Standardized or sterilized? Divergent perspectives on the effects of high-stakes testing in West Texas

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When I drive along the Rio Grande in West Texas, I see miles and miles of *Tamarix*, an invasive plant commonly called saltcedar. Much of the habitat along riparian areas is infested with dense stands of this shrub, which was introduced to our continent in the late 1800s. It deposits salt in the soil, creating high saline conditions favorable to its own growth but toxic to most other species. The *Tamarix’s* very extensive root system crowds out other plants, and it uses more water than native species. In some cases, entire riparian areas have dried up as the result of a *Tamarix* invasion. Finally, by eliminating nearly all other grasses, forbs, and small trees and shrubs, *Tamarix* standardizes the riparian community and sterilizes the rich plant diversity (Muzika, 1997).

Assessment can be the stimulus for a rich learning environment that is full of diversity and that provides a fertile bed where thoughts and ideas can sprout and grow.¹ An example of this kind of fertile setting is the annual coming together of high school students who live along the Rio Grande in the United States and Mexico. The students gather to present the results of their river water quality monitoring and to report on the progress of their community environmental improvement projects. They have to defend the quality of their ten water-monitoring tests to students from other teams and to community judges. In addition, they must convince the judges that their projects reflect research into the community’s needs and an understanding of several points of view in dealing with environmental issues (Hampton & Licona, 1998).
In too many educational settings today, however, this authentic approach to disciplinary knowledge (see Sloan, this volume) is the exception rather than the rule. More commonly, education occurs in a “Tamarix-infested” environment fraught with rigid standards and high-stakes tests, where the landscape is altered into one of sameness that chokes children’s and teachers’ creative potential and crowds out the rich variety of curricula necessary to prepare students for the complex future. My goal in this chapter is to provide evidence of the Tamarix-like impact of Texas’s system of accountability and the sterilizing, if not suffocating, uniformity it engenders.

I report selected findings from a larger study conducted in 1997 that compared a school district in New Mexico where high-stakes testing was not in place with the nearby Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas, which was participating in the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) high-stakes testing program (Hampton, 1997). In that study, I drew primarily on data gathered from 24 schools (where I had administered surveys and conducted focus groups with teachers and administrators) to examine whether the TAAS supports quality student learning.

In both states, teachers felt the negative effects of testing. Teachers in the Ysleta district, however, reported much more pressure to improve their students’ test scores. They narrowed their curriculum to TAAS format and content, and they focused more on students whom they thought were close to the passing range, at the expense of the children who were well above or below this range. For purposes of providing an in-depth examination of how school personnel experience high-stakes testing, I focus herein on the Ysleta Independent School District.

At the time of this study, the Ysleta Independent School District was nationally acclaimed for rapid and impressive increases in test scores. Superintendent Anthony Trujillo
took over the Ysleta District in 1992. He implemented a hard-nosed approach to management focusing on accountability via increased scores on the state test. By 1997, scores on these state tests had risen, especially for Hispanics, and Trujillo and the Ysleta district were credited in national news reports for these increases. Ysleta was nationally recognized by Texas Comptroller John Sharp and U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1998–1999 for high test scores and a dropout rate that was impressively low in comparison to other Texas districts (Lueng, 1999).

Trujillo's hard-nosed approach was passed along to building-level administrators and often interpreted in the narrow and detrimental manner described in this chapter. In the next few years, Ysleta's district administration collapsed. Trujillo was fired amid allegations of the misuse of power, and the district was eventually taken over by the state education agency amid various controversies and questionable practices (Stover, 2001). The same year, the Ysleta District was one of three in the state that was cited and received an unacceptable rating for dropout data too inaccurate to be trusted (Texas House of Representatives, 1999).

The data in this research from 1997 describe detrimental effects of the high-stakes testing environment, which are ongoing. As a faculty instructor in the university field program, I teach interns in four of the Ysleta schools and visit regularly in the classrooms. The Ysleta district today hosts some schools whose high test scores are based on a more inclusive curriculum and thinking-centered learner strategies. For example, Alicia R. Chacon International Magnet School is a kindergarten through eighth grade (K-8) year-round school in the Ysleta district often recognized as a leader in bilingual education. Rather than seeing students working individually on drill sheets, I often see students working together to explore complex mathematics and science problems and developing their literacy skills through a variety of writing and reading activities.
With this caveat in mind, the majority of the following analysis centers on a less sanguine portrayal of high-stakes accountability based on survey data, focus group data, and interview data from teachers and administrators in the Ysleta district. The teachers consistently perceive the TAAS program as detrimental to their students and as responsible for a narrowing of their curriculum to a point at which it is unhealthy and dissatisfying. Although the administrators show greater respect for the TAAS program’s ability to accurately measure student learning, their comments reveal an artificially constricted, sterilized educational program.

Background

The origins of the *Tamarix*-like education that today finds expression in high-stakes testing systems (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000) may be traced to a paradigm introduced in the early twentieth century when ideas from behaviorist psychology and strategies for assembly-line efficiency began being applied to educational practices (Callahan, 1962; Gould, 1981). Advocates of the new approach presumed that knowledge could be broken down into small pieces, taken out of context, and learned in order (Eisner, 1994; Medina & Neill, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Summed, these small pieces result in something we may call “knowledge,” and once consumed, these bits of information constitute a child’s “education.” Freire (1996) calls this perspective the “banking concept of education.” The learner’s role is to passively accept and store deposits of knowledge and then to catalogue what has been stored. But, as Freire (1996) points out,

... in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the
restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (p. 53)

To be sure, high standardized test scores *can* come about with curricula that are relevant and interesting to students (Resnick, Bill, Lesgold, & Leer, 1991). For example, elementary school students in Austin who participated in a problem-centered, non-TAAS mathematics curriculum showed impressive gains in their TAAS mathematics scores. African American and Hispanic students, in particular, significantly improved. This experience led the district to conclude, “Active student involvement, development of conceptual understanding, problem-solving set in a real world context, variety of instructional strategies, and assessment embedded in classroom instruction are among the best practices listed as positively influencing student achievement” (Austin Independent School District, 1998, p. 3). One could therefore argue that if teachers just teach well, the TAAS will take care of itself. Indeed, innovative teachers who modify their curriculum very little often still have classrooms in which the students earn impressive TAAS scores. As will be demonstrated here and in other studies (Herman & Golan, 1993; Sloan, this volume), however, that is not the reality in most classrooms in high-stakes environments.

The “high saline soil” within the current system prevents both teachers and children from developing their full potential. The growth of new “species” of curriculum options is thwarted by the toxins emitted by the real and perceived pressure to focus on the TAAS. The teacher and administrator data presented in this chapter indicate that the imposed testing system has diminished curriculum and constrained what qualifies as relevant content, has limited professional development, and has restricted class and scheduling options.
The Study

The Ysleta Independent School District is the second-largest district in the El Paso area. At the time of the study, there were 32 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, seven high schools, and several alternative school programs. From these, nine elementary schools and three middle schools were selected for the study. Neither quality of education nor test score ranking was considered in the selection. The schools were chosen on the basis of their similarity to those in the New Mexico sample in terms of student body size and ethnicity. The overwhelming majority of the students were Latino, and 63 percent had been identified by the Texas Education Agency (1995) as economically disadvantaged. All but two schools reported over 90 percent of the student body as Latino. Of the two with lower percentages, one reported 72 percent and the other 78 percent. Spanish was the home language for many of these students.

Thirteen administrators (the principals from nine elementary schools and principals and assistant principals from three middle schools) were interviewed about their role in administering the TAAS, how they prepared for the test, how the results were used, and how the test affected their school’s curriculum. A total of 60 teachers from these same schools provided information about the impact of the TAAS on their practice by responding to a survey (N=42) or by participating in a focus group interview (N=18). The survey instrument, the modified Teacher Questionnaire (Herman & Golan, 1993), contains 80 Likert-type items probing teachers’ perceptions of the effects of testing on the teaching and learning process in the schools. The items were charted in subscales to capture the broader attitudes. The survey results were computed into averages and percentages.

Teachers who participated in the two focus groups were drawn from several disciplines to ensure a curriculum content balance. The focus group participants also reflected the schools’
ethnic demographics: majority Hispanic. The teachers were asked to respond to the open question, “In your experience with the state-mandated, standardized testing, what effects have you observed on the curriculum, on the students, and on your school climate?” The analysis presented here is further supplemented with information provided by 56 university students who were interning in 15 schools in the district when the research data were being collected. The interns, who were teaching and observing four days per week, responded to an informal survey about the amount of time they observed teachers devoting to test preparation.

Results

Constricting the Middle School Curriculum

Principals from three middle schools were interviewed, and teachers from these schools participated in the survey research. A focus group interview with 10 teachers was held at Middle School 2. When the most recent TAAS results were published, this school's math scores had increased by a very impressive 28 percentile points. This achievement resulted in the district presenting the school with a formal recognition. The principal attributed the improvement in test scores to extensive changes that had been made at the school: classes and time schedules had been drastically restructured, a student tracking system had been imposed, and the curriculum had been revised to match the contents of the test. At the other two middle schools, principals undertook similar restructuring and reported some improvement in test scores, but no change as dramatic as that experienced at Middle School 2.

The school’s new schedule allotted significantly more time to instruction that mirrored the test format, and it allowed for greater amounts of remediation. The principal and teachers described a complex series of programs targeting students who did not do well on the TAAS. One remedial class—known as “TAAS-Up Class”—was for students who had scored below the
70th percentile. The principal explained that students in this class received direct TAAS instruction in writing during the fall semester and in math during the spring semester. Another remedial class was designed specifically for students who had scored between the 70th and 85th percentiles. Children in this group were known as “bubble students” because, with extra help, they could increase the school’s average passing score on the TAAS. The “bubble students,” who represented about 40 percent of the student body, also attended a computer-assisted instruction class that focused exclusively on the TAAS. The principal and teachers reported that students were not ability grouped; yet the principal described the remedial classes this way:

When we created this remediation, it minimized the number of electives, but not entirely. The kids have three electives to choose from. If you don't pass TAAS Reading, you have to go to Reading Improvement, another block class. So, you could go to TAAS-Up and Reading Improvement. We took all the seventieth percentile to eighty-fifth percentile students into an on-level reading class. This is a special class, also. So, we got you any way you go!

In addition to this restructured schedule, the principal described a process of improving math scores by teaching math in all the other curriculum areas. Teachers in every class, from language arts to physical education, taught math during their own class time:

This process provides a great increase in the quantity of math instruction the students receive. The math teachers created worksheets and activities that they give to all the other teachers to use during the 35-minute advisory class each day, so the children get extra math during advisory. The math teachers grade these, and it goes on the math scores. In addition, a warm-up activity, described as a reading, math, or writing question in the TAAS format, was implemented in every class for 15 to 20 minutes each day. The “curriculum
inspector” (as the teachers dubbed her), a middle-level administrator from the district office charged with curriculum improvement at a small cluster of schools, checked all the teachers’ plans to make sure they were teaching this TAAS warm-up.

For many students, these changes resulted in an overwhelming increase in math-related activities. For instance, during their two-day block schedule cycle, these students had one math class based on TAAS objectives; possibly a second math class or “TAAS-Up Class”; a computer TAAS class; a 35-minute TAAS math “advisory” class (every day); and in all the remaining classes, a TAAS focus that resulted in the first one-third of class time being devoted to a TAAS math or writing problem.

Just as the students’ day was redesigned to hone in on TAAS instruction, the curriculum was redesigned to hone in on TAAS content. Most of the administrators interviewed described this as “curriculum alignment,” meaning that classroom instruction deliberately focuses on the 29 objectives covered by the TAAS tests. For the principal at Middle School 1, this overlap between the TAAS and classroom curriculum “helps clarify what is expected and what they [students] should be able to do by a certain point.” He elaborated:

This test is aligned with the curriculum. There are thirteen math objectives, seven writing objectives, and nine reading objectives tested on TAAS; so we aligned our curriculum to these objectives. To say we have to “teach the test” is not really accurate because the objectives are written into the curriculum frameworks. Some of the objectives are easy ones and some are real hard ones. We place most emphasis on the ones that the kids can pass and need help on. We want to get those that are within our grasp.
To help teachers design TAAS-like tests for use in their own classrooms, this administrator further provided the school’s teaching teams with regular opportunities for professional development in writing test questions. His statement that teachers in his school do not teach to the test revealed his faulty and problematic premise that the state’s curricular framework is reducible to the test items around which they coached students. Indeed, teachers at his school focused their instruction primarily on those items that they believed would be tested. Accordingly, they commonly created their drill exercises by copying pages from previous years’ TAAS test booklets.

When teachers teach to standardized tests by providing daily skill instruction in the format of the test, their instructional practices are not merely ineffective; they are also detrimental. Learning isolated facts and skills is more difficult for students because there is insufficient context to mentally organize the information in ways that make it relevant and, thus, easier to remember and meaningfully apply to one’s life. Moreover, in the real world, problems do not come in neat, step-by-step pieces; thus, learning skills apart from their context reduces students’ ability to solve real problems (Corbett & Wilson, 1993; Herman & Golan, 1993; Shepard, 1992). Nevertheless, hoping to improve their students’ scores, teachers in the Ysleta district had resorted to using study tools such as TAAS MASTER (published by ECS Learning Systems) and drill sheets that present study items in the exact format used on the TAAS, complete with bubbles.

The National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (1989) advocates a problem-based approach to learning mathematics in which students focus on thinking through complex problems and examine approaches to solving the problem. The drill sheets, in contrast, present many isolated concepts. On a single drill sheet, for example, students were asked to answer one
multiplication word problem; put four cities’ temperatures in order from coldest to warmest; write a check to the teacher on a sample check form; measure a rectangle in centimeters; and divide the rectangle in eighths. Teachers in the schools involved in this study reported using drill sheets like this one up to two hours per day, and assigning them for homework as well. A strong emphasis on isolated mathematical facts drew approval from the principal at Middle School 3, who praised the TAAS for forcing educators to take a linear approach to mathematics:

Math is structured where you have to know one concept before you can go on to the next. This self-paced curriculum will help with that structure. The classes will be heterogeneous to begin with, then separated sort of like a race. [The plan was to group students according to their scores on each isolated concept.] We don't want the kids to see it as tracking, but a different way to learn. Since math builds on itself, if you skip a concept, you have to make sure they learn it well before going on. At the three- or six-week break, those who have learned the concept well go on, and those who have not have a different approach in their class.

Drill sheets were only one of many methods used to tailor classroom instruction and delivery to the TAAS format. In Middle School 2, every essay every student wrote had to use the TAAS two-page format. An administrator at Middle School 3 encouraged his language arts teachers to have their students use the TAAS-style eight-step paragraph structure (topic sentence, subject 1 and detail, subject 2 and detail, subject 3 and detail, and concluding sentence) in every paragraph they wrote. In addition to the strategies school staff developed on their own, the district and individual sites hired professional development consultants, selecting them on their ability to present ideas and lessons in the TAAS format.
In the following excerpts, teachers from Middle School 2 describe their contextless, TAAS-focused teaching, the stress it causes them, and the monotony their students experience.

TEACHER 1: We had a workshop with [a particular consultant]. She gives seminars on taking TAAS. She helped us focus on TAAS objectives, and we decided to structure all our six-week tests like TAAS. So they [the students] all do multiple choice and the two-page essay as on the TAAS writing test. We all have to incorporate all the objectives that are on our school's timeline on that six-week test. So, in reading, I structure the reading passages and the questions as they are on TAAS, and then I have to ask questions on math and capitalizing and spelling, just like they see it on TAAS. These six-week tests are twenty-five percent essay, so everybody focuses on one type of essay, say persuasion. Everyone has to have their six-week test with that type of essay question . . . all eight classes. We all use the same type of outlining or mapping for the essay, so they [the students] know exactly what to do. They do get tired of taking eight tests on the same format. I think this does test the kids’ writing ability well, but everything is in this certain format of a two-page essay, like TAAS. Sometimes I tell them they can write a regular essay that they might do after they get out of school. They are finally starting to see this basic format and the organization. To me it has been very beneficial because I have become more focused on what I am doing.

TEACHER 2: I think the kids get stressed-out sometimes.

TEACHER 3: I do too.

TEACHER 2: It is every teacher, every day. It has gotten to where the kids are geared towards the objectives: “Which objectives are we on today?”
TEACHER 4: Especially writing the essays. On our six-week tests, each teacher requires a TAAS-formatted essay. Within one week, they will have written eight TAAS-formatted essays. They do get tired. You see that. It is straining. One test you will get a really good essay, and the next time you can tell you are the last class [of the day], because it is not good.

TEACHER 5: We do a lot of phrasing practice and circling and underlining, because you don't want the vernacular to beat them—and that is what beats them on the TAAS. Rarely is it that they don't know what they were doing.

TEACHER 2: As long as it is not TAAS tested, we can't teach it. They have to learn that the world does exist besides TAAS. It seems like there is not much room for pleasure, or what you do in the outside world, or life skills—nothing but the TAAS and preparing for the high school TAAS. The way I see it, I am preparing them so they are going to succeed in high school, not so much after that.

TEACHER 5: We've revamped all the curriculum, so to speak, to make sure the TAAS objectives are included in our regular curriculum. We've taken each of the TAAS objectives and divided them up in a timeline, so that in each six weeks we have covered all the objectives. We are focusing on those objectives and trying to get our content area in at the same time. It is very stressful. Very stressful. It is a lot of work, because even though there are a lot of materials out there for TAAS, they are not geared for the specific curriculums.

TEACHER 6: We are really limited in that we cannot do stuff that is not TAAS. Seems like it's all TAAS preparation, TAAS work. They're the same, I guess.
Even though we are not teaching the TAAS, it is a lot of TAAS preparation. It's hard covering all the math objectives in the TAAS-Up Class in six weeks—even less than six weeks. So in less than six weeks we have to cover thirteen objectives, plus the reading. It is real hard to get writing and reading in math.

**Standardizing the Elementary School Curriculum**

Administrators at the elementary schools in the research sample believed that TAAS alignment was helping them by giving them a focus and providing valid insights into which programs should be modified and which students were not learning. With one exception, none of these principals objected to the narrowing of the curriculum caused by the TAAS, and none questioned the wisdom of using this one tool as the only indicator of the quality of their educational programs. Most interpreted educational improvement as improved TAAS scores. One principal, in describing her concept of curriculum alignment, began by defending it, but ended on a note of doubt:

> We now have objectives and learning targets defined on TAAS. Those objectives now become our lesson objectives. We used to be textbook driven; now we are objective driven. It is good to align the curriculum. If something is not TAAS-related and does not meet one of those objectives, there is no need for us to be doing it. We have to justify. It helps the kids have common information. It sometimes stifles the creativity of teachers. As it gets close to TAAS, we become obsessed.

Another principal confirmed that at her school, they prepare for TAAS “. . . a lot from day one. We teach what we test and test what we teach.” Several principals stated that the alignment included kindergarten, first-, and second-grade teachers helping the third-grade
students prepare for the TAAS, the first grade level where it is administered. They did so by aligning their own curriculum with what was tested on the third-grade test.

Another principal described alignment as “determining the deficiencies in the curriculum from the test results and targeting these areas.” At her school, teachers used TAAS practice books for 45 minutes every day, in every class. She referred to this as “daily enrichment.” The principal at a different elementary school reported that they used the item analysis of the TAAS test results to group students according to the objectives they were weak in and then provided remediation. Many schools in the district hired the services of a particular Texas teacher who provided TAAS-focused professional development. According to administrators, this teacher/consultant had “taken the TAAS objectives and made a curriculum on it. She gives strategies to use, codes, and tools. She uses manipulatives and breaks down math.”

TAAS-dominated curriculum was widespread and appeared to persist throughout the school year. In an informal survey of 56 university students (Hampton, 2000) working as interns in different classrooms in 15 elementary schools in the district, 14 reported that the teacher focused on TAAS practice most of the day, 30 reported that TAAS practice was a regular part of the curriculum, and 12 reported TAAS practice occurring rarely. Over half reported that the math curriculum was the prescriptive, standardized content and format described in this chapter and that all teachers in the school were instructed to follow this curriculum daily. Every math question was presented to the students in the TAAS bubble format.

The principal of a school that scored well on the test described her school’s testing environment as a “worship” of TAAS.

Since it is with us, we build on it and show that it can be done. I have seen growth and pride because we are a recognized school. I see quality in our classrooms. The
kids know it is very important, so we celebrate. Last year everyone got to go to a skating party before the test and a barbecue after the test. The children in kindergarten, first, and second grades adopt a TAAS-tested grade and bake them cookies, and make banners for them, and give them rewards during the test. It seems to be less an assessment tool and more a worship practice.

In sharp contrast to the generally positive opinions of the TAAS offered by elementary school administrators, teachers at the elementary level expressed serious reservations. Eight teachers participated in the focus group interview at Elementary School 1, a model school recognized by several agencies for quality teaching. The school had received the state’s coveted “exemplary” rating (one level above the “recognized” rating that Middle School 2 had been awarded), indicating that their students’ scores were in the top category. The teachers reported that they were still able to implement sound instructional practices that involve critical thinking. However, they expressed great concern about the controlling effect of the TAAS test and its power to restrict their autonomy in teaching. As one teacher put it, “It demeans my intelligence that they can just look at the scores in my class and not have any idea what kind of teacher I am, what kind of students that I have. It is terribly demoralizing as a professional. You know, you work so hard—and your whole worth comes down to how well you did on that TAAS.”

“Teacher 11” in the focus group described the effects of the TAAS this way:

[A few weeks ago], I mentioned that I felt so guilty because I am doing projects only. I visited New Zealand a few years ago, and that is what they do. That is how the children develop their literacy. No one feels guilty about it. That is exactly what you do. But here, it is, “Oh my gosh! I need to go back to the dittos.” I always end up going back to the dittos. And I call it transfer, but I know it is just
my safety net. I want to be able to give the kids what I know they need. But I also want to make sure that they show up on paper. If they don't, everything else becomes invalid, and that is sad.

The focus group was held in the bilingual classroom of this award-winning teacher. The room was filled with complex student work in Spanish and English. She and her colleagues (all in the focus group) taught together as a team, shared projects and information, provided moral and emotional support, and spoke with a united voice:

TEACHER 12: In the race to be the top district and the top school, I think we are really narrowing it down to just one form of what you know. Even colleges look at how you are involved in sports, community work, your grades, you as a social being. And here we are just using one indicator. We all work extremely hard to make sure the kids have success. And success is not what is measured on the TAAS. Success is feeling good about themselves, feeling good about what they are doing, feeling like they are improving. We are trying to help the kids become whole individuals . . . whole. We are working on all aspects of it. Just targeting test-taking and TAAS is not right. It [our complaint] is not sour grapes. Last year we scored highest in math and language arts. We were very high the year before. It is not that we can't do this. But there is so much more to education.

TEACHER 13: Unfortunately, this test correlates highly with educational success in a lot of people's eyes. Unfortunately, people in power see it that way. But it doesn't represent success at all. If you are producing mechanical idiots that can't think their way out of a paper bag . . . that is what we are doing. So-called experts say that TAAS is supposed to measure children's critical thinking skills as well as
basics. Yet, when children are taught to test and not how to be critical thinkers, the whole point of the test is meaningless. This [pointing to students’ projects displayed around the room] is what our team does. And you feel guilty because you are doing this kind of stuff and you are not doing the ditto stuff. If the results on the TAAS are not great, it makes it look like this was worthless. Like I have been playing.

TEACHER 14: It is degrading for the child as well as the teacher. Now, some form of testing is important. But we have gone overboard. It is like you ask for a drink of water and they drown you. We have blown it out of proportion. Too much emphasis on it.

TEACHER 11: Yes, exactly.

Important concepts and life skills were put on an artificial timeline or eliminated because of the TAAS pressure. The teachers felt that they faced a curriculum so predetermined and rigid, with so much pressure to cover this material, they could not teach important subjects such as science and social studies or cover significant topics that were interesting and relevant to the children.

TEACHER 13: When I come back the first of April, I have got to get to that ditto machine, and I have got to run off thirty-nine million copies of the math test, because we will have three weeks until TAAS. We do reading all afternoon. Forget science and social studies. We'll do those in May. And then when TAAS is over—do whatever you want to do. Then you can really teach. Most teaching gets done in May . . . all my projects. I am not doing protractors until May. It is not on
the test. I am teaching circumference, diameter, and radius because that is on TAAS. We do the fun unit in geometry in May. Get those dittos out, darlings!

TEACHER 12: Yesterday, the kids had their presentation on “growing up.” They were very interested and needed to talk. We talked about it. You have to, or they won’t focus on anything. It was a good discussion, and you bond with the kids.

We spent about forty-five minutes talking, and I was sitting there thinking, “Oh, we have to hurry up and study math!”

The Tyranny of the 70th Percentile

Shepard’s (1992) research indicates that with increased emphasis on test scores, hard-to-teach children are denied access to quality education. They are targeted for grade retention, referred to special education, or placed in low-level, remedial classes with an even greater focus on drilling isolated facts. Teachers and administrators in this study described how instruction was narrowed to focus on those students who were performing just below or just above the 70th percentile to ensure greater numbers of students passing. They worried that students not in this range were being overlooked. “We are mostly concerned for those kids that are barely passing,” one teacher said. “There really is not much encouragement for kids who are advanced. It is very time consuming to try to do extra projects for these kids. You don't have time to do something that is not on the objective list.” Another teacher described the district as guilty of “reverse discrimination”:

TEACHER 12: Anyone who does not pass TAAS has to go to summer school. That will be expensive. But there are no funds available to hold open our computer lab, which is where they really need to be writing. There will be no funds available for the bright child . . . an enrichment program to extend their
learning. As a parent of a pretty smart kid, I resent that because I am paying taxes. And now I am paying to send my son to a private school to get what he is not getting with my tax money. And I highly resent it. I am not saying these kids don't need to go to summer school. But I am saying, if we are going to work with that group of people, why don't we have something rewarding for the children who have mastery? It is reverse discrimination. This district is the worst I have seen for that.

TAAS pressures led one teacher to automatically (but unconsciously) rate her fifth graders as they entered the room. She would tell herself, “I don’t need to work with that one, because he is way below [or way above] seventy.” With others, she would note that she should spend extra time with him/her because that student was close to the 70th-percentile range. She said she felt terrible when she realized she had been doing this. She had always believed that all her students were equally deserving of her attention.

Similarly, McNeil and Valenzuela (2000) and Haney (2000) provide evidence of specific negative effects on students who have the greatest educational need. Valuable educational expenditures are diverted from high-quality curricular resources in favor of test-preparation materials and activities. Because the TAAS is a minimum-skills test, teachers aim at the lowest level of skills and information. Classroom activities often are selected solely because they will help raise test scores. Moreover, the TAAS does not consider the children’s culture or experiences, nor is it aligned with what is known about how children learn. McNeil and Valenzuela argue that the strong emphasis placed on the TAAS has caused a decline in overall educational quality in the state. They have identified classroom practices in many Texas schools
as narrowing to little more than test preparation. They also note that these practices are more evident in districts that reward the administrators financially for high scores.

The Impact of the TAAS: Highlights From the Teacher Survey Data

Data analyses show that the Texas teachers strongly emphasized basic skills lessons at the cost of lessons that required higher-order thinking (see Hampton, 1997). The TAAS program significantly influenced the decision to narrow instruction to mainly TAAS format and content, and it detracted from the school’s ability to focus on good instruction. The teachers reported spending great amounts of time on direct TAAS instruction. Some of the experiences reported by the Ysleta teachers were echoed by their counterparts in New Mexico, where standardized, but not high-stakes, testing was in place. The Texas teachers, however, felt significantly more pressure to improve test scores, they devoted significantly more time to testing, and they reported significantly more attention paid to test scores than did the New Mexico teachers. Testing also had more impact on curriculum and instruction in Texas than it did in New Mexico, but the difference was not statistically significant. Overriding the comparison, however, were consistent data from all teachers indicating that the testing program negatively affected their practice. Teachers in both districts agreed that the state-level testing did not give accurate readings of student attainment.

The survey instrument included nine subscales probing the testing program’s impact on teacher practice. In four of the subscales, there were no significant differences. One of the subscales was entitled, “School Attention to Good Instruction.” It included a rating of “weak,” “moderate,” or “strong” on areas such as implementing innovative instruction and a school focus on improving student learning. Over 75 percent of the teachers surveyed rated these areas between “weak” and “moderate.” When asked how much attention they were able to give to
higher-order thinking and problem solving, 93 percent responded between “a little” and “moderate” (on a three-point scale: “a little,” “moderate,” “a lot”). When asked how much attention they were able to give to drilling students in basic facts, 50 percent marked “moderate,” and 43 percent marked “a lot.” Only two percent of the teachers rated attention to test preparation as “little.”

On the subscale “Time in Test Preparation,” teachers were asked to rate the amount of time they spent on the items listed. The scale rating was “none,” “one day,” “a few days,” “a week,” “4 weeks,” or “throughout the year.” Specifically, three of the items on this subscale asked teachers to rate giving students test review worksheets, giving students practice in items formatted like the test, and instructing students in test-taking strategies. On these three, the teachers marked “throughout the year” over 80 percent of the time. When asked questions about giving students commercially-produced practice tests and old forms of the test for practice, over half of the teachers reported doing this for “four weeks” or “throughout the year.” University interns working in the area classrooms described this practice-test-style curriculum as going on throughout the year. They reported that in math classes every day the children were working drill sheets that were formatted like the test, covering content that was to be tested. The middle school language arts teachers in this research described their ongoing practice of teaching children to write in the same paragraph structure as required on the test.

The survey data indicate that the teachers felt that the testing program forced them to implement and spend the great majority of their instructional time on a curriculum that was drill based and that left little room for thinking-centered instruction. These data consistently support the qualitative findings derived from the focus group interviews.
Conclusion

As stated in the beginning, Ysleta bears a distinct privilege in the state of Texas for its high scores and school ratings. However, in the high-stakes testing environment in the district, administrators and teachers provided disheartening information about the impact of testing. The administrators described curriculum changes that labeled children, grouped them for intense test drill programs, and focused the school’s instructional program on a narrow, sterile curriculum in which direct test instruction occurred daily in the majority of the schools. Most administrators did not express concern over this shift in educational priorities. The teachers’ survey responses and comments also confirmed the implementation of a narrow, test-driven curriculum. Unlike most of the administrators, however, the teachers expressed dissatisfaction and concern over the fact that the TAAS focus crowded out coverage of many other important subjects. The teachers worried about the practice of focusing most of their classroom instruction on those students who were scoring near the 70th percentile, leaving the needs of the other children unmet. The level of the teachers’ frustration was evident as I conducted my research. Because I was very conscious of their valuable and limited time, I tried to keep the interviews on schedule and prompt. The teachers deliberately slowed the pace. They told me that it was very therapeutic to be able to voice their intense feelings about the detrimental effects of this test.

The TAAS test, on its own, is neither good nor bad. It is simply a tool, like a hammer or a computer. But when misused, assessment can be a weapon. Testing is misused when it is the only instrument for evaluating the condition of education. It is misused when administrators and policy makers far removed from the classroom make the test results the basis for rewarding or punishing teachers, students, and schools. It is misused when it is allowed to gain so much power that it forces a narrow, standardized curriculum on a huge state rich with cultural diversity.
When the testing system was legally challenged in 1999, the judge upheld the system because it provided the same curriculum for all students (McNeil, 2000). The court interpreted this sameness as equity. McNeil describes this confusion, “In the lawsuit, access to a test score came to displace access to an equitable education” (p. 510). The research described in this chapter further defines that sameness as a detrimental narrowing of opportunities and resources for students in a majority Latino/a community. The children get the same access to the TAAS test and the prescriptive curriculum it has spawned. They get the same curriculum every day, in every class, and in the same format, with the same bubble sheets and the same ditto sheets.

The TAAS test has been misused to the extent that the curriculum across schools is so standardized that it has become sterilized. Diversity is limited; monotony prevails. The saline environment has poisoned the growth of interactive, relevant, student-centered learning experiences. The schools have become stark, dry, and uninviting. They have become standardized and sterilized.
NOTES

1. The U.S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation’s 1994 document, *Joint Statement of Principles on Assessment in Mathematics and Science Education*, defines a quality assessment program for students as one that will “be coherent and comprehensive; be equitable and engage all students; be integrated with instructional strategies and curriculum materials to promote effective student learning; and provide information that will help yield valid inferences about students’ learning.” (p. 4) The *Statement of Principles* also explains that many different methods of assessment should be used, and that assessment should be an integral part of the learning process, not the end result. Particularly in border communities with blends of languages and cultures, evaluations of students’ growth should involve varied assessments tied to vibrant curricula (Sosa, 1993).

2. The Ysleta Independent School District authorizes the use of its name but proffers no opinion regarding the conclusions made by the researcher.

3. Twenty-seven fifth-grade teachers from nine elementary schools and fifteen middle-school teachers from three middle schools responded to the survey. Eight teachers from one elementary school participated in one focus group, and ten teachers from one middle school participated in the other focus group.

4. The principal noted that because the school’s integrated learning system computer lab was aligned with the TAAS, “Low-scoring students can be plugged into that system.”

5. The survey instrument has been determined to be internally consistent. Factor analysis on the eight subscales confirmed a good fit between identified indicators and the measurement model. Eight paired t tests, one for each subscale, were run to compare the results of the responses from the two districts. For more information, see UMI Dissertation Services at www.umi.com/
REFERENCES


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