practices accrue not to the students themselves, and not to the society as a whole, but to a select few, such as individuals or groups who need such data to support particular reform efforts. Using students in this manner to produce a metric of assessment that satisfies reasons external to the students is the very definition of commodification.

### ***3. Methodology***

In this qualitative case study, we sought to learn more about how one particular school in a large Bay Area community attended to the socio-emotional dimensions of education despite the pressures from district administrators and from many parents to maintain high scores on the California STAR test, a statewide standardized measure of academic performance. We found that a qualitative approach was suited to the descriptive nature of this study, given the complexity of the contexts we investigated.

### ***4. Data Sources***

Maple Elementary School is a title I K-5 school serving a student population of just over 400 students, most of them from minority cultures. We chose Maple Elementary because of its reputation in the district as a school with particularly strong community ties, a well-developed school culture, and an emphasis on meeting the social and

emotional needs of its students. We collected data through tape-recorded and transcribed interview sessions with the principal, Dr. Jordon, twelve teachers who volunteered to speak with us, and the parents of three students. We also observed numerous class sessions, attended school events, and spent lunch sessions at the school site, keeping field notes concurrently while observing when such note-taking could be done unobtrusively, and making notes as soon as possible afterward when note-taking was not practical, following accepted standards of practice (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). We also gathered numerous documents that were identified by participants as relevant to our focus, or that seemed to us to be relevant.

## **5. Results**

Following Merriam's (1998) description of a grounded theory approach, we identified three relevant themes regarding how Maple Elementary attended to the socio-emotional dimensions of education: *school as family*; *education as a collective responsibility*; and *school culture as an explicit creation*. (Note: these themes – and our methodology - are only briefly introduced in this proposal; the full paper contains a more complete presentation of them, with a more robust contextualization and supporting evidence.)

### *Theme 1: School as Family*

Maple Elementary School was a close-knit, caring community that time and time again its members referred to as a “family.” As one mother explained, “We hang out here a lot, since it’s so welcoming.” Many practices support the growth of community, such as daily whole-school morning meetings, a common lunch hour, and many opportunities for cross-grade collaboration, both among students and teachers.

### *Theme 2: Education as a Collective Responsibility*

Another important theme was the view among administration and staff that, in the words of one teacher, “everyone takes responsibility for all the students. It’s not like each teacher has only 30 students. We’re all responsible for all the students, and each student belongs to all the teachers.” Perhaps more than anything else, this structural element – an agreement to take collective responsibility for all students – seemed responsible for the feeling of family that we encountered at Maple Elementary.

### *Theme 3: Culture as an Explicit Creation*

A third theme was the extent to which the school culture was carefully cultivated through the use of explicit school-wide traditions designed to foster cohesiveness by circumscribing and encouraging particular norms of behavior. While traditions such as these could have easily led to the rise of an oppressive organization where behavior outside the articulated norms would be ostracized, we saw no evidence of it. On the contrary, a sense of humanity and inclusiveness seemed to lie at the center of these traditions, and it was apparent that their purpose was not to instill a particular brand of “groupthink,” but rather to provide structure to allow teachers and students to feel safe and cared for.

Overall at Maple Elementary, it was clear that the social and emotional needs of the students were never viewed as secondary to academics. That is not to say, however, that academics were secondary. On the contrary. Dr. Jordon vigilantly guarded against any intrusion that in his view might compromise STAR test performance; however, he did so only because he did not want low performance on STAR tests to hinder his ability to run his school in a manner he saw fit. As he explained, “We don’t use those test for

anything meaningful as far as instructional decision-making. But those numbers are the coin of the realm with the district. So as long as our numbers are high, I have the power to do things my way, but if those numbers slip...”

Dr. Jordon’s assessment of the constraints of context illustrates both the power of current standardization and assessment trends to influence schooling as well as an ironic and somewhat Machiavellian path of resistance to that power: he was willing to invest significant time preparing his students to perform well on STAR testing but only so that he could minimize its impact. At Maple Elementary, and we suspect at other schools attempting to attend to the socio-emotional needs of their students, educators choose to game the system in order to maintain the autonomy to relate to their students as more than academic performers.

In terms of a tragedy of the commons, Dr. Jordon’s decision to push his students to perform well on the STAR test can be viewed as a mechanism to internalize a benefit on behalf of his students for their efforts on the test: if they do well, they get the benefit of teachers who are not hounded by Orr’s “terrible simplifiers.” It must be said, however, that despite the fact that Maple Elementary seems to be doing an admirable job of gaming the system, it does seem less than ideal that they feel compelled to do so in the first place.

## ***6. Significance of the Work***

Although Hardin’s theoretical framework is well known in ecology studies, particularly in areas of sustainability, to our knowledge its use in the context of public education is novel. We believe that applying Hardin’s theoretical framework in this context can provide useful perspectives and may lead to a better understanding of the short-and long-term effects of a variety of trends, including current trends toward



standardization that threaten the quality of public education. Also, in keeping with this year's conference theme, we believe that this framework may also suggest useful courses of action to ensure public education serves students and society equally well.

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