



Are Children Dumber Today Than a Century Ago?

Seeing high-school student Rachel Jeantel — who can't read cursive or speak proper English but boasts a B average — testify at the recent George Zimmerman trial certainly could make one wonder what passes for education in 2013 America. And now this question has been brought into even sharper focus by the publication of a 1912 Bullitt County, Kentucky, test required for eighth-grade graduation — a test that most of today's college graduates couldn't pass.



The exam, published at [Lew Rockwell](#), asks questions such as “Adjectives have how many Degrees of Comparison?” “Through what waters would a vessel pass in going from England through the Suez Canal to Manila?” “Define Cerebrum; Cerebellum” and “Name three rights given Congress by the Constitution and two rights denied Congress.” And such apparent academic rigor has prompted many to ask, as a *Daily Mail* [headline](#) on the topic puts it, “Were children smarter a century ago? Test for eighth graders in Kentucky dated 1912 ignites debate over kids' intelligence today.”

Let's be clear, however, that what's really at issue here isn't intelligence but knowledge. As far as intelligence goes, note that studies relating to generational I.Q. changes conflict. Political scientist James Flynn has recently received a lot of ink for [research indicating](#) that the average I.Q. increased 30 points between 1900 and 2012; in contrast, [other studies](#) show that I.Q. peaked in 1950 and is now steadily falling. And, of course, there's no question that environment during infancy and toddlerhood — and perhaps even during intrauterine development — can affect the developing brain. (Why, there's research indicating that environment influences even gene expression.) Then we have to ask how I.Q. is being measured. Have the people really been raised up or dumbed down? Or have the tests been?

Whatever the case, I suspect that social analyses have been dumbed down. Consider the aforementioned *Daily Mail* piece. It does make the good point that the Kentucky test may not reflect the intellectual foundation of average 1912 14-year-olds, as many poor and less intelligent children a century ago would have already left school to start working prior to eighth grade. Yet it also contains the following:

One commenter noted: “Most of these [exam] questions are memorization-based. They prompt memorized answers with specific words that would have been used in classes back then.

There are very little critical thinking questions or any other questions that require more than



rote memorization to complete.”

Another woman, under the name of Leah Jaclyn, agreed, writing: “Often people who think our kids are dumb fail to realise that rote memorisation is a skill that is not often required anymore.”

The idea that we shouldn’t just be teaching “facts” but instead “critical thinking” is *de rigueur* among today’s educators. After all, any idiot can practice rote memorization, right? Not exactly. Because if a person actually is capable of “critical thinking,” he’ll realize that the modern academic conception of it is a con.

Why? Well, let’s say you’re an educator with wanting students but also a need to show good “results” for school-district superiors and public officials. What kind of yardstick would you prefer? Facts are stubborn things easily measured by standardized tests; you either know where the Laurentian Uplands are or you don’t. But “critical thinking” is a nebulous concept not easily quantifiable, and outcomes can be massaged to fit success targets. (Hey, you analyzed the evidence and concluded homosexuality is natural but sex roles artificial? That’s an A in critical thinking, Johnny!)

In fact, other educational innovations hold the same water-muddying appeal. Examples would be “creative spelling,” where a student is allowed to spell words any way they sound to him; and Outcome Based Education, under which teachers may accept an incorrect math answer if the child can explain the “strategy” used to arrive at it. I wonder if this would suffice if you suddenly gave the teachers a creatively low paycheck.

Calling this curriculum a con, by the way, doesn’t mean that millions of educators don’t believe in it. Let’s face it, man has a great capacity for rationalization, and we all want to feel that what we do is meaningful. So there’s tremendous emotional incentive to suppose that proficiency in this dunce cap-cover curriculum resists measurement only because it is, you see, the very soul of esoteric sophistication.

Of course, that facts are only an impediment to an agenda of fiction gets at why they really matter: A fact is a small snippet of reality, a little picture. And as with a jigsaw puzzle, if you have enough of the little pictures and can assemble them properly, you may be able to see the big picture.

Besides, we may marvel at people who know a lot of facts and can run the tables on shows such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and *Jeopardy*; in contrast, individuals who know few facts are called ignorant.

Also forgotten here is that a basic education is just that: basic. Not everyone will become an Einstein or Aristotle, but if all children learn proper English, necessary math and basic facts about history, geography, and civics, they’ll stand a far better chance of being good citizens. And this is where “rote memorization” is invaluable. Why, how do you think you learned your ABCs?

Yet there is an even deeper reason facts are out of fashion. Another way of describing a fact is as a little snippet of Truth. And it’s not surprising that in a relativistic age that denies Truth’s existence — where skepticism about the big picture reigns — that its constituent little pictures would be de-emphasized. This explains why revisionist history is all the rage, with afrocentrism, women’s, Latino, and “Gay and Lesbian” studies. Hey, “truth” is all a matter of perspective, anyway, so why not teach kids whatever will make them feel better? Self-esteem all around!

The results of this mentality are plain to see. We have college degrees today that, it’s said, are only the equivalent of a 1947 high-school diploma. And we have a president who couldn’t [pronounce](#) the word “corpsman,” a vice-president who said that FDR went on TV after the 1929 stock-market crash, and a



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major-network reporter who [didn't know](#) what the hammer-and-sickle flag represented.

All is not lost, though. Today's youth are far more conversant in things such as white privilege, contraception use, and "gender-identity" theory.



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