



The influence of test-based accountability policies on school climate and teacher stress across four states



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Accountability policies predict school climate, which predicts teacher stress.
- This study is the first to examine variation in accountability systems.
- Different state-specific accountability systems yielded similar results.
- Policy makers should consider the negative effects of accountability policies.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship of test-based accountability policies on teacher stress and school climate across four states in the United States. Structural equation modeling of data from 6428 teachers found that increased accountability pressure predicted increased stress in the environment, curriculum-related stress, teacher stress in general, and teacher stress specific to testing. Increased accountability pressures were associated with more negative student-to-student relationships, which were also associated with increased teacher stress. This study provides evidence across multiple states that test-based accountability policies may have a negative relationship with school climate and teacher stress. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

For decades, researchers, educators, and policymakers around the world have sought to identify how best to measure student achievement and effective teaching and to promote learning outcomes. Despite these efforts, results have remained elusive. Many countries use student test performance on annual achievement evaluations to measure and evaluate important educational outcomes. A primary aim of the present investigation is to examine the consequences of such decisions, including the potential relationship of test score use with teacher wellbeing (i.e., teacher stress). Test-based accountability policies and the subsequent influence on

teacher wellbeing have been especially important for at least the past thirty years. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the teaching profession in the United States has undergone significant changes and has been in a near continuous state of educational reform. Student test performance on large-scale assessments have become both the impetus and benchmarks for progress of reform efforts. For example, test scores have been used as key indicators of student academic progress and school effectiveness since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; Koretz & Hamilton, 2006).

Moreover, teachers are held accountable for student learning based on students' performance on annual tests (Valli & Buese, 2007). In some states, the implementation of test-based educational accountability policies has also resulted in using student test performance as a "significant factor" in the determination of teacher quality and effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education,

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2009, p. 9). However, there are questions about the validity of such methods (Baker et al., 2010) and susceptibility of student test scores to non-instructional factors (e.g., student psychosocial variables, school attendance; Corcoran, 2010). Recent evidence suggests that teachers may experience increased pressure to raise student test performance on large-scale assessments, leading to higher reported stress (von der Embse & Putwain, 2015), poorer school climate (Putwain & Roberts, 2009), and changed instructional practices (e.g., “teaching to the test;” Menken, 2006).

Further, the school turnaround movement—involving the restructuring of school administration and staff—has gained widespread popularity (Cucchiara, Rooney, & Robertson-Kraft, 2015) and increases pressure on teachers, administrators, and staff to increase student test scores. Evidence suggests that changing teacher work conditions have significantly influenced teacher emotions, perceptions of self-efficacy, and commitment to remain in the profession (Bascia & Rottmann, 2011). Moreover, these constant educational reforms and increased pressure to increase student test performance may significantly impact teacher stress and emotional wellbeing. In a recent state-wide survey in North Carolina, von der Embse and Putwain (2015) reported that nearly 30% of teachers experienced *clinically significant* anxiety specific to test-based accountability policies.

However, the degree to which these outcomes generalize across different states in the U.S. (and other countries with large-scale test-based accountability policies) is less clear due to historically wide variability in accountability systems and curriculum (Ysseldyke et al., 2004). Recent reform initiatives have sought greater alignment in curricular standards across the United States (e.g., Common Core State Standards [CCSS]; CCSS Initiative, 2014), and have been implemented in concert with two newly designed large-scale assessment systems, allowing for performance comparisons across students, schools, and many states. At present, forty-two states have adopted the CCSS and 26 states are part of the one of the assessment consortiums. Since teacher stress is a function of job-related pressures (e.g., accountability) relative to the personal capacity to meet demands (Kyriacou, 2001), it follows that changes brought forth by the CCSS may result in increased stress for some teachers (i.e., those with limited capacity to change practices and improve student test performance). Alternatively, it may have a positive relationship on the emotional well-being of others (i.e., those whose practices are aligned with newly implemented standards and assessments).

Importantly, the influence of changing educational policies on teacher wellness may be reflected in and buffered by school climate (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001). Research has demonstrated the importance of contextual factors such as school climate to a wide range of outcomes including academic achievement (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003), general behavior problems (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001), and “quality and character of school life” (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). School climate is determined by the quality of relationships in a school amongst teachers, administrators, parents, and students (Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011; Cohen et al., 2009). How teachers interpret their contextual environment (i.e., school climate) may influence manifestations of stress, perceptions of teaching efficacy, and decisions made within the classroom (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Pendergast & Kaplan, 2015; Perry & Rahim, 2011). A supportive school climate leads to less teacher stress and lowers the likelihood of burnout and job dissatisfaction (Schwab, 2001).

However, the use of high-stakes test performance to evaluate students, teachers, and schools may significantly alter important relationships and impact school environment and climate. Importantly, the context in which instruction takes place is an important

variable in determining teacher effectiveness and student performance (Saeki, Pendergast, Segool, & von der Embse, 2015; von der Embse, Schoemann, Wicoff, Kilgus, & Bowler, 2016). The broad purpose of the present investigation was to examine the relationships of newly implemented, test-based accountability policies and assessments across multiple states with individual (i.e., teacher stress) factors as potentially explained by environmental factors (i.e., school climate).

2. Theoretical and conceptual underpinnings

2.1. School climate

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) social ecological model highlights the influence of contextual factors in psychosocial development and wellbeing. At the proximal level, these factors include such settings as school, family, peer group, and work. Similarly, school climate research has emphasized the importance of context and school environment as facilitating or inhibiting individual's attitudinal characteristics or emotional responses (Cano-Garcia, Padilla-Munoz, & Carrasco-Ortiz, 2005; Pendergast & Kaplan, 2015). School climate can foster resilience or become a risk factor (Freiberg & Stein, 1999), and has been linked to teacher burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008), work commitment (Collie et al., 2012), and school connectedness (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006). School climate may serve as a useful contextual variable for understanding the influences of distal variables (i.e., accountability policies) on proximal responses (i.e., teacher stress or instructional practices; Saeki et al., 2015; von der Embse et al., 2016). Within Stockard and Mayberry's (1992) theoretical framework, school climate is conceptualized as social action and social order. Social action is reflective of the everyday social interactions amongst students, teachers, and staff. Social order is an indicator of the structure within a school that is intended to promote safety and lessen behavioral problems (Griffith, 1999; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). Since the quality of school-based relationships have been routinely linked with teacher outcomes (Collie et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009) and student academic initiative, motivation, bullying, and achievement (Baker, 2006; Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008), measuring social action, including teacher perceptions of teacher-student and student-student relationships, may be a particularly useful lens through which to understand the multifaceted relationship of test-based accountability policies with climate and subsequent manifestations of teacher stress.

2.2. Variations in test-based accountability policies and practices

The provision of a public education in the United States has long been considered the responsibility of individual states rather than the federal government, leading to a high degree of variability in curricular standards and assessment of student academic progress and school effectiveness across the country (Harris & Herrington, 2006). Given concerns over inequities in educational access and quality, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was instituted to measure subsamples of students in all 50 states. Research with NAEP data spanning the last three decades had shown a stagnant or even widening achievement gap among racial subgroups of students (Camara & Schmidt, 1999; Harris & Herrington, 2006; Lee, 2008). These persistent gaps were an impetus for the passage of NCLB and represented a significant expansion in the role of the federal government in education (Koretz & Hamilton, 2006). Specifically, NCLB mandated states to implement higher accountability standards leading to a dramatic shift in the purpose of testing from evaluating minimum competency to proficiency, with consequences attached to student test

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