

# *Managing Standardized Testing in Today's Schools*

ANA MARIA KLEIN  
ANDREA A. ZEVENBERGEN  
NICOLE BROWN

*State University of New York – Fredonia*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores how teachers manage standardized testing in schools. A survey was distributed among 20 elementary, middle, and high school teachers in a semi-rural community of Western New York. The data gathered from the survey responses reveal important information about the impact of testing on teaching. Standardized testing affects many of the teachers' focus on instruction. In many cases, teachers prepare their students year-round. Teachers provide test-related, preparative instruction, which governs most of their curricula. A few teachers admit that testing allows them to develop more focused teaching experiences for their students. Insights gleaned from this research study reveal the need to address the many challenges teachers encounter related to standardized testing.

**RÉSUMÉ:** On découvre ici la manière dont les professeurs emploient les tests d'examens standard à l'école. Un sondage a été réalisé dans un quartier mi rural de l'ouest de New-York parmi vingt enseignants dont des instituteurs d'école élémentaire et primaire et des professeurs d'école secondaire. L'ensemble des réponses recueillies par le sondage révèle une information importante sur la conséquence que les méthodes d'examens peut avoir sur l'enseignement. Les méthodes d'examens standard entravent énormément le but essentiel de l'enseignement du professeur. Dans de nombreux cas, les professeurs préparent leurs étudiants tout au long de l'année et apportent des examens qui sont liés à la préparation des études et qui couvrent presque l'ensemble du cours. Quelques uns admettent que ces moyens de contrôle leurs permettent de se focaliser encore plus sur leurs méthodes d'enseigner. Grâce aux discernements recueillis par cette étude, nous découvrons que les professeurs doivent relever de nombreux défis face aux méthodes d'examens standardisées.

My research colleague and I teach at a university in Western New York, in the United States. She, a clinical psychologist, and I, a teacher-educator, surveyed teachers in two local school districts to find out how incremental standardized testing is affecting their teaching. Prior to surveying teachers, we held focused interviews with community stakeholders and school administrators. These interviews allowed us to shape our research questions and to construct our research plan. We learned from our school administrators that the *English Language Arts* test (*ELA*) has been given to fourth grade students since the year 2002 and that several districts use the older *Terra Nova* tests in other grades to practice and prepare for the official *ELA* test. We found out that as of the year 2003, discipline-specific tests have been given to students starting in grade five. In the year 2003, for example, fifth-graders took a social studies test. In the year 2004, when these same students were in grade six, they took a science exam. Throughout their middle and high school years, they take discipline-specific exams each year, and also take *Board of Regents* examinations in grades nine, ten, and eleven. It is important to note that passing the *Board of Regents* examinations is a high school graduation requirement as well as a college-entry requirement in the state of New York. So, with incremental testing and the emphasis on testing success in our region, it is an important issue for research.

### *A Review of the Literature on Standardized Testing*

High-stakes testing is a concern in many American educational settings. Most states in the union use some form of standardized testing (Lynd, 2000). Recently, because states have delineated the instructional standards that schools need to adhere to, standardized tests have been designed to measure attainment of these standards. Statewide standards and the accountability required to meet these standards have produced changes in testing frequency and design.

Before standards-based assessment, students were tested every three or four years (grades 4, 8, and 11 or 12). Norm-referenced tests given included the following: the *Stanford Achievement Test*, the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills*, the *California Test of Basic Skills*, the *California Achievement Test*, and the *Achievement Test*.

Standards-based instruction calls for a new form of tests called *criterion* or *standards-referenced* tests. These itemize content knowledge, measuring how well students have acquired the standards. Public

reports of results of these standards-based tests inform constituents about student progress and performance of schools. This is a pivotal point that guides our exploration because with such stringent exit requirements, administrators and teachers feel a great responsibility to prepare students to perform well on the tests.

### *The Need for Accountability*

The literature points to the *1909 Thorndike Handwriting Scale* as the first standardized achievement test used in public schools (Perrone, in Kamii, 1990). Testing practices spiraled upward after 1950, as results were used to determine school readiness. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, there was heightened discontent with public education (Popham, 2001). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was a federal law that invested funds in United States school districts to improve instruction. Minimum competency tests were also implemented in school districts in the 1970s and 1980s to measure educational outcomes. These minimum competency tests (e.g., Metropolitan Achievement Tests, Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills) focused on low-level skills and knowledge (Popham, 2001). Mandatory testing in one form or another became even more widespread in the United States after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which informed American citizens that students were performing substantially below students in other countries in literacy and numeracy-based activities. It was argued that something new needed to be done to raise the bar on expectations for student achievement and to improve instruction and assessment. Thus began a strong push for standards-based assessment as well as increases in school accountability. With *Goals 2000*, a federal plan was devised to delineate educational standards for each state. Once the standards were in place, each state was accountable for the implementation of standards-based instruction and assessment, and the improvement of education in each school.

Currently, composite test scores are publicly shared by school districts in New York and in many of the other states. Schools and neighborhoods are ranked based on test results. This need for accountability can lead to considerable pressure on students, teachers, and administrators.

### *On Reactions to Standardized Testing*

The literature points out that parents, legislators, and constituents expect high achievement and accountability in education. In this day and age of technological advancement there is a generalized need for keeping up with the rest of the world. The literature on improving education and raising the bar on expectations coincides with the goals set forth by standards-based instruction. Aligning standards to the curriculum has met with positive results. Parents, administrators, and legislators at large want to hold schools accountable for the education of their constituents. A RAND (2000) analysis, for example, found that redesigning standards, assessment, and accountability provided long-term academic gains for students in North Carolina and Texas. A 2001 NEA (National Education Association) study found that of 1000 voters, 69% agreed with testing to assess student performance in schools.

Researchers (Kamii, 1990; Lynd, 2000; Madaus & Clarke, 2001; Popham, 2001) indicate that contemporary teaching is focused mostly on success in testing and meeting imposed standards as opposed to developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Popham (2001) argues that teachers are under great pressure and that they leave out subjects that are not tested. He quotes the following comment from a teacher, "If our chief job is to raise test scores, why waste time teaching content that's not even tested?" (p. 15). On the other hand, Lynd (2000) suggests that in some cases, testing in numeracy and literacy helps predict future success or failure of students.

A problem faced by many educators within their district is competition between schools and collective pressure to report test results. Taxpayers receive a yearly progress report on how their school districts are faring. This progress report affects housing, school taxes, and an array of neighborhood issues. The blame is placed on failing schools and the pressure mounts. When test results are made public in this way, the pressure is on the teachers, administrators, students, and families to please tax-payers. One of the current issues is how to manage the large amount of testing that takes place in our school systems and how to adapt instruction to this new format. This is what triggered our interest in carrying out this research.

### *Method*

We placed 200 questionnaires in teachers' mailboxes in five schools in the Western New York region. We were not expecting a 100% response

rate because we did not target classroom generalists and content-area specialists involved in the testing process, but the entire faculty (considering that everybody is affected by standardized testing in schools). Twenty teachers sent detailed written responses to our questionnaire. We then set out to analyze these responses using qualitative analysis. The issues that we wanted to explore were:

- 1) the impact of testing on teachers and students;
- 2) the way teachers manage instruction towards testing;
- 3) the way teachers assist student learning while testing.

### *Questionnaire*

We created the questionnaire to generally assess ways of managing standardized testing. The questionnaire also assessed teachers' thoughts regarding advantages and disadvantages of standardized testing in schools. There were eight questions on the questionnaire. The questionnaires were placed in a packet with a self-addressed envelope and a letter explaining the study.

How long have you been a teacher? \_\_\_\_\_

Current grade level: \_\_\_\_\_

OPTIONAL: Race/ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What standardized tests do you give currently in your classroom? What is your experience with administering standardized tests in the past?
2. What do you do in your classroom during testing week to manage the standardized testing process effectively?
3. What do you do throughout the school year to manage the standardized testing process effectively?
4. What is the impact of standardized testing on your teaching?
5. How do you see standardized testing as related to creativity in your teaching?
6. What is the impact of standardized testing on your students?
7. What are the advantages of standardized testing?
8. What are the disadvantages of standardized testing?

Participants were given ample space to answer questions about the kinds of standardized tests they administer in their classrooms, their

experiences administering them, and how they manage the process. All participants read a letter and completed the study if they wished.

### *Data Analysis*

The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method of analyzing qualitative data combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all units of meaning obtained. Using an inductive approach, we examined the meaning behind the participants' words on the questionnaires. We were interested in developing propositions: statements of fact inductively derived from a rigorous and systematic analysis of the data (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). We first identified small units of meaning, unitizing the data. Second, we cut apart each questionnaire to separate the data units. Third, we created categories using common features in responses. As each new unit of meaning was selected for categorization, it was compared to all other units of meaning and then categorized. Fourth, we created larger categories based on the common threads of meaning across the smaller categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It should be noted that two researchers (the second and the third authors) first engaged in this analysis process independently, then came together to discuss categorizations and develop consensus on the category judgments.

## *Results*

### *Surface Information Contained in the Responses*

Of the five participating schools, three were elementary, two were middle schools, and one was a high school. We carried out a surface examination of our sample population in terms of gender, race, grade taught, and years of teaching experience. We found that of our 20 participants:

- 1) 30% were male and 70% female,
- 2) 43% taught elementary school, 29% taught middle school, and 19% taught high school,
- 3) the mean length of teaching was 15.0 years ( $SD = 12.24$  years) and,
- 4) 78% of our respondents were Caucasian.

As one can see from the above data, a high percentage of teachers in our sample were Caucasian and female. Their level of expertise provided us with an interesting seasoned-teacher's perspective.

### *In-Depth Information*

Of all the statements made regarding standardized testing, 77% were negative and 23% were positive. The data were analyzed as falling into four main categories:

- 1) How testing influences teaching
  - *It becomes ingrained in the curriculum, so that all activities can promote testable writing/reading and listening sections of the test.*
  - *My teaching philosophy involves an attempt to prepare students as much as possible for the test, without teaching to the test.*
- 2) How testing affects the way students learn
  - *It creates an intense dislike for subjects they do not excel in.*
  - *Students don't feel like they are learning to learn, to enjoy learning or to appreciate knowledge.*
  - *The students take their lessons more seriously. They get sick of the teachers preaching about doing well on the ELA tests so they seem to take the test more seriously.*
- 3) How content taught is reflected in the tests used
  - *I try to create lessons that address the standards. I also formulate activities that mirror the ELA. I do, however prepare students for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade ELA and math by using certain writing forms and using the problem of the day.*
- 4) Influence of testing on views of self and education.
  - *Probably lowered their self-esteem.*
  - *They feel hopeless.*
  - *Lots of fear of tests and passing them as well as fear of not graduating.*

Overall, 100% of our respondents admitted to some form of test preparation, be it exposure to test format, covering test content, using test-driven teaching, or teaching items that will be tested later (see table 1 for an itemized report of our data). Sample comments from the 33% of respondents who prepare students for the test format included:

- *We do several activities that mirror the test format so the children aren't so intimidated by it.*
- *I explain the layout of the exam.*
- *I try to ensure that some of the questioning forms used on the test are familiar to students.*

- *I make sure my students will be familiar with the test and comfortable with the multiple choice questions and the essays.*

Sample comments from the 71% of respondents who acknowledged teaching test content throughout the year included:

- *I try to develop a way to coordinate curriculum with standardized tests.*
- *My students get early exposure to the state exam. I've placed old part 1 and part 2 questions on homework assignments as early as the second week of school. As time draws closer to the test date, I use solely old questions as my warm-up and homework problems. I administer a quiz in November that consists of part 1 multiple choice questions.*
- *From September to January, we totally taught to the ELA test. We used practice-books and parallel tasks to ready them for the test. Very little authentic reading took place.*

Sample comments from the 24% of respondents that used “test-driven” teaching included:

- *The material is covered in a variety of methods so students will be able to answer Regents style exam questions when they are presented to them.*
- *We practice taking standardized tests. Every week we do listening activities, reading comprehension activities and writing activities.*

Teachers also help students develop response strategies:

- *When a good test-taking skill comes up in the course of the day I mention it explicitly and give examples- often when going over a quiz.*

Teachers are aware of the emotional constraints of a testing situation. They assist learners in developing a positive testing environment by ensuring that healthy behaviors and attitudes are in place prior to the exam:

- *I send notices home advising parents of testing to make sure children get enough sleep.*
- *I send notes home alerting parents and suggest eating good breakfasts, plenty of rest and comfortable clothing.*
- *I put their minds at ease the day before the exam.*

During the examination, they use the following strategies to help students perform as well as they can during the testing:

- *I provide water bottles and snacks.*
- *Ensure instructions are clearly stated and understood.*
- *Record information on blackboard, read over materials, use a timer.*
- *I have pencils, directions and booklets ready ahead of time.*
- *I make sure students have space.*
- *I break the test down into smaller parts.*
- *I give the tests early in the day and rearrange the rest of my schedule.*

Low percentages of authentic instruction (4%) were reported as well as a low percentage of adapting instruction to the individual learning styles of students (9%). However, one teacher did make reference to authentic instruction and how she uses authentic literature to prepare students for the ELA. Another teacher described how she integrates the individual learning styles of her students so that they all have opportunities to practice test taking in their preferred learning style.

### *Discussion*

The results of our study suggest overall that standardized testing does currently affect teaching and learning in our community. New legislation currently affecting all educational settings in the United States promotes a need for accountability and an incremental record of success in all public schools. Schools that fall behind are considered to be short-changing students who by law are entitled to equitable teaching and learning opportunities under the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2000). This new legislation promotes high standards in schools, meeting these standards through measurable results, and providing qualified teachers and paraprofessionals in every classroom. This legislation also means that schools need to meet yearly progress standards or otherwise face closure. Funds have been and will continue to be allocated to schools that are making steps in the right direction.

We found that teachers were more opposed to standardized testing than to accepting it. Teachers must consider: (a) the need to use a variety of ways to teach, (b) repercussions of low test-scores, and (c) keeping up with the standards and the curriculum. The majority of teachers in our study felt that standardized testing drives much of their teaching. From a few teacher comments, we found that some teachers take advantage of the format or test question itself to promote higher-order thinking. Other teachers informed us that they bank on the

material covered in old questions to design new explorations of similar themes and ideas. Some teachers have also expressed that they use the opportunities of exploring teachable moments through some of the testing strategies that they model for students. Hence, there is opportunity to use old test questions for teaching, processing problems out-loud, and modeling the critical thinking strategies applicable to test questions.

These potentially positive outcomes aside, it is our view that standardized testing may put considerable pressure on school teachers, because the evaluation process is so transparent. Administrators need to keep their constituents happy with good educational outcomes in their schools, and may put lots of pressure on teachers to produce good test results for the year. Not only do classroom teachers have to produce good test results, but they also need to bring children up to the standards expected of them. This kind of tension may create workplace anxiety as poor test results might warrant school closure or reduction in funding. Less funding may result in the release of non-tenured faculty. We are concerned by the number of teacher responses which were worded almost identically, saying that they do similar or parallel things in their classrooms to prepare students for the tests. We worry that they are simply echoing school administrators' mandates instead of embracing this type of teaching as best pedagogical practice.

We recommend that school administrators offer teachers in-service workshops to boost their morale and to encourage them to continue doing what they do well. These forums could be devoted to teaching strategies for converting test-taking skills/drill activities into strategy-building ones. For example, one could bank on teachable moments and select older test questions that can be modeled and taught through think-aloud protocols so students receive a clear view of how the critical thinker uses strategies to process problems. Teachers could model these think-aloud strategies frequently and solve problems together with their students. Decision-making processes could also be modeled so that students are introduced to the idea of making choices, predicting outcomes, and processing data to respond to open-ended questions. Students could also be introduced to the idea of pacing themselves during a test, learning how to respond to the test as a whole, and not to become flustered over small portions of the test. Parents can also be included in these conversations so that they encourage positive engagement at home. School administrators can also develop outreach programs for under-represented communities, and decrease the tensions

around standardized testing created by language barriers and the threat of failure (Zevenbergen & Klein, 2004).

As we consider what we found, a few questions arise. We continue to ponder whether authentic instruction formats (portfolio assessment, creative reading and writing opportunities, lab-style math and science forums) are now largely being lost. We also wonder whether some teachers' strategies are likely to lead to higher scores on tests, in detriment of lasting knowledge-construction.

Overall, the results of this study provide suggestions for teachers who are having difficulty coping with testing. Good strategies are discussed by these teachers, suggesting that they are managing despite increasing expectations.

Table 1. *Specific Coping Strategies Used by Teachers (%)*

Teach test content throughout year	71
Generally taught test content	58
Prepare students for format	33
Prepare students mentally	33
Focus on organization	33
Used test-driven teaching	24
Encourage healthy behaviors	23
Offer appropriate test environment	19
Teach test-taking strategies	14
Model evaluation	14
Decrease other demands on students	14
Give accommodations where required	14
Teach to individual learning styles	9
Provide authentic instruction	4
Prepare students who need extra help	4

*Note.* Numbers in table refer to the percentage of teachers reporting that they had engaged in a particular classroom activity.

## REFERENCES

- Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Kamii, C. (Ed.). (1990). *Achievement testing in the early grades: The games grown-ups play*. Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lynd, C. (2000). *The new generation of standardized testing*. Washington DC: Center for Education Reform.
- Madaus, G.F. & Clarke, M. (2001). The adverse impact of high stakes testing on minority students: Evidence from 100 years of test data. In G. Orfield & M. Kornhaber (Eds.), *Raising standards or raising barriers? Inequality and high stakes testing in public education* (pp. 85-106). New York: The Century Foundation.
- Maykut, P. & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. Washington, DC: The Falmer Press.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk*. Washington, DC: Department of Education.
- National Education Association. (2001). *Executive summary*. Retrieved March 17, 2006, from <http://www.nea.org/lac/edpoll01>
- Popham, W.J. (2001). *The truth about testing: An educator's call to action*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.
- RAND. (2000). *Rising math scores suggest education reforms are working*. Retrieved March 20, 2006, from <http://www.rand.org/news/Press/naepcores.html>
- Zevenbergen, A.A. & Klein, A.M. (2004, April). *Increased alienation: A potential impact of high stakes testing on under-represented communities*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

*Ana Maria Klein* is assistant professor of mathematics methods and cultural studies at State University of New York at Fredonia. She received her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from McGill University in Montreal in 2000. Her research interests include children's problem-solving abilities, raising cultural awareness in the community through pre-service teachers, and community outreach.

*Andrea Zevenbergen* is associate professor of psychology at State University of New York at Fredonia. She received her Ph.D. in clinical psychology at State University of New York at Stony Brook in 1996. Her research interests include children's emergent literacy, parent-child narratives, and effective discipline strategies, particularly in cross-cultural contexts.

*Nicole Brown* received her bachelor's of arts degree in psychology at State University of New York at Fredonia in 2003. She is currently a student in the master's program in Student Personnel Administration at Buffalo State University.

*Authors Addresses:*

Ana Maria Klein  
School of Education  
E-276 Thompson Hall  
SUNY Fredonia  
NY 14063, U.S.A.  
EMAIL:  
anamaria.klein@fredonia.edu

Andrea Zevenbergen  
Department of Psychology  
W347 Thompson Hall  
SUNY Fredonia  
NY 14063, U.S.A.  
EMAIL:  
Andrea.Zevenbergen@fredonia.edu

Nicole Brown  
Student Personnel Administration  
State University College at Buffalo  
1300 Elmwood Avenue  
Buffalo, NY 14222, U.S.A.  
EMAIL: Nicole.brown@aol.com

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of yellow and orange rectangular segments. A small red diamond is located at the top of this bar.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Managing Standardized Testing in Today's Schools  
SOURCE: Journal of Educational Thought 40 no2 Aut 2006  
PAGE(S): 145-57  
WN: 0628802409008

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

Copyright 1982-2006 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.

4. A standardized test teaches students prioritization. Standardized testing covers core subject materials that students need for success in other subject areas. Without reading, for example, it would be difficult to learn how to write properly. Without mathematics, it would be difficult to pursue scientific concepts. The goal of a standardized test is to cover core subject materials that will help students excel in other related subjects, giving them the chance to master core curriculum items so they can move on to correlating subjects with greater ease. 5. It allows school districts to disco This paper explores how teachers manage standardized testing in schools. A survey was distributed among 20 elementary, middle, and high school teachers in a semi-rural community of Western New York. The data gathered from the survey responses reveal important information about the impact of testing on teaching. Standardized testing affects many of the teachers' focus on instruction. In many cases, teachers prepare their students year-round. Teachers provide test-related, preparative instruction, which governs most of their curricula. A few teachers admit that testing allows them to develo The number of standardized tests U.S. public school students take has exploded in the past decade, with most schools requiring too many tests of dubious value, according to the first comprehensive survey of the nation's largest districts. A typical student takes 112 mandated standardized tests between pre-kindergarten classes and 12th grade, a new Council of the Great City Schools study found. By contrast, most countries that outperform the United States on international exams test students three times during their school careers. Testing affects even the youngest students, with the average pre-K class giving 4.1 standardized tests, the report found. [Parents are revolting against standardized tests]. The study analyzed tests given in 66 urban districts in the 2014-2015 school year.