Thriving in a High-Stakes Testing Environment

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Introduction

These are difficult times for those of us who think literacy is more than basic skills and teaching is more than testing. We see more and more schools put test preparation ahead of "best practices" in reading in an attempt to avoid low test scores. But, interestingly, this is not the case everywhere. Some schools deal with high-stakes testing while also providing rich literacy instruction. So what is the difference? Why are some schools merely surviving while others are thriving?

The Current Situation and Potential Consequences

Teaching today is so difficult that even Garrison Keillor is aware of it. On a recent Prairie Home Companion broadcast he told about wandering through the Minnesota State Fairgrounds and coming upon a pavilion devoted to English majors. Inside, he found a young woman swallowing swords. When he asked why an English major was working as a sword swallower, she responded that she had been a middle school teacher of English but had quit. When Garrison asked why, she said, "Have you been a middle school English teacher lately?"

She didn't have to explain further. Many schools use high-stakes testing as a reason to impose more and more lockstep teaching methods, more and more rigid teaching rules, more and more scripted instruction, more and more emphasis on low-level, stimulus-response types of test preparation, and more and more pressure to get students to score well on end-of-year tests. The result: more and more of our best teachers leave the field.

De-emphasizing rich literacy seems to be pervasive. "Balanced instruction" is condemned as "code" for "whole language" (Moats, 2000); sustained silent reading (SSR) is rejected because it may not raise test scores (even though the purpose is not to raise test scores, but to develop a love of reading); cooperating teachers discourage student teachers from nesting basic skill instruction in motivating projects "because we don't have time for that fancy stuff – we have to prepare kids for the test;" and principals reject "best practices" because, "let's face it, the teachers who get the best test results just do drill and practice, so that's what we're going to have to do." These comments from teachers and principals are driven by the fact that financial bonuses are awarded for raising test scores – no reward is offered for raising test scores *while also* providing children with rich literacy experiences, so why put forth the extra effort? On a more personal note, something similar is happening to my step-daughter, a first-year teacher. Her principal is only interested in raising test scores and, to achieve that goal, requires her to use reading materials well above the ability levels of her students. As a result, she is faced with frustrated and rebellious students who are learning to hate reading

and to avoid learning. Like the sword swallower, she is thinking of leaving the teaching field.

The result of such decisions is often an authoritarian, factory-like system of literacy instruction in which curriculum is defined by what is on the test, reading is defined as low-level skills, "best practice" becomes repetitive test preparation, and rewards and punishments are doled out in a vaguely behavioristic manner. It is a seductively simple model – so simple that some educators call it "the logic model" (Kame'enui, 2005) – meaning that it is only logical that you would emphasize low-level skills and put "higher" forms of literacy on the back burner.

The message seems to be that rich literacy experiences are less important than raising test scores. Unfortunately, however, this may be a seriously short-sighted view. All but the most fervent advocates of high-stakes testing argue that tomorrow's citizens will need a more sophisticated literacy than is measured on end-of-year tests. For instance, Friedman (2005) says tomorrow's children will have to be "versatilists" who can respond adaptively and quickly to a variety of literacy demands; Gee (2004) says tomorrow's children will have to be "shape-shifting portfolio people" (p. 91) who can handle change; and the National Center on Education and the Economy (2007) says that students "will have to be comfortable with ideas and abstractions, good at both analysis and synthesis, creative, and innovative, self-disciplined and well organized, able to learn very quickly and work well as a member of a team and have the flexibility to adapt quickly to frequent changes …" (p.. xviii-xix).

It is possible, then, that in making high test scores the criterion for success, we may fail to prepare children to meet the challenges of coming decades. It seems unlikely, for instance, that children drilled and trained to respond to low-level test items will grow up to be the adaptively critical and creative citizens of tomorrow. The plummeting scores as test-wise children move into seventh and tenth grade testing suggest that when required to read to learn or when required to think analytically or critically, they cannot perform. With the emphasis on drill, and with limited experience in using literacy for important and sensible purposes, we are in danger of producing an underclass proficient in basic skills but unable to be anything other than compliant followers.

Is There An Alternative?

Must high-stakes testing obliterate rich reading instruction? Perhaps not. While some schools engage almost solely in pressure-filled drill-and-practice, thirty miles down the road other schools teach basic skills well while also engaging students in meaningful and motivating literacy tasks. What accounts for the difference?

The difference appears to be school leaders and the choices they make. Leaders are found at all levels of responsibility – grade-level team leaders, literacy coaches, curriculum facilitators, building principals, central office personnel, superintendents, and teacher educators. The best leaders communicate a message that honors the need to

do well on tests while simultaneously authorizing teachers to encourage children who not only *can* read but who *do* read. How do they do it? They make different choices. Three examples follow.

They Keep High-Stakes Testing in Perspective

First, leaders of schools who thrive in a high-stakes test environment keep high-stakes testing in perspective. They know the problem is not testing. The problem is that rules, regulations, and pressures designed to ensure high test scores replace "best practices" with more drill and practice, and replace professional teaching with technical compliance. By keeping testing in perspective, leaders communicate a calming message about tests rather than a pressure-filled message.

For instance, these leaders avoid blaming everything on testing. True, high-stakes testing is intrusive; true, the pressure to do well is often oppressive. However, good leaders acknowledge that because schools are funded with tax money, there is nothing wrong with collecting data to establish that taxes are being spent effectively. So they describe accountability as sensible, not as evil.

Similarly, they support the idea that all students should achieve at grade-level or close to it. It used to be okay to have "the bluebirds, the robins and the crows" as three reading groups in the first grade and for the same students to be in the same ranking in the 12th grade. But that was when students could quit school at sixteen and earn good salaries in industry. Now, however, our society can no longer employ people who lack high literacy skills. So insisting that all students read better is a matter of national survival. Leaders communicate this message.

Finally, good school leaders do not dwell on the weaknesses of tests. They understand that it is difficult to conduct large-scale testing in a cost efficient manner, that there are limits to what these tests can measure, and that the public likes such tests because they are easy to understand. They regret that tests are limited to low-level skills, but they do not limit their accountability to those skills.

They Keep Reminding Us of What Literacy Is

Leaders in schools that thrive in a high-stakes testing environment do not think of literacy in terms of test scores. They think of literacy in terms of what they want their own children to experience. Apparently, even the power brokers behind high-stakes testing have strong feelings about their own children's literacy, as evidenced by the fact that policymakers and politicians profiled in popular magazines often report that they send their children to private schools.

I expect they do so because they want their children to experience the richest possible literacy experiences. They do not want their children exposed to the endless days of drill and practice often found in public schools. They want their children to have

creative and inspirational teachers who motivate children to use literacy in important ways. In short, they want their children to experience "best practices."

What are those "best practices" that parents want for their children? Certainly, competence in basic skills is one of them. But that is not all they want. They also want their children to love reading, to *be* readers, and to develop a life-long reading habit. They expect that teachers will inspire children to be readers, whether it is through the use of SSR or other techniques yet to be proven by experimental research, such as visits to the school library, reading stories orally to children, encouraging book clubs, and so on.

They also want their children to be writers. They hope that their children will be like a third grader of my acquaintance who, when she received a gift from her grandmother, said that she didn't want to thank her by phone but, instead, wanted to write her a note "because that was better." Parents want their children to be able to write connected text for sensible purposes. They are less passionate about their children's ability to write short answer test responses.

These parents also value authentic literacy tasks for their children – tasks that require them to use literacy to accomplish real goals. For instance, they like to see their children engaged in project-based learning. They know that when children are engaged in such tasks, they are not only using basic skills to achieve important ends, but they are also motivated and learning to read critically, to discuss issues analytically, to problem-solve, to collaborate, to demonstrate personal agency, to be in self-regulatory control of their learning, and to develop high aspirations. These are the outcomes they want for their children. They are less interested in having their children spend their days practicing how to answer test items (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial & Palincsar, 1991; Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall & Tower, 2006-2007; Miller 2003; Turner 1995).

Leaders who thrive in high-stakes testing environments understand that such "best practices" ought not to be reserved just for children of the affluent. All children – culturally diverse children, English language learners, children in poverty – also deserve to reap the benefits of rich school literacy experiences. Consequently, successful leaders emphasize that the literacy we teach should be the literacy we want for our own children.

They Keep Reminding Us of Why We Became Teachers

Leaders of schools thriving in high-stakes testing environments acknowledge that most of us did not become teachers to do drill and practice. We became teachers because we wanted to inspire children, because we thought teaching would be challenging and creative work, and because we had a vision for how, through our students, we could make the world a better place to live. While we understood that mundane test preparation and technical compliance might be part of the job, we did not think mindless work would dominate. What we thought would dominate was

professional skill dedicated to inspiring and developing students to thrive as tomorrow's citizens.

Because of this, leaders talk about teaching as a calling, not as a job. Discussions about testing are conducted within a larger framework, one in which the implicit assumption is that teachers teach because, as Christa McAuliffe said, "I touch the future; I teach." That is, leaders put teachers in a position to think beyond basic skills and to inspire children to dream dreams, to aspire to greater heights, and to influence what future society will become. All of us, including the power brokers behind high-stakes testing, can point to a teacher who inspired us to become who we are today. The best leaders keep reminding teachers that their real mission is to do the same for today's children. In short, they remind teachers that raising test scores is relatively minor in the larger scheme of things.

Similarly, in contrast to the restrictive nature of the highly prescriptive programs currently favored by policymakers, good leaders constantly remind their teachers of the ambiguous, dilemma-ridden nature of their work. Good teaching is not a technical task that can be accomplished by following pre-determined steps set out in advance by a commercial publisher. Rather, teachers are successful to the extent that they modify commercial prescriptions, are responsive to the needs of different children, and are adaptive enough to live by a "one size does *not* fit all" mode of teaching.

Likewise, good leaders understand that success in teaching depends on motivating students. And they know that what motivates one student will not necessarily motivate another. Consequently, they encourage teachers to be creative innovators who seek each child's "magic button" – the button that will engage the child in learning to be literate. This cannot be realized when prescriptive commercial programs limit teacher decision-making.

In sum, leaders of schools thriving in a high-stakes testing environment value teachers as professionals who work for reasons that go well beyond the results of this year's test scores. By communicating this message to teachers, they establish a balance that values accountability on tests while also promoting the more elusive goal of inspiring children to be as much as they can be.

Conclusion

Whenever I urge schools to enact "best practices," the response I often hear is, "You just don't understand the pressure we're under from the people above us." But in some schools, there isn't that sense of pressure. Rather, the message seems to be, "We will be responsible for what is tested, but we'll also accept responsibility for seeing that students can apply basic skills in empowering and enriching ways."

I don't think it is a matter of conscientiousness. Leaders and teachers in all the schools I visit are working themselves to the bone. Nor do I think it is a matter of student clientele. While many high-poverty schools are often dominated by high-stakes testing,

there are also high-poverty schools that are *not* dominated by high-stakes testing. No, I think the difference lies with the choices districts and schools make. What do leaders promote as their mission? Is the primary goal to prepare students to be test-passers, or is it to prepare students for the high-level literacy they will need as adults? What do they see as equity? Is it equitable to have *our* children educated in schools where rich literacy experiences dominate while children of poverty are educated in schools dominated by drill and practice? How do they view teachers? Do they view teachers as paraprofessionals responsible primarily for drill and practice, or do they view them as professionals who must exercise judgment to create high quality literacy experiences for students? Accountability, federal control, and testing are here to stay. They're not going to go away. So the only real question is, "How will we choose to respond?" Will we merely survive each testing cycle, year after year, or will we be accountable for the annual tests while also providing all students with rich literacy experiences?

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