

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 797

TM 034 183

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TITLE Teachers' Responses to Policy Implementation: Interactions of New Accountability Policies and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Urban School Reform.  
PUB DATE 2002-04-04  
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 1-5, 2002).  
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Accountability; \*Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; \*Culturally Relevant Education; Educational Change; \*Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; \*Multicultural Education; Program Implementation; Standardized Tests; Teacher Administrator Relationship; Urban Education

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how new accountability policies interact with culturally relevant teaching at the classroom level. When teachers are under the constraints of accountability and student testing policies, are they able to adopt and practice culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms? Previous research indicates that high-stakes accountability systems connected with standardized testing are viewed as having negative effects on teachers, the teaching profession, and curriculum and instruction. As a result, teachers have reported feelings of guilt, anxiety, shame, and alienation. Teachers' relationships with administrators have become more complicated, and students have demonstrated decreased levels of trust. Accountability systems have also led to more constraints on teachers use of time, leaving little or no time to fulfill students' emotional and personal needs, and leaving teachers feeling overwhelmed. Research also suggests that the standardized testing associated with accountability systems have led to the narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, and increased instructional hours spent on test preparation. Accountability policies do not necessarily exclude the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy, but mandated standardized testing policies clearly create conditions that are harmful to culturally relevant pedagogy and its goals. This raises great concern for students of color. The surface-level incompatibility of these two reforms, however, does not mean the demise of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally aware teachers across the United States are probably fighting to find a balance between engaging students through culturally relevant practices and attending to accountability measures. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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Prepared for the 2002 Annual Meeting of the  
American Educational Research Association  
New Orleans, LA

April 4, 2002

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## Introduction

A flurry of school reforms has characterized urban education in the last two decades, leading to reform as the status quo for urban schools.<sup>1</sup> Accountability policies—particularly those holding schools accountable through top-down regulations and measures from district and state education offices<sup>2</sup>—has especially taken hold in many urban public school districts. Emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the *new* accountability movement,<sup>3</sup> has led to an “expansion of the use of test results for accountability purposes.”<sup>4</sup> Under these new accountability systems, school districts and states rely heavily on standardized test scores to hold both schools and students accountable, often in identifying and setting consequences for failing schools, as well as in making student promotion and retention decisions. Most recently, accountability and testing have become almost interchangeable words in the educational policy arena, and the stakes have been raised even higher for teachers, administrators, and students.

Another educational reform movement, culturally relevant pedagogy, has also gained popularity in the educational arena in recent years. In this paper, I adopt Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1994) conception of culturally relevant pedagogy, which calls for student empowerment and critical thinking:

Specifically, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right (pp. 17-18).

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<sup>1</sup> Hess, 1999

<sup>2</sup> Darling-Hammond & Ascher, 1991, p. 2

<sup>3</sup> Fuhrman, 1999, p. 1

<sup>4</sup> Linn, 2000, p. 7

In addition, according to Ladson-Billings (1995), student empowerment is a collective effort, not only an individual one, and is built upon three assumptions: “(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competences; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p. 160). Given the heightened value placed on accountability measures today, it is important to understand how new accountability policies interact with other curricular and instructional reforms, such as culturally relevant pedagogy, at the ground level.

At first glance, these two reform movements—accountability and culturally relevant pedagogy—seem to be very different types of reforms. First, they contain different targets. While accountability policies are designed to target schools, teachers, and students as well as the motivational levels of these actors, culturally relevant pedagogy is specifically aimed towards teachers and their teaching philosophies and practices. Second, accountability measures have the intention of changing teacher behavior towards an outcome, whereas culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to change teacher beliefs and instruction. Yet, at second glance, these two approaches share common effects. Not only do both accountability policies and culturally relevant pedagogy change instructional content and form, albeit an unintentional consequence of accountability policies, they also intend to increase student motivation. The question that arises, then, is whether the relationship between accountability driven policies and culturally relevant pedagogy is indeed contradictory, or if it is one that can be complementary.

This paper will examine how new accountability policies interact with culturally relevant teaching at the classroom level. That is, when teachers are under the constraints of accountability and student testing policies, are they able to adopt and practice culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms? If so, must these teachers adapt their instructional methods, which may have been previously influenced by accountability policies, to meet the needs of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy? And, in reverse, do teachers adapt their culturally relevant teaching in order to implement accountability-related policies? In short, is the implementation of accountability and testing policies compatible with that of culturally relevant pedagogy? Currently, the ability to answer these questions is limited, as there has been little or no research conducted specifically on this issue. Thus, to ponder the compatibility of accountability and culturally relevant pedagogy, I will draw from existing research on the effects of accountability and testing policies on teachers in the classroom.

### **What We Know: Accountability Policies and Teacher Responses**

While little or no research has been completed specifically on the effects of accountability policies on culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms, and vice versa, much has been done on the effects of accountability policies on classroom instruction in general. In particular, research on the effects of mandated student testing policies has especially been abundant throughout the years. It is with this research that I will begin my discussion on the ground-level interactions of new accountability policies and culturally relevant pedagogy.

The majority of the research on teachers' responses to accountability-driven reforms focuses on changes in curriculum and instruction. Teachers' perspectives on mandated accountability and student testing policies indicate negative views, particularly in reference to tightened controls over instruction and interference with the craft of teaching. In their study on Dade County public school teachers in Florida, Cohn & Kottkamp (1993) found that teachers regarded accountability measures as changing the nature of teaching in damaging ways:

From the teachers' perspective, the thrust of accountability-driven mandates is to squeeze the juice, the life, the soul out of teaching—even for the “little ones”—and render it dry, routine, repetitious, and boring. Teachers believe they need discretion, and they believe that classrooms need life, creativity, and fun, for both students and themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Despite a number of their respondents' agreement with the general concept of accountability and an emphasis on basic skills and learning processes, teachers' negative views of accountability policies persevered. The majority of their respondents “reported at least one specific form of dysfunction resulting from mandates and accountability measures.”<sup>6</sup> These dysfunctions included goal and means displacement,<sup>7</sup> increased dropout rate, confusion from rapid and frequent changes in policy, pressure and stress, and subversion of mandates and accountability mechanisms.<sup>8</sup> According to the teachers interviewed, the competency-based accountability system imposed on them also increased their vulnerability, leading to feelings of nervousness, fear, and burnout.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993, p. 141

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 143

<sup>7</sup> Goal and means displacement refers to the displacement of instruction and other important responsibilities due to accountability requirements.

<sup>8</sup> Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993, pp. 143-149

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 151-153

In addition, Cohn & Kottkamp discovered that teachers believed that accountability requirements led to losses in interpersonal elements of teaching, as well as time for pedagogical development. “From the teacher’s perspective, the pressure to achieve higher test scores all too often ignores the human and individual dimensions, and asks teachers instead to concentrate solely on the cognitive.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, teachers’ straining to fulfill accountability requirements and to manage higher amounts of paperwork left little time for them to fulfill students’ emotional needs or to build working relationships with other teachers.<sup>11</sup>

In another study on Arizona elementary school teachers, Smith (1991) found that an accountability system consisting of public reporting of standardized test scores caused teachers feelings of anxiety, shame, loss of esteem, and alienation. As a result of these feelings, teachers resorted to various means to raise test scores, including devoting a high number of classroom hours to test preparation, narrowing content and pedagogical strategies to those of the test, and adopting instructional approaches that mirrored testing formats. Teachers were essentially adopting instructional methods that were geared towards the test: “Because multiple choice testing leads to multiple choice teaching, the methods that teachers have in their arsenal become reduced, and teaching work is deskilled...Over time and with increased testing stakes, teaching becomes more testlike.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 121

<sup>11</sup> Teaching in the twentieth century has undergone a process called “intensification,” which refers to increased demands and pressures on teachers and decreased flexibility with their use of time. For a good discussion on intensification, see Apple, 1986, pp. 41-45. Hargreaves, 1994 also devotes a chapter to this topic.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 1991, p. 10

As the stakes are raised for teachers, students, and schools by accountability measures, the negative effects of testing on curriculum and instruction grow more severe.<sup>13</sup> In a study of a large, high-poverty and high-minority urban school district, Koretz, Linn, Dunbar, & Shepard (1991) found that teachers focused on the content and skills of the standardized test used for their district's accountability system. The increase in students' scores resulted from teachers' providing instruction to improve students' test-taking skills, rather than raising general student knowledge and achievement:

...Students in this district are prepared for the high-stakes testing in ways that boost scores on that specific test substantially more than actual achievement in the domains that the tests are intended to measure. Public reporting of these scores therefore creates an illusion of successful accountability and educational performance.<sup>14</sup>

Koretz et al's determination that teachers largely focused on preparing students for the district's high-stakes test was further evidenced by students' poor performance on a standardized test that was similar—but not identical—to the district's test, which was administered to them by the researchers. Additionally, their site interviews and nationwide teacher survey supported the same conclusion—teachers had prepared students for the specific test, and classroom instruction did not center on improving student learning or knowledge.

Another study done by Lomax, Maxwell, Harmon, Viator, & Madaus (1995) found that mandated standardized testing had damaging effects on mathematics and science instruction and curriculum, and with even greater impact in high-minority classrooms and schools. Instead of receiving instruction that encouraged higher order

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen & Barnes, 1993, p. 225

<sup>14</sup> pp. 2-3



thinking skills, students spent time preparing for high-stakes testing with an emphasis on low-level thinking skills.<sup>15</sup>

Cohen & Barnes (1993) summarize the research on the effects of minimum competency tests on instruction:

Several researchers assert that the tests have had a broad and powerful effect on teaching. They report that competency tests drove instruction in a mechanical and simplistic direction, that teachers oriented instruction to test items, and if students did poorly on the tests, remediation consisted of drill on the items they did not know...But for every research claim that testing has such effects, there is another that teachers rarely take testing into account in instruction.”<sup>16</sup>

While Cohen & Barnes assert that both critics and proponents of testing policies easily cite existing research in support of either side of the issue, they also recognize later that the studies indicating that testing affects instruction were those that described as high stakes situations.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, Darling-Hammond (1997) asserts that although testing proponents have argued that tests measure basic skills that are important for future student learning, these “basic skills” are only a combination of subskills, when placed together, do not indicate student ability or performance:

And as mentioned before, studies have found that teaching children to produce correct answers on multiple-choice tests of reading and arithmetic subskills does not teach them to read or solve problems and may even work against their acquisition of performance capabilities.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, standardized tests guiding classroom instruction in both content and form can be extremely harmful to students. The pressure that teachers feel to incorporate test content and skills into their curriculum and instruction can be severe, leading to extreme forms of

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<sup>15</sup> p. 183

<sup>16</sup> Cohen & Barnes, 1993, p. 225

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 225

<sup>18</sup> Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 59

responses. In Cohn & Kottkamp's study, teachers "described how tests took time away from learning, skewed instruction narrowly toward passing them, and even resulted in teachers cheating."<sup>19</sup>

Research also points to conflict between teacher beliefs and those promoted by standardized test. In a study on the high-stakes testing system in Texas, McNeil (2000) reported that some teachers were torn between the needs of their students and their own professional security: "They would have to choose between creating lessons that were meaningful and engaging for all their students...or lessons that would earn them, the teachers, high ratings on their own annual performance evaluations."<sup>20</sup> As a result, many teachers complied with the standardized testing policy, which had a negative impact not only on instruction, but also on teachers' relationships with their students and administrators:

The data from the magnet schools demonstrate very compellingly that these "reforms"...reduced what was taught, constrained teachers in the ways they could teach and, as a result, set in motion dynamics in which teachers would have to choose between course content they felt to be valid and content that was required by the state...As they shifted their teaching to accommodate to the mandated curricula and teaching techniques, they saw their trust relationships with their students eroded, their relationships with administrators become increasingly adversarial, and their carefully constructed school programs jeopardized.<sup>21</sup>

Other teachers, at least in one school, responded to the Texas testing policies by covertly resisting test preparation activities mandated by the principal, while creating the appearance of compliance by "dummying up" display charts of students' practice scores.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993, p. 212

<sup>20</sup> McNeil, 2000, p. 190

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 190

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 216

Darling-Hammond & Wise (1985) found similar results in a study on teachers in three school districts—two suburban and one urban—which had begun to implement mandated accountability mechanisms. Teachers were torn between their students’ needs and their own careers: “Teachers in such highly constrained settings feared for students’ welfare and for their own future as professionals.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, most teachers in these three districts reported conflict between their own educational goals and those of the district-wide curricular and standardized testing mandates:

These tensions typically resulted in conflicts with administrators, feelings of being overwhelmed by excessive demands, or a continual sense of guilt at not being fully able to serve two masters. Most teachers tried to accommodate district requirements, at least superficially, but preserved what they felt was important for students even when that seemed an act of defiance.<sup>24</sup>

Similar to the teachers in McNeil’s study, teachers in Darling-Hammond & Wise’s study were conflicted between their own educational goals and those of their districts, as well as between the futures of their teaching careers and those of their students. And, once again, as a result of these tensions, many teachers resisted the district mandates, though appearing to comply on the surface.

In summary, previous research indicates that high-stakes accountability systems connected with standardized testing are viewed as having negative effects on teachers, the teaching profession, and curriculum and instruction. As a result, teachers have reported feelings of guilt, anxiety, shame, and alienation. Teachers’ relationships with administrators have become ridden with more conflict, and students have demonstrated decreased levels of trust. Accountability systems have also led to more constraints on teachers’ use of time, leaving little or no time to fulfill students’ emotional and personal

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<sup>23</sup> Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 79

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 90

needs and leaving teachers feeling overwhelmed. Lastly, standardized testing associated with accountability systems have led to the narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, and increased instructional hours spent on test preparation.

In the next section, I will discuss the relationship between what we already know about the effects of accountability and standardized testing on classroom instruction, and what this means for culturally relevant pedagogy.

## **Discussion**

In applying the aforementioned research conducted on accountability policies and their effect on classroom instruction to Ladson-Billing's conception of culturally relevant pedagogy, points of agreement and conflict both emerge. As I discussed in the introduction of this paper, Ladson-Billings' (1995) definition, though flexible, emphasizes three elements—academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. These three principles will guide my discussion on the relationship between accountability policies and culturally relevant pedagogy.

A common trait between culturally relevant pedagogy and accountability policies is the importance placed on academic skills and success. As Ladson-Billings maintains, "Culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students' academic needs, not merely make them 'feel good'" (p. 160). Similarly, a large component of accountability and testing policies is meant to ensure that students' academic skills and knowledge are developed according to their grade level. Where these two approaches differ, however, is the level of academic skills that are emphasized. While accountability

policies often promote basic academic skills, culturally relevant pedagogy calls for higher order thinking skills that are meaningful and engaging to students.

Accountability policies and culturally relevant pedagogy diverge in the other principles of culturally relevant pedagogy, cultural competence and critical consciousness. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), cultural competence refers to “utiliz[ing] students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (p. 161), while critical consciousness “allows [students] to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 162). Although accountability policies do not necessarily divorce classroom instruction from cultural competence or critical thinking, their emphasis on basic skills and testing works to replace instruction geared towards these two principles with more routinized curriculum and pedagogy that is geared towards the test. In addition, as existing research indicates, mandated standardized testing policies constrain teachers’ use of time, often leading to teaching to the test and increased instructional hours spent on test preparation—leaving less time for culturally relevant instruction to occur. Accountability policies have also led to negative consequences for teachers’ interpersonal relationships, including decreased levels of student trust, little or no time to fulfill students’ emotional and personal needs, and adversarial relationships with administrators—conditions that are harmful to the strong teacher-student bonds that are necessary for culturally relevant pedagogy.

Thus, while accountability policies do not necessarily exclude the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy, mandated standardized testing policies clearly create conditions that are harmful to culturally relevant pedagogy and its goals.

## **Conclusion**

While research specifically investigating the interactions between accountability and culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms is necessary, I discussed in this paper how accountability policies and culturally relevant pedagogy might interact, based on related research studies. I concluded that, as previous and ongoing research studies indicate, mandated student testing policies have negative effects on classroom instruction that contradict the principles and goals of culturally relevant pedagogy. Thus, new accountability and culturally relevant pedagogy are not compatible. This determination raises great concern for students of color, in light of the higher levels of severity in the negative consequences that standardized testing policies have on high-poverty schools with large student populations of color—students who would benefit most from culturally relevant teaching.

The surface-level incompatibility of these two reforms, however, does not mean the demise of culturally relevant pedagogy. As many policy researchers will agree, policy implementation is not a cut-and-dry process, but one filled with great complexity and often unpredictability. Not only do micropolitical and contextual factors influence how policy implementation plays out in particular schools, but teachers' responses to the policy are also a key determinant. Ultimately, how teachers respond to the implementation of accountability policies in their classrooms—whether through compliance, resistance, adaptation, or a complicated web of all three—matters most in what occurs at the ground level. It is probable that culturally relevant teachers across the nation are fighting to find a balance between engaging students through culturally

relevant pedagogy and attending to accountability measures required of them and their students. In light of the heightened use of national-, state-, and district-mandated accountability testing, however, conditions will prove to be challenging for culturally relevant educators.

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