

High-Stakes Test Accountability: A Controversial Issue in Educational Measurement

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present a research-based discussion of high-stakes test accountability system controversy in literature. This paper presents scholarly discourse based on testing systems and school accountability, along with a presentation of the proponent and opponent view of high-stakes testing. The authors of this document found research studies to be inconclusive with no clear indication of whether or not high-stakes test should continue to drive test-based accountability systems. But most notably, the actual issue connected to this debate may be the lack of understanding of the direction to take even in the midst of high-stakes testing situation. The authors intend to unearth the possible sustainable way to go in a high-stakes testing environment.

Keywords: High-stakes, test-based accountability, proponent, opponent.

1. Introduction

High-stakes testing has become a central national policy issue in many nations in the world where national or state policies within the educational reform agenda are propelled and supported by mandated high-stakes tests (Allington, 2003; Cuban, 2007). These high-stakes tests are seemingly held as a metaphor for standards of student learning, teacher effectiveness, and school success, where a number or a test scores shape our perceptions and our objectivity within the educational environment (Dorn, 1998). Again, Allington (2003) stated that No Child Left Behind Act that emerged in the United States of America has dramatically changed the testing story, making high-stakes tests one of the leading and central characters of current educational reform for US and many nations around the world.

Policy makers and the general public have been dissatisfied with student achievement for several decades, hence the prevalence of test-based accountability in the 21st century. Tests in education are used for many purposes. If a test is used to hold individuals or institutions responsible for their performance and has stakes attached to it, it constitutes what is commonly called a test-based accountability system. A consideration that has fueled the interest in test-based accountability is the persistent finding of sizeable gaps in achievement between economically-disadvantaged and economically-advantaged students (Linn, 2008). Supporters of test-based accountability often suppose that teachers know what to do to improve students' achievement, but aren't putting forth sufficient effort. They believe that teachers and other educational personnel know what needs to be done, but need incentives to stir up the effort required to improve achievement and reduce gaps. Thus, if accountability mechanisms, involving sanctions and/or incentives, are put in place, it is assumed that teachers and other educators will work harder and student achievement will improve while achievement gaps will diminish (Linn, 2008). The use of test-based accountability systems assumes that high-stakes tests are adequate measures of the important goals, or at least the important academic goals, of education and hence requires that the tests provide an adequate representation of adopted content standards (Linn, 2003). The questions that readily comes to mind at this point are; should high-stakes test be the only anchor for test-based accountability measure? Is there any merits or demerits to the use of high-stakes tests? This paper will explore related literature surrounding the proponent and opponent views regarding the use of high-stakes tests for test-based accountability.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Argument for High-Stakes Testing: Proponent views

Proponents of high-stakes testing contend that these tests convey students' achievement and serve as an effective pivot and monitor of educational system effectiveness. Hess (2002) opined that, for high-stakes testing to have a significant effect on overall educational outcomes and teacher quality, "educators must be rewarded or sanctioned on the basis of students' performance" (p. 73). Citing the highly controversial results of the early Texas Assessment of Academic Skills research and supported by an assumed public commitment to standards-based reform, Hess argued for rewards and sanctions to be implemented as effective levers for change. Additionally, in a Public Agenda Survey conducted by Farkas, Johnson and Duffet (2003), teachers

reported that they supported high-stakes tests for student promotion and that, in their opinion, these tests improved students' academic performance. Further to this perspective, Roderick, Jacob and Bryk (2002), analysing the impact of high-stakes testing, reported higher levels of students achievement attributed to the implementation of high-stakes tests in Chicago schools. Moreover, citing their findings from a 50-state analysis, Carnoy and Loeb (2002) provided a perspective view which described positive relationships between mandated accountability measures and overall performance of students' on high-stakes tests.

Furthermore, it has been empirically discovered that high-stakes tests are highly efficient and necessary vehicle to hold schools, programs, and larger state initiatives accountable, reward those that are high performing, and identify those failing so that they are targeted for extra support (Firestone, Monfils, & Camilli, 2001). In a study by Stecher, Hamilton and Gonzales (2003) the positive effects of high-stakes tests is that it makes teachers' aware of their knowledge and skills level thereby motivating them toward the reward attached to the test. These researchers concur that accountability measures in the form of high-stakes tests yield increase in individual motivation and academic achievement while offering stringent accountability measures for assessment of students, teachers, programs, schools, districts, and federal initiatives.

2.2 Argument against High-Stakes Testing: Opponent views

In contrast to the proponent view, opponents of high-stakes testing see mandated tests as a grievous move to control, narrow and inhibit student achievement. For example, Hillocks (2002) hashed out how mandated high-stakes tests adversely impact instruction and emphasise many of the issues and concerns of utilising high-stakes tests to drive curricula. Again, Mathison and Freeman (2006), stating findings from a study, reported that teachers' felt they had lost control over their pedagogy and practice. They further mentioned that high-stakes tests had dramatically altered their priorities and purpose in teaching.

Moreover, Costigan (2002) interviewed six (6) first-year teachers of grades three through to grade five who taught in New York City. The teachers were interviewed at the end of their first semester of teaching and a second time in the middle of their second semester of teaching. Costigan's findings suggest that testing became the main concern among teachers, and they have a view that, testing had negative impacts on students, the curriculum, and classroom teaching practices. The teachers in this study also noted they were unprepared to deal with the volume of testing, and the respondents also reported a loss of power for teachers.

Similarly, Crocco and Costigan (2007) interviewed teachers in New York City. Crocco and Costigan's study focused on reporting narratives about teachers' work. During a 5-year period, the researchers conducted over 200 interviews with novice teachers who all had no more than 5 years of experience. Additionally, interviews with focus groups were conducted, Crocco & Costigan concluded that, as a result of the accountability movement in New York, teachers reported that testing had narrowed the curriculum, and they perceived they have lost control over the teaching practice. Furthermore, Franklin and Snow-Geron (2007) conducted a quantitative survey focusing on the perceptions of 106 teachers working in a standardised testing environment in the Northern Rocky Mountain Region. While teachers in this study reported not being anti-testing and expressed their understanding of how testing can support both teaching and learning, 95 % of teachers reported extreme feelings of stress and anxiety related to high-stakes testing pressures. Factor analysis determined three specific variables related to pressure: administrative pressure, media pressure, and pressure from other involved parties. Finally, review of educational research done by Solorzano (2008) outlined some of the negative effects of high-stakes testing to involve issues of pressure on teachers to raise test scores, fear of state take over, and loss of curricular control within a highly test driven accountability system.

3. Conclusion

In the implementation of test-based accountability systems, high-stakes test in any form epitomizes a double edged sword. In other words high-stakes testing has several academic achievement potentialities clothed with intended and unintended consequences. This is important to be taken notice of by all stakeholders of education, especially, education administrators, ministries in charge of education and government of countries. What then is the way to go? Over the years, several countries implementing test-based accountability system have resorted to high-stakes testing as the steering directing the entire educational curriculum and dictating standards. Clothed with intended and unintended consequences, should the practice be continued? In high-stakes testing positive dimension, tests are highly efficient and necessary vehicle to hold schools, programs, and larger state initiatives accountable, reward higher performers, and identify those failing for extra support and a host of others. However, tests could as well be a grievous move to control, narrow and inhibit students' achievement. In narrowing the curriculum, teachers develop the habit of 'teaching to the test' so as to get students passed in order to be rewarded or escape punishment. Clearly, this has implication for quality of instruction received by students and consequently, the quality of work force produced for nation building. Amazingly, high-stakes test

accountability might have a cause to explain the gap between academia and industry in the 21st century especially, in sub-Saharan Africa.

4. Recommendations

It is recommended that within a district, states or nation that implement test-based accountability system, the authorized body or council in charge of assessment vary the form of assessment instrument used at regular point in time. For example, if the previous mandated test was a traditional assessment (i.e. multiple-choice, true/false, essay) type, the current test must take alternative assessment (performance assessment, portfolio etc.) form. This will prevent instructors from teaching to a specific representation of a concept rather than to a broader understanding of the concept. Moreover, major stakeholders of education such as governmental ministries in charge of education, boards and examination councils must ensure that at regular point in time, validity of the use of test scores for purposes of accountability are evaluated. Finally, test-based accountability systems should be supplemented by qualitative information about the quality of teaching. Such information might be obtained from interviews or classroom observations either as a routine part of the accountability system or at least for district or schools that are underperforming. The qualitative information is likely to be more useful than the test results in the event of stakeholder seeking for improvement the testing systems of schools.

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