The Effects of High Stakes Testing in an Inner-City Elementary School: The Curriculum, the Teachers, and the English Language Learners

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews with teachers, this study examines the effects of a high-stakes standardized test (the SAT-9), on a large inner-city elementary school in southern California with a high English Language Learner (ELL) student population. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions: (a) How much of an emphasis is there on the SAT-9? (b) Do teachers believe the SAT-9 is a fair and valid measure of teaching and student learning? (c) How has the SAT-9 affected the curriculum taught to students, especially ELL students? (d) How has the SAT-9 affected the teachers and students? And, (e) has the SAT-9 improved teaching and learning at the school under study? The findings reveal that standardized testing has not resulted in higher quality teaching and learning in this school; rather, it has resulted in a narrowed curriculum and harmful effects on both teachers and students.
Diverted resources: Schools that perform poorly on high-stakes-tests are labeled “failures” and sometimes have resources taken away from them. The hundreds of millions of dollars spent on testing in Pennsylvania are not available for classroom education. School closures: Schools labeled as “failing” on the basis of test scores can be threatened with closure. These schools are usually in communities of color. Loss of curiosity and love of learning: Bubble tests are developmentally inappropriate for the youngest learners. Emphasis on “skill drill and kill” fails to stimulate children’s imagination.

Effect of High-stake Testing (con’t): The pressure felt by high-stakes testing is greater in disadvantaged schools and results in more drill and practice instruction. Parents tend to not trust the abilities of school officials to educate their children. Teachers and students feel a tremendous amount of pressure associated with highstakes testing to produce high student test scores. The pressure felt by teachers associated with high-stakes testing results in drill and practice type of curriculum and instruction. There appears to be a consistent increase in test preparation activities in the period immediately preceding the administration of a test, ending abruptly following. High-stakes testing in reading: Today in Texas, tomorrow? Article. Feb 2001. English Language Learners (ELLs)--students whose second language is English and who are not fully proficient in English--constitute the fastest growing portion of the K-12 student population. Because many of these students tend to do poorly in school, teachers are encouraged to regularly use research-based practices to improve these students’ academic achievement. The intervention effects were as large for the English-language learners (ELLs) as for the English-only speakers (EOs), though the ELLs scored lower on all pre- and posttest measures.