

How Can Teachers Alleviate Parental Anxiety in High Stakes Testing?

LaTonja Walker, Jorine Voight, and Sonya Jenkins
Florida International University, USA

Statement of the Problem

In Florida, third and tenth graders are required to take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), a high stakes test. Third graders must score a Level 2 or higher on the Sunshine States Standards portion of the FCAT or fifty-one percent or higher on the Norm-reference portion of the FCAT in order to be promoted. In 2003, the Florida Department of Education reported 31 percent of third graders in Miami-Dade County were retained (2003).

The purpose of the study is to investigate how third grade teachers can decrease the level of parental anxiety for this high stakes test and determine if there are different levels of parental anxiety based upon certain variables. Parent workshops will be offered to families focusing on FCAT strategies and relaxation techniques designed to increase parental efficacy and decrease parental anxiety related to high stakes testing.

Theoretical Framework

In order to end social promotion, students need to demonstrate more than a minimal amount of reading and math ability (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Horn, 2003). Incentives are given to those who achieve mastery and penalties for those who fail (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Tracking, promotion, and graduation are the consequences (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000). There are disproportionate numbers of minorities and low socioeconomic students who have not demonstrated acceptable levels of mastery on these tests (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Horn, 2003).

Test anxiety is the uneasiness or apprehension that a student experiences before, during, or after a test because of worry or fear of failure (Vrana, 1999). It may cause children to rush through testing in order to escape the unpleasant physical experiences, and can create an “invisible disability” of achievement stress that can extend throughout a student’s academic career. As pressure is placed on students to achieve higher test scores, there is a need to implement interventions to help reduce test anxiety (Cheek, Bradley, Reynolds, & Coy, 2002).

This demand for high stakes testing is putting more pressure on students, teachers, and parents (Guleck, 2003). For parents, their child’s anxiety triggers helplessness and anxiety (Mulvenon, 2003). Parents can help balance the importance of preparation against the reality of a particular exam (Vrana, 1999). Longitudinal studies indicate that students whose parents are involved in their academics will experience higher achievement scores (Sheldon, 2002).

Method

This study takes place at three different elementary schools in Miami-Dade County, Florida. The student composition ranged from predominantly Hispanic to African-American, with a large concentration of students participating in the free and reduced lunch program. The subjects of the study are parents of current third grade students who will take the FCAT in March 2004.

Transcripts from focus groups of third grade teachers will be analyzed to determine common themes related to ways to decrease parental anxiety. Parents will be administered a pre- and post parent efficacy scale designed to measure changes in parental anxiety after participating in the parent workshops. Results of pre and post surveys will be compared among the different schools.

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