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Zombie Ideas in Education: High-Stakes Testing and Graduation Policies

NERAJ Fall 2013 Review of Research in the Classroom

Diane Kern, University of Rhode Island

Tests need to inform, not punish

~Solórzano (2008)

Forty percent of Rhode Island's eleventh graders may not earn a high school diploma in May 2014. I suspect you are as stunned as I am by this shocking information, knowing the likely effects of not graduating high school for approximately 4,000 high school juniors in one state. Why are so many adolescents failing high school, you may ask? Many policymakers will tell you that these students did not earn a score of partially proficient on the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tests, and we must ensure that all students are college and career ready before they are awarded a high school diploma. These students need to buckle down, study harder, complete online and other remediation modules, and retest in October. Like nearly 25 other states in the U.S., Rhode Island's high school diploma system requires students pass a high school exit examination (Center on Education Policy, 2007; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1998; National Research Council, 1999).

Research, on the other hand, will tell us that several other variables and issues are at work here in Rhode Island, and perhaps also in your state's school accountability system. We will exam the research on high-stakes testing and its use as a high school graduation requirement. Specifically, we will look at the key issues that have emerged and examine research-based remedies to these issues, which include: 1) designing testing programs to maximize benefits requires much teacher input; 2) students are not solely responsible for their achievement on tests, because they may not have had equal access to resources and opportunities to learn; 3) high-stakes testing policies often result in schools "gaming the system"; and 4) graduation tests increase the probability of dropping out of high school for lowest achieving students. This article concludes with three research-based recommendations for college and career ready assessment systems as well as a specific plan for getting accountability right.

Issues in High-Stakes Testing Programs and the Need for More Teacher Input

Sloane and Kelly (2003) analyzed the current emphasis on high-stakes testing in the United States and considered several issues that are fueling the debate about high-stake testing in PK-12 schools. In this review, we will focus on the issue of the tests themselves.

Assessment systems in today's education accountability movement require that students demonstrate learning of important content that is found on internationally accepted standards and that assessment systems are established to let the local, state and national public know how schools and students are ranked. Student demonstration of content standards requires criterion-referenced tests—a test that measures a specific body of knowledge and skills (Fairtest, 2007a); ranking students and schools requires norm-referenced tests—a test that compares test-takers and school to a “norming group” comprised mainly of multiple-choice and short answer questions on material typically found in nationally-used textbooks, not the local curriculum. (Fairtest, 2007b). Sloane and Kelly (2003) conclude that one form of testing is not better than another. Rather one must “be clear about the policy goals; know the strengths and weaknesses of all testing instruments; recognize the political, social and educational trade-offs involved...; and most importantly, not demand of any testing instrument performance for which it was not designed” (p.13).

In Rhode Island, the high-stakes testing system used to rank students and schools is called the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP). The NECAP is a series of reading, writing, science and mathematics achievement tests also used by New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine. One component of the Rhode Island Diploma System, which affects students in the graduating class of 2014, requires students to achieve a “partially proficient” score on the reading and mathematics tests in order to earn a high school diploma. The 4,000 juniors I mentioned to open this column have not achieved the “partially proficient” score on either the reading or the mathematics NECAP. In Providence, 994 students scored substantially below proficient in mathematics; 290 did not reach the necessary score in reading (Borg, February 15, 2013). These results motivated many teachers, high school students, community groups, higher educators and others to more closely examine the RI Diploma System and the technical manual for the NECAP. Much to our dismay, we found that the NECAP technical report specifically states that these tests are not designed for use as a high school graduation requirement! Sloane and Kelly's research must not have been considered by the Rhode Island Department of Education, which designed this diploma system. After much attention and debate on this issue, the newly reconfigured RI Board of Education will reconsider the use of the NECAP as a graduation requirement (Plain, May 28, 2013).

This important change in policymaker's perceptions and decision-making came about only after teachers, students, higher educators, and the public raised the serious concerns and disconnects between policy and research-based best practice. Sloane and Kelly (2003) wisely advise that teacher input must be a cornerstone of any testing program to maximize the benefits of the assessment system and “**the teaching profession needs to actively engage in the testing debate**, demanding more powerful psychometric theories and better instrumentation”(p.16).

Impact of High School Graduation Exams

Approximately 1,300 juniors from Providence high schools—a staggering 60% of the Class of 2014—may not graduate earn a high school diploma. The Providence Student Union, a group of student activists who convened initially to protest the NECAP as a graduation requirement, staged a protest march to the RI Department of Education dressed as zombies and one student member aptly stated “We’re zombies because this policy will kill us...If we don’t get a diploma, we’ll end up in dead-end jobs” (Borg, February 13, 2013). Another student also goes on to say that the use of the NECAP as a high school diploma requirement discriminates against minority students because they are offered a substandard education in a school system where more than half the schools are chronically low-performing. Let’s examine research that fully supports the Providence Student Union’s claims.

Solórzano (2008) found that the results of high-stakes tests used as a high school diploma requirement “show quite clearly that Blacks and Latinos (and English Language Learners) are disproportionately failing them, whether enrolled in Texas, New York, California, or Minnesota” (p. 312). He goes on to say that students who do poorly on these exams “are viewed as the problem; they are retained, tracked, or denied graduation” (p. 316) and cites several sources for this statement. Then, comes the most logical and obvious, yet often negated fact of this matter: “They are held solely responsible for their grades, when in fact, **they may not have had equal chance of learning because of the unequal resources and opportunities at their disposal at their school site**” (p. 316).

The court case *Williams v. State of California* (2000) demonstrated the dire inequity and injustice of this lack of educational opportunity for low-income area students. Solórzano (2008) study extensively reviews the literature on determining academic achievement, the relevance of language proficiency tests, and fairness issues of high-stakes testing and recommends the development of an Opportunity to Learn (OTL) index that alongside test scores includes, but is not limited to:

- Quality teachers
- Quality of instruction
- Use of students’ first language to support or instruct English Language Learners
- Quality of resources at school
- Quality of textbooks
- Quality of courses
- Quality of school infrastructure
- Quality of financial resources and expenditures

Solórzano (2008) effectively argues students are not solely responsible for their test scores, demonstrates the serious validity and fairness problems with high-stakes tests and concludes, “**policymakers must discontinue the use of these tests for high-stakes decisions**” (p. 319). Harvard professor Brian Jacob (2001) found “graduation tests have **no significant impact on 12th grade math or reading achievement**...results suggest that **policymakers would be well-advised to**

rethink current graduation test policies” (p. 99). Heilig and Darling-Hammond’s (2008) found that high-stakes testing policies created incentives for, “schools to **‘game the system’** by excluding student from testing, and ultimately from school” (p. 75). These ‘gaming the system’ strategies also revealed “**reduced educational opportunity for African American and Latino high school students”** (p. 75). Thompson and Allen (2012) demonstrate that African American students are being gravely harmed by the current high-stakes testing movement, resulting in 1) **instructional practices that have not resulted in higher test scores;** 2) **increasing student apathy;** 3) more punitive policies and **pushing youth into the prison pipeline** (p.218).

Great minds-- like those students in the Providence Student Union, the Supreme Court Justices of California and several distinguished college professors and researchers--think alike.

Guidance for Authentic and Effective Assessment Systems of College and Career Readiness

As we consider the research-based practice as well as past policy mistakes in high-stakes testing and accountability systems, educators must not only heed Sloane and Kelly’s advice to be actively engaged in the testing policy decision-making, but also understand an assertion made by other researchers--that the high-stakes testing movement has created a zombie-like narcissistic K-12 public school system. “A narcissist is described as an individual who rejects his or her real self and becomes obsessed with creating a ‘perfect image’” (Thompson and Allen, 2012, p.222), yet narcissism may also apply to organizations, according to Oakley (2008). Teachers, teacher educators and researchers must insist policy-makers see the ‘less than perfect image’ in the current system and insist that we, along with our students, have a central role in shaping the future of education in this country.

We all want each child in our classrooms to be college and/or career ready. Maruyama (2012) argues that future assessment systems of college and career readiness should include the following:

- use of benchmarks with meaning and consequences for students
- employ multiple measures
- present readiness in terms of probability or likelihoods rather than as ready or not

In other words, proficiency scores from a single assessment, such as the NECAP or the soon to be unveiled PARCC and SMARTER Balanced tests, should not be used to determine high school graduation. There should be a close alignment between curriculum, instruction and the multiple-measures used in the assessment system, and, perhaps most importantly, the determination of **college and career readiness should be stated in terms of probability or likelihood, rather than ready or not**. Not earning a high-school diploma because of a score of less than “partially proficient” on the NECAP, even though there are other components to the diploma

system and multiple opportunities to retest, is antithetical to the research and is, in my reading of the research reviewed in this column, an egregious social injustice inflicted on our nation's youth.

Richard Rothstein and his colleagues (2008), an impressive list of higher educators, researcher, policymakers, parent representatives, community members, teachers and educators, assert that reducing social and economic disadvantages, along with quality education systems, can improve academic achievement. They call their plan a Broader, Bolder Approach, which is built on four central tenets:

- **Pursue an aggressive school improvement strategy**, which includes smaller class sizes in the early grades for children at a disadvantage; recruit and retain high-quality teachers, especially in hard to staff schools; improve teacher and school leader training; offer and make a college preparatory curriculum accessible to all; and offer special consideration and programming for recent immigrants.
- **Provide high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood, pre-school, and kindergarten care and education.**
- **Address children's health needs and care.**
- **Improve the quality of out of school time.**

"Test scores alone should not define school effectiveness" (Rothstein, 2008, p. 172), and in the insightful, disturbing words of Classical High School student, Cauldierre McKay from Providence, RI, "**To take away the diploma is to take away our life, to make us undead**" (Borg, February 14, 2013, p. 1). High-stakes testing as a determinant of the awarding of a high school diploma is a zombie idea in education.

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