

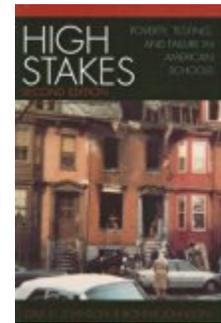
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Dale D. Johnson, Bonnie Johnson. *High Stakes: Poverty, Testing, and Failure in American Schools*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. xv + 255 pp. \$87.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-3531-2; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-3532-9.

Reviewed by Jennifer de Forest (University of Virginia)
Published on H-Childhood (September, 2006)



Teaching and Learning in an Age of Accountability

In 2000, education professors Bonnie Johnson and Dale Johnson set out to refresh their k-12 teaching experience and to see firsthand the effects of the nation's accountability movement. The two each took a year's leave of absence from their university jobs as teacher education professors to take third- and fourth-grade teaching positions in Louisiana at Redbud Elementary School, one of the nation's most impoverished schools. The Johnsons recorded their experiences and observations in journals, which make up the bulk of their *High Stakes: Poverty, Testing, and Failure in America's Schools*, released this year (2006) in its second edition. In *High Stakes* Johnson and Johnson document their daily struggle to educate their students, who are poor and largely minority, in an age of standardized testing. To this end, the pair hone in on the effect that the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) and its centerpiece, the LEAP test, have on the most fundamental elements of schooling.

Johnson and Johnson clearly elucidate the absurdities that have accompanied the increased centralization of teaching and learning in Louisiana, a byproduct of LEAP. The authors describe, for example, how they and their colleagues are forced to spend their weekends notating their lesson books in an arcane code so that each learning objective is matched with a standard from the LEAP test, a standard from the Iowa Test, and the appropriate level of Bloom's Taxonomy. Johnson and Johnson provide examples of the cryptic entries to show the reader the inane work that occupied their Sunday afternoons, which we come to understand frustrates their creativity

and limits the time they have to prepare for actual teaching (pp. 29-31).

Johnson and Johnson also describe the way centralization has converted Louisiana's school system into a sort of panopticon, in which the authorities constantly police the state's schoolteachers. "The message today," the authors explain, "is that people in positions of authority in state governments do not trust [teachers]" (p. 129). For example, soon after arriving at Redbud, the Johnsons are warned that their principal can at any time check their plan books to see that they are properly coded (p. 26). Indeed, during the run-up to the fourth-grade LEAP test, just as the stress-level in Redbud's classrooms reaches its zenith, an announcement is made over the intercom that teachers' lesson plan books will be collected for scrutiny (p. 134). Johnson and Johnson convincingly explain that this sort of treatment is far from meaningful accountability. Rather, it demoralizes teachers, erodes their professionalism, and puts them in an oppositional relationship with school administrators.

Johnson and Johnson also portray the stress that the ever-looming LEAP tests inflict on Redbud's students. Moreover, they are persuasive in their argument that an inflexible pass/fail model may not be an efficacious way to account for the learning of severely disadvantaged students. For example, the authors introduce us to Milo and describe his excitement when he finds out that he has been invited to spend the summer with his father in Texas. However, we discover, if he fails the LEAP test, he will be

required to attend a summer test preparation class. We are relieved when Milo passes the LEAP test. However, we also share in Dale Johnson's anger as a handful of his students who missed the benchmark by *less than three points* are labeled failures. Unlike Milo, they will be required to spend their summer preparing to retake the test. If they fail again, even if just by a single point, they will have to repeat the entire fourth grade. As Dale Johnson laments, this is not testing to enlighten, but testing to torment (pp. 165-167).

Johnson and Johnson also make clear the irrational influence that LEAP has had on educational spending in Louisiana. In *High Stakes* we witness teachers struggling to educate poor children in a facility where there is only one bathroom, where heaters and air conditioners do not work, and where materials are both scant and woefully outdated. The authors explain that while more than half of Redbud's students cannot afford the \$2.50 to attend a local performance of *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*, the district blithely sank \$85,500 into a computer-based test preparation program that turned out to be a white elephant (p. 65). Fittingly, Johnson and Johnson begin to ask *qui bono* as they witness a stream of consultants from textbook and testing companies passing through Redbud feeding at what the pair call "the trough of the standards and accountability movement" (p. 44).

Johnson and Johnson succeed in eliciting a sympathetic reaction from the reader for the students and teachers at Redbud Elementary. They also effectively document the way LEAP perverts learning and teaching in Louisiana. However, in only a few instances do they draw on their academic expertise to help us gain a more transcendent understanding of the inequities created by the national accountability movement. For example, when Dale Johnson, who is a literacy specialist, enhances his observations of literacy instruction at Redbud by explaining that a student's prior knowledge influences his acquisition of reading skills, he makes clear the implications of centralized decision-making. While none of his students has ever flown on an airplane, he tells us, the district's approved reading series is replete with stories of children going on vacations that require baggage tags, check-in procedures, and "tugs" that push planes back (p. 100). Unfortunately, most of the references to research in

the authors' journal entries are brief asides that recall a rather predictable group of commentators, including Alfie Kohn, bell hooks, and Michael Harrington who do little more than echo the Johnson and Johnson's observations. While the authors include a separate chapter at the end of *High Stakes* that discusses research on testing, setting it apart does little to deepen our understanding of teaching and learning at Redbud.

Finally, while there much is to be learned from the authors' year at Redbud, some readers may find their observations somewhat Manichean, and thus off-putting. In particular, in their effort to defend teachers in the face of the accountability movement, Johnson and Johnson paint a suspiciously rosy portrait of Redbud's teaching staff. The teachers are variously described as creative and selfless (p. 18), intelligent (p. 54), competent (p. 64), wise (p. 102), and, in multiple instances, heroic (p. 109). Indeed, the only teacher the Johnsons portray negatively, who is "rumored to be a racial bigot," conveniently turns out to be uncertified (p. 75). Moreover, in an entire school year, the only time we hear about friction among Redbud's teachers is when they are under the stress of test preparation (p. 130). In the end, the authors' unwillingness to consider teachers' flaws detracts from their otherwise convincing observations of the way accountability harms the profession.

Johnson and Johnson conclude *High Stakes* with an epilogue that implicates those who play politics with education. Here the authors boldly take aim at Louisiana's politicians who misrepresent research, rankings, and testing results to heap unearned praise on LEAP, while ignoring its failings and the needs of communities like Redbud. And, satisfyingly, the authors are not afraid to name names. Similarly, they rebuke the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE) for failing in its role as a watchdog for the profession by refusing to take a position on the standards movement (p. 187).

Bonnie and Dale Johnson's *High Stakes* is a provocative and highly personal account of teaching and learning that takes you inside life at Redbud Elementary. Whether you are a proponent of accountability and standardized testing or not, *High Stakes* will convince you that the LEAP fails Louisiana's poor and minority children.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-childhood>

Citation: Jennifer de Forest. Review of Johnson, Dale D.; Johnson, Bonnie, *High Stakes: Poverty, Testing, and Failure in American Schools*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12218>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.