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Texas Voices Speak out about High-Stakes Testing: Preservice Teachers, Teachers, and Students

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Although teachers and students are directly impacted by high-stakes testing policy mandates, their opinion is often left out during the decision-making process. As future educators, preservice teachers are also affected by these mandates; thus far, their perspectives have also been ignored. Providing these stakeholders a forum in which they can speak about accountability testing allows others to hear their voices in this controversial issue. To achieve this goal, we employed a qualitative design. Data gathered consisted of observational journals and threaded e-journals. Data were critically analyzed and triangulated. Trustworthiness was further established using peer-review and member checking. Emerging patterns revealed that, across grade levels, preservice and inservice teachers see the overemphasis on high-stakes testing as being intrusive on their curricular and instructional decision-making. They note that instructional decisions are not being made in the students' best interests. Across grade levels, students' perceptions and their approach to tests differ. These voices challenge notions of whether high-stakes tests are valid measures of students' learning, ability, or potential, and whether test results should be used as an accountability measure.

In January 2002, President George W. Bush signed his landmark educational legislation, the "No Child Left Behind Act," with the intent to improve education through the requirement that each state develop an accountability system vis-à-vis testing students grades 3-8. President Bush's political agenda for educational reform used Texas as an exemplary model of an accountability system. Further support came from politicians and educators that see Texas as a trendsetter for establishing an accountability system that they credit with increasing student performance. Texas began this trend by initially requiring basic competency as a precursor to graduation from high school (See, Texas Education Agency, [TEA], 2002). Later, Texas raised the bar by establishing rigorous state standards, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), for all grade levels, K-12, and all subject matter. Policy makers further held the public school system - including teachers and students - accountable for these standards by requiring state-mandated testing, known as the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Schools were rated as being either "low performing," "acceptable," "recognized," or "exemplary," depending on academic performance- students' passing/failing rates in one or all sections of the TAAS test- as compared to schools sharing similar populations (TEA, 2002). Texas, in the eyes of some, continues to lead the nation as a model for standards-based accountability and its unwavering stance for continual reform of the educational system. In placing Texas on a pedestal, policy makers

established a rationale for the current national accountability mandate.

Texas' success has not come without criticism. Opponents of the accountability system would suggest that increased scores are a mere illusion of high-stakes testing practices and should not be heralded without closer scrutiny (Amrein & Berliner, 2002b; Haney, 2000; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000). Other critics also argue that for most policy makers, while ignoring the apparent inequities (funding, teacher quality, and resources) that exist in schools, the answer has been singular: accountability via high-stakes testing - as if high-stakes testing will fix ailing, ill-equipped, low performing schools - is the only answer to accountability.

When it comes to high-stakes testing, educators often wonder to whom do policy makers listen and how do they make their decisions? Possibly, they listen to lobbyists who represent the testing industry. According to Metcalf (2002), the three major test-publishing companies, McGraw-Hill, Houghton-Mifflin, and Harcourt General, have become involved at an all time high in testing issues. Perhaps the profit margin may be what drives testing publishers to design and provide these tests, even though the validity of competency tests may be compromised by their inappropriate use, i.e., to evaluate school performance and to set graduation requirements. Even when researchers (Valenzuela, 1999, 2000a, 2000b) have testified on the aversive effects of the excessive emphasis on Texas' mandated testing programs, policy makers may look upon such expert testimony with trepidation and suspicion. Apparently, policy makers can also turn a deaf ear to the pleas of concerned citizens who have marched upon the steps of the state's capital to protest high-stakes testing (Joyce, 2003; Young, 2001). Court rulings on the TAAS suggesting that the positive outcomes outweighed any negative effect have supported the efforts of standards and testing proponents (Pipho, 2000). However, little has been heard from those most affected by political or judicial decisions. The purpose of this paper is to provide such a forum for these voices.

While policy makers, researchers, and other stakeholders continue the debate about standards and accountability, certain voices have been left unheard or have been silenced in this debate. Stakeholders, such as preservice teachers, teachers, and students, have a right to be heard regarding their experiences and opinions about high-stakes testing. As Flores (2001) argues, preservice teachers as observers of classrooms have been impacted by high-stakes testing policies. Although preservice teachers have not had extensive classroom experience, what they are witnessing in their assigned classrooms during this high-stakes testing era can offer an untainted perspective. Preservice teacher voices can serve to alert teacher educators about the impact that "teaching to the test" is having on the formation of future teachers. Moreover, it is also important to consider teachers' and their students' perspectives.

Smith and Fey (2000) note, "In the professional literature, teachers are not regarded as knowledgeable agents in the (high-stakes) debate" (p. 343). Yet their experiences and perspectives can directly shed light on this controversial issue. After all, teachers and students are the ones engaged in the daily realities of testing. Even though schools are the ones held accountable for test scores, teachers and students assume the heaviest of burdens in the accountability issue. In this study, we were driven to provide preservice teachers, teachers, and students a forum to speak out about high-stakes testing because of the persistent stories from the field that were being made evident through classroom observations, classroom discussions, and journals.

Review of the Literature

Researchers promoting standards hold the position that making schools accountable, vis-à-vis testing, has led to increased achievement for all students, and specifically created an educational system of equity for minority students (Fuller & Johnson, 2001; Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000). The researchers posit that the accountability system has been successful in narrowing the achievement gap. They also point out that the results show that ethnic and language minority students have the capacity to learn and can demonstrate their achievement on tests, and, therefore, schools can no longer justify failure simply because of student demographics. Moreover, Skrla and Scheurich (2001) credit the accountability system in changing the perspectives of school leaders and school systems. Their analysis of five Texas school superintendents' reflections reveal that there was a paradigm shift away from their school district's deficit thinking-an erroneous belief that certain populations, specially low-income and ethnic minority students, cannot be academically successful. Further, the researchers surmise that the accountability assured resistance to deficit thinking. In a similar study examining the transformation of a Texas urban school district, Koschoreck (2001) defends the accountability system as a means to achieving educational equity. His study finds that the superintendent's vision and commitment to educational equity is clearly articulated across the school district. This common vision was seen as a conduit for transforming that district's rating from "low performing" to "recognized" status. Fuller and Johnson (2001) argue

that the accountability system has been "a major force in driving their (school district) efforts to improve the learning of all students, especially children of color and children from low-income homes" (p. 281). Nevertheless, some of these researchers (Koschoreck; Fuller & Johnson) concede that other factors, such as class size reduction, better inservice training, and changes in curriculum, have also assisted in improving student performance.

However, when Texas' schools showed a performance increase on the state's mandated competency test, and a number of schools-including low-income schools and those with ethnic minority students-changed from "low performing" to "recognized" status, research evidence did not support the basis for these status changes. When comparing the TAAS reported gains with other standardized tests' results, rather than touting a Texas "miracle," critical reviewers noted that this reported achievement was more myth than a reality (Haney, 2000; Klein et al., 2000; Amrein & Berliner, 2002a, 2002b). Amrein and Berliner suggest that the focus on high-stakes tests in the daily classroom, while it may result in increased scores, does not result in a transfer of knowledge and skills to other similar measures, and as such, are a failed policy. In the case of low-income, high minority schools, these practices are exacerbating the achievement gap. Thus, as Flores (2001) notes, for some low-income, high minority schools, this "Texas Miracle" is more of an urban legend than an urban reality. Parker (2001) would argue that the accountability system perpetuates deficit thinking because ethnic minority students' scores still lag behind their white counterparts.

Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan and Foley (2001) suggest that inferior schools are the cause of historical minority student failure, and in promoting accountability, proponents are treating the symptoms of school failure rather than the cause. Although accountability proponents acknowledge that the current system is not perfect, they still contend that equity will not be achieved without some type of systematic means (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2001; Scheurich, et al., 2000). Other researchers also support the notion that standards and appropriate test use can ensure that all students, especially minority students, receive high-quality instruction (Heubert, 2001).

Nonetheless, the current literature abounds with evidence that the Texas' state-mandated test is driving the curriculum (McNeil 2000a, 2000b; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000). In a recent survey of a random sample drawn from the members of Texas' reading association, teachers (N=200) clearly revealed the overemphasis and harmful impact of TAAS on the curriculum and on learner-outcomes (Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001). Specifically, as these experienced classroom teachers' responses pointed out, "the TAAS does not measure what it purports, is unfair to minority students, is affecting instruction in negative ways, is leading both students and teacher to 'drop-out,' and is being used in ways that are invalid" (p. 490). Conversely, Cimbricz (2002) argues that high-stakes testing is not the only factor that impacts teachers' practices, and that other factors, such as teaching experience and knowledge, influence teachers' instructional decisions. Nevertheless, Cimbricz concedes that she does not know the impact of such decisions in schools where there is a greater emphasis on test performance as compared to those schools with lesser emphasis. Wright's (2002) study with experienced elementary teachers, working with a large number of English language learners in a California inner city school, reveals not only the psychological stress, but also the limitations placed on these teachers regarding curriculum and lesson planning as a result of the state-mandated testing program. Thus, we must consider that in low performing schools, in which there are a large number of ethnic minority students, the stakes are high and the pressure is great.

Flores (2001) also points out how the excessive emphasis on testing impacts preservice teachers' experience. As teacher candidates, they formulate their knowledge while attaining teaching experience. In her study, four themes were identified as emerging from classroom observations and preservice teachers' field journals: (a) focusing on basics, (b) emphasizing rote learning, (c) teaching to the test, and (d) promoting an English-only curriculum. In conclusion, Flores further suggests that these kinds of field experiences will not only reduce the quality of experiences preservice teachers will have, but will also reinforce future teachers' notions of deficit thinking regarding students' abilities, and will likely reaffirm prescriptive teaching. McNeil (2000b) poignantly argues, "This prescriptive teaching creates a new form of discrimination as teaching to the fragmented and narrow information on the test comes to substitute for a substantive curriculum in the schools of poor and minority youths" (p. 728).

In a recent article, "Bamboozled by the Texas Miracle," a Texas teacher warns others about the pitfalls of state-mandated tests. Beam-Conroy (2001) states that since coming to Texas as a teacher, she has learned five important lessons: (1) high-stakes testing is king; (2) high-stakes testing will take over your teaching; (3) do what the tests demand or lose your job; (4) high-stakes tests are scholastic Darwinism; (5) high-stakes testing corrupts even

well-meaning reforms. Beam-Conroy expresses feeling "Bush-whacked" and powerless as a teacher.

The misuse of high-stakes testing results has also been criticized (Haney, 2000; Kellow & Wilson, 2001). Haney initiates the discussion by pointing to the paucity of the TAAS' psychometric soundness and the apparent inattentiveness to measurement error, which have resulted in a great misuse of the test results for high-stakes decisions, such as awarding of high school diplomas. Kellow and Wilson's analysis of Texas TAAS 1998-1999 data extend the conversation by demonstrating that using the results for high-stakes decisions without considering the measurement error has likely resulted in a number of students who were denied their high school diploma when, in fact, their observed adjusted scores met the criteria. According to their approximations, 35,182 students who failed the reading subtest and 43,077 students who failed the math subtest were false negative classification errors.

Needless to say, the denial of these students' high school diplomas is an egregious error. One only has to wonder, over the years, how many thousands of students were denied their diplomas because of this false negative classification error. Kellow and Wilson (2001) estimate that 2% of student scores are misclassified annually, and if a high-stakes test like TAAS were in place nationwide, approximately 1.1 million students would be misclassified on an annual basis. Apparently, in Texas, many students have already been abandoned by political mandates; when high-stakes testing is implemented nation wide, millions more will also be "left behind."

Moreover, these high-stakes decisions have been made regardless of the criticisms waged that the misuse of the results are compromising the test's validity. Smith and Fey (2000) remind us that "Focusing on high scores for the sake of high scores, as seems to be the case in high-stakes accountability programs, diminishes the validity of the test and makes it less useful in tracking real gains and losses in the construct generally" (p. 340). Similarly, Amrein and Berliner (2002b) evoke the Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle: "the more important that any quantitative social indicator becomes in social decision making, the more likely it will be to distort and corrupt the social process it is intended to monitor" (p. 16). Relying solely on test results to make curricular decisions compromises the validity of the test. Validity is further jeopardized when tests are used to justify policy, rather than as indicators of content knowledge learning. Likewise, the validity of the test scores should also be questioned because of current classroom practices. The emphasis and practice on testing creates a false echo in the form of rhetoric pointing to the increased scores as indicators of student achievement, school accountability, and educational equity. However, as we have seen, these inflated scores are not an indicator of measurable learning (Amrein & Berliner, 2002b, 2002c; Haney, 2000; Klein et al., 2000), but rather, are reflective of test practice and teaching to the test. Sadly, this rhetoric is perpetuating the great divide among different ethnic groups (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Valenzuela, 2000a; Valencia & Villarreal, 2003). Disconcerting, the overemphasis on tests and test scores may in fact result in students having a distorted view of learning and its value as a lifelong skill (Sheldon & Biddle, 1998).

Despite these academic criticisms based on empirical research and the several MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense Fund) lawsuits that have been filed on behalf of students who have been denied their high school diplomas on the basis of test scores (Fikac, 1999), Texas continues in its high-stakes testing trend. Additionally, Texas has recently increased the stakes for third graders, requiring that they pass the new Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test or risk retention. The TAKS is designed to be more aligned with the state's curriculum standards. According to state reports, had the law been enacted in 2001, nearly one-sixth of all third graders in Texas would have been retained (Spencer, 2001). Valencia and Villarreal's (2003) current projections also indicate that this law will have the greatest adverse effects on minority populations. Policy makers also apparently disregarded the grade level retention research indicating that retention increases a student's likelihood of dropping out (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Smink, 2001; Valencia, 2000; Valencia & Villarreal, 2003).

These types of actions may increase if there is no change in policy or in the people who make policy. We shall see further developments, now that the "No Child Left Behind Act" has been mandated. As stated by Smith and Fey (2000), "In the polis, teachers are regarded as either anonymous throughputs or obstacles to effective policy" (p. 10). Perhaps the acts that challenge high-stakes testing policy, such as stakeholders speaking out, will assist in changing the policy.

Methodology

We employed a qualitative design for this study in which a total of 18 undergraduate preservice teachers, 10 graduate inservice teachers, and 30 public school students participated. Approval to use human subjects for research was granted for the study. Confidentiality for all subjects was maintained and names used in this study are pseudonyms. During the Fall and Spring semesters, data gathered included faculty directed e-mail threaded journals, preservice

teachers' observation journal reflections, and faculty direct observation field journals.

In order to understand the high-stakes phenomenon and to provide preservice teachers and inservice teachers a forum for freely expressing their views without fear of reprisal or any prior expectations, they were encouraged to comment in their threaded dialogue e-mail journals on issues of testing within their schools. Specifically, preservice and inservice teachers' discussions were based on prompts initiated by the professors: What do you think about high-stakes testing? Can you give examples of high-stakes testing? As the dialogue continued among the participants, we read and followed their comments.

Using their comments, we further stimulated the threaded discussions by asking the inservice teachers to relay their colleagues' and students' reactions toward high-stakes testing. The specific email prompts sent to everyone participating in the threaded discussion were: How do your colleagues think/feel about high-stakes testing? What do your students think/feel about testing, like TAAS? Question prompts for public school students were sent to their respective teachers in the study and included: What do you think/feel about TAAS? The teachers then forwarded the students' responses to us via e-mail.

Data obtained from the teachers, preservice teachers, and students were critically analyzed and triangulated to identify common themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We each independently developed a matrix to identify common patterns across the data. Through our peer-review, we included only themes mentioned by the majority of the respondents in the analysis. We examined and agreed upon all identified patterns. The preservice teachers' observational journals and direct observation of inservice teachers enrolled in an advanced methods course were also used to triangulate the findings. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, member-checking was employed by presenting the findings to the preservice and inservice teachers. Both groups acknowledged that we captured their perceptions of the high-stakes testing impact on them and students. They were elated that their voices would finally be heard. Excerpts drawn from the groups were representative of the majority of the responses given.

The preservice teachers (n=18) and inservice teachers (n=10) were matriculated in either an undergraduate or graduate program of study at a major Southwest Texas institution and enrolled in our courses either during the Fall and/or Spring semesters of 2000-2001. On the first day of class in the fall and spring semesters, the threaded e-mail assignment was presented to our classes as the first activity of the semester. At this time, students were invited to participate in the study. Of the eighteen undergraduate preservice teachers who volunteered for the study, nine were elementary education generalists taking their final methods course and observing in urban middle- and low-income school districts. Most of these were first-generation, college-aged students, and monolingual. The other nine were preservice bilingual education majors who were enrolled in an undergraduate language assessment course and engaged in fieldwork in an urban, low-income school district. The bilingual education preservice teachers were bilingual and were non-traditional, second career college students. The inservice teachers included early childhood, elementary, and secondary teachers in bilingual and monolingual settings who were enrolled in a graduate level assessment course (n=5) or an advanced methods course (n=5). The inservice teachers enrolled in the graduate assessment course were bilingual and experienced teachers of five or more years. The other graduate class members were first year teachers, two of whom were monolingual and the other three whom were bilingual. Teachers across grade levels were included in this study because all grade levels are held accountable for the state standards (TEKS) and all students are tested using benchmark assessments, district "TAAS" mock tests, or other standardized tests. The majority of these teachers work in urban, middle- and low-income schools throughout the city and the surrounding area.

The public school students were enrolled in the inservice teachers' classrooms. The teachers forwarded the students' responses to us. The public school students represented a variety of geographic settings (urban to suburban), socioeconomic positions (low to upper-middle class), and school levels (elementary, middle, and high school).

Findings and Discussion

In the midst of our data analysis, we received a graduate inservice teacher's urgent telephone call and subsequent email reflections as part of the ongoing threaded discussion. This fourth grade teacher's query began with a shaky voice asking, "Can I get fired just for not teaching the TAAS?" The following vignette describes what led to Eleni's urgency, which we felt captured the essence of what is occurring as a result of the emphasis on high-stakes testing:

> Eleni was very excited when she landed her first teaching job as a first grade teacher at a middle class urban school with a majority Mexican American student population. Her teaching

evaluations indicated that she was an exemplary first year teacher. However, a dark cloud loomed over her. She did not like the overwhelming presence of the TAAS test. The school principal required that students practice taking the TAAS daily, and teachers were discouraged to teach anything that would not be on the TAAS test.

After a year of skill and drill, the school's rating went from "acceptable" to "exemplary" status. However, Eleni was not happy with this outcome. As she put it, "I felt that we had cheated because of the things we had to do to get there; I wasn't proud (crying and voice shaking). I was ashamed and I felt that all of us (the school's faculty), all belong to this 'secret society' because we all knew what we had to do to get 'exemplary status.' This year other schools visited us, because we are an exemplary school, but all I feel is shame and sadness. It is like a pseudo-reality - a big farce."

During her second year, now as a fourth grade teacher, Eleni began to challenge the TAAS spoon-feeding methods of her school. She knew that the students were capable of more and they were not being exposed to other experiences. One day, as a change to the humdrum TAAS skill and drill, she decided to have the children write letters using cursive handwriting. Though required by the curriculum, the students had not been exposed to cursive writing and could not read simple notes in handwriting.

As she was teaching the lesson, the principal walked into her class, and upon leaving, he left a note asking her to come to his office. On entering his office, the principal began yelling at her and asked, "What do you think you are doing?" She explained how she was using the letter-writing task to practice TAAS skills. The principal was livid and told Eleni that she would be written up because of her insubordination. She then responded, "But I am teaching the state's curriculum!" The principal retorted, "If it is not being tested, you are not going to teach it!" She left the office disappointed and disgusted - " I wanted to run, run and never to return to the school."

In this vignette, we note the teacher's concerns about Texas' mandated testing program and the schools' focus on its rating, rather than on student learning. Critics have argued that this narrow, misguided focus is perpetuated by accountability mandates, and calls into question the validity of the test and the purpose of schooling (Smith & Fey, 2000; Amrein & Berliner, 2002b).

In our analysis of the threaded e-mail discussions and observational journals, the data reveal themes similar to those implied in the introductory vignette and other research. Each of these themes will be presented and discussed in the subsequent sections. For the themes listed below, the term "teacher" is used inclusively to refer to both preservice and inservice teachers. The six themes we identified in our analysis were:

1. Teachers are not against accountability; rather, they view assessment as distinct from high-stakes testing.
2. Teachers posit that an overemphasis on testing results in an unbalanced curriculum and inappropriate instructional decisions.
3. Teachers suggest that excessive pressure is placed on particular grade levels.
4. Teachers are having second thoughts about pursuing or remaining in the teaching profession.
5. Teachers propose that test results should not be used to make high-stakes decisions.
6. Teachers have observed that test emphasis affects students negatively, and is manifested as physical, psychological, or emotional symptoms.

1. Teachers are not against accountability; rather, they view assessment as distinct from high-stakes testing.

Teachers recognize the importance of assessment. The analysis reveals how teachers are very attuned to the role that assessment should take within the teaching and learning cycle. However, they also acknowledge that there is a difference between assessment and testing. Further, they recognize that there are limitations to testing and assessment. As Amy, a second grade teacher states:

I think that it may be a necessary evil, even though we know that

> these tests don't accurately reflect knowledge. They don't take into account test taking abilities, computer awareness, anxiety, physical conditions, etc. Still, we need a measure to gauge children's learning and teachers' abilities in teaching. Benchmarks and TPRI [Texas Primary Reading Inventory] are essential in assessing the child's knowledge and detecting growth at certain intervals. These are very helpful tools, at least for me.

Karen concurs: "I have found that testing is beneficial in order to see what level the student is in… " Another teacher agrees:

> I've realized that, in kindergarten, the children need to be reaching higher goals and expectations to be promoted to first grade; but I also realized how important it is to test them because sometimes it is not enough to observe them as a group, but also individually, and in testing them we can address their needs.

There are teachers who have mixed thoughts about the focus and benefits of testing. Lucille states, "I personally have a problem with putting a big emphasis on testing. On the other hand, I feel we really do need to assess students. Why are so many students struggling academically?" On the other hand, Patricia, a fourth grade teacher, suggests that there are alternatives:

> I believe that the only way to get accurate results about what the students have learned is to test what is being taught. I believe that the teacher-developed tests are the best indicators of what the students are actually learning.

A preservice teacher believes that the results will help her improve her teaching: "As for myself, I feel that testing will help me understand how to implement my teaching strategies that will aid the child's needs. Whatever the results of any type of tests, it is a reflection on my teaching methods." This preservice teacher recognizes the role of assessment as a diagnostic tool rather than a prescriptive mechanism.

Contrary to popular beliefs that teachers do not want to be held accountable, teachers' views of assessment versus high-stakes testing are quite distinct. The teachers, both preservice and inservice across grade levels, see assessment useful when it informs them and their teaching. So when assessment is diagnostic and purposeful, teachers feel it is an important component. Wright (2002) also observed that teachers often feel that standardized test results do not provide them with the adequate information that they need to make decisions concerning specific student needs, and thus, do not assist in helping them modify their instruction.

2. Teachers posit that an overemphasis on testing results in an unbalanced curriculum and inappropriate instructional decisions.

Teachers are not against testing; rather, they are concerned about the effect that testing has on the curriculum and on their instruction. Teachers recognize that overemphasis on any one component distorts the curriculum. They also note that the focus on testing results in the narrowing of the curriculum. A third grade teacher notes:

> There is so much material teachers have to cover to prepare for testing… leaving little time to teach. It seems very time-consuming, confusing, and with the responsibility of numbers (% passing rate) placed with the teacher, it is obvious why we are stressed.

Another teacher feels in conflict with what is expected of her and her students, and what she has learned is best for young children: "I think the district wants the Pre-K teachers to really prepare them for reading. I guess it is needed if these students are to succeed." Similarly, a preservice teacher reveals her uncertainty in her observation journal:

> I am observing in Kinder and they are just being prepared for the test. I think that when my cooperating teacher is handing out material to practice for the test, the students still don't know exactly what they are preparing for...

A beginning fourth grade teacher's e-mail note reveals how much TAAS emphasis there is throughout the school year.

> It's October and we are getting ready for the TAAS. The environment in the school district and at school is certainly getting fired up. We have been given practice workbooks that must be covered and understood by the children by Dec. 1. We will be tested on Feb. 19th, 2002. On top of that, fourth grade is being pressured into teaching four writing modes (one a month) when the children do not even know how to write a decent sentence, much less

> compound sentences. They have never been introduced to elements such as quotes, titles, etc. At this point, I'm just making progress in getting students sent to the right places for assistance and having my special eds finally classified.
>
> The principal tells me I need [a] minimum [of] 12 children to pass TAAS, and has now required that all teachers do a daily Michael Eaton Sentence with the classroom. Write the sentences on huge tablets for display, turn a set in to him every week along with the students samples, submit the writing papers the children are producing that week, and rework a televised TAAS problem. The general comment from other instructors is that we are all behind in grading, preparing new materials, and keeping up with the snowball of paperwork. I feel I am teaching grammar, writing, spelling, and an iota of math. How do I squeeze in anything else? I really feel I am shortchanging the students. Help, does anyone have any suggestions?

Although there have been claims that the closely aligned system has resulted in a better way to evaluate student progress (Scalafani, 2001), the general consensus among the participants is that there is no such alignment. This preservice teacher sums it best when she calls for better alignment between curriculum and testing:

> Students need to be cued on what is expected of them. The teaching should be a reflection of what they will be tested on or material that is taught in class. In the early grade levels testing may be easier because the child may not fully understand that they are being evaluated. They might not understand that concept. In the older grades 3-12, the comprehension of testing is clear. In these grades levels students do group work, but they should be able to work independently. Testing is independent work.

Teachers note that the curriculum standards are what should guide curricular and instructional decisions, not the TAAS test. As a first grade teacher affirms: "As one of our classmates said, as long as you are teaching the TEKS, the children will be prepared for TAAS." Another third grade teacher agrees and expands on this notion:

> Talking about the TAAS, I think there is so much pressure for kids about the test and they cannot even focus on learning because sometimes teachers are just preparing them for the test. I think it is necessary for them to be tested, but not to teach them for passing the test. I remember that one teacher told us when we are teaching the TEKS we are preparing them for the test and I strongly agree with that opinion. …There should be a way to avoid a [state-mandated] test and the pressure we, as teachers, and they, as students, have to go through when testing.

Connie, a preservice bilingual teacher observes:

> In the classroom, one of the major issues (in high-stakes testing) is not considering the individual student needs or the development level of the child. Regardless of these issues, the student is required to master standardized testing. As I have seen with my cooperative teacher, I notice that she is pressured to make sure these students master the objectives needed to meet requirements. In my web search, I notice that many standardized tests focus on accountability and that bilingual researchers are trying to make sure that students' cultural backgrounds, individual needs, and development levels be considered.

Implicit in these comments is the overemphasis on TAAS, even to the point of accepting practices that may be developmentally inappropriate. There is a lack of consideration for the students' needs or background when high-stakes tests become the driving force for curricular and instructional decisions. Evidence of an unbalanced curriculum has also been noted in other research studies (Amrein & Berliner, 2002a; McNeil, 2000a, 2000b; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Valenzuela, 2000b). Also, according to teachers, the principals are more concerned with the number of students passing rather than with their learning, thus leading to

inappropriate instructional decisions. Valencia & Villarreal (2003) maintain that test-driven instructional decisions will not lead to student learning.

3. Teachers suggest that excessive pressure is placed on particular grade levels.

The focus on state-mandated testing and accountability places excessive pressure on particular grade levels. Although all teachers acknowledge that each of them has a responsibility for how students perform on the test, it is apparent that the TAAS-designated grade levels bear the greatest burden. Nevertheless, all teachers sense the pressure, as Katherine, a preservice teacher reveals: "Due to testing, it seems teachers are feeling frustrated and overwhelmed."

Even though Pre-K children are not tested by the state, early childhood teachers share this concern about the effects of state-mandated testing. As one early childhood teacher notes,

> I don't think that getting high scores in TAAS should be the light at the end of a tunnel… I think it's really sad when teachers only teach around the test! What about all the other important stuff? We're all responsible.

A first year teacher, Marina, laments about her primary responsibility:

> I am teaching fifth grade and this is all I have been told to worry about. Testing strategies is what they need to learn, and simply taking their time. They seem to just want to rush through the test and get it over with.

Another preservice teacher recalls:

> For my second approaches class last semester, I spent 30 hours in a third grade classroom. All the lessons I observed were based on math and reading worksheets dealing with what the teacher called "TAAS strategies". It was easy for me to see that the students and teacher were only going through the motions of learning. Neither one cared about what they were doing. As a future teacher I believe that my biggest challenge is going to be how to get the students to do well on the TAAS while at the same time learning.

Elsie describes the general consensus regarding TAAS at her elementary campus: "… let's get ready to become exemplary for the 2001-2002 school year. We don't like it, but let's all get together and help one another to achieve the district's goal of becoming an exemplary campus." Conversely, Lolli, a third grade teacher, is concerned with the goals of the school in relation to testing:

> I believe that much pressure is placed on teachers and students in regards to testing. The teachers teaching the upper grades are consistently being told about TAAS scores and what needs to be done to do better. If you are "acceptable", then you want to be "recognized". If you are "recognized", then your goal is "exemplary." There is nothing wrong with being recognized or exemplary, but does so much emphasis need to be directed to the teachers, and also to the students? Much time is spent preparing for the TAAS.

A preservice teacher, Sara, uses her experiences to examine the issue from multiple perspectives. She offers the following insights:

> As a student, I think testing causes anxiety and it creates a distance between the student and their education. Students tend to use testing as a criterion for not only judging themselves, but on what others think of themselves. As for teachers, I think that teachers take it as "their job being on the line." I think that teachers are evaluated based on classroom performance and not on the students' individual needs, background culture, and their development level. As for myself, as a teacher candidate, I think that tests should be evaluated on individual needs and that the teacher is not the one being evaluated based on her classroom performance.

Evident in these responses is the general consensus that students and teachers, in particular TAAS-designated grade levels, are being held accountable for the school's goal to attain either "recognized" or "exemplary" status. Interestingly, on some campuses achieving a "recognized" or "exemplary" status gives the campus a common goal. This common vision is seen by standards and accountability proponents as a means to achieving equity (See Fuller & Johnson, 2001; Koschoreck, 2001; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). However, the respondents indicated that excessive stress is created by the unrealistic demands on students and teachers. There is a real concern among them that the students are only going through the motions of learning. In support of this concern, critics have warned us about the impact of high-stakes testing on students' desire

for learning (Sheldon & Biddle, 1998). There is also a sense among the respondents that teachers' jobs will be in jeopardy if their students do not perform well on the test. Similarly, Amrein and Berliner's (2002a) recent study also noted that high levels of stress among classroom teachers are due in part to the pressure of the state and the school district's emphasis on testing.

4. Teachers are having second thoughts about pursuing or remaining in the teaching profession.

At a time when the "No Child Left Behind Act" calls for highly qualified teachers, there continues to be a critical shortage of such teachers-especially in bilingual and early childhood education. A disturbing eventual outcome is likely. Both teachers and teacher candidates are considering leaving the profession or are not entering into the profession in the first place, due to this excessive pressure. A preservice teacher reflects:

> I believe testing will affect negatively teachers' delivery of effective instruction. I also believe testing will affect me as a teacher candidate as that is part of what is going to determine if I am going to become a teacher or not.

Teachers also believe that testing overemphasis limits their grade level choice. As an early childhood teacher candidly states: "I don't plan on teaching an older grade [level]! I am amazed by how much hype is caused by this test! I also see the pressure that the teachers get as far as their students' performance!"

In sum, many preservice teachers are having second thoughts about pursuing the teaching profession because in their field experience, they encounter the negative effects of testing. They see testing as a factor in reducing students' creativity and motivation, as well as in hampering teacher autonomy and decision-making power. Sheldon and Biddle (1998) would concede that the emphasis on testing hinders students' love for learning and teachers' love for teaching, and also results in a loss of intrinsic motivation for both. Preservice teachers have expressed similar reactions regarding interest and disillusionment for the teaching profession (Flores, 2001). As a result of the overemphasis on the TAAS, inservice teachers feel that they are losing creativity in their teaching, teaching to the test, becoming "pawns" in accountability issues, "dumbing down" the curriculum, and losing options for and interest in teaching certain grade levels. Teacher flight as fallout from the high-stakes accountability system was also noted in Amrein and Berliner's recent study (2002a).

5. Teachers propose that test results should not be used to make high-stakes decisions.

Teachers are wary of high-stakes decisions that are being made based on state-mandated tests. They also consider the long-term outcomes of such decisions: "I hate the idea of tests being the source of deciding if a student passes, or as a measure of intelligence. Not everybody is a test-taker. Doesn't mean they're dumb!" Another teacher ponders the use of high-stakes testing results:

> I believe testing affects students in that the results may be used to make education decisions that impact individual students. The student may be put in special education, misplaced in the education system, or not taking into consideration what they really know, how they know it and how they learn. They can be treated differently by teachers and peers.

A bilingual preservice teachers suggests: "As a bilingual/bicultural person, I believe that one of the most important issues is that formal testing only takes into account the experience of the 'typical' student." Another preservice teacher offers this criticism regarding testing companies: "The national testing firms seem to formulate tests geared towards the middle-income white students instead of considering the vast numbers of multicultural/multilingual students." Another preservice teacher concedes: "Tests in the past have been designed for a certain group of people. They were for 'average' middle class students. Research has proven that teacher-made criterion based tests are better because they are for individual assessment."

The findings show a clear message coming from aspiring and practicing teachers regarding high-stakes decision-making as a result of testing. They are concerned about whether or not the tests are valid instruments for certain student populations, and whether or not they are true indicators of diverse students' abilities. They are also concerned about the assumptions being made regarding certain student populations based on test performance. Overall, they argue that tests cannot be the sole barometer of a student's ability. They suggest that additional measures must be used to get a full profile of a student's range of abilities. Most importantly, they insist that tests must be valid instruments for the population being tested, and must address linguistic, cultural, and economic differences among test-takers. Professional organizations such as the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association (2000), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children

(1998) have issued specific high-stakes position statements. These statements support arguments that test results should not be the only factor taken into consideration when making high-stakes decisions, and that tests must demonstrate psychometric soundness for the population that is being tested.

6. Teachers have observed that test emphasis affects students negatively, and is manifested as physical, psychological, or emotional symptoms.

Teacher and preservice teacher perceptions

The overemphasis on testing has resulted in aversive effects on students that are easily observed. Teachers are genuinely concerned about their students' well-being as they are subjected to increasing stress caused by the testing policy. An elementary teacher states:

> Testing definitely affects the students academically and mentally. If a student does not do well in a test he/she might think they are dumb and this lowers their self-esteem. I am already hearing that just from the practice tests. …Most of my students were stressed and after a whole week of testing they were a bit nervous and anxious to know their results.

A secondary teacher suggests that the tests fail to account for individual differences in relation to test taking: "The test doesn't measure students' skills in that some students can't work under a certain pressure." Another teacher discusses the observable ill effects of the test:

> Testing can have many affects on students and teachers. For a lot of students, tests are scary, painful realities of school life. A lot of teachers have also come to see testing, especially the TAAS tests, as a measure of whether they get to keep their jobs are not. Unfortunately, I have seen too many teachers direct all their efforts at having the students do well on the TAAS.

A bilingual preservice teacher contemplates language issues:

> Some of the issues that are important when testing would be language. Sometimes a student is tested without taking into consideration his first language or the language spoken at that child's home. If we test our students in their primary language they might score at a higher level.

Another bilingual teacher candidate is bewildered by the experienced teachers' decision-making. She notes:

> Today in my visitation field classroom for my second approaches class, there is one student that speaks little English. Also, there were three teachers deciding on what language should Luis should be tested in, this is his second year in third grade, last year they tested him in English and this year they are thinking, he would be better off testing him in Spanish even though his progress in English is much better than last year. The big question today was, "What language should he be targeted for TAAS?" My question is: "What is better for LUIS?" In a case like this, should the teachers inquire what language does Luis speaks at home, what language his friends use when they are playing at home? Doesn't a student's home environment count also for academic purposes?

This preservice teacher notes students' concerns at her designated field site: "In the second visit the students took the practice TAAS. The students knew it was a test and became nervous. The teacher told them not to get nervous. Then several asked what would happen if they failed." According to Rebecca, a generalist preservice teacher, even when children are physically ill, they are expected to perform even on practice tests:

> I was substituting and had a child that was physically ill (upset stomach etc.). She threw up in a trashcan in my room. I sent her down to the nurse. She returned to me with a note that stated the principal did not want any student to go home during the test; the student would have to complete all her testing before her parents could be called. ... The student was very upset about the test. She told me that it made her nervous and that her tummy hurt. She did not want to be placed in the after school TAAS tutorial again the following year. If her score did not reach 80% she would be placed in an after school program.

The pressure children face is also observable days before the test date. Victoria, a third grade teacher in a higher income school, writes about the week before the TAAS test:

> I want to let you know that my kids are super pressured, stressed, scared, and anxious. I told them we were having a game and fun day on Monday so that they can relax and forget about TAAS, clear their minds and then be more relaxed for the test. …I would love to share with you some of my experiences. ... All of a sudden, many of my kids cannot remember anything they have learned throughout the year. They are getting confused and frustrated that they cannot work out word problems. They don't want to read any passages and would rather be eight- and nine-year olds.
>
> I'm also stressed out about the test and find myself less patient with my students. Today, instead of explaining something to a student (for the 100th time) I told him that I couldn't believe he still could not understand it. I apologized and explained what stress is and how people react to it. He understood but I still feel terrible. Everybody else is on edge around here, including the counselor.
>
> The principal-concerning the noise level during the test-has passed down strict guidelines. Children must be quiet in all non-TAAS classrooms before the door is opened and doors must not be allowed to slam. Bathroom hand dryers are banned and so is anything "normal?" like you would find at an elementary school? During TAAS, this will be like a ghost town. It is RIDICULOUS!!!

A high school teacher also notes how the students' stress level increases as the test date nears:

The way I can tell is on the way the students breathe, some students become sick, maybe their adrenaline becomes too high; others are so exhausted because they studied so hard the night before and all they do is SLEEP. The worst thing is that we cannot wake them up!

Students' perceptions

Several of the teachers discussed the TAAS with their students. Responses and reactions were obtained from students, grades 3 to 11. Teachers collected these responses from their students' and then e-mailed them to us. Although different formats were used to obtain the data, we still found similarities across the responses; students reacted from an emotional, attitudinal, and/or motivational stance.

The following third grade students' responses allowed us to vicariously scrutinize what is occurring in the classroom. Emotional and attitudinal responses included those that are forthright: "I freak out," and "I hate it." Others demonstrate mixed emotions: "I like the celebrations (TAAS pep rallies, T-shirts, buttons that say *Bust the test, Baby*), but I worry when they test." Motivational responses ranged from boredom, as written on a TAAS work sheet, "I am bored," to one of persistence "…like in a TAAS 'Rocky' play: first the test beats you up, miss, then like Rocky, you have to come by and punch the lights out of it."

A fourth grade teacher reports:

> I just asked my math class what they thought about the TAAS. Let me preface their responses with a description of the class as a whole. I have the second-highest math class in fourth grade. All my students scored between 85-89 on last year's TAAS, so they're pretty bright. They are all between nine and ten years old. I LOVE this group of kids, and would be happy if I had them all of the time.

Similar to the third graders, these fourth grade student responses ranged from, "the TAAS is boring," to "The reading part is boring, but the math part is cool!" Unlike the third graders, these students were more likely to talk about issues of trust: "We don't have any freedom [while taking the test] and the teachers don't trust us," or, "We should go to the bathroom by ourselves." Others were more concerned with the length of the test: "I like it, but it's too long." Some students expanded on how the length affects their interest: "I get bored during the test. We should take a break in the middle of it for recess." Others posit that the test length makes it difficult to attend to the task: "It's so long, that in the middle, my brain just like, blanks out, and I don't care anymore," "Sometimes I hallucinate because it's so long," and "We write so much it feels like our hands will fall off."

In addition to length of test, a specific student concern is with the prompts: "Yeah, if we had funnier stories, it would be more interesting." One student offers a viable solution to change the mood of the testing environment: "It's too quiet, and there are

too many distractions. Teachers need to play a little soft music while we work." Some students are concerned with the fairness of the test: "I don't think it's fair that if you are absent, you don't have to take the test another day," or "I feel like we're in trouble; like we're in jail." A student suggests the use of other measures: "Why can't we have the test based on our homework?" When this same teacher asked the children about her teaching practices, the children's responses are very candid and revealing: "You teach to the test mostly" and "You need to know reading, writing, and math in life too."

A fifth grade teacher asked her students to respond to a writing prompt: "How do you feel about the TAAS?" Again, there is a range in the emotional responses among these fifth grade students:

> Hi, I am Angela and I think the TAAS is the most fantastic thing that has ever been brought up. If TAAS was not brought up, people would probably be failing left and right. They would be failing because they know that they didn't have to take the TAAS so they don't have to study at all.

Cyndy reveals:

> I feel happy about the TAAS because it pumps up my brain. I really like when the TAAS tries to trick me, because that really gives me a challenge. The things I don't like about TAAS are when we practice all the time. Why, I ask myself, why? I know that I am still a child, so I can't whine much.

Juan reports:

> I like the TAAS test because it is a review of what I have learned in the class. It teaches kids if they're ready to move on or not. The TAAS could bring out the best in kids if they are willing to try. The TAAS can teach kids things they didn't know before. Last year I passed the real TAAS test, it showed me I was ready to move on to the fifth grade. TAAS could interest you in something you didn't know before. If someone doesn't pass the TAAS it tells the person they need to study harder so they could get a diploma. I want a diploma when I grow up so my parents will be so happy with me. Passing the TAAS is real important, and it could help you get a good job when you are older.

Ralph writes:

> How I feel about the TAAS… well I guess you could say that I feel kind of scared and good. The reason I feel scared is because I'm afraid that I am going to miss a lot of the questions and fail. The good part is that I will do my best and to try my hardest.

Cara reveals:

> The TAAS test for me is a big challenge, but I feel comfortable about it. Some questions I have to think about for a while, others I don't. The day of the TAAS test my Mom always tells me to pray. It helps me a lot. There's another key though, a key so magical, we just look it over. That key is made with faith, goals, and success. Everybody has it, and it really doesn't matter if you pass it or not. I mean of course you want to pass it, but if you try your hardest and you don't pass, it's okay. The TAAS test is also very interesting because I learn some new things. Also if I miss some question, I know I need to work on it, or those problems.

In the fifth graders' responses, we note an increase in concern with not passing or doing well on the TAAS. These fifth graders suggest that passing the TAAS will likely affect future educational and occupational outcomes.

Another teacher followed the same procedure with her sixth grade students, and again we see a variety of insightful written responses. Ruben writes: "I feel scared about the TAAS test, because if I don't pass I am in trouble."

Seneca reveals:

> How I feel about it is that it is a skill to see how we are doing, but sometimes they give it to us too many times. Every year we have to take one. And it takes some time from our work. That is how I feel.

Rita responds:

> I feel nervous about the TAAS. I worry that I could not pass it and fail it with a really bad grade, and that my mother would ground me for three months. When I get nervous I can't concentrate, neither

> can I understand the questions. I'm going to study so I'll get a good grade and not be nervous, so I hope to get a really good grade.

Valeria reports:

> How I feel about the TAAS is I think it is very important on us because as we get older the teachers will look back on our score to see if we have to go to a different class or not. Also, I think TAAS is something you just have to do.

Albert says:

> Well, I feel very tense about the TAAS because I don't think that it should be taken in only one state. I guess it is good to take because I feel really good because everything you learn through the whole year. The people want to see how much you've learned by taking it. So I feel very nervous when it comes to taking the TAAS since it's for the whole district.

Arnie writes:

> I feel kind of scared that I won't pass the test. Sometimes I feel sad because I might not pass. …I won't get to go with my friends to seventh grade. So I really have to try and pass the TAAS test.

Sixth graders continue to be concerned with their performance on the TAAS since they have realized that if they do not do well they will not pass to another grade, or they will be placed in another class (i.e., special education). They also speak to the issues of the importance of the test, the content areas represented on the test, and the consequences of the test.

A seventh grade teacher's query about TAAS resulted in negative responses from her students, such as: "I don't like the TAAS," "I get frustrated," "The TAAS makes me nervous," and "I'll be taking the TAAS so I can get it over with and not worry about it anymore."

At an upper-middle class school, the teacher integrated the task as an optional activity for a class project. Erica, an eighth grader, surveyed her peers and these are some of their thoughts based upon their TAAS experience. Rather than being concerned with their performance, these eighth graders were more likely to characterize the test and process as: "Dumb, because we didn't know why we have to take it," "Stupid!" "Has no point!" "Dumb, learned everything the year before," "Boring," and "Waste of time."

During the study, the field-testing of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test (TAKS) occurred. TAKS is a new state-mandated assessment program designed to have a closer alignment with the state's standards. After taking the pilot version of the TAKS, Erica, in a follow- up survey, shares some of her peers' comments. Half of the students remain constant in their criticism of the test: "It's stupid," "Why do we have to take these things? It's not even to find out if we know anything," "It's only to find out if you 'recognize' schools," and "After taking this test, we shouldn't have anymore school; there is no point to it." A couple of responses reveal the increased difficulty of the TAKS as compared to the TAAS: "It's too hard," and "I had to guess on half of them." Two other students provide a justification for taking the test: "Good thing to take so that you can prove you learned something," and "Gives an academic overview for universities." Questions regarding the TAKS are starting to surface with the increased stakes created by this new test. In the spring of 2003, a high school student from an upper-middle income home is challenging the state mandate by refusing to take TAKS. She feels it subtracts from the quality of teaching and also contributes to the inequity of low-income students. The freshman suggests that, "High stakes testing has stolen her thirst for knowledge and tarnished what she treasurers about school-learning." (Torres, 2003a, p.1B, 2003b, p. 4B).

A high school teacher asked her classroom students: "What do you think about the TAAS?" and "Do you think it reflects what you have learned?" Most of the responses by high school students who have been successful in school feel that the test does not reflect what is needed to be successful in life. Their responses reflect the students' confidence, yet are rather cynical: Rudy (17) responds: "It was a waste of time. I think it was boring. It was easy. 'Do you think it reflects what you have learned?' "No." Lisette (15) expands on this notion:

> It was easy, if that's the standard; it is a low standard. Too many students are above it, if that's what average is for us. We need a higher standard; it is too low for the real world. "Do you think it measures what you have learned?" No, most of us have learned more.

Interestingly, some students are against the test because they feel that they are not being challenged by the required lower standards.

Evident among the responses is that across grade levels, students have distinct perceptions about the test, the items, the purposes, and the difficulty level of the state-mandated exam. Their responses

show how some students are clearly concerned with their performance, while others are annoyed by the process, others are relying on their persistence to do well, and still others are motivated by the test to demonstrate what they have learned. Similar findings were found when Massachusetts' students were asked to draw and explain their reactions about their state's competency tests (Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2000, 2002). In our current analysis, the teachers' and students' responses clearly reveal the psychological, emotional, and physical effect on students. Wheelock et al. found similar effects in students' drawings about the tests. Teachers also observed these side effects as a result of high-stakes testing in California (Wright, 2002). We are reminded by Sheldon & Biddle's (1998) work that students' motivation toward learning can be thwarted when conditions such as high-stakes testing exist.

We also note that some of the younger students' responses tended to be more positive in nature in comparison to the older students. Perhaps younger students are trying to appease their teachers, but we also posit that the younger students at the time were not faced with the possibility of retention, as is the case now. A follow-up study examining the effects of the current testing mandates would provide insight into whether or not younger students would maintain their favorable perceptions.

Interestingly, students do not have a clear understanding of the purpose of testing; they think that passing tests (a) will help them become interested in content areas, (b) will provide job opportunities, (c) will ensure their grade promotion, or (d) represent the end all of the learning process. The existence of so many differing perceptions and concerns about the test calls into question the validity of TAAS results. Yet, schools and teachers are judged by these results. Apparently, as a means to demonstrate equity and to ensure school accountability-and regardless of the compromise to validity-policy makers continue to make decisions and enact legislation based on high-stakes test scores.

Conclusion

In providing these teachers, preservice teachers, and students a forum to voice their perspectives, insights as to the implications of policy dictates have been garnered. While educational opportunity and equity are goals for which we should all strive, the current accountability system, as it is currently being implemented, appears to have gone awry. Preservice and inservice teachers acknowledge that assessment is an important part of the teaching-learning cycle; however, they feel that high-stakes tests result in a test-driven curriculum. As we note in this study, these teachers recognize the limitations to teaching to the test and wonder if students will know or value anything beyond what is tested. Similarly, Amrein and Berliner's (2002c) recent study examining data across 28 states, including Texas, confirm that the focus on high-stakes testing has not led to increased student performance on other standardized measures. Our findings support Amrein and Berliner's (2002a) conclusions that focusing on high-stakes testing results in incidental outcomes such as a narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, and teacher flight from public schools as well as from the profession in general. Through the voices of our respondents, we sense the undue stress that results from current high-stakes testing policies, and the effects of that stress on teachers and students. Such stress is likely to impact not only test performance, but also motivation towards learning in general.

In the case of the Texas teachers quoted in our research, we can see that they are not afforded the opportunity to make appropriate curricular, instructional, and assessment decisions based on their professional knowledge and expertise. Rather, all decisions are being made by policy dictates. When teachers' decision-making power is limited, their ability to be innovative in meeting student needs is also limited, thus leading to feelings of frustration and to a sense that their educational role has been reduced to that of a technician. Removing decision-making power from the teacher is a clear example of de-professionalization. Like Smith and Fey (2000), we recommend that teachers become active agents in the high-stakes testing debate. To do so, "they must learn the culture of both polis (to understand the political actions and intentions that lie behind accountability policies) and psychometrics (to point out the fallacies of local accountability programs)" (p. 343). As teacher educators, we should take a strong stance and assist in this effort to make certain that our preservice teachers have this knowledge. We must also provide support for those currently in the field. We must not stand idly by while others define the profession through policies that focus on test results rather than on student learning. As an educational community, we must set the standards regarding what it means to be a "highly qualified" successful teacher.

This focus on Texas and its state-mandated test, TAAS, has brought to the forefront the issue of high-stakes testing and the repercussions on effective teaching and ultimately, student outcomes. This study serves as an example of policy dictates and the aftermath of such policy. Texas is not the only state that is plagued by high-stakes testing; this has become a national concern. While politicians debate each other about how to assure school accountability, teachers, teacher candidates, and students are at the

forefront as the unwilling pawns of policy mandates. Recognizing that tests are not predictors of creativity or future success, across the country teachers and students are beginning to dig in their heels to protest standardized testing, either by demanding for alternative exit criteria (Kossan, 2001), by refusing to administer the state-mandated test (Ohanian, 2001), or by suggesting that teacher assessment is a better indicator of student learning (Rapp, 2001). Students have also become active in boycotting against the Massachusetts test "weight" on graduation requirements (Gehring, 2000) or by protesting against their state's mandated test (Organized Students of Chicago, 1999). Vermont's governor suggests that changing their current educational system to incorporate high-stakes tests will result in "dumbing down" school curriculum, and thus, is considering refuting the recent federal mandates (Pyle, 2002).

Although polls indicate that parents support testing (Thernstrom, 2000), parents are being misled to believe that high-stakes testing ensures that their children receive the best education, and that such testing is the only way to achieve school accountability. Like teachers, parents are organizing to protest the inequities of testing, and groups are currently being formed throughout the country. Parents and communities share the responsibility for questioning educational testing policies. Further studies that examine parents' notions of testing would shed light on their perspectives.

As professionals, we must join other efforts challenging policy makers in order to examine the discrepancies between who are, and who should be, the educational policy decision makers. Current policies have resulted in ineffective teaching practices. Our findings concur with Swope and Miner (2000) that the "misuse of standardized tests can distort learning, exacerbate inequities, and undermine true accountability" (p. 8). At the crux of this issue is that students' potential is being undermined with prescriptive teaching practices. All voices and issues need to be heard to help schools make decisions that not only assure accountability, but that also achieve educational goals.

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