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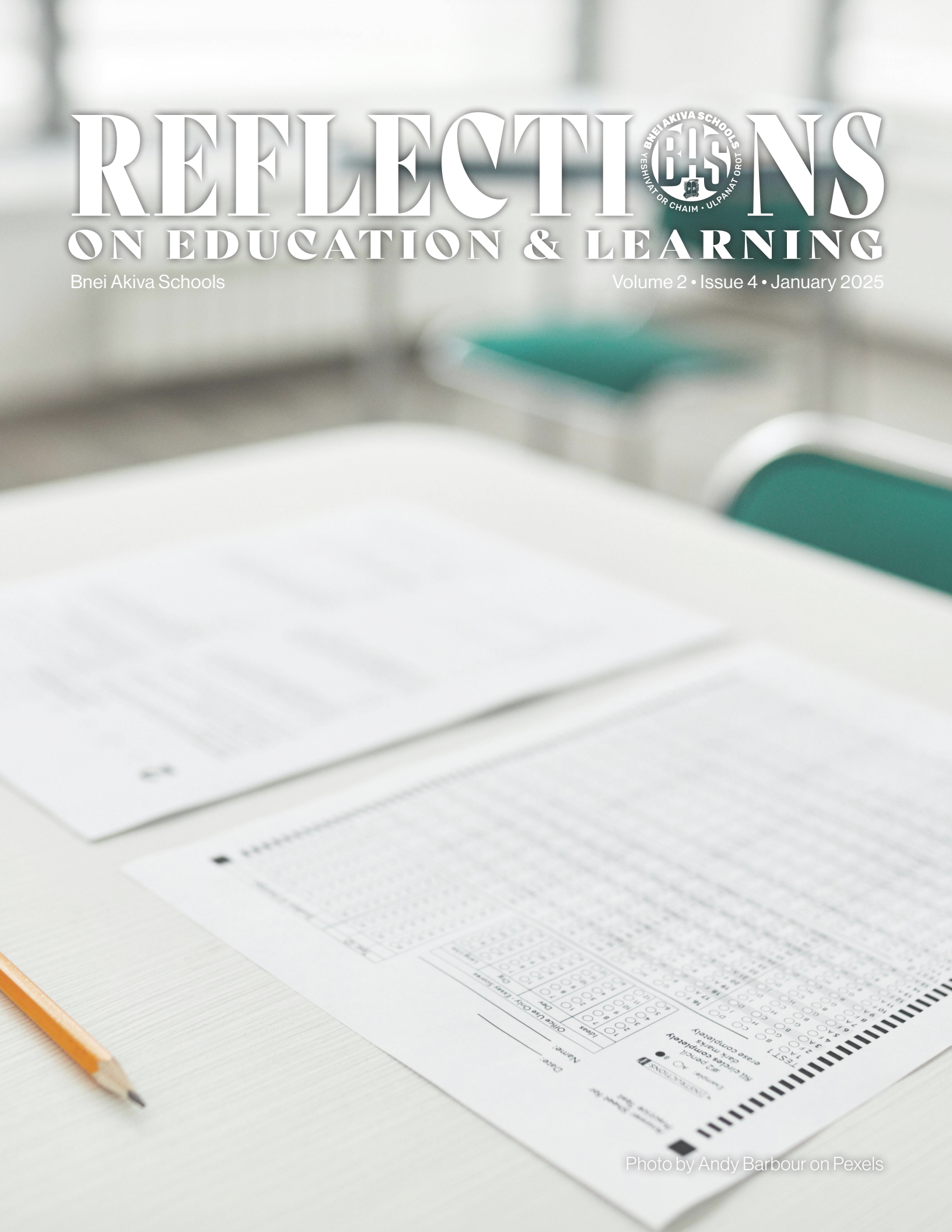

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EXTENDED TIME IS A FEATURE, NOT A BUG

THE ERROR OF EXTENDED TIME ON TESTS AND ONE RADICAL IDEA TO CORRECT IT

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IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCE WITH HIGH school education, as a student, parent or teacher, you likely know the term "extended time." This refers to an accommodation given to some students that extends the time allotted for them to complete tests. In the twenty years since I began teaching high school, it remains a source of confusion and controversy for parents, students and educators alike. Parents I know openly discuss "getting extended time" for their child as an advantage that can be pursued or purchased: they see this as something others have already done, and that failing to do so would place their child at a significant disadvantage relative to peers. Likewise, educators I know openly decry the learners with extended time for whom it seems unnecessary while lamenting the learners who seem to really need extended time but don't have the wherewithal or the resources to obtain it (Michigan State University, 2023). I believe that there is a better way that schools can deliver tests in light of the individual relationships between young learners and time. I would like to outline the scope of the problem and suggest a simple but radical solution.

The prevailing wisdom in how schools implement extended time goes something like this: There is a standard speed at which most learners are able to effectively recall and demonstrate their learning. The time allotted for testing should be set to this standard. A smaller number of learners will have a difference in their learning that delays their ability to either

process what is being asked or effectively recall and demonstrate their learning within the standard timeframe. Trained experts can diagnose this difference. Once diagnosed, this difference must be accommodated so as to create equity between the standard learner and the different learner when taking tests. To accomplish this, parents will typically seek one of a few possible third parties to indicate to the school that their child should be given extended time. The school will then assign some predetermined amount of extended time, typically 25% or 50% of the standard time based on what is most practical for the school to implement in their program.

I would like to challenge this approach. The inclination toward providing extended time is rooted in the best knowledge we have about learning and the real need to differentiate certain expectations for neurodivergent learners. I myself went through all of my primary and secondary education with an undiagnosed language-based learning difference. Not finishing tests was something I came to accept, along with the poor marks I'd inevitably receive. But my contention is with the systematic implementation of the extended time accommodation in traditional schools conducted for the sake of so-called equity. When implemented, the extended time accommodation creates an oversimplified binary between learners in the "standard" category and those in the "different" category. This binary does not properly address the nuanced and spectral role (Lovett, 2020) time plays in learning and leads to abuses of the system.

Expanding on the problem, my first concern is that dividing between "standard" and "extended" time implies a testing environment where everything is kept equal. The standard time is applied in a consistent way to everyone in the "standard" group for all tests, and the extended time accommodation can be equally applied to everyone diagnosed as "different". On its face, this cannot be accurate. Each teacher and subject department in a typical high school design tests differently and hold the "standard" learners engaged in the test to a different, well, standard. Further, there are many variations in individual learning so the fixed extended time accommodation of, say, 50% cannot possibly correct (National Center on Educational Outcomes, N. D.) for the inequity in all learners with the accommodation. In other words, standard time is not actually standard and extended time is not a fixed number that can be universally applied.

What could be more inequitable than an economic barrier to access?

Second, this binary assumes that the third parties who assess student learning profiles in order to recommend extended time are operating using clearly defined and uniform criteria such that real equity can be achieved between those in the standard group and those in the different group. But that is hardly the case. Recommendations for extended time can come

from pediatricians, therapists, educational psychologists and various assessment centers, each of them often using different criteria.

Finally, none of this passes the smell test for truth and objectivity, as I mentioned at the opening. Why would a system that is ostensibly about equity require many parents to pay thousands of dollars (Goldstein & Patel, 2019) for this accomsmodation? What could be more inequitable than an economic barrier to access? I have personally seen expensive educational assessments that identify no specific learning differences and yet recommend the students receive extended time. A colleague in the US who supervises an excellent inclusion program serving students with a variety of learning disabilities recently told me of the challenges she encounters when trying to convince the College Board to provide extra time for her students despite their having all the right documentation and an obvious need. The Board has simply seen too much abuse in the system (Prinstein, 2019) to trust when it is actually needed.

At the root of this flawed system, I believe, is a faulty conception of the role time plays in learning. Our current system assumes a minority of learners have a bug that extends their time frames in learning and we need to accommodate for this bug so everyone is treated equally. Since time is a bug, the goal, it seems, is to remove time from the equation of learning and present learners with a measure of their learning as if time was not a factor. No apparent bug, no apparent inequity. But time is a feature of learning and not a bug. Our processing speeds and recall abilities are important features of who we are as learners that are worth tracking and understanding. A learner who can recall or process the prompt for recollection relatively quickly and the one who does it relatively slowly should have a clear sense of how fast or how slow they perform given the task they are asked to complete. There is no benefit to anyone interested in understanding a learner, especially the learner himself, to present the test result as if time was an irrelevant part of the process. This creates the appearance of equity for something that is fundamentally unequal. My learning difference necessitates that I will never be a fast test taker, which is the case with many neurodivergent learners. That is a feature of who I am as a learner and should be transparent in any measure that tries to reasonably capture who I am as a learner.

> **it would be far more beneficial to use testing as means to record, understand and react**

Instead of carrying on in a flawed system without transparency, I suggest it would be far more beneficial to use testing as means to record, understand and react to these differences in test taking speed. Consider a relatively simple change where all tests are delivered in a fully untimed setting for all students, but that "time to completion" of the test is recorded alongside the mark that measures learning. First off, this genuinely creates equity in that each learner has an equal opportunity to demonstrate learning

regardless of the time it takes and whatever the idiosyncratic needs of that learner are. There are no systematic or financial barriers required to be granted a special status. There is only the learner and the test of learning. It would also improve test design. Teachers can no longer conflate speed with the actual measure of learning by implicitly designing tests that are meant to rush students. Additionally, teachers could continually improve tests to be delivered effectively given the average time recorded for their classes. Likewise, students would be incentivized to finish as quickly as they can knowing that speed is a feature of their learning that is being measured. But, importantly, they would not be forced to finish before they could accurately demonstrate their learning.

With this change, knowing and the speed at which one demonstrates knowing are clearly measured as two distinct features of a learner's profile. Surely this would require real adjustments within a school's testing schedule to allow for varying completion times, and there would likely need to be some way of addressing a student who refuses to submit a test despite having clearly exhausted all ability to demonstrate learning. But the benefits of this change seem to far outweigh the costs. In addition to removing the deeply flawed extended time system, the insights gained relating to student learning would benefit the student and system in important ways.

Take, for example, a learner who sees that although she is receiving top marks on her demonstrations of learning, she is lagging behind the average on time to completion of her tests. She wants to pursue a career or course of study where quick recall and processing are essential. Maybe she wants to be an Emergency Room physician. Now she has a moment for meaningful self-reflection, to ask herself, "Where am I on the spectrum of speed as it relates to my learning?" Maybe she wants to work at this and see if she can improve her speed. Maybe she wants to get an educational assessment, not as a means to purchase an accommodation, but as a genuinely reflective learner trying to understand her cognitive makeup and what the obstacles might be on her desired path. And maybe she wants to reconsider her path and choose something better suited to her baseline timing abilities.

In our current system, she would be pressured to purchase an extended time accommodation, be given a fixed amount of time that may or may not help, and have no ongoing reflective visibility into her learning style to make informed decisions about how to best approach her future as a learner. In our efforts to create equity, we have treated time as a bug that must be systematically removed from measures of learning. But time has always been a feature in the diverse array of learning styles that fit the human condition. We would be wiser to treat it as such. ■

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