

Let's Treat the Cause, Not the Symptoms:
Equity and Accountability in Texas Revisited

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The December (2000) Kappan article, “Thinking Carefully About Equity and Accountability” by Jim Scheurich, Linda Skrla, and Joe Johnson, is a very important contribution to the current discourse on standards-based school reform. We appreciate the authors’ invitation for “... a dialogue on these issues” (p. 296). We also thank Kappan Editor, Pauline Gough for allowing us to respond to the Scheurich et al. piece, and for inviting Scheurich et al. to provide a rejoinder in this issue of Kappan.

At the heart of this exchange between Scheurich et al. and us is the subject of the standards-based school reform movement, which “is premised on the idea of setting clear, high standards for what children are supposed to learn...” (Heubert & Hauser, 1999, p. 13). In addition to using standards (e.g., test results) for deciding who gets promoted to the next grade or who receives the high school diploma, standards are also used to rate district and campus performance.

To be sure, there is a ground swell of discussion on standards-based school reform as evidenced by the growing scholarly literature, conferences, symposia — and even litigation. Regarding the latter, a recent court case (GI Forum et al. vs. Texas Education Agency et al., 2000) has highlighted the divide between those who believe high-stakes testing — a major component of standards-based school reform — is useful and defensible, to those who assert that such testing is discriminatory and results in adverse impact on minority students. Following the GI Forum trial, experts for the plaintiffs (see Valencia & Bernal, 2000a) and for the defendants (see Phillips, 2000) published Special Issues (in journals) that discussed their respective perspectives and opinions — which are strikingly different.

The Scheurich et al. article continues this important debate on standards-based school reform. Our response to their essay is designed to stimulate further careful thinking about equity

and accountability. Our focus is on several misconceptions, omissions, and flaws in the argument proffered by Scheurich et al. This response is organized around the following points of discussion: (a) common ground we share, (b) flaws in the “historic possibilities” thesis, (c) misconception of accountability as a dichotomy, and (d) our vision of equity and accountability.

Common Ground

Indeed, there are a number of points in which we disagree or differ from the perspectives of Scheurich et al. There are, however, several on which we agree — in part. We believe it is important to outline, with caution, this common ground so further dialogue on these issues can be developed.

Historical Grounding. Scheurich et al. assert that “We [referring to a collective “we”] have posted a miserable academic record with the great majority of low-income children and children of color specifically” (p. 294). We strongly agree. Literature abounds on the historical, and current lack of equal educational opportunity experienced by students of color.¹ Failure to acknowledge this historical reality is the major reason why standards-based school reform — in which testing plays a prominent role — works against students of color. Although Scheurich et al. are aware of the dismal track record our society has had in promoting school success for low-socioeconomic status (SES) students and students of color, it appears that the authors do not truly appreciate the need to take into account the persistent, pervasive, and oppressive nature of such school failure in addressing the reformation of our nation’s public schools (Valencia, in press, 2000a). For example, such inattention by the State of Texas and its expert witnesses to past discrimination was clearly seen in the GI Forum et al. v. Texas Education Agency et al. case.

The State of Texas underscored its necessity to have a high-stakes test as a standard for graduation, yet was ahistorical regarding the plight of students of color. The logic of having an exit-level examination for high school graduation makes sense in a perfect world in which equal educational opportunity exists. Of course, this is not the case.

Standards-based school reform very much misses the mark. It is structurally misdirected because it treats the symptoms of school failure (e.g., poor achievement), rather than the cause (i.e., inferior schools). We agree with Art Pearl (in press) who notes: "...school failure [and success] can be fully understood only when analyzed in the broadest political, economic, and cultural contexts. Macropolicies establish the boundaries of possibilities."

Deficit Thinking. Citing the works of Lisa Delpit (1988), Richard Valencia (1997), and Angela Valenzuela (1999), Scheurich et al. discuss a significant issue: Many educators view the educability of low-income students of color as being limited and the makers of their own academic problems. This is viewed as "deficit thinking" (see Valencia, 1997). In sharp contrast, there is the perspective that students of color, especially those from low-SES backgrounds, must be viewed as having unlimited potential. Furthermore, we must have high, reasonable standards for success, and provide equal encouragement via democratic education (see Pearl & Knight, 1999). Scheurich and associates are aware of the egregious nature of deficit thinking and its effects on students of color (also, see Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Yet, the accountability model the authors espouse, standards-based school reform, reinforces deficit thinking by placing the onus of academic improvement largely on the individual and his/her family. As Richard Valencia and Ernesto Bernal (2000b) comment, a more reasonable and accurate explanation of such school failure is systemic in nature — that is, there is the need to examine how schools have

been organized to exclude students of color from learning, especially through a denial of equal educational opportunities.

National Equity Norm. Scheurich et al. call for a “new national equity norm.” We are also very interested in pursuing a national agenda for equal educational opportunity. This vision is shared in some of our own writings (e.g., Valencia, 1997, in press; Valenzuela, 1999; also, see McNeil, 2000). The question that remains, however, concerns the path that will lead to equity for all groups. Contrary to Scheurich et al., we do not see the viability of standards-based school reform as the vehicle for a national equity norm. Our vision of a national program that will lead to equal educational opportunity rests on the principles of democratic education (Pearl & Knight, 1999), additive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999), demystification of current educational equity (McNeil, 2000), and anti-deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997). Also, see Nancy Kober’s (2001) incisive report, It Takes More Than Testing, for excellent suggestions on how to reduce the White/minority achievement gap.

Flaws in the “Historical Possibilities” Thesis

To us, the core of the Scheurich et al. article is the section on “Three Historical Possibilities.” Here, the authors develop their thesis: Currently, there is a triangulation of three “moments,” and they should be seized in order to promote educational equity. Moreover, accountability systems are driving these three historical possibilities. We offer a critique of each of these.

1. Scheurich et al. assert: “In what prior historical moment has there ever been such a high level of public attention paid to the public schools’ lack of success with low-income children of color?” (pp. 294-295).

Indeed, the plight of students of color is receiving considerable attention in light of current scholarship and public attention. Scheurich et al. ignore, however, that these students have been subjects of interest for decades (see, e.g., Valencia, 1997, in press). Yet, the denial of educational equality and subsequent school failure for many of these students has persisted. Over the years, there have been numerous White scholars and scholars of color — e.g., W.E.B. DuBois, Horace Mann Bond, Martin Jenkins, Otto Klineberg, George I. Sánchez, Thomas Carter, Mari Luci Jaramillo, Arthur Pearl, Gilbert González, Jeannie Oakes, Guadalupe San Miguel, Richard Valencia, Henry Trueba, Rubén Donato, Michelle Fine, Douglas Foley, Linda Darling-Hammond, Gary Orfield, Angela Valenzuela, Linda McNeil, and many, many others — that have written about the plight and struggle of students of color. Notwithstanding this vast amount of scholarship, much of what stems from it regarding implications for the improvement of schooling for minority students has been ignored or disregarded by policymakers and the courts. Given our nation’s poor track record in addressing and realizing equal educational opportunities for all students, we fail to see how this current “historical moment” of “a high level of public attention” will spur a movement leading to equitable school reform.

2. “In what historical moment has there ever been a major public commitment to high academic performance for all races and socioeconomic classes of students by both major U.S. political parties and their candidates for President?” (p. 295).

One would be hard pressed to find an instance in the recent history of U.S. politics when either major political party — or either major candidate for President — did not support efforts

to affect high academic performance for all students. Campaign trail rhetoric, however, should not be misconstrued as absolute common ground on, or commitment toward this issue. We feel that the message conveyed through the above question by Scheurich et al. obfuscates substantive differences in the debate, both in the political and academic arenas, of how to reach a goal of high academic performance for all students. Rather than placing our faith on a test-centric systems of accountability to “leverage” more equitable, higher quality education for all students as do Scheurich and colleagues, we believe that there are proven means that are less top-down in nature and do not lead to reductionistic models of teaching and learning. For example, issues of class size (Bingham, 1993; Mosteller, 1995), school size (Bryk et al., 1999; Lee & Smith, 1997), and teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2000) have been shown to correlate with higher academic achievement, especially among low-income students of color, but far less commitment to these issues has been demonstrated by either major party. As a result, alternative, more pedagogically substantive means to achieving high academic performance for all have been excluded from the most recent education debates between the major parties that have been dominated by school funding flexibility (read: vouchers) and accountability through increased testing requirements (Robelen, 2001).

3. “The third historical consequence of these accountability systems is the substantially improved academic success of children of color and low-income students and the substantially improved equity in some schools and districts in some states” (p. 295).

To support the above assertion, Scheurich et al. draw heavily from their work with a small number ($n = 30$) of school districts in Texas — which comprise a minute percentage (2.9%) of Texas’ 1,041 school districts. These districts, Scheurich et al. claim, have been experiencing considerable success in academic achievement (e.g., as evidenced by TAAS pass

rates). This work of Scheurich and associates is more fully described in Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson (2000) and Skrla and Scheurich (2001). In underscoring their thesis that “equity-driven achievement-focused school districts” (Skrla et al., 2000) can be identified and nurtured, Scheurich and associates showcase “the best of the best” by focusing on 4 school districts (0.4% of Texas’ school districts) — Aldine, Brazosport, San Benito, and Wichita Falls (see Skrla et al., 2000; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). There is no doubt that TAAS pass rates for students have improved in these 4 districts. Scheurich et al. assert that these gains are largely attributed to the “effective school” philosophy and practice initiated by the late Ronald Edmonds (e.g., Edmonds, 1979, 1986) in which strong administrative leadership and high expectations of students play key roles in promoting high academic achievement.

Undoubtedly, the administrators and teachers in the Aldine, Brazosport, San Benito, and Wichita Falls school districts have been hard at work in trying to raise the academic performance of all students. Notwithstanding these efforts and results, we raise a number of concerns regarding the following:

1. Clean Methodology? Arthur Pearl (1991), in a methodological critique of the effective school movement, noted: “At the present time we do not know whether the gains cited for the Effective School are treatment effects — caused by the intervention — or selection effects of two kinds: non-representative leadership and a non-random selection of minority students” (p. 295). We ask: Might Pearl’s methodological concern of effective schools also be germane here to the “best of the best”?

2. Success for All Students? In reference to their four poster districts of success, Skrla et al. (2000) assert that these districts have been able “...to produce equitable educational success for literally all the children in their districts” (p. 39). As a case in point, let us examine Aldine

— one of the four districts. TAAS pass rates (all tests taken) have significantly increased for all students from 1994 to 1999 (see Skrla et al., 2000 Appendix A, p. 42). Yet, based on U.S. Department of Education data of the nation's 100 largest districts (see Haney, 2001, p. 50, Table 4.1), Aldine, in 1997-1998, had one of the poorest graduation rates (54%) in Texas and in the nation (of the 100 largest districts, Aldine ranked 77).

Let us examine the San Benito school district — another “best of the best.” Considerable within-district variability on TAAS pass rates (all tests taken) can be seen (Texas Education Agency, 2000). In Down Elementary School (91.1% Hispanic), the TAAS pass rate in the 1999-2000 school year was 93.8% for Hispanic students. By sharp contrast, in La Paloma Elementary School (99.8% Hispanic) the TAAS pass rate for Hispanic students was only 66.7% — a difference of 27.1 percentage points.

In sum, the existence of a global effect (“...equitable educational success for literally all children...”) that has been trumpeted by Skrla et al. (2000) cannot be supported. Their assertions, therefore, are not only misleading and inaccurate, but they also perpetuate “the myth of the Texas miracle” (Haney, 2000, p. 3).

Scheurich et al. also claim that National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) achievement scores verify significant test score gains in Texas (p. 294). Scores on the NAEP have risen in Texas. The important question, however, is: Have the achievement gaps between White and minority students been significantly reduced? Paul Barton (2001) recently investigated this issue and found that 47 states (including Texas) failed to significantly reduce the gap in average NAEP achievement scores between students in the top 25% of the distribution and bottom 25% of the distribution of White and minority students (Black and Hispanic combined) in 4th grade math and reading, and 8th grade math (1990 to 1998 were the years

examined by Barton). Furthermore, TAAS has been touted as reducing the dropout rate in Texas. Natasha Rubanova and Tom Mortenson (2001) examined the “cohort survival rate” of the 50 states (the rate is defined as the ratio of fall 9th grade enrollment divided by regular high school graduates 4 years later). In 1998-1999, Texas — with a cohort survival rate of 60.6% — ranked 38, which was below the median of 71.8% (Connecticut). Texas has also consistently ranked below the national median in its cohort survival rates since 1991, the year TAAS was implemented. Scheurich et al. need to be very cautious in drawing conclusions that TAAS’s impact on national achievement data (tests scores and school completion rates) has been favorable.

3. Typical Academic Minority Outcomes? In their Kappan article, Scheurich et al. make the point that in the Texas schools they have studied, academic progress has indeed been made. The authors also note “...that the success has not happened everywhere” (p. 296). In our view, Scheurich et al. vigorously need to remind their audiences that the districts with which they are working are outliers. Their TAAS pass rates and campus ratings (“exemplary” and “recognized”) are highly atypical for high enrollment schools of students of color when compared to Texas as a whole. Aldine (83% combined African American and Hispanic) and San Benito (97% Hispanic) were rated (in 1999-2000) as “recognized.” Brazosport (56% White) and Wichita Falls (63% White) were rated “exemplary” and “recognized,” respectively.

Mark Fassold (2000) conducted a comprehensive analysis of Texas public schools’ (statewide) accountability ratings by various racial/ethnic enrollments (50%, 66%, and 90% or greater White, and 50%, 66%, and 90% or greater combined minority student population) by schools level (elementary, middle, and secondary [i.e., high]). Fassold’s findings were quite

consistent across the various cells (i.e., racial/ethnic enrollment levels and school levels): White schools in Texas were consistently rated higher compared to minority campuses.

By exclusively focusing on outlier schools, researchers take the risk of potentially creating an illusion of widespread school success and a false sense of security that school reform is in progress. Such a narrow focus, we assert, is hardly a basis for responsible educational policy, and if anything, distracts from the entrenched and systemic problems faced by the other hundreds and hundreds of schools in Texas.

Misconceptions of Accountability as a Dichotomy

Scheurich et al. begin their article by asserting that current discourse on state accountability systems have “developed into a strict dichotomy in which accountability is either ‘all good’ or ‘all bad’” (p. 293). This is an inaccurate reading of the terrain and further polarizes an already contentious arena of academic discourse. It is our position that having accountability systems are very important. The need for accountability systems is not the issue. It is the type of system that becomes the point of contention. The Texas accountability system — which has the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test as its centerpiece — is a case in point. In our view, Texas’ system is inherently flawed. It is a top-down, remote-control system that works against parents, their children, and teachers. The system favors policymakers, the Texas Education Agency, and school administrators. Most importantly, the driver of Texas’ accountability system, TAAS, is high-stakes testing at its worst. African American and Mexican American students, in particular, are being adversely impacted as evidenced by increased dropout and retention rates, less challenging curricula due to measurement driven instruction,

and pernicious labeling effects resulting from “public report cards” of school ratings (see Haney, 2000; Valencia, 2000b; Valencia & Bernal, 2000a).

In sum, the Scheurich et al. characterization of the accountability system discourse as being bipolar — “all good” or “all bad” — is simply inaccurate. Also, their reference to “the critics of accountability” is not useful. This notion closes, rather than opens discourse.

Accountability is vital, we argue, to public education. It must be implemented, however, with careful thought. Principles such as (a) parental involvement in their children’s school work, (b) the allowance for teachers not to be fettered to rote, nonchallenging, and measurement-driven instruction, (c) comprehensive diagnostic testing, and (d) multiple indicators of academic performance need to shape our accountability systems.

Our Vision of Equity and Accountability

We believe that the Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (C.A.R.E.) (<http://www.fairtest.org/arn/masspage.html>) provides an excellent point of departure for reconceptualizing accountability because of its two founding principles: First, local schools know students best. Second, the state should not be making decisions about individual students. Instead, its role is to ensure all students’ access to high quality teaching to guarantee their success. In the spirit of democracy and local innovation, schools and districts assume primary responsibility over both assessment and its relation to retention, promotion, and graduation decisions. A central tenet is their accountability to the communities that they serve. This is done through annual reports based on fully-articulated school reform plans approved beforehand by each school district.

A distinctive feature of the C.A.R.E. proposal is a call for quality review boards at state and regional levels. In this framework, standardized examinations primarily test for numeracy and literacy and are used in combination with other criteria in promotion decisions.

In the area of curriculum, the state's role is to define an essential, but limited, body of knowledge and skills based on a predetermined set of broadly defined competencies. In the area of assessment, quality review boards at state and regional levels assume primary responsibility in assessing and reporting on the quality and availability of resources, opportunities, instruction, and curriculum in public schools. At the state level, the quality review board's primary responsibility is to disseminate and promote best instructional, curriculum, and assessment practices, as well as to report annually to districts and communities on extant disparities in resources and opportunity. Promoting equity by helping schools and districts better address their diverse needs and populations constitutes the state's core mission in this design.

At the regional level, quality review boards — comprised of teachers, administrators, teachers, parents, state education agency staff, as well as higher education and business representatives — would develop a localized accountability system around a democratically derived set of indicators that extend beyond standardized test scores. These could include portfolios of reform efforts, including external reviews or evaluations, provided by schools falling within their jurisdiction. Authentic assessments of student work (e.g., student exhibitions, portfolios, products, and performance tasks) could also be used.

Bringing the model full circle, districts and regions could also evaluate the state's educational agency in terms of its responsiveness and quality of support in helping communities meet their equity goals. Such a bidirectional, participatory, and democratic model challenges the

current top-down, results-driven, single-indicator system in ways that substantively address minorities' historic quest for equity and excellence.

Conclusion

In their conclusion to the Kappan piece, Scheurich et al. assert that current state accountability systems are both harming the education of students of color, as well as increasing equity for them. By contrast, we contend that state accountability systems (e.g., the one in Texas) are causing much more harm than good. We believe that the divide between Scheurich et al. and us lies within the conception of the more appropriate model. Scheurich and associates, on the one hand, emphasize the need to have a shift from an “input-driven to results-driven accountability” model (Skrla et al., 2000, p. 10). This explains these researchers' heavy focus on raising test scores (i.e., the outputs of schooling). We, on the other hand, assert that what is needed is an accountability model that has a tripartite structure: (a) input (the adequacy of resources), (b) process (the quality of instruction, and (c) output (what students have learned as measured, for example, by tests or other indicators) (see, e.g., Cárdenas, 1998a, 1998b; Valencia & Bernal, 2000b). As José A. Cárdenas has noted:

Since neither input, process, nor output has proved to be adequate in evaluating student-teacher performance, where should the focus be placed? The obvious answer is the distribution of evaluation among all three. None of the three can be utilized without consideration of the other two. Past and present failures in evaluation cannot be attributed to the use of any of the three phases. The failure can be attributed to the focus on one of the three phases to the exclusion of the other two. (1998a, p. 10)

In conclusion, Scheurich et al. are advocating an untenable model of accountability, with its attendant implications for reform, in which symptoms of school failure need to be “fixed” (i.e., raising the low academic performance of schools, as measured by test scores). We, by contrast, argue that treating symptoms is misdirected and unproductive. Arthur Pearl (in press) has commented that there “is the undeniable fact that testing does not alter life chances any more than measuring temperature reduces fever. In the haste to do something there has been no serious effort to distinguish standards from obstacles.” What is needed is systemic intervention by addressing the factors that shape school failure of students of color — school segregation, financial inequities, noncertified teachers (disproportionately in minority schools), curriculum differentiation, underserving of English language learners, narrow and punitive assessments, and so forth (see Valencia, in press). Both Scheurich et al. and we want all children and youths to succeed in school. We differ considerably, however, in the means to achieve this goal.

Notes

¹See: Donato (1997); Feagin and Booher Feagin (1999); González (1990); Lomotey (1990); Moreno (1999); San Miguel (1987); San Miguel and Valencia (1998); Valencia (1991, in press).

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