impede serious instructional reform which is difficult to enact as it is.

In the end, it is hard to not recommend *High Stakes* for the sheer value it offers as a documentary artifact of teaching in a poor, predominantly African American community in rural Louisiana at the outset of the millennium. The Johnsons have provided us with an invaluable record of teaching at the extremes of both poverty and state-mandated accountability schemes. The authors' strategy of just telling their story, letting the facts speak for themselves through a week-by-week account of their experience, makes their point. We learn, again, that when disconnected from a coherent vision of instruction, a serious recognition of the important role of the teacher, and especially the life conditions of very poor children, these accountability schemes are absurd and only harm those who can afford them the least.

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High Stakes: Children, Testing, and Failure in American Schools. Dale D. Johnson and Bonnie Johnson. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield PUblishers, Inc., 2002, 248 pp., ISBN 0-7425-1789-6.

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Two professors, leaving academia to work in one elementary school for one year. They went for a story, one to use in their undergraduate and graduate teaching, and quickly found a story that went beyond their imagination. After serving as interim teachers for a year, they poured out a book, where they never expected to write one. The results tell of their immersion in a highly structured, under-funded school and their disappointment and recriminations about the effects of high-stakes testing. While the introduction and conclusion summarize the apparent problems of high-stakes testing, what lies between is a faithfully written chronicle that reads like a stack of 100 neatly arranged postcards from the testing zone.

Their book is a sober reminder of the negative consequences of high-stakes testing. Children at Redbud Elementary School don't compete on a level playing field to begin with; they grow up in an extremely poor, rural Parish in northwest Louisiana. The effects of the impoverished community on the life of the school are one of the themes portrayed throughout the book. In the best cases, schools are often more than the sum of the parts; but in this case, the school identified in the lowest category of performance on the state's high-stakes test. The school's problems reflect the community. Based on Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) test scores, by the end of fourth grade over 30% of the students will be held back a grade. That is the get-tough policy of consequences for individual students' test performance. A policy of automatic retention based on a single measure. it flies in the face of research. At first glance this may not appear to be

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earth-shattering news, but the Johnsons took the time to witness the year as teachers.

The more I reflect on *High Stakes,* the more I see this book as an expose, like *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (1906) or Jonathan Kozol's (1992) *Savage Inequalities.* It's a reminder to all who value free, public education as an expression of social justice and an instrument of individual and social development. The distinctly emotional appeal tries to strike a chord of unfairness and injustice. It is as if the authors will not rest until *No Child Left Behind* is re-written as *No Child's School Left Un-funded.* Will our nation become mired in the world of high stakes testing, school closings, and mass retention of students? Will our children be hampered by the old model of testing-reward and punishment?

The book is worth reading if you are involved in any aspect of the education field. As I read *High Stakes,* the narrative evoked particularly strong responses from three perspectives: (a) an active parent and community member, (b) a teacher of graduate education courses in classroom assessment and in research methods, and (c) a member of the technical advisory committee for Maine's Comprehensive Assessment System. In the following paragraphs, I interpret each of these perspectives and ponder the issues presented by the authors as one who is immersed in the same milieu.

As a parent and community member, I am concerned about the implications of such a high stakes, external testing environment. I kept thinking about my children and the potential effects of such testing. My children have the advantages of a two-parent home, a strong set of values around the purpose of school and educational aspirations, and a well-funded school system. Few if any of the children at Redbud Elementary have these advantages. As the Johnsons point out, in Louisiana, parents with the means to pay parochial school fees opt out of the system in large numbers. Reasons for leaving public education might be religious, social, or academic, but the testing environment makes public education even more questionable. The point is that private schools do not have to comply with these testing requirements; tests are constructed and administered by teachers.

If I had a child who could not pass the fourth grade test, what would I do? As a reader and parent, I felt that this was a crucial missing voice from the narrative. The question is left unresolved by the authors, but it is the silent specter for parents and students. Over 30% of the students failed the fourth grade test, boys like Dwayne and Derek. From the tone of the narrative, both boys had turbulent home lives. As Dwayne wrote about his stepmother, "I hate her. She don't like me." In terms of policy, failure means you are retained; you must repeat the entire fourth grade year. That must trigger a deep sense of inadequacy and shame for the child and her/his parents. What could parents do? If you are not involved in your child's education by the fourth grade. the likelihood of a profound change is doubtful especially when failure is punished in such a public fashion. On the other hand, the authors admit in a vignette written in December "that one of the unpleasant aspects of teaching is dealing with the few pushy or demanding parents" (p. 98).

In terms of research, over the past 20 years has found that grade retention is a good predictor of future academic failure and repeated grade retention. High-stakes testing advocates are seeking an alternative solution in school vouchers. Just take your voucher worth the annual per-pupil expenditure and go to the nearest successful school. At the time of the Johnsons' year at Redbud Elementary School, the parents in Louisiana did not have this option. Even if vouchers were available, would Dwayne's parents be willing to seek out another public or parochial school? According to the Johnsons' account, little in the way of school support was available to parents.

One of my frustrations with the book is prompted by a second perspective, the research design perspective. The Johnsons stated early in the book that they never intended to write the book, and in some respects the message suffers. The immediacy of the book is never in doubt, as the steady stream of daily entries provides a consistent chronicle of events and the setting. In qualitative research terms, it rings with credibility. However, the student characters, like Dwayne, Yolanda, and Derek, and the teachers got lost in the rigid, temporal sequence of the chronicle. The method of writing daily entries brings out the constant clamor of the classroom. The authors wrote as few as 8 entries in December and February, and the greatest number of entries (19) was in March. March is the month for LEAP testing. That is the main story, but I need a cast of characters to follow it. When the discussion focused on classroom events and specific children, I was lost. The result was that I had little feeling for what was taught, what the goals were, what the authors believed to be consistent instructional practice. In qualitative research, especially narrative inquiry, the development of characters is a major touchstone of the writing. In other words, pick out four or five students and follow their story in depth. These children become the key informants and can be used to discuss the variety of issues and concerns, test anxiety, reading and writing instruction, and parental interactions. I did not feel like the Johnsons went out of their way to interview anyone. Even conversations with other teachers are given little attention. Indeed, the workday of teachers at Redbud was so regimented and authoritarian, an interview may be totally unrealistic. Still, it would have helped to triangulate the data and data sources. I tried to go back and build a character summary of one of the students, and it proved frustrating. But, maybe that is what the authors intended; leave the fractured lives of the children strewn across the

narrative landscape of standardized testing and poor schools. In any case, the narrative method of writing emphasizes high-stakes testing in the context of an extremely poor, under-funded elementary school. The desired effects seem to grow as I reflect and re-tell this story.

Other interests I have stem from my involvement as a teacher of graduate courses in testing and assessment and as a member of a state committee to design and evaluate our state's comprehensive assessment system. From this point of view, the book rings with warnings. High-stakes testing based on a single, standardized test is a ticket for disaster. It's like putting children in an earthquake zone, housing them in different quality structures (i.e., school organizations) and watching as some structures collapse on the teachers and students during the inevitable seismic events (i.e., high-stakes tests). At the minimum, testing is fair only if the schools have sufficient, equitable funding, well-prepared teaching and administrative staff, and active, effective plans for improvement.

As I read the book, I got the impression that the Johnsons simply were against standardized testing. They did favor a portfolio approach, but there was no further discussion of what that might mean. In the courses I teach in testing and assessment, many teachers have the same answer but have not thought through the implications of a portfolio approach to student-level accountability. That shifts the burden of understanding to the classroom teacher where it should be according to experts like Richard Stiggins and Grant Wiggins. According to Stiggins (2002), both teachers and administrators have big gaps in their understanding of classroom and large-scale assessment. Without a more thorough understanding of testing and assessment, discussions of state testing results or local assessments will serve as feigned compliance with the intended purpose of testing-to improve student achievement. I did not hear any insight about the benefits of large-scale testing.

There was an exchange during October parent-teacher conferences that underscores a crucial dilemma of using multiple measures for any decision relating to students. The parents "ask if it is true that children who do well in their daily work and earn good grades can fail fourth grade if they fail the LEAP test" (p. 65). Of course the answer should be "no," but it is "yes." A demoralizing prospect. It is especially disheartening for students, parents, and communities who have experienced persistent failure in our school systems, poor, African American, Latino American, and Native students. But, here is where I have a question for the Johnsons: How will we be able to foster improvement unless we raise Our expectations and measure students' productivity?

The Johnsons portrayed a tightly controlled, prescriptive school environment with minimal resources to improve instruction or the environment of instruction. The literature on school improvement has been growing since the 1980s, but it is now highlighted with the desperate tone used by the Johnsons. Now we have a testing environment that is developed in advance of schools ready to meet the state standards. In the case of Redbud Elementary School, a teacher's discretionary time is dominated by mindless paperwork, checklists, and inventories. Instead of a coherent framework to combine *assessment for* learning (classroom assessment) with assessment *of* learning (high stakes, standardized testing), there were computer-based, skill-and-drill, test prep programs, endless worksheets, and a fanatical monitoring of lesson plans. Is school improvement possible? We hope. Will it happen because of state standardized testing? Probably not.

I don't know for certain, but it seems that we as Americans still don't appreciate the experience of extremely poor and minority children and immigrant communities. We have come up with words like at-risk and resiliency through research on national databases to describe attributes and categories of behaviors. As a researcher, I have calculated effect sizes and beta weights, sliced and diced concepts into statistical currency. But can we design classroom experiences that will foster growth and improvement? We can design programs and innovate change, but the effects of community wealth persist to this day. That is the message. The two main forces operating in the jousting over high-stakes testing, the pro-testing faction led by the State Superintendent Cecil Picard and Louisiana State Board of Education member Leslie Jacobs and the antitesting faction led by the Johnsons' need to find the middle ground. This book helps justify the need for balanced thinking. More work needs to be done to chronicle what that middle ground looks like.

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