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TESTING IN THE RURAL MISSISSIPPI DELTA

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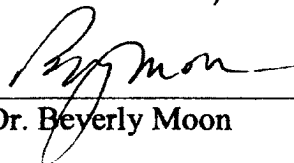
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PREVIEW

**Student Perceptions of High-Stakes Testing
in the Rural Mississippi Delta**

**A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Education
Degree
Delta State University**

Shannon S. Lamb

Spring 2015

PREVIEW

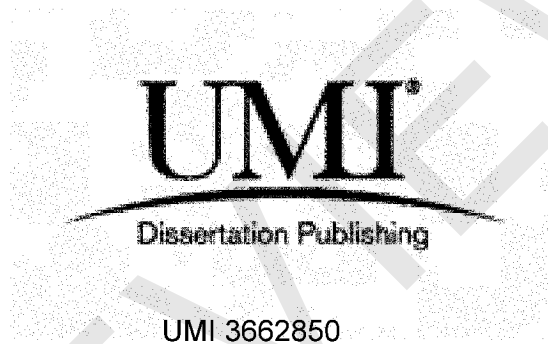
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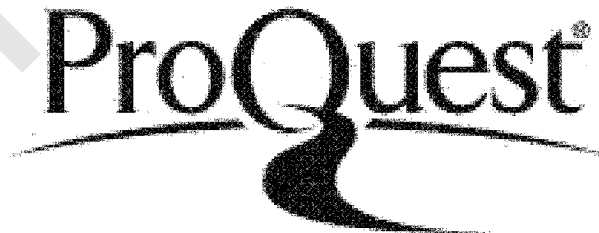


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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children, whose presence has been my greatest motivation in pursuit of this goal.

PREVIEW

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like thank the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Ensley Howell, Dr. Hui Liew, Dr. Jacqueline Craven, and committee chair, Dr. John Alvarez. Your guidance in this effort has proven invaluable. I have been truly fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with each of you.

PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

A number of studies (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Heilig, 2011; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012) have provided evidence to show students negatively affected by high-stakes testing. This study was the first to use quantitative methods to examine students' perceptions of high-stakes testing. The goals of this study were two-fold: first, to identify students' perceptions of high-stakes testing through the qualitative methods established by pioneering researchers, Cheri Foster Triplett and Mary Alice Barksdale (2005); then to determine whether significant differences existed amongst students' perceptions. Research was carried out in two phases. In Phase 1, students ($N = 94$) enrolled at two secondary schools located in the Mississippi Delta provided written statements describing their perceptions of high-stakes testing. Written statements were categorized by commonalities and it was concluded that student perceptions of high-stakes testing fell under one of three major categories: (1) *Indications of Anxiety*, (2) *Perceptions on the Use of High-Stakes Testing as a Requirement for Graduation*, and (3) *Generalized Perceptions*. During Phase 2, a larger student sample ($N = 487$) was surveyed in order to determine, (1) the prevalence of students having experienced anxiety in association with high-stakes testing, and (2) the prevalence of students opposed to the use of high-stakes testing as a requirement for graduation. Respondents overwhelmingly (76.40%) reported experiencing anxiety associated with high-stakes testing, yet the results of survey question two were inconclusive. Phase 2 results were also used in computation of two logistic regression analyses with a confidence interval of 99.00% ($p < .001$); the results of which concluded that significant differences did exist among student perceptions. Possibly, the most significant findings were those derived from a triangulation of Phase 1

and Phase 2 data analysis which concluded: (1) students opposed to the use of high-stakes testing as a requirement for graduation were less likely to experience anxiety, (2) Students having perceived a need for accountability in education were most likely to be unopposed to the graduation requirement, (3) Students unopposed to the graduation requirement were most likely to experience anxiety, and, (4) Students unopposed to the graduation requirement were more likely to perceive a need for accountability in education, and more likely to be anxious as a consequence.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

A number of studies (Au, 2014; Franco & Seidel, 2014; Welsh, Eastwood, & D'Agostino, 2014) have provided evidence to show primary and secondary schools in the United States to be insufficiently serving the needs of all students. National statistics (Ravitch, 2013; Thomas, 2013) have shown high school dropout rates on the rise, coupled with an ever widening achievement gap directly correlated to class and race. Furthermore, these issues are accompanied by persistently low achievement scores across the board (Dworkin & Tobe, 2014; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013).

The Elementary and Secondary School Act, commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2008) was passed in an attempt to counter the country's faltering education system and brought with it many new accountability measures which had enormous impacts on each school and school district in the nation (Jennings & Sohn, 2014; Thomas, 2013; Thompson & Allen, 2012). In accordance with the 2001 legislation, schools were to be rewarded for students' consistent high performance on standardized achievement tests and penalized for consecutive years of low achievement (Franco & Seidel, 2014; Nelson, McMahan, Torres, 2012). Soon after the full ratification of NCLB, 24 states mandated the administration of standardized, achievement tests as a requirement for high school graduation, thus initiating the era of high-stakes testing (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Brookhart, 2013; Dawson, 2013; Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2012; Eslinger, 2014; Husband, 2014; Jones, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, Yarbrough, & Davis, 2002; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Koh, Reddy, & Chatterji, 2014; Papay, Murnane, & Willit, 2010; Reese, 2013; Sadovnick, O'Day, Bohrnstedt, & Borman, 2013).

Need for the Study

Perhaps state and federal policy makers responsible for framing the NCLB legislation labored under the assumption that attaching “high-stakes” to state-mandated achievement tests would increase the motivation of students and educators, but might have neglected the possibility that such measures may also yield adverse effects in public education (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014; Williamson & Snow, 2014). The objective of the law was to put into place a mechanism by which to gauge the academic performance of primary and secondary schools in the U.S. in an effort to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students, such as English Language Learners (ELLs), and those students who were believed to be at more of an advantage in the current education system (Jennings & Sohn, 2014; Thompson & Allen, 2012). Unfortunately, studies (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013; Horn, 2003; Thomas, 2013) have shown that high-stakes testing has actually worked to decrease student motivation and contributed significantly to the greatest increase in high school dropout rates in the history of American public education (Au, 2014; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013). In light of these findings, researchers (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Welsh, Eastwood, & D’Agostino, 2014) concluded that stakeholder perceptions of high-stakes testing were essential to the investigation of both the intended, as well as, the unintended consequences of NCLB.

Pioneering research (Guskey, 2007; Triplett & Barksdale, 2005; Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2002) in the area of stakeholders’ perceptions of high-stakes testing revealed several reoccurring themes amongst educators and administrators including the narrowing of curriculum, teaching to the test, and frequent reporting of anxiety onset by the pressures related to state-mandated accountability assessment (Dee, Jacob, &

Scwartz, 2012; Eslinger, 2014; Jones et al., 2002). However, as noted by Amerin & Berliner (2003), educators' perceptions of high-stakes testing had been well documented, yet little consideration had been given to students' perceptions. Harriman (2005), also raised issues concerning the lack of studies involving student perceptions of high-stakes testing and challenged researchers to begin an immediate and thorough investigation, highlighting students as those individuals to whom the nation's education system was ultimately responsible (Amerin & Berliner, 2003; Harriman, 2005). Therefore, in keeping with Harriman's point of view, quantification (von Eye & Mun, 2012) of the role that anxiety plays amongst student's perceptions of high-stakes testing was established as the need for this study (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012; Von Eye & Mun, 2012).

Statement of Problem

The research problem was identified as an area lacking in research. According to Triplett and Barksdale (2005), student perceptions of high-stakes testing have been largely disregarded due to the prevailing attitude among researchers that students would naturally report a negative bias toward all forms of accountability assessment. Ample studies (Dawson, 2013; Dworkin & Tobe, 2014; Eslinger, 2014; Husband, 2014; Vernaza, 2012) have compared the attitudes and beliefs of school administrators, teachers, pre-service teachers, school counselors, and parents. However, few studies (Barksdale & Triplett, 2010; Dutro & Selland, 2012; Heilig, 2011; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012) have given consideration to students' perceptions of state mandated accountability assessments (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005).

Purpose

The basis for this study was founded on a set of reoccurring themes prevalent throughout the body of literature (Barksdale & Triplette, 2010; Dutro & Selland, 2012; Wheelock Bebell & Haney 2000) concerning student perceptions of high-stakes testing. Given consideration to the expanse of generalizability of the results of previous studies (Hoffman & Nottis, 2008; Lamb, 2007; Nelson, McMahan, Torres, 2012;), this research questioned whether the generalizability of previous research (Lattimore, 2008; Pershey, 2010; Williamson & Snow, 2014) would extend to students' perception of high-stakes testing in the rural Mississippi Delta. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify student perceptions of high-stakes testing, and to determine if significant differences among these perceptions exist.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, the following questions were addressed:

Question 1: What are students' general perceptions of high-stakes testing?

Question 2: Are there differences in students' perceptions of high-stakes testing?

Methods

The design for this study was mixed method. The Research conducted was carried out in two phases. The rationale for this design stemmed from the findings of earlier research (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012; Noguera, 2007) which identified the following reoccurring themes in regards to student perceptions of high-stakes testing: (1) *indications of anxiety*, and (2) *the use of high-stakes testing as a requirement for graduation from public schools*.

During Phase 1, participants ($N = 94$) were administered the Student Perceptions Determiner (SPD), which asked them to provide a written statement describing their thoughts on high-stakes testing. Keywords and phrases were identified in order to determine the overall sentiment of the written responses. Words and phrases such as: *good, easy, like, and I feel confident* were considered indicative of an overall positive sentiment toward high-stakes testing. Words and phrases such as: *boring, hate, stressful, and I feel it is wrong* were regarded as negative sentiments toward high-stakes testing. Closely following the procedures outlined by Barksdale, and Triplette (2010), data were collected, transcribed, analyzed, categorized by theme, tabulated, and displayed in chapter four of this study as frequencies and percentages (Barksdale, & Triplette, 2010).

During Phase 2, participants ($N = 487$) were administered the Student Perceptions of State Testing Survey (SPSTS) instrument containing two yes or no questions which sought to determine the number of students who reported anxiety onset by high-stakes testing and the number of students opposed or unopposed to the use of high-stakes testing as a requirement for high school graduation. Results were tallied, analyzed, and reported as frequencies and percentages. Frequencies were entered into the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS), and used in the computation of a binary logistic regression analysis to determine whether significant differences existed among participants' responses, namely, the differences among factors affecting the likelihood of students reporting perceptions of anxiety onset by high-stakes testing.

Additionally, frequencies derived from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 were entered into the electronic database, SPSS, where a two-step cluster analysis was performed. As a result of clustering, both Phase 1 and Phase 2 participants were segmented by commonalities.

Finally, the results of analysis of both, Phase 1 and Phase 2 were triangulated in order to further validate the results of analysis derived from the two phases of research.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study the following definitions were given:

Accountability Measures: Steps taken by state and federal policy makers to ensure accountability in public education (Eslinger, 2014).

Accountability Assessments: State mandated standardized achievement tests given annually to all public school students in order to gauge student progress and school performance (Ravitch, 2013).

Exit Exam(s): Required assessment for high school graduation. (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013).

High-stakes Testing: The act of using one standardized achievement test as the sole determining factor for making major decisions (Husband, 2014).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): Legislation passed to ensure that schools are held accountable for the education of all students in their charge (Au, 2014).

Stakeholders: Parents, teachers, pre-service teachers, students, school counselors, and administrators (Thomas, 2013).

State Tests(ing): See: “High-stakes Testing”

State Mandated Achievement Test(s): See: “High-stakes Testing”

Limitations

Bryman (2014) makes the assertion that convenience sampling will often provide rich qualitative data, but may not accurately represent the total population. This study may be limited by the use of *at hand*, or convenience sampling which may not accurately

represent the total population of the two study sites. Because participants were selected as a result of convenience sampling from two high schools located in the rural Mississippi Delta, the generalizability of this study may be limited (Bryman, 2014).

The study was limited by geographic region because the researcher did not conduct research outside of the Mississippi Delta. Therefore, the generalizability of the results may be limited to the geographic region encompassed by the northeast Mississippi Delta (Fowler, 2013). According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), sample size may impact the results of research because small study samples may not be reflective of the total population. Therefore, this study may have been limited by the sample size (94) of the focus group used in Phase 1 which may not have been representative of the total population.

Delimitations

According to Mertens (2014), generalizability refers to the extent with which population characteristics and or theories developed within one study are transferrable to other studies for the purpose of providing a contextual and or theoretical basis for the explanation of other populations or phenomena in comparable situations. This study included a sample population of high school students from the rural Mississippi Delta, therefore, the study was most generalizable to high school students from the rural Mississippi Delta. The study did not take into consideration the history of each school's past performance on state mandated accountability assessments (Horn & Wilburn, 2013). The study also did not attempt to separate participant responses for those students having been diagnosed with disabilities or learning disorders in one or more areas.

Assumptions

According to Custer (2010), when survey participants have little to fear from the answers given on a particular survey, they have little reason to lie. Therefore it was assumed participants would respond truthfully to the survey questions. It was also assumed that high-stakes testing would continue to be an area of concern in matters related to accountability in education (Center on Education Policy, 2011; Dutro & Selland; 2012). According to Fowler (2013), when conducting survey research, each sample population will tend to differ slightly from the total population. Therefore, it was assumed participant responses would be similar to other students of the same age and same geographic location.

Significance

Compelling evidence (Barksdale & Triplett, 2010; Gaddis & Lauen, 2014; Thompson & Allen, 2012) has shown a great many students suffer the adverse effects of high-stakes testing each year. As noted by Guskey (2007), in an effort to explore all possible avenues for improved academic achievement in the nation's public schools, student perceptions of high-stakes testing should be taken into account. This research project will have represented the most comprehensive investigation of student perceptions of high-stakes testing to date (Barksdale, & Triplett 2010; Dutro & Selland, 2012; Harriman, 2005; Heilig, 2011; Lamb, 2007; Lattimore, 2008; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012; Trotter, 2006; Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2002). This research will also have carried the added significance as the first study of student perceptions of high-stakes testing to combine qualitative and quantitative methods (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012; Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2002).

Summary

In an effort to reform the failing U.S. public education system, the NCLB legislation of 2001 put in place a mandated system of accountability which penalized schools whose students performed poorly on standardized achievement tests (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Seed, 2008). As a result, most states in the U.S. mandated the use of standardized achievement tests as a requirement for graduation from public schools, thus bringing about the era of high-stakes testing (Allington, 2002; Bridwell, 2012; Dworkin & Tobe, 2014). In an effort to assess the validity of these accountability measures, researchers (Eslinger, 2014; Goertz & Duffy, 2003; Husband, 2014) began to investigate stakeholders' perceptions of high-stakes testing.

These studies, on stakeholder perceptions (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2012; Hargrove, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, & Davis, 2002; Jennings & Sohn, 2014) implied that attaching *high-stakes* to standardized testing had caused numerous ill effects throughout the nation's public schools. Although, a lack of research (Harriman, 2005; Triplett and Barksdale, 2005) was noted in the area of student perceptions of high-stakes testing. By year 2014 a growing body of research (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Heilig, 2011; Nasir & Shah, 2011; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012; Pershey, 2010; Triplett & Barksdale, 2005; Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2002) maintained that students enrolled in public education perceived high-stakes testing as a trigger for apathy and anxiety (Dworkin & Tobe, 2014; Thompson & Allen, 2012; Triplett & Barksdale, 2005).

Compelling evidence (Barksdale & Triplett, 2010; Gaddis & Lauen, 2014; Thompson & Allen, 2012) mounted each year to show a great many students suffering from the adverse effects of high-stakes testing. Guskey (2007), called for further

development in the study of student perceptions of high-stakes testing in an effort to explore all possible avenues for improved academic achievement in the nation's public schools. The purpose of this study was to identify student perceptions of high-stakes testing and to determine if significant differences existed among these perceptions.

Although this study may have been limited by convenience sampling (Bryman, 2014), and its limited geographic region of study, it was determined to be significant for having been the first study of student perceptions of high-stakes-testing to have employed quantitative and qualitative analyses. Therefore, this study was considered to be a significant contribution to the body of knowledge surrounding student perceptions of high-stakes testing (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012).

PREVIEW

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter two presented a review of the relevant literature pertaining to the study of students' and stakeholders' perceptions of high-stakes testing including: (a) a brief history of high-stakes testing, (b) the validity of high-stakes testing, (c) stakeholders' perceptions of high-stakes testing, (d) Stakeholders' perceptions of anxiety associated with high-stakes testing, and (e) stakeholders' perceptions of accountability.

A Brief of History of High-Stakes Testing

The notion of high-stakes accountability in public education began over three decades ago with the U.S. Department of Education's 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCOEE], 1983) which declared the U.S. education system failing and in need of immediate and drastic reform. The report (NCOEE, 1983) called for increased rigor in the national curriculum to be accompanied by measurable standards of achievement across the board. Federal and state policy makers promptly began restructuring public education with a focus on the use of standardized testing and achievement outcomes to be measured yearly and compared over time (Fuller, Wright, Gesiki, & Kang, 2007; Goertz & Duffy, 2003; Reese, 2013).

In the nearly two decades following *A Nation at Risk* (NCOEE, 1983), statewide accountability assessments were mandated nationwide, yet, the oversight of these assessments was left to the individual states without prize or penalty dependent on their academic progress (Ravitch, 2013). This changed in 2001 with the U.S. legislatures' ratification of the Elementary and Secondary School Act, which became commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2008). The law (NCLB, 2008) raised the stakes for public education by rewarding schools for consistent

yearly progress in student achievement and by penalizing those schools identified as underachieving. As a result, states began to attach increasingly higher stakes to accountability measures and established state-mandated standardized achievement tests as a condition for graduation from public schools (Horn & Wilburn, 2013).

By 2005, most states had begun to use high-stakes testing as a factor to determine student eligibility for grade-level promotion and retention (Sadovnik, O'Day, Bohrnstedt, & Borman, 2013). With the NCLB legislation signed into law January 2002, educators were under extreme pressure to enhance academic achievement for all students, including those with special needs (Blake & Swarts, 2002; Heilig, 2011). During the months and years to follow, primary and secondary school curricula would reveal a well-defined movement toward rigid intervention practices focused on preparation and remediation for NCLB's state-mandated accountability measures (Au, 2014; Boaler, 2003; O'Donnel, 2008).

The Validity of High-Stakes Testing

The use of high-stakes, compulsory testing as a requirement for graduation from public schools ignited immediate criticism (Jones et al., 2002; Kohn, 2000; Sloan & Kelly, 2003) for its perceived negative impact (Hemlet & Marcotte, 2014; Jennings & Sohn, 2014) on schools and stakeholders which caused a great many educators and policy makers to question the validity and forethought involved in the implementation of such measures (Au, 2014; Williamson & Snow, 2014). Contention was widespread surrounding the arguments both for and against the mandates brought about by NCLB (Boaler, 2003; Jones et al., 2002; Minitrop & Sauderman, 2009). Nonetheless, researchers (Hargrove, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, & Davis, 2002; Koh, Reddy, &