

# Daryl Takes a Test



Students for whom standardized tests are painful obstacles deserve other ways to demonstrate their intellectual strengths.

Anyone who watched Daryl all year could predict that standardized testing would upset his tenuous equilibrium in the classroom. In third grade, he twitted the authorities, refused to obey the most basic rules, could not sit still, called out inappropriately, and expended a considerable amount of time in transitions from one activity to another. He gave no clue to his feelings, exhibited no obvious strengths, and had no friends. Daryl was an enigma whose behavior in most classes would result in an immediate special education placement.

Staunchly against such labeling and segregation of children, Daryl's teacher Karen refused to have him tested by the school Committee on the Handicapped. She felt that his massive resistance, plus his academic weaknesses, might doom him to a program for the emotionally or mentally handicapped from which he would never emerge. So she stuck with him through 3rd grade—and then another year, in 4th grade.

Karen's strategies for his social development (Jervis 1983) and her recognition of his strengths (Jervis 1986) brought about a stunning metamorphosis. By April of the second year Daryl revealed himself to be funny (even witty), friendly, observant, artistic, and a much more cooperative classmate. However, testing is an institutional task that Daryl still cannot tolerate.<sup>1</sup> No matter how skilled he is in daily classroom work, if he does not pass these tests, he will require another year in 4th grade. With his record on standardized tests, no appeal will be granted—every year, he has stood on the borderline for promotion. Still, everyone is rooting for him to pass the tests. His success is possible, but not certain.

#### Day One: Reading

Today is test day. Daryl makes his appearance late and without ceremony. He approaches Karen, "Do we have to take the test today? I don't want to." His tone is whiny and insistent. He continues to plead, and Karen turns her attention elsewhere. Daryl opens his ever-ready drawing book. Having made eye contact with her, he announces with

renewed energy, "I'm going to draw until we have to take the test." Daryl is learning to regulate himself, and the ability to retreat into drawing rather than put on a public display is a healthy development.

Daryl cooperates during the vocabulary test. The next section is reading comprehension. Karen asks Daryl to read the sample. "Ralph is late and bumped his knee on the table," he reads fluently, adding the editorial comment, "Clumsy." He opens the test booklet against the rules and protests yet again, "I don't want to read this story. It's too long."

Asfid, who reads no English at all, is the first to finish the test. She whispers in Karen's ear that she wants to go to the movies. Somehow Asfid has found out that *Mary Poppins* is being shown in the auditorium. Karen smiles with pleasure at Asfid's secret information, dismissing her to the movie with a hand gesture. As other children finish, Karen reminds each of them to check their answers. No child does. She sends them off individually to the movie, which is meant to keep children occupied until everyone is finished. Only three children remain: George, who is restless and no longer concentrating; Daryl, who has gone to the bathroom several times and on each return changed his seat; and Theresa, who has recently arrived from Portugal and is proceeding slowly through the test. George leaves. Then Theresa. Daryl is still squirming in his seat when children straggle back from the movie.

#### Day Two: Math

Karen hopes for a better performance from Daryl than yesterday, but today could be even more difficult. Monday was Daryl's easiest test. He is able to read, though his standard English vocabulary is limited; and no one expects that he can fully transfer his quick and flexible linguistic skills from "playing the dozens" to a standardized test. But Daryl is less secure in math than in reading.

Yet Karen has reason to expect improvement. Yesterday Daryl was not "disgusting" (Karen's word for con-

duct that is completely out of bounds). Though he reverted to his less mature self—a restless distracting presence with a weak bladder—he did not fall apart before or after the test. Karen accepted his need to get used to the tests and highlighted his ability to control himself by quietly drawing when he first entered the room. She savored this evidence of his growth.

On the other hand, Karen is philosophical. If children are constitutionally able to follow the rules (and she recognizes when they are not), then they should accept the consequences of their actions. She knows Daryl could have been a more serious math student, and she has mentally prepared herself for his retention if he fails the test. "No one can consider him a candidate for special education. Maybe that is growth enough," she rationalizes, adding, "What would be wrong with retaining Daryl? His friend Nick would be in 4th grade too. Maybe another year at P.S. 135 would be good for him, and he could really consolidate his gains." Despite this reasoning, Karen is repelled by the idea that Daryl's future might be dictated by these tests.

Karen calls on Daryl to read the first sample question. The topic is numeration. He fluently reads, "What is the sum of 9 plus 8?" He chooses "71" from among the four possibilities. Karen points out that "lots of people, including me, do what Daryl just did. He reversed the digits in his answer. If

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you are one of those people, like Daryl and me, then be careful."

After LaFonta answers the second sample, Karen begins to read the test orally, as the instructions dictate, so that nonreaders will not be penalized in math. She then allows a specified interval for figuring and recording. Some children work at their own pace, tuning out Karen's voice. Others dutifully listen, compute, and wait for the next problem. Daryl is the only one having obvious trouble.

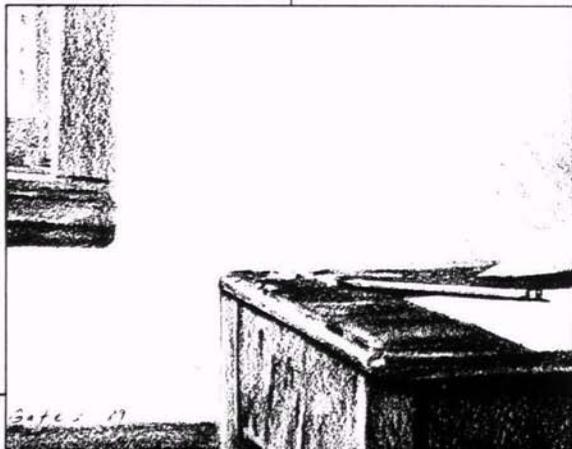
Daryl has marked the two sample questions in the body of the test. A child may read perfectly well or be a whiz at numeration systems, place value, and Roman numerals—the content of this section—but if answers don't correspond to questions, the re-

sult is failure. For children who say "71" when they mean "17," marking the score sheet correctly is already a pitfall.

I am sitting next to Daryl when I note his error. He is not keeping up with the oral reading; by 10:15 he has stopped working, either from frustration, the end of his stamina, or refusal to cooperate. Assessing the mess on his answer sheet, Karen gently suggests he start the next section: computation. He does nothing, muttering under his breath, "Why should I?" But after five minutes of stalling, he marks the sample and begins working on his own. Karen and I know from 16 months of watching Daryl that it takes him a long time to begin a new task, and that his resistance, which has been a severe obstacle to progress, has only recently diminished.

Humming to himself, Daryl begins the computation questions at a slow pace. After 10 minutes of concentration, he stops to annoy a friend from another class, who is sitting next to him. All of a sudden he addresses Karen from five feet away, "Do we have to take this test now? I don't want to take it now." His humming becomes a distracting buzz. "Can I go to the bathroom?" he asks rhetorically as he gets up to leave.

The class is now ready for the computation section. Karen suggests Daryl wait until she has read the directions. He waits, then goes to the bathroom. Upon his return, he can't remember where to begin. I point to where he left off. He starts on the problem:  $15 - 7 = ?$  He chooses "6," after he has made 15 marks on the page and drawn a line between the sixth and seventh lines. I am clearly monitoring him, and I motion him to count again. He does and corrects his answer. But my interference compels him to stand up his notebook as a barrier and poke his friend to get him to look. I raise my eyebrows, and his friend goes back to work. Not Daryl. His ability to concentrate is depleted, and he begins a show with Superdog and Robin, superheroes he extracts from his pocket. He fully expects his tablemates to be engaged, but my presence deters them, and Daryl goes back to the test. The problem is  $9 \times 7 = ?$  Counting on his



fingers, he gets "64." His answer is not among the choices, so he marks "not here." Then he erases it and, with a chuckle, marks "69."

As a solution to the next problem— $310 \times 4 = ?$ —Daryl records "314." I know Daryl can compute, so I risk intruding. Using a pencil as a pointer, I query, "What is  $4 \times 0$ ?" "Zero," he says, writing it down on his scratch paper. " $4 \times 1$ ?" He writes down 4 correctly, and then this is too much adult pushing. "Why can't I do it myself?" He marks "314" on his answer sheet. I retreat to strict observation.

By now almost all the other children have left. Daryl walks wearily across the room to where Karen is standing. "Do I have to finish?" he asks. Karen replies in a louder than usual tone, "Yes. *Go to it.*" He sinks into his seat while conversing silently with his superheroes. He makes no more attempt at completion, and it is clear he is finished. He hands in his paper. On the numeration section, he has left 14 blank, missed 17, and gotten 5 right, probably by random good luck. On the computation section, he has answered 20 right out of 48. This surely means failure.

Just as I announce Daryl's results to Karen, someone appears to collect the answer sheets. They will be locked up overnight, to be redistributed tomorrow for completion. Theoretically, every answer sheet must be accounted for, but with a quick flick of the wrist, Karen removes Daryl's paper from the pile. My disconcerted expression prompts Karen's comment, "Is Daryl a special education person or not?" Most educators would defend an affirmative answer to that question even if, technically, Daryl is not a special education student. Karen has protected him from that fate for two years, though in some classrooms Daryl's special placement would be the only solution for maintaining teacher sanity and classroom order.

Karen seizes on a loophole. She cites Office Memo #108, Attachment #2, which says that special education students may have:

1. time limit extended or waived,
2. examination administered in a special location,
3. answers recorded in any manner.



She proposes I take the class during silent reading, while she and Daryl go to another room where he can answer questions directly in the test booklet. Not willing to act alone, she tells the principal what she is doing. He suggests that Daryl himself transfer answers from the test booklet to the answer sheet. Daryl's final score is 26 right out of 36 on numeration and 39 right out of 48 on computation. Passing? We don't know.

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### Day Three: Math Applications

The third day is more routine for the children. Daryl's task is to submit to Math Applications, a survey of problems from the whole curriculum. In a resigned voice, Karen comments to me, "If Daryl took the test alone, untimed, he would have more stamina to finish than anyone in the class."

Karen cannot legally individualize because doing so contradicts one stated purpose of the test: to compare children under uniform conditions. Were she to set up optimal circumstances for each child, the tests would no longer be standard. Allowing Daryl more time so he can dawdle, or even providing smaller testing units with more breaks, is not possible. That Daryl needs more practice in test-taking, especially in mastering the answer sheet procedures, is obvious, but since he opposes the whole enterprise, direct instruction and repeated test exercises would certainly fail.

Today Daryl cannot focus, but neither does he disrupt. When he hands in an almost blank paper, I am sure he will be retained next year. He might work some more after lunch and recess restore his flagging energy, but the tests are to be picked up and delivered to the district office in one hour. Karen, as strained by the testing as Daryl, signals me that if I want to get

him to finish, I can. Her parting advice to me is, "He should only fill in the blanks. Don't let him correct wrong answers."

I take him to the small room where he finished yesterday. If he was reluctant during the test, now he is cataleptic. He slowly withdraws from me and my plan, refusing even to make eye contact. If I offer him a bribe—a candy bar or a comic—he will come alive, but knowing Karen's stance on bribery, I refrain. He manages to complete several problems, as if he were doing them in his sleep. Lackadaisically, he approaches a graph like the one Karen had demonstrated on the board. With my incessant encouragement ("Keep going. You can do it."), he answers all but one of the related questions. I feel like his jailer; he must feel as if he's in jail. The second graph is beyond his endurance. He sits motionless until I dismiss him for recess. He returns from his break energized—a different child from the earlier paralyzed lump who had been forced to conform beyond his capacity.

#### Day Four: Degrees of Reading Power

Daryl arrives Thursday morning ready for a normal day. He glides straight toward Karen, always his first contact. "Go to Helen's room," she instructs him. "The 4th graders are to take a test there." In his typical way, Daryl pushes

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to be released from yet another day of testing, his energy draining: "Do I have to?" The act of locating a pencil takes an excruciating 10 minutes; finally he is ready.

Walking down the hall to Helen's room, Daryl twirls round and round. Taking account of his body from the neck down, I note that he seems cheerful, but the expression on his face is grim. He stops at the bathroom, and I continue to Helen's room, where other 4th graders are already assembled in their assigned seats. When Daryl enters late, Helen assigns him a seat by himself, the only such place in the room. This test, the Degrees of Reading Power, is a cloze procedure. Each paragraph has several blanks with five possible word choices for every blank. The DRP, as it is known, is new to New York City, and this year's test is a pilot. The reason for the change, an official at the board of education's testing department told me, is that this test is absolutely free from bias. "Children do not have to have any background or previous experience to answer correctly. The word choices are no more than 3rd grade level, so children don't have to decode answers that are beyond their ability to understand."

Helen gives the children directions for taking the test. While writing the sample on the board, she reassures them that no one is expected to get all the answers right. LaFonta (always the first volunteer) reads the sample aloud, "It was sunny and hot for days. Then the \_\_\_\_\_ changed. It turned cloudy and cool." The choices are: (a) price, (b) read, (c) job, (d) weather, (e) size. The students mark their answers. LaFonta chooses *weather*, and Helen writes it on the board. Daryl picks up his pencil, marks the answer, and puts down his pencil, just as requested. I attribute his ease to the written illustration on the board as well as to an accumulation of test-taking experiences over the week. But then I look again. He has marked the samples where the real test begins. And he has begun the test by marking answers for the next three questions on the same line!

Why does Daryl do this? After three years of standardized testing and three

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consecutive days this week, how can he not distinguish between the sample questions and the test questions? Daryl's school history suggests that he may sabotage any effort that forces him to adopt a pace other than his own. By hanging on to the last vestige left him—control of his answer sheet—he signals the world his intent not to cooperate.

After 30 minutes, Daryl makes another trip to the bathroom. He returns with the look of a serious test-taker, but he does not get absorbed in the test. At 11:00 he asks me, "Is there another test Friday?" I tell him this is the last one. "You mean I have to answer all of these?" he says, pointing to the 100 blanks on his answer sheet, of which he has filled 46. I remind him the test is only 56 questions long. With relief he begins on the last 10 questions but soon goes to the bathroom again.

Most children have left, and Helen's own class is returning. When Daryl drifts back from the bathroom, I watch him struggle with the most difficult paragraph, a description of Mt. Vesuvius and the archaeological findings that help us learn from it. That Daryl has never heard of Pompeii puts him at a disadvantage no matter what the board of education says about children not needing prior experience or background. Daryl and George are the only test-takers left. George is creating a major disturbance; Daryl watches intently and then, leaving the test on his desk, slithers out of the room, as if he wants to avoid some well-meaning

adult (me) who might give him the golden opportunity to raise his score by finishing the test.

I quickly check his answers now, otherwise there will be no time. As per board of education instructions, Helen is already packaging and sealing the tests so they will be in the principal's office by noon. The central office truck will pick them up and deliver them to the district office. Daryl got six out of seven right in the first easy paragraph, and then one right in each of the other paragraphs. He has performed so incompetently on this test that he has even fewer right answers than Asfid, who reads no English at all.

Clearly this testing situation inadequately captures Daryl's reading ability; the whole process has been agonizing. I seriously consider Karen's contention that what test-makers are measuring for some children is their

ability to sit in the same place for a certain amount of time. Assessment should not penalize children but rather build on their strengths. □

1. Testing now has the power to change children's lives. In 1980, New York City abandoned "automatic social promotion" in favor of strict measures of academic progress. The board of education began to use the tests to identify 4th and 7th graders who scored one year behind grade level in reading and two years behind in math. Such children "fail" the test and do not pass through the "promotional gates." They are segregated with other low scoring children in "gates classes" or held over in the same class; they are not promoted to 5th or 8th grade until they pass these tests. They may re-take them at the end of summer school, the following January, or in April. If again they fail, they are assigned to a "double gates" class.

#### References

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Jervis, K. (May 1986). "A Teacher's Quest for a Child's Questions." *Harvard Educational Review* 56: 132-150.

*Author's note:* "Daryl," "Karen," and other names used throughout the article are pseudonyms. My account of Daryl's experience during testing week is based on my observation of his class several years ago. This article is an excerpt from a book in progress that chronicles his class from September to June. From reading this description, one might conclude Daryl is so idiosyncratic that thinking about his special needs is beside the point. But there are many "Daryls" whose individual histories differ, but whose difficulties with tests are obstacles they shouldn't have to face.

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