

Learning to Teach in an Age of Accountability: Middle Level Student Teachers and High Stakes Test Preparation

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This paper reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristic: Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the experiences of 33 middle school student teachers who are learning to teach in an era of standardized testing and investigated a recurring question in the current era of accountability as measured by high stakes test scores—to what extent is it possible to maintain meaningful instruction, while integrating ethical high stakes test preparation strategies?

Let's start with the really important question first. What should our students learn in schools? I have asked that question across the nation; I have asked school board members, legislators, CEOs, parents, superintendents, principals, teachers and students. Their answers were remarkably similar: Learn how to learn, problem-solving, a broad sense of history, communication skills, responsibility, a sense of self-worth, respect for others, cooperative skills, survival skills. Never, not in one case did any one list higher scores on achievement tests or basic skills at the top of the list.

Jane Stallings, Dean, Texas A & M, 1987

Today's middle level teachers not only consider what to teach and how to teach it, but also how to prepare students for high-stakes tests in ways that are ethical, effective and will not narrow the depth or breadth of meaningful, appropriate middle school curriculum.

Is integrating test preparation into the curriculum good instruction? It may be a null argument—in the current age of educational accountability, good instruction, by default, has become instruction that raises students' test scores (Grant, 2000; Rex & Nelson, 2004). When preparing students for high-stakes exams, the central question most middle-level teachers ask is can they prepare students for the tests without setting aside

what they know to be true about effective teaching and learning? While many researchers have explored the encroachment of high stakes testing on teaching in middle school, less is known about the experiences of preservice middle school teachers and how they manage instruction within a high stakes testing environment. This project presents the experiences of middle level preservice teachers who are learning to teach in an era of accountability, and who hope to maintain meaningful instruction, while integrating ethical high stakes test preparation strategies

Background and Overview

At a time when standardized test scores are highly valued, often at the expense of student learning, this project analyzes student teachers' narrative journals with the intent of expanding knowledge of the ways preservice middle school teachers negotiate the pressure of accountability. By sharing these preservice teachers' experiences, I hope to offer insight into middle level instruction and high stakes test preparation as informed by these future middle school teachers' experiences. For this project, student teachers:

- Participated in 2 small group discussions on high-stakes tests and goals of education.
- Examined and debated five high-stakes test preparation strategies the week before student teaching began.
- Submitted bi-weekly and cumulative reflection journals documenting their experiences in detail with the five strategies.
- In their journals, student teachers were asked to identify which of the five strategies they:
 - a. Could integrate with their instruction and still support student learning (wasn't isolated test prep).
 - b. Did not use or was not helpful.

Five High-Stakes Test Preparation Methods that Matter

A meta-analysis and literature review of high-stakes testing indicated teachers, researchers and measurement specialists have identified several significant high-stakes test preparation practices, which if practiced appropriately and ethically, can both help teachers demonstrate professional knowledge and support student learning during stressful instructional situations like high-stakes testing (Turner, 2009). The five most-often cited high-stakes test preparation practices in the literature were:

- (a) *Teaching to the curriculum and integrating test content.* Teaching to the curriculum suggests a middle level teacher's instruction closely follows the district's curriculum guide and provides pupils with knowledge and skills on which they will be tested.
- (b) *Integrating assessment approaches and item format.* Middle school pupils need opportunities to learn and practice a variety of assessment approaches likely to be on high stakes tests, including multiple-choice, short answer, extended response, vocabulary, word attack skills, and performance and computational tasks.
- (c) *Reviewing test-taking strategies.* Teachers can assure pupils are familiar with test-taking skills such as correctly marking answer sheets, strategies for making optimal guesses on certain types of items, and carefully allocating test-taking time.
- (d) *Judicious timing of test preparation.* Suggested intervals for test preparation occur intermittently throughout the year, with some review in close proximity to the test.
- (e) *Engaging student-motivation.* When middle grade students are not sufficiently motivated to take high stakes tests, they often mark answers randomly, engage less in critical thinking and complete test items quickly without really trying or thinking about their answers.

Methods

While acknowledging limited generalizability, preservice teachers' experiences can be translated into useful narratives that promote open investigation of the participants' perceptions of the issues under study. Reflection journals were analyzed for their common elements and differences across the 33 individual journals. Among the themes that developed into categories that were coded and analyzed:

- a. Strategy that was used most often
- b. Strategy reported to support meaningful learning and retention of content
- c. Strategy reported to lead to student engagement
- d. Strategy reported which disengaged student
- e. Strategy reported as likely to continue

Critical analysis was based on all 33 student teachers cumulative journals and this paper focuses on the experiences of a few student teachers to document a detailed application of teachers integrating test preparation. Common themes identified among all student teachers journals were: (1) increasing middle school students' academic *achievement* was a priority for each student teacher and their instructional planning reflected that purpose; (2) since it was known and communicated to pupils that high stakes tests would be occurring, each student teaching intern felt some measure of test preparation may be warranted and appropriate; (3) student teachers constantly brainstormed ways to keep pupils motivated and engaged in their learning process, or meaningful learning was less likely to occur; and (4) the majority of student teachers experienced pressure (from mentor teachers or administrators) with regard to preparing pupils for high stakes tests and were expected to integrate some measure of test preparation.

Individual Findings

1S. (First strategy) Teaching to the curriculum and integrating test content. Each of the 33 student teachers (interns) identified teaching to the district curriculum was important and indicated doing so was a significant element of their instruction. This strategy was reported by all participants as the easiest to integrate and as effective. The interns reported pretesting and compacting (focusing on curriculum students did not know).

Table 1: *Teaching to the curriculum and integrating test content*

| Method | 1S Curriculum/Test Content | |
|--|-----------------------------------|----------|
| Participants reported | Participants | % |
| a. Strategy was Integrated (tried) | 33 | 100% |
| b. Strategy Supported Meaningful instruction | 33 | 100% |
| c. Strategy Supported Student Engagement | 33 | 100% |
| d. Strategy Disengaged Students | 0 | 0% |
| e. Likely to continue using this strategy | 33 | 100% |

Other experiences reported:

I ensure the classroom content is relevant and closely aligned to district curriculum standards. I practice this strategy by displaying grade level indicator strips provided by the district, in the front of the classroom for the classroom community to observe.

I pretest students and focus instruction on concepts and content not yet mastered by students.

Teaching to the state standards is the main focus at this school....both cooperating teachers always had standards nearby as references. The textbooks used closely aligned with these standards. With the use of the textbook and the state standards handy, I was able to create varied lessons that required different levels of thinking on the students' part. Using the state standards as the main basis for lessons really is integrating test content at the same time.

I didn't "teach to the test," but instead I found appropriate activities that supported the content in which my students are expected to master by the end of the year... I have made it my mission to incorporate creativity and hands-on activities into my lessons that allow my students to explore and become active participants in their learning process. I believe that my students need a good balance between direct-instruction and inquiry learning, so I must make sure that they are both incorporated in my lessons. I do not want to eliminate these creative activities to help prepare for standardized tests because these are the activities that are motivating my students and make an impact on their learning.

2S. Integrating assessment approaches and item format. Here 32 of the 33 interns who integrated this strategy reported not just varying assessment approaches but specifically including assessments which were likely to be on high stakes tests. This was easy to implement and helped pupils show different ways that they understood or “got it,” An interesting contradiction came up— one social studies student teacher expressed regret about not including more extended response essay questions even though her students needed to practice them—she just didn't have the time to grade long essays. Another student teacher made certain to include more extended response essay questions, because her students were struggling with them.

Table 2: *Integrating assessment approaches and item format*

| METHOD | 2S Assessment Approaches | |
|--|---------------------------------|----------|
| Participants reported | Participants | % |
| a. Strategy was Integrated (tried) | 33 | 100% |
| b. Strategy Supported Meaningful instruction | 32 | 97% |
| c. Strategy Supported Student Engagement | 31 | 94% |
| d. Strategy Disengaged Students | 0 | 0% |
| e. Likely to continue using this strategy | 31 | 94% |

Other experiences reported:

[Our school] recently has implemented the use of a scantron machine. Students now mark on a bubble sheet and answer short and extended questions on an answer document.

An example of a typical test that I gave students includes multiple choice questions, short and extended response questions, social studies skills questions, and questions that reflect the usage of a chart or diagram. These are all question formats that students will see on high stakes tests.

I gave practice questions to students that we went over together or they completed on their own. We always reflected on their answers and what a correct response may look like and what a response that needs improvements looks like...it will be interesting to compare test results from this year to other years based on test format and question practice implemented in class.

While teaching math I also made sure that each unit test was comprised of multiple-choice questions, vocabulary matching, true and false statements, and extended response questions that reflected both performance and computational tasks. I even had my students answer their extended response questions on graph paper just like they do on standardized tests. I practice these assessment approaches in hopes that my students will feel more comfortable in answering a wide variety of these kinds of questions on future tests.

If [students] show their work then they are going to get a point and they know it, even if their answer is wrong, On the state tests, they award partial credit for answers. My students know that trying to solve a computation will give them partial credit. I feel that it is good preparation for the test and it is a good habit to get into.

3S. Reviewing test-taking strategies. The student teachers reported middle-level students needed to know how to take tests. Thirty-two of 33 interns indicated they consistently integrated test-taking strategies into their instruction. There was no drill reported, most often interns cited explaining test-taking strategies in the context of ‘here

are some ideas as you approach the test, here are some idea to help you do better' (succeed on the test). Five of the interns commented one of the most difficult strategies to teach their students was reading all directions for an assignment.

Table 3: *Reviewing test-taking strategies*

| METHOD | 3S Test-Taking Strategies | |
|--|----------------------------------|----------|
| Participants reported | Participants | % |
| a. Strategy was Integrated (tried) | 33 | 100% |
| b. Strategy Supported Meaningful instruction | 32 | 97% |
| c. Strategy Supported Student Engagement | 32 | 97% |
| d. Strategy Disengaged Students | 0 | 0% |
| e. Likely to continue using this strategy | 32 | 97% |

Other experiences reported:

What I have noticed while working with students of all ages and backgrounds is that tests make them anxious. They tend to fear the unknown. I review test-taking strategies every time my students are approaching a test; not just a standardized test. At the beginning of the year, my mentor teacher had the students bring in a highlighter as part of their school supplies. My mentor teacher walked through the directions with the students during the first test and taught them how to highlight and pull out the key words of the questions. After the first two months of doing so and teaching test taking strategies when the time presented itself, the students would do it on their own without ever being told to do so. This was one of the best things I learned. It really helped the students in all areas in all subjects. It made them better direction followers in general, but will also help them a great deal when taking [high stakes tests], and she taught them all of this without them even knowing.

Test taking strategies are reviewed and used throughout the year to help students practice skills to use on their achievement tests; One way that we have already began to execute strategies in short answer and extended response questions is through the school-wide usage of the acronym RAVE. The acronym stands for the following: R-Restate the question in your answer; A-Answer all parts of the question and avoid the use of pronouns; V-Use of strong vocabulary words in your writing; E-Provide a strong explanation, reasoning or examples in your response. Using the acronym helps students to organize their thoughts and provides them with a checklist when they read over their responses. It has so far been effective for all students.

I taught students how to recognize and eliminate incorrect answers to help them minimize their options and make it easier to identify the correct answer. Just by the way my class ran, my students understood that they should always make an educated guess instead of skipping a tough question. I now realize that this helped my students as a learner and as a test taker on how to make informed guesses.

4S. Judicious timing of test preparation. The timing of test preparation was cause for concern—how much is too much, student teaching interns indicated there was a fine line between preparation and pressure. This was the least-used of the five strategies— six participants indicated this strategy didn’t support meaningful instruction and was more likely to disengage students.

Table 4: *Judicious timing of test preparation*

| METHOD | 4S Timing of Test-Prep | |
|--|-------------------------------|----------|
| Participants reported | Participants | % |
| a. Strategy was Integrated (tried) | 33 | 100% |
| b. Strategy Supported Meaningful instruction | 27 | 82% |
| c. Strategy Supported Student Engagement | 27 | 82% |
| d. Strategy Disengaged Students | 1 | 3% |
| e. Likely to continue using this strategy | 28 | 85% |

Other experiences reported:

Since many of my classroom assessments follow standardized test formats, the integration of test preparation opportunities occurs almost weekly in my classroom. While the notion of standardized tests may be brought up every once in a while in my class, I make sure it is not overly stressed or deemed as more important than our own classroom goals for the year.

I occasionally like to give my students a question from previous state tests as a bell work problem. These questions will usually be aligned to the content from the previous day to see if they can apply what they learned. I never tell my students that this is a state test practice question but instead call I call it a challenge or problem of the day. This way my students are

being exposed to standardized test questions and formats without even realizing they are.

Test preparation for my students has been occurring since the beginning of the school year. Everything that we do in the classroom is a piece of the state exam puzzle; which gears them towards a passing score.

In both of my classes, students were given rubrics along with some of their major assignments or projects. They were able to assess their own work before turning it in and also were able to ask questions about what they would be graded on.

I felt that this strategy supported student learning because they knew when it was time to focus in on what to expect on the state tests. Instead of cramming at the last minute, students have taken weeks, even months to prepare.

Cramming in standardized test strategies and content right before a test is not as helpful as frequent preparation throughout the school year is. As an instructor, I try to incorporate as many test preparation strategies as possible in my lessons without the students realizing that they are preparing for a test.

5S. Engaging student-motivation. Most student teaching interns reported they used a combination of personal enthusiasm, and increasing pupils' personal connections to curriculum to engage student motivation. Most interns responding here discussed their general motivation strategies to maintain a positive class environment but four teachers indicated it was especially difficult to motivate students when high-stakes tests are looming.

Table 5: Engaging students' motivation

| METHOD | 5S Engaging Motivation | |
|--|-------------------------------|----------|
| Participants reported | Participants | % |
| a. Strategy was Integrated (tried) | 33 | 100% |
| b. Strategy Supported Meaningful instruction | 29 | 88% |
| c. Strategy Supported Student Engagement | 29 | 88% |
| d. Strategy Disengaged Students | 1 | 3% |

| | | |
|---|----|-----|
| e. Likely to continue using this strategy | 29 | 88% |
|---|----|-----|

Other experiences reported:

I also tried to create a classroom environment where my students felt comfortable enough to make guesses and not afraid to make mistakes. One student in my sixth grade classroom stated that one of my teaching strengths was “making you think you could do it and not laughing if you got something wrong.” This statement shows the classroom environment I established for my students was one where they felt motivated and encouraged to succeed. This environment provided my students with a safe place to learn and gave them the much needed support that they can pass any standardized test because they are capable of succeeding in anything they put their minds to.

In preparation for providing standardized testing to students in my language arts classroom, my cooperating teacher and I had students set a personal goal which they hope to achieve or do better. The students responded well to this and seemed to take more pride in the work they were doing, all while holding themselves responsible for their own success.

My teacher explained to students that instead of complaining and groaning every time they were forced to take another state standardized test they should instead look at it as an opportunity to prove their intelligence. She would constantly tell them “I’ve always known I was smart, now here is my chance to prove it to the world.” This little speech would always have the students building up excitement and the confidence to go and take the test to the best of their ability without letting doubt and dread cloud their abilities.

In the school where I am student teaching, student motivation seems to be a huge concern. [The students] have a “so what?” attitude about school and even high stakes testing. Personally, I have not found a way to motivate students to care about how they do on the test. To them it means nothing because they do not have to pass the tests in order to pass sixth grade. On the other hand, how can I expect these students to get motivated with all the challenges they face at home?

Summary and Conclusion

The goal of this project was to report the experiences of 33 middle school student teachers who were learning to teach in an era of standardized testing, and report what

extent they found it possible to integrate ethical and appropriate high-stakes test preparation without short-changing meaningful instruction. The majority of participants reported integrating high-stakes test preparation into middle grades instruction need not stifle effective teaching. In fact, some of the findings here suggest the opposite can occur— modeling intellectual curiosity, promoting critical thinking, attending to students' academic skills, and engaging deeply with the curriculum are all still possible even with the imposition of preparing for high-stakes testing (Libresco, 2005).

Middle level teachers who maintain instructional practices which support important principles of meaningful learning and at the same time, ensure students receive adequate test preparation, will not by themselves close troubling academic disparities which manifest themselves in the nation's schools. To achieve and sustain authentic gains in middle school students' academic achievement, adequate preparation for high-stakes tests is only a small part of what is needed.

Middle level teachers must continue to do what they already do well— teach creatively; plan engaging lessons with differentiation and student diversity in mind; and continue to offer young adolescents a rich, exploratory, standards-based curriculum with multiple opportunities to use their knowledge in authentic contexts. Additionally, what's needed are meaningful professional development opportunities for middle level teachers which addresses the pressures of high-stakes testing. A coherent core curriculum, fair and responsive testing policies, and widespread agreement on the kinds of knowledge, skills and abilities we expect students to have before we test them, is also needed. Otherwise, the students in our nation's middle schools, caught between a crossfire of high-stakes testing and accountability, will likely receive the kind of educational

experiences that stifle learning, rather than the responsive, developmentally appropriate education all middle school students truly deserve. A student teacher learning to teach in a culture of testing sums up her perspective on accountability this way:

I personally see that value in high stakes testing. I don't believe that teachers should be teaching to the test, meaning constant review questions and timed multiple choice and essay sessions. What I do think is that teachers need to follow their state standards and cover them as completely as they can, provide authentic and engaging activities for students when they can, and take as many opportunities as they can to make connections between old and new material. Being a teacher doesn't mean I have to teach the test, I just need to know what is on the test, know my standards, and do my job to teach students science or social studies.

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