High-Stakes Teaching: What’s at Stake for Teachers (and Students) in the Age of Accountability

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High-stakes testing in New York City (NYC) schools has produced a culture of high-stakes teaching. The latter concept emphasizes both the importance of good teachers to the performance of urban students and the threat to keeping good teachers in NYC schools due to measures such as scripted lessons and mandated curriculum. This essay draws upon interviews with beginning NYC teachers in English and social studies, raising questions about whether such measures will exacerbate the already low rates of teacher retention in urban schools.

Teaching in New York City has long been among the most challenging ways to launch a career in education. Over the last five years, the job has grown even tougher. In this essay, we argue that high-stakes testing has produced high-stakes teaching in many schools, raising the risk of aggravating the already high level of teacher attrition in New York City’s public schools. We introduce the concept of “high-stakes teaching” to emphasize the extraordinary importance of good teachers to the performance of urban students. This is especially so within an educational climate that places a premium on standardized tests’ narrow ways of assessing student learning. High-stakes teaching connotes two allied phenomena: both the need for good teachers with initiative, creativity, knowledge, and the ability to grow in their practice, as well as teaching in the testing and accountability-driven culture found in many schools today.

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Far too frequently, New York City’s teachers work in crumbling buildings, often under poor leadership, and for less money than in most suburban school districts. To obtain their jobs they have to navigate a complicated bureaucratic licensure, certification, and hiring maze. Many teach in classrooms that do not have adequate teaching materials. Individuals working in high schools often teach upwards of 175 students a day. Over the last few years, many of New York City’s teachers have also seen the small degree of autonomy they once had for creating curriculum and pedagogy undermined by high-stakes testing and its attendant technologies. Secondary social studies teachers, for example, deal with mandated curriculum that is notoriously “a mile wide and an inch deep,” and in some schools gets virtually wiped out by the emphasis on literacy. English Language Arts teachers often face scripted lessons that minutely prescribe pedagogical moves, desk and chair arrangement, curriculum materials, and modes of bulletin board and classroom “artifacts” display. Taken together, such measures have created a great deal of dissatisfaction among the new teachers we have interviewed over the last several years.

The New York City Department of Education’s recent recruitment and advertising campaign has attracted many bright, ambitious, and well-educated young people to teaching in New York City schools. Dedicated, hardworking, and idealistic, they have joined the ranks of some seasoned, knowledgeable veterans who are also dedicated and hardworking. However, there simply are not enough of these high quality teachers to impact all the students in all the schools.

We write this essay as two New York City professors of education with many years of experience as high school teachers and teacher educators. We recognize the magnitude of the problem in accomplishing systematic and widespread improvement of urban schools. The New York City Department of Education’s own language is instructive here. It refers to its “failing schools” as places characterized by a revolving door of poor leadership and ineffective teachers, with little apparent understanding of how to break the downward spiral. Such places also get labeled “Schools under Registration Review” or simply “hard-to-staff” schools, acknowledging the mutual dependency of good teachers with well-functioning schools.

We believe that the factory model of education remains very much alive in our post-industrial society, although these days perhaps it is better labeled the “Wal-Mart model” of education. By this we mean an educational system that emphasizes the “basics” of education (English, Math) and not the “luxuries” of education (Social Studies, Art, Music), use of interchangeable poorly paid workers (teachers), standardization of the curriculum nationwide, and emphasis on narrow measures of return on investment (e.g., success on tests). In this vision, American education needs to work faster, better, and cheaper to produce workers (urban students) for low-paying service jobs. Despite the lofty rhetoric of many politicians and
policymakers about the importance of teachers, too often they are treated as easily replaceable drones who deliver scripted lessons and mandated curriculum and whose efficacy is best measured by standardized tests.

We favor elevating standards, especially in high schools, but we do not believe that politicians and taxpayers have come to honest terms with the price tag behind their aspirations for educational excellence—for all the nation’s children. Nor do policymakers seem to comprehend the pivotal role played by teachers in improving American education (Darling-Hammond, 2005). The current path to reform via high-stakes testing will not lead to significant long-term improvement in the nation’s schools. Indeed, we question whether its real project lies not in improving public education but in destroying it.

We write this essay out of shared concern that many aspects of educational “reform” as practiced in New York City are destructive of high quality education. High-stakes testing as a lever of change will not deliver on its promise of overcoming the “soft bigotry of low expectations” (Paige, 2003). Instead, we suggest, it will ultimately undermine the possibilities for producing long-term improvement in New York City’s schools by driving out the very high-quality teachers who are necessary for improving education (Darling-Hammond, 2004). In short, this is an age not only of high-stakes testing but also of high-stakes teaching.

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

Given the working conditions teachers often confront, it is hardly surprising that so many new teachers exit New York City schools for the relative ease of suburban schools or abandon teaching entirely. It is most remarkable, however, when young teachers stay the course and remain within a system that too often undervalues their contributions, invests inadequate resources in improving their working conditions, and continues to erode the space for teacher autonomy and creativity in their work, two factors intimately connected to job satisfaction for young “knowledge workers.” In many ways reminiscent of early twentieth century efforts at school change promoted by the “cult of efficiency” (Cuban, 1993; Kliebard, 2004; Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999), many of today’s educational “reforms” seem yet another chapter in “teacher-proofing” curriculum rather than investing in recruiting, supporting, and rewarding adequate numbers of talented and well prepared teachers for New York City.

Several factors help explain why the stakes are so high for so many. For students, the end to New York State’s Regents Competency Tests brought a new requirement that they pass five rigorous Regents exams in core subjects, significantly raising the bar for high school graduation. The so-called “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB) has produced fresh calls for additional testing throughout the high school years and across subject areas. Many educators
have predicted that these new measures will mean even higher dropout rates for New York City’s students, as they have for other big cities (Haney, 2000).

New York City’s dropout rate is a subject of much political contention (Cardwell, 2005). Sociologist Andrew Beveridge (2003) argues that high-stakes testing is only making matters worse, commenting that the “new trend in grading schools by test scores and holding administrators accountable for them may encourage educators to get rid of poorly performing students” (p. 2). Moreover, rising drop-out rates have been linked to higher rates of incarceration for minority youth (Grodin, 2005). Some editorial writers, sensing the crisis that is upon us, have called for an “urgent new commitment to public education,” insisting that the “nation take seriously the daunting (and expensive) task of getting highly qualified teachers into all classrooms” (Herbert, 2005, A15).

The stakes for teachers are also high in the current climate of accountability, although perhaps it is less obvious why this is so. The retention of excellent new teachers has always been a precarious enterprise in New York City. But the imposition of high-stakes testing, mandated curriculum, and scripted lessons runs the risk of driving highly qualified new teachers out of New York City schools in ever larger numbers.

Teacher attrition is a complicated phenomenon. Richard Ingersoll (2002, 2003) has shown that the so-called “teacher shortage” is really a problem related not to recruitment but to retention. During the first five years of teaching, anywhere from one-third to one-half of new teachers leave New York City schools or teaching altogether. Likewise, significant out-migration from urban to suburban teaching has been documented for other big cities such as Los Angeles (Quartz, 2000a; 2000b). Recent reports suggest that this situation will be aggravated over the next five years by the looming retirement of a significant percentage of the baby boomer-aged teaching force (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005).

Just how important it is to have a highly qualified teacher for students in urban schools is addressed by Linda Darling-Hammond (2005; see also National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future [NCTAF], 1997; 2003) and others whose research demonstrates that well-prepared teachers are critically important to student achievement, especially for poor, minority students. Wasley and McDiarmid (2004) summarize this research by noting that: “Teacher quality consistently proves to be far more powerful than commonly recognized influences on student achievement, such as class size or strong administrative leadership” (p. 3). Likewise, Robert Hanushek (2005) presents evidence supporting the importance of teacher experience for student achievement. Together, these findings suggest the negative impact of a revolving door of inexperienced teachers in schools.

In what follows, we briefly describe our research and share the perspectives of interview subjects about their experiences working in New York City’s middle and high schools. These interviews are inspiring tales of the commitment of young people seeking to “make a difference” in
the lives of students. That some of them have persisted for five years in working with students under the most difficult circumstances is laudable. Yet, these are also cautionary tales. Increasingly, our subjects have related their frustration with the ways in which high-stakes testing shapes their everyday teaching lives, the pressures they face from school administrators to raise test scores, and the sadness they feel in knowing the world judges their students chiefly—and negatively—in terms of this one measure.

LEARNING TO TEACH IN AN AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Over the last five years, we have conducted scores of interviews with new teachers working in urban schools. They are graduates of Teachers College, Columbia University and Queens College, City University of New York, who teach middle school and high school social studies and English Language Arts, respectively. Our project was designed as an effort to understand how new teachers make sense of their early years within this urban context, but the stories told us are by no means unique to New York City. As researchers and teacher educators, we believe that eliciting narratives from beginning teachers is the best way to understand their experiences. We also hope that engaging teachers in making meaning from their experiences helps them theorize, strategize, and resist the challenges they face. In the end, we consider our research a form of activism intended to help new teachers maintain their commitment to teaching in urban schools.

From the outset, one of our chief interests was in whether those choosing to teach in New York City’s public schools (grades 4–12) would stay or leave after their first few years. Over time, as new accountability measures were introduced into the schools, we became increasingly concerned about the effects of testing on teachers’ practices, their satisfaction with their jobs, and decisions about remaining in City schools.

The teachers interviewed were predominantly female, overwhelmingly white, and middle class. They taught at a range of schools across four of the five boroughs of New York City, some of them in small new schools, and others in traditional comprehensive middle and high schools. When the New York City Teaching Fellows program was established, one of us interviewed the Fellows at Queens College as well. Although their entryway to teaching was different, the issues they raised about the experiences of their first years were remarkably similar to the other interviewees.

In all, over the last five years we have conducted well over 200 semi-structured interviews with approximately 140 students/graduates of our programs. In addition we have held twelve focus group discussions (four each year over the last three years) with small groups of students/graduates. We have also been engaged in numerous informal conversations with many of these individuals inside and outside of our respective teacher education
institutions. The interviews were all tape recorded, transcribed, and coded for emergent themes or “process codes” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Further conversations were held with participants to “member check” the trustworthiness of our conclusions (Ely et al., 1991).

We used these interviews as the basis of our book, *Learning to Teach in an Age of Accountability* (Costigan & Crocco, 2004). We addressed this work to pre-service and in-service students so that the stories of these new teachers might assist them as they made the transition into teaching. We hoped it would help to prepare other new teachers for the conditions they will face in New York City schools. At the same time, we hoped it would also be helpful to teacher educators so that they can support their students to operate responsibly and ethically within the constraints of high-stakes testing.

Studies of teacher attrition indicate that new teachers with strong credentials are often those most likely to leave the profession during their first years of teaching (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2004). Our subjects are capable and energetic individuals; most of them held a master’s degree at the time we interviewed them. They made a conscious, informed choice not just to teach, but to teach in urban schools. We were particularly interested in understanding how they came to teaching, thought about their jobs, handled stress, found satisfaction in their work, and sustained, refined, or jettisoned the ideas they took from their teacher education programs. Over several years of watching them in their early career journeys, our respect has grown for their accomplishments, often under exceedingly difficult circumstances.

“NEGOTIATING WHAT WE KNOW IS BEST EDUCATIONALLY”

Contributing to a Better Society

A recurring theme throughout all our interviews was new teachers’ desires to contribute to a better society. Many entered teaching because they felt they had something to offer young people. They were drawn to the relational aspects of the profession; it was the pleasure of helping young people that gave them their greatest satisfaction. In this, their educational philosophies reflect the importance of caring for their students (Noddings, 1992; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004).

Claire, who is five years into her teaching position at a small high school in Manhattan, exemplifies this theme. Energetic, enthusiastic, and reared within a Midwestern family of educators, Claire is unusually dedicated to pursuing a career not only as a teacher but as a teacher activist in New York City. Although she was offered a position in Westchester County before graduating from Teachers College, she opted instead to work in a
new, small New York City high school. Highly reflective and analytical about her work in education, she has testified before the New York City Council on issues related to maintenance of the school’s waiver from the Regents exams. She is also a regular petitioner of the New York State Commissioner of Education about matters of significance to her life as a teacher. When we first talked to Claire in 2000, she described her motivation to teach in these terms:

If you’re concerned about society, especially in a democracy, then part of what’s so important is that people participate, and for someone like me, it’s important that my life has meaning in terms of shaping other people’s lives . . . I see it as my way of contributing to a better society. And doing that is trying to educate people in a way that makes them aware of their world, and makes them aware of why they are important as people, and it also tries to give them skills to be able to do what they feel they want to do to make our world a better place.

Five years later, when we spoke with her again, we found Claire lamenting the amount of energy she and her colleagues spent embroiled in the politics of New York City schooling, especially in keeping alive her school’s waiver from graduation by Regents tests. She was frustrated with the cynicism exhibited by some members of the New York City Department of Education whose actions lead her to conclude that they do not believe students of color can achieve academically. But she also spoke of the rewards of seeing kids going to college, especially those who some teachers did not believe would make it. The culture of accountability looms large in her thinking about teaching in New York City, its satisfactions and strains. She talked about “negotiating what we know is best educationally” and how difficult it is to find space for good teacher practice in the face of curriculum mandates:

I think a lot about how much pressure there is for results, results, results, about how intense the kids’ needs are, and how few resources we are given and about how creative you have to be to find resources to do what you want to do. I think it’s really overwhelming. There’s so much pressure on schools to perform and to solve the inequities we have. I guess that’s where I’ve come to sense that a lot of the problems of education are how unequal our society is. Schools are asked to correct these inequities when nothing else in the society is working to support equity. So teachers are asked to carry that burden—as if you’re going to make these kids equal when everything else is working against them. That’s the hardest part. If you’re in an environment where there’s pressure to educate every kid well, like we have at our school, then that’s good pressure. But where there’s pressure for just test results, test results, test results, then I think it loses all the reasons that people go into teaching, and all the passion and fun of it.
In the closing moments of our interview, Claire reflected on how the current conditions of schooling threaten kids, parents, and teachers:

I went to one of the high school fairs this year, and found out how these pressures are affecting us all. When you go and talk to parents and students who are entering high school, they’re so demoralized by the options that are out there. It appears that there are not nearly enough options in terms of good schools for the number of kids who need it. I think that sort of weighs on anyone who’s in the system, because then it seems as if public education is not that valued. So public teachers are not that valued and that is just so apparent then. It has an effect on these kids that we’re teaching, that they sort of know that their education is not really valued . . . I think also about how much of the media attention is focused on how terrible the schools are. Kids come with all sorts of expectations about school being terrible. And parents, too. When you look at our building, it only reinforces the idea that public schools are in a terrible state.

Wary of Support of the Wrong Sort

Another theme raised by many new teachers, especially those who worked in high poverty “hard to staff” schools, was their wariness toward the state-mandated mentoring they received as new teachers. Michael and Ted, New York City Teaching Fellows who work in challenging middle schools in Queens, were, like many of the teachers we interviewed, of two minds about support. On the one hand, they believe support is critical to their improvement as teachers. On the other hand, they are skeptical of the kind of support they get when they ask for it. Ted notes that non-interference is sometimes the best form of “support” he can expect for his teaching, especially in the context of scripted lessons and mandated curriculum:

And as long as you’re not doing anything terrible, then you’re pretty much on your own, and can do what you want. And the problem is that I also feel very hesitant to get support, because I don’t want anyone coming in my classroom and getting in my face, because my experience with the administration is that when I ask for help, it winds up being no help and more work . . . and first of all, then I have someone sitting in my classroom, on a more regular basis, looking over my shoulder, telling me everything that they think that I’m doing wrong, making nine out of ten suggestions that I’ve either already tried and have failed or suggestions that I know for a fact that if I implemented them in my classroom that it’s going to be disastrous.

As far as Ted is concerned, the assumptions behind scripted lesson are antithetical to the healthy growth and development of new teachers:
Teaching is not formulaic. There is not one way to teach. Assuming so is foolhardy. A scripted curriculum stifles a teacher's creativity. How are we supposed to teach students to develop their own voices or to think outside the box if we, the teaching community, are prohibited from doing just that?

Michael believes that following others’ scripts is not only antithetical to good teaching but also produces, somewhat ironically, unnecessary work for teachers:

It takes me longer to do a scripted lesson than to do one of my own. I mean it’s almost cryptic the way they write these lessons . . . [and] I feel that it takes such a long time to read it and try to figure out what they are asking me to do—which is very often not clear at all—and then I have to translate it to a lesson that I can apply to my kids. So it’s three steps as opposed to two. Like with me [on my own] it’s “[1] what do I want to do, and [2] how I am going to do it. Here it’s, “[1] what do they want me to do, then [2] what am I going to do, and [3] how am I going to do it”. . . . It really is a puzzle, and at nine o’clock at night it gives me such a headache. And a lot of other teachers that I talk to say their brains hurt trying to figure out these lessons.

Teaching to the Test

Many of our interview subjects reported that a message of accountability permeates their schools, especially those with a lot at stake in proving themselves as quality institutions. We heard a regular refrain from high school teachers, “In terms of school climate, it’s all about the Regents.” Some teachers mentioned the divisiveness introduced into their schools by the overwhelming influence of high-stakes testing. While a few teachers hailed the tests as a much-needed corrective to the deterioration of high school learning standards, others decried the tests’ negative impact on students, curriculum, and teaching. Many others we interviewed told stories of highly regarded teachers who left teaching or retired early due to high-stakes testing. In one school, friction developed between faculty and school leadership when the administration brought in an outsider who was hired to shore up support for the Regents tests and introduce teachers to test prep methods and curriculum geared to raising scores.

Another theme emerging from these interviews was the degree to which high-stakes tests drove curriculum. Many social studies teachers likened their teaching to a “forced march.” They felt constrained by a curriculum that allows little room for student-centered approaches such as cooperative learning, role play, and simulation. One complained, “I never get to spend any amount of time on what I want to do and it is terrible.” Another commented, “The whole movement is destructive to innovation and alternatives.” Several
noted the damaging effects of this regimen on students: “It really annoys me that I can’t veer away from the prescribed curriculum and do something more in depth. And the students want it in more depth. They’re always asking me, ‘Why can’t we spend more time on this?’”

**TALES OF RESISTANCE AND COMPROMISE**

Not all the schools our subjects worked in experienced high levels of turnover. Perhaps this stems from the fact that many of our most satisfied new teachers, typically those who had graduated from their master’s programs before beginning teaching, had sought jobs in schools where a community of teachers and administrators shared their commitment to improving urban education. Nevertheless, even many of these individuals struggled with whether they would remain teaching in New York City’s schools. Whether it was battle fatigue over the politics of maintaining waivers from the Regents exams, conflict between teachers and administrators bent on raising test scores, or coping with 175 students a day, the reasons they gave for leaving New York City schools were abundant.

Perhaps in places outside New York City where passing five Regents exams for high school graduation is taken for granted, the problems posed by the culture of accountability are not experienced as acutely as they are by our subjects. The contrast between the wealth of many suburban schools outside New York City and the conditions of schools in New York City could not be more vividly captured than in books such as Jonathan Kozol’s (1992) *Savage Inequalities* or *The Shame of the Nation* (2005). The head of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity across New York State’s school districts, Michael Rebell (2005), has shown that New York State school districts in the wealthiest areas spend almost twice what those with the lowest property wealth spend, a formula which leaves New York City’s schools grossly under-funded. Students in the poorest school districts such as New York City, where 85% of students are children of color, are expected to achieve at the same level as those in the wealthiest districts spending twice as much on their children’s education (Joshee & Johnson, 2005).

In New York City schools, passing or failing high-stakes tests hangs in the balance for many students due to a complex set of factors, most notably, the high number living in or near poverty, low levels of literacy among many students, and the large number of recent immigrants with language differences. The teachers interviewed for our study overwhelmingly judged the impact of high-stakes testing in negative terms, both for their students and their own teaching lives. Even those who believe that testing is a reasonable method for elevating educational standards in New York City schools expressed regret about the degree to which their teaching has become more traditional and constrained in order to accommodate a felt need for teaching to the test.
Our subjects told us that the current emphasis on high-stakes testing makes them feel they must use more multiple choice tests, spend more time administering sample tests, limit in-depth exploration of topics, and adopt textbooks designed to keep students moving through the curriculum at a brisk pace. Many have had to abandon the portfolios they previously used to gauge student work over time. They know their students should be reading primary sources and doing more writing, but they simply cannot find the time. While they resist the curricular and pedagogical impositions, they are constantly negotiating a set of compromises between what’s required and what they believe to be best for student learning. The resilience of these teachers in the face of working conditions they find discouraging is inspiring. Still, we are worried that these conditions will aggravate the already high rates of attrition plaguing New York City’s schools.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW YORK CITY’S SCHOOLS

With the near certainty that NCLB will bring new tests into the high school curriculum in coming years, the trend towards further intensification of teachers’ work in New York City and across the country will surely not abate. This raises a large question for a school system already struggling with meeting the demands of the culture of accountability: What will be the impact of this movement on teachers, especially those whose academic credentials and strong teacher education preparation provide them with other options about where to teach?

Since educational research has shown that teachers who leave teaching are often those whom policymakers are most interested in attracting and keeping (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2004), and since research also shows the importance of having highly able teachers in classrooms (Darling-Hammond et al, 2005), the acute dissatisfaction we have heard from new teachers about their working conditions triggers our concern, a harbinger, perhaps, of hemorrhaging rates of retention down the road.

Undoubtedly, increasing the number of good teachers in New York City and other urban areas will be costly. Retaining good teachers by creating more suitable physical spaces, intellectually robust classrooms, and professional working environments presents an enormous challenge, one that must be addressed through a variety of measures at the local, state, and federal levels. Among the thorny issues to be grappled with are deconstructing the “apartheid” system (Kozol, 2005) of schooling that exists in this country, funding schools in more equitable ways, and putting policies and practices in place to professionalize teaching. What remains to be seen is whether politicians, policymakers, and the public have the collective wisdom and will to improve education in ways that support rather than demoralize and drive away good teachers.
Let us hope that we do: what is at stake is excellent education for all the nation’s children.

REFERENCES


