education review // reseñas educativas
editors: david j. blacker / gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

December 12, 2013 ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
the National Education Policy Center, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University
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Bower, Joe & Thomas, P.L. (Eds.) (2013) *de-testing + de-grading schools: Authentic Alternatives to Accountability and Standardization*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers, Inc.

Pp. ix + 276 ISBN 978-1-4331-2239-2

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In *de-testing + de-grading schools: Authentic Alternatives to Accountability and Standardization*, Joe Bower and P. L. Thomas bring together essays that provide a landscape of high-stakes accountability and standardization in current schools. More importantly, they highlight the ways in which administrators, teachers, and teacher educators are negotiating this landscape to lessen the presence of grades and testing their classrooms and schools. Bower and Thomas provide a strong case against high-stakes accountability and standardization by bringing together a

Citation: Clark, J. Spencer. (2013 December 12) Review of *de-testing + de-grading schools: Authentic Alternatives to Accountability and Standardization, by* Joe Bower and P. L. Thomas. *Education Review, 16.* Retrieved [Date] from http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1265.pdf

wide range of perspectives and educational stakeholders from Canada and the United States (U.S.).

Bower and Thomas divided the book into two sections. The first section, "Degrading Learning, Detesting Education: The Failure of High-Stakes Accountability in Education", provides historical, philosophical, and theoretical perspectives that focus mainly on the systemic effects of accountability on students' learning and schools as learning environments. The authors in this section focus especially on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. They highlight how NCLB has failed to realize its promises to schools, students, and teachers. More importantly, several of the authors identify ways in which the NCLB legislation has imposed damage to communities, schools, students, and teachers by focusing on "the processing of children at the cheapest possible cost" (p. 60). The damages are only intensified when the authors consider the continued marginalization of students based on class, gender, learning style, and race through high-stakes accountability and standardization. The authors' in this section identify specific failures of the NCLB legislation, which made the consequences of the legislation, and their connections to societal well-being, more concrete and less subject to conjecture.

A couple of the authors in the first section of the book develop unique critiques of NCLB and other policies regarding high-stakes accountability (see chapters 3 and 6). These chapters not only connect educational high-stakes accountability and standardization to US economics, but also provide comparative examples to solidify this connection. For example, author Anthony Cody uses eight components of the concept "groupthink" to frame the harmful ways that a focus on high-stakes accountability has inflated the value of educational test data. Furthermore, the inflated value has created an industry upon which many people and corporations become economically dependent for their livelihood. Such dependence has created a coercive cycle, which "has in turn produced a network of consultants, paid strategists, leveraged public administrators and legislators, media pundits, and academic grantees" (p. 44) who all depend on data-driven education to sustain their economic well-being. Cody compared the inflated value of the educational data to the recent housing bubble, in which the inflation

could also be attributed to a groupthink, and which we all know eventually burst. In terms of data-driven education, Cody believes the bubble will also burst because:

> We get swept up into this momentum, and more and more of our values an livelihoods hinge on this set of beliefs…with this particular set of beliefs, we are, as a nation, building a huge technological infrastructure of curriculum, instructional tools, assessments, and data systems based on this diehard belief that test performance will drive learning to new heights. (pp. 48-49)

Cody recommended that the sooner the educational bubble bursts the better, even though it will signify the collapse of the system, because the schools will otherwise continue to be undermined by high-stakes accountability and standardization. Cody's chapter, as well as Morna McDermott's chapter, really clarifies the deeply rooted and problematic economic connections between the high-stakes accountability and standardization movements, as well as the broader neo-liberal movements, for readers.

In the second section, "De-Grading and De-Testing in a Time of High-Stakes Educational Reform", the authors provide specific examples of how they have navigated the high-stakes accountability and standardization landscape to lessen the impact of grades and testing in their roles as administrators, teachers, and teacher educators. The authors in this section provide key distinctions between assessing and measuring students, collecting information on and evaluating students, as well as sharing information with and grading students. The authors in this section also highlight the agency of individuals to counter the enormous structural constraints of high-stakes accountability that were outlined in the first section. As John Hoben notes, grading "is something like a neat trick that power plays on us to rob us of our agency" (p. 181) because grading implies that obedience and devotion to the system will provide individual success, possibly even social mobility, but it is success that is socially constructed within a system of inequity. Like Hoben, several of the authors argue that lessening the presence of grading and testing in schools will create more democratic, engaged, equitable, and student-centered classrooms.

The chapter from Alfie Kohn, "Case Against Grades," anchors the book's second section. This chapter is pivotal to the collection of essays as a whole, and provides a

framework for understanding the effect of grades on students, as well as the problematic nature of grades. While Kohn's arguments in this chapter may have been familiar to some, they carry fresh nuance in combination with the chapters that preceded and followed it. The recommendations made by Kohn suggested that the issue of grading is systemic and terribly difficult to challenge or even change. However, the chapters that follow Kohn's essay provid glimpses of how those challenges can take shape; and in the case of Peter DeWitt's chapter, how a whole school can shift, even if only for a week, to a non-graded and non-tested environment. The logic and research that support Kohn's points in his chapter come to life as a result of the examples in the other chapters of the book.

Co-editor Joe Bower's chapter further conceptualizes the points in Kohn's essay by examining the role of judgment in assessing students' work. Bower distinguishes judgment from simply sharing information with students about their learning and noted, "we often seriously overestimate the effectiveness of judgment and evaluation and a precondition for learning" (pp. 158-159). Citing Bruner, Bower advocated for students to experience success and failure not as reward and punishment, but as information. He also used the example of UCLA college basketball coaching great John Wooden, in which a study of his practices demonstrated that he merely gave information to his players nearly 87% of the time, instead of disapproval or praise. Bower believes that circumventing judgment in the assessment of his students is the most effective way to avoid many of the inherent traps of grading identified by Kohn. I think this is a very valuable point for all educators. However, for most educators, it will require a complete paradigm shift in how they approach grading and more importantly their relationships with their students. Regardless, Bower provides a good example for those readers entertaining such a shift.

Each chapter of the second section of the book explicitly or implicitly addresses issues of individual, collective, or institutional agency. However, the concept of agency was most salient in Lisa William-White's concluding chapter. She discusses the preparation of emergent, or pre-service, teachers to teach authentically for social justice. Assessment is a common concern for many pre-service teachers as they leave teacher education (Heafner, 2004;

Mertler, 2003; Mertler & Campbell, 2005; Sigel & Wissehr, 2011), and often times they lack an adequate understanding of the role of assessment and high-stakes accountability in their teaching (Campbell & Evans, 2000; Stiggins, 2002). William-White identifies the collective need for teacher educators to address equity issues surrounding high-stakes accountability in teacher education and noted, "cultivating radical and progressive educators who are committed to social justice teaching has become increasingly challenging within this age of accountability, particularly when training candidates within a context with competing objectives, outcomes, and assessment goals" (p. 255). Despite the challenges, cultivating pre-service teachers' resilience in a high-stakes accountability context and their ability to assess students in more constructive ways (Clark, 2011) is the only foreseeable path to positively burst the data-driven education bubble identified by Cody. Furthermore, these issues cannot be solely addressed in teacher education because novice teachers face many challenges associated with assessment and accountability once they enter the teaching profession, such as professional acceptance (Clark, 2013). Therefore, in-service educators need to understand the issues addressed by William-White, and this book was helpful in identifying the opportunities for educators actively to resist the dominant and systemic constraints of grading and testing. The essays and examples in this book also make it clear that systemic change requires individual agency and resilience to develop a collective resistance to high-stakes accountability and standardization (Clark, Heron-Hruby, & Landon-Hays, In Press).

Overall, this collection of essays is very helpful in thinking about possibilities in the current educational system, that might allow for administrators, teachers, and teacher educators to educate in ways that counteract the current high-stakes accountability movements. I was especially compelled by the combination of chapters by Peter DeWitt, an administrator, and Brian Rhode, a teacher at DeWitt's school. These accounts helped me consider the possibility of future work on this topic, especially regarding a future study on the de-grading and de-testing of an entire school. An in depth look at the collective effort of a school to combat high-stakes accountability and standardization would be immensely helpful for

administrators, teachers, and teacher educators trying to navigate the high-stakes accountability and standardization landscape. Research of this nature would benefit from including the voices of other stakeholders at the school, especially student voices. While this book focused on the ways high-stakes accountability can shape positive and negative learning experiences in the classroom, there should be more attention given to the voices of students who learned in these classrooms. For example, in the second section, the authors report that students were more engaged and that parents appreciated the efforts to de-grade and de-test. However, readers would have benefitted more by hearing these voices to shed further light on the affordances that educators, like DeWitt and Rhode, made a reality. Without students' voices, and possibly parents' voices, the reader is limited by the author/educators own judgment and evaluation of their own efforts to lessen the impact of grading and testing in their educational context.

The purpose of this book was to offer a map of the high-stakes accountability and standardization landscape, and more importantly to provide ways to navigate this landscape in positive ways. Bower and Thomas are successful in this regard and have provided a powerful critique that equally identifies powerful alternatives to high-stakes accountability. Overall, this is a fresh look at how to meld the theories behind de-grading and de-testing schools with actual classroom practice. This book could be a useful tool for instructors of pre-service methods and assessment courses, and possibly educational foundations courses at all levels, as it provides both an analysis of key aspects of a failing system of accountability and possible alternatives to it.

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The National Education Policy Center http://nepc.colorado.edu, and the
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