



Teachers' Perceptions of High-Stakes Accountability in Florida's Title I Elementary Schools

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Teachers are catalysts to the success of high-stakes accountability policies, yet noticeably absent from previous studies is an examination of teachers' responses toward being held accountable for their students' performance on state-mandated, high-stakes assessments in low socioeconomic status (SES) school settings. An on-line survey instrument was used to determine how third grade, Title I classroom teachers in two southeastern Florida school districts believed they were capable of being held accountable for their students' knowledge of reading and mathematics standards assessed on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Open-ended survey responses received from 61 respondents acknowledged the need for teacher accountability in terms of contingencies, students' academic growth, and teachers' instruction, but raised significant concerns regarding the fairness of high-stakes accountability policy and shared accountability for student achievement.

Keywords: accountability, Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), high-stakes, socioeconomic status (SES), Title I

Nearly two decades after the birth of the standards-based reform movement, high-stakes testing and accountability remain issues of concern throughout our nation's public schools. Research continues to document teachers' perceived pressures to demonstrate gains in student achievement on state-mandated, high-stakes assessments (Assaf, 2006; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Bomer, 2005; Moon, Brighton, Jarvis, & Hall, 2007; Pedulla et al., 2003). Moreover, educators teaching in Title I schools (i.e., schools receiving federal financial assistance due to the high enrollment of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds) face additional pressures of preparing "economically and educationally disadvantaged children" (Jennings, 2000, p. 516) in becoming proficient with tested content.

Teaching in the dual context of a state that emphasizes high-stakes assessment, as well as a school whose demographic population may lack fundamental skills, potentially poses a significant concern for

educators (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond & Spillane, 2004). Research has already established that children from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds generally enter school less ready to learn in comparison to their middle class peers (Lee & Burkam, 2002), and that SES plays a role in determining students' academic achievement (Baker & Johnston, 2010; Borg, Plumlee, & Stranahan, 2007; Cunningham & Sanzo, 2002). Yet noticeably absent from previous studies is an examination of Title I teachers' responses toward being held accountable for their students' performance on high-stakes tests.

This gap in the literature demands urgent attention since Title I teachers possess firsthand experience with state accountability policy on a daily basis, and are held professionally responsible for the academic achievement of the disadvantaged students they are entrusted to educate. Hence, the purpose of this study was to elicit classroom teachers' perspectives regarding

the ways in which they believed they were capable of being held accountable for their students' high-stakes test performance in Florida's Title I elementary schools. By allowing Title I teachers a voice as stakeholders accountable for their children's education, the broader educational community can gain vital information regarding teachers' daily occupational realities of high-stakes policy implementation within low SES school settings.

Effects of State-Mandated Assessment

A broad body of research conducted throughout the United States has consistently documented similarities in teachers' perceptions of the effects of state-mandated assessment. Such perceived effects have commonly included narrowing of the classroom curriculum and instruction, whereby teachers have devoted the majority of their instructional time to specific subject areas in which their students are tested. Other effects have included changes in teachers' instructional strategies aligned with test preparation, as well as a decrease in teacher morale and student motivation (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Berry, Turchi, Johnson, Hare, & Owens, 2003; Boardman & Woodruff, 2004; Jones & Johnston, 2004; Jones et al., 1999; Parke, Lane, & Stone, 2006; Pedulla et al., 2003; Taylor, Shepard, Kinner, & Rosenthal, 2003).

One additional effect of state-mandated assessment relevant to the current study is teachers' perceived feelings of test-related pressure to improve student achievement. Teachers in multiple states have reported feelings of increased pressure from various individuals, ranging from district superintendents and principals to students' parents. Research has documented teachers' feelings of test-related pressure regardless of the level of stakes associated with state-mandated tests (Pedulla et al., 2003), as well as teachers' feelings of constant stress and pressure to ensure students' success on these exams (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000).

In particular, teachers' perceptions of test-related pressure are not uncommon in schools serving students from predominantly low SES backgrounds. A national study of elementary through high school educators showed that teachers working in schools with higher levels of poverty felt more pressure to raise students' test scores (Moon et al., 2007). Moreover, interview data from teachers working in an impoverished urban Texas neighborhood conveyed their perceptions of test-related pressure to increase students' scores as one of the most significant effects of testing, whereby low-performing students were perceived as liabilities (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Other studies have also documented teachers' frustrations over being compared with educators of middle-class students when held accountable for their economically disadvantaged students' test scores (Wright, 2002), as well as teachers' agreement that test-related

pressures have led good educators to flee the teaching profession altogether (Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001).

Such perceptions of test-related pressure in low SES communities seem to warrant justification. According to Hertert and Teague (2003), "Poverty is the single best explanation research has found for why children differ in ways that affect school performance, both before they enter school and once they are enrolled" (p. 5). In fact, a positive relationship has been shown to exist between students' SES and their performance on standardized tests (Cunningham & Sanzo, 2002). Recent research has shown that low SES students attending Title I schools were less likely to pass high-stakes tests than higher SES students attending non-Title I schools (Baker & Johnston, 2010), and that SES was a key indicator of students' success in attaining the minimum test scores necessary to meet graduation requirements (Borg et al., 2007).

Teachers' Responses to Accountability

Although previous research indicates that teachers seem to share similar perceptions of test-related pressure, several studies have established that teachers throughout the United States are not opposed to accountability. For instance, e-mail data from teachers in Texas showed they were not against accountability, yet contended that classroom assessment served as a more valuable tool in informing their instruction rather than high-stakes tests (Flores & Clark, 2003). In another study, most educators surveyed in Texas indicated that teachers should be held accountable for their teaching, yet did not believe their state's high-stakes achievement test was an accurate measure of students' learning (Reese, Gordon, & Price, 2004). Similarly, interview data from teachers in Illinois indicated that although most agreed with being held accountable for their students' knowledge of state standards, they also disagreed with the amount of emphasis placed on high-stakes testing (Stitzlein, Feinberg, Greene, & Miron, 2007). Finally, almost all of the teachers interviewed in six other states recognized the importance of accountability, yet were in disagreement with the negative effects they perceived their state accountability systems had on curriculum and instruction (Berry et al., 2003).

Teachers' perceived feelings of test-related pressure do not appear to prevent them from favoring accountability in general, yet research simultaneously suggests that most teachers do not favor specific aspects of their state accountability systems. The critical question remains as to how teachers envision a favorable accountability system to which they are fully capable of being held professionally accountable for their students' test performance. Hence, this study attempted to ask Title I teachers this question as a means of building the foundation for a new literature base on high-stakes accountability. In order to provide the context for the

present study, the following sections provide a brief overview of Florida's accountability system and outlines teachers' responses to the policy documented thus far.

High-Stakes Accountability in Florida

Florida's accountability policy, the A+ Plan for Education (Section 1008.34, F.S.), was enacted by the state's Legislature under the leadership of then-Governor Jeb Bush in 1999. Labeled as "the nation's most aggressive test-based accountability measure" (Greene, Winters, & Forster, 2004, p. 1124), the Plan called for increased accountability through school grades (ratings from "A" to "F") based on elementary and secondary students' performance on the state-mandated Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) - a criterion-referenced test that measures students' learning performance on selected benchmarks from Florida's learning standards (i.e., Sunshine State Standards). [Additional information regarding the FCAT, as well as the revised FCAT 2.0, is available at <http://www.fldoe.org/>.]

In 2002, the school grading system was adjusted to incorporate an annual learning gains component so that school grades reflected student performance and learning gains equally. Thereafter, Florida's public schools were assigned a letter grade based on: the percentage of students meeting high standards in reading, writing, and mathematics; the percentage of students making reading and mathematics learning gains; and the percentage of the lowest 25% of students who make reading learning gains (Florida Department of Education, 2007).

Florida's State Board of Education later added three more components to the school grading system: the percentage of students meeting high standards in science was measured, as well as the percentage of the lowest 25% of students making mathematics learning gains. In addition, high schools with at least 50% of 11th- and 12th-grade students who retook the Grade 10 FCAT and met graduation requirements were eligible to receive additional school grade bonus points (Florida Department of Education, 2007).

In particular, third graders are unique from students in other elementary grades in Florida since they must earn a Level 2 or above (on a scale of one to five) on the reading portion of the FCAT in order to be promoted. According to the Florida Department of Education (2007), FCAT scores are not adjusted for students' SES: "Schools are responsible for teaching all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status. All students are capable of making adequate learning progress, and all schools are held to equally challenging performance standards" (p. 20). Data show that a combined total of 49% of all students eligible for free or reduced price lunch in two Florida counties being surveyed in this study scored a Level 1 on the FCAT Reading during the 2007-2008 school year (Florida Department of Education, 2008).

Teachers' responses to accountability in Florida. Sparse research has examined classroom teachers' perspectives regarding Florida's accountability system. However, those studies that do exist convey similarities in teachers' dissatisfaction. Shortly after the Plan's implementation, survey and interview data from elementary through high school teachers and administrators throughout Florida showed that the majority of the educators acknowledged feelings of intimidation by the FCAT and school grading system, and disagreed with schools being rated based solely on students' FCAT scores (Inman, 2001).

Thereafter, the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy conducted a survey of elementary and secondary educators in 47 states in 2001 (Pedulla et al., 2003), including 167 teachers from Florida (Abrams, 2004). The majority of Florida's teachers (80%) reported feelings of pressure from district superintendents to raise test scores. Approximately 60% also indicated that the use of FCAT scores to make promotion or retention decisions was inappropriate.

Similarly, focus group interview data derived between 2001 and 2003 from third and fourth grade teachers of English Language Learners and low SES students in an urban school district in Florida also revealed their increasingly negative perceptions of accountability (Shaver, Cuevas, Lee, & Avalos, 2007). Teachers complained about the misuse of students' test scores to award school grades, and were even more concerned about the unfairness of retaining third grade students based on FCAT Reading scores.

In addition, Jones and Egley's (2004) on-line questionnaire of third through fifth grade teachers across Florida in 2002 also documented teachers' concerns regarding the unfairness of using test scores to compare students and judge teaching ability due to factors beyond the teacher's control, such as students' SES, cognitive abilities, emotional stability, cultural values and norms, as well as students' parents and home life. Other uncontrollable factors cited included students not being good test takers, or simply not performing well on the day of the test. Included in the same theme were teachers' perceptions regarding a lack of student and parent accountability.

One additional theme that provided the impetus for the current study was Jones and Egley's (2004) finding that although none of the teachers surveyed indicated they were opposed to accountability, more than 10% raised the concern that they did not favor the means by which they were being held accountable. Since the survey did not elicit teachers' views of a revised accountability system, the field of education has yet to understand teachers' beliefs regarding their perceived ability to adhere to favorable state accountability measures.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate third grade reading and mathematics classroom teachers' responses to high-stakes accountability policy in Florida's Title I elementary schools. Specifically, this study addressed the following research question: In what ways do third grade teachers believe they should be held accountable for their students' knowledge of Reading and Mathematics Sunshine State Standards assessed on the FCAT?

Methods

Participants

Participants were derived from the estimated population of approximately 720 third grade teachers in two school districts' Title I schools in southeastern Florida. Third grade teachers teaching in Title I schools were labeled Title I teachers for the purpose of this study. A total of 92 elementary schools having Title I status and eligibility to participate in research studies for the 2008-2009 school year were identified from both school districts' websites. Charter schools were not included. Once permissions to conduct research were received from both school districts' research departments, access to participants was sought through school administrators. Ninety-two principals in two school districts were mailed a packet containing a cover letter and a consent form. Consent forms sought principals' permission to allow their third grade reading and mathematics classroom teachers to participate in this study. Follow-up packets were mailed two to three weeks later to principals who did not initially respond to the first mailing.

Of the 53 principals from both school districts who responded, 27 (51%) agreed to their teachers' participation and returned the following written information to the researcher via U.S. mail: the name of a school contact person (not in a supervisory role); the contact person's school e-mail address; the exact number of third grade reading and mathematics classroom teachers at the principals' schools; and principals' signatures as proof of permission. A total sample size of 184 teachers was attained. Of the 184 teachers assumed to have been forwarded a survey via e-mail by their school's designated contact person, 68 (37%) responded to this study's survey.

The majority of respondents (80%) were experienced teachers with five or more years of full-time teaching experience, while 20% were novice teachers with fewer than five years of teaching experience. Most teachers (62%) indicated that the highest degree they obtained in education was a bachelor's degree, whereas 38% held a graduate degree. Most of the participants (86%) were employed in one of the two school districts surveyed.

Instrumentation

A Web-based survey instrument, entitled High-Stakes Accountability in Florida, was developed by the

researcher. Several survey items were adapted from two existing instruments (i.e., Hamilton et al., 2007; Parke et al., 2006). Face and content validity were established by consulting with a panel of individuals who had expertise in developing surveys. Each individual examined the survey items' representativeness, clarity, and comprehensiveness. Instrument revisions were made based upon their recommendations. The survey was then given to classroom teachers for the purpose of providing feedback to the researcher to ensure the instrument's usability, whereby further revisions were made. An alpha coefficient value of .94 was obtained.

Overall, a combination of 44 open- and closed-ended items elicited information about the following topics: demographic information; context and capability beliefs regarding professional development, instruction, and instructional resources; and perceptions regarding accountability. This article specifically discusses participants' responses to one of the open-ended items that asked, "In your opinion, in what way(s) should third grade teachers be held accountable for their students' knowledge of Reading and Mathematics Sunshine State Standards assessed on the FCAT?" Participants typed their responses into a text box provided within the on-line survey. Overall, the survey required a maximum of 15 minutes to complete.

Procedure

Data collection occurred between October, 2008 and January, 2009. Once consent forms were received by the researcher from principals allowing their teachers' participation, cover letters inviting teachers to participate in this study were sent twice via school e-mail by the researcher to principals' designated contact persons in 27 Title I elementary schools in two southeastern Florida school districts. The e-mail requested that the contact person forward the cover letter to all third grade reading and mathematics classroom teachers at their schools. Cover letters indicated that the teachers' participation may contribute to the field of education and literature focusing on the impact of high-stakes accountability policy. Anonymity of teachers' identity, Internet protocol (IP) addresses, and survey data were assured. Teachers who responded to the e-mail accessed the survey through an active link contained in the cover letter. All survey data were stored in an on-line database.

Data Analyses

Sixty-eight Web-based surveys were initially analyzed; however, two were discarded due to excessive missing data. Frequency distributions were computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to obtain information regarding sample demographics. Coding and a search for themes were used to analyze teachers' open-ended responses. The coding process involved identifying and bracketing text that related to single concepts, and assigning codes that succinctly described the meaning of the text. Codes were

examined for overlap; similar codes were regrouped and redundant codes were eliminated.

Three categories of codes were developed: Teacher Accountability (TA), Other Accountability (OA), and Contingency-Based Accountability (CB). A codebook containing a list of 22 operational definitions corresponding with each code was developed. Codes that occurred most often were grouped into broad themes that formed major concepts; similar themes were grouped and interrelated.

Interrater agreement was used to establish the dependability of teachers' open-ended responses. One peer reviewer external to the study independently coded survey responses and searched for subsequent themes that emerged from the data. Coding results and themes were then compared to the researcher's to determine whether similar interpretations were made. This resulted in a 94% rate of agreement across all open-ended survey responses.

Results

A total of 61 participants responded to this study's open-ended survey item. Preliminary analysis of teachers' responses revealed that the majority of respondents acknowledged a general need for teacher

accountability, a finding consistent with previous studies conducted throughout the United States (Berry et al., 2003; Flores & Clark, 2003; Reese et al., 2004; Stitzlein et al., 2007). An examination of participants' responses resulted in the identification of three themes: contingency-based accountability, accountability for student growth, and instructional accountability (see Table 1).

Contingency-Based Accountability

The most frequently recurring theme emerging from teachers' open-ended responses was contingency-based accountability, whereby the majority of respondents indicated that teacher accountability for third grade students' FCAT reading and mathematics performance should be contingent or dependent upon the consideration of certain factors. Such responses were usually signaled by words and phrases such as "if..., then," "depending on," "unless," "only," and "rather than." In particular, three types of contingencies in need of consideration were noted: accountability for others; personal student factors beyond the teacher's control; and students' level of academic performance upon entering third grade.

Table 1

Title I Teachers' Proposed Views of Accountability in Florida

<u>Proposed Views</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Contingency-Based Accountability	
1. Accountability for others	Students, parents, previous teachers
2. Factor beyond teachers' control	Ability, home environment, behavior
3. Students' academic level	Mastery of second grade skills
Accountability for Student Growth	
4. Students' knowledge of learning standards	Students gain one year's worth of knowledge
Instructional Accountability	
5. Implement instruction of the curriculum	Evidence of effective instruction

Accountability for others. Several respondents referred to accountability for others (in general) as a contingency upon which teacher accountability should be based. As noted by two respondents, “I don’t mind be [sic] held accountable, but I do mind being the only one accountable;” and “There are so many factors that contribute to learning that it would be unfair to hold one person accountable. It takes a village to raise a child.”

Other respondents identified specific individuals (in addition to third grade teachers) who should also be held accountable for students’ knowledge of Florida’s reading and mathematics standards. For example, a few respondents referred to the need for student accountability in addition to teacher accountability, as noted in the following comment: “They [teachers] should be accountable for what they teach, but so should the students in the learning process.” Accountability for previous teachers was also mentioned: “It is not just up to the third grade teacher – the previous teachers should also be held accountable because they must teach foundations upon which third grade teachers build knowledge.” Also, a need for parent accountability was cited: “I think we should have to show a reasonable amount of growth per child per year. If you hold me accountable then the PARENTS should also be held to the same accountability.” Simultaneous accountability for multiple individuals was suggested: “I think it is a 50/25/25 teachers, students and parents should be held accountable for a child’s knowledge.” Less than a handful of respondents shunned teacher accountability altogether: “Third grade teachers should not be held accountable no [sic] shape or form.”

Personal student factors beyond the teacher’s control. Consideration of student factors beyond the teacher’s control was the second most commonly cited contingency upon which respondents believed teacher accountability should be based. The majority of respondents referred to student ability (including capability, disabilities, and reading ability) as one such factor. Corresponding statements included, “They [teachers] should be held accountable for the progress the students make, depending on the student’s [sic] capability;” “Teachers should be held accountable to a certain degree. All students should be able to show gains in the academic areas, unless there is a severe disability;” “If the students are not reading at a third grade level due to their inability then the teacher should NOT be held accountable for the student receiving [sic] a 1 on the FCAT.”

Several respondents also referred to uncontrollable factors or issues stemming from students’ home environments, including “reinforcement of [learning standards] from home,” “divorce, negligence,” and “social/home issue [sic].” Other factors included students’ behavior; testing factors (“The child could have a bad day or could also be a nervous test taker”); and

students’ backgrounds (“The population of the students should also be considered”).

Students’ level of academic performance upon entering third grade. The third type of contingency respondents believed teacher accountability should depend on was students’ level of academic performance upon entering third grade. Related responses included, “Students who are missing skills from second grade come into third with a disadvantage. I think teachers should be accountable for those who are ready to learn all third grade reading and math skills as tested on the FCAT;” “If a student enters the third grade below level [sic] we should not be held responsible.” Other respondents further elaborated: “Many students arrive in 3rd grade unprepared for the course work. It is difficult to get all of the curriculum under their belts in 7 months and be 100% accountable for what they are able to do or not do;” “If I receive a student who arrives to me on a beginning 2nd grade reading level, it is hard to expect for my student to effectively pass the FCAT which is at a level of an ending of the year for a third grade student.”

These findings are similar to those previously obtained by Booher-Jennings (2005), whereby elementary teachers viewed below-level students as a “liability rather than an opportunity to promote individual growth” (p. 254). Moreover, these responses appear to be consistent with the opinions of those who indicate that test scores themselves are not limited to reflecting students’ current learning experiences. As Kohn (2000) states, “It seems difficult to justify holding a ... teacher accountable for her students’ test scores when those scores reflect all that has happened to the children before they even arrived at her class” (p. 20).

Accountability for Student Growth

A second theme emerging from participants’ responses was teacher accountability for students’ academic growth. Several participants indicated that they should be held accountable for their students’ knowledge of Florida’s reading and mathematics standards by demonstrating that their students gained a year’s worth of knowledge in a year’s length of time (as is consistent with the Plan’s underlying premise). Such responses were similar to the following: “We should be accountable to show one year of growth in students’ knowledge of Reading and Mathematics.”

Other participants discussed students’ academic growth in more general terms: “I think we should have to show a reasonable amount of growth per child per year;” “Third grade teachers should be held accountable for overall growth.” One respondent indicated that growth should be determined by each student’s point of academic origin upon entering third grade [“We should be held accountable for moving our students. We should be expected to move our students a minimum of a year from where they came to us”], whereas another respondent indicated that the performance of the whole class should

be considered versus looking at each individual child ["Third grade teachers should be held accountable to the fact that their class as a whole has made progress. We can not guarantee [sic] how each individual child does on one test"]. Finally, one respondent suggested, "There should be a growth model," but did not provide additional details.

Instructional Accountability

A final theme emerging from participants' survey responses was their description of teacher accountability for third grade students' performance on the FCAT in relation to whether or how teachers implement instruction of Florida's learning standards. Such comments included: "Teachers should be held accountable for effectively teaching the ... reading strategies, and math concepts;" "They should be held accountable to the degree that each standard was taught and assessed prior to the FACT [sic];" "In my opinion if I'm teaching by what the SSS [Sunshine State Standards] are based, then I'm 100% accountable for student learning."

A few respondents even suggested the need for documentation as proof that instruction of the standards occurred: "Teachers should be held accountable by having all the necessary documents showing what they did with that particular student and how they helped them [sic] better prepare for the FCAT;" "If the majority of students have scored on or above grade level on the test, that should be sufficient to prove the skills had been taught and learned."

Comments derived from this theme, as well as the accountability for student growth theme, are somewhat consistent with the basic tenets that characterize state-level accountability systems: teachers are responsible for focusing their lesson design and instruction on state learning standards based on the conviction that every child can learn and no child should be left behind. Thereafter, high-stakes achievement data then serves as evidence to determine if students have met high standards and made learning gains.

All but two teachers had some perception of what they envisioned teacher accountability should look like in the state of Florida. One respondent stated, "I haven't seen a truly effective way for teachers to be accountable for student's [sic] knowledge. Student's [sic] knowledge depends on many factors including a good teacher, parental involvement, behavior issues, language issues, developmental issues, etc." Another teacher commented, "I agree that we should have some form of accountability through standardized data, but not in the form we have right now."

Discussion and Conclusion

Whereas previous studies have shed light on teachers' dissatisfaction regarding various aspects of Florida's accountability policy (Inman, 2001; Jones & Egle, 2004; Pedulla et al., 2003; Shaver et al., 2007), the

current study provided an alternative focus by addressing the one question that researchers had yet to ask: In what ways do Title I teachers believe they are capable of being held accountable for their students' academic achievement on state-mandated, high-stakes assessment? The three subsequent themes derived from the survey data (contingency-based accountability, accountability for student growth, instructional accountability) confirmed previous research indicating that teachers are not opposed to accountability (Berry et al., 2003; Flores & Clark, 2003; Jones & Egle, 2004; Reese et al., 2004; Stitzlein et al., 2007). Many of the teachers' comments began with phrases such as "Third grade teachers should be accountable..." and "We should be held accountable..." and revealed that most participants had preliminary conceptions about how teachers should be held accountable for their students gaining at least one year's worth of knowledge in one year's length of time.

Despite evidence documenting the relationship between SES and students' academic achievement (Baker & Johnston, 2010; Borg et al., 2007; Cunningham & Sanzo, 2002), teachers in this study did not refer to SES as an uncontrollable factor that should be considered when held accountable for their students' high-stakes test performance as has been noted in previous research (Jones & Egle, 2004; Wright, 2002). Instead, they referred to uncontrollable factors related to students' backgrounds and home environments. These comments mirror those derived from elementary teachers surveyed in Florida shortly after the implementation of the FCAT (Jones & Egle, 2004), and appear to be aligned with the views conveyed in the National Association of School Psychologists' (2003) position statement on the consequences of high-stakes assessments:

Administrators and teachers are rewarded or sanctioned based on student test performance, despite having little or no influence on some factors that significantly impact student achievement, such as student mobility and parent involvement....Myriad factors can impact the performance of any one student at a single point in time, significantly reducing the reliability of test scores. (pp. 2, 4)

However, two significant results emerged from this study's survey data. First, participants raised a concern regarding the fairness of high-stakes accountability systems in that a true disadvantage exists with students who enter third grade lacking previous grade level skills. Such a concern merits further attention since teachers who are responsible for educating such students would essentially have to help their students gain more than one year's worth of knowledge in one year's length of time in order to become proficient with tested learning standards.

A second result emerging from the survey data was teachers' concerns regarding a perceived lack of shared accountability for students' knowledge of Florida's learning standards. Participants' responses indicated they were clearly in favor of shared responsibility (Linn, 2003) rather than one-way accountability (Berliner, 2006), and confirmed previous research documenting the pressures teachers experience when held accountable for their students' academic achievement based on one high-stakes test score (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Moon et al., 2007; Pedulla et al., 2003). Participants' responses supported the notion that in order for accountability to truly contribute to the improvement of education, the focus on accountability must be shared across all groups including teachers, students, and parents, as well as administrators, policymakers, and educational researchers (Linn, 2003).

Although this study contributes preliminary findings to a new literature base on accountability in Title I schools, several limitations must be recognized. Small sample size may be partially attributed to responses not received from 39 elementary principals in 2 school districts solicited by the researcher. In turn, teachers at those school sites were not provided an opportunity to have a voice in this study.

Moreover, lack of teacher representation can also be attributed to an unanticipated restriction on the number of Title I elementary schools deemed eligible to participate in this study by one school district's research department. Specifically, 49% of that district's Title I schools were labeled as "restructuring schools" and prohibited from participating in research studies, thereby limiting the total number of potential participants from that school district. Thereafter, a low rate of returns was achieved.

Nonetheless, this study raises new questions regarding high-stakes accountability in Title I schools: Are Title I teachers' perceptions of high-stakes accountability in other school districts different from those elicited from this study's respondents? Do Title I teachers in other school districts consider students' SES a factor that influences their ability to be held accountable for their students' high-stakes test performance? Do Title I teachers in other school districts have concerns related to the fairness of accountability policy in addition to those raised in this study? Gaining further understandings of Title I teachers' perspectives is urgently needed since teachers are catalysts to the success of any accountability system.

Although the findings of this study are not intended to be generalized to other schools serving low SES populations, this study demonstrates the value of conducting research in Title I schools throughout the state of Florida as well as the rest of the nation. Researchers may seek to build upon the current findings since

accountability in Title I elementary schools has yet to be systematically studied. Future survey research may benefit from using follow-up or focus-group interviews as a means of allowing teachers to clarify and elaborate on their written concerns.

Based on the current findings, policymakers are now equipped with preliminary data that can be used to examine the specific ways in which Florida's accountability policy holds teachers responsible for their third grade students' reading and mathematics achievement on the FCAT in Title I schools. The three accountability-related themes that emerged from participants' responses confirm that teachers have voices that must be recognized at the policy level (Debard & Kubow, 2002; Shaver et al., 2007), and possess valuable insights that are worthy of further discussion. Survey data emphasized the need for dialogue between policymakers and educators, and suggest that Title I teachers should have a voice in improving accountability systems so that they can assume greater ownership of high-stakes assessment policies.

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