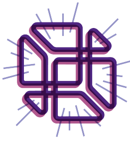

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Foreword

Meaningful Accountability and Educational Reform

Cynthia J. Reed and Van Dempsey, Guest Editors

States have long been responsible for establishing educational standards and procedures. However, in the past decade the federal government has become increasingly involved in defining how schools are to be held accountable. The No Child Left Behind Act (Pub. L. No. 107-110), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), is the newest example of federally mandated "accountability." For example, beginning with the 2005-2006 academic year, all schools in the United States will be required to test students in grades three to eight annually in reading and mathematics, and at least once in grades ten to twelve. This suggests that reading and mathematics are the most important academic subjects and likely implies that federally funded educational research and reform initiatives will be focused on these areas. Consequently, federal funding agencies become ad hoc policymakers, defining policy issues as they dispense resources for programs and research.

Many of the new federal rules defined in the ESEA are already active or are scheduled to be in place for the 2002-2003 academic year. They include redefinition of "highly qualified" teachers; state and school district report cards of students' progress toward meeting state standards; graduation rates; schools that need improvement; students excluded from testing; and mandatory school choice for low performing schools. These mandated reforms pose "substantial challenges for schools, districts, and states" (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). Consequently, some educators and researchers feel that public schools are under attack rather than being engaged in meaningful reform.

The academy is also under federal scrutiny. There have been numerous criticisms of academics and academic publications (Kohn, 2000). Some politicians have the perception that research and resulting academic publications are shoddy and self-serving unless the research results support the federal policy agenda. These same politicians have issued directives about what types of research they deem acceptable. As a case in point, the No Child Left Behind Act frequently references "scientifically based research." In fact, the term is mentioned at least 111 times in this act (Shavelson & Towne, 2002).

The message is clear: Educational reform must be grounded in research. While most educators would agree with that premise, the situation becomes far more contentious when the federal government defines what counts as research. *Scientific Research in Education*, a recent report from the National Research Council (NRC) attempts to define scientific research (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). Six principles of scientific inquiry are stated in this report:

- Posing significant questions that can be investigated empirically
- Linking research to relevant theory
- Using methods that permit direct investigation of the question
- Providing a coherent and explicit chain of reasoning
- Replicating and generalizing across studies
- Disclosing research to encourage professional scrutiny and critique

Scientifically based research implies that all federally funded research must be quantitative and use large databases and populations. There seems to be a narrowly defined research agenda, even though we know that the "business" of schooling is complex. Educational research differs from the so-called "hard sciences." Students and classrooms are not cells in a petri dish. There is great variance across education programs, schools, and communities, as well as ethical considerations when studying children. The definition of scientifically based research does not appear to allow for contextually relevant interpretations or small scale non-quantitative studies.

Education is the quintessential profession based in "blurred genres" of interdisciplinary knowledge (Geertz, 1983); yet some researchers and policymakers tend to see definitiveness and simplicity where complexity, ambiguity, and contextual judgment are the norms for our professional work. We, as a society, must also be careful that we do not, in the name of raising standards, narrow the practices of effective assessment and research, and consequently, the knowledge base of teaching. Kohn (2000) notes: "Once we are compelled to focus only on what lends itself to quantification the process of thinking has been severely compromised." The current political climate and the educational reforms emerging from it suggest that we are well on our way down a misguided path.

A critical crack in the foundation of the current high stakes assessment movement in American public schools is that assessment occurs without a focus on ideas for improvement and what we know about high quality teaching and learning. There appears to be a prevalent belief that if test scores have gone up, teachers are doing something different, and what they are doing differently is good for children. The country is littered with examples of classroom practices that teach children little of value and have marginal consequences for their life chances, but still raise standardized test scores. Conversely, we are too quick to believe that if test scores are low or have decreased, something bad has happened at school, or teachers are not working hard.

The education field, like other professions, should have deep, rich knowledge about professional practice and appropriate mechanisms for assessing those practices. Teaching is a highly complex, intellectual, and demanding profession. We are too quick to judge it by the lowest common denominator (Hilliard, 2000; Kohn, 2000). Judge medicine, law or architecture by the worst practitioners using the most rudimentary assessment practices, and the result may be that anyone can practice healing and that medicine is a profession in peril. Assess teaching in ways

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that are as complex as the practice at its best, and the image of teaching is altogether different. The way we view and support teaching and learning greatly influences how others value the teaching profession.

Most testing schemes are not created or implemented to assess quality; they are tools, albeit limited ones, to measure quantity (Hilliard, 2000; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). Standardized testing offers a false read on what teachers do, what we can learn about exemplary practice, and what happens in the best classrooms. High stakes testing does little to inform the practice of effective teaching and learning; instead it offers a superficial assessment of studentsí ability to perform well on the tests.

Research conducted on empowered principals in south Florida (Reed, McDonough, Ross, & Robicheaux, 2001) found that schools receiving a higher state-issued grade were more likely to offer enrichment and extracurricular activities for students than were lower performing schools. The principals and teachers in lower performing schools instead focused more energy and time on test preparation. Principals in higher performing schools expressed the view point that maintaining a focus on proven teaching strategies would naturally encourage students to perform better on standardized tests. In these high performing schools, the focus was clearly on learning, while in the low performing schools the focus was on raising test scores.

Educational reform is complex (Fullan, 1998; Hilliard, 2000; Kohn, 2000) and involves changing the cultures and practices in classrooms, schools, and school systems. Organizational reforms typically have multiple outcomes, most of which are not measurable through high stakes standardized testing. Standardized tests "tend to measure the temporary acquisition of facts and skills, including the skill of test taking itself rather than meaningful understanding" (Kohn, 2000). McNeil's (2000) study of educational reforms based on high stakes testing in Texas strongly suggests that the consequences of this type of educational reform include deskilling teachers and redefining education, particularly in inner city schools, to focus on standardized test taking. Further, her study suggests that the Texas testing model created lowered educational expectations, increased the inequities between poor and affluent schools, substituted extended test preparation for genuine curriculum in low performing schools, and centralized power in district and state-level educational bureaucracies.

Few would argue that accountability is not important. As educators, we should be accountable to the public, to our students, and to each other. The concept of accountability becomes contentious when defining what it should or should not be. According to Kohn (2000), "A high stakes approach often holds people accountable for factors over which they have little control, which is as pointless as it is cruel." Nearly 20 years after *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Education, 1983), our corporate colleagues have learned that the pressures foisted on educators are based on false pretenses. The political winds have driven us to a bottom line, quantifiable approach to accountability, ironically as corporate accounting – the quintessential bottom line in America – has become vilified. The public has come to realize that one number, or one statistically derived indicator, cannot be used to identify the status of a corporation or business. Businesses are complex, and sometimes short-term profit losses or gains do not tell us what we need to know about the health of the corporate organization. The same holds true for education. Simple approaches to assessing the health of education do not tell us much that is useful.

In this special issue, we present a variety of perspectives about what meaningful accountability is and should be. Further, we explore the notion of what constitutes research that is sensitive to the needs of students, educators, and policymakers. Six thematically-focused articles are presented. In the first article, titled "If We Don't Watch Where We're Going, We Might Not Like Where We Go: School Reform at the Turn of the 21st Century," Dempsey describes the work of a successful school reform initiative focused on the simultaneous renewal of public education and professional education preparation programs. The work of this initiative, called the Benedum Collaborative, is offered as an example of authentic school renewal centered on enhancing educator quality and contextually relevant accountability. Smith, in the second article, "Is There a Better Way? Applying Rules of Science to the Process of Improving Schools," examines common assumptions framing high stakes improvement models for schools across America. In this article, Smith considers research variables, theoretical relationships, and a theoretical critique of whether the current high stakes testing model is appropriate based on principles of scientific research. In the third article, "The Locus of Control Issue in Standards-Based Accountability," McNeal and Christy pose the argument that meaningful accountability is best accomplished by putting more authority, not less, in the hands of those at the building level. This article stakes the claim that micro-level locus of control offers the potential for sophisticated, rigorous, and self-correcting assessment.

The fourth article, "Systemic Violence and High Stakes Testing," exposes the discriminatory consequences of high stakes testing. Watts argues from the conceptual framework of institutional and systemic violence that high stakes testing is a type of violence that has long lasting educational and societal ramifications. The fifth and sixth articles describe alternatives to high stakes testing as models of accountability. In "Taking Control of What Counts in Accountability: The Context Enriched Report Card," Ross, Reed, Kochan, and Madden describe the creation and use of a local accountability and reporting system that serves three purposes: (1) a tool for educators to use to promote proactive accountability; (2) means of fostering ongoing inquiry and reflection; and (3) a means of informing the public about indicators of school quality. Webb-Dempsey argues in "Standing at the Crossroads: Taking the Path of Least Resistance or Forging Ahead Toward Action-Oriented Assessment?" that practitioners should be integrally involved in the continuous renewal of teaching and learning in their schools and in the larger educational community. She suggests that action research is one way to engage practitioners in meaningful inquiry about teaching and learning.

Our country is currently at a crossroads regarding the underlying purposes for education. How we define the purposes of education and the value and role of research greatly impacts the future of education and indeed our country. If the focus is on increasing high stakes standardized test scores at the peril of authentic learning, then rote teacher-directed learning will be the norm. This is a pedagogy that has not worked well in the past; yet it appears to have become re-legitimized and institutionalized (Gold, 2002; Kohn, 2000). Educators are professionals, and our voices must be heard (Reed & Ross, 2001). We know what works – and what will not work. As issues about teaching and learning and how to assess them are debated, conflicts over education reform and the purposes of education will escalate. Perhaps this is a positive trend, especially if educators and other stakeholders begin to consider the possibilities of creating meaningful educational opportunities for all children. We can no longer afford the arrogance of politicians and policymakers who claim to "know best" for others (Reed & Kochan, 2001). Meaningful

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educational research must address the richness and complexity of teaching and learning contexts. Our intent with this special issue is to further the debates about accountability so that contextually relevant research-based decisions can be made at all levels. It is our hope that these debates will prepare the way for meaningful accountability and sustainable educational reforms that benefit all children.

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