

BOOK REVIEWS

Carnoy, M., Elmore, M., & Santee Siskin, L. (Eds.). (2003). *The New Accountability: High Schools and High-Stakes Testing*. New York: Routledge/Falmer, Softcover, 218 pages.

This book creatively investigates a central aspect of the new assessment based accountability systems in the United States: the way single schools cope with these new challenges. Despite the fact that the book suffers some methodological short-comings it still is very much recommended for careful reading.

Although the implementation of output based, assessment oriented accountability systems has many different and local sources the authors identify at least the following two as commonly underlying these efforts: removing long standing inequity of the educational system between different ethnic groups (Afro-Americans, Latinos, and Whites) and minimizing the existing gaps between input (financial resources) and output (student achievements) – that is, to raise the quality of the schools by stimulating achievement in students, especially with respect to the lowest achieving student groups.

The authors of the book focus on the strategies schools apply when dealing with external accountability and assessment systems. There were 15 schools from four American states selected for this study: three from each of the states of Kentucky, Vermont, and New York, and six from Texas. In a two year field research effort, administrators, teachers, and students to a minor extent, were interviewed concerning the way they coped with the requirements of external accountability pressure and the changes these new challenges have brought for them and for their schools.

Although the authors mention that they had chosen schools with different characteristics such as rural and city schools, large and small, public and private, and schools from a lower socio-economic sector and a higher socio-economic environment, the whole study should still be qualified as “case studies” (p. 199) which are exploratory rather than hypotheses testing.

In the first chapter a detailed overview is presented concerning the different historic routes of the implementation process of the new assessment based accountability systems in the four states in question.

This historic overview serves as an indispensable background for the next four chapters in which the authors present and analyze their collected interview material. Chapter two deals with the responses of schools in each state to the specific external accountability policies; chapter three investigates the impact of subject focused accountability – mathematics and English in particular – on untested subjects such as technology and music; chapter four deals with the role of different forms of leadership in the process of coping with external assessment, and chapter five explores student responses to standardized testing, whether high stakes were associated with it or not. In chapter six a different methodological approach was chosen – data on the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills), which has been applied since 1991, was statistically analyzed on an overall level as well as on an ethnic specific level and then compared with more general indicators for school success such as drop out rate and transition rate to college. The final two chapters, chapter seven and eight, draw implications from the results presented in the previous chapters.

When turning to formal issues of the book one quickly recognizes that the authors could have taken a second look at citations. The correlation between works quoted and referred to in the text and that included in the bibliographies at the end of each article is wanting – there are books cited or referred to in the text which are not included in the bibliography following each chapter¹, just as there are many books listed in the bibliographies for which one searches in vain in the corresponding text². In addition one also observes incongruencies concerning the year of publication between references in the text and in the bibliography³. Besides these formal shortcomings, which one may dismiss as overestimated formalism, there is a more serious problem concerning methodology (relevant to chapters 2-5, 7 & 8). Even though the authors frequently mention that their study is exploratory in nature, that they only present case studies and that the results are based on a narrow sample, this is no excuse for not detailing for the reader information on the methods used. One is left helpless: What kind of interviews were made? Structured, semi-structured, open? Have the contents of the answers been categorized? And if so, what categories have been chosen? What is the size and character of the sample: number of administrators, teachers (per school), students interviewed, age and gender distribution, test performance of the students? Only on the basis of answers to these questions do the case studies offer results, which are at least roughly interpretable – otherwise the presented results run the

risk of remaining purely anecdotal. This methodological weakness forces the authors (especially in the final two chapters) to use very vague formulations when it comes to identifying trends in or implications to be drawn from their data base. Specific examples follow: "In some cases (p. 180), "For many teachers and administrators" (p. 183), "a noticeable difference between schools" (p. 202), and "in fact there isn't much evidence" (p. 206). The reader is left in the unsatisfying position of not being able to evaluate the representativeness of these results.

The strength of the book undisputedly lies in the differentiated picture it paints of the complex reality of American high schools. It offers many interesting facets of schools that have responded very differently and with greatly varying efficiency to the imposed external assessment systems. This colourful picture offers opportunities to formulate hypotheses concerning the impacts different external accountability systems have on schools. They lead to: (a) teaching to the test and thereby neglecting a broader scope of education, (b) changes in evaluating subjects (untested subjects such as music are de-emphasized), (c) handicap schools starting with lower internal accountability systems (= usually schools with a high percentage of students from low income families) because young teachers (especially in subjects such as mathematics and physics) seek employment in well-performing schools, (d) a shift from performance based testing (school band, physics competitions) to multiple choice oriented paper and pencil tests; finally (e) the hypothesis can be formulated that state officials, despite verbally maintaining the opposite, provide little financial support for schools to improve staff and resources.

Such hypotheses and many more could easily be formulated on the basis of the rich results of this qualitative study. These hypotheses should be formulated stringently and put to severe emperico-statistical tests. To do so, questionnaires can be used at this stage of inquiry in order to gain representative data for the different state school systems and their accountability systems. Only such representative data will allow for drawing practical consequences on a reliable basis. This is an indispensable further step in order to make fertile the multifaceted results of this first step exploratory data gathering. Without this, the results presented in this book, despite its richness, will not gain the importance it undoubtedly deserves for the real improvement of school systems, not only of those in the United States.

NOTES

1. Oakes 1985, 2; Office of Technology Assessment 1992, 13; Hendrie 2000, 28; Mosco 2000, 29; LaFranchi 1987, 34; Conant Report 1959, 87; Haney 1999, 147; NAEP 2001, 148; Siskin 2000a, 177; Gutierrez & Morales 2001, 179; Miller & Allensworth 2001, 179; Heubert 2003, 181; Fuhrmann, Goertz & Duffy 2003, 181.
2. Tyack 1974, 12; Wells & Crain 1992, 12; Darling-Hammond & Asche 1991, 51; Elmore, Abelman & Fuhrmann 1996, 15; Hartocollis 1999, 51; Hoff 1999, 52; Holland 1999, 52; Mae[r?]off 1984, 52; Mills 1996, 52; Olson 2000, 52; Patton 2000, 52; Paul 1997, 52; Winter 1985, 52; De Brabander 1993, 97; Kliebard 1986, 98; McNeil 2000, 98; Kliebard 1986, 98; McNeil 2000, 98; Young 1971, 98; Rhoten et al. 2000, 145; Abelman & Elmore 1999, 192; Doyle 1999, 192; Adams & Kirst 1999, 192; Angus & Mirel 1999, 192; Boyer 1983, 192; Conant 1959, 192; Cross 1998, 192; Doyle 1999, 192; Fine 1991, 192; Firestone & Herriott 1982; Firestone, Mayrewitz & Fairman 1998, 192; Kahne, Bridge & O'Brien. 2001, 193; Kirst 2001, 193; Olson 2001b, 193; Powell, Farrar & Cohen 1985, 193; Schwartz & Robinson 2000, 193; Siskin 1994, 194; Sizer 1984, 194; Smith & O'Day 1991, 194; Uriarte 2001, 194; Wilson & Corbett 2001, 194; Beneviste et al. 2003, 209.
3. Chubb & Moe 1990/1980; Hoff 1998/1999; Mathis forthcoming/1999; DeB[b?]ray 2000/2001; McNeil & Valenzuela 1999/2001; Shrag 1999/ 2000; Metz 1991/1990; Porter 2000/2001.

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