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Systemic Violence and High Stakes Testing

Ivan E. Watts

The use of high stakes testing as the primary tool of school reform is sweeping the nation. Proponents of standardized tests, including most state legislatures, the President, governors, boards of education and even the American Federation of Teachers, have embraced the rhetoric of higher and tougher standards. Of course, no one advocates for low standards, but the movement towards test standardization is terribly flawed and will not fix our failing schools. Many scholars, teachers, parents and administrators believe that high stakes testing is actually undermining efforts to attain quality teaching and learning in public schools (Ross, 1999). Rather than focus on strategies that have proven to increase student achievement, such as smaller class size, more time for teacher planning, and equitable resources for all schools, politicians, test-makers, and policymakers have imposed more standardized tests on students without providing any evidence that testing improves teaching or learning (Kohn, 2000).

The use of high stakes tests is not new, and the effects of these tests are not always beneficial. The consequences associated with test results have long been a part of America's educational and selection process. For example, in the early part of the 20th century scores from standardized tests taken by prospective immigrants could result in entrance to or rejection from the United States. In the public schools, test scores could uncover talent, provide entrance into programs for the gifted, or as easily, provide evidence of deficiencies, leading to placement in vocational tracks or even in to institutions for the mentally ill and feeble-minded. Test scores could also mean the difference between acceptance into or rejection from the military (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). As will be discussed in this article, standardized test scores are also used to confirm and validate the superiority or inferiority of various races, ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and social classes. This discussion of high stakes testing will be examined within the theoretical framework of institutional and systemic violence which critically scrutinizes the use of standardized test scores to validate and maintain discrimination along racial, ethnic, and class lines.

The purpose of this article is to critically explore the highly controversial issue of high stakes testing. In this article, it is my intention to expose some of the discriminatory consequences of high stakes testing manifested throughout this nation. Some of these consequences will be discussed in the context of human and civil rights violations. Once an understanding of the uses of high stakes has been established, the theoretical framework of institutional and systemic violence will be utilized to support the hypothesis that high stakes testing is a type of violence that has long-lasting educational and societal ramifications.

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High Stakes Testing

In recent decades, test scores have come to dominate the discourse about schools and their accomplishments. Test scores can even influence the important decisions made by families, such as where to live and where to send their child(ren) to school. According to Haladyna, Nolen, and Haas (1991), real estate agents use school test scores to rate neighborhood quality, affecting property values by up to \$10,000. At the national, state, and local levels, test scores are being used to evaluate programs and allocate educational resources. Some states even provide merit pay to administrators and teachers if students meet or exceed national averages. Many states also offer scholarships to students who score well on national standardized tests. For example, in 2000, Michigan implemented the Merit Award Scholarship program in which over 42,000 students who performed well on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program high school tests were rewarded with scholarships of \$2,500 or \$1,000 to help pay for in-state or out-of-state college tuition (Durbin, 2001). In addition, 1,346 California city school teachers and administrators demonstrating the greatest improvements in test scores over a two year period were to share \$100 million in bonus rewards, ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000 per teacher, through Certificated Staff Performance Incentive Bonuses (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). It is clear that millions of dollars now hinge on the test scores of students.

Our current confidence in and reliance on tests scores dates back to the Soviet Union's ability to launch Sputnik into space before the United States, causing state and federal politicians to question the quality and rigor of instruction provided by America's schools. Later, in the 1970s, the belief that the achievement of students in U.S. schools was falling behind other countries led state and local policymakers to establish minimum competency testing (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). States began to rely heavily on basic skills tests to ensure, at least in theory, that all students would learn the minimum skills and information needed to be a productive citizen. Florida was one of the first states to implement a minimum competency test for their students, with minimal gains. Students there were required to pass this test prior to high school graduation. After experiencing modest increases in students' scores, the perceived gains hit a plateau. This leveling off allowed differential pass rates and an increase in dropout rates among ethnic minorities and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to surface. As a result, Florida's testing policy was postponed as it was widely perceived that minimum competency tests were "dumbing down" the content in schools (Linn, 2000).

Minimum competency testing was resurrected in 1983 when the National Commission on Education released *A Nation at Risk*, an influential report on the state of education in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). According to Kohn (2000) and Berliner and Biddle (1995), this extensive report put an end to minimum competency testing and introduced the high stakes testing movement raising the nation's standards of achievement drastically. The Commission reported that schools in the United States were performing poorly in comparison to other countries and that the country was in jeopardy of losing its global standing, triggering a nationwide panic regarding the weakening condition of the American education system (Kozol 1991). In spite of criticisms of inaccuracy and lack of scholarly rigor, *A Nation at Risk* brought about massive calls for reform, advocating for rigorous standards and accountability processes. The Commission recommended that all states implement

high standards and that those standards be assessed through high stakes testing where schools would be held accountable.

Nearly every state in the country instituted high educational standards and assessment policies to meet those standards. To ensure positive results, state policymakers attached incentives for high performance as well as sanctions for poor performance on the tests. In other words, schools with high test scores would be rewarded and underperforming schools would be penalized (Quality Counts, 2001). The rationale that fueled this line of reasoning was that once poor performing schools knew their status, students would be motivated to learn and school personnel would be forced to do their jobs, rather than face further penalties, thereby improving themselves without much to the state. This reform strategy made sense on its face, and it gained popularity throughout the country. However, what policymakers did not anticipate was that the incentives for schools to set and meet those high standards would also widen the educational achievement gap along racial, ethnic, ability, and class lines.

The more high stakes testing gains momentum, the more salient differential patterns of test scores become. When the majority of underperforming schools are significantly populated by poor, African American, and Latino students (Kohn 2000; Noguera 2002), violence is occurring. In this case, the violence that targets marginalized groups is called systemic violence. This article illustrates how high stakes testing is a form of systemic violence.

Systemic Violence and High Stakes Testing

What is violence? Newton Garver (1968) states that violence, "occurs in several markedly different forms, and can be usefully classified into four different kinds based on two criteria, whether the violence is personal or institutionalized, or whether the violence is overt or covert and quiet" (20). The most recognizable form of violence is overt personal violence such as murder, rape, and assault. However, the least recognized form of violence in our culture is systemic or institutionalized, which is covert and quiet. Violence can occur at the institutional level as well as at the individual level. The military, police, church, and educational system are cultural institutions that are capable of using force in the name of the public good. These institutions may even go beyond force to violence that instead undermines the public good (Curtin & Litke 1999). For example, the development and implementation of high stakes testing in nearly every state in the United States was intended to produce higher standards. Yet, to achieve these standards students were forced to take an examination where the scores highlighted the perceived educational inferiority of students of color and the poor. Systemic violence occurs when these disparities are allowed to continue, and students are penalized by not being allowed to graduate or being retained in earlier grades.

Violent institutions, such as the military, do exist within our society; however, this article is written to expose the institutionalization of systemic violence by our society, specifically our educational system. Overt acts of violence may be committed against individuals, such as murders by lynching or late night shootings in ghetto alleys, whereas systemic violence is the covert infliction of violence, the violence that draws no blood – yet goes to the heart (Ginsberg 1999). Drawing from this alternative definition of violence, violence can be done even though no one raised a hand to another. Since there may be no evidence of an overt act of violence, a perpetrator, or victim, one may be inclined to conclude that no harm has been done. This veil of self-deception enables the institutionalization of

systemic violence, allowing violence to be concealed. For example, the American Evaluation Association (2001) has reported that high stakes testing often leads to educationally unjust consequences and unsound practices, even though it occasionally shows modest improvements in the teaching and learning conditions in some classrooms and schools. What is most concerning are the increases in dropout rates among African Americans, Latino Americans and the poor. At the same time, teachers and administrators become deprofessionalized by a singular focus on testing, loss of curricular integrity, increased cultural insensitivity, and the disproportionate allocation of educational resources into testing programs. The concealed acts of violence that high stakes testing perpetrates are so detrimental and compelling that the American Evaluation Association (2001) does not support test-driven accountability.

The institutionalization of systemic violence has countless perpetrators but as a collective, it is faceless. Systemic violence includes impersonal mistreatment of individuals not by any identifiable evil person or politician, but by the configuration of the social structure. Racism, bigotry, and other oppressive paradigms cannot exist or flourish without the collective understanding that "this is the way things are." Subscribing to this philosophy, or at least not challenging it, cleanses us from any and all wrong doing to a certain group, even when one is an active member of that group (Sparks, 1994). Freire (1970) stated that any situation in which people are prevented from learning is an act of violence. The major thrust of his work is the exposition of the oppressor's role on the life and learning of the oppressed. The situation of oppression is, as he states, "a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those they oppress." In other words, to prevent others from learning is to violate their humanity. The dehumanizing of students is an insidious form of violence. This dehumanization can propel students to fail, drop out of school, or, in some cases, commit acts of aggression that culminate in their suspension or expulsion. In addition, the production of discriminatory educational results emanating from a school culture that distorts the social, historical, legal, and economic differences among students is an act of institutional violence (Marshall & Vaillancourt, 1993).

Continuing a critical analysis of high stakes testing as systemic violence, Epp and Watkinson (1997) discuss educational systemic violence as "any institutionalized practice or procedure that adversely impacts on disadvantaged individuals or groups by burdening them psychologically, mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically, or physically" (p. 4). Systemic violence is a byproduct of conventional policies and practices, such as high stakes testing, which support a climate of violence and policies and practices that appear neutral but result in discriminatory and adverse effects. Discrimination is systemic violence (Epp & Watkinson, 1997). Perhaps one of the major reasons for the growing reaction against high stakes testing is the detrimental and negative consequences. Subsequently, in a effort to increase scores and find more time to teach the content covered by high stakes tests, schools and districts are resorting to non-research-based strategies, such as increasing homework geared toward the test, abolishing recess for younger students to increase instructional time, limiting or eliminating time spent teaching subjects that are not assessed, and even holding students back in an effort to end social promotion (NEA Teaching and Learning Team, 2000). Also, as evidence of a blatant disrespect for human rights and a clear act of educational systemic violence, countless numbers of children – primarily poor, black, and brown – are being denied access to quality learning opportunities

on the basis of high stakes test scores. Being tracked, retained in a grade, or denied a diploma, regardless of what one knows or can do in real-life situations, are a few examples of the ways high stakes tests manifest institutional violence (Kohn, 2000).

When discussing the effects of educational systemic violence through high stakes test, there are two important factors that will produce future, if not current, political anxiety: (1) segregation; and (2) the departure of educators from the profession. The effects of high stakes testing programs on student retention, graduation, and admission into academic programs affects students' rights to a high quality public education. As mentioned throughout this article, high stakes testing is about test scores and accountability. These elements have consequences for schools as well as for the students themselves, such as withdrawal of monetary support if they are underperforming. It has been demonstrated that schools with large minority populations often fall below state and national averages on test scores. Thus, these schools would be affected disproportionately if future testing results in similar performance gaps (Brennan & Haas, 2001). Further, the publication and dissemination of test scores will have far-reaching implications because families with school-aged children often search out neighborhoods with schools that report higher test scores. Therefore, according to Kozol (1991), segregation of neighborhoods along racial and economic lines, which already exists, is likely to become worse.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence, although little hard data, that many educators are leaving the K-12 educational arena because of what is being done to schools in the name of accountability and tougher standards (Kohn 2000). Evidence is supplied by several state surveys that have been able to capture the extent of educators' disapproval of testing. Given this environment, prospective teachers may rethink whether they want to begin a career in which high stake test scores have direct personal, professional, and economic consequences. School administrators are affected as well. A lead story in a respected New York newspaper reported that, "...a growing number of schools are rudderless, struggling to replace a graying corps of principals at a time when the pressure to raise test scores and other new demands have made an already difficult job an increasingly thankless one" (Kohn, 2000, 2). Unfortunately, those people who are quitting, or seriously thinking about doing so, are not the mediocre performers who are afraid of being held accountable. Rather, they are competent educators frustrated by the difficulty of doing high-quality teaching in the current climate (Noguera, 2002; Kohn, 2000).

The most serious limitations of high stakes testing is its determination that a student's level of educational cognizance can be evaluated by a narrowly focused test. The ongoing practice of high stakes testing in America's schools is an effort to address teaching and learning in a simplistic manner although students' educational progress is part of a complex equation, which is further compounded by the inequitable allocation of funding. In order to standardize a comprehensive education, we need input from a multiplicity of viewpoints regarding the cost and benefits of various educational programs for an increasingly diverse group of school children. High stakes testing oversimplifies complex educational and social issues; thus, unsound and hasty decisions are made. Currently, high stakes testing policies and practices ignore progressive processes that might justify their continued use.

Conclusion

High stakes testing policies do not now and may never accomplish what they set out to do. Furthermore, if failure in attaining the goals for which the policy was created results in disproportionately negative effects on the life chances of America's poor, African American, and Latino students, then these policies are more than a benign error in political judgment. Rather, they reflect systemic violence that allows structural and institutional mechanisms, such as high stakes testing, to discriminate against all of America's poor and many of America's racial and ethnic students. Use of the theoretical framework presented in this article can provide valuable insights into the debates surrounding high stakes testing, thus offering yet another perspective about the unintended consequences of such policies and practices.

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