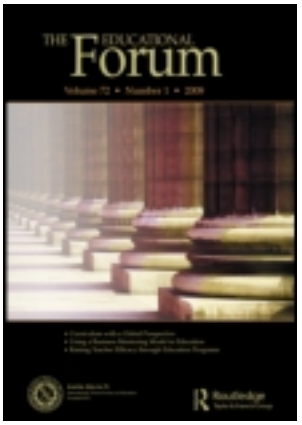

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The Rules of Engagement: Examining the Limits of Standards and Accountability Policy

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Abstract
Standards and accountability policies are central elements of school reform agendas aimed at equalizing students' access to quality education and closing the achievement gap. Yet, such policies have failed to yield the expected, large scale results. One explanation may be found in the embedded zones of wishful thinking. Two particular zones of wishful thinking are the policies' efficacy to foster deep learning and the standards' ability to create cohesive P–12 systems of educational excellence.

Key words: *accountability policies, achievement, learning, school reform, standards.*

The belief that standards-based accountability will forge the path for student achievement and school effectiveness is a compelling one. This belief has aggressively permeated the culture of school districts, particularly in urban districts serving students in the highest needs areas. The standards-based accountability policies that flooded the arena of school reform with sanctions and rewards for achievement among disaggregated student groups under the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) have been well received between legislatures and the public alike. In many urban areas, such as New York City, the embrace of standards and accountability has sprouted outgrowths of quality review examinations of schools and pay-for-performance policies, as well as determinations of teacher tenure based on student performance. While the aim is to hold schools accountable for the quality of teaching and learning at the classroom level, this belief and its resulting policies have yet to produce the desired sustainable, large-scale outcomes. Despite reported gains in test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in some urban districts (Council of Great City Schools, 2008;

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U.S. Department of Education, 2003), these scores have continued to remain consistently below the national average. Harris and Herrington (2006) concluded from their research on accountability, standards, and the achievement gap that while the steady gains of minority students over the past half century reflect progress, the link between achievement and race/ethnicity persists. That is, minority students still score nearly a full standard deviation below Caucasian students. Achievement results for low-income students are equally forlorn in comparison to those of their higher socioeconomic counterparts.

The persistent racial and income-based achievement gaps reflect only a few challenges that undermine educational equity. Easley (2009) showed that even high performing high school graduates are likely to report being unprepared for a competitive 21st century workforce in the absence of postsecondary education. The consortium of the Conference Board, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the Society for Human Resource Management (2006) held a corroborating position, reporting that high school graduates, in general, are less likely than college graduates to be prepared for today's workforce. These findings give credence to new efforts to realign existing standards with ready-for-college and ready-for-work knowledge and skills.

For the students in need of the most assistance to make Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB, the theories-of-action that inform standards and accountability policies harbor several zones of wishful thinking. Zones of wishful thinking (Hill & Celio, 1998) operate in such a manner that, while a policy may assume certain outcomes, it can only account for its partial means and/or outputs. Because policies are often implemented within open systems, the full range of factors influencing their efficacy cannot be adequately estimated beforehand. Miller, Benjamin, and North (2010) explained that government policies have unintended consequences, and that pronouncements of their effects commonly misinterpret their impact due to the limitation of analysts' abilities to account for the full range of actions people would otherwise have taken. For example, it is assumed that standards and accountability policies for student achievement will increase the capacity for improving teaching and learning. It is believed that a focus on standards and accountability will: (a) level the playing field for student achievement across communities of learners by making clear to schools and parents what students should be able to know and do at particular points throughout their P–12 matriculation, thereby improving instructional quality; and that (b) student learning will increase, thereby bringing closure to the racial and economic-based achievement gaps. Yet, this logic is made wishful in the absence of attention to critical elements and conditions unaccounted for by the theories-of-action that inform current policies.

While standards and accountability policies have certainly turned school administrators' attention to issues such as teacher quality and the use of test data to inform instructional planning, two conditions remain largely unattended to: (a) the core elements of the teaching and learning process that foster deep learning for students, and (b) the systematic, uninterrupted coherence of instructional quality from one grade to the next represent two specific zones of wishful thinking. An understanding of these zones is essential for educational reform that truly improves and sustains student learning.

Reflecting on Education Preparation Programs

Goals 2000 ushered in a federal mandate for states to create content area standards. The standards movement, in part, was anchored in the belief that by establishing a common set of expectations for what students should be able to know and do, and by sharing these expectations among teachers, administrators, and communities, student achievement would increase. Since that time, we have seen the tight coupling of standards and accountability through market-based sanctions and rewards that pull on the purse strings of schools according to their ability to make AYP. As a result, schools focus on student achievement data (mainly reported by scores on standardized tests) to determine effectiveness and inform curriculum and instruction. In this regard, NCLB has perhaps achieved its greatest success. In fact, the attention to data resulting from standardized tests has become a cornerstone of much proposed legislation.

Schools have adopted various curricular and school governance models in order to raise student achievement and institutional effectiveness, such as the Backwards Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) curriculum planning model and Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998) for collaboration to increase student achievement. Teachers cite differentiation (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008) and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983, 1999) as informing their instructional decisions. These curricular, governance, and instructional considerations converge as teachers and principals convene during meetings to discuss student data.

In New York City, for example, disaggregated student data are routinely shared, often to groups of teachers at a single grade level or to a cluster of teachers who share students. The data are reported on students' achievements and skills as aligned with targeted standards and/or skills. The language used commonly conjures up expressions such as "covering" or "hitting" the standards, and decisions for instructional remediation are made for students who have failed to meet the standards. Teachers and principals tend to regard these routine meetings as learning communities and describe them as spaces for teachers to share best practices for advancing student achievement.

In both my teacher education and leadership preparation courses, I ask students, many of whom are teachers of record, or interns as teachers, or principals in training, "What do you do when test data reveal that certain students have not met the targeted goals?" They typically report that they reteach the lesson. I probe further, "And if subsequent test data indicate that students still did not achieve the target, what course of action do you take?" With few exceptions, both groups respond that they proceed to the next lesson, citing demands of curricular pacing as the reason they "move on." The culture of schools, particularly low performing schools, is hit hardest by the demands of accountability policies, namely to make AYP. Diamond and Spillane (2004) explained this culture as one of selective academic press. As such, these schools are more likely to use test data to target select grade levels, students, or content areas in order to ward off the threat of probation with limited discussions about instructional implications. They are less likely to examine data in complex ways to define students' individual learning needs and to inform schoolwide instructional decisions for both high and low achievers (Diamond & Spillane, 2004). This is a culture learned by teacher interns, practicing teachers, and aspiring administrators in many urban schools, or at least in those where most of my current students work.

When I ask, "What does the test data in your schools tell you about how students learn?," I am often met with silence and blank stares as though my students fear this to be a trick question. I then redirect my line of questioning to one that is more concrete. "In your opinion, do you think that the test data used in your schools provide you with insights into the cognitive processes of students?" Even during a recent professional development workshop of more than 100 teachers and building leaders from the Charleston, South Carolina, area, the most common response was simply, "No." The critical teaching and learning issues raised by such responses are as follows: (x) How do students learn, particularly at the conceptual level by which they move beyond memorization of discrete facts to see the relationships among concepts and begin to make generalizations? (y) How do students use certain tools needed to test these generalizations through further investigation? and (z) What is the possibility that the traditional use of student data may inform teachers' instructional practices to foster x and y?

Taken together, these issues reflect one zone of wishful thinking of the traditional focus on and utilization of standardized test data. The logic of NCLB expresses that the standards and accountability policies will shine a light on what President Bush termed the "soft bigotry of low expectations" and will, consequently, improve instructional practices. Conversations with the educators mentioned above reveal that while traditional standardized test data are effective for tracking students' achievement toward standardized aims and assessing relevant achievement gaps, in their current use, they are less accommodating for helping teachers to understand how students learn (i.e., unearthing the cognitive processes and strategies that students use to make meaning of information at the conceptual level within and across content areas). In addition, the conversations during coursework troubled the assumptions that instructional differentiation through the multiple intelligences addresses students' thinking for meaning making. Rather, it became clear that such differentiations, as applied in their schools, more accurately served as the means through which students access information. Thus, discussions about how information is transformed into knowledge through social contexts (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Schön, 1983) and reflective practice followed. These conversations delved into how meaning making is accomplished through negotiations by which students actively engage in the social, cognitive, and emotional processes of learning. As a result, the notion of student "participation," supported by school cultures that pay a high regard to the routine of teachers asking questions and students raising their hands to provide the correct answers, became transformed. Candidates of both the teacher and leadership preparation programs began to question the measure of high quality instructional interaction commonly noted during classroom observations in their schools—a practice by which students are expected to memorize, recall, and readily report on facts and formulas when called upon. The concept of students' "engagement" in meaning making ensued. Engagement (Easley, 2011; Wenger, 1998) in this regard is the process by which students take up ideas, privately and socially. This process is cognitive, and social, "even when it does not clearly involve interactions with others" (Wenger, 1998, p. 57) —that is, students' learning is influenced through reflection, through their participation in the world as observers, thinkers, and emotional beings, with their learning continually expanded and retooled as new knowledge is generated. This process is dynamic. Based on conversations with teacher and leadership candidates, its outcomes cannot be fully measured by the current standardized test scores reported in schools.

This dynamic process of meaning making is typically not discussed in the schools where my class participants work. The process is often absent during leadership internships in which future principals participate in learning walks, supervision activities, and school improvement meetings. Tony Wagner (2008) reported similar findings, explaining that in most schools and school districts that he visited, a common expectation for and explicit description of high quality teaching and learning were missing.

This line of reasoning brings into question unexamined assumptions about student engagement in meaning making and the instructional practices that unearth an understanding of students' cognitive process and strategies in order to foster deep learning in and across content areas. My students asked for an instructional model that can be practiced both during university courses as well as in their classrooms with their P–12 students. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) showed that not only is the concept of instructional leadership highly misunderstood, it lacks clarity and is often used in slogan fashion among superintendents, principals, and teachers. The roles of the teacher and the principal are found to be the two most important school-related factors that determine what students learn (Leithwood et al., 2004). Most teacher education and leadership preparation programs focus on instruction and pedagogy, classroom management, and learning theory, attending to the canonized educational theories and/or practices that Firestone and Pennell (1993) described as fostering a commitment to teaching rather than a commitment to students' (deep) learning. Few of these programs have mastered courses that help teachers and principals systematically examine students' learning processes, strategies, and meaning making within and across content areas in order to calibrate instructional planning and delivery for the advancement of students' learning.

Focusing on Student Learning

The focus on students' learning processes and meaning making is undergirded by the need for a cultural shift in what is measured as quality teaching and learning. Based on conversations with educators during coursework, many of their classrooms can be described as environments in which teachers lead students to convergent responses (i.e., the right answers) and teacher-pleasing behaviors (i.e., sitting still, raising one's hand to speak, following orders, etc.). Thus, attention is not given to students' deep learning in a systematic manner.

According to Martin Simon (personal communication, October 16, 2008), a distinguished professor of mathematics whose research focuses on understanding the process by which students develop mathematical concepts through activity, teachers and future administrators should begin by thinking about their own learning and the learning of their students. One way to reflect on meaning making is through the 5 E's Constructivist Model (Bybee, 1997), in which students Engage, Explore, Explain/Elaborate, Expand, and Evaluate. This model is designed to place students in structured, concept-based activities in which they engage in exploration, articulation, and evaluation of their thinking. Other experiential learning models have been modified, with particular attention paid to cultural relevancy, as exemplified by Moran's (2001) espoused processes of culture learning. As such, students are asked to respond to new knowledge in ways that personalize schemata building.

Redesigning traditional standardized tests to move beyond the assessment of content area achievement gaps and toward cognitive analytical assessments would reposition teachers' and administrators' attention from "assessment of learning" toward "assessment for learning" (Stiggins, 2005), fostering student engagement and strengthening teachers' decision making to align instructional practices with students' varied learning needs and cognitive processes. Though there has been some advancement with certain state-based standardized mathematics tests requiring students to show their work and explain their processes, typically these redesigned exams still fall short of deep conceptual learning and are not utilized broadly from state-to-state. The quality of state exams and their related curricula became a source of debate among educational advisors during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Linda Darling-Hammond, President Obama's advisor at the time, explained that the curricula offered in the United States are geared primarily to "rote" skills—memorizing pieces of information—and conducting simple operations based on formulas or rules that are not sufficient for the demands of modern life or for the new standards being proposed nationally and internationally" (2007, p. 330).

Focusing on Instructional Coherence

A second zone of wishful thinking of current standards and accountability policies is that shared expectations among parents, teachers, and schools will result in increased and consistent student learning. While many school districts have adopted textbook series and curriculum pacing charts as a means of standardizing instructional practices across schools, there are few reports of school districts producing systematic and continuous improvements in student achievement from one grade to the next, particularly for low income and minority populations. Urban public schools, which serve the majority of the racial minority and low income student populations (i.e., approximately 50%) in the United States (Center on Education Policy, 2006), produced greater achievement gains in reading and mathematics for elementary schools compared to years past during 2006–2007, but these gains waned at the secondary level (Council of Great City Schools, 2008). McKinsey and Company (2009) explained that based on the Program for International Student Achievement (PISA) outcomes, the longer U.S. students stay in school, the larger the achievement gap widens between them and their international counterparts. The report clarifies that this effect is not limited to the economically poor, but rather reflects the gap for most students across economic groups.

While U.S. elementary schools tend to fare better on an international comparison, the decline in achievement in upper grades may by be due, in part, to the lack of coherence in curricular and instructional programming from one academic level to the next. State initiatives to create P–16 curricula have failed to foster high levels of consistent student achievement. In the absence of teachers looping with their students from one grade level to the next and the feeder patterns among certain magnet and charter schools, teachers and leaders from elementary schools and middle school rarely interface with one another. As students progress throughout the P–12 system, the persistent downward turn in achievement is couched within a pedagogy of blame (Easley, 2005) in which administrators and teachers within the system apply a top-down blame game for its failures. In this case, high school teachers often point to middle school teachers for students' lack of academic preparation and so forth. This fact has not gone unnoticed by certain entrepreneurial entities such as

the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). The network of public charter schools has begun to expand its middle level college preparatory programming to include elementary and high school feeder patterns in select cities. However, there is a belief among some district leaders that systemic cohesion is not the aim. New York City's former Chancellor, Joel Klein (2009), stated during his keynote address at the National Charter Schools Conference', that 'it is not about a great school system; it is about a system of great schools,' explaining that systems are political entities. He did not address the status of schools operating in silos rather than in a coherent fashion with vertical alignment of teaching and learning practices from one unit to the next. Even when such coherence does occur, it is more likely available to select students rather than the public at large.

Curricular coherence is defined as the integration of important ideas and concepts, typically thematically. These are often developed in graduated complexity across content areas and grade levels. In a discussion with several high school principals at an assessment workshop, the issue of curricular and instructional coherence among the elementary, middle, and high school experiences within their districts arose. They confessed that other than the purchase of a textbook series, no systematic efforts had been made to forge a coherent academic continuum across units by bringing together grade level teachers from elementary, middle, and high schools to plan for seamless curricular and instruction transitions throughout students' matriculation.

This critical zone of wishful thinking may simultaneously inform the prevailing low graduation rates among racial minority high school students. It has been estimated that nearly 600,000 U.S. high school students of the class of 2008 dropped out of school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). While the national graduation rates among White and Asian/Pacific Island students hover just below 80%, Latino and African American students tend to graduate from high school at a rate only slightly above 50% (Greene, 2001; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). According to Orfield et al. (2004), the rates for Black, Native American, and Hispanic males entering 9th grade and graduating in the 12th grade with a regular diploma are 43%, 47%, and 48%, respectively (p. 2). Pinkus (2008) revealed that early-warning data consistently implicated certain academic factors, many of which were classified as compounding, that were exhibited well before students entered high school as more accurate predictors of student dropout than socioeconomic factors. In some districts, the chances that a student will be a future dropout have been attributed to poor academic performance as early as the fourth grade (Pinkus, 2008, p. 2). Yet, these early-warning data cannot be collected, analyzed, and acted upon systemically and longitudinally in the absence of instructional and curricular coherence across grade levels along the P–12 trajectory.

One response to this zone of wishful thinking is to rethink the culture of teacher and school isolation. The current federal accountability policies, steeped in a market-based accountability (MBA) model of punishment and reward, tend to produce contradictory results. These policies function in a manner that honors individual teachers and schools as the arbitrators of students' academic success rather than encouraging collaboration and coherence-building across educational units. Current MBA policies tend to produce "islands of excellence," in which schools compete for resources in the "race to the top"

rather than bringing teachers and schools together for the development of "systems of excellence." In a system of excellence, rewards are applied at both the micro and macro levels to promote programming calibrated according to early-warning data and students' unique learning needs. In such a system, teachers and schools communicate across units to discuss instructional and curricular coherence, whereby meaning making is integrative from grade to grade for conceptual congruence. In such a system, the appropriate resources are aligned to support coherence building, and the rules of the blame game are rewritten to foster reciprocal accountability.

Conclusion

While the theories-of-action for educational reform policies rationalize their intended outcomes, those informing the nation's current standards and accountability practices obfuscate embedded zones-of-wishful-thinking that render the desired large-scale outcomes unlikely. Yet, standards-based reforms are not going away any time soon, as Malone and Nelson (2006) explained: "We gain little by not supporting the standards movement, but we gain immensely in learning what we do not know; what we do know that is flawed; and what we need to know to exist in the global age" (p. 123). Attention to the zones of wishful thinking reflects the important examination of what we do not know about the current standards and accountability policies.

Examination of the unattended to zones of wishful thinking, conditions, and practices associated with standards and accountability policies is essential for reframing the theories that inform them. Such examination is equally important for shaping considerations for future legislation. While many of the failures of No Child Left Behind are masked by highlighting individual and isolated successes, most policy makers and educators would agree that the promise of a large-scale rise in student achievement has yet to be fulfilled. Collins (2009) explained that dissenting voices from those who are affected by social problems like racism are often countered by hyper-attention to individual successes, thereby masking persistent problems. Similar defenses can be found in the policy arena, which shines a spotlight on the successes of individual schools and other islands of success. In spite of this, policy juggernauts tend to press forward with the expansion of their agendas in compelling ways, while paying little attention to the zones of wishful thinking and partial capacity of current enactments to yield full scale results.

The Obama administration gained increasing support among the nation's governors for the enactment of the Common Core Standards. Yet, Spillane (2004) warned that, "If history is a reasonably reliable guide, then, we can expect that state standards initiatives are unlikely to curtail [traditional] instructional policymaking in local school districts" (p. 18). It would seem as though a move toward commonly shared standards throughout the nation may offer a reasonable solution to the failure of state standards to yield high student achievement nationwide; yet, without an assessment of the related conditions that produced the instructional policy-making alluded to by Spillane, the substitution of one set of standards for another is unlikely to be a silver bullet. The mere substitution of national level standards for state standards, without attending to critical zones of wishful thinking, is likely to re-inscribe what economist Paul Krugman (1998, p.17) called "emotionally satisfying fictions."

While deep learning and instructional coherence are not inherently predictive outcomes for the current standards and accountability policies, these unattended-to conditions do not reflect the full extent to which zones of wishful thinking make theories-of-action and policy-based reforms problematic. Nor are these zones of wishful thinking reflective of simplistic limitations of the current school reform agenda. Rather, much can be learned from the limited capacity of such policies to produce the desired large scale, sustainable student learning needed to close the achievement gap. Examination of the zones of wishful thinking must inform both policies and practices for teacher preparation, cohesive P–12 instructional programming, and overall educational quality.

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