
Winter 1-1-2007

Quiet, Do Not Disturb: Prying Open the Door to Examine Our Worlds of Testing and Assessment

Amma Akrofi
Texas Tech University

Carole Janisch
Texas Tech University

Mellinee Lesley
Texas Tech University

Robin Griffith
East Carolina University

Xiaoming Liu
Penn State, Harrisburg

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS!

Essays in Education (EIE) is a professional, peer-reviewed journal intended to promote practitioner and academic dialogue on current and relevant issues across human services professions. The editors of *EIE* encourage both novice and experienced educators to submit manuscripts that share their thoughts and insights. Visit <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie> for more information on submitting your manuscript for possible publication.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie>



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Akrofi, Amma; Janisch, Carole; Lesley, Mellinee; Griffith, Robin; and Liu, Xiaoming (2007) "Quiet, Do Not Disturb: Prying Open the Door to Examine Our Worlds of Testing and Assessment," *Essays in Education*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 3. Available at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie/vol19/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OpenRiver. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Essays in Education* by an authorized editor of OpenRiver. For more information, please contact klarson@winona.edu.

**Quiet, Do Not Disturb:
Prying Open the Door to Examine Our Worlds of Testing and Assessment**

**Amma Akrofi
Carole Janisch
Mellinee Lesley**
Texas Tech University

Robin Griffith
East Carolina University

Xiaoming Liu
Penn State Harrisburg

Abstract

Teacher educators recount their personal experiences related to testing and assessment. Through the examination of these experiences stemming from collegial conversations, the individuals have come to better understand the issues and challenges their university students, preservice and inservice teachers, will face in their classroom settings. Along with theory and research, the realities encountered by these individuals become “course capital.” The content of their current and future university literacy courses and assessment courses reflects their renewed emphasis on responsive and child-centered instruction as opposed to the untoward focus on testing.

In thinking about our areas of expertise and the delivery of our university courses, we as teacher educators are impacted by theory, research, and practice—and our reflections on each. The authors of this paper are all colleagues in a College of Education Language Literacy Program and collectively realized that we have been informed to a great degree by practices associated with high stakes testing. We have all either witnessed or experienced these practices, the policies that direct them, and the outcomes for teachers and students. Thus, the perspectives we bring to our university lives represent issues and challenges that we have encountered in a high stakes testing climate and, as we came to learn, ones that cut across national boundaries. The realities of this climate are present in classrooms, schools, districts, and the teaching profession itself. An awareness of these realities influences and drives what we as current and future educators profess in our undergraduate and graduate literacy courses and what we as researchers design to study. Indeed, for those of us who are currently teacher educators, the realities we have encountered and personally experienced become our “course capital.”

Three of the authors are faculty members and the other two are doctoral students. One faculty member is from Ghana, and one doctoral student is from China. The faculty members teach graduate and undergraduate reading and language arts courses, and the doctoral students have either taught undergraduate courses or held teaching internships in literacy courses. Not only because of the proximity of our offices, but also because the doctoral students have been in our classes, worked with the faculty as teaching and research assistants, and are currently

agonizing over the dissertation research, we have many professional conversations. These conversations are wide-ranging but invariably lead to the topic of reading instruction and reading assessment. Involvement in literacy is common to everyone through public school classroom experiences connected to our research, the field experiences of our course work, and our role as parents in a high-stakes testing climate. Through these discussions we came to additionally think about our own current and past personal observations and experiences regarding issues and challenges in testing and assessment. We realized those views were either directly or indirectly affecting how we approached our university teaching and research. Further, we realized it was these stories of practice that greatly influenced our views about testing in general and the testing of reading.

We begin by providing an account of our experiences. We first present our individual teaching and learning scenarios from high-stakes testing climates. We present these perspectives framed by the question: What relationships exist between testing and learning and/or what relationships exist between testing and teaching? We further considered how these relationships and their associated practices, which became clearer to us as we conversed and ultimately wrote, influence our thinking and practices as educators and researchers in our university work. Included in our work is the goal of better positioning our College of Education students for teaching and assessing in the classroom contexts beyond their university courses. To move toward that goal we filter our thinking through the situations and circumstances relative to our experiences.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the themes that emerge across the individual perspectives. In spite of our diverse and varied backgrounds and the uniqueness of our experiences and observations, we bring insights that reflect shared common ground. We note the similar threads that run through the scenarios and in doing so, suggest the omnipresent climate of high-stakes testing, its consequences, and the “dilemmas” it poses.

Our Stories

Amma discusses the extent to which institutionalized testing, prescribed and administered by the testing giant known as the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), impacts learning and teaching in Ghanaian junior and senior high schools. She draws parallels between her Ghanaian experience and what she sees as the “challenge” of teaching pre-service teacher candidates in the U.S. and urges her students to “teach true” (Wolf & Wolf, 2005, p. 296). She focuses on junior and senior high school students in Ghana because those are the two groups of students who write “external” high stakes examinations.

Ghana was not able to completely rid itself of illiteracy in the twentieth century. Therefore, one of the goals it set itself in the last decade of that century was to provide Free, Compulsory, Universal, Basic Education (FCUBE) for all children by the year 2005. The Ghanaian government and public recognize the critical link that must exist between formal education and “a better quality of life.” At the same time, however, the public is aware of a disconnect, on the one hand, between the learning that is supposed to provide a better materialistic life for people and propel the country into scientific advancement and, on the other, wisdom that guides a community’s collective behavior, morality, and spirituality. Ghanaians

make a distinction between *nnɔ̃noma sua* (book learning) and *efie nyansa* (home knowledge or wisdom). They are usually quick to call a person stupid if he or she has learned “book knowledge” but not enough “home knowledge” or wisdom. “Wisdom” has been defined as “the understanding that comes with connected thought and critical thinking after long study” (Campbell, 2000, p. 405). The lack of respect Ghanaians have for mere book knowledge without wisdom may be attributed in part to their experiences with school instruction that generally stresses memorization of text and recall of information, de-emphasizes creativity and responsibility for constructing learning (Freire & Macedo, 1987), and minimizes ability to connect school information to “a wider world of understanding and thoughtfulness” (Campbell, 2000, p. 407).

The reason learning in Ghana has been reduced to studying the text, particularly at the junior and senior high school levels, is because the immediate goal of learning is to pass tests that open doors to higher education. School success there is determined almost exclusively by high passing scores on examinations conducted by WAEC. WAEC’s influence on Ghana’s education could, in part, be explained by the funnel-shaped nature of the country’s educational structure. For instance, in the 1996/97 academic year there were 5,880 public and private junior high schools but only 504 public and private senior high schools and yet still only five public universities (For more statistical information on students enrolled at different levels of Ghana’s educational structure, see <http://www.ghana.edu.gh/educationStats.xls>). The pyramidal structure makes access to higher education a literal uphill task, with WAEC’s examinations constituting the means for climbing that hill. As a result, the Council has been able to entrench itself, over the past five decades, as the fearsome giant overseer of academic standards as well as a standards setter and enforcer of the academic knowledge and skills millions of pre-college students are expected to have. WAEC reported that in 1990 over two and a quarter million candidates wrote its examinations in more than 50 subjects, thus making “the Council one of the fastest growing educational testing organizations in the world” (<http://www.headquarters-gh.org/history.html>, November 2005).

Therefore, it is not surprising that junior and senior high school students perceive learning as reading textbooks, class notes and/or pamphlets, and practicing examples of concepts explained by the teacher. Particularly during senior years and when students meet in small groups for after-class discussions, these meetings usually center on examination past questions or teacher-generated questions. Critical thinking and inquiry learning through class projects are rare and usually considered “time-wasting.” Additionally, content not listed on the external examinations syllabuses and strategies seen as not directly and expeditiously helping students cram for those examinations are deemed substandard and useless.

Just as no junior or senior high school student in Ghana can escape the grip of WAEC’s tentacles, no parent, teacher, or educator is spared the anxiety and/or frustration associated with WAEC’s examinations results. As a high school teacher and later as faculty, I witnessed the distress that led to either mollification or disappointment depending on whether students in my school obtained high WAEC examinations scores, got passing scores not competitive enough for admission to college, or failed the examinations. Then as a parent whose son and daughter wrote, between them, three of WAEC’s examinations, I have experienced, first, the panic, and later the relief usually felt by a minority of parents whose children are lucky enough to get high passes.

But for thousands of Ghanaian parents, WAEC spells anguish, academic investments gone awry, and futures either dashed or put on hold till constant retakes of the examinations result in scores high enough to secure admissions to prospective senior high schools and universities.

Because of decades of WAEC examinations, some junior and senior high school teachers have resorted to teaching to the test. First, they do this through pamphleteering, producing their own WAEC-relevant pamphlets for instruction. Since "quality" pamphlets now constitute the major review material for WAEC examinations, students would rather purchase those than take notes in class.

A second way teachers teach to the test is by organizing after-school private classes. There is now a booming "extra classes" industry in Ghana because students believe they provide better preparation for WAEC's exams and non-attendance might spell failure and doom. Some of the most popular classes are organized by veteran teachers who also grade WAEC examinations. Teachers attract students by either doing selective teaching of content during their regular class hours and then teach the remaining content during their private tutoring time.

Generally, extra classes' attendees are not duly concerned about earning good grades on their school report cards because they view excelling in class work and passing WAEC examinations as two different entities. Good teaching in Ghana is seen as an ability to comprehensively and expertly prepare students for WAEC examinations. As a high school teacher, I neither produced pamphlets nor ran an extra classes business because I taught freshman and sophomore students who had yet to be turned into "examiniaics" by the system. As a parent, however, my family and I succumbed to the pressures of the testing environment: My children became typical extra classes' attendees and pamphlets purchasers.

As an education professor in the U.S., I try to rid myself of WAEC influences, but I seem to have encountered, instead, a testing brick wall. The easier part of my work has been teaching graduate students who are already certified teachers and not under any pressure to prepare for the state's certification examination. My graduate classes afford students the freedom to question, create, reflect, investigate, and draw their own conclusions through inquiry projects. However, my undergraduate pre-service teacher courses pose a challenge. At the beginning of every semester, the students indicate that one of their biggest expectations is to learn ways of making literacy learning engaging, communicative, and authentic for children, and they become excited about early literacy instructional strategies like interactive read alouds, shared reading and writing, interactive reading and writing, guided reading and writing, reading/writing workshop, and classroom-based assessment techniques (e.g., Button, Johnson, & Furgeson, 1996; Caldwell, 2002; Calkins, 1994; Calkins & Harwayne, 1991; Eldredge, Ruetzel, & Hollingsworth, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). However, these students become anxious about their own certification examinations and, more so, about the fact that they will be required by their school administrators to prepare *their* public school students for high stakes tests. A particularly revealing remark one student recently made in class during a discussion of Sharon Taberski's (1996) video on read alouds and shared reading was: "The children were definitely having fun selecting their books, reading them alone or with their buddies, and thinking about and doing creative and unique extension projects. But we won't be allowed to use those instructional strategies, will we?" When I got a teaching job in an American university, I assumed I had said

goodbye to prescriptive curriculums, textbooks and pamphlets, and teaching to the test. I thought I would have every opportunity to share the knowledge I had about emergent literacy and early literacy development (e.g., Durkin, 1966; Neuman, 2001; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Teale & Sulzby, 1986) with my students and guide them to grow as knowledgeable and confident early literacy classroom teachers free to make informed decisions about what works for children's literacy growth. I know that my undergraduate students grow week-by-week in their ability and desire to learn to "teach true" (Wolf & Wolf, 2005, p. 296) by providing young children with an enabling environment for constructing their own literacy learning and helping them to develop a "critical understanding of the act of reading and writing" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35). But how do I also convince myself and my students that schools, school systems, and examinations institutions also understand that and will therefore give teachers a free hand to practice research-based and effective literacy pedagogy?

Mellinee examines the conflict she feels as an education professor "teaching against the grain" (Cochran-Smith, 1991) of high stakes testing while simultaneously preparing certification-seeking students to successfully navigate a culture of standardized testing. Mellinee explores the implications of high stakes testing for teacher preparation programs and discusses the unnamed pedagogical chasm between "best practice" and "teaching to the test."

During a spring semester in my content area literacy course for post-baccalaureate students, I did my usual stint with research-based literacy pedagogy (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004), content area reading methods (Topping & McManus, 2002; Irvin, Buehl, & Klemp, 2002), and critical literacy philosophy (Shor, 1999; Luke & Gore, 1993). The students in the class were largely receptive (or at least polite) to the course content and studying the required material.

One evening we read a piece from *Access to Academics for All Students* (Kluth, Straut & Biklen, 2003) pertaining to standardized assessment. During class discussion over this work, every student voiced concerns about the validity of standardized tests, the inherent biases in standardized tests, and the test-crazed learning environment of public education. Although they lacked a teaching certificate, roughly half of the students in this class were already practicing teachers in K-12 settings. These students who were in the trenches of "real world" teaching were particularly vocal about the atrocities of standardized testing. They voiced frustration at the lack of time they had to work with "struggling readers" and engage their adolescent students in cooperative learning exercises. They bemoaned the pressure they felt from administration to ensure high test scores. And, they questioned the motives of policy-makers who rarely, if ever, cross the threshold of public education classrooms.

Other students in the class questioned the contradiction between the best-practice, research-driven methods they were learning in university coursework compared to the reality of "teaching to the test." All of the students verbalized frustration over the fact that most high school students do not get to experience literacy practices such as writing multigenre essays (Romano, 1995), exploring texts through a reader's workshop format (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997), or engaging in place-based research (Gruenwald, 2003). This cruel realization lingered in the expressions on their faces and essays written at the end of the semester as students formulated personal definitions of content area literacy within their respective content area

specializations. Throughout the semester, the bad taste of standardized testing never completely dissipated.

When we looked at a sample of our statewide ninth grade reading test and disagreements erupted about the correct answers on these tests, students looked at me incredulously. Shaking his head, one student stated, “And, we’re adults! How can we expect ninth graders to figure out the right answer?” Through this exercise, students realized fully the limitations of the standardized tests they would be held accountable for in public high school settings. They saw the inherent injustice between the literacy tasks they had been engaged in as students in my class (e.g., primary source research) and the literacy tasks high school students would be confronted with. Statements of outrage and indignation, however, eventually gave way to statements of resignation. “But, we have to prepare them to do well on the test,” one young woman insisted. I responded, “I agree. Given the high stakes surrounding the outcomes of these tests, it would be unethical for teachers *not* to prepare their students for this test. The question is,” I continued, “how to prepare them for the expectations on this test without compromising best practice instruction.” Stating these words and offering suggestions for teaching sample test items as an embedded genre study within a rich literacy environment, I immediately thought of my third grade daughter who was facing her own high stakes tests in reading and mathematics, and I suddenly felt the stain of hypocrisy.

I remembered the weeks and months of completing homework pages in reading and mathematics that were constructed in four part multiple-choice questions. Helping my daughter find the main idea, correct inference, best-guess definition of words, and singular hypothesis of why the author wrote the endlessly dull paragraphs of text comprised our evenings together. I remember my daughter and I puzzling over the final question on a worksheet pertaining to “fact” and “opinion” that asked: “Which of the following is an **OPINION** stated in the story?” [emphasis included in the original text]. We found two possible answers: (1) “Two of the most important things in the world are time and love,” and (2) “Boppa is the best grandfather in the world.” Both of these answers had to be inferred from statements in the text. Only one of the answers represented the test creator’s perception of which inference was more correct than the other one. Suddenly, I found myself deducing the answer based on assumptions about the intentions of the test creators that I had garnered through years of schooling. The truth is, I was feeling the pressure of the outcome of the tests my daughter had to take. The fear associated with not passing these tests dramatically colored our third grade homework experiences leaving me feeling hyper-cynical at times. The weeks of test-preparation worksheets blurred together until spring emerged, and we greeted the arrival of March with great trepidation.

The night before the reading test in March, my daughter couldn’t sleep. “What if I get a zero?” she worried as I tried to reassure her. When we made the long journey down the school corridor the next morning, my daughter burst into tears at the entrance of her classroom. “I’m afraid,” she sobbed pulling me back from the threshold. “I’m afraid I won’t get to go to fourth grade.” My daughter’s teacher came to the hallway in the most jovial mood I had seen all year. She told my daughter that she would do fine and presented her latest Accelerated Reading test score as proof that she could do the test. Then, she showed my daughter the special snacks they would get to eat during the test. Somehow we managed to calm my daughter down and send her to her desk to prepare for the monolithic exam. As I left the building, I reflected on my own

experiences with taking the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in elementary school. There was no fanfare of acrobatic pep rallies, extra cheerful teachers, special P.A. announcements from the principal wishing all third grade students super good luck, stacks of snacks, or promises of rewards for high scores. I marveled at the evolution of standardized testing and how today's schools have created an entirely new culture of learning that revolves around a testing circus.

A few weeks later in April, my two worlds as professor and parent collided when I shared with my content area literacy class some of the stress my daughter felt about taking the test. Students expressed immediate indignation over the purposes and uses of high stakes testing with children. "That's awful!" one student blurted out from the back of the classroom then shook his head as if he were rendered speechless by this utter atrocity. "That's just wrong to do that to little kids," another student asserted.

The advice I patiently dole out to my new and soon-to-be teachers who struggle with the dilemma of "teaching to the test" paled into insignificance when confronted with the trauma my child experienced at the prospect of the statewide reading test. With all of my professorial knowledge, why did I feel so helpless? What advice would I give myself as a literacy professor? Was it enough to advise my students to follow "best practices" in literacy pedagogy in an integrative fashion with the realities of high stakes testing? Or, was something more required?

New teachers like the ones in my content area literacy class need to learn more about professional advocacy and agency in the wake of high stakes testing. With my content area literacy class, I feel that I failed to fully model these processes for beginning teachers. My personal challenge as a teacher educator, consequently, is to pursue this disconnect between higher education and public education in meaningful, transforming ways in order to teach students to be agentive in making changes to the current climate of high stakes testing and redress the stakes they face as educators.

It's not enough to give students pedagogical options, we need teachers who are savvy evaluators of assessment procedures (Stiggins, 2001; Stiggins, 2004). Brooks and Brooks (2003) note, "Rich evidence relating to higher-order thinking is available daily in classrooms, but this evidence is not necessarily translatable to paper-and-pencil assessments" (p. 165). Although new teachers may be adept at best practice pedagogy, translating these experiences into evidence of student learning requires an additional step. In order for new teachers to be advocates for their students' learning, they need to be steeped in knowledge about all forms of assessment. Stiggins (2004) writes, "Teacher licensing laws have failed to require competence in assessment as a condition of licensure to teach. Thus teacher preparation programs have failed to weave assessment training into their curriculum" (p. 26). Teacher preparation programs cannot foster teachers who challenge inequities in standardized assessment without developing an understanding of formative assessment, student self-efficacy through assessment, teacher feedback through assessment, and student-driven assessment. In effect, new teachers need to be armed with an understanding of "assessment for learning" (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William, 2004).

As I prepare for a new batch of certification-seeking teachers, I plan to present the conundrum of high stakes testing as an impetus for learning more about alternative assessment

procedures. Teachers need not be hapless victims of “teaching to the test” curricula. They should not feel forced to “forget everything they learned in the university” in favor of “real world” testing expectations. We must simply do a better job of preparing teachers to advocate for a broad array of assessment tools. Focusing on one test and one pedagogical approach that addresses that test must be challenged in all of our minds. Ultimately, we need to request broader forms of assessment that include a variety of performance tasks.

Robin is aware of the classroom instructional climate from the standpoint of a parent and a graduate student. What the schools offer in terms of curriculum appears to be in opposition to what she desires for her own child. Through this awareness she plans to help future teachers think of “non-negotiables,” effective literacy instructional practices.

As I prepared to enroll my oldest child in the public school system, I had numerous conversations with other parents about schools in the area. I often asked parents to tell me about the schools their children attended. The universal answer was “it’s a great school.” I found the answer interesting, yet inadequate, so I often pressed further. “What do you mean, it’s a great school?” The dominant reply was something like, “Well, it’s an exemplary school (in terms of testing outcomes), so they must be doing something right” or “The school has a good reputation.” Still, I pressed further, “What kinds of things does your child read and write?” That question usually stumped the parents. They usually alluded to something about test-preparation worksheets. I surmised that parents were judging the schools by one factor – the rating assigned by the state, as determined by the standardized test scores.

These conversations left me perplexed. I wanted more for my child than a passing test score. I wanted her to be a life-long reader and writer. For five years, I watched my child discover the world around her. She asked questions like a true scientist. “Why does the moon follow our car?” She spent hours “reading” books and had recently begun to break the code. I often found her sitting next to her easel with baby dolls gathered around her. “Ashton, let’s write a letter to Grandma,” she’d say. For me, signs of true learning were marked in small increments each day. How could one test taken one day in the spring provide an adequate picture of my child as a learner? While test scores provide important information, additional data needs to be considered (Horn, 2003).

Still, I was anxious about her entry into the formal setting of school. I knew she was prepared academically and emotionally. I, on the other hand, was an emotional wreck. I had visions of what school would provide for my daughter. I wanted her exposed to rich literature. I wanted her to learn to write about things that were important to her and to write in such a way that she discovered the power of the written word. I wanted her to learn about science and social studies through experiments, investigations, discussions, and reading. In my mind, all of this would take place within a community of learners, with the teacher supporting every child along the way. My anxiety stemmed from my knowledge that many schools were turning away from child-centered learning and focusing exclusively on the standardized test. I was fooling myself if I thought we would not have to worry about test pressures until third grade. I often heard teachers talking about preparing the first and second graders for “the test.”

Earlier in the previous semester, I spent one Saturday morning tutoring a second grader in reading. The mother had decided to hire a private tutor because the teacher mentioned that he probably wouldn't be ready for the reading portion of the statewide achievement test in the subsequent school year. I asked his mother to bring an example of what he was asked to read in the classroom. She produced a reading passage from the test that was a full page of typewritten text, with small print and no picture support. Of course, the passage was followed by the standard multiple-choice questions. As I worked with this student, I quickly realized that he was reading nowhere near grade level. I explained to his mother that he was resorting to unproductive reading strategies because the text was too difficult. This experience left me pondering the predicament high-stakes testing was causing for teachers. Pressure to prepare students for the test seemed to be forcing teachers to ignore the immediate needs of their students in the quest for high test scores. How could we expect children to do well on "the test" if teachers did not do a better job of meeting them at their current level of development? Parents would never allow their child's swimming instructor to insist the child swim the backstroke when she was just learning to hold her breath and go under water.

I understand the need to monitor student progress in relation to standards. However, I did not want these tests to become the curriculum. Among others, Madaus warns us that these high-stakes tests narrow the curriculum and "constrain creativity and spontaneity of teachers and students" (Madaus, 1998). Like an ominous cloud looming overhead, the high stakes test seems to cast a dark shadow on classroom instruction. When I think about my daughter's reading curriculum, I hope it is not limited to test passages. With a vast collection of quality literature available to young children, I wonder if my child will experience them in school.

As I enter the final stages of my graduate student career and move toward my future career as a professor and teacher educator, I consider how my experiences as a parent will influence my teaching of pre-service teachers. I feel that my job is to empower new teachers with knowledge. They need a strong understanding of how children learn and the courage to stand up for their beliefs. A recent conversation with a fourth grade teacher gave me hope. She adamantly stated that she was "a student of the statewide achievement test" and she thought school was painfully boring because the days were filled with test preparation worksheets. She decided to become a teacher because she knew there must be more to learning than completing stacks of test prep materials every day.

I will not be able to make these high-stakes tests disappear, but I can show teachers how to prepare students academically, not just for the test, but for life by reading good literature and doing authentic literacy activities. I hope to help pre-service teachers compile a list of "non-negotiables" that will guide them to make sound decisions when faced with moral dilemmas. If they believe that reading and writing should occur in meaningful contexts, then the teachers find ways to make that happen, in spite of the test. My litmus test of good teaching for my preservice teachers becomes: "Would I want this for my own child?"

Living through two different cultures, Sarah sees similarities in testing and assessment between America and China, even though the cultural values differ. Now in this country, she advocates for authentic assessment, which more closely matches the cultural values that this country claims to honor.

Growing up and having 16 years of education in a system that is extremely test-driven, I was accustomed to taking tests and thus remained almost oblivious to the negative effects the tests might have on students' lives. In China, test scores are described as the *ming gen* (the root of life) of students. The entrance exam to colleges is depicted as "a huge crowd trying to cross a single-log bridge," indicating how important and competitive it is. The exam used to take place in July, so people called that month "Dark July."

Looking back at my 16 school years in China, what remains fresh in my mind are those scenarios relating to test-preparation and test scores: piles of work sheets, tons of simulation tests, rankings across grade level based on test scores, happiness and sadness as well. I remember being happy for reaching the scores I wanted or expected by my parents. The bicycle I had was actually the reward I got from my mom because I attained top ten of the entire grade level on one final exam. I also remember being sad because I had been rejected by the schools I was eager to enter because my scores were not high enough. One time my score was 1.5 points below what was required. All in all, this is what test scores meant to me throughout most of my school years: high scores equal keeping up the "good" work and low scores equal needing to work harder (although I wasn't sure what exactly to work on as the scores couldn't give me a single clue).

As I mentioned, I stayed in this kind of educational system so long that it took me a while before I finally woke up and asked myself such a question: Do these tests really measure what matters most in learning? What triggered my inquiry was actually an English writing test I took during the third year in college in China. The assigned topic was, "What are your opinions of egoism?" Apart from two lines of instruction, which set requirements on language, genre, and word limit, there was no context clue whatsoever from which I could draw the meaning of the word "egoism." I sweated, I was scared, and as a result, I failed the test. From that point on, I started to question the validity of that particular test: Was it a writing test or a test on vocabulary or word recognition? I remained doubtful but didn't seek further for a solution.

Several years after graduating from college, I came to the United States for my graduate study. Before coming, I imagined the education in this country would have much more freedom and flexibility in terms of teaching, learning and assessing. What I heard in China about the schools in the U. S. was that they were like a "paradise for children." I never associated "high-stakes testing" with a U. S. education. However, ever since I came, I have known that testing in the United States not only has a history of more than one hundred and fifty years (Rothman, 1995), but test results seem to have been misused -- labeling, gate-keeping, rewarding, and punishing (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; Kohn, 2000). Kohn indicates that teachers might find their paychecks "swollen or shrunken" according to their students' scores, and schools might receive more funding for high scores or close down for low scores (Kohn, 2000). I was stunned knowing this. Later on, I found out I was not the only one who has had this "cultural shock" or "educational shock." My experience was shared by another Chinese scholar, Danling Fu (2000). In one of her articles, she said,

I find there is a disjunction between the cultural values this nation claims to honor [individuality or uniqueness] and the teaching practices it allows to take place [standards or uniformity], especially in the area of assessment...

...But even though it seems that the teachers in this country have more freedom, they are also bound by standardized tests. It seems that this country uses standardized assessments to standardize teaching and learning that values diversity and individuality. This is a discrepancy between teaching and learning and assessment. It must pass on a very confusing message to the children: Can you really be creative or diverse when your learning achievement has to be assessed by a certain set of standards? (pp. 105-106).

One year after I started graduate study in America, I took a literacy assessment class in which I learned a whole new way of assessment, namely alternative assessment, often known as authentic assessment, portfolio assessment, or performance assessment. This type of assessment matches the values this nation claims to be based on: freedom, individuality, equality, and justice, by means of giving learners freedom to select their work to demonstrate their learning and growth, letting them take control of their own learning and assessment of their progress, and respecting the differences in their learning styles, linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds (Dangl Fu, 2000; Garcia, 1994; Garcia & Pearson, 1991; Shepard, 2000; Valencia, 1998) The purpose of this kind of assessment is not only *of* learning, but *for* learning as well. In other words, authentic assessment should serve to help students want to learn and feel able to learn.

Now recalling those moments when I felt happy because I scored high in tests, and sad because I didn't get a high enough score, I realized learning in fact was never in my hands. I studied, studied hard, but that was only to please the teacher and my parents. As Stiggins points out, "when some students are confronted with the tougher challenges of high-stakes testing, they do redouble their efforts, and they do learn more than they would have without the added incentive," however other students may just "give up in hopelessness" (Stiggins, 2002). Although I survived the tests, that does not mean I understood the true meaning of learning. Take learning English for example: It was my favorite subject in school. What I mainly did was memorize the grammar rules, learn the vocabulary words by rote, and ultimately present a nice test score; however, the true meaning of mastering a foreign language is far more than these. It also includes learning about the culture where the language is spoken, reading good literature in that language, and being able to communicate with native speakers. In a word, studying hard to achieve a better test score does not reflect the authentic aspect of learning. With that of obtaining a high test score as my overarching goal in previous times, it was impossible for me to see this true meaning of learning.

Authentic assessment also changes the lens through which teachers look at each individual student. Standardized tests narrow the view to checking on students' learning while neglecting their progress and continuous growth as learners. Standardized tests fail to provide teachers with the moment-to-moment and day-to-day information about student achievement that they need to make instructional decisions accordingly and as a means to enhance the students' learning. In this sense, the difference between standardized tests and authentic assessment is that the former determine the status of learning, while the latter promote greater learning (Stiggins, 2002).

With what I have learned from literacy assessment class and other courses and research projects, I am eager to continue conducting research on authentic assessment. My dissertation topic considers how portfolio assessment might enhance the literacy achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students while at the same time connecting their home culture and literacy and the culture and literacy of school.

Carole recounts experiences as an elementary school classroom teacher that illuminated for her the effects of teaching and learning that position the teacher and testing at the center (Wixson, Valencia, & Lipson, 1994). She was the perpetrator of a view that removed from students the opportunity to value and evaluate themselves (Graves, 200; Hansen, 1998) and set goals for achievement (Valencia, 1998). Always mindful of the scenario she describes, her university classes center on responsive teaching, students' development of critical thinking through reflection, alternative means of assessment (particularly portfolios), and empowerment of students (Valencia, 1998).

Am I going to pass 6th grade? That question, asked by Julie (pseudonym), a high-achieving and capable student in my classroom of the past, has shaped my today's view of assessment and testing. The question has long haunted me and only recently did I begin to understand the significance.

I became versant in standardized testing as a classroom teacher. I recall the standardized tests taken by my students and in the late springtime toward the end of the school year. One year stands out in particular.

First the students' testing trauma and then my own. Students were anxiety ridden and with reason: The consequences for them were "not passing" to the next grade. The tests themselves arrived in a bundle just prior to the day of the test administration and on the testing day, we hung a sign on the door, "Quiet, Testing, Do Not Disturb." Students took a full battery of tests in all subject areas and across a week's time. I can resonate with what Hoffman said about his findings regarding teachers and test administration practices that sometimes included cheating (Hoffman et al., 2001). I do remember wanting to give hints and prompts. I wanted to say to Jeremy, "You're finished already?" From my observations, he had filled in the bubbles without even a brief consultation of the actual test items. My good conscience prevailed although I cringed at his test-taking manner and what that meant for him and me.

Students who failed to obtain passing scores were retained and parents were invited to the principal's office to hear the news. Our classroom was the first room next to the office and the first in a long string of classrooms housed in an extremely long rectangular shaped building. The students and I watched out the classroom windows as parents drove up the drive in front of the school, got out of their cars, and entered the principal's office. Of course, the only parents who came—and were invited to come—were the parents of the students who had failed. Everyone watched with an uneasy and unsettled feeling. I remember feeling sorry for the students.

The real trauma came for me when the school scores appeared in print. The schools were ranked and composite classroom scores by grade level appeared in print. I don't recall any punitive measures, but the public disclosure was distressing and unnerving.

For those students who passed the standardized test, I dutifully took their folders from the office and filled in their scores. I completed the student profiles and filled in the percentiles and the stanines and ultimately sat across the table from parents and reported these scores through numerous graphs and charts I was required to complete. This was complicated, and I, of course, was not conveying much helpful information to parents.

In this climate of testing I also administered the end of level tests out of the basal reading program. I was into testing, and I was into grading. I would be the one to tell students what they knew and they didn't know, what they could do and what they couldn't do. I would keep them totally informed.

Now back to the question: Am I going to pass 6th grade? One evening after school in this springtime of testing trauma and before the scores were released to parents, Julie appeared at my door after school and asked if she could come in and talk to me about something important. I was busy and ready to leave for the day so I suggested she come after school the next day and we could talk. She appeared at the appointed time, and I still remember her pulling a chair up along side my chair as I sat behind my desk—a most authoritative positioning and posturing. She asked me the question in earnest (and with the sparkling dark brown eyes that usually danced with excitement and enthusiasm) and with a genuine sense of urgency: Am I going to pass 6th grade? I was speechless and couldn't believe that she of all people was asking this of me. She was not only academically talented, but was already an accomplished musician. I said something feeble like “of course” or “you certainly will.” It has taken me a long time to figure out her reason for asking that question. Now that I believe I have done that, I have a new view.

My teaching was anything but learner-centered. I provided direct instruction and then tests were used to determine if children had indeed learned what I had taught. My sixth-grade students relied on the test scores and me to inform them about what they had achieved. Their scores were the measure of who they were and what they had achieved (Hillard, 2000). In contrast, Valencia notes the importance of student ownership of learning and reflection on that learning. Students need to be active participants in the assessment process (Valencia, 1998). According to her, students need to learn about themselves and their achievement from the assessment and to find value in setting personal goals and evaluating progress toward those goals. Wolf (1989) suggests assessment should be “episodes of learning.”

I am no longer a classroom teacher, but in my graduate courses related to literacy teaching and learning, learner-centered instruction and alternative assessment measures situated in the classroom are a central purpose of the course (Garcia & Pearson, 1994). For example, we discuss the use of conferencing for both reading and writing instruction (Serafini, 2002). Teacher-student conferences focusing on children's reading and writing, not only inform the teacher about children's strengths and weaknesses, but the child is in on the conversation and has opportunities to become more aware of what they have accomplished and would still like to accomplish—something denied Julie.

I also focus on the use of portfolios as a means of classroom assessment. It is with these measures that students keep track of and reflect on their best evidence of learning (Stefanakis,

2002). Moreover, the teacher is informed by the students' choice of reading and writing content for the portfolio (e.g., written pieces, CD's, artifacts related to achievement) and the students' reflection on why the representative pieces were chosen. More importantly, the students themselves are informed about what they have learned-- something denied Julie. Additionally, the involvement of parents in the portfolio process can provide information to both teachers and students. Parents can add home content to the portfolio and be in on the reflective process: goals achieved and goals yet to be attained (Rief, 1992). Viewing the child's learning outside of school can validate that learning and provide insight into who the child is as a learner, the basis for responsive teaching.

Julie had no clear idea of what she had achieved for the year and whether it was at the level that would allow her to move to junior high the next year. The metacognitive awareness of who we are as learners, i.e., what we have accomplished and what are future goals were missing from her scheme of things. In sum, student ownership of learning was missing. I had taken that ownership completely away from her.

Abdication of accountability of students for learning and of teachers for teaching is not what I am suggesting. As I remind my university students, there are various audiences that need various indicators of student success and testing is one (Farr, 1992). However, the use of multiple indicators of learning and much evidence from students, teachers, and parents can make students partners in teaching and learning (Valencia, 1998). Julie helped me understand that.

Common Threads

Our stories represent critical issues and challenges that predominate in a climate of high stakes testing and cut across national boundaries: preparing students for testing; children's abilities as test takers; test situation pressures for students, teachers, and parents; stakeholders learning the results of tests; parent decisions regarding school choice; administrative roles and decisions in the testing process; and test-driven pedagogy.

Although we bring diverse backgrounds and experiences to our conversations, common threads weave in and out. The incredible high stakes nature of testing and the very real consequences for teachers and students are ubiquitous, but we have put a face on them: Mellinee's daughter currently, Carole's sixth graders of the past--and even Sarah herself. Parent awareness and confrontation of the realities of the curriculum, testing, and assessment policies is not as commonplace. Robin and Mellinee are both concerned about the focus on testing to the detriment of good authentic reading and writing instruction. Both of them express their frustrations as they confront the realities their children face. Amma too has the role of a parent and has witnessed the policies that mitigate against many learners in her country. Interestingly, Robin, Mellinee, and Amma can take steps to alleviate the difficulties their children will face, e.g., Amma's children attended the extra classes and she purchased pamphlets for them. However, children without parents who are informed about the issues and challenges of testing--and have no recourse--may not fare as well. Finally, any differences in issues and challenges that cut across our diverse cultures are only ones of degrees, and as Sarah suggested, there are two cultures (or even three) and one testing system.

The Horns of a Dilemma

It is with an eye toward these stories that help influence what we as researchers and current and future educators profess in our undergraduate and graduate literacy courses. At the moment our own experiences have provided us with “course capital.” In our courses, we draw students’ attention to the issues and challenges posed by high stakes testing through our own assessment practices, readings of “best practice” research reports, consideration of alternative means of student assessment, and discussions of sample standardized tests. We prepare teacher candidates and in-service teachers to be aware, reflect, consider instructional and assessment alternatives, and then make good choices for students. Thus, we prepare our students and will continue to do so. However, what we have also come to realize is that we place our students on the “horns of a dilemma.” When they enter the classroom they will confront the realities we all so vividly describe. Even armed with knowledge, they find it difficult to implement what they have learned about learner-centered instruction, portfolio assessment, responsive teaching, and communicative language learning in a high-stakes testing climate. We cannot offer the solution to this dilemma and part of our professional conversations are filled with discouragement, disappointment, and downright despair. However, we have chosen to let our students look through the keyhole and past the “Do Not Disturb Sign” and understand and see the need to rescue children from behind them. We trust them to ultimately be steadfast, persistent, and true to their convictions and common vision.

Finally, we are rightfully reminded of the need for accountability. As we presented our perspectives at a professional conference, a member of our audience cautioned us to remember why we have testing in place. The member conceded that the issues surrounding testing are complex, but when tests are used to hold teachers and students accountable for learning, we can begin to reduce the dropout rates. In the view presented, testing becomes a means of reform. This view reflects the sentiment conveyed in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that many states have embraced and moved to a broad and inclusive scope and higher level in terms of reading teaching and testing. In our minds we cannot help counter with the image described by Melinee. She tells us of the young boy who rubs his hands on his face and says, “I can’t. I can’t read. Miss, I hate reading. I don’t want to do it.” Has testing diminished his desire to learn and continue in school? Are children bearing the brunt of a culture of high-stakes testing?

References

- Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & William, D. (2004). Working inside the black box: Assessment for learning in the classroom. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86, 9-21.
- Brooks, M., & Brooks, J. (2003). The courage to be constructivist. In J. Noll (Ed.), *Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial educational issues*. Guilford, CT: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin.
- Button, K., Johnson, M., & Ferguson, P. (1996). Interactive writing in a primary classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 49, 446-454.
- Caldwell, J. S. (2002). *Reading assessment: A primer for teachers and tutors*. New York: Guilford.
- Calkins, L. M. (1994). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Calkins, L. M., & Harwayne, S. (1991). *Living between the lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Campbell, D. (2000). Authentic assessment and authentic standards. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 8, 405-407.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1991). Learning to teach against the grain. *Harvard Educational Review*, 61, 279-310.
- Durkin, D. (1966). *Children who read early*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Elderedge, J. L., Ruetzel, D. R., & Hollingsworth, P. M. (1996). Comparing the effectiveness of two oral reading practices: Round-Robin reading and the shared book experience. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 2, 201-225.
- Farr, R. (1992). Putting it all together: Solving the reading assessment puzzle. *The Reading Teacher*, 46, 26-37.
- Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (1996). *Guided reading: First good reading for all children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Fu, D. (2000). The connected T: Portfolios and cultural values. In B. S. Sunstein & J. H. Lovell (Eds.), *The portfolio standard: How students can show us what they know and are able to do* (pp. 105-115). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Garcia, E. G. (1994). Assessing the literacy development of second-language students: A focus on authentic assessment. In K. S. Urbschat & R. Pritchard (Eds.), *Kids come in all languages: Reading instruction for ESL students* (pp. 180-205). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Garcia, G. E., & Pearson, P. D. (1991). The role of assessment in a diverse society. In E. H. Hiebert (Ed.), *Literacy for a diverse society: Perspectives, practices, and policies* (pp. 253-278). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Garcia, G. E., & Pearson, P. D. (1994). Assessment and diversity. *Review of Research in Education*, 20, 337-391.
- Ghana Education Service. (2004). Retrieved January 2, 2004, from <http://www.ghana.edu.gh/educationStats.xls>
- Graves, D. H. (2002). *Testing is not teaching: What should count in education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gruenwald, D. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), 3-12.
- Hansen, J. (1998). *When learners evaluate*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Heubert, J. P., & Hauser, R. M. (1999). *High stakes: Testing for tracking, promotion, and graduation*. Washington DC: National Academy Press.
- Hilliard, A. (2000). Excellence in education versus high-stakes standardized testing. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51, 293-304.
- Hoffman, J. V., Assaf, L. C., & Paris, S. G. (2001). High stakes testing in reading: Today in Texas, tomorrow? *The Reading Teacher*, 54, 482-492.
- Horn, C. (2003). High-stakes testing and students' stopping or perpetuating a cycle of failure? *Theory Into Practice*, 42, 30-42.
- Irvin, J., Buehl, D., & Klemp, R. (2002). *Reading and the high school student: Strategies to enhance literacy*. New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Kaufman, D. (2000). *Conferences & conversations*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Keene, E., & Zimmerman, S. (1997). *Mosaic of thought: Teaching comprehension in a reader's workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Kluth, P., Straut, D., & Biklen, D. (2003). *Access to academics for all students: Critical approaches to inclusive curriculum, instruction, and policy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kohn, A. (2000). Burnt at the high stakes. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51, 315-327.
- Luke, C., & Gore, J. (1993). *Feminisms and critical pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Madaus, G. F. (1988). The influence of testing on the curriculum. In L. Tanner (Ed.), *Critical Issues* (pp. 83-121). Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education.
- Neuman, S. (2001). The role of knowledge in early literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36, 468-475.
- Neuman, S., & Roskos, K. (1993). Access to print for children of poverty: Differential effect of adult mediation and literacy-enriched play settings on environmental and functional print tasks. *American Educational Research Journal*, 30, 95-122.
- Rief, L. (1992). Eighth grade: Finding the value in evaluation. In D. H. Graves & B. S. Sunstein (Eds.), *Portfolio portraits*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Romano, T. (1995). *Writing with passion: Life stories, multiple genres*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rothman, R. (1995). *Measuring up: Standards, assessment, and school reform*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Ruddell, R., & Unrau, N. (2004). *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (5th ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Serafini, F. (2002). *The reading workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Shepard, L. A. (2000). The role of assessment in a learning culture. *Educational Researcher*, 29, 4-14.
- Shor, I. (1999). What is critical literacy. In I. Shor & C. Pari (Eds.), *Critical literacy in action* (pp. 1-30). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Stefanakis, E. H. (2002). *Multiple intelligences and portfolios*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Stiggins, R. (2001). The unfulfilled promise of classroom assessment. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 20, 5-15.

- Stiggins, R. J. (2002). Assessment crisis: The absence of assessment for learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83, 758-765.
- Stiggins, R. (2004). New assessment beliefs for a new school mission. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86, 22-27.
- Taberski, S. (1996). *A close up look at teaching reading focusing on children and our goals* [Tape 2/videorecording]. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Teale, W., & Sulzby, E. (1986). *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Topping, D., & McManus, R. (2002). *Real reading, real writing: Content-area strategies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Valencia, S. W. (1998). *Literacy portfolios in action*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Wixson, K., Valencia, S. W., & Lipson, M. (1994). Issues in literacy assessment: Facing the realities of internal and external assessment. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 26, 315-337.
- West African Examinations Council. (2004). Retrieved September 29, 2004, from <http://www.headquarters-gh.org/history.html>
- Wolf, S. A., & Wolf, K. P. (2005). Teaching *true* and *to the test* in writing. In Z. Fang (Ed.), *Literacy teaching and learning: Current issues and trends* (pp. 296-306). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Wolf, D. P. (1989). Portfolio assessment: Sampling student work. *Educational Leadership*, 46, 35-39.