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STATEWIDE ASSESSMENT: ITS IMPACT ON THE EDUCATIONAL WORLD

by
Erin M. Lanigan

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Teaching Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
June 29, 2005

Approved by

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ABSTRACT

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Statewide Assessment: Its Impact on the Educational World
2004/2005
Dr. Marjorie Madden
Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this study is to further investigate the topic of standardized testing. A controversial topic within the educational world, the researcher seeks to discover the views and opinions of these tests from teachers. Surveys, interviews and a research journal are used to collect data for this study. The setting of the study is a small district in the northern part of New Jersey. The subjects in this study are elementary, middle, and high school teachers. There are 52 participants in this study (10 male, 42 female). To analyze the data, the surveys are looked at first in three groups: elementary school, middle school, and high school. Secondly, results are considered across all teacher groups. Upon completion of this study, the researcher found that majority of teachers felt extreme pressure to have students perform well on these exams. These teachers also felt that standardized tests are not an accurate measure of ones teaching/academic ability. Many teachers feel the consequences of high-stakes exams are unfair to students. A suggestion to further research this topic might be to examine the various statewide exams across grade levels, as well as investigate the opinions and views of a diverse population of students.

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In loving memory of Dr. Joseph Strano, my Uncle Joe, who convinced me that becoming an educator was the right career path to choose.

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Chapter One Scope of the Study

Introduction

The following scenario was taken from the article “Testing What for What” by Kieran Egan (Educational Leadership, November 2003.)

Imagine that the government has just enacted a new legislation that will radically change how incomes are determined. From now on, instead of working for a set salary, you will be required to attend the cinema on a given night. At the end of the movie, instead of going to a local coffee shop and chatting about it with a friend, you will stop in the theater lobby to take a multiple-choice test. You will have to answer such questions as:

What was the color of the villain’s car in the second chase scene?

- a. Red b. Blue c. Taupe d. Silver

Your score on the multiple-choice test will determine your salary for the next week.

Each week you will be required to go to the cinema again, and repeat the process in order to determine that next week’s salary.

Imagine how legislation would affect your experience of going to the movies. With this new legislation in place, you would be anxiously trying to remember the color of cars, the names of dogs and people, and everything else that you think might appear on the test. What does this remind you of? Yes, we call it school. Many people involved in schools-especially teachers-argue that current testing systems undermine the main purposes of education. (Egan, 2003).

Background/Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact that statewide assessments have on teachers and the diverse population of students in schools today. Standardized testing is one of the many controversial issues surrounding education today. Popham (1999) states, "Educators are experiencing almost relentless pressure to show their effectiveness. Unfortunately, the chief indicator by which most communities judge a school staff's success is student performance on standardized achievement tests." In the United States, the use of nationally developed state-mandated testing has risen in the past decade (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2000).

There are many arguments concerning the use, and misuse, of high-stakes exams. Holloway (2001) states "Testing is important in education reform, but we need to use tests carefully". Sacks (1997) also argues that standardized testing is not the way to measure one's academic ability. He states the following:

"Most Americans have taken standardized mental tests from the day they entered kindergarten. Test scores have told the gatekeepers of America's meritocracy-educators, academic institutions, and employers-that one student is bright, the other is not bright, that one is worthy academically, the other less so. Some, with luck, are able to overcome the stigma of poor performance of tests. But others will not."

Standardized testing seems to have become such a controversial issue that many people aren't sure as to whether or not they actually provide adequate measure of a

child's ability. The National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest) has calculated that at least 100 million such exams are administered in the public schools each year. The actual number could be as high as 200 million—the equivalent of each child taking over 60 standardized tests while completing the kindergarten-through-12th-grade school program. (Neill, 2003)

As the quest for higher test scores continue and the pressure mounts for educators to meet these higher goals, many teachers have reconciled themselves to skipping traditional curricular content and replacing it with only that material that is likely to appear on the next standardized test (Kaufhold, 1998). Due to the pressures put on teachers to have students perform well on tests, and these pressures causing them to teach to the test, it is no wonder people are concerned as to whether or not tests provide a good measurement of learning. In "Using Data to Improve Student Achievement," Neill (2003) states, "Standardized paper-and-pencil tests are poor tools for evaluating important kinds of learning. If instruction focuses on the test, students will not learn the skills that they need for success in college and beyond." Neill continues to argue that there are many different types of assessment and "deep learning" skills that engage the brain and thinking better than the typical standardized test.

Standardized testing also does not account for the varying development of children; rather, it assumes that all students develop at similar rates and ages (Schmitz, 1991). Some students are poor test takers at a young age and grow up still being poor test takers. This doesn't mean that they won't succeed; they can be at the same level as the skilled test taker. Yet, with increasing knowledge of learning styles out there, it seems questionable that one type of test can measure accurately the competencies of students.

“Humans learn best through active thinking” (Schmitz, 1991). Active thinking, creative thinking, and individuality are all things that aren’t displayed through standardized test scores. Schmitz argument here is that humans learn best through active thinking and not memorization of what’s going to be on the test.

The Problem Statement

Standardized testing has become second nature to the American culture with testing beginning as early as the kindergarten level in some parts of the United States. Because of this reality, I have become interested in and concerned with the increasingly accepted idea that standardized testing measures academic ability. My study further investigates standardized testing, focusing on ways that this growing testing trend impacts teachers and students.

Research Question(s)

The overriding research question becomes: How does standardized testing impact teacher instruction and student success? More specific questions are (a) What are the various pressures and incentives surrounding high-stakes exams? (b) How is teacher instruction affected by these tests? (c) How is the diverse population of students affected by these tests? (d) Is standardized testing an appropriate and accurate measuring tool of teaching ability and student academic proficiency?

Story of the Question

I’ve always had strong opinions about standardized testing, throughout my education. When I began thinking about my research thesis topic, I decided to stick with something I was surrounded with when I was in school. I can relate to how the students feel, and now that I am older I can relate to how the teachers feel about the tests as well.

Standardized tests are something I didn't enjoy throughout all my years in school. I guess nobody ever really enjoys the idea of taking a test. However, I became so frustrated with the idea, that I often found myself "drifting off" halfway through these important tests. You might ask why I decided to research the topic since I disliked standardized testing so much when I was younger. Now that I have matured academically, I understand that there really is no way of escaping the statewide assessments. I use to face tests as a nervous student, sitting in my desk with a number two pencil in hand. Now, I face the tests as the one in front of the room administering them. Now, I am the one in charge of preparing my students for the tests that I disliked so much.

Everyone knows when it's close to statewide exam time. Instruction changes and teachers, students, parents, and administrators become uptight and nervous. Anxiety heightens and concern about how well the students will perform is overbearing. Reviews and assignments are given in the multiple-choice format with which we have become so acquainted. Number 2 pencils are a "must-have". Standardized testing is like an epidemic sweeping through the hallways of schools.

Overall, I remember performing at the proficient level or higher on these exams. Do I remember what was on the exams? Not at all. When I look back through my years in school, I don't remember the testing; rather, the teachers that impacted my life. I remember why they had an impact on my life, and how each one of them in some way lead me to the career path I've taken. The teachers who grabbed my attention the most weren't the ones who taught to the test and straight from the book. Throughout college we have always been advised to be creative when teaching lessons and think outside of

the box; these are the qualities that distinguish a good teacher from the teacher who reads straight from the book. Standardized testing has caused many teachers to begin thinking “inside the box” again, so to speak. And so I am interested in why we spend so much time “teaching to the test” and ask if it is really a good idea. I also am concerned for students with disabilities, those from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, and minority populations.

Importance of the Study

I believe many people can benefit from this study. Because standardized testing has become a driving force in education, I feel my study will be of value to educators, students, and parents. Further, since I am now taking the next step beyond graduate school and into the real world of teaching, I feel as though I will benefit greatly from this study. I am hoping that it will prepare me for my first year of teaching and the anxieties I will have around test time.

Chapter Two Review of the Literature

Introduction

In the following review of the literature, I will provide the reader with information on three major issues surrounding the controversy of high-stakes testing. The first section will discuss the pressures and incentives surrounding the test. The second section will describe how these tests affect teacher instruction, specifically narrowing in on the practice of “teaching to the test”. The third section highlights important issues that pertain to how the mandated standardized tests affect diverse student populations.

Standardized testing is probably one of the most controversial topics within the educational world today. W. James Popham (1999) explains it as follows:

“These days, if a school’s standardized test scores are high; people think the school’s staff is effective. If a school’s test scores are low, they see the school’s staff as ineffective. In either case, because educational quality is being measured by the wrong yardstick, those evaluations are apt to be in error.”

In order to understand how standardized testing has become such a must-have within the educational world, information about the Standards Based Reform Movement of the 1990’s is necessary. This movement gave rise to state-level accountability systems. These systems are characterized by four different components. The first is *content*

standards; they communicate the desired knowledge and skills each student should achieve. The second, *tests*, are designed to measure the progress towards achieving the content standards. *Performance targets* come next; they are used to identify criteria used to determine whether the school and students have reached desired level of accuracy. Last, there are *incentives*, such as rewards and sanctions, based on the attainment of the performance targets.

Pressures and Incentives

Incentives, as just mentioned, play a major role in the whole idea of standardized testing. It has been found in recent studies, that teacher salary can be affected by standardized testing; this is often called “educator pay-for-performance” (Gleason, 2000).

Many places in the United States are providing monetary incentives to teachers who get good test results from their students. The most talked about is taking place in Denver. Policymakers have designed a pilot program that affects around fifteen percent of teachers in that they are eligible for bonuses “primarily tied to improvements in student test scores” (Gleason, 2000). The New York City Partnership and Chamber of Commerce are sponsoring a twenty-nine million dollar program to raise superintendent, principal, and teacher salaries if student’s scores improve. According to Gleason, these bonuses can be as high as \$30,000 for superintendents alone. Nonetheless, in a survey given on financial incentives, only 38% of teachers support more pay for teachers whose students score higher on standardized tests (Johnson, 2000). Many teachers would rather worry about teaching real content knowledge to students, instead of numerous amounts of busy work to prepare them for these exams. The rewards they can receive, supported by the survey results, aren’t worth lowering ones teaching quality.

Although the incentive of monetary bonuses exert pressures on today's teachers, one of the major downsides to bad test results is the possibility of job loss. According to Dave Posner, in "What's Wrong with Teaching to the Test" (2004), if teachers in schools and districts fail to improve, the schools can be closed and districts may be taken over by state government. This may result in loss of job for those teachers who have students that don't perform well.

Not only educators, but students, too, are facing extreme pressures to do well on mandated assessments. Students are often discouraged by standardized tests; one can imagine how a child feels under more severe pressure and circumstances. Students have been told that the scores they receive on these tests predict many things. They are forced to take these tests year after year. The tests determine where a student gets placed the following year. That one grade can affect a student greatly. Some students might not perform well on multiple choice exams, while others do extremely well. Popham (2004) states "the overarching reason that students' scores on these tests do not provide an accurate index of educational effectiveness is that any inference about educational quality made on the basis of students' standardized achievement test performances is apt to be invalid. Employing standardized tests to ascertain educational quality is like measuring temperature with a tablespoon."

School systems have gone as far as to bribe students to perform well. Governor Jeb Bush of Florida has implemented an accountability system known as the "A+ Plan". It is a financial reward system, paying students \$100 if they receive an A on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). This isn't a reward; it's a bribe because the students are advised of this "reward" well in advance to taking the exam (Berube, 2004).

The pressures and incentives involved with standardized testing have indeed affected much of the educational world. Teacher instruction is also affected by these exams, which will be discussed next. Also, with the diverse population of students in schools today, how do you think standardized testing affects each type of learner? The impact of standardized tests on teacher instruction and diverse student populations will be discussed in the following sections.

Teaching to the Test

We've learned to refer to it as "teaching to the test". Teachers prepare daily lessons around what needs to be known for the statewide exam. This kind of teaching occurs throughout the day because teachers feel it is the only way to ensure good test results. Often, teachers are known to change their overall teaching style to which they so strongly believe in order to create an everyday test-like environment.

In the article, "Helping All Students Achieve: Teaching to the Test", Popham (2001) describes two types of teaching. *Item teaching* is when teachers organize their instruction around the actual items found on the test. *Curriculum teaching* is when a teacher directs higher instruction toward a particular set of content-knowledge or specific set of cognitive skills. Unfortunately, curriculum teaching often disappears because of high-stakes testing. Popham continues to discuss whether teaching to the test, or item teaching, is wrong. He argues:

"Because teaching either to test items or to clones of those items eviscerates the validity of score-based inferences- whether those inferences are made by teachers, parents, or

policymakers-item teaching is reprehensible. It should be stopped. But can it be?"

Teaching to the test truly takes away from student learning. Not only does it take away from the students, but it also takes away from teacher creativity and uniqueness. Often teachers find their beliefs compromised as Pedulla (2003) argues: "To bring students to the required level, teachers apparently find it necessary to use teaching strategies that they don't believe in". In *"Making Standards Work: Here Today, Here Tomorrow"* Gandal and Vranek (2001) explain that teachers may feel forced to turn to something else besides standards to guide their instruction, and often they turn to the tests. This fuels concerns that schools are teaching to the test rather than teaching a rigorous curriculum.

Berube (2004) also argues that teaching to the test is wrong. She believes that standardized testing prevents good teaching. She feels as if the tests in no way can prove anything other than rote memorization. As teachers, because of the pressures, we try to convince ourselves that multiple choice exams prove that our students really understand information; however, in reality, we ask ourselves, "Do they?" Or is it really just memorizing the facts? These are two questions I am going to keep in mind when implementing my study.

Hargrove, Jones, and Jones (2003) also agree and feel that high-stakes testing programs may push schools and teachers to teach to the test in ways that emphasize the "basics" and de-emphasize critical thinking and problem solving skills. When researching how teacher instruction is affected by these high-stakes exams, I began to wonder how students are affected. Year to year, these exams don't change much;

however, diversity among students does. I began questioning how single exams can be used as accurate measure of academic ability if student difference, culturally and academically, is truly valued and recognized.

How the Students are Affected

Driving instruction with high-stakes tests will not improve schools. A large body of research demonstrates that high-stakes testing narrows the curriculum and dumbs down instruction (Neill, 2003). According to data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, high-stakes testing is not associated with improved scores but is associated with a higher dropout rate (Neill, 2003). Students become turned off by the exams and decide to drop out. Neill (2003) also explains that standardized tests sometimes induce schools to push students out, increase retention rate, and force teachers to leave. In the end, high-stakes testing will hurt students-particularly those who most desperately need better schools (Neill, 2003).

One major concern with these tests is that they are designed with the assumption that every student has been exposed to the same concepts and life experiences. We call this *content bias* (ASHA, 2003). For example, test stimuli are typically derived from the concepts and vocabulary used in white middle-class school settings and on familiar interaction patterns in mainstream culture (Washington, 1996). Children who are classified as learning disabled or culturally diverse may perform more poorly on these exams because of their difference in learning and literacy, background and ability.

The No Child Left Behind requires states to bring all students to the “Proficient” level on standardized tests by the 2013-2014 school year. Currently, each state is attempting to raise the level of proficiency in equal annual increments leading to 100

percent aptitude (Hargrove, Jones, & Jones, 2003). They argue that the heavy reliance upon high-stakes testing is the most troubling to critics of the NCLB law. Many people feel that the focus on these tests hinders the higher-order critical thinking needed in order to succeed in today's highly technological world. And, when dealing with children with special needs teachers understand that every student learns differently. We must provide students with disabilities with the material they need in order to succeed in school and in the real world. Simply teaching them how to perform on a multiple choice exam is not going to prepare them with the knowledge needed to perform outside the school.

Hargrove, Jones, and Jones (2003) responds to the federal mandates of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* and of NCLB, that great emphasis has been placed on statewide testing as a means of determining academic achievement status. Some teachers report that they do not feel that tests are fair for all students. Students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency, those of low socioeconomic status, or those belonging to a particular minority group may be at risk of failing in a standardized testing environment.

Hargrove, Jones, and Jones continue to argue that these groups are at a disadvantage when it comes to statewide exams. "Historically, minorities have not fared as well academically as their white counterparts" (p. 142)

Yet, teachers do acknowledge that students in these minority groups do excel in school. Being a member of a minority group does not necessarily mean that a student will achieve at a lower level but the issue is complicated by the fact that minorities have traditionally been given fewer resources and been denied equal educational opportunities in the educational system.

If these factors play a major role in the outcome of test scores, why do people still feel as if statewide assessment exams are a good measure of one's ability?

Conclusion

Educators need to take a closer look at how achievement is measured. From the information provided within this review of the literature, it doesn't seem as if statewide exams are the most accurate ways to measure student ability. Berube (2004) believes that achievement should not be measured by how well we train our students to take multiple choice tests and if we are not careful, we could become a nation of people who score high on standardized tests but who cannot understand, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what we have truly learned.

Chapter Three Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

This chapter discusses the research design and methodology of my study. It also provides information on the context of the study, including the school and participants from which the data was collected. Also included are the procedures in which the data was analyzed. This study is a qualitative one, in which three data collection instruments were used.

Context and Setting

The setting in which this study took place was a small district in the northern part of New Jersey, in Union County. This township has two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

According to the 2000 Census, this community has a population of around 14,707. The town is 99% White American and the socioeconomic level in this community ranges between \$10,000 and over \$200,000 yearly household income.

Of the 70 teachers surveyed, 52 chose to participate. There were 17 elementary school teachers, 20 middle school teachers, and 15 high school teachers. Of those who participated, the average number of years teaching experience was 12. There were 10 male participants and 42 female participants in this study. Of the 52 participants, 31 hold undergraduate degrees, 20 hold graduate degrees, and one holds a doctorate.

The statewide assessments that are used in this school district are the NJASK (3rd and 4th grade), the GEPA (8th grade), the HSPA (11th Grade), and of course the SAT for those students who plan on entering college after graduation of high school.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to starting the study, an introduction letter to the teachers, concerning my investigation, was sent out (Appendix A). Three data collection instruments were used in this study. The first instrument used was a survey with demographic questions and 9 statements in which the participants were to respond using a Likert type scale (Appendix B). The Likert scale that was used was based on a 1-5 response, 1 being *strongly agree* and 5 being *strongly disagree*. In addition to these 9 statements, the participants were also asked 4 open-ended questions. The survey and questions centered on the whole idea of standardized testing and the pressures and anxieties that come along with them. Other questions focused on the accuracy of the test in measuring ones academic ability. The teachers were informed of their anonymity should they participate in my research.

The second data collection instrument was in the form of brief interviews. Upon completion of the survey, the participants were given the option to agree to further discuss their responses with me through an interview, either formally or through email. Of the 52 participants, only 5 agreed to further discuss their opinions of statewide assessment.

The third instrument used in this study was a researcher journal, where I kept various observations and discussions I had with teachers and administrators about my topic of research. The research journal was used throughout the entire process and includes notes between September (2004) and June (2005).

Data Analysis

“In qualitative analysis several simultaneous activities engage the attention of the researcher: collecting information from the field, sorting the information into categories, formatting the information into a story or picture, and actually writing the qualitative text” (Creswell, 1994). In order to analyze the data for this study, I started by dividing the surveys into three piles (elementary level, middle school level, high school level). I then analyzed each different group of surveys in search of common themes and responses. Upon completion of analyzing the surveys separately, I then made comparisons among all of the 52 surveys to see if teachers at all grade levels shared common thoughts and opinions about standardized testing.

Upon completion of analyzing the surveys and open-ended questions, I looked into my researcher journal and notes taken on interviews to see if some of the data correlated with what was learned from the surveys. The findings of the data will be further discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four Findings of the Study

Introduction

This study was designed to analyze teacher's perceptions and attitudes towards standardized testing. The study was broken down into three groups. The groups were elementary, middle school, and high school teachers. In the final analysis of all the data, the groups were once again combined to determine if the overall views of everyone were similar.

Of the 70 surveys given out, 52 were returned, making for a return rate of 74%. The surveys were heavily weighted by female teachers. There were 10 male respondents and 42 female respondents. The participants in this study were completely honest in their feelings and opinions and had plenty of reasons to back up their responses in the open-ended parts of the surveys. The following chapter includes my findings at each grade level, using the responses from surveys, open-ended responses, interviews, and my researcher journal.

Analysis of the Data

The Elementary Level

The following table shows the responses of 17 elementary education teachers responded to the survey.

80% of these teachers do not feel as though statewide exams are a good measure of one's academic ability.

I analyzed open-ended responses and my research journal, looking for correlations to the survey findings. Upon doing this, I came to realize that many teachers at the elementary level share quite similar views, whether a first year teacher, or a teacher of over 25 years. Representative comments follow:

Open-Ended Question #1: Do you “teach to the test”? Why or why not?

Respondent #1: (Special Education Teacher Grades 1-3)

“With the population that I serve, it would be both ineffective and immoral for me to teach to the test. I like to employ creative strategies and I try to make the test less formidable”

Respondent #2: (3rd Grade Teacher)

“Yes, not necessarily exact material, but similar material. It's not that I want to...I sort of 'have to' you know?”

These responses represent the views of a regular education and special education teacher. Both respondents seem against the idea of “teaching to the test”. The special educator reveals her need to employ more creative strategies to reach the minds of her group of students, while the regular educator does it because she “sort of, has to”. My researcher journal records notes from an interview, further supporting the realization that teaching to the test is unavoidable. “Unfortunately there really is no way around teaching to the test. It's such a shame because it really doesn't allow for some of the most creative teachers to use that great quality” (Researcher Journal November 2004).

Open-Ended Question #2: Do you think teachers should be held accountable for bad test results? Explain.

Respondent #1: (4th Grade Teacher)

“Absolutely not! 1. Sometimes students just have a “BAD DAY”. 2. The test does NOT truly measure a student’s ability. 3. Level of student body varies from year to year.”

Respondent #2: (4th Grade Teacher)

“I do feel that teachers should be held accountable for ‘bad teaching’; however, they should in no way be held accountable for bad test scores. We cannot turn every student into a good test taker over night. I’ve watched my greatest of students just freeze up during the exam-that doesn’t make me a bad teacher.”

These two respondents both share the same feeling that some students just aren’t test takers. I was given the opportunity, during my student teaching, to witness the taking of the Terra Nova exam in March. I watched two students freeze up and come to tears, and I also witnessed others just giving up halfway through. One student said to me after the test “I don’t really care what I get on this test so I didn’t really try that hard” (Researcher Journal, March 2004).

Open-Ended Question #3: About how much time per day do you spend reviewing for the annual state assessments?

I went through each of the 17 surveys and found that each teacher spends between one and two hours per day, during the months of January through March, practicing for the statewide tests. Teachers discussed various worksheets and manuals that they teach from in order to prepare their students.

Open-Ended Question #4: Have you ever feared a loss of job due to bad test scores?

Respondent #1: (4th Grade Teacher)

“Not my job, but my position definitely.”

Respondent #2: (3rd Grade Teacher)

“No, however we’ve been threatened with a building move by some principals.”

Respondent #3: (Special Education Teacher Grades 2-5)

“Not really, but I know it can happen. It happened to a friend of mine in another district.”

These responses show that teachers are very well aware of the fact that certain things can happen if test scores aren’t where they should be, findings that support current research as in chapter two.

The Middle School Level

The following table displays the responses of 20 different middle school teachers (Grades 6-8).

| Statement | 1 Strongly Agree | 2 Somewhat Agree | 3 Neutral | 4 Somewhat Disagree | 5 Strongly Disagree |
|--|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| There is a lot of pressure on teachers, students, and higher administration to receive high test scores. | 12=60% | 4=20% | 2=10% | 2=10% | 0 |
| State assessments are geared toward one particular type of student. | 2=10% | 9=45% | 5=25% | 4=20% | 0 |
| Student background and socioeconomic status may affect how they perform on these tests. | 8=40% | 9=45% | 1=5% | 2=10% | 0 |
| You receive adequate training and information on how to practice for and administer the test. | 3=15% | 6=30% | 6=30% | 3=15% | 2=10% |

| | | | | | |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Incentives have been attached to good test scores. | 4=20% | 1=5% | 4=20% | 1=5% | 10=50% |
| State assessments are a good measurement of one's teaching and academic ability. | 0 | 3=15% | 2=10% | 1=20% | 11=55% |
| Exam questions are worded appropriately for all types of learners. | 0 | 2=10% | 5=25% | 5=25% | 8=40% |
| State assessments are a good way to measure one's academic ability. | 0 | 3=15% | 4=20% | 7=35% | 6=30% |
| State assessments are designed to meet the needs of student's with disabilities. | 2=10% | 0 | 1=5% | 5=25% | 12=60% |

Upon completing and analyzing this table of responses, I find that, compared to the 100% of elementary teachers who feel pressure for their student's to perform well on statewide exams, only 80% of the middle school teachers feel the same pressure. The other 20% of these teachers remain neutral or disagree to the idea that tests bring an enormous amount of pressure. The middle school teachers also feel that the test is geared toward one particular type of student and feel that socioeconomic status and background play a role in how a child performs on these exams. As with the elementary teachers, majority (75%) of the middle school teachers do not feel as if statewide assessment tests are a good measurement of one's academic ability. Overall, from the two tables seen so far, many of the percentages and feelings among teachers are quite similar.

Upon reviewing the open-ended responses of these 20 middle school teachers, I again notice many similarities among these teachers, along with the elementary teachers mentioned earlier. Here are the statements that stuck with me when reviewing the responses:

Open-Ended Question #1: Do you "teach to the test"? Why or why not?

Respondent #1: (7th-8th Grade Teacher)

“Yes, only because I was TOLD to.”

Respondent #2: (6th Grade Teacher)

“No-Students need to be exposed to all topics that they will need both academically and for life skills. Simply teaching to the test will only teach them how to void out incorrect answers on a multiple choice exam. I feel as if lifelong lessons are more important than filling in circles on a test.”

Along with these two responses, I found the majority of these teachers are against teaching to the test and try to find a way around; however, many explain that they feel somewhat “forced” to do it. I chose to include the 6th grade teacher’s response because I think it makes for a strong point that test-taking is not as important as learning the things to get you by from day to day in the world we live in today.

I briefly met with a middle school teacher from a different district and asked her how she felt about teaching to the test. “It’s quite unfortunate that we spend so much time preparing students to take a test, which, ten years down the road, they will not remember taking. It’s the various life skills and critical thinking courses that reach out to these students and allow them to remember who taught them these things ten years down the road” (Researcher Journal, May 2005)

Open-Ended Question #2: Do you think teachers should be held accountable for bad test results? Explain.

Respondent #1: (8th Grade Teacher)

“Teachers cannot be held accountable for the student’s actions. If they were, we would be teaching to the test every day of the school year, and who wants to do that? We need to take into consideration that not all students can perform well on these strict tests.”

Respondent #2: (6th and 7th Grade Teacher)

“I think a teacher should prepare all students; however, that does not mean that all students *are* prepared when the test comes. Some students just don’t care and do not try at all. We can’t be held accountable for these types of things.”

Respondent #3: (7th and 8th Grade Teacher)

“No, it’s all a matter of how much each student can retain when the real test is given.”

Open-Ended Question #3: About how much time per day do you spend reviewing for the annual state assessments?

As I did with the elementary teachers, I reviewed each answer to this question and majority of the teachers stated that they spend the months of January through March reviewing for the exam. Many of these teachers are involved with the GEPA exam and explain that much time is needed to be set aside in order to prepare for this test.

Open-Ended Question #4: Have you ever feared a loss of job due to bad test scores?

Respondent #1: (7th and 8th Grade Teacher)

“I personally feel as if a teacher does his/her best, they should have nothing to fear, even if scores aren’t up to par.”

Respondent #2: (8th Grade Teacher)

“Yes, absolutely.”

Respondent #3: (7th and 8th Grade Teacher)

“No, I am resigned to the fact that testing is a way of life in the U.S”

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|-------|-------|-------|
| State assessments are designed to meet the needs of student's with disabilities. | 0 | 0 | 2=13% | 8=53% | 5=33% |
|--|---|---|-------|-------|-------|

Upon review of this chart, again one can notice the extreme similarities among answers and percentages as compared with the teachers at the elementary and middle school level. The amount of pressure that teachers feel because of these exams is apparent and can be proven by the numbers on this chart. These high school teachers all feel quite strongly about a student's background and socioeconomic status having an affect on test outcomes. 86% of these teachers strongly disagree with the statement *State assessments are designed to meet the needs of student's with disabilities*. With the elementary and middle school teachers, over 50% of them felt that tests do not measure one's academic ability. With the high school teachers; however, only 47% do not feel that tests are a good measuring tool.

When I discussed statewide assessment with various administrators in the building, they all seemed to agree upon the idea that, at various levels of teaching/learning, it becomes so much harder. The SAT and HSPA are two of the most important exams to take because they allow for exit of high school and entrance of college. The retention rate at this particular high school is not high and the test scores are good; however, there are a number of students year after year that are put in remedial and basic skills classes in order to re-take the exam and make sure they can exit high school at the appropriate time. (Researcher Journal, April 2005)

The open-ended responses of the high school teachers also correlate strongly with the numbers on the table. Here are some of the various responses I've chosen to include:
 Open-Ended Question #1: Do you "teach to the test"? Why or why not?

Respondent #1: (10th-12th Grade Teacher)

“I try---forced to.”

Respondent #2: (11th Grade Teacher)

“Somewhat, but I feel we (high school teachers) all are more concerned with teaching good test taking strategies and knowledge of certain types of vocabulary. Usually the strategies help more than redundant practice tests and ‘teaching to the test’.”

Respondent #3: (9th-12th Grade Math Teacher)

“No. I teacher math, and teaching to the test would severely interrupt the flow of the subject.”

So, at the high school level, I find that some teachers feel “forced” to teach to the test, while others feel as if it would interrupt their daily schedule too much. As mentioned with Respondent #2, a lot of other respondents stated the importance of test taking strategies and vocabulary. “As I think back to my days in high school, I can still recall some of the test taking strategies I was taught. How to narrow down the multiple choice responses to two, how to interpret the definition of a word by process of elimination, and how to read through passages narrowing in on the most important facts. I do not consider this teaching to the test; I think these teachers have the right idea on how to handle the world of standardized testing.” (Researcher Journal, May 2005)

Open-Ended Question #2: Do you think teacher should be held accountable for bad test results? Explain.

Respondent #1: (9th-12th Grade Teacher)

“No. Often (especially in urban areas), poor scores are a result of poor home environment, poor nutrition, etc. rather than teacher ability/effort.”

Respondent #2: (9th-12th Grade Teacher)

“No, because different teachers are responsible for teaching different sets of topics, and to hold one teacher responsible for several years of materials is completely unfair.”

Respondent #3: (10th Grade Teacher)

“Often, bad test results are the end product of attitude, parental involvement, and/or overall ability. While teachers can impact behaviors in school, the reinforcement at home plays an integral part of a child’s success or failure.”

It wasn’t until I read Respondent #2’s statement that I thought about how many teachers throughout the years prepare students for taking exams. This particular teacher is exactly right in feeling that he or she should not be responsible for an area in which they do not teach. The high school level of testing is hard in that a student has many teachers preparing him or her for one exam. Some students might be better in math than they are in language arts; therefore, should the math teacher be responsible for a below proficiency language arts score? (Researcher Journal, June 2005)

Open-Ended Question #3: About how much time do you spend reviewing for the annual state assessments?

The responses to this particular question varied anywhere between no reviewing to only 30 minutes a day to every day three weeks prior to the test. Many teachers also revealed that they spend practically no time reviewing in an honors class and a majority of their time in a remedial class. Class makeup is definitely a factor in how much time is spent on testing reviews.

Open-Ended Question #4: Have you ever feared a loss of job due to bad test scores?

I was extremely shocked by the fact that out of all 15 high school teachers, not one of them have ever feared a loss of the job due to bad test results. One teacher made a statement very similar to another teacher's answer in a different question by saying "Test scores are not the result of just *one* teacher's effort/ability; they are a result of all prior teachers efforts as well as the effort/understanding of the student."

Conclusion

The following table displays the percentages and responses of all 52 participants in the study.

Table 1.4 RESPONSES OF ALL 52 PARTICIPANTS

| Statement | 1 Strongly Agree | 2 Somewhat Agree | 3 Neutral | 4 Somewhat Disagree | 5 Strongly Disagree |
|--|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| There is a lot of pressure on teachers, students, and higher administration to receive high test scores. | 34=65% | 12=23% | 3=6% | 2=4% | 1=2% |
| State assessments are geared toward one particular type of student. | 11=21% | 26=50% | 8=15% | 5=10% | 2=4% |
| Student background and socioeconomic status may affect how they perform on these tests. | 23=44% | 23=44% | 3=6% | 3=6% | 0 |
| You receive adequate training and information on how to practice for and administer the test. | 10=19% | 21=40% | 13=25% | 6=12% | 2=4% |
| Incentives have been attached to good test scores. | 5=10% | 5=10% | 17=33% | 5=10% | 20=37% |
| State assessments are a good measurement of one's teaching and academic ability. | 1=2% | 5=10% | 10=19% | 12=23% | 24=46% |
| Exam questions are worded appropriately for all types of learners. | 0 | 8=15% | 10=19% | 18=35% | 16=31% |
| State assessments are a good way to measure one's academic ability. | 0 | 9=17% | 13=25% | 15=29% | 15=29% |

| | | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|--------|--------|
| State assessments are designed to meet the needs of student's with disabilities. | 2=4% | 1=2% | 4=8% | 15=29% | 30=57% |
|--|------|------|------|--------|--------|

Now that all of the responses have been put together into one table, it becomes apparent that these teachers, regardless of the level they teach, express similar opinions of mandated testing. Over 50% of all the teachers surveyed agreed with the idea that standardized tests are not a good measurement of one's academic ability. Teachers feel strongly about the tests not being designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities, or those with different socioeconomic status and backgrounds.

A teacher's job is to make a difference in his or her student's life in some way. From the data shown in tables, teachers' open-ended responses, and my observation researcher journal, the opinions presented correlate with the research discussed in previous chapters. The final chapter discusses the conclusion of my study, the implications and importance of what was learned from this study, and possible ideas for further research.

Chapter Five Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Statewide assessment has been a controversial topic within the educational world for many years; and, the controversy seems as if it will remain for many more years to come. It's quite interesting to hear the many different sides of the story. As with all debated topics, there exist pros and cons to standardized testing. This study investigates the topic of standardized testing, looking specifically at the views and opinions of elementary, middle, and high school teachers.

Summary of the Problem

There really is no avoiding the reality of standardized testing. At some point in their career, all teachers are faced with the stress and pressures of high-stakes exams. Students, as well, are faced with the difficulties of preparing for the exam. Teachers tend to stray away from their so called "normal daily routine" in order to fit in time to review for the annual test. There have been many studies conducted on the effects of statewide assessment on the educational world. One of the major debates concerning standardized testing is whether or not they truly measure one's academic ability. The purpose of this study is to further analyze teacher's views and feelings about these types of tests. The following questions are considered while performing this study: (a) What types of pressures do teachers/students face when it comes to these tests? (b) How is teacher instruction affected by these tests (i.e. Do teachers feel forced to "teach to the test"?)

(c) How is the diverse population of students affected by these tests? (d) Is standardized testing an appropriate and accurate measuring tool of teaching ability and student academic proficiency?

Summary of the Procedure

The setting for this study was a small middle class school district in the Northern part of New Jersey, in Union County. There were 52 teachers, elementary through high school, who took part in the study. This study took place over a five week span, where teachers were asked to complete surveys that contained both Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. A select number of teachers were also willing to allow time for an interview, whether it was in person or via email.

Summary of the Findings

One 8th grade teacher who took part in this study stated the following: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink. Likewise you can teach a child a concept, but you cannot make him learn it.” I chose to leave this response until the end because I think it fully sums up what I have learned from this study. As seen within the tables in the previous chapter, there were a high percentage of teachers who feel the pressure of standardized testing, and do not feel they are a good measure of one’s teaching and academic ability. Teachers strongly disagree that one exam can predict the academic ability of each and every student. Student’s need to be given the opportunity to prove their ability throughout the school year in a variety of ways; therefore, allowing the diverse population of learners to succeed in their own ways.

Responses to certain questions reveal some trends among the participants of this study. When analyzing the data, I tried to focus on the pressures teachers felt, “teaching

to the test”, accountability for bad test scores, incentives and fear of job loss, and how much time is normally spend reviewing for the test. Each of these areas were ones about which many teachers felt most strongly. These are among the trends found in my study, as well the related research reviewed in chapter two.

When the topic of teaching to the test was investigated, I found that many teachers felt “forced” to do it. Teaching to the test is an all too familiar theme that stretches across the grade levels between the months of January and March in the targeted district. If teaching to the test takes away from the more creative side of approaching teaching, these teachers are missing out on three months of it. There were a few special education teachers who were honest in saying they do not teach to the test because, with their population of students, “it would be pointless”. Teachers realize that not every student can learn the same, or perform the same on these standardized tests; however, the pressure put on teachers to receive high test scores is quite extreme.

The thought of teachers being held accountable for bad test results was a question that provided quite interesting responses. A majority of the participants felt it would not be fair if they were held accountable. The fact that a student receives a high test score, is not the doing of just that year’s teacher, it’s because of what the child has also learned in the previous years. Therefore, one bad test result does not mean that one particular teacher should be held accountable. Also, the makeup of classrooms is very diverse, and home-life of students and parental involvement are other factors that play into whether or not a child will perform well on an exam. Sometimes students “just have a bad day and freeze up---teacher’s can’t control that” (Researcher Journal, March 2005).

As much as teachers do not enjoy practicing for the annual statewide exam, countless number of hours are spent reviewing for it. A few respondents of surveys claim they don't switch their day around to review for the test because "We expect our curriculum to already be aligned with what will be on the test; however, I wouldn't count on it." At all three levels of school, it seems as though anywhere between a half hour and two hours a day, between the months of January and March, are the amount of time dedicated to test preparation.

In chapter two, research was presented that verifies situations where incentives were attached to good test scores, and punishment, such as loss of job, was attached to bad test scores. However, in my study, the idea of incentives being attached to good test scores was avoided in interviews, and only 20% of the participants agreed that some type of incentives have been attached. When asked if they feared a loss of job, many responded that they didn't necessarily fear losing their job completely; however, a big fear of switching positions or buildings was mentioned.

Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

This study correlated strongly with much current research. My study further investigated teachers' views of standardized tests and it proved that there are more teachers that disagree with the tests purposes than agree with it. Although the study supports correlating ideas and themes of other studies, there nevertheless remains plenty of room for further investigation.

I, myself, have learned from this study and have gained further insight into the world of standardized testing. I believe, too, that administrators, students, and parents can all benefit from this study.

Something that I might be interested in researching further is the whole idea of incentives being attached to good test scores. As mentioned earlier, I did not receive a lot of feedback on this part of the survey.

Although this study proved that many teachers' views are similar about standardized testing, I think it might be interesting to further investigate the topic within the elementary level, the middle school level, and the high school level separately. It might be interesting to investigate each statewide test taken and then look across grades of teachers to compare the level of pressure and stress.

Because many teachers agreed that socioeconomic status and background of student's plays a vital role in the performance on these exams, I feel that this could be another area of further investigation. Had I been able to conduct my study in another area with lower socioeconomic status and a high percentage of minorities, it would have been interesting to see how that data correlated with the data from this district.

Finally, because standardized testing is such a big topic, there are many other ways to approach the study and branch out into further debated topics and investigation. Another way to approach this study would have been to survey and interview students, inviting students' voices into the testing conversation.

Overall, testing of students today plays a vital role in education. Standardized testing is a complex and controversial topic within the educational world. Many teachers feel that the tests are not designed in such a way to determine their overall teaching ability, or their student's academic ability. Finally, if the purpose of these mandated tests is to receive accurate and reliable information, then why do people have such strong feelings and views against the idea? Popham (1999) argues: "To evaluate

educational quality by using the wrong assessment instrument is a subversion of good sense. Although educators need to produce valid evidence regarding their effectiveness, standardized achievement tests are the wrong tools for the task” (p.15). The outcome of this study has added to the argument that there are many other ways, besides such controversial assessments, to measure the learning of an increasingly diverse population of students in schools today.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Introduction Letter to Teachers

Dear Teachers,

My name is Erin Lanigan and I am an MST student from Rowan University currently doing my student teaching and working on my thesis. Some of you may already know me because I attended Kindergarten through 12th grade in this district. I have chosen to use my former schools for the gathering of information for my thesis. I will be conducting a field study for my thesis on the topic of standardized testing. The intent of my study is to add to the body of research already done on standardized testing by gaining teacher insights on the topic. I am interested in learning of the different viewpoints various types of teachers have. Additionally, I hope to explore teachers' thoughts on how they personally prepare their children for the tests or if they have to follow some type of strict guidelines for practicing for the test.

In order to complete this research, I will be giving each classroom teacher a short survey where you will be given the opportunity to share your opinions on standardized testing. While you are under no obligation to participate by completing the survey, your responses would be greatly appreciated. The identities of the respondents will remain anonymous at all times. I will also be asking teachers to further discuss the responses of their survey by participating in an interview. Again, while your responses will be included in my thesis, your identity will not. I hope you will all join me by contributing to what hopes to be an informative addition of research on an ongoing topic of controversy within education today. If you have any questions you may contact me at Erin2434@aol.com

Respectfully,

Erin Lanigan

Appendix B
Survey

By completing the following survey, you are agreeing to participate in a study entitled State Assessment: How does it impact teacher instruction and student success? It is being conducted by Erin Lanigan, a Collaborative Teaching MST student from Rowan University.

The purpose of this study is to explore teachers' views on state assessment and how it affects their instruction and their students' learning. The data collected in this study will be included in my master's thesis.

All participation in this study is voluntary and participants are not required to respond to all questions and statements. All responses will be anonymous and all data gathered will be confidential. Information obtained through this survey may be used in any way thought best for publication in the thesis provided that the respondent is not identified and their name is not used.

If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study you may contact Erin Lanigan (732) 423-6036 or faculty sponsor Dr. Marjorie Madden at (856) 256-4500 ext. 3834.

Please complete and return in provided envelope to the labeled box in the main office by April 29, 2005. Thank you for your participation.

Respond to the following demographic statements.

1. Number of years teaching experience _____
2. Highest educational degree obtained _____
3. Grade level(s) currently teaching _____
4. Gender _____

The following statements are in regards to your views on written state assessments. Respond to these statements to the best of your ability. Circle the number which best indicates your response. You are not obligated to answer every statement or question. Any information you provide will be a great contribution to my study, so if you can only participate in pieces of the survey, feel free!

1= Strongly Agree

2= Somewhat Agree

3= Neutral

4= Somewhat Disagree

5= Strongly Disagree

There is a lot of pressure on teachers, students, and higher administration to receive high state assessment scores.

1 2 3 4 5

State assessments are geared toward one particular type of student.

1 2 3 4 5

A student's background and socioeconomic status might affect how they perform on a state assessment.

1 2 3 4 5

You receive adequate training and information on how to practice for the exam as well as administer it.

1 2 3 4 5

Incentives have been attached to good test scores.

1 2 3 4 5

Please indicate if you would be willing to further discuss your responses to this survey through a brief interview. Interview respondents will remain confidential. Interviews can take place in person or through questions over email or phone.

Yes

No

Please print your name **ONLY** if you are willing to be interviewed.
