The Impact of High-stakes Testing on the Learning Environment

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The Impact of High-stakes Testing on the Learning Environment

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In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine/St. Thomas University of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a search problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the University Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master’s thesis nor a dissertation.
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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of high-stakes testing on the learning environment in public schools, focusing on perceptions by teachers, administrative personnel and school social workers. This research was based on the literature that documented how the learning environment in public schools has been affected by high-stakes testing implemented as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). While increases in testing has affected all students, the literature shows that it has marginalized sub-groups of at-risk students, including students with disabilities and students of color. The methodology for this research used a qualitative design that focused on obtaining research perspectives from teachers and other school professionals. Following the methodology, the results of the findings was presented through several different themes: English Language Learners are overly tested, teachers are unable to form healthy relationships with their students, and the loss of subjects and the narrowing the curriculum. This research is important because it provides an important foundation for school social workers and other school personnel given very recent changes in federal legislation designed to improve the learning environment while continuing to hold schools accountable.
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Introduction

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was a national act designed for kindergarten through twelfth grade education. The NCLB Act was signed into law in 2001 by President George W. Bush, and was an amendment to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The NCLB Act was created to eliminate the educational achievement gap between socio-economic classes so that “100% of U.S. students would meet predetermined standards in reading and math by the 2013-2014 school year” (Lagan-Riodan, Agilar, pg. 136, 2009). In order to determine if students were meeting standards, NCLB created high-stakes standardized testing as a way of holding schools accountable, ensuring equity between school districts and among various student groups, and providing important services to students with special educational needs. The law required test results to be tracked and reported with the hope of improving schools that were underperforming and by rewarding schools that were doing a good job.

High-stakes testing is currently one of the most argumentative issues in education today, and research on human motivation suggests that such incentives and punishments may not work as intended (Partnership, 2014). Defined by the Great School Partnership (2014),

“High-stakes testing is any test used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts, and is most commonly for the purpose of liability to ensure that students are enrolled in effective schools, and being taught by effective teachers” (Partnership, 2014, pg. 1).

“High-stakes” means that test scores are used to determine punishments (such as sanctions, penalties, funding reductions, negative publicity), or rewards (awards, public celebration, positive publicity), or compensation (salary increases or bonuses for administrators and teachers). High-stakes testing was designed in hopes that rewards or sanctions would help students, teachers, and school administrators to take the tests seriously, make personal or
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organizational changes, and then put in the necessary effort to improve test scores (Partnership, 2014).

Currently, U.S. students across the country have not met 100% proficiency. The goal of NCLB was to reduce the reading and math achievement gap between white and non-white students, and to reduce the achievement gap between rich and poor students (National research Council, 2011; Riordan, 2011), but this has not happened. Ironically, high-stakes testing has been criticized as taking over public education, widening the achievement gaps, exacerbating educational inequalities based on race, culture, and economic status, and forcing teachers to "teach to the test" (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The NCLB Act created annual testing requirements which appear to be negatively affecting public schools by effecting the learning environments, students, administration, and teachers.

"Over the past decade, the high-stakes testing regime has squeezed out much of the curriculum that can make schools an engaging and enriching experience for students, and teachers have been forced to dilute their creativity to teach to the test" (Walker, 2014, pg.2).

Walker (2014) goes on to speak about how today’s classroom educators are producing future test takers instead of creative, critical thinkers. He continues to speak about the needs of testing in public schools, and how testing has changed into a high-stakes event, rewarding and punishing schools, and causing the focus of education to no longer be about the student’s educational needs, but rather a mere test score.

Today there are over 500 school social workers employed in the United States who are often the ones called upon to work with students who are having school related difficulties, including but not limited to, difficulties associated with high-stakes testing (Walker, 2014). School social workers play a critical role in school settings by working with students to enhance
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their emotional well-being and improve their academic performance (Walker, 2014). School social workers help students with issues related to truancy, social withdrawal, overaggressive behaviors, rebelliousness, and the effects of special physical, emotional, or economic problems. School social workers and clinical social workers need to be more aware of how the current learning environment has been impacted by high-stakes testing. Educators are losing the love for learning due to the amount of test prep that happens all year long (Au, 2011), and students between kindergarten and high school graduation are taking 8 tests a year, which amounts to an average of 112 mandatory standardized tests taken by students by the time they graduate high school (Zernike, 2015).

No single assessment should ever be the sole factor in making an educational decision about a student, an educator or a school (Zernike, 2015). “Our children are being treated with a one-size-fits-all education approach, which is causing unreliable test scores” (Popham, 2015, pg.15). Popham (2015) goes on to explain how teachers are losing power within their classrooms and are being punished for test scores that are not proficient. She continues to raise awareness of the unfairness of measuring student’s abilities on a mere test score by addressing how important it is to be aware of student’s disabilities, language barriers, and/or mental illnesses that can make a test challenging for a student. Testing what a student knows and excels at is beneficial and uplifting for a child, but right now high-stakes testing is only looking at what a student does not know and shaming them for low test scores (Flannery, 2015).

The Obama Administration recently declared testing has gone too far and has urged schools to step back and make exams less time consuming and more purposeful (Zernike, 2015). Currently, testing is consuming the learning environment and there has been no evidence to support that more time spent on tests improves academic performance (Zernike, 2015). The
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recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) will provide school social workers and other school personnel an opportunity to respond to the unintended consequences of NCLB, but only if they have clear data about those consequences. As schools transition from NCLB to ESSA, they need not only empirical data about the impact of high-stakes testing, they also need to better understand the qualitative impact of high-stakes testing on teachers, students and the learning environment as a whole. ESSA has now given the power to individual states to identify and provide support for struggling schools, and prohibits the federal government from interfering (Singer, 2015). That is why this study and the timing of it now is so critical. The need for ESSA to improve education is a must because students are suffering due to narrowed curriculum, and this can lead to failure in the future economy if our nation continues to rely too heavily on high-stakes testing to improve educational equality (Au, 2011). Au (2011) goes onto say that our children are our future and narrowing the gap of learning to teach to the test will only cause future problems, and instead of creating future test takers schools should be generating creative, critical thinkers.

The purpose of this study is to explore the impacts of high-stakes testing on the learning environment in public school. High-stakes testing has increased since the passing of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Teachers now feel that high-stakes testing has resulted in a rigid, unbalanced and narrowed curriculum (Phelps, 2015). The research done about high-stakes testing has shown that teachers and administrators are facing high pressure that is effecting the learning environment negatively. Today the pressure is so high that schools are being caught cheating, excessively test prepping, and changing test scores to ensure that test scores appear to meet required standards in fear of sanctions (Berliner, 2011). Awareness of this
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issue needs to be addressed. Therefore, the literature review will explore what is already known about high-stakes testing in education today.
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**Literature Review**

In education today, high-stakes standardized test scores are representing at-risk students as failures due to nationwide test scores (Apple, 2006). Zernike (2015) explains that tests have been seen as a federal takeover and also seen as a “one size fits all” approach. The unreliability of these tests is beginning to be recognized nationwide. Test scores cannot fully and fairly represent student’s knowledge without recognizing outside environmental risk factors (Apple, 2006; Byrnes, 2015, Hidden Curriculum, 2014). Schools need to recognize the importance of understanding student and their environment in order to help them meet their full potential academically and socially (Apple, 2006). Apple (2006) goes on to explain that this can be done when school educators begin to address personal and family characteristics that effect a student’s learning such as: mental health problems, community violence, and unemployment of family members, health care, nutrients, and housing need to be addressed and focused on in order for students to succeed academically. Currently, high-stakes testing is implemented in all public schools’ curriculum and teachers are no longer focusing on supporting student’s emotional needs, but rather solely focusing on high-stakes testing and the score that the student will ultimately receive (Gorman, 2015; National Research Council, 2011).

In public schools, at-risk student subgroups are continuing to fail academically. The literature suggest that high-stakes testing is impacting students’ success. This literature review explores at-risk student subgroups, financial incentives/corporations creating the tests, the impacts of the learning environment, including test anxiety, and teacher’s perspectives on testing.
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At-risk Student Subgroups

National indicators states that students in at-risk subgroups underperformed when compared to students not in at-risk subgroups. The term at-risk is defined in the Glossary of Education (2014) as, “students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school” (Hidden Curriculum, 2014). At-risk students also refers to individuals facing circumstances that could harm student’s educational ability, such as; homelessness, health issues, violence at home, incarcerated parents, students with learning disabilities, low test scores, disciplinary problems, grade retentions, or other learning-related factors that can poorly affect students educational performance (Hidden Curriculum, 2014). Educators use the term to define and categorize students that are a concern, these are the students that will work closely with school’s social workers and need a lot of guidance and help. At-risk students are struggling in school due to outside risk factors that are out of their control such as poverty, being a minority, homelessness, etc.

High-stakes testing was created in efforts to close the achievement gap and create a greater learning environment for all students. Currently, this is not the case, the achievement gap is widening and students that are at-risk are continuing to suffer academically. The problem with test are that at-risk students are facing life stressors, and the life stressors they are facing are not being considered during high-stakes testing and its scoring (Delgado, 2014). Schools are no longer focusing on the child and their environment, but rather a mere test score. Studies have proven that students are more likely to have academic achievement if their social and emotional environments are address or improved (Gorman, 2015).

The literature identifies several at-risk student subgroups. These include: low income and minority students, students with special needs, and English language learners.
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**Low income and minority students.** The number of American children who are living in poverty is totaling around 16 million in 2013; one in every five children are living in poverty (Shields, 2013). Prolonged and environmental stress, like living in poverty, can actually change a child’s neurological pathways impairing one’s ability to learn, and effecting a student’s educational opportunity (Shields, 2013). Life stressors, such as living in poverty, as often reflected in many students school work and can offer insight as to why high-stakes testing outcomes is unreliable (Carney, 2013). Achievement gaps in public education continues to unequally effect race, culture, and economic status in a negative way in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Achievement gap refers to; “the unequal or inequitable distribution of educational results and benefits, and the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities.” (Hidden Curriculum, 2014). Study after study is proving that high-stakes testing is not bringing fourth educational equality, but rather widening the achievement gap more and more (Jennings, 2005). High-stakes testing has not brought education results to an equal playing field. The goal of NCLB was to improve students reading and math achievement scores between white and non-white students, and improve the achievement gap between rich and poor, testing is not doing this (National research Council, 2011; Riordan, 2011). Children living in poverty are affected negatively from high-stakes testing. Minority groups, especially African American and Latinos are greatly affected, as well.

 Dropout rates associated with high-stakes testing are especially high for African American and Latino students due to lower achievement of this subgroup (Au, 2013). When the high-stakes testing accountability system began to be implemented into schools it saw a 4 percent decline in graduating students within Massachusetts alone. Following that finding, in Texas, 50 percent of African American and Latino students who started ninth grade did not make
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it through to twelfth grade (Darling-Hammond, 2007). In the United States education system students do not have an equal chance at becoming ‘successful’ based on how hard they work or study (Berlinder, 2012). Students face a wide variety of barriers that give students a lesser chance of academically succeeding such as: gender, economic class, language barriers, and/or culture (Segool, Carlson, Von Der, & Barterian, 2013; Berlinder, 2012).

Schools with larger populations of minorities and low-income students are less likely to pass high-stakes standardized tests (Krieg, 2011). One study reported that students in low poverty schools, are 22 times more likely to reach high academic achievement, when compared to students that are in high poverty schools. Schools measure students living in poverty by how many students are registered for free and reduce lunch (Segool; Carlson; Goforth; Von Der Embse; Barterian, 2013). Schools that have less minority students and lower poverty rates are 89 times more likely to reach a passing level on high-stakes testing than that of schools with a larger population of minorities and low income families (Klenowski, & Wyatt-Smith 2012). Schools with high poverty rates and minorities students tend to have fewer resources already and are struggling to find ways to improve student learning. At-risk students are struggling to meet proficiency on high-stakes standardized tests. This is leading to funding cuts by the government, which in return is leaving students to continue to fail and not succeed in school due to not meeting proficiency on high-stakes tests (Au, 2013).

Sixty percent of out of school variables account for how a student achieves academically. Such factors include; family income, housing, family/community violence rate that one sees or is part of, food security, language barriers, and so forth (AU, 2013; Popham, 2001). These factors are important in understanding how high-stakes testing is causing minorities students and students living in economic hardships in a negative way. If high-stakes testing was
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effectively closing the achievement gap then in fact it would show equal numbers of rich and poor students passing and failing, and equal numbers of white students and African American kids passing and failing, unfortunately this is not the case (Au, 2013; Linn, 2003; Popham, 2001). Today and historically high-stakes standardized testing continues to show critical race and class disparities in the United States (Apple, 2006; Barrow, 2006).

**Students with special needs.** High-stakes testing creates power imbalances for students and teachers. Students and educators are required to take or give standardized test that are not equally designed to meet all children’s needs (Dee, 2011). Classrooms are filled with children of all different behaviors, and many have special needs. Special education students receive IEPs that address what special education students need in order to academically prosper within their classroom. An IEP is “the legal document that defines a child's special education needs. An IEP includes the disability under which the child qualifies for Special Education Services, and provides yearly goals, objectives, and any accommodations that must be made to assist in a student’s learning” (Byrnes, 2015, pg. 6). Accommodations are not happening within the public schools for children with IEPs, and they are continuing to fail high-stakes testing (Au, 2013; Byrnes, 2015).

Byrnes (2015) states that teachers are losing power within their classrooms and are being punished for test scores that are not proficient. He continues to address that it is unfair for teachers, the students they work with who have different disabilities, language barriers, and/or mental illnesses. Walker (2014) brings up the point of how children with special needs are being left feeling defeated due to not knowing many answers on the tests. He then continues by speaking about how testing what a child knows and excels at is beneficial and uplifting for a child, but right now high-stakes testing is only looking at what a child does not know and
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discrediting them for it. Educators are being trained to look past student needs and solely focus on how to make a student receive a good test score (Flannery, 2015; Popham, 2015).

**English language learners (ELLs).** English-Language Learners (ELLs) are beginning to dominate public schools (Katz, 2013). Katz (2013) states that ELL students are the fastest growing group of school-age students in the United States, and they come from tremendously diverse backgrounds. ELL students represent a population that have: numerous languages, cultures, ethnicities, nationalities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and in most cases ELL students’ parents and grandparents are often immigrants who speak native language at home. (Partnership, 2014). English-language learners face many challenges that can affect their academic achievements (Partnership, 2014).

ELL students are being left behind in public education due to high-stakes testing curriculum and the fast pace classroom instructions designed for fluent English speaking students (Katz, 2013). ELL students are facing academic barriers because they are not learning or speaking English when at home. ELL students rarely receive accommodations during high-stakes tests (Ortiz-Marrero, 2010). If tests were given in more languages perhaps scores would be more reliable (Katz, 2013). Katz (2013) explains that ELL students should at least be given accommodations in terms of additional time when testing. She goes on to state that it is unrealistic to expect students to navigate two languages in the same amount of time as an English speaker. On average, it takes five to seven years to master cognitive academic language expertise (Katz, 2013; Ortiz-Marrero, 2010). Ortiz-Marrero (2010) states that students are thrown into English speaking classrooms and how it is idealistic expectations to assume this population of students should do well academically and on high-stake-standardized tests. He continues by
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stating that the journey of learning a new language can be long, complex, and difficult when in an environment designed for native speakers.

Teachers need to recognize the importance of bringing in one’s home language and culture in order for students to succeed. High-stakes testing is only offered in one language and students do not have the opportunity to write essays in their own home language (Katz, 2013). Barriers like these for ELL students create a learning environment where ELL students fall behind academically because classroom teachers don’t focus on student’s cultures and home languages (Krieg, 2011). “It is our experience that when teachers honor both oral and written home languages in school, they validate the child’s point of power in learning; thus, academic investment is most likely to occur” (Krieg, 2011, pg. 6). By 2050 it is expected that the United States will account for 65% of English language learners. The United States is growing rapidly and addressing the way we teach English language learners needs to become a priority so all students, from all backgrounds can succeed academically (Ortiz-Marrero, 2010; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Sunmaryono, 2010; Wilma, 2010).

Financial Incentives for Large Corporations

High-stakes testing was created to measure students’ progress so that schools, teachers, and students could then be rewarded or face sanctions based on a students’ test scores. This way of teaching is dominating the United States public education system. Recent studies are beginning to suggest that incentives are not working, and they should be used with caution and carefully evaluated on its actual progress of helping students and teachers succeed (Bettinger, 2012). The United States has and continues to trail behind many other countries in education. Due to the United States continuing to fail at education, policy makers designed incentives in
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hopes that K-12 education would increase students standardized test scores (Bettinger, 2012; Dee, & Jacob, 2011).

After the passing of NCLB policy makers designed sanctions for schools whose students did not perform well on high-stakes standardized tests, and even more recently school districts began awarding bonuses to teachers if their students’ test scores meet proficiency levels. These rewards or sanctions schools and educators are receiving are based on how well a student is scoring on their standardized tests (edglossary.org. 2013; Dee, & Jacob, 2011). Policymakers began to see that students were not meeting proficiency on their standardized test scores so sanctions and rewards were created in hopes that educators would be motivated to improve student performance (Dee, & Jacob, 2011). Incentive programs for schools, teachers and students aimed at raising standardized test scores are not increasing students test scores. What incentive are actually doing to the learning environment, is putting pressure on educators and students. Incentives are also leading teachers to only concentrate on class material that will be on standardized, scored tests. This concentration merely focusing on testing is narrowing the curriculum of education and making an unfair learning environment for teachers and students.

Testing has been in public education for numerous years, but it has changed in several different ways since it first appeared in education. It is meant to be used to determine a student’s achievements, growths, and progress. However, today standardized testing is not used for the exact same purposes it was created for. The purposes of standardized testing has turned into a system that is segregating and separating students by their intelligence, socio-economic status, wealth, and privilege (Holmes, 2015). Incentives in the learning environment, created by policymakers, is creating a learning environment focus on just curriculum based around high-stakes standardized testing, which is known is “teaching to the test” (Holmes, 2015; Gorman,
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2015). “If a schools’ performance falls below a state-defined threshold on statewide achievement exams, the school is subject to a series of sanctions. The sanctions range from placement on a watch list for the first year of failure to “restructuring,” which involves replacement of a school’s administration and staff,” (Gorman, 2015, pg. 2).

“Standardized testing in the US has been estimated to be a multi-billion-dollar industry" (Popham, 2015, pg. 6). Today, standardized testing has taken over education in public schools in its year round curriculum. The cause of this is that big cooperation’s are promoting and selling standardized test for mere profit and the more test sold the more corporations are making (Popham, 2015). The stakeholders for standardized test have only one concern, and it is about making profit. If high-stakes testing continues to produce revenues for educators and schools, slowly standardized testing will take over education and will be ran by large cooperation who are only concerned about profit (Gorman, 2015; Popham, 2015). Incentives designed by policymakers are not closing the achievement gap, nor bringing students closer to proficiencies. Cooperation and policymakers designing high-stakes standardized test continue to ignore this in hopes to create revenues from schools they sell high-stakes standardized test to (Bettinger, 2012, Popham, 2015).

Current Impacts on the Learning Environment

Students, teachers, and educators are feeling the pressure of achievement which is causing a shift in the environment. The literature suggest that the learning environment is impacted in several ways. First, high-stakes testing increases test anxiety among students. Secondly high-stakes testing reduces creativity and variety of subjects taught. Finally teachers are impacted by high-stakes testing in important ways.
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**Test anxiety among students.** Estimates on the rate of test anxiety among school-aged children vary widely (Zeidner, 2001). Researchers use different criteria when defining levels of anxiety that students are facing. The amount of research done on students facing anxiety due to high-stakes testing is lacking, but the amount of research that has been done does prove that school-aged students are facing anxiety due to high-stakes testing (Triplee & Barksdale, 2005; Zeidner, 2001). One common factor found in students perspectives of high-stakes testing is that they are feeling; anxiety, stress, worried, and overwhelmed (Mulvenson, 2005; Popham, 2011, Ritter, 2005). Students are understanding the importance of high-stakes testing and how it can affect the school in a positive or negative way. Students do not fully understand how it works, but they do understand the pressure they are facing along with feeding off of the stress and anxiety from their teachers. Results have proven that students are experiencing more test anxiety then ever since the passing of NCLB due to high-stakes testing (Abrhams, 2003). Test anxiety can make children do worse when testing, while also have physiological effects on a child’s well-being (Wren, 2004).

There is lots of evidence that is shown representing the negative effects from standardized testing on the teacher and the student. The pressure the teachers have is wearing off on the students and causing students to feel test anxiety and pressure to do well. Teachers are not creating the love for learning anymore, while teachers are also losing the love for teaching (Wren, & Benson, 2004). The anxiety and stress every educator and student is facing around testing time is at an all-time high and it needs to be recognized. “We narrow that gap through teaching kids how to work with their hands, to work in teams, to solve problems, not just how to ace a test,” (Weingarten, 2015, pg.4). The problem of anxiety our students are facing is widespread and is being noticed nationally.
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**Loss of creativity in curriculum.** Teaching is changing over time due to high-stakes standardized testing because teachers focus on subjects that are easiest to measure on standardized tests (Au, 2013). Testing has given teachers less room to teach creatively within their classroom. Educators are no longer teaching children that there can be more than one answer, but rather they are teaching how to refer to the text and get the right answer. Obviously, there is times when there is only one right answer, but now children are not learning important tools about how to be creative thinkers and debate answers (Au, 2013; Dutro, & Selland 2012). A national 2007 study by the Center of Education Policy reported that since 2001, 44% of school districts had reduced the time spent on science, social studies and the arts by an average of 145 minutes per week in order to focus on reading and math, and 75% of those interviewed cited high-stakes tests are the reasons (National Research Council, 2011). High-stakes testing is continuing to eliminate needed curriculum within classrooms that make schools an engaging experience. The reason for the narrowing of curriculum is due to high-stakes testing and how teachers are feeling forced to teach to the test (Walker, 2014).

**Negative impact on teachers.** Over the years research studies have examined how teachers are perceiving high-stakes testing and the implementations required due to the passing of NCLB. Teachers feel pressured to teach to the test, and schools are losing great teachers because of the pressure (Evans, 2013). Teachers believe high-stakes testing has a negative impact on students (Popham, 2011). Teachers cannot spend time building a meaningful relationship with their students because many teachers have felt whiplash as they rush to rewrite curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Zernike, 2015). In 2008, a study showed that 78% of teachers felt that high-stakes testing was not improving school morale, and saw NCLB in a negative way due to inadequate measures from high-stakes testing (Darling-Hammond, 2007).
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Teachers and administrators felt that NCLB narrowed the curriculum, required an unnecessary amount of test preparation, and lessened time to teach students how to use higher level thinking skills (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Studies report a difference between teacher perceptions depending on weather they taught at-risk students at a low-income or higher-income school. Teachers working at low-income schools perceived testing in a more negative way due to more of their students failing the test. (McCarthy, 2008). Teachers at higher-income schools had less criticism about NCLB and high-stakes testing due to more students doing well on standardized tests. Teachers at low-income schools often felt more pressure, stressed, frustration, and less positive impacts driven from NCLB. Teachers in low-income schools felt more pressure and anxiety because they felt like their jobs were often threaten. (McCarthy, 2008; Riordan, 2010).

Summary and Research Question

The literature addresses the issues regarding high-stakes testing and who and what within the learning environment is affected. At-risk students are effected the most in today’s education system, the literature goes onto identify specific groups effected such as: students living in poverty and minorities students, students with special needs, English language learners, and then goes on to review how finical incentives and large corporations play a big role in high-stakes testing, and how the learning environment is being effected. Students come from a wide array of needs and high-stakes test scores are not adequately examining each student’s individualized needs, therefore they are unreliably identifying student’s academic ability.

Today’s testing era is creating a learning environment in which students are being marginalized due to factors out of their control, and this is creating less student-teacher interactions because teachers are focusing their attention on students likely to pass the
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standardize tests, and ignoring students who are academically struggling the most. Therefore, the research questions for this study is: What is the Impact of high-stakes testing on the learning environment?
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Method

This research examines the impact of high-stakes testing on the learning environment using a qualitative research design. This design focused on obtaining research perspectives from teachers and other school professionals about how the learning environment has been impacted by high-stakes testing. The researcher used semi-structured interviews because they are useful when researchers do not want to be restricted by numbers and would rather target a population about their life experiences (Berg & Lune, 2012).

In order to present the methodology used, several subjects will be discussed: sampling procedures, protection of human subjects, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. This chapter will conclude with a brief description of strengths and limitations to conclude the research design section.

Sampling Procedures

The sample consisted of 8 public school professionals within the Anoka-Hennepin School District including: principals, special education teachers, mainstream classroom teachers, school social worker, and an English as a second language teacher.

A high school in the Anoka-Hennepin school district was selected because of its high poverty rate (75%). This was important criteria because the literature suggests that schools with high poverty rates face challenges in their learning environments, and often have lower test scores. In order to recruit participants, the researcher went to a staff meeting and introduced herself, spoke about her research project, and handed out recruitment fliers. She encouraged school personnel to contact her if they are interested in being interviewed. The flier explained the project, the research question, and how to connect with the researcher via email if they were
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willing, or had questions. Only school personal who are involved daily with achievement test were allowed to participate in the interviews.

Protection of Human Subjects

Before the interviews were conducted the researcher received approval from the University of Saint Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB application clarified that participants could answer all, some, or none of the questions, and that there were no risks or direct benefits for the participants of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the researcher reduced the threat of coercion by allowing interested participates to contact the researcher independently and privately if they wanted to participate. The researcher followed informed consent protocol using a consent form that clearly outlined the purpose of the study, the duration of the interviews, and how it was administered in detail (See Appendix A). The consent form clarified that went interview transcripts would be locked in a secure area, and the destroyed after data analysis. The researcher also communicated to the interviewees the steps she would take to keep the interview data confidential.

Instrumentation

The instruments used in this study were a semi-structured interview schedule, and the researcher herself. The interview schedule was based on themes in the literature review. It consisted of 13 open ended questions designed to obtain in depth perspectives from the interviewees based on their own life experiences. Before the interviews took place, the researcher had her committee review the interview questions in order to establish face validity of this instrument.
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In qualitative research the researcher is also an instrument because she is the instrument that analyzes the data. This is why articulating researcher lenses is critical. More will be said about these in the following chapter.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Data was collected via face to face interviews using the interview schedule already discussed. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The procedure for analyzing data was based on a grounded theory methodology (Berg & Lune, 2012). The researcher noted different concepts that emerged in the interviews by looking for patterns and themes, coded the interviews in order to identify main ideas, and then organized the data accordingly.

During data analysis, the researcher actively looked for data that might support alternative explanations about the impact on the learning environment from high-stakes testing. She used reflexivity by monitoring closely her passion and personal biases. The researcher repeatedly challenged herself by stepping back from her own perceptions in order to be open to the data. In this way she was making sure that she didn’t find what she was looking for or impose her own biases on the data.

Strengths and Limitations

There are both strengths and limitations of this research design. One of the strengths of using a qualitative design is that participates can say more, share more freely, and use their own words. Another strength of this design is that data was collected from multiple sources (teachers, school social worker, special education, English language learners, and administrators), and this triangulation of data sources strengthens the reliability and validity of this study’s findings.
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There are also limitations to this research design. The small sample size limits its generalizability. This is a threat to validity, but I don’t think we want to assume this happened I would delete. Lastly, there was only one school social worker, therefore the research is limiting its applicability to social work.
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Research Lenses

It is especially critical for qualitative research to clarify their research lenses. These lenses impact the development of the project and how a research interprets the data collected. In this chapter I will discuss my theoretical lenses, my professional lenses, and my personal lenses.

Theoretical Lenses

The theory that best relates to my research project and has helped me frame this research is the Ecological-Systems Perspective. In order to understand the effects of high-stakes testing on the learning environment, the students and their environments needed to be examined at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The Ecological-Systems Perspectives does exactly that. The framework of this theory examines the person’s environment at the micro (individual), mezzo (family, small group), and macro (large group, community).

“Thus, in an ecological-systems perspective, systems and ecology are integrated by viewing the person(s) as a system(s), the environment(s) of the person as a system(s), because a person is seen as a system with various independent parts,” (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002, pg. 17).

The Ecological-Systems Perspectives addressed the importance of looking at a person and their environment because all human beings are elements of their environment. This theory shaped my decision to interview a variety of school personnel. It was important to gain different perspectives from a variety of school professionals through interviews because it gave me a holistic perspective of how the learning environment is effected by high-stakes testing.

Professional Lenses

My professional experiences involved with high-stakes testing began last year. I had not realized how much testing was happening in the schools until I became a special education support staff within 4th grade. From the first week of school until thru sometime in April I saw
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that the curriculum was designed around testing. This it really struck me when our school district observed the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday. Before the holiday I asked some students if they knew who he was, and they told me no. This caught my attention, and I wondered why we were not teaching about Martin Luther King. I began to observe more of what the teachers were teaching. Social studies, creative writing, science, and other subjects were being put on the back burner. I asked a 3rd grade teacher why the students were not learning about civil rights, or more about science and social studies, and she told me there was no time due to the fast moving curriculum of trying to get students ready for testing. This experience raised my awareness about high-stakes testing, and this is when I began to do more research on testing.

I have had other experiences as a special education support staff that have also influenced me on this topic. Another incident that caught my attention was when I worked with a student who was removed from her home by Child protection Services. The next day she came to school and was required to take the final Minnesota Assessment, which would determine whether or not she would meet proficiency for the year. The teacher’s abilities would also be reflected in this child’s test score. Situations like these represent the importance of understanding a child’s environment in order to make a fair assessment of the child’s academic ability. It is also important to understand that it is not always the teacher’s fault when a student’s not proficient. A mere test score cannot fully explain whether or not teachers are doing their jobs well. These experiences represent professional biases towards testing, and why I wanted to learn more about it.

Personal Lenses

Growing up I struggled academically. I had several outside life stressors that affected me being able to succeed academically. I grew up in a household with a Vietnam veteran (my father)
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who struggled with PTSD. We lived in poverty, and my parents fought constantly. I had high anxiety and dealt with depression. These personal experiences made it difficult to focus in school, nor did I have much support at home with reading and doing homework. I was quiet and well behaved at school so I believe I slipped through the cracks. As I grew older, my passion as I grew older was to work with children in need because I never had anyone in the school spend time on me and show me that they cared about me and my academic success.

The way I grew up in a tense and stressful household has given me a personal bias toward high-stakes testing and the learning environment in public schools. I think a test score is not reliable enough to predict a academic potential or achievement. The way education is centered around high-stakes testing is not going to help students if outside life stressors are not addressed. I was a student who tried to do my work, but struggled, and did not do so well on tests. It made me feel horrible and stupid when I would fail a test. Experiences like this in my early school aged days makes me believe testing should not be taking over education today. Rather, we should be addressing students’ environmental issues if we truly want them to succeed academically.

As a researcher I was aware of my personal bias, so I asked open ended questions in the interviews. The open ended questions were not guided towards the negative effect from high-stakes testing, so it allowed participants to answer freely based on how they feel. I also did not share my own personal thoughts with participants before or during the interviews. This allowed participants to answer truthfully by not knowing my own opinion. I continued to be aware of my bias when analyzing the data.
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Findings

The results of this study will begin with a description of the research participants. Next, observational data will be presented. This will be followed by the presentation of the themes that emerged from the data which include: Unable to Form Teacher/Student Relationships, Students’ Academic Potential is not Accurately Portrayed, English Language Learners are Overly Tested, Too Much Time Spent on Testing, Pressures on School Educators and Students, The Loss of Subject and Narrowing of the Curriculum, Labeling and Shaming, and Legitimate Functions of Testing.

Description of Participants

Eight school professionals were interviewed for this study. The participant’s job titles were: principal, vice principal, teacher of English language learners, school social worker, special education director, and three licensed teachers. 6 out of the 8 participants were women, and all of the participants were Caucasian. The range of years that the participants worked within a school setting ranged from 3 to 25 years.

Observational Data

The participants expressed a range in emotions and the length of time spent on the answers to the researcher’s question varied. The participants who were willing to participate responded quickly to the email flyer. All interviewees responded within 24 hours to say they were interested in being interviewed. Once participants were willing to be interviewed, the researcher began setting up interviews; this process was difficult because it was hard to correlate times and days to meet. All of the participants wanted the researcher to come to at the schools where they worked. None of the participants wanted to stay after their work day so they requested to do the interviews before the school day started.
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Each interview took 30-45 min, and two lasted only 25 minutes. Some interviewees spent more time answering the questions than others, and some went into more depth in their answers than others. The participants who had more in depth answers were those that had been school employees for more than ten years. They had more stories to reflect on and were able to speak about how testing has changed the learning environment over the years.

The interview process appeared to be enjoyable for the participants. Participants mentioned how educators are not allowed to speak with one another, or with their students about what is on a high stakes test, or what they are like until the testing season is over. This interview gave school professionals the time to speak up and reflect on their opinions towards high-stakes testing.

Unable to Form Teacher/Student Relationships

All 8 participants discussed the inability of teachers to develop the kinds of relationships with students that are needed for student engagement and learning. Participants discussed their views about why healthy relationships between teachers and their students are not developed.

*Teachers feel mandated to produce good test scores. This is causing us to only worry about seeing an end product, so now we are forgetting to get to know our students and we are only seeing them is a test score.*

Another participant discussed how important it is to build rapport with their students but how hard it is to do so today in education:

*I want to make my students feel wanted, important, and cared about within my classroom, but we feel we do not have time to do so anymore.*

Participants went onto discuss how the teachers’ relationships with their students does impact how well a student will do in their class and on an achievement tests. The following quote from a licensed teacher makes this point:
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If you ask a student, they remember the teachers who cared about them and taught them how to be kind to one another. The relationship between the teacher and the student really determines how well a kid will do on a test. If they like the teacher than they will want to do well for them because they want to please their teacher.

Participants spoke about the importance of understanding students, and their environments in order to help them succeed within their classrooms. They continued by speaking about why there is a shift within classrooms:

Due to pressure of high-stakes testing, testing is indeed forcing teachers to care less about getting to know their students, and instead, focusing on an outcome.

A teacher spoke about the lack of teachers getting to know their students is individuals and spoke about it being due to the pressures of producing good test scores, she went onto say:

We are mandated to teach bell-to-bell, I understand keeping students engaged bell-to-bell, but this rule has drastically reduced teachers getting to know their students. I have no time to take a break and get to know my students because if there is down-time, this is when I target the students struggling academically by pulling them aside. I’m constantly trying to make my students do better academically, not focusing on them is a whole.

Another participant discussed how the lack of a relationship can actually hinder the results on an achievement test by saying:

I think if the relationship is strong, then the student will do better on a high-stakes test. The relationship is much more important than a test score, but the pressure for teachers is effecting the way teachers build relationships, because teachers feel they have no time anymore to get to know their student.

The participants’ relationships with students is diminishing, and not as important as they used to be. One participant stated:

I do not feel like I can be myself any more, all I do is worry about the testing outcome which is not until the end of the year.

Participants spoke about the worry, stress, and pressure that teachers are facing today, and how it is forcing teachers to produce better test scores and focus less on meeting a
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student’s needs. The school social worker summed this theme up well by discussing the importance of teachers showing their students what a healthy relationship looks like:

*Teachers are lacking in a relationship with students, many want to see the end product and forget to get to know their student is a person, not a score or a grade. Even though the score may make the teacher look better, schools need to bring back the importance of building healthy relationships so those who do not have healthy relationships out of school can understand how they work. Schools have become test driven, and it is shown in the lack of relationships between students and teachers.*

**Students’ Academic Potential is not Accurately Portrayed**

In all eight interviews participants discussed how test scores are not accurate indicators of student learning:

*We have to uphold standards, and it’s up to our student’s test scores whether or not we are considered good teachers, which isn’t even an accurate measurement of our student’s academic potential.*

Participants spoke about how students’ academic potential is not accurately portrayed through test score:

*It doesn’t get considered when students go up a reading level. They are still considered behind and teachers could be sanctioned because that student is still not meeting standards, it drives me nuts. In elementary school a kid could go up 3 levels of reading, but they do bad on the Minnesota achievement test and that score is what shows, not whether or not the student has made gains, just a test score, isn’t that unfair?*

Throughout the interviews participants continued to speak about the inaccuracy of a test score due to schools not grasping the importance of looking at how a student’s life stressors, mental health conditions, and/or behavior problems can effect a student’s academic outcome. Below a participant summed about the hindered process for students:

*One time one of my students raised their hand during the Minnesota compressive test to ask about different words; I explained to them I cannot read to you the words you do not know. If I were able to read to them words they do not know I believe my students would get better test scores. The achievement test aren’t accurately portraying students, especially ones with*
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language barriers, or cognitive disabilities, the process for them is already hindered.

English Language Learners are Overly Tested

Participants spoke about students who are English Language Learners (ELL) and how they are being overly tested compared to mainstream students. Eight participants spoke about how ELL students are falling even more behind than other students because they are being tested on the four domains throughout their school year:

They begin by being tested on the four domains which are; reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Than before you know it they are testing again on reading, and math with the mainstream students, followed by another standardized test which is called the ACCESS test which is just for ELL students.

Participants discussed how hard it must be for ELL students to adapt in American public schools due to the test driven material within classrooms. Participants spoke about how testing is dominating ELL student’s education:

The ELL students have to test more than other students. This is lessening the time for English learners to be doing what the other mainstream students are doing. ELL students need a chance to explore, like by taking a book they find at the library, and then allowing them to explore that book. ELL students are not experiencing ways of play, social skills, or relationships with other students, all they are learning is how to speak English and do well on an achievement test.

Participants spoke about how ELL students are already coming to America with language barriers, and how difficult it must be for them to catch up academically with mainstream students. The frustration of educators towards the way ELL students are being overly tested was evident throughout the interviews, and the quotes above from participants clearly shows the imbalance within classrooms. Not only are the ELL students being effected, but the whole learning environment is changing due to high-stakes testing, this will be further looked at next.
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Too Much Time Spent on Testing

All of the participants discussed issues around too much time being spent on testing. Participants continued by discussing how much time is being spent on testing, but how difficult it is to minimize the time spent teaching students the material:

Kids today are literally spending half of their school year on learning how to take a high-stakes test, testing is adding up to about 5 months of their schooling. In elementary school we are teaching our students how to take a test through tutorials, and then setting up practice labs, and then practicing the actual test, and then we add in staff meetings and staff tutorials, it is over taking our schools. Day in and day out testing is at the for front of learning, and it is consuming are teacher’s daily curriculum. The pressure is high when being put in a position of being sanctioned or rewarded so it is difficult to spend less time teaching the material that will be on an achievement test.

Participants continued to speak about how much time they are spending on test prepping all year, and they continued to talked about how lessening test prep time feels impossible. Continuing on that thought participants continued to address feeling overwhelmed with the time being spent on testing, and how it is taking over their curriculum, but they continued to explain it can’t be lessened even though they recognize the problem. Below one participants spoke about the problem of lessening the time spent on testing and why it seems impossible:

We can’t spend less time test prepping. Students need to know what to expect on a high-stakes test. The whole school year and curriculum is spent on preparing for one test, but we can’t lessen the time practicing for an achievement test because it’s all competitive, there are goals set district wide, and school wide, and even each grade level; so we need to prepare and prep our students all year, because than the outcomes will be efficient.

There were several interviews that addressed the fact that schools need to spend less time on testing, but are struggling to do so, due to them wanting to produce good test scores. Participants made it clear that schooling today is merely focusing on a test score. Participants spoke about how testing is taking up too much time within classrooms, which in return is
causing school professionals to feel high levels of pressure in order to produce good test scores. Below the issue of pressure facing students and teachers will begin to be addressed.

**Pressures on School Educators and Students**

High-stakes testing is creating pressure for students and educators. In all eight interviews all participants spoke about the pressure they are facing. The participants described testing as an:

*Unnecessary pressure due to educators and students trying to uphold standards, and it is causing a lot of pressure on us. Testing is important when used right, but now testing has turned into a pressure ridden machine driven to find a mere test score.*

Below, participants spoke about the pressures they are facing is educators and how they are seeing the pressure wear off onto their students:

*I constantly feel like the pressure is on me to prove that I am a good teacher. When test scores come back it makes me feel like I am not doing my job right if the achievement test scores don’t meet the districts set goals. I can feel the pressure I am facing is stressing my students out due to me drilling them day after day about knowing and understanding the standards. Working all year to see a test score leaves a whole year of pressure because we do not see outcomes until almost May.*

*Nobody went in to teaching to see if they could create test takers, but now the pressure is high and everyone is dealing with a high level of pressure to do well. I can see it every day. Our kids are stressed because they can feel that we are stressed because all we do is talk about testing. I know it is causing everyone to feel the pressure, it is even making the principal feel the pressure. I have seen kids cry before during the MCAS, they feel the pressure, and some stuff they just don’t know, and they shouldn’t be held accountable for that, and neither should I.*

Participants agreed about the unfairness of having to deal with daily pressures about producing proficient test scores, and how unfair it is to have students feel the pressure too, especially like several participants stated:
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High-stake tests are unreliable measures to see how students are doing educationally, so why are we facing so much pressure to produce good test scores that aren’t even relevant to a student’s ability?

The pressure educators and students are facing is changing the way teachers are delivering their curriculum due to them wanting to produce good test scores, this theme will be look at next.

The Loss of Subject and Narrowing of the Curriculum

Several participants stated that the loss of subjects other than math and reading is slowly disappearing from the daily curriculum in public schools. Participants suggested that the curriculum is solely focusing on math and reading and leaving other subjects out of school learning:

It has gotten to the point where we have to offer more math and reading classes due to low test scores. This is making students do worse in school because they are having classes taken away from them that they love. It always comes back to testing. Electives are good. We shouldn’t eliminate electives due to poor test scores. We are forgetting the meaning of school. Kids are supposed to find a passion so they can do what they love one day. Honestly, I feel the curriculum today is guiding students away from the love for learning, especially if electives continue to diminish.

Participants continued to speak about the loss of educator’s ability to create their own curriculum:

We are adding a (not optional) third trimester math to our freshman schedule next year. This is a huge deal because a few years ago we changed semesters to trimesters, and the school board dictated that we were NOT allowed to have year-long courses, except for band or choir. Now, next year, year-long math is mandated. That was a complete change in philosophy. because our school is continuing to receive low math scores, the philosophy changed.

Participants discussed how curriculum is being driven towards math and reading, leaving other important subjects out such as history, art, exercise, creative writing, and social studies. One participant, a licensed teacher stated what standards are:
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Standards are written descriptions of what our students are expected to know and be able to show they know by the end of the year through an achievement test. So, whatever is going to be on something like the MCAS is than put into our curriculum that is given to us by the school district. So, all year I am teaching to the standards.

Participants continued to discuss the loss of subjects and how there is no more self-exploration by students or teachers due to state standards. One participant, a special education director stated:

There are lots of ways to teach kids to learn, but we only do it the way the standards want us to.

Participants continued to speak about how testing has created a loss of curriculum designed for the students to enjoy, and teachers no longer feel they have a voice due to the requirements of producing proficient test scores. An interviewee discussed how too much time is being spent on certain areas and how important it is to remember that children can be successful in many different areas:

If schools are not meeting state wide goals then the government begins to look at cutting things like music, phy-ed, and electives, and so then students are forced to take more math and/or reading classes so test scores can increase. I feel like schools are going to end up at some point where all periods will be math, then reading, then back to writing and then miss out on everything else, and I don’t want that for my kids.

All the participants spoke about some sort of loss to the school curriculum that they are seeing.

Labeling and Shaming

Sanctions facing schools and educators was a theme spoke about from all participants. One participant in an administration position described his impression of how sanctions are affecting education:
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Sanctioning schools is a process of labeling and shaming for schools, educators, and students involved. Schools test scores are listed in the newspaper and they are ranked by highest to lowest. The ones who rank the lowest are usually faced with sanctions such as: school closings, teachers are either let go or moved around to new positions, and schools face funding cuts. It is a shameful process; everyone knows if you are a low performing school.

Participants describe the experience of sanctions is a shaming process where teachers feel “less than.” Participants continued by discussing how sanctions are putting pressure on educators, school districts, and students and are impacting the way educators are doing their jobs:

Schools are being labeled as effective or not. Our administration pushes the test so our school don’t have to go down a path of restructuring outside of our control, or face budget cuts.

One participant, a vice principal continued to discussed the difficulties schools and educators are facing due to sanctions that are prevalent in today’s education system by stating:

I can’t always explain exactly why our students aren’t meeting proficiency. There is not always a reason to explain, but after scores come out, schools begin to get labeled. And until lower performing schools can prove that their teachers are teaching proficiently enough for students to retain what they are being taught, sanctions come into play.

Participants described sanctions as unnecessary pressures on educators, and concluded that sanctions are impacting the way educators do their job. Before concluding the findings chapter Participants went onto discuss the reasoning for testing and discussed the benefits in their opinions the testing does bring fourth.

Legitimate Functions of Testing

Participants also spoke about the benefits of testing. Participants described high-stakes testing as providing data that shows where students stand academically:
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*Testing data is collected to help teachers place kids in certain academic intervention groups, which help students in struggling areas.*

The participants continued to speak about the benefits of testing describing it is a form of accountability that shows how schools are doing and holds teachers accountable in means of teaching the fundamentals of learning. Participants continued to describe their views about the benefits of testing by stating:

*I think the reason testing has taken over curriculum is due to so many teachers in the past not teaching the fundamentals of education. So testing came into play to make sure teachers were giving students a fair and equal academic opportunity. Every kid deserves a basic understanding of math and reading, which is the core of learning. Schools need to be held accountable somehow, so they created standardized tests.*

Participants continued to talk about the benefits of testing and how important it is to see data that represents where a student stands academically in relation to other students. One participant went onto discuss her opinion by saying:

*I think the reason testing has taken over curriculum is due to so many teachers in the past not teaching the fundamentals of education. So testing came into play to make sure teachers were giving students a fair and equal academic opportunity. Every kid deserves a basic understanding of math and reading, which is the core of learning. Schools need to be held accountable somehow, so they created standardized tests.*

If our students aren’t passing the test it shows. So then those students are put into small learning interventions groups. Testing was created to help us educators target those who are falling behind. That is definitely beneficial for students.

One participant, a principal, explains why testing has taken over education today:

*In elementary school more testing is happening because this is the age group that needs the right building blocks to learn. Statistically, if students aren’t at grade level for reading by 3rd grade they have a 95% chance that they won’t ever be able to read at grade level; so these test scores can benefit the importance of placing our young students in academic intervention groups. Academic intervention groups can’t happen without data, so the benefit of testing is that we get to see where are students are standing and can intervene if they are struggling.*
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Summary

Through the finding chapter a description of participants, observational data, and themes that emerged from the researcher’s interviews were discussed. The participants had insightful, firsthand experience to share and the themes naturally emerged from the interviewees responses.
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Discussion

The discussion chapter contains the researchers own interpretations of the findings from interviews. The researcher will explain the findings and how they correlate with the literature. Also included is discussion about the unexpected findings, implications for practice, and implications for future research.

Findings Supported by the Literature

In this section I will identify the findings from the research that are consistent with the literature. A number of this study’s findings are consistent with what the literature predicted. The finding that high-stakes testing is creating pressure for students and educators is consistent with what several scholars have suggested (Wren, 2004). There is a lot of evidence that is shown in the literature that high-stakes testing creates pressure and anxiety among students.

This research also supports with another theme in the literature: ELL students are especially being hard hit by high-stakes testing and the fast paced instructions (Katz, 2013). Participants in this study noted that ELL students are tested even more because they take extras tests to see where they stand as English speakers. Testing dominates the ELL student experience. Schools accept students with language barriers with the hope that they will be able to teach them how to read and write in English, but testing them in reading, writing, listening, and math causes them to miss out on class time due to extra time required for testing.

Educators are being forced to teach students that there is only one right answer (Au, 2013), which was consistent with the literature that suggests that the loss of subjects other than math and reading is slowly disappearing from the daily curriculum in public schools.
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This is lessening student’s abilities to learn how to think for themselves and debate answers. Schools are lessening time for recess, free reading, science, art, and music because schools main focus is on math and reading due to these subjects being on standardized tests. Participants in this study discussed how there is only time to teach to the test, and how there is no time left for creativity, or critical thinking. Consistent with the observation that educators are being given much of their curriculum in order to teach to the test.

Unexpected Findings

One unexpected finding of this study has to do with the legitimacy of testing. I did ask about the benefits of testing in order to check my bias, and was surprised at participant’s responses. Surprisingly participants said the main reasoning for testing is so students can be identified and then put into intervention groups to help them succeed in an academic area they are struggling in. This is extremely beneficial, if used the right way. Testing is beneficial, but when testing is designed with a one-size fits all approach, its benefits are compromised; because an individual’s life stressors, or mental illness are not put into consideration when judging a student’s academic abilities solely on a test score.

Implications for Practice

This research suggests a number of important implications for social work practice. School social workers should implement the need to find new and creative ways to respond to the impact of testing in students. The need to understand the new law, Every Student Succeeds Act, and find ways to serve student in this challenging context. Thus the need to advocate for the well-being of all students, especially those most negatively impact by high-stakes testing.

Since school social workers are already limited in the time they have to provide individual or group support, and some students are already getting less time with their teachers
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then is optimal, pulling them out of the classroom for social work services only exacerbates this issue. Understandably teachers are reluctant to have their students pulled out of their classes creating even more pressure on them to increase student performance on a high-stakes test. But students cannot learn if their mental health is not being adequately addressed. Therefore, school social workers need to advocate for change within the school building. School social workers will need to bring fourth education about who they are and what they do. Instead of social workers conforming to the idea of limiting mental health issues in order for students to be in class and not miss out on test items, instead social workers must stand up against high-stakes testing and pull students when they see needed. By advocating for the well-being of the student the social workers will be able to help teachers bring back teaching the whole child, instead of just teaching to the test. With the new law this is as perfect time for school social workers to take the lead within their building and create a plan to better the environment, and the well-being of the child.

School social workers also need to begin connecting their services to improving academic outcomes. One option is to use evidence-based practice interventions, such as, solution-focused therapy to empower students and help them set attainable academic goals, while increasing confidence in their academic capacities. Interventions like these could help at-risk students by helping them feel more in charge of their learning, and more responsible for their academic performance.

Implications for Future Research

With the enactment of the new national educational policy, Every Student Succeeds Act future research on ESSA is needed from social workers. The law is providing funding for states to invest in systems that will provide better feedback on teacher performance then from a test
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score. This will be challenging for individual states to create their own system. A school’s culture is different at every school and future research needs to be done from school professional themselves instead of lawmakers. Further research and understanding of ESSA is a must for educations and social worker so they can understand the law, and advocate for future change within public schools. Educators need to come together and speak up about what is needed in order to create educational equality.

Conclusion

Before the passage of NCLB, students were taking on average 4-6 test a year, but students are now taking on average about eighteen test a year (Au, 2011). Teachers are losing power within their classroom and feel like they are being punished for test scores that are not proficient. As schools transition to Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law on December 10, 2015, it is critical that school personnel understand the impact that high stakes testing has had under NCLB. Social workers, given their relationships with teachers and other public school personnel, are in a unique position to facilitate change within school systems if they can present clear data about how the learning environment has been impacted by high stakes testing to date. This research is important because it provides an important foundation for school social workers and other school personnel given very recent changes in federal legislation designed to improve the learning environment while continuing to hold schools accountable.
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References


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Appendix A. Informed Consent Form

The Impact of High-stakes Testing on the Learning Environment in Public Schools

You are invited to participate in a research study about the perceived impact of high-stakes testing on the learning environment in public schools. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are school personnel that work with a diverse population of students. You are eligible to participate in this study because you work in a public school setting and are involved in high-stakes testing. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Maddolyn Ritt, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to explore perspectives on the impact of high stakes testing on the learning environment in public schools.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to participate in a one hour interview with me the following things: I will not agree or disagree with your statements, but instead will asking questions and making sure I understand your answers.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

There are no known risks or direct benefits for participating in this study.

Compensation

Participants will not receive any compensation for participation

Privacy

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. I will protect you privacy by not using your names and keeping the master list of names in password protected computer that only I can access.
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Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report, I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include: audio-recordings, consent forms, transcripts, master lists of participants, and notes. All these records will be kept confidential. They will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home or on my computer that only I can access with a password. I will keep de-identified transcript data in a password protected file on my computer. I will be the only one transcribing the interviews. Findings from this study will be shared with my committee members, but no names or identifying information will be used. As required by law, all signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. You can withdraw by letting me know either by phone, or email. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Maddolyn Ritt. You may ask any questions you have now and at any time during or after the interview. If you have questions later, you may contact me 320-828-2740 or email me at maddolyn.ritt@stthomas.edu You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

Statement of Consent

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

_______________________________________________________________  __________________
Signature of Study Participant                                       Date

_______________________________________________________________
Print Name of Study Participant

_______________________________________________________________  __________________
Signature of Researcher                                              Date

Appendix B. Interview Guide
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Appendix B. Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working in public schools and in this setting?

2. To what extent are you involved in achievement tests?

3. I’d like you to talk to me about your understanding of sanctions and rewards related to student achievement on tests.

4. How do these sanctions and rewards impact the way you do your job?

5. How do you think sanction and rewards impact student learning?

6. In general, how do you think achievement tests influence student learning? (Time they take, student experience with test, attitudes, etc.)

7. A. How do you think testing is affecting the curriculum as a whole?
   B. How do you think testing impacts teacher’s delivery of the curriculum?

8. Do you think there are some areas getting too much time and attention and others not enough? Please explain.

9. How do you think testing impacts relationships between teachers and students?

10. Can you tell me a story about high-stakes testing that sheds light on what we have been talking about? (Specific examples, and/or experiences)

11. What are some benefits of testing from your point of view?

12. Do you think the schools should lessen the amount of time spent on preparing for tests? Why or why not?

13. What else would you like to tell me that I haven’t asked you?
Now recruiting volunteer interviewees!

Maddolyn Ritt is conducting a study about the perceived impact of high-stakes testing on the learning environment in public schools. She invites you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are school personnel working with students who are involved in high stakes testing.

The purpose of this study is: To explore perspectives on the impact of high stakes testing on the learning environment in public schools.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used.

Interested in volunteering? Have any further questions?

Please contact the researcher directly through email:

maddolyn.ritt@stthomas.edu
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