

Book Review



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.

Reviewed by

Stephen A. Swidler
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

High Stakes: Children, Testing, and Failure in American Schools is the story of an academic couple's year of teaching elementary school in a poverty stricken, rural Louisiana community. Driven by their frustration with what they view as the indifference of teacher educators toward real-world schooling, Dale D. Johnson and Bonnie Johnson set out to reconnect with this world. Along the way, we learn about teaching in a high-poverty, southern rural community and the unyielding pressure from Louisiana's state standards and accountability system upon teachers.

The Johnsons had several years teaching experience in both schools and universities and, at the outset of their story, held privileged positions at a regional state college in Monroe, Louisiana. They took unpaid leaves of absence in 2000-2001 to teach third and fourth grade at Redbud School. The school, located in northwest Louisiana, is a traditionally black school; 80% of the school is African American. Redbud School is by all measures impoverished: 95% of the students receive free lunch; most come from single-parent households, some of which have no electricity or running water; the school building is dilapidated, with no hot water, library, or useable playground; instructional materials are incomplete and outdated; some of the official discipline polices, including paddling, are positively cruel; and children regularly come to school tired and sick. It was in this environment that the Johnsons faced a new state-mandated accountability scheme.

The book documents the Johnsons' year chronologically. We follow them as they acquire their provisional

teaching certification in Baton Rouge, as they are put through some rather mindless inservicing, and, most importantly, as they are introduced to the demands of the Louisiana standards and assessments scheme that are, by anyone's definition, "high stakes."

The bulk of this book, however, is the Johnsons' week-by-week account of their work as elementary school teachers. They describe in journal-like fashion their activities and encounters with students and the school and the constant pressure of the accountability system that Redbud School is required to take on. It is this daily teaching grind we see and hear as it meets the grind of poverty. For example, in November the Johnsons realize there is "no time for talk" with their teaching colleagues, who are constantly exhausted. We hear in December that Redbud teachers are ordered to turn in their lesson-plan books. When they are returned later that day, the books are covered with yellow sticky notes pointing out deficiencies, another instance of monitoring by officials and sending the message teachers are not to be trusted. In March we learn from Bonnie how administering the Iowa Test of Basic Skills affects her third graders:

As the children begin the first timed test, Kelvin vomits in his hands and runs to the bathroom. He does not complete the first section. I must document this. Gerard takes one look at the first section and begins to cry. He picks up his pencil and, between sobs, randomly fills in bubbles on the answer folder. I cannot comfort or encourage the children. I must [only] read the words printed in boldface in my administrator's manual. Throughout the morning, I notice that my best reader cannot complete the test sections in the time allotted. (p. 141)

For educators and educational researchers, this kind of journaling provides a rich source of information on the mundane aspects of life in a poor, rural school in a high stakes age. It is in the mundane that schools' lives are lived, not in the exceptional moments that are easily recalled from memory. As I read through their account, I imagined if only 10% of rural school teachers were to keep journals like this, we would have an extraordinary corpus

Correspondence concerning this review should be addressed to Stephen A. Swidler, Center for Curriculum & Instruction, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. J 18 Henszlik Hall. Lincoln, NE 68588-0355. (sswidler2@unl.edu)

of data that captures the telTain of rural schooling, a telTain that is poorly represented in educational scholarship.

There are, of course, a number of ways to regard *High Stakes*. At one level, it is an extraordinary historical artifact. It captures a particular time in educational hiswry, in a corner of Louisiana when the practical consequences of state standards and assessments are coming home. While we have some interesting cases of coherent state standards that, at least initially, held promise for improving instruction (e.g., Cohen & Hill, 2001; Jennings, 1996), many of the schemes are ill-conceived and represent reform done on the cheap (see Elmore, 2002). This appears to be the case in Louisiana. *High Stakes* provides us with a ground-level report of the effects of such reforms.

Ultimately, though, we have to take *High Stakes* on its own terms and judge it by what it claims to do. This is one of those books that seeks to straddle scholarly inquiry and the popular educational press. It seeks to give insight into what is certainly a pressing contemporary educational issue for rural and poor schools in "high stakes" accountability plans, and in a state that seems to be either oblivious to the socioeconomic plight of many of its children or just clueless about how to go about reforming instruction (or both). The book does this while deeply empathizing with teachers, who are the agents of any educational reform. The question to ask, then, is how does this book fair as a trade book on teaching and as a qualitative report of research? *High Stakes* comes up short on both counts.

It is important to consider this book in light of others in this genre of practitioner-writing-on-teaching. We have rich traditions of practitioners writing of their work with minority children and in impoverished communities. George Dennison (1969), Jim Herndon (1968), Marv Hoffman (1996), Herbert Kohl (1994), and Sylvia-Ashton Warner (1965), to name a few, are all provocative writers who have dwelt in the "real world" of schools and brought forward both the humanity of students and their families and the problems teachers face. We have a similar tradition in American rural education, from Jesse Stuart's (1958) tender-hearted *The Thread That Runs So True* to *Sometimes a Shining Moment* by Eliot Wiggington (1985).

Unfortunately, *High Stakes* is not a compelling part of this genre of nonfiction. For example, the Johnsons do not make particular children their extended focus as Kohl or Ashton-Warner do. It is little more than a descriptive log of what these teachers go through. Nor do the Johnsons lend much insight into "teacher thinking" as they work though complicated, contradictOry, and outright absurd demands. They nicely layout, but never fully explore, these demands in a way that might help other practitioners think through their own dilemmas as they encounter their own versions of high stakes assessments.

If we are to view *High Stakes* as research, it is nor at all clear what its object of inquiry is. It would seem logical

that this should be the world of teaching practice in the face of poverty and the effect of high stakes schemes upon practice. But no teaching is ever analyzed. We catch glimpses of the lively classrooms the Johnsons created with their students. But overall, depth is scarified for breadth. For example, we are not taken through the Johnsons' efforts to craft cUlticular units or lessons, or how their thinking is constrained and how their planning is thwarted by the ever-present need to attend to standards and the test. They never analyze how these shape and constrict their relationships with children-the tragic effect of these schemes. While the Johnsons honor teachers whose wisdom is enchained, we do not get an idea of what might happen if rural Louisiana teachers were set free from these nasty demands. Why should we think enhanced instruction would emerge?Decades of research on teaching indicate that simply removing obstacles is not enough to improve pedagogy. On any meaningful scale, teachers will tend to teach in ways they have always taught; the cultures of teaching are powerful indeed. As teacher educators, the Johnsons have missed an opporTunity to do a bit of teacher education.

This is not an unreasonable expectation for this book. We presently have the work of academics who are themselves teachers and who put their own practices under scrutiny. For example, recem works by Heaton (2000) and Lampert (2001) in mathematics education provide scholarly models of inquiry in teaching practice conducted by the practitioners themselves. This kind of research is even construed as contributing to a foundational body of knowledge in teacher education and professionalization. What we learn from *High Stakes* is that the Johnson's teaching situation is plain awful. How did these thoughtful teachers manage to teach at all in this school? I'm hoping a sequel to this book appears, called something like *Crafting Thoughtful Pedagogy in Impossible Places*.

Moreover, we do not hear about them engaging in the kinds of ambitious teaching which I assume they promote in their roles as teacher educators and reformers in higher education. In other words, they missed an opportunity to analyze what the high stakes schemes do to the "average" teacher who is trying to get by the best slhe can. Further, we do nor see the Johnsons trying to enact the high-quality instruction we expect to hear about from teacher educators and, more imporrant]y, how these high stakes accountability schemes thwart aspirarion to more ambitious instruction. The new state standards and assessments (in any state), while technically problematic and generally devoid of understanding of the relationship between policy and practice, nevertheless are attempts to improve instruction and cUlticulum; they do nor intend to do harm. And this is the central and tragic irony that the Johnsons needed to tell us about: Not only are high stakes schemes destructive to schools and children in the here and now, but they actually

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.

References

- Ashton-Warner, S. (1965). *Teacher*. New York: Touchstone Books.
- Cohen, D. K., & Hill, H. (2001). *Learning policy: When state education reform works*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dennison, G. (1969). *The lives of children: The story of the First Street School*. New York: Random House.
- Elmore, R. F. (2002). Unwarranted intrusion. *Education Next, Spring(1)*, 30-35. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Hoover Institution.
- Heaton, R. (2000). *Teaching mathematics to the new standards: Relearning the dance*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Herndon, J. (1968). *The way it 'sposed to be*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Hoffman, M. (1996). *Chasing hellhounds: A teacher learns from his students*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.
- Jennings, N. (1996). *Interpreting policy in real classrooms: Case studies of state reform and teacher practice*. New York: Teachers College Record.
- Kohl, H. (1994). *H won't learn from you!" and other thoughts on creative maladjustment*. New York: New Press.
- Lampert, M. (2001). *Teaching problems and the problems of teaching*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Stuart, J. (1958). *The thread that runs so true*. New York: Scribner.
- Wiggington, E. (1985). *Sometimes a shining moment: The Foxfire experience*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press! Doubleday.



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.

Reviewed by

Jeffrey S. Beaudry
University of Southern Maine

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

Correspondence concerning this review should be addressed to Jeffrey S. Beaudry, College of Education & Human Development, University of Southern Maine, 221 Bailey Hall, Gorham, ME 04038. Ubeaudry@usm.maine.edu