

**Case Study IV- The Hegemony of High Stakes Testing and Community Accountability
Measures**

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Introduction

Current education research focuses on issues such as the achievement gap and the lack of 21st century skills in current graduates. This paper seeks to explore the possibility that the achievement gap, though existent, is not as it seems. Part of the reason why American education is not able to provide students with the desired skills is that the system is focused on perpetuating and enforcing the current social caste system more than it is focused on educating our children. The systematic oppression and socialization of marginalized communities in schools can be seen in the use and misuse of high stakes testing.

Background

The social caste system was originally identified and explained in detail in Gunnar Myrdal's (1944) *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Samad (2009) explored this research to identify that the American education system is an extension of the social caste system. Samad argued that the racial privilege afforded to white people and disprivilege cast upon Black people have allowed educational disparities to continue. Such disparities in the United States social arena is perpetuated through the limiting of educational opportunities and in extreme cases, an outright denial of education for Black children (Bush & Bush, 2018; Spring, 2016).

The term "high stakes" is used to describe tests that have a direct impact on a person's life opportunities (Moses & Nanna, 2007). High stakes testing can be traced as far back as the 1920s and the development of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) by United States psychologists, including eugenicist Carl Brigham (Au, 2013; see also PBS, n.d.; Rosales, 2018). High stakes tests like the SAT often result in a chain of educational and social events that will determine a student's social position (Moses & Nanna, 2007). With "No Child Left Behind",

President George W. Bush's 2002 reiteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, high stakes testing moved into the K-12 arena (United States Congress, 2002). Additionally, President Barack Obama's "Race to The Top" initiative continued the push for testing as the accountability measure to determine funding, even for the United States' most marginalized schools (Au, 2013). Our system of testing is ingrained into the core of our society, and parents will need to be major partners in societal change and advocate for this better system of education.

Evaluation

Considering high stakes testing as a post-colonial apparatus within our school systems, the school reformers have essentially established policy within communities of color that continue to confirm the colonial status quo (Heilig et al., 2014). To counter the pedagogy that accompanies the schooling of students in marginalized communities, Freire (1972) suggested the problem-posing framework which allows students to bring their cultural competencies, worldviews, and a wealth of knowledge into the classroom environment. The leading authority within the United States in this type of pedagogy is PBLWorks (<https://www.pblworks.org>), formally known as Buck Institute of Education, who has many processes in using a project-based learning approach. There is still an element of hegemonic power that controls the actual deep learning outcome because it is anchored in the popular goal of increasing standardized test performance. Deprioritizing standardized testing will allow this framework to serve as a possibility for authentic learning. Honoring the power of problem - posing learning, we must focus on linking success criteria of projects to the impact on community through student self-agency.

Solutions

School leaders and instructional teams serve a pivotal role in creating equitable learning environments and authentic learning experiences for our students. This role is amplified by the collaboration and support of parents, caretakers and community members and agencies.

Accountability should not rest in standardized scores or standardized curriculum practices.

Establishing community schools that implement Problem Based Learning (PBL) may disrupt the enclosures placed on our marginalized students while dually allowing the students to advocate for their communities, resulting in community accountability measures (Anyon, 2014; Heilig et al., 2014).

The Coalition for Community Schools (<http://www.communityschools.org>), defines a community school as both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. The integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and engagement with and in the community via partnerships is intended to improve student learning and cultivate stronger families and healthier communities (FitzGerald & Quiñones, 2018). Fostering the foundation of the Community School Model, we embrace the tenets of Community-Based accountability to disrupt the colonial paradigm within our urban schooling experiences. It is imperative that we empower our communities to exercise their democratic power, to set new ways to define achievement and become agents of change in their schools and communities (Heilig et al., 2014). In collaboration with school level teams identify wrap around services to whole-child development and compliment the instructional experiences that take place within the school. To compliment the strong foundation of a community school we are proposing the use of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as the framework

for creating authentic learning experiences that invite parents, caretakers and community members to be active participants in their child's educational journey.

By empowering parents and students as agents of their own trajectories and deep learning via PBL, we are transforming the way in which teachers teach and define achievement while tailoring instructional practices to engage children and teachers in meaningful learning, preparing children to be life-long learners and shifting our understanding and practices to an evolutionary model (Fullan et al., 2018). In order to catalyze this change in practice and theory, it is critical to provide teachers with high quality job-embedded training to develop their capacity to implement principles of PBL in theory and practice.

Recommendations

One specific strategy to support community schools is to first complete a needs assessment of teachers and students to determine the gaps in the current use of PBL or how PBL can be adopted, if not currently being used. Collaboration in examining teaching and learning practices will enable school level teams to explore and identify what is working to serve their students and community and what is not. When this process becomes a consistent practice in schools, it mobilizes school-level teams and sets the stage for internal accountability and continual learning for all (Fullan et al., 2018). PBL places accountability in the hands of the practitioners and community as agents of change in transforming learning and accountability.

Second, schools must refuse standardized testing as a summative assessment and consider its impact on perpetuating the deficit models of instruction particularly for historically marginalized students and communities. True to its eugenic foundations, standardized assessments continue to serve its purpose to enclose our Black and Brown communities and pre-determining their trajectories and defining their perceived future social roles (Kliebard, 2004).

Furthermore, since standardized testing will be removed as an accountability measure, it should be replaced with an evaluation of the community impact of the school and of student projects. Heilig et al. (2014) contended that communities should set their own goals for students based on the needs of the same. Perhaps some communities will choose to focus on test scores for diagnostic purposes, others may focus on salary gains or college completion. By returning education to the communities, the possibilities increase dramatically.

Lastly, further research should be conducted to identify current resources that deprioritize high stakes testing as a validating marker of success. Additional research may also pave the way for professional development opportunities that engage school level leadership in redefining authentic learning and developing ways to catalyze community- based accountability.

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