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# The Role of Money, Race, and Politics in the Accountability Challenge

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*The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 propelled high stakes testing to an unprecedented level of significance. Decisions based on the results of such mandated assessments is flawed in that the tests are not an accurate measure of actual knowledge and neglect to address environmental, socio-cultural, and economic factors influencing student performance. This researcher does not claim to tell a new story, but it seems one that bears repeating. The results of this quantitative investigation further illustrate that variables such as median income and per pupil revenue have an undeniable impact on the academic success of students.*

The word “accountability” has acquired new meaning over the last two decades, becoming the focal point of reform movements seeking to establish standards-based accountability. With increasing focus on standards and accountability, the legislature has dramatically altered the purpose of testing with policies mandating reliance on “high-stakes” assessment to gauge academic achievement. High stakes testing, characterized as an assessment used for accountability that has significant consequences, makes the assumption that the tests will improve educational quality and academic achievement (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Hunter & Barteo, 2003). A recent *Education Week* article discussing a study by David Berliner, Sharon Nichols and Gene Glass notes that in theory the pressure from high stakes standardized assessment is supposed to push schools to improve. However, no current research proves a relationship exists between pressure and student gains. Additionally, Berliner, Nichols, and Glass write that states that employ “test based accountability systems have not shown improvement on national assessments” (as cited in Manzo, 2005, p. 9).

Implicit in this pressure-test based theory is the assumption that test results are a function of curriculum and instruction as delivered by teachers, as well as of what students have an opportunity to learn (Hoover, 2000). Noticeably lacking in this assumption is the inescapable effect of poverty and the influence of environmental variables on the academic performance of children (Davison, Seo, Davenport, Butterbaugh, & Davison, 2004; Taylor, 2005). Often, children from low socio-economic environments are academically at-risk and cannot compete on a level playing field due to factors such as abuse and/or neglect, homelessness, high mobility rate, low education level of young

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parents, unemployment, and most importantly, lack of exposure to the educational experiences comparable to their more affluent peers (Kindle & Pelullo-Willis, 2002; Rothstein, 2002). Children from affluent homes outscore children from low income homes in all academic areas, and family income continues to be a reliable predictor of student achievement (Taylor, 2005). The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that influence the reading test performance of fourth grade students. The objective of this article is two-fold. First, the results of the investigation provide another opportunity to present empirical data underscoring the influence of socioeconomic factors in educational achievement. Secondly, the author will argue that the use of high stakes testing serves a particular societal purpose; to validate, justify and maintain the status quo.

### **Perspectives**

One of the most pivotal events in the history of school reform is reportedly the 1983 release of "A Nation at Risk." This report, a culmination of an eighteen month study by the United States Department of Education on the progress of America's schools, notes with sobering clarity that, "through our rising tide of mediocrity...we have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament" (U. S. Department of Education, p.5). This crucial document drew critical attention to our nation's failure to adequately educate our nation's youth, leading to a fury of school reform initiatives.

The years following the release of "A Nation at Risk," realized a tremendous push for state legislatures to implement statewide assessments to raise student achievement and standards. In addition to overall achievement, educators, politicians, and informed stakeholders became concerned over the increasing gap between the achievement of children from different socio-economic, ethnic, and racial environments; often referred to as the achievement gap (Hunter & Bartee, 2003; Truscott & Truscott, 2005; Weissglass, 2001). African American and Hispanic students, who are more likely to be impoverished, lag significantly in achievement behind their white peers in all subjects (Taylor, 2005). In addition, African American and Hispanic students, hailing from socio-economically disadvantaged environments are more likely to enter school less prepared than their middle class white peers (Davidson et al. 2004; Neill, 2003; Truscott & Truscott, 2005). Noted researchers such as Ruth Johnson (2002) place much of the achievement gap blame on the public school, charging that children enter school ready to learn and that lags begin to appear in the mid elementary grades. Many disagree with Johnson's assertion including the parent respondents in the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Phi Delta Kappa Gallop Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Public School. Nine of 10 poll respondents feel closing the achievement gap is very important, but also attribute the gap to factors

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other than schooling (Rose & Gallop, 2005). Other researchers also suggest that gaps begin in the home environment prior to kindergarten and reading readiness is key to academic growth once official schooling commences (Davison et al. 2004; Truscott & Truscott, 2005).

Students arrive at the schoolhouse door with varying levels of developmental readiness and educators believe states are misusing achievement data when it is the primary factor in the rating and categorizing a districts' effectiveness. Substantial disagreement exists between practitioners, researchers, legislative policy makers and stakeholders as to the meaning, interpretation, and use of test results (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Ayers, 2000; Baines & Stanley, 2004; Borman et al. 2004; Elmore, 2002; Hoover, 1999, 2000; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000; Olson, 2000).

### **Methods**

This study examines the relationship of socio-economic variables on the fourth grade reading performance of 150 elementary school students randomly selected from 54 Ohio public school districts. Reading achievement continues to be a significant factor in gauging the success or failure of the school environment. Fourth grade reading achievement, specifically, is a crucial indicator on Ohio's Report Card and is often used as a pivotal data benchmark in reports compiled by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. School selection for the study was achieved through stratified sampling of the 612 public school districts in the state and test result data were collected from the Ohio Department of Education's Educational Management Information System (EMIS). The Ohio Proficiency Test (OPT) was administered in the 2003 school year to all public school children in the state and was used as the dependent variable in the study. Independent variables included for analysis in this study were (a) the percentage of students in the district for which Disadvantage Pupil Impact Aid is received, (b) the median income, (c) the local per pupil expenditure, (d) the percentage of students who were considered disabled, (e) the district report card performance rating, and (f) the district racial composition. The system established by the state of Ohio rates districts on a 22 point Report Card according to the number of performance indicators earned from test passage rates, and graduation and attendance rates. Of the districts randomly selected for inclusion in this study, 8 were rated as Excellent (21 – 22 points). Eleven districts were rated as Effective (17 – 20 points). Twenty-six districts are rated as Continuous Improvement (11 – 16 points). Five districts were rated as Academic Watch (7 -10 points) and four districts were rated as Academic Emergency (0 – 6 points).

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Regression analyses of variance at the .05 probability level were used to examine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The regression analysis in this examination illustrates how the changes in the independent variables affect the dependent variables. Stepwise analyses were used to eliminate the independent variables that had no effect on the reading scores.

## Results

The results of the analysis of variance calculations show that at the .05 probability level there are significant relationships between the fourth grade reading scores on the OPT and six independent variables. The independent variables that had significant interaction with the fourth grade reading scores are (a) the district report card performance rating, (b) the percentage of students who are disabled, (c) the percentage of students who are disadvantaged, (d) the median income level, (e) the per pupil expenditure, and (f) the district's racial composition. The following paragraphs detail the resulting interactions.

In districts rated as excellent, meeting 21-22 performance standards, significant relationships exist between the fourth grade reading scores and the percentage of students who are disabled and the median income,  $F(2, 7) = 12.50, p = .049$ . For each decrease in the percentage of disabled students, the fourth grade reading scores increased. Similarly, for each increase in the median income the student reading scores increased. Districts rated as excellent demonstrated the highest attendance levels and for each increased point in attendance the student reading scores increased.

In districts rated as Effective, meeting 17 – 20 state performance indicators, significant relationships exist between the fourth grade reading scores and the per pupil expenditure, the median income, and the percentage of non-white students,  $F(4, 9) = 75.90, p < .01$ . For each increase in per pupil expenditure and median income the reading scores increased. Additionally, for each decrease in percentage of non-white students the reading scores increased.

In districts rated as Continuous Improvement, meeting 11-16 state performance indicators, significant relationships exist between the fourth grade reading scores and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students,  $F(2, 24) = 5.24, p < .01$ . For each percentage point increase in Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid and Ohio Works First Benefits, student reading scores decreased.

For districts rated as Academic Watch, meeting 7 – 10 state performance indicators, significant relationships exist between the fourth grade reading scores and the percentage of non-white students, percentage of disabled students and per pupil revenue,  $F(1, 4) = 1168.59, p = .021$ . For each increase in non-white student population and percentage of disabled students, the fourth grade reading scores

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decreased. In addition, as the local per pupil revenue increased the reading scores also increased.

Districts rated as Academic Emergency, meeting 0-6 state performance indicators, exhibit significant relationships between the fourth grade reading test scores and the per pupil revenue and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students,  $F(1, 3) = 251.74, p < .01$ . For each increase in local per pupil revenue the reading scores increased and predictably, the reading scores decreased for each percentage increase in Ohio Works First Benefits.

### **Discussion**

Results of the study clearly illustrate that test performance is strongly correlated to the socio-economic status of the student and the district. The variables that most strongly influence the fourth grade reading test performance in this study were relative to socio-economic status. As a point of contention the reader may quickly and accurately surmise that there is scant new or pivotal research reported here. This, the author purports, is the point of the article. The argument presented in the following paragraphs has a dual purpose. First, discussion of the study results is yet another opportunity to emphasize the significant role poverty plays in academic achievement. And secondly, the article draws attention to the author's contention that the use of data gathered from high stakes testing serve a particular societal purpose. The author believes this purpose is to validate, justify and maintain the status quo.

According to reports by the Ohio Department of Education's web site, low poverty schools continuously out perform high poverty schools on all portions of the OPT. The 2003 cumulative reading scores for low poverty schools, those with less than 50% of the student population on free and reduced lunch, had a reading passage rate nearly twice that of high poverty schools with 50% or more students on free and reduced lunch. The significance of economic status as an influencing factor on academic performance calls into question the validity of the proficiency tests as a single measure in assessing academic achievement.

Over the last twenty years legislators have created a huge and unprecedented social experiment on the nation's children, one with tremendous costs and unproven benefits (Sacks, 2000). Lawmakers, educators, and educational institutions are alarmed with the discrepancy in the state and national test performance between students from different socio-economic levels (Houston, 2003; Weissglass, 2001). If the achievement gap between the haves and have-nots is continuously proven to be correlated to socio-economic status, why then does the state continue to report the scores from the high stakes testing as a measure of district success relative to teaching and learning? This researcher believes the answer to this question is difficult, complex and deeply

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embedded in the fabric of our capitalistic society. The beneficiaries of high stakes testing are those who have historically reaped educational benefits; the privileged, well educated and affluent. The students who have historically come up short include children of the poor, working class and undereducated. Statistics from the census bureau indicate that people of color are more likely to live in poverty than their white counterparts. The environment and circumstances surrounding living in poverty encompass variables that have historically been understated and/or ignored by political and educational institutions. Variables associated with poverty include unemployment, language barriers, abuse and neglect, young and single parents, low parent educational level, low birth weight, homelessness and high mobility, and dangerous neighborhood environments (Pellino, 2002; Stringfield & Yakimowski-Srebnick 2005; Taylor 2005; Viadero 2003). Extensive research exists illustrating that social and environmental contexts have a significant impact on the educational development of children (See Hunter & Bartee, 2003).

Hoover (1999) notes that proficiency tests are misleading as an indication of intelligence, arguing the examinations are tests of cultural experience. There are marked differences in the cultural experiences of those in the dominant culture and those who are impoverished (Viadero, 2000). Readiness to learn is a multifaceted concept that includes behavioral and cognitive factors (Pellino, 2001). Children from impoverished environments begin their lives at a disadvantage, considering inadequate prenatal care, insufficient early health care, quality of day care, and a lack of accessibility to basic experiences that enhance the ability to be successful in school (Stringfield & Yakimowski-Srebnick, 2005). Inability to successfully perform on standardized assessments is not a sign of intellectual deficiency. Pellino (2001) reports experiences that impact the academic success of students include the availability of home computers, attendance at high quality pre-schools, visits to libraries, museums, zoos, opportunities to be read to, the availability of literature and educational materials and routine interaction with literate, well spoken adults. Appropriate social interaction is also essential to the development of cognitive skills. Researchers continue to assert that children of poverty are often unable to develop mutually satisfying social relationships with teachers leading to the development of higher order cognitive processes (Benson, 1995; Bowman, 1994; Guerra & Schutz, 2001). These social relationships assist in the development of skills necessary to be successful on standardized tests.

High mobility rates among poor students also have a particularly negative impact on educational achievement (NCREL, 2000). Frequent relocation interrupts the learning process through irregular attendance,

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continuity of curricular material, and the ability to develop relationships with teachers and peers. NCREL (2000) reports that 41% of highly mobile students are low achievers as opposed to 26% of students from more stable environments.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

It is the opinion of this researcher that many school policy-makers accept the legitimacy of high-stakes testing. The results of the test provide “evidence and validation” of the meritocracy ethos that undergirds the belief systems of many Americans. Meritocracy refers to a social system which allows people to achieve success proportionate to their talents and abilities, as opposed to one in which social class, or wealth play a significant role. If we, as a nation, were to overtly acknowledge that wealth, or lack thereof plays a role in the success one is able to achieve, we would also have to acknowledge that some individuals are privileged by wealth and may even be bestowed with such at birth. This suggests that other individuals may not have a fair or equal opportunity for economic or academic success. Lawmakers and American society would have to acknowledge that there may be systematic mistreatment of certain groups of people on the basis of characteristics such as socio-economic status and skin color. Weissglass (2001) quotes Shirley Chisolm, the nation’s first African American congresswoman, as remarking that “racism is so universal in this country, so widespread and deep-seated, that it is invisible because it is so normal.”

Gauging the success of certain groups and the failure of other groups based on high-stakes testing without the overt admission that societal and environmental factors may predispose one’s success is irresponsible. The consistent and routine reporting of student failure among the nation’s impoverished validates the erroneous, but long held belief that some children do not have the ability to achieve in America’s schools. This approach is “more comfortable” than addressing deeper issues such as that inequality of educational opportunity begins at birth. Comparing the success of the affluent to the success of the impoverished perpetuates notions of genetic inferiority and minimizes factors such as racism, prejudice, and systematic and institutionalized biases. Until we, as nation are willing to overtly address the real issues of student failure, disadvantaged students will continue to fail tests constructed to reflect the values and experiences of the dominant culture.

Questions should continue to be raised as to the true validity of high stakes testing as a single measure of student achievement. Domenech (2000) notes that the issue isn’t academic benchmarks; it’s the misguided use and data interpretation of a single test. Ayers (2000) notes that the purpose of a democratic education is to reduce barriers,

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overcome obstacles, open doors, minds, and possibilities (p. 76), however Sacks (2000) surmises the use of high stakes testing has served to further stratify the nation along race, ethnic, and class lines.

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