

Literacy and Accountability: The High Stakes of High-Stakes Assessments

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This inaugural issue of the *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction (JoCI)* highlights the efforts of teachers, teacher educators, and reading researchers as they seek to implement exemplary literacy practice during a time when such efforts have been seriously challenged, undermined, and impacted by a variety of political influences. Since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in January of 2002, federal, state, and local accountability mandates have mushroomed resulting in the administration of high-stakes assessments at all-time highs. Policymakers from both sides of the aisle echoed the sentiments of Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy who described this landmark legislation in apocalyptic terms.

This is a defining issue about the future of our nation and about the future of democracy, the future of liberty, and the future of the United States in leading the free world. No piece of legislation will have a greater impact or influence on that (Rudalevige, 2003, p. 23-24).

Despite its initial bipartisan congressional support, No Child Left Behind's era of good feelings dissipated as its mandates reached the school doors of the very institutions it sought to help. Ongoing debate about the impetus behind this legislation and the impact of its outcomes continues (see Bracey, 2006; Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Karp, 2002; McDonnell, 2005; Noddings, 2005; Wallis & Steptoe, 2007) as its reauthorization approaches in late 2007.

Meanwhile, teachers, students, and administrators have spent the past five years navigating the waters of NCLB together in America's 95,000 public schools (US Census Bureau, 2006). The federal mandate's unmistakable message that student learning must be measured by standardized assessments has challenged many educators. They know that exemplary teaching involving a variety of factors including choice, appropriate challenge, and relevance to students' lives (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005), leads to more engaged students who develop into self-regulated independent learners. The notion of placing ultimate focus on high-stakes testing as the sole accountability measure for student achievement is clearly misguided according to many nationally known educational experts.

The scope of education isn't supposed to be based on what's tested; it's the other way around, says P. David Pearson, Dean of the University of California, Berkeley, a graduate school of education. "Never send a test out to do a curriculum's job," he says (Wallis & Steptoe, 2007, p. 39).

Thus, the purpose of this July 2007 inaugural issue of the *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction* is to focus on implementation of literacy instruction emphasizing “best practices,” rather than simply preparing students to score well on high-stakes assessments. Featuring the courageous efforts of educators who sought to “do what is best for kids” despite the requirements, pressures, and demands of political mandates seemed like a noble and well-grounded undertaking for the *JoCI* Editorial Team. This focus on best practices/exemplary teaching in literacy instruction is evident as the third edition of *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007) was published earlier this year by Guilford Press, featuring contributors such as Peter Afflerbach, Richard Allington, Rita Bean, Camille Blachowicz, Cathy Block, Patricia Cunningham, James Flood, Linda Labbo, and a host of other notable literacy researchers. Beyond the work of these well-known names, a literature search for “literacy best practices” in JSTOR’s electronic archive of important and current scholarly journals yielded 12,595 results (JSTOR, 2007).

Clearly there exists a focus on best practices/exemplary teaching in literacy instruction. But in today’s educational arena, few topics are more emotionally charged than those involving high-stakes assessment and accountability. Literacy researchers and practitioners from across the nation contributed their insights, questions, and findings to *JoCI*’s first issue, including the caution that if best practices were being considered, then high-stakes testing would not be involved! Thus, the readers of Volume 1, Number 1 can expect to have their preconceived notions both challenged and confirmed as they consider the work of an array of authors ranging from exemplary classroom teachers to seasoned literacy researchers whose reputations are long-standing.

By invitation, Gerald G. Duffy draws upon his wealth of experience and research in school settings to reflect upon differences in how schools operate within high-stakes testing environments. He poses a question that occurs to many teacher educators fortunate enough to spend time in various public school settings.

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? (2007, p. 8)

In his piece entitled, “Thriving in High-Stakes Testing Environment,” Duffy emphasizes the essential role of educational leaders at all levels of responsibility whose decisions impact how teachers and students negotiate learning experiences within their respective school settings. Further, he describes how leadership decisions can shift schools from a mindset of “teaching to the test” to one of “conscientiousness” as they seek to motivate all students to thrive as learners and responsible future citizens.

Heather Casey's study entitled, "Making Room for the Middle Grades: High-Stakes Teaching in an Era of High-Stakes Testing," examines the literacy teaching and learning that takes place in a seventh grade language arts class. As this middle school teacher seeks to maintain responsive pedagogy, she encounters a number of challenges pressuring her to move toward more uniform expectations for all of her students. A description of her case includes details about the components included in her literacy instruction; her efforts to organize, plan for, and manage instruction; and her efforts to maintain meaningful relationships with her students. Case study implications suggest that a responsive model of instruction allows Lisa to challenge her students with meaningful literacy activities while simultaneously attending to the outside requirements of accountability mandates.

Suggesting that looking beyond standardized tests is crucial in order "to enable willing, focused, and persistent – that is self-regulated – students and teachers" (p. 31), Stephanie Davis and Erika Gray focus on the notion of self-regulated learning in "Going Beyond the Test-Taking Strategies: Building Self-Regulated Students and Teachers." Using Zimmerman's phases of self-regulation development as a framework, Davis and Gray align the interaction between one student and her teacher as both move toward greater self-regulation. Additionally, professional development strategies fostering self-regulation are suggested since, according to the authors, this ability is not acquired, but "shaped and developed through participation in environments that provide students and teachers with opportunities to be in control of their own learning" (Davis & Gray, 2007, p. 42).

Prisca Martens describes the self-perceptions, beliefs, and reading proficiency of two third grade students retained on the basis of high-stakes assessment scores in "The Impact of High-Stakes Assessments on the Beliefs about Reading, Perception of Self-as-Reader, and Reading Proficiency of Two Urban Students Retained in Third Grade." Students become acquainted with Martens during personal interviews and retrospective miscue analysis (RMA) sessions. Specific details about student-researcher interactions are included in order to provide the reader with a rich description of the students' notions about themselves and how they read. Despite deepening their understandings about their own reading process, increasing their ability to articulate their actions while using productive reading strategies, and improving their proficiency as readers during this study, these two third grade students are unable to perceive themselves as capable readers. Their retention based on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores seemingly disables their ability to view themselves as the productive readers that they become through the ongoing support provided by RMA discussions.

Amy Broemmel collaborates with elementary school teachers, Kristi Boruff and Ellie Murphy-Racey in action research meant to document the impact of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) on the first grade students in a small,

neighborhood school. The professional development school (PDS) collaboration between this public elementary school and their local university partner allows the PDS philosophy of reflective practice to impact veteran teachers, as well as the interns who learn to teach alongside them. Concerned about the lack of scientifically-based reading research supporting the implementation of SSR, a practice that these teachers knew to be highly beneficial to their students, Broemmel, Boruff, and Murphy-Racey seek to document the effects of independent reading on their students' reading attitudes and achievement. Their findings reported in "Increasing Fluency in First Graders: Practice Makes Perfect...or at Least Better," offer credibility for the notion that in order to become good readers, students need to spend a lot of time reading.

Last, if notions about "best practices" have not already been challenged by some of the authors mentioned thus far, David Reinking's exceptional commentary, "Toward a Good or Better Understanding of Best Practices" argues that the quest to identify best practices in literacy instruction should be abandoned. The search for a silver bullet, the one and only "best practice" reinforces the false notion that absolutes can be identified when it comes to teaching and learning. Reinking's reasoning is powerful, illustrating how searches for answers to questions such as, "What is the best religion?" or "Which is the best team in baseball or football?" lead to endless arguments, rather than to productive professional conversation. He further explores the interesting notions of best practice as "relatively good practice," "what experts or most teachers do," "achieving valued outcomes," and "as scientific evidence." His powerful conclusion encourages readers to more thoughtfully question many of the agendas operating within our present era of accountability and can hopefully enable more constructive and proactive responses to "those who often take an adversarial stance toward our field and our profession" (Reinking, 2007, p.87).

The articles in this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Curriculum & Instruction* have potential to speak to all educators. Featured authors work to highlight the impact of high-stakes testing on teachers, curriculum, students' learning, and students' attitudes. Continued research and educational conversations must focus on the importance of authentic and meaningful literacy experiences in the midst of high-stakes pressure. Negligence to do so could undermine efforts to help American school children become the kind of flexible, critical thinkers necessary to successfully face the challenges of tomorrow.

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