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Conceptualizing Constituent Perceptions of Success towards Public Education

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Abstract

The aggressive age of assessment and accountability to which the American public school system belongs, belies the dichotomy, or disparate and passionate views of how to appropriately determine growth or success of learning for our students. The differences are startling; polar opposites of conception and ideal, and controversial, with educational professionals at odds with policy makers and the general public. At issue, or the core of this debate, is the question of what is the most effective way in assessing our schools and the children within them? Is there really one way to assess or determine success and are we really being honest with ourselves when we say our students are learning and achieving?

The definition of a successful school is dependent upon the context, or premise of the subject, in which it is being presented. Lindalyn Kakadelis, a former educator and public school board member, defines success “in which academic achievement can be measured, and [where] data on student performance show an upward trend. Academic growth is the top priority, for all groups of students” (Kakadelis, 2005). Jessica Wolff (2003), citing the activist, educational group, PENNY or The Progressive Education Network of New York, states that their definition of success is determined through individualized recognition of “their schools’ work with diverse populations of student[s]” (p. 1). PENNY opposes the standardized, assessment driven, and comprehensive curriculum common in many states and districts.

The difference in conception of what constitutes success has not been lost on state and federal regulatory agencies or political entities active in reform. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 changed forever the role of the federal government in education, historically the least influential group behind the local education agency (LEA) and state governing body. Traditional responsibilities of public schools have been defined by representative state charters, usually further relegated to local communities charged with creation, oversight and funding towards their institutions. Local control of LEAs has historic roots in American government, both in history and policy implementation.

A common nuance of federalism or the Americanized style of dual governments is that public schools are controlled by separate states operating with semi-autonomy under the envelope of a central authority, or federal government. Originally defined or created under the Ordinance Act of 1787, commonly referred to as the Northwest Ordinance, a specific block or section of land, had to be set aside by each community for the sole purpose of education. This was justified under the concept of citizenship with “knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools

and the means of education shall forever be encouraged” (Northwest Ordinance Act of 1787, Article 3). Each community, diverse in population, geography, culture and history then created their own LEA, itself a mirror image of the town or area it serves. From the auspice of political capital, the autonomy of communities would be further established and strengthened by their own educational agencies (“Democracy and Public Schools”, 2003). Each agency would develop its own standards towards academics, teacher development, class structure and scope, etc., diverse and separate to each other. These schools would develop into what is now defined as the American public school system albeit haphazardly and inconsistently; today a loosely organized educational system with limited or no singular definition in concept, goals or assessment.

In the years following ESEA, the federal government has increased in prominence its role and importance towards LEAs, individual schools and the educational process. This, in regards to more recent, inclusive policies such as NCLB, is an attempt to homogenize or to establish a more uniform school system. The precedent for a centralized, federal educational system, at least through accountability standards, is contrary to established policy and historical precedent, creating a difficult, politically charged and controversial setting of which the educational system now finds itself (Cohen, 2006). As local control continues shifting with the enforcement of policy to state, and eventually federal oversight, local educational systems may be beginning to buckle under the strain, with consequent failings being felt at the state level. In the recent and politically charged atmosphere some states have threatened to remove themselves out from under this legislation, citing the precedent or historic role of state control over the far reaching, and too intrusive federal government (Cohen, 2006).

Components of this debate remain, including the definition of success, the policy of accountability, and the possible penalties for not reaching established criterion or outcomes. Federal legislation, through NCLB, defines or measures success with the use of standardized testing, establishing accountability to no less than the number of students passing an established mark or number (Case, 2004). Critics favor other criterion, less involved with outcome, but through student performance and cognition gains, minus the penalties associated with testing (Wolff, 2003). Two broad approaches or models have developed, or conceived through these differing conceptions; the behaviorist approach and the assessment approach. The federal government and most states favor the assessment approach, while many LEAs and educational professionals prefer the behaviorist approach.

Behaviorist/Holistic Approach

The behavioral approach, or concept towards education, is a conceptual idea that looks for indicators, or proof of learning primarily through means not associated with assessments or tests (Kochan et al, 1996). Education is about learning, the cognitive process of the mind, inclusive of subjects not tested and knowledge gained both concrete and abstract which serves to better a student’s chances in life (Kaufman et al, 2001). The premise being to become an active, productive citizen in the community in which he or

she lives, serving the local and or state framework, a purpose for which the local education agency was traditionally created (“Democracy in Public Schools”, 2003).

The strength of this approach is in its flexibility and ability to judge students weaker or less able to perform at established criterion levels, common concerns for special education, ESOL, and other categorically defined students and an expressed weakness of the assessment approach (Kochan et al, 1996). Teachers, many of whom enter the field for humanistic reasons to serve, or to better others, are strong advocates of this philosophy and apt to implement and/or develop assessment systems aligned towards it; notwithstanding its dismissal of punitive measures usually found in the assessment approach (Cochran-Smith, 2003). This concept is easier to implement around cultural and social differences between different schools and in different areas of the country, adaptable to diverse cultures and thought.

A problem with this concept is in accountability, specifically what and how to measure success. The assessment driven approach utilizes a standard instrument that can be interpreted with statistical techniques and allows for measurement. The behavioral approach, however, only looks at individual behaviors, different variables within different contexts and defined from school to school which would be difficult, albeit impossible to accurately measure (Cheng, 1997). Any instrument, or standard measuring tool needed to look for improvement or progress would be difficult to conceptualize and useless when comparing to other groups or schools. Assessments, though criticized for their weight given in school improvement, are powerful tools for accountability, forcing educators to focus on weak, underserved populations and groups (Gunzenhauser, 2003). Without definable indicators LEAs, despite the best intentions of educators, could relegate less attention or focus on problematic populations or less achieving groups; issues that led to change in the first place and in the absence of assessment driven accountability measures, could conceivably happen again (Stoll & Fink, 1996).

Assessment Approach

The concept of using assessment driven data to measure success is the most relied upon measurement for the American school system today (Popham, 2002). Key to the concept of accountability, assessment instruments generate massive amounts of measurable data, which can be used to isolate and track pertinent indicators. “Accountability is central to the success of the No Child Left Behind Act”, declared former Secretary of Education Rod Paige in a policy letter addressing States’ concerns over NCLB (2002). With societal pressures and current trends predicating higher standards, accountability is considered the cornerstone for success with LEAs and schools being held responsible for the results.

The strength of this approach lies within the assessment, or measuring instrument itself. The utilization of a measurable component or variable gives more weight to the conclusion or premise being defined. The concept of reliability, or “whether a particular technique, applied repeatedly to the same object, yields the same result each time”, gives credence to a test, especially if used repeatedly and with valid results (Babbie, 2002, p.

136). The validity or the ability to “draw meaningful and useful inferences from scores on the instrument”, or in the more narrow definition of content validity as “items (that) measure the content they were intended to measure,” confirms the measurement as accurate (Creswell, 2003, p. 157). If an instrument is measurable and considered both accurate and reliable, the use of this device can be a powerful and useful tool in establishing success.

The states or LEAs’ school improvement concept can augment teaching practices and concepts as educators “align curriculum and accountability mechanisms with (national/state) standards” to prepare students for the tests (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002, p.3). “Changes in the structure, roles, and related formal elements of the organization”, or restructuring puts all of the elements of the school system, traditionally compartmentalized and separate from one another, into focus and on the same track (Fullan, 2000, p. 3). The differing components within the system, albeit state, district, or school, now must work together in order to achieve a common, unified objective. “School effectiveness is the product of a unified effort marked by district wide, building-wide integration of attitudes, goals, policies, and programs that promote learning” (Center for Policy Studies, n.d., p. 1).

The problems, or weakness of such an approach is the dependence upon, or utilization of an instrument not properly designed for the task. Several types of assessment instruments commonly used by public schools or institutions exist, usually defined by the size of the area or locality it covers, but most, if not all, are similar in scope, methodology and content measurement. “All of these tests are standardized in the sense that they are to be administered, scored, and interpreted in a standard, predetermined way” (Popham, 2002, p. 1). This standardization can be a flaw or weakness when trying to assess the skill level of heterogeneous groups, disaggregated by culture, ethnicity and other demographics with an instrument designed for the masses, possibly ill-suited for the target population (Cheng, 1997).

Most tests are achievement based, or designed to measure a student’s knowledge or skills, rather than aptitude, or the predicting of future academic success (Popham, 2002). The scores measure the knowledge and skill set of the individual student, indicating strengths or weakness in variables, usually in mathematics and reading or language arts. These scores are then compared to other student’s scores creating a distribution, hopefully normal as one would “assume that (the) variable is normally distributed” when sampling a large population (Howell, 2004, p. 102). The weakness occurs when these tests, designed for a normal distribution curve, are used to compare schools to one another based on the number of their students achieving a pre-established benchmark. These instruments were designed for a finite data set with the expectation that a set percentage of students will perform on the low or failing end, a percentage on the high or excelling end, with the largest percentage right in the middle. The tests were designed for a normal distribution and may not take into account, or accurately measure, other variables associated with testing; cognitive abilities, socio-economic status and/or demographics (Popham, 2002). Students on the lower end of these variables tend to test poorer against their better off peers despite the quality of teaching they may or may not

receive; establishing a performance level used to further policy. Public schools are being evaluated through a testing instrument not specifically designed or measured for that specific purpose and (possibly) receiving subsequent poor grades from the misaligned instrument.

This may mean that schools, despite achieving successful status “may not be uniformly successful in serving the learning needs of all their students... Schools that place too high a premium on academic excellence may inadvertently alienate their lower-achieving students and ultimately force them out of school” (Kochan et al, 1997, p. 1). This model, though effective in gauging performance through measurable data may be too limiting in scope to address all the nuances and needs of students, creating an accountability problem it was originally designed to correct.

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