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A Tale of Two Systems: Principals' Concerns with NCLB Testing and School Resource Availability

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Abstract

This study examined the patterns, and discrepancies regarding concerns of principals with NCLB annual testing and school resource availability. An ethnographic approach was used to determine the attitudes of eight middle school principals from high resource availability, average resource availability, and low resource availability. From the responses of the participants, one of the themes that emerged was concerns with NCLB testing. The patterns which emerged for concerns with NCLB testing were: stress, finances, and content. Principals from all resource groups other than high resources spoke in detail about the stress that they felt NCLB testing was creating within their schools. Principals from high resource schools spoke about the financial impact that NCLB testing brought upon their budgets. Principals from high and low resource schools spoke from different perspectives about their concerns with the content of annual state tests.

Objective

The purpose of the current research investigated when middle school principals are asked to describe their beliefs regarding concerns regarding No Child Left Behind annual testing requirements, what do their comments reveal along lines of similar school status?

Perspectives

In 2001 NCLB changed the paradigm for public schools operation. The impact of annual testing, highly qualified teacher requirements changed how schools operated. NCLB required outputs in student performance in the form of annual testing.

Differing opinions exist about the feelings and impacts that annual testing has had upon instruction and student learning. Taylor, Shepard, and Rosenthal (2003) found that teachers voiced positive feelings towards the adoption of standards, but not towards annual testing. Other studies (Abrams, Pedulla, and George, 2003, Clarke, Shore, Rhoades, Abrams, Miao, Li, 2004, and MacMillan, 2005) found

that teachers have expressed a high degree of stress being created by annual testing. In studies regarding annual testing (Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, 2004; Sunderman and Kim, 2005; Sunderman, Orfield, and Kim, 2006) found that teachers' fear of being associated with a failing school are causing them to leave struggling schools.

Methodology

To determine the attitudes of the principals, an interview protocol was administered. This allowed for the principals to describe in their own words their attitudes about the topics being researched. By analyzing the responses of the principals this study also investigated if differences in the attitudes of these middle school principals existed along lines of similar school status.

Eight middle school principals were selected from eight different middle schools representing seven school districts in Suffolk and Nassau County, New York. The eight principals represented six distinct similar school groups. Three of the principals worked in

schools categorized by New York State as low needs to resources available category, three in average needs to resources available category, and two in the high need to resources available category.

Table 1 identifies the gender, similar school status, resource availability to student need, experience in education, administration, and as a middle school principal.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Gender	Resource	Experience	Yrs. Admin	Yrs. Principal
MH19	M	High	19	9	6
MH38	M	High	38	35	21
MA13	M	Avg	13	7	5
MH11	M	High	11	6	1
FA36	F	Avg	36	27	3
FA35	F	Avg	35	14	11
FL19	F	Low	19	9	8
FL18	F	Low	18	10	8

Data

The patterns that emerged from the theme of concerns with NCLB testing were creation of stress, finances, and test content.

Principals from all resource groups spoke of how annual testing was creating stress in their school. When speaking of this stress, two of the principals spoke of how test results are published as a source of concern. MH19, state, “When you show up in Newsday as this is where you are and where you ought to be, I think it holds some back.” The same pattern was spoken of from a principal in an average resource school. FA36, “When you get reported in the newspaper, and your school is on the

chopping block, obviously everyone feels pressured.” Two of the principals spoke of the punitive nature that NCLB mandates bring to their schools. A principal from a low resource school, FL19, said, “I think the accountability is overly punitive. I think when we talk about published test results, particularly among a special education segment; I just think that is punitive.” A principal from an average resource school also spoke of the punitive nature associated with NCLB testing. MA13 “That threat of punishment is always over your head. I think that is what creates so much anxiety among teaching staff, and ultimately that creates anxiety out in the public as a means of motivating us to do a job in which we are already inherently motivated to do.” One principal, FA35, felt that NCLB testing impacted every stakeholder group in her school. “There is a ripple effect. Teachers are more stressed and I find that students are more stressed, and parents are more stressed.”

Two principals from high resource schools, MH38 and MH11, acknowledged that fear could exist because of the pressure to perform, but did not report it being present in their buildings. MH38 said his reason for this was that he refused to let it exist. Another of the principals from a high resource school, MH11, spoke of not being concerned with the “minimum competencies” of NCLB testing. Both of these principals stated they do not support many of the mandates of NCLB.

Only the three principals from high resource schools spoke about NCLB testing and funding. The concern of these principals is that the mandates for testing do not provide financial relief for costs that the school incurs to provide training for teachers to be able to score tests and the costs incurred for substitute teachers. These principals spoke about how they are also funded at a lower rate than other schools. MH11 said, “I mean, a district is going to spend, for instance

between \$12,000 and \$15,000 just to rate the assessments, and that's coming out of already razor tight budgets. There is limited BOCES aid if you do regional scoring. But otherwise, particularly in low-need districts like myself, you bear the burden of that cost entirely."

Among the criticisms of the test itself, two high resource principals, MH11 and MH38, stated a concern about the tests which were used to evaluate schools because of the narrowness of their scope. Both of these principals were critical of a "one size fits all mentality." MH11 stated, "to use a single measure to evaluate what's actually happening and the successes that are taking place within the school is narrow in perspective."

MH38 and FL18 commented at length about the content and composition of the test itself; both had criticisms about the content found on the annual tests. MH38 noted that in his school many of his brightest students were not performing well on these standardized tests because the tests were limited and not open ended. He stated:

The big problem in some ways is for the smart kids who are doing the inferencing. They are doing a lot of inferencing. When they do inferencing on the multiple choice questions, they get themselves into trouble. They are looking too deep when the subject is straightforward.

FL18 associated a drop in the scores of students at her school due to the abstract nature of the tests. She stated:

If you looked at the actual test, they're very abstract in many parts, and at the middle school level we're dealing with very concrete learning, still at this point. Our students really haven't moved to that abstract learning process yet. They're just getting there, probably towards the end of 8th or 9th grade year, where they can

really start to think about abstract concepts.... but, you always see a dip when you see middle school scores – doesn't matter what district; there's always some sort of dip.

Conclusions

Participants spoke of three types of concerns they associated with annual testing: the creation of stress, financial constraints, and issues with the content of the annual tests. The feeling of stress was frequently stated as fear of public exposure by local newspapers. The principals also spoke of the tests creating stress among the faculty and the students. This finding is consistent with the findings in the literature (Abrams et al., 2003, Clarke et al., 2004, and MacMillan, 2005). Only principals from the highest resource availability did not express stress being caused by fear of performance on state tests.

In their studies regarding annual testing (Hanushek, 2002; Abrams et al., 2004; Sunderman and Kim, 2005, 2006) found that teachers fear being associated with a failing school. This study found that similar fears exist among principals. Many of today's schools operate in a paradigm fueled by fear of failure and public exposure. The question that must be answered is whether or not this fear has positive impacts upon student achievement or debilitates learning.

Another concern, shared by two of the male principals from high resource schools, was the creation of financial burdens upon the school. This is felt when teachers are called upon to mark annual tests and substitute teachers have to be paid from the local budget without regional or statewide support. A final concern associated with the test that the content of the test was not appropriate for their students. A Principal from the high resource schools felt that the test penalized students who inferred and

thought beyond the scope of the question. The principal from the low resource stated that the tests were often too abstract for concrete learners and that the questions were not developmentally appropriate.

school played a significant factor in determining the specific nature of concern regarding test content.

Importance of this Study

This study added to the body of literature in four of its key findings: 1) Discrepancies in the nature of NCLB testing and creation of stress; 2) The prevalence of fear being shared by the principals of schools in addition to the faculty, students and school community at large; 3) Concerns of principals of high resource school regarding the funding of NCLB testing; 4) Discrepancies between principals of high resource and low resource schools regarding the actual content of annual tests.

The first finding of this study was that NCLB testing is creating an atmosphere of stress in the schools. This feeling of stress is found more profoundly in low and average resource settings, and is not present for the most part in high resource school settings. These findings are similar to previous research but those studies did not address school resource availability as a variable. In previous studies regarding annual testing (Hanushek, 2002; Abrams et al., 2004; Sunderman and Kim, 2005, 2006) found that teachers fear being associated with a failing school. This study found that similar fears exist in the principal's offices.

Another finding of this study was that principals in high resource schools express a greater concern about the financial impacts of annual testing mandated by NCLB more than their counterparts in average or low resource schools. A final finding was that while principals from differing resource groups have concerns regarding the content of annual state tests, principals the resource availability of the

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