

Conference Proceedings: Hawaii International Conference on Education
High Stakes in the Heartland: Assessment and its Effects on Literacy Instruction

Title: High Stakes in the Heartland: Report of a Work-in-Progress

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Introduction

The world community has a long history of testing children to assess academic success and measure teacher accountability (Buros, 1977; Lemann, 1999). Much has been written concerning the numerous measures used to assess students' academic performance and gauge successful teaching practices (Downing and Haladyna, 1996; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Resnick & Resnick, 1985). Implications for instruction for all students, K – 16, are the focus for discussions among educators at the local, state, national, and international levels (Allington, 2002; Hillocks, 2002; Hoffman, 1998; Kohn, 2001; Madaus, 1991; Eisner, 2001).

International Perspective

Ongoing research indicates that countries other than the USA are not as obsessed with measures of student progress (Paris, 1998; F. Thybo Interview, 6/2002). However, the recent discussions of student achievement from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2002) indicate a global concern for comparative data.

State and National Perspective

State and national mandated assessments in the USA are not reflective of how student progress is measured by other members of the international community (Kentucky Department of Education, 2002; F. Thybo Interview, 6/2002). The current approaches in Kentucky (Commonwealth Accountability Testing System or CATS) and Ohio (Ohio Proficiency Test) have their own set of high stakes accountability for teacher and students (Kentucky Department of Education, 2002; Ohio Department of Education, 2002).

Kentucky's Education Reform Act is now ten years into its testing program (Pritchard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2002). The CATS package consists of writing portfolios that are scored at 4th, 7th, and 12th grades (with scores contributing to a school's accountability

index or measure of academic success); Open-response essay tests in six subjects, graded on the same scale as portfolios; multiple choice items in the six subject areas; and a set of “non-cognitive” indicators. The effects of this initiative on student achievement and curriculum change have been considerable (Bishop & Larison, Manuscript in preparation).

Ohio has implemented two high stakes components, the high school proficiency exam required for graduation and the third grade literacy requirement. Both state mandated measures are supposed to serve as gatekeeper functions to assure the academic success of all children (Ohio Department of Education, 2002). However, the effect of these assessment mandates has seemingly narrowed the range of instructional options for classroom teachers instead (Bishop & Larison, Manuscript in preparation). As a result, some instructional practices in reading (Whole Language and other child-centered approaches) have fallen into disfavor (Bishop & Larison, Manuscript in preparation). Therefore, some schools in Kentucky and Ohio have chosen to employ what is billed as a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, the 4-Block Approach that demonstrates how recent research-based instructional literacy practices prepare children for the third-grade reading requirement mandated by the state and Bush’s “No Child Left Behind.”

Concerns for On-going Research

Are the mandates from state and federal government having a positive influence on student performance on high stakes testing? Do new requirements of teacher training institutions (i.e. mandatory courses in phonics) improve the quality of instruction in Ohio classrooms? Is there a movement toward a standards-based curriculum in other countries? Do the results of informal observations of students and interviews with teachers reveal a different pattern from standardized measures of academic progress and successful teaching? These questions are the

topics of our on-going research. The answers have implications not only for all of us as academics, but for school age children worldwide.

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