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Issues for principals in high-stakes testing

JUDY SMEED, KAREN SPILLER AND MEGAN KIMBER warn that teaching and learning is in danger of 'shrinking' to meet externally-imposed targets.

Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to the Facts, sir!

Mr Gradgrind in 'Hard Times', by Charles Dickens

THE above quotation draws attention to some of the concerns about high-stakes testing, such as NAPLAN, in Australia. In the absence of a national curriculum at this point in time, having national testing for children of different ages presents a number of difficulties. These difficulties can be compounded if the end results are used to compare States and schools. While not as extreme as Dickens in *Hard Times*, NAPLAN high-stakes testing, along with the public accountability and reporting requirements on schools, have the potential to transform teaching and learning. Like Dickens' school, classrooms may become content and skills factories instead of environments of creativity (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Robinson, 2006). In this short article we examine the literature relating to practices undertaken in some schools as a consequence of the pressures of high-stakes testing. We also posit a list of 13 practical suggestions for the consideration of principals in relation to their own responses to high-stakes testing.

Overview of issues identified in literature

Amrein and Berliner (2002) applied Heisenber's Uncertainty Principle to high-stakes testing. The principle states: *'The more important that any quantitative social indicator becomes in social decision-making, the more likely it will be to distort and corrupt the social process it is intended to monitor'*. In relation to high-stakes testing, advocates of this principle warn that attaching serious personal and educational

consequences to test performances leads to a greater likelihood of corruption and distortion in matters relating to the test. As a result, the validity of many high-stakes tests (including the NAPLAN test) may be considered and could become increasingly questionable.

High-stakes testing continues to have an impact on education at both classroom (Flores, 2005) and whole-school levels (Rowe, 2000; Ward, 2006). At a classroom teaching level, many suggest that external testing programs influence both what is taught (Greene, 2003; Luke, 2007 February; Pinar, 2004; Rowe, 2000; Ward, 2006) and how it is taught (Broadhead, 2001; Carlson, 2005; Pinar, 2004). Perry and McWilliam (2007) espouse that impact has *'led many schools to a reductionist view of education, one defined in terms of scores, market appeal and conformity'*. They suggest that this reductionist view happens in schools, despite claims to the opposite in their documents and publications. The narrowing of the curriculum to focus on high-stakes testing can also be linked to Ranson's (2003) views on accountability. He writes that accountability is no longer *'merely an important instrument or component within the system'*, but *'constitutes the system itself'*. One then asks, is a test no longer an instrument of assessment that informs the teacher? Has it actually become the curriculum? If this is the case, Perry and McWilliam (2007) conclude that, increased accountability, bureaucratic policies, programs, and the focus on high-stakes testing have replaced educational theory as the main influence in deciding the content of school curricula. Essentially, according to Seddon (2001), the test becomes the endorsed learning or school curriculum.





The stringent accountability measures as a consequence of high-stakes testing have also created a pressured environment in schools. Teachers report anxiety, shame, loss of esteem and alienation associated with the increased instructional pressures of testing (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Tomlinson, 2001). One of the consequences of this pressure is that teachers are 'teaching to the test' (Amrein & Berliner, 2002) in an attempt to ensure good results.

As the system, and in particular the curriculum, narrows its focus to meet these external targets, there is a concern that creativity, diversity and individuality will disappear from classrooms and ultimately the work of the teacher will change (Meadmore, 2004). Pinar (2004) concurs with this and suggested that an *'educational experience seems precisely what politicians do not want, as they insist we focus on test scores, as the "bottom line"*. He further suggests that, by linking the curriculum to student performance on standardised testing, politicians have, in effect, taken control of the school curriculum.

At a school administrative level, the school curriculum can be used to control the type of student a school enrolls (Rowe, 2000; Ward, 2006). By offering only

'academic' courses, entry is restricted to the 'brighter' students and, therefore, published data become a product of this screening practice (Ward, 2006). The school is considered to be performing well by a public that compares results through league tables published in (and sometimes devised by) the media (e.g., Bonner, 2009; Tomazin, 2009; Ricci, 2009; Anonymous, 2009). These tables can be misinterpreted and their publication can lead to a flight of students from schools that are perceived to be performing poorly to those that they are perceived to be performing well. This enrolment pattern can result in increased inequality. Such a trend to seek out and encourage only the best and brightest students to particular schools may lead to a homogenising effect on the school environment and the students' experiences (Klenowski, 2008).

Florida (2002) questions the benefits of such homogenising practices. Claxton (2005) also points out that these students (from homogenised sites) who perform well on narrow test instruments may not be the most resilient learners. While selective enrolment practices seek to elevate a school's position on published league tables, school administrators need to be conscious of their cultural effects (Florida, 2002; McWilliam & Perry, 2006).



Finally, high-stakes testing can have an impact outside the schools. An example of this impact is in the real estate market. Because some schools and systems 'cap' enrolments to restrict numbers, real estate agents use school test scores to rate neighbourhood quality. These scores, then, affect property values (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Thus, the use of standardised testing and league tables has significant implications beyond the assessment of students and the accountability of teachers. They might result in negative views of schools, students, and communities, impacting on the socio-economic status of the area.

Suggested responses for principals

What, then, can you as a principal do to respond to the accountability demands of high-stakes testing and to maintain the integrity of your own school philosophy? Some practical suggestions are listed below.

- Whenever possible, educate your community of the need to consider a broad education, not one that focuses on a narrow range of outcomes.
- Promote the idea that published data is only one snapshot of your school. It gives general information about a specific year level of students at a specific instant in time.
- Encourage your community to consider other forms of data in relation to your school.
- Make your curriculum and strategic decisions based on both the good of the group and on the good of the individual.
- Maintain a school reporting system where all subjects are treated equally.
- Highlight the importance of extra-curricula activities in the school.
- When addressing the community, constantly refer to school 'motherhood' documents such as vision and mission statements and curriculum frameworks.
- Refer to the above documents when reporting to the community. This sends a clear message about the value you place on them.

- Conduct curriculum, assessment and values audits to ensure that the school's endorsed curriculum is being taught.
- Visit the classrooms of subjects that are not perceived as having a strong impact on NAPLAN results.
- Educate your local politicians about the things your school values.
- Educate politicians about the problems created by the publication of high-stakes test results.
- Discuss, with your community, the reasons why your school should reflect a diverse society.

Conclusion

In this article we have considered some of the implications of high-stakes testing, such as NAPLAN. While a central use of high-stakes testing is to increase the accountability requirements on teachers and schools, the implications for educational communities can be far reaching. For instance, there is a danger of the test becoming the narrow, de facto curriculum that stifles creativity. Further, test scores may be used to generate league tables, and the community's perceptions of low and high performing schools can be influenced by these publications. To address these issues, we concluded the article with a list of 13 practical suggestions for how principals can respond to high-stakes testing while maintaining the integrity of their school philosophy.

**A comprehensive set of references is available from the authors.*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Judy Smeed is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the Queensland University of Technology. Her research links the areas of accountability, particularly in the form of high-stakes testing with curriculum change and school performance. She also works extensively with schools in these areas. She can be contacted by email at: j.smeed@qut.edu.au.

Ms Karen Spiller is Principal of St Aidan's Girls School, in Brisbane, Queensland. She has a keen interest in researching ways of academically extending her students to achieve the best possible outcomes. Ms Spiller can be contacted by email at:

k.spiller@staidan.qld.edu.au

Dr Megan Kimber is a researcher in the Faculty of Education at the Queensland University of Technology. She researches and writes extensively in the areas of public policy, accountability and leadership particularly in the educational context. Dr Kimber can be contacted by email at:

m.kimber@qut.edu.au