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# The Impact of Norm-Referenced Standardized Test Scores on Teachers and on Reading Instruction

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# The Impact of Norm-Referenced Standardized Test Scores on Teachers and on Reading Instruction

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of Teacher Education

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Michael Scott White

May 1999

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**The Impact of Norm-Referenced Standardized Test Scores on Teachers and on Reading Instruction**

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee Members

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the members of my committee: Drs Kuhlman and Coufal for their suggestions, comments, and support which contributed to the outcome of this project. My chairperson, Dr. Carol Lloyd shared her expertise and gave me her continuous support and encouragement in making this a truly great learning experience I would like to also thank the school district officials, especially the research department, and the school principals that helped with this project affording me their time, information and suggestions. Finally, but not least, a thank you to my friends Chuck and Pam for their encouragement and technical help in the creation of this project.

## Abstract

The influence of norm-referenced scores on standardized tests has increased dramatically over the past two decades. In many parts of the nation these test scores have been influential in district curricula (including all aspects of instruction) decisions regarding reading. Studies have shown that one major influence of these test scores has been to design reading curricula that teaches to the test.

This study examines the influence norm-referenced scores on standardized tests have on elementary classroom teachers and their reading instruction. The participants of this study were elementary teachers, grades two through six from two schools in a large mid-west metropolitan district. The schools were selected based on test performance on the CAT; one school has a history of higher scores while the other school has a history of lower scores. Both schools served children from low socio-economic neighborhoods and included an ethnically and linguistically diverse population. The teachers were asked to respond to an open-ended questionnaire regarding their teaching styles and feelings about standardized reading tests. The results were consistent with studies reported in the literature. The school district has a great deal of influence on reading instruction and teachers tend to rely mostly on the district-selected basal series for reading instruction and on district guidelines concerning grouping of students for skill instruction. The majority of teachers dislike the publication of test scores in the newspaper and put little emphasis on those tests themselves, yet they spend large amounts of instructional time in preparation for those tests.

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## CHAPTER ONE: THE QUESTION

In recent years the media spotlight focused on our nation's public schools has been concentrated on reading instruction, especially at the elementary level where children are expected to learn to read. School administrators, elected political leaders, as well as opponents of public education have turned to norm-referenced standardized test scores (hereafter referred to as standardized tests) to prove or disprove the success of public school reading instruction. In many places across the nation, these scores have been used to determine school reading budgets as well as to determine the fate of entire reading programs (Anders & Richardson, 1992). This practice continues despite the fact that the use of standardized test scores in this way is at odds with reading theory and practice (Black, 1993; Goodman, 1984; O'Neal, 1991; Shannon, 1992). With so much riding on these test results, we need to ask the question: How does all of this attention affect teachers and their classroom instruction? Studies indicate that the increased pressure to increase performance on standardized reading tests does affect teacher attitudes and practices in the classroom (Anders & Richardson, 1992; Herman & Golan, 1993; Miller, 1995; Miller, Adkins, & Hooper, 1993; McCormick, Cooter, & McEneaney, 1992; Smith, 1991; Stephens, Pearson, Gilrane, Roe, Stallman, Shelton, Weinzierl, Rodriguez, Commeyras, 1995).

Americans have had a fascination with standardized test scores as an assessment of instructional quality for nearly a century. Early in the twentieth century, as our nation

faced a period of uncertainty, similar to today, public schools came under attack as being inefficient and non-productive. Standardized tests were developed as one of several ways in which to assess the reading ability of children and to prove a school's productivity. Because they were cheap and easy to administer and because the statistics could easily be displayed, standardized tests quickly became the favorite type of assessment for administrators (although not the teachers) (Glaser & Silver, 1994; Johnston, 1984, 1997; Shannon, 1989). Standardized tests were a result of the marriage of science and industry that took place early in the twentieth century in the factory and in the office. Promoters of the "factory system" of production applied it to education, assuming it would result in an educated product (Mathews, 1966; Smith, 1965; Teale, 1995). Standardized test scores became the indicator of whether schools and teachers were judged to be efficient in their teaching of major subjects in the curriculum (Shannon, 1989). Despite evidence to the contrary, influential segments of the population continue to insist that standardized tests define the effectiveness of students' reading abilities and likewise, reading instruction.

There exists substantial evidence that standardized tests tend to be culturally, socially, and linguistically biased in favor of white, middle-class students, the same population that creates these tests (Robinson, 1990; Shannon, 1989). Another major drawback of standardized testing is curriculum content validity, which asks if tests measure what is taught in the classroom. The answer to this question is increasingly, no! At an earlier time, when reading curricula (henceforth meaning to include all aspects of instruction) were more homogeneous nationally, and controlled by basal programs with

frequent use of multiple-choice testing, standardized tests may have been more valid. Today, our society has become more culturally diverse. Even the basals are changing their formats, and curricula is no longer as similar across classrooms as it once was (Bell, Lentz, & Graden, 1992; Garcia & Pearson, 1994).

Literature shows that historically, teachers have been surrendering their independence in making professional decisions regarding reading instruction since the early part of the twentieth century. Because so few teachers were properly trained at that time, school boards and administrators became interested in basal reading programs that claimed to teach children to read. All the teacher needed to do was to read the teacher's manual and follow the publisher's directions. Over the years, teachers came to rely on these basal programs for their reading instruction, surrendering professional freedom (Shannon, 1989). Today, teaching has truly become a profession. Teacher education courses are based on tested theory and teacher certification is required by all states. Teachers are more educated than ever before; and yet studies have found (Anders & Richardson, 1992; Shepard & Bliem, 1995), that teachers question the validity of their own assessment techniques in regard to classroom reading instruction. Teachers feel more confident with basal assessment and standardized reading test scores, although this attitude is beginning to change (Mathews, 1966; Shannon, 1989; Teale, 1995).

Considering the validity that history has attributed to the standardized test and the importance politicians and school administrators have placed on these tests, it is essential to look at how this reliance on standardized test scores is affecting reading instruction in

the classroom. Several studies have reported that reading instruction is being affected by the national focus on test scores (Anders & Richardson, 1992; Miller, Adkins, & Hooper, 1993; Smith, 1991). These researchers reported that in districts where standardized test scores have been given credence in determining curricula and as indicators of the success or failure of teachers, teachers have altered their reading instruction (Anders & Richardson, 1992; Miller, 1995; Miller, Adkins, & Hooper, 1993). Teachers report that they increase the emphasis teaching on those skills that appear on the standardized tests at the expense of other reading activities such as reading non-basal literature and developing higher-level thinking skills. These teachers are also using more multiple-choice assessment procedures to match the standardized tests (Anders & Richardson, 1992; Herman & Golan, 1993; Miller, 1995).

Studies have shown that teacher attitudes and beliefs toward standardized tests also affected reading instruction (Anders & Richardson, 1992; Miller, 1995; Miller, Adkins, & Hooper, 1993; McCormick, Cooter, & McEneaney, 1992; Smith, 1991). Where districts placed a high value on improving standardized reading test scores, there were significant effects on the teachers as well as the teaching. In the participating districts, teachers were concerned about: 1) their control of instruction; 2) accountability issues related to standardized tests; and 3) how the increasing influence of standardized tests on instruction may be affecting their students' learning process and emotional status (Anders & Richardson, 1992; McCormick, Cooter, & McEneaney, 1992; Smith, 1991). Teachers' attitudes about themselves was also affected by the increased emphasis on

standardized test scores. Teachers reported feeling that their professional status was being questioned by the public. In their schools, some teachers were publicly chastised by principals for their students' scores. Several teachers questioned their own ability to assess students on their own (Stephens et al., 1995).

Each of the previously discussed studies took into account the personal or internal feelings of teachers in regard to testing issues as well as external affects on them and their teaching. One area that most studies did not investigate was the possibility of different responses from teachers regarding their attitudes toward standardized tests depending on the test history (high performing or low performing) of the teachers' buildings.

## Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the influence that standardized reading test scores may have on reading instruction in two public, elementary schools in an urban district. Through an open-ended questionnaire, I explored reading teachers' feelings and attitudes regarding standardized reading test score use. To examine possible external influences on instruction and attitudes, I gathered data from two schools that have different standardized reading test score histories; one that is improving or high and one in which scores are declining or low. Through this study I intended to find answers to the following questions: 1) What are the expectations of the district in regards to classroom instruction? 2) How do teachers teach reading? 3) How do teachers assess students' reading? 4) How do teachers use assessment data in their teaching of reading? 5) How

do teachers view the publication of standardized test scores? 6) Are there differences between higher and lower scoring schools on these issues?

I would hope that my findings will be of interest to those elementary educators and administrators that deal with reading instruction and the debate over standardized assessment.

# CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter consists of three parts. The first part reviews reading instruction from the colonial era to the present. The second part examines how standardized tests have been used in education. Part three deals with the effects of standardized reading tests on classroom instruction.

## Reading Instruction in America

This portion of the literature review will examine how reading instruction has changed in America since the colonial era and how business, technology and science have affected that change.

### Reading Instruction in America Prior to the Industrial Age

Reading instruction changed in purpose more than in method between the time of the first colonial schools in America and the advent of the Industrial Age. Reading instruction in colonial America differed between the colonies (Shannon, 1989). In the southern colonies, education was private and for the wealthy children only. In New England and, later, in the middle colonies, public schools were developed that taught all children of the community. These colonial schools were heavily influenced by Protestant religious beliefs of the time. These beliefs consisted of a focus on original sin and the belief that all people were born to sin; therefore, children were evil sinners until baptized as adults (Mathews, 1966; Teale, 1995). The purpose of colonial education was to give

children the ability to read scripture so that they could avoid evil in their lives. Thus, reading instruction was authoritarian, didactic, and moral (Shannon, 1989). Children memorized Bible verses and recited them to the instructor, who may have been a literate female or a young man fresh from college waiting for assignment to a parish ( Teale, 1995).

. Late in the eighteenth century, at the time of the American Revolution, the goals of reading instruction in the public schools shifted from theological concerns to political and national concerns (Lapp & Flood, 1992; Teale, 1995). Reading instruction remained the same as it had been in colonial times with an emphasis on memorization and recitation on the part of the learner, with little or no direction from the instructors. Reading instructional materials were not based on any pedagogical principles. They contained mainly instructional pages dealing with letter memorization and a few poems (to be memorized) mostly dealing with national heroes and historical events. In many areas of the young nation, children did not have books; they memorized their alphabet using horn books. Horn books were printed material on wood or slate. When books were available they may have included The Elementary Spelling Book by Noah Webster, or the New England Primer. The concept of children's literature did not exist at this time so books were not written for a young reading audience. Reading remained a totally oral process during these years because it included intensive instruction in pitch, stress, enunciation, gesticulation, memorization, and recitation (Lapp & Flood, 1992).

Throughout this period and well into the nineteenth century, reading was taught

using the "ABC" method. This involved letter memorization , followed by drill of letter sounds through work with simple vowel-consonant and consonant-vowel clusters and finally, syllables. According to Mathews (1966), this was " a tortuous, time-consuming, and discouraging activity for children" (p.53). Reading activities in the classroom did not consider children's interests or background knowledge (Mathews 1966; Teale 1995).

## The Influence of Horace Mann on Reading Instruction

The educational pioneer Horace Mann helped change reading instruction in American schools as well as ignite a new interest in education, among the population in the United States, during the quarter century prior to the Civil War. Due in part to his influence, teacher colleges began to be established, although in many parts of the nation, teachers were hired with no teacher college requirements. Mann was instrumental in introducing the whole-word method of reading instruction in which entire words were memorized prior to the analysis of letters and letter patterns. Mann also advocated silent reading and reading for comprehension, a rather revolutionary practice at the time (Lapp & Flood, 1992).

At the same time that Mann was developing the whole-word method of instruction, the McGuffy Eclectic Reader was first published. Between 1836 and 1920, 120 million copies of these readers were sold in the United States (Shannon, 1989). Controlled repetition of words for instructional purposes was emphasized in the McGuffy Readers, which fit in well with Mann's teaching strategies. The McGuffy Readers were

revolutionary in that they were the first instructional materials for children that were actually written for children. Sentence length and vocabulary were controlled to match students' current developmental level (Lapp & Flood, 1992). Smith (1965) suggests that " McGuffy must be given the credit of being the first author to produce a clearly defined and carefully graded series consisting of one reader for each grade in the elementary school" (pp. 105-106). Children were beginning to be taught to read through the use of stories, parables, moral lessons, and patriotic selections in an attempt to develop good citizens. The McGuffy Readers dominated reading instructional materials into the twentieth century by updating the material in their books as well as by remaining current with the teaching strategies that dominated the times (Lapp & Flood, 1992).

Horace Mann has been credited with developing a phonics approach to teaching beginning reading only. His phonics approach became popular briefly but teachers did not care for the approach because it depended too heavily on word analysis and too little on comprehension. The trend in reading instruction during the late nineteenth century appeared to be going back to whole-word memorization with the "look- and- say" method of instruction gaining popularity. Simultaneously, Francis Parker's Word Method of Reading was also popular. Both of these required students to memorize words before reading. Teachers, over time, came to reject the "look-and-say" approach because the child was required to learn every word as a sight word, and many children made little progress in learning to read (Lapp & Flood, 1992; Shannon, 1989).

## Reading Instruction and Progressive Education

The waning years of the nineteenth century were dominated politically and socially by reform-minded citizens collectively known as progressives. American education was affected by the progressive era through the work of John Dewey. The education progressives introduced the concept of child-centeredness to American schools, impacting the field of reading. This concept was revolutionary in that it was the first time that educators considered the student's comfort and interests in planning curriculum. Progressives supported the discontinuation of the use of worksheets and the teaching of skills in isolation. Instructors of the "New Education" were interpreters of the culture for their students rather than simple overseers of lessons (Shannon, 1989). Francis Parker developed the Word Method of Reading at this time, in which children first memorized 150-200 sight words that they could also read and understand when used in sentences. Subsequently, they moved on to reading books and other printed material. Very little emphasis was placed on phonics skills. The names of letters were not taught for at least two years so that children would not become confused about their names and sounds (Teale, 1995). Possibly the most lasting influence of the progressive era in education was the move away from emphasis on reading as an oral performance to reading silently for the purpose of understanding the text. Another lasting accomplishment was the belief that the classroom could be an enjoyable place for children to learn.

At the end of World War I, research showed that one fourth of all soldiers could not read (Teale, 1995). This embarrassment was blamed on progressive educational

theory and methods. Progressivism in education died under severe attack from the public sector (although some progressive schools did remain and the progressive ideas of education and reading instruction would remain dormant for another educational reform era).

Leaders in the field of education as well as the nation became fascinated with science and technology and that fascination peaked during the 1920's (Mathews, 1966). This fascination with science and technology was fueled by the Industrial Revolution which began prior to the middle of the nineteenth century and came to affect nearly all aspects of life in the United States.

## The Forces of the Industrial Revolution and Its Impact on Reading Instruction

The Industrial Revolution altered many parts of American life including how the nation educated its children. It affected the content of the reading material from which children were learning to read as well as the teaching practices of reading instructors. In a time of massive immigration from eastern Europe as well as the growth of factories and cities, the industrial and political leaders of the nation wanted to make sure that the value system of the Industrial Revolution and traditional America were firmly entrenched in the children of America, especially the immigrant children. The values to be taught included respect for religion and for private property, a belief in the economic class structure, and strictly defined roles for men and women. Women were to be tidy, appreciative, and submissive; men were to be thrifty, industrious, and charitable. The combined forces of

science, business, and technology came together in the 1920's to reform American education; this reform movement led to the industrial model of education which incorporated the previously mentioned value system and the technological concept of mass-production into education (Mathews, 1966; Teale, 1995).

A paradox exists in the relationship between the American educational system and the nation's political leaders. Throughout American history, in times of great change or national peril, our national leaders have often turned to the educational system to either preserve the status-quo of American culture or to use the educational system to promote massive changes so that America could remain competitive with the rest of the world. In contrast, the American educational system has been used as a "whipping boy" by these same politicians for the nation's ills. The third decade of the twentieth century was such a time.

In the 1920's, voices from education, business, and politics were heard complaining about the deplorable condition of America's schools and the education that American children were receiving in those schools (Mathews, 1966; Teale, 1995). Teacher knowledge was also attacked. Educators were searching for a science of pedagogy that would serve as the one true process to educate children. Business leaders and politicians wanted to see education streamlined and efficient, with measurable results. At this time, the field of psychology became involved in educational theory.

Behaviorism is a theory that states that children learn from repeated exposure to the same material. This material, according to behaviorists, must begin with small pieces

of information and then progress to larger pieces of information. Behaviorists in the field of education such as Edward L. Thorndyke believed that schools ought to intervene in the natural development of individuals to avoid past problems and to make education more efficient. Behaviorist theory was just what the political and business leaders of the time were asking for in education reform (Lapp & Flood, 1992).

The principles of industry were applied to the classroom. Children were streamlined through reading instruction provided by made-for-all textbooks from publishing companies. Standardized tests were used to evaluate the educated product. Publishing companies became the scientific experts for reading instruction. Reading textbooks, known as basals, were anthologies of stories and essays considered scientifically prepared and appropriate for students of various grade levels (Teale, 1995). The content of these materials were not necessarily of interest or importance to the reading audience. The lowest levels of basal series published by Scott-Foresman consisted of formula-directed, contrived stories dealing with the unrealistic lives of Dick and Jane (Shannon, 1989).

Teacher manuals were included as a part of the basal reading program. These manuals included scope and sequence charts of objectives reflecting child development and skills believed to be necessary for children to learn to read. Teachers were given specific directions about how to achieve the stated goals. Little was left to the teacher to decide, and with the advent of the basal series in the 1930's, teachers increasingly surrendered their professional status to teach reading through a commercially-produced

basal program which was, supposedly, scientifically organized (Shannon, 1989; Teale, 1995).

Basal programs also included workbooks in which children practiced the specific skills they were being taught (Lapp & Flood, 1992; Shannon, 1989). Phonics instruction became a major component of the lower levels of the basal series. Record-keeping systems were included as well as tests to be given to track each student's progress through the skills included in each book. There was little room in basal-based instruction for teacher or student interpretation of material. Neither was there consideration of individual needs of students or teachers.

Basal program materials were developed by all of the major publishers of educational materials and the basal approach came to be seen as the scientific (behaviorist) approach to teaching reading (Lapp & Flood, 1992). It was also popular with school districts because the materials could be purchased en masse for whole school districts, thus cutting costs. For these reasons basal reading programs dominated reading instruction throughout the middle of the twentieth century. Over time, school administrators as well as teachers came to view these basal series as the only way to properly teach reading. A study conducted by Shannon (1992) found that contemporary teachers still believe that the publishing companies know more about reading instruction than teachers do.

Behaviorist theory and the entire educational structure came under fire after the embarrassment of Sputnik. The launching of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957 created

an all-out attack on the American education system especially in math, science, and reading. As a result, greater emphasis was placed on reading skills, especially phonics. New basal programs were re-formulated with a vast increase in phonics skill and drill for the lower levels and an increase in comprehensive skills for the upper levels. Even as the Sputnik launch made skill-based instruction dominant in the classrooms, the new focus on reading instruction also drew the attention of researchers from many disciplines of study. The findings from these diverse fields would soon be the cause for an attack on behaviorism and the resultant skill-based instruction of reading (Teale, 1995).

Basal series are still widely used today in reading classrooms nation-wide. These basals have come under a great deal of criticism in recent years due to current research and theory that is not based on behaviorism. Because of these criticisms, publishing companies have altered their basals to some extent and today's basal series tend to be more in line with current reading theories than earlier series. Many basal series have improved their content to reduce gender, racial, and socioeconomic stereotypes and to include literary pieces that are more relevant and meaningful to children (Lapp & Flood, 1992).

## Constructivism and Reading Instruction

The constructivist theory of learning, which is prevalent today, can be linked to a number of developments in literacy research and literacy instruction between the mid 1960's and the 1980's. During this time, research moved away from behaviorism and

toward cognitive psychology. The cognitive revolution and increasing evidence that contextual factors and sociocultural dimensions are fundamental to understanding reading brought reactions against the skills perspective because it was seen as too narrowly conceived (Teale,1995).

Changes were also occurring in reading instruction. Beginning in the 1960's, the effects of humanistic philosophy began to be seen in literacy education. Educators began to emphasize the individual in reading instruction. Methods and materials began to reflect this shift in focus. During the 1960's and 1970's, individualized instruction to teach reading became popular in the United States. Results of this type of instruction were not encouraging enough for many administrators and therefore, the traditional, or basal instruction remained dominant in American classrooms through this period of time. By the 1980's, influenced by the works of Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional model of reading and writing, and the works of Kenneth Goodman's (1984) transactional-sociopsycholinguistic model, language arts instruction in the United States began to be fully integrated. While this model of reading instruction became widespread it did not dominate American classrooms (Lapp & Flood, 1992).

Meanwhile, research from several disciplines impacted the view of reading as a constructive process. Researchers such as Richard Anderson (1978) and John Bransford (1977) contributed to the development of schema theory, as we currently understand it, which is the basis for constructivism. Their works as well as the works of others, developed the concept that the reader's background or life experiences greatly impact

literacy success. Meaning is a personal experience based on what the reader has previously learned. Literacy instruction needs to focus on the individual's understandings.

David Rumelhart (1974) found that reading is an interactive process that depends on perception and cognition. Works of psycholinguists Ken Goodman and Frank Smith were extremely influential in the development of constructivism. Goodman (1984) gave us a theory, reading as a constructive process, that was remarkably distinct from previous ideas about reading. In his book, Understanding Reading (1971), [Smith presented the idea] that reading was not something one was taught, but rather was something one learned to do. Smith also advanced the idea that reading is only incidentally visual and that reading is a matter of making informed predictions, based on the reader's prior knowledge, to gain understanding; reading is a constructive process.

The psycholinguists encouraged educators to value literacy experiences that focused on making meaning, to devalue specific skill instruction in isolation, and to get rid of workbooks and skill worksheets. Teachers were taught to value texts in which authors rely on natural language patterns, and to devalue the contrived language of early- grade basal readers. Today's educators have greater knowledge of the reading process and an appreciation for children's efforts as readers. Above all else, educators' views and values concerning teaching have been fundamentally altered. We have rethought the relationship between teaching and learning (Pearson & Stephens, 1992; Teale, 1995).

## Reading Instruction Today

Evolving from the influences of humanistic philosophy, schema theory, the interactive reading model, and the work of the psycholinguists, constructivism has emerged as the dominant theory of literacy acquisition and development today, although not dominant in practice in the classrooms of America. Educators have come to view reading as a process of meaning construction; a transaction between reader, text, and a context (Lapp & Flood,1992). Language is seen as a naturally occurring event, and literacy development is promoted through reading and writing in a variety of contexts and for a variety of reasons.

There are conflicting forces at work today over the issue of how best to create literate children in our classrooms. The traditional, behaviorist, skill-based methodology has been challenged by the whole language philosophy and constructionist theories of instruction. Whole language is a philosophy that has evolved from the theories of humanism. It is a philosophy that purports instruction should be both responsive to the needs of the child and meaningful to the child (Teale, 1995). Unfortunately, evaluation of the whole language philosophy has rarely been based on an understanding of that philosophy. The evaluation process itself, based on standardized tests, do not adequately measure what is learned in a whole language classroom. Standardized tests were created to measure knowledge of specific skills in isolation (Goodman, 1998). Whole language detractors as well as many well-intentioned educators equate whole language with an abandonment of all skills training (which is not accurate) and a totally literature-based

reading program (Black, 1993). In California, the State Department of Education adopted what it perceived to be a whole language philosophy for its entire school system's reading program. Now the state is blaming whole language for the downward reading scores of California children. Actually, the downward trend had many causes including a large population of ESL students, poor preparation of reading teachers in the philosophy and application of whole language, large class sizes, and the migration of experienced teachers from the inner-city schools to the suburbs. Situations such as California's have helped spur a "back-to-basics" movement based on the traditional skill-based instruction (Black, 1993; Groff, 1994).

Throughout the history of literacy instruction in the United States, reading instruction has shifted from a sequential approach to a constructive approach, with a seeming return to skills-based instruction, so that aspects of each philosophy are likely evident in most reading classrooms today. Findings from the National Assessment of Educational Practices (NAEP) provide evidence that teachers nation-wide reported an increase in the use of trade books as a primary focus of reading instruction as well as an integration of trade books and basals between 1992 and 1994 (Goodman, 1998).

A visitor in an American classroom today would probably see some instructional practices that would be classified as traditional (skills-based) as well as those considered constructivist. This would fit the historic pattern of reading instruction in the United States, wherein teachers of reading tend to take what works for them from the different philosophies, theories, and processes prevalent at the time.

## The Use of Standardized Reading Tests

The current use of standardized tests for the purpose of assessing learning in the field of reading has a history that goes back nearly a century. Standardized reading assessments were first developed to appease the politicians and business leaders of the nation who sought to insure that the expenditures for public education were getting positive results. This concern for accountability led to the development of the standardized test (Johnston, 1984). These tests are scientifically prepared to assess groups of students. Some, however dispute their validity as the sole indicator of individual student development (Valencia, Pearson, Peters, & Wixson, 1989), which is how they are used in many school districts. In many communities today, the results of standardized tests determine much more than they were ever designed to, including teacher salaries, job retention, curricula, and student placement (Black, 1993; Shannon, 1992).

### What are Standardized Tests?

A standardized test is an instrument designed to measure an individual's performance on a specific set of tasks. These tasks are administered the same way by each examiner. The test results generally compare an individual to a peer group (the norming population). Known as norm-referenced, standardized tests, they include such instruments as the Stanford-Binet, California Achievement Test (CAT), and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), to name a few (Shannon, 1992).

Norm-referenced tests are designed to produce scores distributed across a bell curve. The bell curve is a graphic representation showing the number of students scoring at specific percentiles. The curve, or high point of the graphic occurs at the percentiles where most students fall. The purpose of this type of testing is to rank students among their age-matched peers based on their performance. Currently, school districts are celebrating higher test scores as more students score above the 50th percentile. What districts fail to realize is that the scores are no longer valid if more students score above the 50th percentile than students scoring below the 50th percentile. Ironically, the result is that test questions will be altered and the instrument re-normed to maintain the bell curve (Glaser & Silver, 1994).

Another type of standardized test is the criterion-referenced test. It is not as widely used as the norm-referenced test. Where the purpose of the norm-referenced tests is to compare students, the purpose of criterion-referenced tests is to assess what portion of the total skill set students have mastered in a specific content area (Calkins, Montgomery, & Santman, 1998).

## A Brief Look at the History of Reading Assessment

Standardized tests have been used in the United States since the mid-nineteenth century. Boston schools were rated for efficiency based on a test given to each student in each Boston school in 1845 at the request of State Commissioner of Education, Horace Mann. By the 1890's, standardized tests were determining such things as grade promotion

and graduation, decisions formerly determined by the teacher (Glaser & Silver, 1994).

Formalized reading assessment can be traced back to the psychological laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt around 1880. Wundt's assistant, James McKeen Cattell, created a standardized test to measure intelligence, not reading per se. Cattell was attempting to measure the speed and nature of mental events. In so doing, his research focused on word and letter perception and the standardization of tasks. The relationship between intelligence and reading became closer for the scientific community with time. This relationship was echoed by educator Edward Thorndike (1917) who, in trying to measure reading, concluded that "reading is reasoning." For many years it was difficult to distinguish between intelligence tests and reading tests (Johnston, 1984).

Joseph Mayer Rice, who studied psychology in Leipzig, brought standardized tests to the field of reading in the United States. Rice first created a comparative assessment of spelling performance which was received with derision by the National Education Association in 1894. By 1914, Rice's ideas had gained acceptance in the field of education and large-scale surveys of educational progress were under way by the 1920's (Johnston, 1984; Shannon, 1989). During that twenty year span, was the increased interest and belief in scientific measurement by the general public, politicians, educators, and business leaders, led to changes in educators' attitudes toward standardized testing.

This paper has previously examined the influence of the Industrial Age, science, and business on education during the early twentieth century. These powers came together in favor of the use of standardized tests to measure learning efficiency in the

American classroom. Psychologists believed that learning was strictly an orderly and sequential process requiring repeated practice at each stage of development. It was also believed that learning was externally motivated through rewards. Psychologists believed that learning could only be measured through tests that closely resembled what they perceived to be the learning process (Shannon, 1989; Smith, 1965). Scientific management, a concept developed to promote efficiency in the factory and in the office, was then applied enthusiastically to the classroom in the form of the standardized testing. In education, test results substituted for time and productivity measures in the workplace as the indicator of efficiency. To enforce efficiency in all classrooms, algorithms of instruction were identified and developed, and were then encoded into teacher manuals and basal readers. Teachers were then expected to use these materials in accordance with the algorithmic formulas, in the classrooms. Teachers initially rejected the use of standardized testing but they were favored by administrators. Over time, compliance with the testing procedures was guaranteed through basal book and chapter tests, yearly standardized tests, and minimum competency tests (Resnick, 1982; Shannon,1992).

Two forces were at work promoting the testing movement of the early twentieth century. The first was to make psychology worthy of the term "science." This was dependent on quantification and objectivity. The second factor was the rapidly increasing number of children enrolled in public schools and the press for educational accountability (Johnston, 1984, 1997). Added to this was an extremely high failure rate in schools during the early years of the twentieth century. One in six first grade students were

retained and half of eighth grade students were behind their peers educationally (Resnick, 1982). To monitor this problem, school surveys were instituted. This group testing movement became the norm for standardized testing and gained widespread adoption after 1935, when the IBM 805 was introduced to score tests, reducing the cost of testing (Johnston, 1984, 1997).

In the beginning, a variety of standardized tests were used but the tests that were judged the most efficient, though not necessarily the "best" for measuring ability, soon dominated and replaced other tests. The tests that came to dominate, and still pervail today, were the group, silent reading tests. Thorndike can be regarded as the father of modern group tests of reading because of the silent reading test he developed (1917). He was also considered to be the father of modern reliability theory which forms the basis for test evaluation (Johnston, 1983). W.S. Gray argued in favor of the silent reading test as more practical, efficient, and effective than oral reading tests (Shannon, 1992). By the mid 1930's, mainstream reading measurement was heavily oriented toward group assessment via silent reading. This method of assessment went unchallenged by most of the people engaged in literacy education until after the middle of the century (Johnston, 1984, 1997).

Scoring verbatim free recalls was the most challenging and time-consuming method to measure reading performance and there were several methods of accomplishing this (Turner & Greene, 1977). Starch advocated a timed reading system with free recall. He used the ratio of "relevant words" to the total number of words to measure reading ability (Winograd, 1982). Gray added to this system ten questions for each passage to

provide greater validity. Scores were averaged to increase the test reliability (Shannon, 1992). Multiple measures of determining reading ability, both oral and written, were used in the Dearborn-Westbrook Reading Examination. This approach is still regarded as an effective assessment strategy today. In the name of efficiency and costs, the multiple measures approach lost support in the field of education as a means of assessing large groups of students (Johnston, 1984, 1997).

Standardized testing of reading comprehension evolved rather quickly after 1920 to a system familiar to educators today. Students were required to read, silently and timed, a passage and then answer questions about the passage. This approach was first commercially developed by Kelly (1916) in the Kansas Silent Reading Test. The length of the reading passages has varied over time from very long passages to the more familiar short passages of today's standardized reading tests. Once again, in the name of efficiency and cost, writing ability and oral recall were eliminated in favor of the multiple-choice answer format which most standardized tests use today (Johnston, 1997).

From the beginning, standardized reading test scores have been used by education administrators and public officials as an indicator of the success or failure of the public schools of this nation. The tests developed at the beginning of the twentieth century were used, and are still used today, to analyze a schools' learning environment and to measure the effectiveness of teaching methods. Teachers who originally rejected the use of standardized tests, have come to believe that these tests are valid tools for assessing reading comprehension and related skills. Many teachers also believe that standardized

tests are the only valid assessment of reading ability (Johnston, 1984, 1997; Shannon, 1992).

## Drawbacks of Using Standardized Tests

Because standardized tests have such an influential role in our schools, it is important to look at some of the concerns about standardized tests. I have briefly described several of the drawbacks of standardized tests below. These are not ranked by importance, nor are they the only concerns for the use of standardized tests.

### Cultural and Social Bias

While the producers of standardized tests have worked toward eliminating culturally-biased material from the tests, the norming population remains culturally biased toward white, middle-class groups of children. Children with different ethnic, social, experiential, or linguistic backgrounds are considered to be at a disadvantage (Robinson, 1990; Shannon, 1992; Valencia, Pearson, Peters, & Wixson, 1989).

### Physical/Emotional Condition of Test-taker

Children have an allotted amount of time to complete the test. During this time, many factors may affect her/his performance such as fatigue, anxiety, stress, illness, emotional upset, setting, or motivation. Students' amount of experience with timed tests can also affect a child's performance (Shannon, 1992).

Student Group Placement Determined by Standardized Tests

Students are often classified as fast, average, or slow learners and placed into advanced, regular, or resource classes on the basis of their scores on standardized tests. These placements may be long-term and difficult to alter as well as damaging to the student's self-concept (Valencia et al., 1989).

Curriculum Content Validity and Teaching to the Test

High scores on standardized tests have become so important in our educational system that many teachers have begun to teach to the test at the expense of other valid curriculum material (Valencia et al., 1989). The reverse is also a problem in that standardized tests do not necessarily test what is taught in the classroom (Bell, Lentz, & Graden, 1992). Related to this issue of validity is the fact that standardized achievement tests are out of line with current instructional theory (constructivist) and therefore are not adequate assessment tools for measuring reading performance in the classroom (Flood & Lapp, 1986; Garcia & Pearson, 1994; Koretz, Linn, Dunbar, & Shepard, 1991).

Non-standardized Administration of Testing

An issue that is not often discussed but one that could drastically affect test outcomes is that of test administration procedures. As anyone who has administered standardized tests is aware, the test proctor must read a thick pamphlet full of very specific directions including specific start and stop times for each test. A study of test

administration in a mid-south school district found great deviations among the teachers in the administration of the standardized reading test given in that district (Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991) It is not difficult to imagine this occurring elsewhere.

Instructional Methodology is Affected by Standardized Test Scores

It has been noted earlier in this paper that teachers began giving up their professional independence in regards to reading instruction when commercial producers of basal reading materials began to dictate how teachers were to teach reading. Today, standardized test results may be determining what instructional methods teachers are allowed to use. Evidence shows that at educational conferences across the nation, certain instructional methods are being advocated over other methods because those methods appear to result in high standardized test scores (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Shannon, 1992).

Standardized reading tests have many legitimate uses. The problem with these tests is the misuse of the test results by some educators and politicians. In the next section of this literature review I examine how standardized reading tests affect classroom instruction.

## The Effects of Standardized Tests on Classroom Reading Instruction

The focus of this paper will now turn to how the use of standardized reading test scores affects classroom instruction. Studies that deal with this issue will be examined as

well as studies dealing with the attitudes and beliefs of education professionals concerning the impact of standardized reading test scores on classroom instruction.

## Professional Attitudes and Beliefs Concerning Standardized Tests

Several studies show that teacher attitudes and beliefs concerning standardized achievement testing can affect classroom instruction, both directly and indirectly. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs are of great importance as they are the administrators of the tests and in many places they are held accountable for the results of the tests.

In a survey evaluating six third and fourth-grade teachers' literacy assignments for their students, the teachers were asked why they used a particular assignment. The teachers were all from the same Piedmont-region school in North Carolina with three to 28 years of teaching experience. Fifty-seven percent of the students were minority students, primarily African-American, and most of these were from low-income families. A consistent concern among all of the teachers interviewed was accountability pressure to increase standardized achievement test scores. The teachers stated that this pressure heavily influenced classroom instruction. To maximize skills that were emphasized on standardized tests, these teachers stated that they avoided literacy assignments that required the reading of lengthy texts, sophisticated writing, and lengthy discussions (Miller, Adkins, & Hooper, 1993).

In two studies, teachers were interviewed concerning the effects of external testing on teachers. In the first study (Smith, 1991), data were collected from elementary

teachers in the Phoenix metropolitan area. Arizona has mandated state-wide standardized exams and the newspapers tend to be brutal to schools that do not perform well when measured against other schools. The Smith study found that: 1) teachers experienced negative emotions as a result of the publication of test scores and would do "whatever was necessary" to avoid low scores, 2) teachers felt that test scores were used against them, despite the perceived invalidity of the tests themselves, 3) teachers felt that the time used to prepare for and administer these tests reduced the time available for instruction in other areas of the curriculum, thus narrowing curricular offerings, and 4) the focus on test scores reduced the modes of instruction, forcing teachers to teach to the format of the standardized test. Similar concerns were voiced in another Arizona study (Anders & Richardson, 1992) of elementary teachers. This study also found that teachers mistrusted their own judgment when evaluating students' reading.

Teachers' mistrust of their own evaluative judgment was also found in a study surveying attitudes and beliefs of reading teachers ( McCormick, Cooter, &Mc Eneaney, 1992). These teachers felt they did not possess adequate knowledge to use assessment results to aid their students with literacy problems since they had only a bachelor's degree.

Teachers expressed concern about how their students were reacting to the increased influence of standardized tests. In a report of a study of North Carolina elementary and secondary teachers' attitudes toward standardized testing, it was found that teachers believed that there were more negative effects from assessment testing than positive effects. The teachers cited such examples as altered teaching methods and altered

curriculum methods. They also felt that students' self-concepts had fallen (Miller, 1995). This was a unique finding at the time of the report.

Principals of elementary schools have been surveyed regarding their concerns about the assessment of reading skills. In a stratified random sample of 1,244 elementary public school principals regarding their concerns of reading instruction issues, the second most important concern of the principals, nationally, was the assessment of students' reading progress and how that was achieved (Jacobson, Reutzel, & Hollingsworth, 1992).

In a Colorado study parents were surveyed concerning their thinking about assessment. Parents from this study favored teacher-created assessment over report cards or standardized test results for gaining an accurate picture of their child's academic progress. A conclusion of this study was that parents have more faith in their child's teacher than the teachers have in themselves in regards to assessment (Shepard & Bliem, 1995).

## Do Standardized Tests Influence Classroom Instruction?

Several studies examined indicate that where standardized reading assessment test scores are of great social and political importance to the community, the tests may drive reading instruction. The North Carolina study (Miller, Adkins, & Hooper, 1993) discussed earlier is an example of this situation. The study indicated the presence of pressure from the state to improve reading test scores on standardized tests. Teachers interviewed said they began to concentrate their instruction on those skills that appeared

on the standardized tests, avoiding literacy assignments that required lengthy reading passages or sophisticated writing or discussion.

Miller (1995) also examined seven third-grade classrooms in a North Carolina school in which teachers collectively were altering the focus of their reading instruction from a skill-based approach to an approach that focused on extended writing opportunities and time to for students to work together. In a comparison of reading scores from the California Achievement Test, in four of the seven classrooms reading scores increased. In addition, the teachers noted improved student assigned work performance. Despite evidence to the contrary, teachers were concerned that the classroom instructional alteration would negatively affect their students' standardized test scores. It is of interest to note that in North Carolina there is pressure for improvement in standardized test scores at the elementary level of public education from the state.

McAuliffe (1993) examined a reading classroom consisting of at-risk readers in Illinois to determine instructional methods that were successful with at-risk reading students. The students became actively involved in an authentic literacy process; they were becoming a community of supportive learners taking risks and learning to relate the text to their own lives and responding to the literature in positive ways. Then came the time to study for the mandated Illinois Reading Assessment test. The observer noticed a drastic change in the classroom. Instead of trying to figure-out text, they were looking for the "right" answer. The students, in preparation for the test, appeared to be moving away from the empowered stances they were developing as the practice test required them to

find support for someone else's understanding of a piece of literature. The observation was made in this study of how much time was lost from authentic instruction in preparation for taking the exam.

An Illinois cross-study analysis (Stephens et al., 1995) looking at the relationship between instruction and assessment found that instruction appeared to be test-driven in school districts where the instructors had little say about how assessment was conducted. In those districts, it was found that decisions dealing with assessment as well as curriculum were "handed down" from central administration with little or no input from teaching staff. In one district that was test-driven, students were subjected to a ten-minute test blitz each day in preparation for state exams. In another, teachers rushed through the curriculum so that they could finish by April when the exams were taken. In another, in preparation for the Illinois State Reading Test, students as low as grade one were required to fill out prior- knowledge worksheets before reading every basal selection. The conclusions of this study are important in that school district requirements regarding reading instruction are considered in determining whether or not classroom instruction is test-driven.

In a similar study done nation-wide, teachers from medium to large school districts were surveyed regarding issues dealing with teachers' attitudes toward standardized testing as well as their principals' view of the importance of these tests. Teachers were also asked about the effect of these tests on instruction. While teachers felt pressure to improve test scores, specifically from administrators, they also felt that there was little

pressure to alter classroom instruction. In all of the districts studied, administrators did spend special time reviewing standardized test scores but this was done in a positive way, concentrating on ways to improve the schools (except for one response where a principal compared teachers' class scores publically). Most respondents stated that they spent substantial time in preparation for the tests (a week or more), but that they still were able to spend time on non-tested subjects such as fine arts, science, and higher level thinking skills. Teachers' attitudes tended to be positive in regards to their work environment but their attitudes toward standardized testing were negative. Teachers felt that the tests did not help schools improve, did not give teachers valuable feedback about how well they were teaching, or help clarify learning goals (Herman & Golan, 1993).

In studies of two school districts (Shelton, 1993; Weinzierl, 1993), it was found that when teachers are involved in deciding assessment techniques and when districts treat teachers as professionals and allow some level of school autonomy, teachers tend to be more confident in making assessment decisions without relying on basal-type programs or external tests. In the school district in which the district made all decisions regarding curriculum and assessment with no input from teaching staff, it was found that teachers were much less likely to use their own assessment techniques even when they could do so, they tended not to trust their own evaluative processes. These teachers relied more heavily on external testing and also tended to teach directly from basals.

## Summary

These studies would indicate that when standardized tests do drive classroom instruction, they only do so in school districts where test results have been given tremendous political and social power. This seems to occur in districts where teachers have little input into the decision-making process. A result of this can be that teachers are less inclined to trust their own evaluative processes and thus come to rely more heavily on textbook publisher's assessment techniques as well as the standardized test. We found from earlier studies that students are absolutely affected by teacher behaviors and attitudes toward reading assessment.

However, change is occurring. It appears that teachers are increasingly turning to more authentic assessment and placing less value on standardized test scores as a form of assessment, at least in school districts where the teachers are encouraged to act as professionals.

The literature has shown the influence of standardized test scores on reading instruction and on teacher attitudes. This study examines a local community to find whether elementary reading instruction and teacher attitudes are influenced by norm-referenced standardized tests as they are in other locations.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the influence that standardized reading test scores may have on reading instruction in two public, elementary schools in an urban district. Using an open-ended questionnaire, I will explore the feelings and attitudes of teachers regarding the use of standardized reading test scores as well as the use of those test scores in the classroom.. For purposes of comparison, I gathered data from one school that has a history of continual improvement or consistently high standardized reading test scores over a two-year period, and one school that has a history of falling or consistently low standardized reading test scores. Specifically, my study will attempt to answer the following questions: 1) What are the expectations of the district in regards to classroom reading instruction? 2) How do teachers teach reading? 3)How do teachers assess students' reading? 4)How do teachers use assessment data in their teaching of reading? 5) How do teachers view the publication of standardized test scores? 6) Are there differences between higher and lower scoring schools on these issues?

## Pilot Study

In the spring of 1998, I conducted a pilot study which examined the influence of standardized reading test scores on classroom instruction. The ten informants in the study were graduate students in education, who were also teachers, representing several public school districts from one Midwest metropolitan area. They responded to a survey (see Appendix A) consisting of eight limited-response questions dealing with classroom

teaching styles, external influences on the use of standardized reading tests, and teacher attitudes and concerns about the use of standardized reading tests.

The findings from the pilot study were consistent across teachers. When asked how they taught reading, all but one of the respondents stated that they used literature with a basal program. One teacher used literature only. Those who used basals reported they used them because they were required by their school districts. Though the respondents were unanimous in stating that they did not feel pressured in any way to alter their reading programs because of standardized test score results, in one district teachers were required to group students for skill instruction based on test score results. Conclusions from the pilot study included: 1) a relationship did exist between standardized reading test scores and classroom instruction, and 2) the use of test scores in the classroom depended more on district mandates than teacher choice.

As I compiled the data from the pilot study, I was left with many more questions. The pilot study lead me to focus on the role of school district policy in determining how standardized test scores are used in the classroom. In order to find an answer to this question, I included interviews with district officials for the current study. The pilot study questionnaire revealed a need for more information regarding how the respondents taught reading. In the pilot study, respondents were given a limited-response format regarding their teaching style. Information regarding years of experience and level of professional education may provide an insight into teacher responses to questions dealing with their use of test scores. The current study includes this information. In the current study, the

questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions to gather descriptive data revealing respondents' teaching practices and feelings regarding standardized tests and their scores.

The question of whether teachers' attitudes and responses to standardized reading tests differ according to the test history of the schools that the respondents represent was not considered in the pilot study. In the pilot study, all of the respondents came from schools that either scored consistently high on standardized tests, or they came from districts that placed little value on standardized test results. To find the answer to this question, the current study selected two elementary schools from the same district with opposite test histories for the purpose of comparison.

## District Selection

For uniformity, I decided to limit this study to one school district. In this way I could better determine the impact of district requirements concerning the use of standardized reading test scores on classroom teachers. I selected the largest school district of the metropolitan area in order to have a variety of schools with varying test score histories. This district fit the purpose of my study as it administers the California Achievement Test each year to its second, fourth, and sixth-grade students and has its test scores publically reported via the local newspaper. This district also mandates the use of a basal reading series at the elementary level. Currently, the district uses the Silver Burdett-Ginn Series, a literature-based basal program (this series includes separate literature selections that can be used with the series, but is not a necessary part of the series).

## School Selection

Two schools were selected based on their opposite test score histories on the reading portion of the California Achievement Test: one school has had a two-year history of low performance on standardized reading tests while the other school has had at least a two-year history of either high or consistently increasing performance on standardized reading tests. The schools have similar socio-economic and minority compositions. The data used to select the two schools came from the school district's research department.

## Description of the Schools

The Lakewood Elementary School is located in a low socio-economic neighborhood. Its minority population was 70.4 %, an increase of 6.7 % over the two-year period being studied. The percent of students on free or reduced lunch was 82.1 %, a decrease of 1.1 % over the two- year period being studied (see Table 1). Average class size was twenty and twenty teachers taught grades two through six. The school had a history of low performance on the reading portion of the California Achievement Test over the two-year period of 1996-1998 (see Table 2). In 1997, a total of 182 second, fourth, and sixth-graders were tested. In 1998, 208 students from the same grades were tested.

Golden Hills Elementary School is also located in a low socio-economic neighborhood. Its minority population is 57.9 %, an increase of 4.6 % over the two-year period being studied. Students on free or reduced lunch made up 73.4 % of the student

population, a decrease of 18.4 % over the two-year period (see Table 1). Average class size was twenty-five and nine teachers taught grades two through six. Golden Hills had a history of high performance on the reading portion of the California Achievement Test over the same two-year period (see Table 2). In 1997, a total of 105 students in grades two, four, and six were tested. In 1998, 98 students in the same grades were tested.

TABLE 1

School Information

| Lakewood (Low Performing) (P= 100) | | | Golden Hills (High Performing) (P=100) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grades K-6 | 1996-97 | 1997-98 | Grades K-6 | 1996-97 | 1997-98 |
| Percent Minority | 63.7 | 70.4 | Percent Minority | 53.3 | 57.9 |
| Percent of Free/ Reduced Lunch | 83.2 | 82.1 | Percent of Free/ Reduced Lunch | 91.8 | 73.4 |

## Performance Definition

For the purpose of this study, the definition of a high performance school is the definition provided by the Research Division of the school district in which the schools are located. A high performance school is a school which meets or exceeds predictions based on a regression analysis using the following variables: percentage of students participating in the federal lunch program, gender, attendance rate, mobility, parental participation, median household income, home ownership, and college educated parents. The last three factors were calculated by the school district from census data derived from zip code areas. A low performance school would be one which does not meet its

predictions based on the regression model. There is no district-wide cut-off line between high and low achieving schools as each school is evaluated individually.

## California Achievement Test Score Information

Group results of the vocabulary and reading comprehension sub-tests, as well as the total reading scores of the C.A.T. results for grades two, four, and six were provided by the school district in which the two schools are located (see Table 2). The test scores listed are the National Percentile (NP) scores as well as the Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) scores.

Table 2

CAT Statistics

| Lakewood (Low Performing) | | | | | Golden Hills (High Performing) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grade 2 | 1996-97 N = 65 | | 1997-98 N = 81 | | Grade 2 | 1996-97 N = 41 | | 1997-98 N = 45 | |
| | NP[1] | $NCE_2$ | NP | NCE | | NP | NCE | NP | NCE |
| Vocabulary | 42 | 45 | 29 | 38 | Vocabulary | 49 | 49 | 46 | 48 |
| Reading Comprehension | 41 | 45 | 31 | 39 | Reading Comprehension | 46 | 47 | 45 | 47 |
| Total Reading | 42 | 45 | 30 | 38 | Total Reading | 47 | 48 | 45 | 47 |
| Grade 4 | 1996-97 N = 55 | | 1997-98 N = 72 | | Grade 4 | 1996-97 N = 34 | | 1997-98 N = 30 | |
| | NP | NCE | NP | NCE | | NP | NCE | NP | NCE |
| Vocabulary | 35 | 41 | 49 | 49 | Vocabulary | 93 | 81 | 85 | 71 |
| Reading Comprehension | 38 | 44 | 57 | 53 | Reading Comprehension | 58 | 54 | 54 | 52 |
| Total Reading | 37 | 43 | 54 | 52 | Total Reading | 81 | 68 | 72 | 62 |
| Grade 6 | 1996-97 N = 62 | | 1997-98 N =55 | | Grade 6 | 1996-97 N = 30 | | 1997-98 N =23 | |
| | NP | NCE | NP | NCE | | NP | NCE | NP | NCE |
| Vocabulary | 40 | 44 | 24 | 35 | Vocabulary | 47 | 48 | 66 | 58 |
| Reading Comprehension | 43 | 46 | 37 | 43 | Reading Comprehension | 60 | 55 | 84 | 70 |
| Total Reading | 41 | 45 | 30 | 39 | Total Reading | 54 | 52 | 77 | 65 |

1 National percentile

2 Normal curve equivalent

## Teacher Questionnaire

All elementary, regular classroom teachers in grades two through six in both buildings were asked to complete the questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was threefold: 1) to identify the professional background of the teachers, 2) to describe how the teachers teach reading, and 3) to explore the beliefs and attitudes of teachers concerning standardized reading tests, their use in the classroom and the publication of standardized test results. The questionnaire consisted of eighteen questions dealing with these three areas: four questions dealt with professional background, nine questions dealt with reading instruction and internal and external influences of standardized reading tests, and five questions asked about beliefs and attitudes of the teachers concerning the use of standardized reading tests. The questionnaire consisted of seven short answer, six open-ended, and five follow-up questions. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

## Interview with District Reading Administrator

A telephone interview was conducted with an administrator of the school district to determine the district policy guidelines for the use of standardized reading test scores in elementary classrooms. Questions included the following: 1) Does the district have expectations for the use of the basal series in classroom reading instruction? If so, what? 2) Does the district expect standardized reading test scores to be used in the classroom? If so, how? Clarifying follow-up questions were asked.

## Procedure

With the assistance of the school district's research department, two schools that met my criteria were selected. An application to conduct research from the school district was submitted and approved. An Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for approval to conduct this study from the university that I attend was also submitted and approved. I then conducted a telephone interview with a district reading administrator. I left questionnaires with complete directions and a candy bar and book mark, for an incentive to complete the questionnaire, with principals in each building. After one week, I picked up the completed questionnaires. I received one completed questionnaire in the mail and I made a second request in the schools to complete the questionnaires, I received three additional questionnaires as a result of that request.

## Evaluation of the Data

The data were evaluated based on the questions raised in the purpose statement of this study. These questions fall into four categories: 1) professional background (questions 1-4) 2) reading instruction (questions 5-8) 3) reading assessment (questions 9-14), and 4) attitudes and beliefs (questions 15-18). These categories are used in the questionnaire that was given to the participants. A fifth category of questions dealing with district expectations for the use of standardized reading tests was used from a telephone interview. The process of my qualitative evaluation is based on data reduction and interpretation (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Upon receiving the completed questionnaires, the data were randomly assigned a number and keyed according to school building by a graduate student not involved in this study. This was done so that the initial evaluation of the data would be blind in regard to school

Upon the first review of the data, the frequency of all numerical and yes / no data was recorded. All open-ended questions were evaluated using the Constant Comparative Method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), which looks for common themes in written responses through reading and re-reading. I read and re-read the responses, looking for categories according to the similarity of responses, although I expected to have some responses that might not be able to be categorized. After developing categories for the questionnaire responses, I separated the data by schools to compare responses. The information provided by the district reading administrator was then compared to teacher responses that dealt with outside influences on their teaching behaviors as well as those responses that dealt with district requirements concerning reading instruction.

# CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This chapter presents a more detailed description of my data analysis and the results I found. I have analyzed my data based on my research questions: 1) What are the expectations of the district in regards to classroom instruction? 2) How do teachers teach reading? 3) How do teachers assess students' reading? 4) How do teachers use assessment data in their teaching of reading? 5) How do teachers view the publication of standardized test scores? 6) Are there differences between higher and lower scoring schools on these issues?

Background information about testing and reading instruction came from district administrators. Information directly related to my research questions came from teachers.

## Reading Instruction: District Policies

Prior to beginning my analysis of the data, I conducted a telephone interview with the district administrator for elementary education to determine the district's policies about reading instruction. The district requires the use of a basal series as the primary instrument for elementary reading instruction. In addition, teachers are encouraged to use additional materials in their teaching of reading. The district also mandates specific amounts of time by grade level for the purpose of reading instruction. However, an administrator for Reading Services explained that if teachers can defend the use of a different instructional program, they can receive permission to deviate from the district requirements concerning use of the basal. She said there were pockets of alternative

reading instruction throughout the district. From her description, it seemed to me that a cumbersome process was required before teachers could deviate from district requirements. The district administrator explained that each elementary building is responsible for creating a plan for reading instruction. CAT scores as well as Benchmark scores are to be used to help each school focus instruction for reading. The Benchmark is a test designed to assess how well students have met the learning goals of the District. The scores from these tests help determine whether a student needs to be placed in a skills group. Skills groups are long-term groupings of students that test scores indicate need to have extra instructional attention for reading instruction.

## Teachers: Background, Reading Instruction Practices, and Attitudes and Beliefs about Testing

Twenty-nine second through sixth-grade teachers were invited to participate in this study. I received eighteen completed questionnaires, twelve (of 20) from Lakewood School and six (of 9) from Golden Hills School. This represents approximately an equal proportion from each school. As a reminder, Lakewood School is the low-performing (per CAT score) school and Golden Hills is the high-performing school.

### Professional Background of Respondents

.Teachers' responses on the questionnaire reveal that a majority of them from both schools have had some form of post-bachelor degree education, including graduate college

courses as well as seminars and workshops (see Table 3). Golden Hills teachers had more education overall than Lakewood respondents. All respondents from Golden Hills School have had some level of graduate course work and they hold more masters degrees than Lakewood School teachers proportionately. Teachers reported obtaining three types of masters degrees: one in reading (Lakewood), one in administration (Golden Hills), and six in elementary education (Lakewood-2, Golden Hills-4).

Table 3

Percent of Teachers with Post BS/BA Education (P=100)

| School | Seminars, workshops, etc. | Graduate courses | Masters Degree |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lakewood | 83 | 22 | 17 |
| Golden Hills | 100 | 100 | 83 |

There was a great difference in years of experience of teachers between Golden Hills School and Lakewood School (6.4 average) (see Figure 1). Most teachers have attended district sponsored in-services for reading. Several teachers mentioned specific programs that they have attended such as "Project Read" and the most often mentioned, "The 4-Block Literacy Model Workshop" (which will be described in the Reading Instruction portion of the analysis). Metropolitan Reading Council (the local International Reading Association Council) workshops, whole language workshops, motivational workshops and seminars, and phonics workshops were also mentioned.


**Figure 1**- Years of Teaching Experience

It is unclear how many of these were sponsored by the school district. It appears that most of the teachers have had a variety of workshop and seminar experiences in the field of reading. Only two teachers mentioned that they had not been to a reading workshop recently. I found it interesting that, by a large margin, the teachers who have taken graduate courses and have attained masters degrees came from the higher performing Golden Hills School.

## Respondents' Classroom Data

Classroom size ranged from fifteen to thirty pupils among the eighteen respondents. Classes tend to be larger at Golden Hills School with an average of twenty-

six students; Lakewood School has an average of twenty-one students per classroom.

Three types of student services are provided in reading at both schools (see Table 4): special education, English as a second language (ESL), and Title I. Lakewood School teachers reported having more students in special reading services than did Golden Hills teachers. Four Lakewood teachers reported having over fifty percent of their students involved in special reading services (see Table 5).

Table 4

Number of Teachers with Students Involved with Reading Services (multi-responses)

(N=30)

| School | ESL | Title I | SPED |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lakewood | 5 | 8 | 9 |
| Golden Hills | 1 | 2 | 5 |

The majority of teachers in both schools responded that the make-up of their classrooms had changed in recent years. The most often cited change, by eight teachers, was an increase in ESL students. Three teachers stated that their students had lower reading abilities than in previous years. Both schools are Title I schools and both schools have a large population of students whose primary language is not English.

Table 5

Percentage of Students Involved in Reading Services

| Teacher # | % in reading services | School L/GH | Teacher # | % in reading services | School L/GH | Teacher # | % in reading services | School L/GH |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 37 | GH | 7 | 4 | L | 13 | 55 | L |
| 2 | 19 | GH | 8 | 40 | L | 14 | 14 | L |
| 3 | 9 | GH | 9 | ** | L | 15 | 29 | L |
| 4 | 15 | GH | 10 | 59 | L | 16 | 30 | L |
| 5 | 16 | GH | 11 | 53 | L | 17 | 55 | L |
| 6 | 8 | GH | 12 | 32 | L | 18 | 32 | L |

L= Lakewood GH= Golden Hills **= Inappropriate response

The number of students teachers felt were successful in reading had a wide range, from a low of fourteen percent to a high of eighty-three percent. I found a difference in attitude between the two schools. All six of the respondents from Golden Hills School felt that a majority of their students were successful in reading. Only five out of twelve respondents from Lakewood described the majority of their students as being successful in reading.

## Reading Instruction

The teachers were asked how much time per week they spend on reading instruction. The answers to this question fit into three categories (see Table 6), possibly dependent upon whether the teacher teaches primary or intermediate level grades. District requirements for hours of reading instruction could be responsible for the data falling into

such defined categories. On average, Lakewood teachers spend more time on reading instruction (9 hours) than do the Golden Hills teachers (8.6 hours), although this may be due to more responses from primary teachers at Lakewood than at Golden Hills. Three Lakewood teachers' responses fit into two categories because of a wider range of hours that they gave in response to this question. Three teachers specified teaching reading for one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon. One teacher responded that reading was a part of the language arts block of time and another, the only teacher to respond in this way, stated that reading carried over into all subject areas.

Table 6

Hours of Reading Instruction per Week by Percent of Teacher Responses (P=100)

| | 4-6 hrs | 7-9 hrs | 10+ hrs. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Golden Hills | 67 | 0 | 33 |
| Lakewood | 20 | 40 | 40 |

When asked to describe how they taught reading, all respondents answered the question by describing the types of groupings they employ. All stated that they teach students as whole group, in small groups, and in skill groups, thus following district guidelines. Flex groups were also mentioned by teachers. These are groups that are temporary and are created to teach specific skills in which a student may be deficient. When the students master the skill, they leave the group. The group is disbanded when all have mastered the skill being taught. Nine teachers expanded on their responses in the

following ways.

Four teachers, all from Lakewood, specified that they taught reading using the 4-Blocks Reading Model. When I asked principals about this, I found that teachers from both schools had attended a district-sponsored workshop describing the techniques of this method. This method, which relies on the use of a basal, was developed by Pat Cunningham (1994). The method involves the dividing of reading instructional time into four blocks of specific instruction with designated amounts of time: guided reading/basal block, self-selected reading block, vocabulary and skill block (Working with Words), and the writing block (Sigmon, 1997).

Three teachers describe their reading instruction as including grouping students for special interests, teaching using student interests as a basis for instruction, individualization of instruction, and team teaching. One teacher mentioned student immersion and one teacher stated that his/her reading instruction was based on "whatever works." I found responses to be similar between both schools.

When asked how they decided to teach in the way that they do, teachers' responses fell into six categories (see Table 7). Several teachers had multiple answers. Among the most educated teachers, experience or experimentation and observation of others was the most common response. These were also the most frequently stated responses by Lakewood teachers. Workshops, seminars, in-services and college course work were mentioned by several Lakewood teachers as well as several of the most educated teachers. Four teachers responded that they determined how to teach reading

based on the school district's guidelines. One teacher stated using test scores to determine how reading was taught. No patterns emerged from Golden Hills responses or from teachers with twenty or more years of experience. I was a bit surprised that more teachers, especially those with masters degrees, did not mention college courses they have taken as helping them decide how to teach reading.

Table 7

How Teachers Decided to Teach As They Do/Number of Teacher Responses (N=50)

| Description | Lakewood | Golden Hills | Bachelors + | 20+ yrs. experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| experience/ experimental | 5 | 2 | 5 | 2 |
| district guidelines | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| observing others | 7 | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| student needs | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| test scores | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| workshops/ in-services, college courses | 4 | 0 | 3 | 1 |

Teachers were asked to describe the materials that they used in teaching reading and how often they used those materials; the choices they were given and their responses can be found in Table 8. All eighteen teachers use the basal to some extent as a part of their reading instruction (the district requires use of a basal series). Only one Golden Hills teacher uses the basal exclusively for reading instruction. This teacher has had twenty

years of experience teaching and has a masters degree in Elementary Education. The teacher had responded that she/he had not been to any reading workshops or seminars in recent years. Most teachers responded that they used the basal with other materials as well as using stories from other sources. Most teachers also used informational materials as a part of their reading instruction.

Table 8

Materials Used for Reading

(N=48) (P=267)

| Response | Number of Responses | Percent of Teachers Responding |
|---|---|---|
| Basal Only | 1 | 6 |
| Basal & Other Materials | 17 | 94 |
| Stories from other sources | 16 | 89 |
| Informational Sources such as: books, magazines, Internet | 14 | 78 |

Most teachers indicated that they use the basal materials in addition to other materials on a daily basis, such as workbooks, worksheets, reading games, trade books, and flash cards (see Table 9). When asked how these materials were used, all responded that they use these materials for skill building which includes increasing vocabulary and comprehension skills in both whole and small group instruction sessions.

A majority of teachers also use stories from outside sources; only two teachers responded that they do not use any stories from other sources (other than the basal) in

their reading instruction. Stories outside of the basal program are used on a daily basis by fifty percent of the Lakewood teachers, while only seventeen percent of Golden Hills teachers use stories on a daily basis. When asked how these materials were used, most teachers stated that they use literature from outside sources to supplement the basal lessons and for skill development. Five teachers responded that their students use outside literature for individual or "comfort reading." Only one teacher used the phrase "for student enjoyment" when describing why she/he used certain reading materials.

Table 9

How Often Materials are Used by Percentage (does not include basal only use)

(Golden Hills: P=285) (Lakewood: P=299)

| | Golden Hills | | | Lakewood | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Response | Basal/Other | Stories | Info/ Materials | Basal/Other | Stories | Info/ Materials |
| Daily | 67 | 17 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 17 |
| Multi x wkly | 17 | 17 | 33 | 8 | 33 | 33 |
| Weekly | 0 | 17 | 17 | 17 | 8 | 50 |
| Not Specified | 0 | 33 | 33 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Not at all | 0 | 17 | 17 | 0 | 8 | 0 |

Teachers had multiple responses as to how they use reading materials, which are shown in Table 10. These responses were very similar from both schools as well as from teachers with more education and teachers with greater amounts of experience.

Table 10

How Reading Materials are Used/Teacher Responses

(N=53) (P=221)

| Response | Number of Responses | Percent of Teachers |
|---|---|---|
| To supplement the basal | 18 | 75 |
| To develop skills | 24 | 100 |
| Enrichment, enjoyment, interest development | 11 | 46 |

When teachers use informational sources, most teachers use those sources either weekly or several times a week. This pattern was evident only among Lakewood teachers; no clear pattern was detectable among Golden Hills teachers. Most teachers responded that the informational material is used to supplement the basal program and to enhance the research skills of their students.

Most responses to questions in the category regarding reading instruction did not fit any specific patterns by school, amount of education, or experience other than teachers in both schools see skill building as the primary focus of their reading instruction. These same teachers also appear to be very tied to their basal in regards to how they use other materials. Even when using outside stories, several teachers responded that they only used outside literature when it tied in to the basal lesson for that week. Teachers with more education tended to use more variety in reading materials and more variety in their

use, although these teachers were also primarily concerned with skill development and basal support.

Teachers were asked whether they grouped students for reading instruction. The district, as mentioned earlier, does require skill reinforcement groupings based on CAT scores and other standardized tests. Unexpectedly, two teachers responded that although they do, they were not required to group their students for reading instruction. All eighteen respondents have skill groups based on CAT scores. Seven teachers stated that they also group their students for instruction based on other test scores such as basal unit tests and Benchmarks test scores (see Table 11). All other methods of grouping students are used for story reading and projects. For these purposes, five teachers use random selection, eight teachers use self-selection, and five teachers use other methods or combinations.

When asked what type of instruction these children receive in these groups, most teachers responded that the groups were for skill instruction and skill reinforcement. Peer instruction was another type of instruction mentioned.

When asked what materials were used for group instruction, responses included trade books, worksheets, flash cards, scaffolding tapes, SRA materials, Project Read materials, E-Z Readers, computer programs (one teacher), and slates. Basal materials were specifically mentioned by nine teachers.

| Table 11<br>Type of Grouping/No.of Responses<br>(N=43) | |
|---|---|
| By skills need | 18 |
| By test scores | 7 |
| By random selection | 5 |
| By self-selection | 8 |
| By other methods or combinations | 5 |

Reading Assessment Responses

Teachers with the most experience and education tend to prepare students for CAT by teaching skills all year rather than intensifying preparation prior to testing; most of these teachers were from Golden Hills. All other teachers (mostly Lakewood) increase preparation time for CAT in varying amounts of time during the semester of testing (see Table 12). Lakewood teachers were more specific in amounts of time dedicated to preparation for the CAT.

The fact that most teachers increase their preparation time for the CAT's as testing time nears suggests that test's importance to the teachers involved. Sixty percent of teachers with higher levels of education prepared students for CAT over the entire school year rather than intensifying preparation immediately prior to administration of the CAT. Most of these teachers teach at Highland, the higher performing school.

| Table 12<br>Time Spent in Preparation for CAT (N=25) (N=12) | | |
|---|---|---|
| Response | No. of Lakewood Teachers | No. of Golden Hills Teachers |
| All year | 4 | 4 |
| Increases prior to testing | 11 | 4 |
| Daily | 7 | 1 |
| Multi x weekly | 2 | 3 |
| Not specified | 1 | 0 |

Teacher responses to the question of how they felt their students would perform this year on the CAT had a wide range from "very good" to "poor or badly" (see Figure 2).

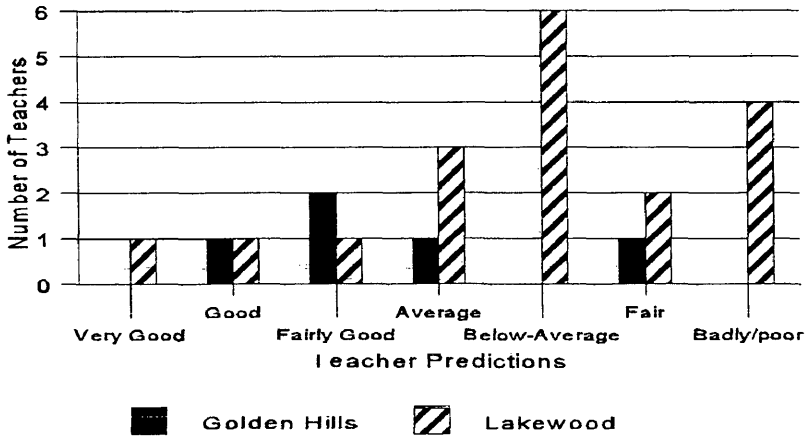


Figure 2 - Teacher Predictions of Student Achievement on CAT

The most positive prediction came from a Lakewood teacher who predicted that thirty percent of students would do "quite well" on the tests. Half of the responses were given in ranges. Four Lakewood teachers predicted at least a portion of their class would perform "poorly" or "badly". One of these predicted their entire group would perform "poorly". Two Golden Hills teachers were not giving the CAT this year. All but one prediction of students performing "below-average" to "bad or poorly" were Lakewood teachers; an equal number of teachers from both schools predicted their students would do well on the CAT.

The next two questions regarding reading assessment go together. Teachers were asked if they were required to use CAT scores in their reading instruction, and if they were not required to use CAT scores, did they use them in any way.

From my interview with the school district official, I already knew that CAT scores are required to be used by the district in the formulation of skill groups and for consideration in the individual school's reading plans. Despite this, ten teachers responded that they were not required to use CAT scores in their reading instruction. Of the ten who stated that they were not required to use test scores in their reading instruction, one, a first-year teacher was not sure how she/he would use the scores. Of the remaining nine, when asked if they did use these scores in their reading instruction, all but two stated that they did, for skill groups. Two of these teachers also responded that they felt that the CAT scores helped them to determine what they would teach in regards to reading instruction. Those remaining two teachers responded earlier in the questionnaire

that they did group their students for skills and one of those two even responded on the previous question that the district did require the formation of skill groups. There was obviously some confusion. Some of this may be explained by the fact that while the district requires the use of CAT scores in helping to form school reading plans and individual classroom skill groups, other tests such as Benchmarks are also used. The following statement made by one of the teachers, while not totally accurate, seems to summarize well what teachers wrote about this subject: "While not required, we are encouraged to use test scores as a tool to help plan teaching strategies. CAT is not based on our Learning Outcomes but some skills are the same, so the scores can help [with instruction]."

Teachers were asked if they altered their reading instruction due to CAT score results. Nearly half of the respondents answered yes, and nearly half answered no. Golden Hill teachers split three and three on this question while five Lakewood teachers said yes and six said no. Of those answering that they did alter their instruction, responses included that instruction was altered by using CAT scores to help determine the focus of reading instruction for the following school year and to improve instruction. One teacher used the CAT scores to become more "analytical" in instruction. Three teachers responded that they altered their instruction prior to testing in that they concentrated more on the skills that are on the CAT as well as doing more testing using the CAT format. Two of these teachers felt that it was important to prepare students during reading instruction time to become more aware of the standardized testing format and to teach

students how to take a test. The responses were fairly evenly distributed between both schools and across experience levels as well as educational levels.

Teachers were asked what other forms of assessment that they use with their reading instruction (see Table 13). There were multiple responses from several teachers. Most teachers fell into two groups in regard to other forms of assessment they use in reading instruction: basal materials (such as unit tests, vocabulary tests, and basal reader Checkpoints), and teacher observation. Lakewood teachers offer a wider variety of responses including the use of rubrics and writer's response.

Table 13

Other Forms of Assessment Used (multiple responses)*

| | ( N=19) No. Lakewood Teachers | (N=12) No. Golden Hills Teachers |
|---|---|---|
| Basal materials | 7 | 5 |
| Benchmarks | 2 | 0 |
| Self-observation (students) | 0 | 1 |
| Observation (teacher) | 6 | 5 |
| Class discussion | 1 | 0 |
| Writer's response | 1 | 0 |
| Oral reading | 1 | 1 |
| Rubrics | 1 | 0 |

* Four teachers did not respond

When asked how these assessments were used, all respondents stated that they used these forms of assessment for grading, planning instruction, and one teacher mentioned using these assessment devices for grouping students.

Most teachers felt that their own observations were their best form of reading assessment. Several teachers had multiple answers to this question (see Table 14). Basal tests were the second most mentioned favorite form of assessment. One teacher felt that using rubrics were the best form of assessment because, "Students can see their own growth and they add confidence."

I found little difference between schools on these questions. Teachers who have taught for ten or more years tend to rely on traditional methods of assessment such as basal unit tests and standardized test scores. A large number of these teachers also rely on teacher observation as an assessment technique.

Generally, but definitely not always, teachers with more years of education tended to use more variety of techniques for reading assessment. These were the teachers who also used more student-centered assessment techniques such as rubrics and writer's response

Table 14

Best Form of Assessment (multiple responses)

| | (N=13) No. Lakewood Teachers | (N=8) No. Golden Hills Teachers |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher observation | 8 | 4 |
| Basal unit tests | 2 | 3 |
| Class discussion | 1 | 0 |
| Writer's response | 1 | 0 |
| Benchmarks | 0 | 1 |
| Rubrics | 1 | 0 |

Responses Concerning Attitudes and Beliefs

Responses differed the most between the two schools on this portion of the questionnaire. When asked what their feelings were concerning standardized tests, the teachers who wrote a lot were those with negative feelings about the tests. Of the seven negative responses, six teachers were from Lakewood School. Concerns over student feelings of self worth were repeated by many teachers. One Lakewood teacher had the following to say concerning what happened in her class at test time:

> I had a student randomly guess last year who scored higher than someone who tried very hard. The tests are very stressful for students. A few cry, throw their tests on the floor or refuse to even start. I am supposed to get them to perform &

keep them from distracting others.

The strongest condemnation of the CAT was that too much emphasis has been placed on the test results. Two teachers responded that the CAT's are biased, while one other teacher was concerned that standardized tests do not show growth and compare students in different circumstances.

A number of teachers from both schools have mixed feelings toward the tests; they felt that while there are some good uses for the tests such as finding weak areas in reading instruction, there are several negative aspects that bothered them, all of which were discussed earlier.

Interestingly, of the five respondents who felt that the CAT was a positive or good thing, three came from the low-performing school, Lakewood. These five teachers felt that the CAT helped to set standards and goals and helped the district find which schools need help for reading.

Most teachers' attitudes toward CAT have not changed recently. Of the six teachers who had changed their attitudes toward CAT recently, all had responded that their attitudes had changed from positive to negative; four of these six teachers were from Lakewood School. One of these teachers stated that going back to school as a graduate student had changed his/her attitudes toward testing in general. Several teachers from both schools felt that pressure to perform well has increased recently. I found the following Lakewood teacher response interesting:

I have become more bitter towards CAT's due to the inequity of the students

> taking it. Students in my school seem to score low making it look like they aren't learning--they are learning! The test doesn't show what they are learning. [The] public doesn't look at the big picture of what is going on in our city.

Teachers from both schools admitted that they have altered instruction to improve student performance on the CAT, both in skills emphasized in instruction and in time given to actual preparation for CAT.

I was not surprised to see the difference in attitude between Lakewood and Golden Hills, although it was interesting to see the number of Lakewood teachers who had positive responses toward CAT. This was not the case when teachers were asked their feelings concerning the publication of CAT scores in the local newspaper, ten of thirteen negative responses came from Lakewood teachers which included the following:

> Ridiculous! This makes schools & teachers want to teach to the tests & unfairly compares students. [They] also lead public to inaccurate conclusions regarding what goes on in schools. There are a lot of other issues that are a part of test scores that are never addressed such as mobility & kids coming to school without basic needs being met.

Another Lakewood teacher responded that the publication of scores in the newspaper were unnecessary and politically motivated to gain funding for textbook company's business. Several teachers felt the publication was unfair and that the public did not understand the scores anyway. One teacher even responded that he/she did not even understand the scores.

A few teachers had mixed feelings about the publication of test scores. While they mentioned the same negative concerns as previously described, they felt that it was the public's right to know what the test scores were. Two teachers, one from each school, felt that the publication of test scores were "O.K." and that the public had a right to know the test scores.

## Limitations of the Study

This study was designed to be used with a small population of teachers. The extensive use of open-ended questions in the questionnaire would be difficult to categorize if this study had been done district-wide. Unfortunately, this also limits any generalizations that can be made concerning teacher attitudes, beliefs, and practices beyond the two schools studied. A limitation of any study that relies on a questionnaire for the majority of its data is the reliance on self-reporting information.

If this study would be repeated, I would expand the study district-wide and include observations of teachers teaching reading. I would also ask for information regarding the grade level taught by teachers responding to the questionnaire. I would also ask a district reading administrator if teacher input is used when determining district reading policies.

# CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I discuss my findings and make some conclusions from the study while attempting to answer my original research questions. I have divided this chapter for discussion purposes into sections for each of those questions.

Over half of the teachers from both schools initially invited to participate in this study did so. While I cannot make generalizations regarding these two schools, enough teachers did respond so that certain patterns in both schools can be seen. I cannot make any generalizations concerning this school district aside from district-wide policy regarding reading instruction, as this study focused on only two elementary buildings in that district.

## District Expectations Regarding Classroom Reading Instruction and CAT Use

From interviews with two district reading officials and from the uniformity of responses regarding reading instruction from teachers, it is apparent that the school district policy does play an important role in classroom reading instruction, specifically in three areas: amount of time for reading instruction, use of a specific basal series as the focus for reading instruction, and the use of CAT scores (and other test scores) for the formation of skill groups. My findings show that these district requirements are well adhered to by teachers in both schools. These findings are the same as those in the Stephens et al.(1995) study which found little creativity or variety in regards to reading instruction when school districts dictated reading instruction from the central office.

The most puzzling portion of the study was teacher response to the question of classroom independence regarding reading instruction. Despite the multiple district requirements for reading instruction, those teachers from the study all responded that they had a great deal of independence in how they taught reading! These results mirrored what the Stephens et al. (1995) study found. In that study, teachers were comfortable with district requirements because they had a part in forming those policies. My questionnaire did not consider the issue of teacher input in district decisions regarding reading instruction. The same study also found that teachers who felt that they had a great amount of independence in reading instruction tended to be more creative in their reading instruction. This was not what I found in my study. Rather, I found great conformity among teachers in their reading instruction, while at the same time these teachers felt they had a great amount of independence in how they taught reading.

## Reading Instruction: How Do Teachers Teach Reading?

I was most surprised by the results from this portion of the questionnaire. I found great conformity to district guidelines regarding basal use and skill group formation. I would expect to find this to be true among first or second-year teachers, but I found this adherence to district guidelines across the spectrum of experience and education. There appeared to be little creativity in how materials were used in reading instruction with most teachers using non-basal materials simply to support the basal lesson or to enhance skills. All teachers reported using CAT and other test scores for grouping students into skill

groups, which are permanent placements at least for that school year. This information is in agreement with what was found in other studies that reported similar findings where school districts had a great deal of influence on classroom reading instruction (Miller, 1995; Stephens et al.,1995).

I found throughout the responses regarding use of reading materials that all but one of the teachers are using non-basal materials in their reading instruction, which includes outside literature and informational sources. My data did not reveal the specific use of trade books by the teachers although current national trends, according to the findings of the NAEP, found an increase in the use of trade books with basal programs between 1992 and 1994 (Goodman, 1998).

It is encouraging to see more variety of materials being brought into the reading classroom. This change must be in part due to the fact that teacher colleges and reading theorists have been promoting the use of non-basal materials for several years. Some publishing companies are responding by including trade books in their basal programs. The basal series that is used by this district includes trade books. Over time, this may help to create more successful reading experiences, especially for those students who have a lack of reading materials in their own homes. It would have been interesting to ask teachers how often "low" performing students get to read trade books and in general, how they use the basal materials.

Unfortunately, this district is facing an increase in the use of standardized tests both at the district level and possibly, in the near future, at the state level. This may

increase the practice of teaching to the test which may mean a stronger reliance on the basal. Reliance on tests that focus on skills to determine reading success or failure ignores current constructivist reading theory (Rumelhart, 1974; Goodman, 1984) which states that reading is more than the learning of isolated skills; students become successful readers by building meaning based on their personal schemas. The skill-based approach to reading instruction also ignores the socio-cultural aspects of learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

### How Do Teachers Assess Students' Reading and How is that Data Used?

It is not surprising to see in a district requiring basal use that the most used form of assessment of student reading by teachers is basal materials (Table 13). I found that the other most popular form of assessment was teachers' own observations of student performance. This finding does not support what researchers have found in similar basal-centered reading programs (Shelton, 1993; Weinzierl, 1993) where teachers did not tend to trust their own evaluative techniques.

Teachers use their assessment data for grading purposes and skill group assignments. This follows a general trend that I found across the board in regard to reading instruction. Teachers in both schools tend to be most concerned with skills and skill group formation and grades. This is not surprising considering district requirements and the growing pressure for students to perform well. I was dismayed that more teachers do not use more personal forms of assessment such as portfolios, which no one mentioned, or writer's response, which only one teacher mentioned.

## Teachers' Views of Standardized Tests and Their Publication

The responses from the teachers in this study echoed findings in several related studies dealing with teacher beliefs and concerns regarding the use of standardized tests (Anders & Richardson, 1992; McCormick, Cooter, & McEneaney, 1992, Smith, 1991; Stephens et al., 1995). I would assume from the negative responses by the majority of teachers in this study that if the district did not require teachers to use standardized test scores then most of them would not use them at all. This is supported by the fact that very few respondents mentioned standardized test scores when discussing how they assessed their students. Whether teachers agree with the use of these test scores in the classroom or not becomes a moot point considering the fact that the district requires skill group formation based in part, on CAT scores.

As discussed in the previous chapter, teachers generally have negative feelings in regard to the publication of CAT scores in the local newspaper. It is interesting that while most teachers were quite adamant in their disdain for publishing test scores in the paper, these same teachers all use reading instruction time to prepare students to perform well on the CAT. I can only conclude from this finding that while teachers may not place a great value on the CAT scores, they feel a need to make sure their students perform well on those tests. Obviously there is pressure from the district to improve test scores and possibly also from principals (although no one stated this to be the case). Publication of test scores in the local newspaper is not having a positive effect on teachers or students according to the respondents; the practice only adds to the emphasis on test scores. This

is in agreement with previous studies (Smith, 1991; Stephens et al., 1995).

## Is There a Difference Between the Higher and Lower Performing Schools on the Issues Discussed?

I have found that the greatest difference between the high-performing CAT school (Golden Hills) and the low-performing CAT school (Lakewood) is in the area of years of experience and number of teachers with a greater amount of education. Golden Hills School had higher numbers of teachers in both categories.

I found that there is also a great difference in teacher attitude toward testing in general and in attitudes concerning how students will perform on the CAT between the two schools. Overall, Golden Hill teachers appear to be more positive in their views of their students' abilities, teacher attitude does affect student performance (Miller, 1995).

In comparing test results from the two schools studied, one must look at the fact that this study found a much higher percentage of students from Lakewood School had students involved in special reading services. I was told by district officials that many of these students do participate in the CAT. Even if these students' scores were not figured into the overall school

scores, the increased special needs at Lakewood certainly must affect the overall reading program at that school.

More teachers at Golden Hills School prepare their students, skill-wise, over the entire year rather than concentrating on preparation just before testing time. This may

reduce the anxiety level of the students concerning the test, but introducing and practicing skills over an entire school year must better prepare the student at test time.

While several teachers have integrated reading throughout their curriculum, most are tied to the concept of reading being taught only as a specific block of time during the school day. As previously discussed, several teachers suggested through their responses that they use outside literature mainly as a supplement to basal lessons. It is obvious from the similar responses concerning reading instruction as well as grouping of students from both schools, that district requirements as well as teacher beliefs heavily influence what is taught in the reading classroom. Even where teachers have an opportunity to be more creative in their reading instruction, a majority from both schools tend to rely on the basal and basal supplemental materials for that instruction. I also found that skill development is the primary focus of reading instruction at all levels in both schools. I found no noticeable differences between the two schools in regards to reading instruction and CAT performance.

Do Standardized Reading Tests Have an Effect on Reading Instruction in the Classroom?

As I have previously stated, I cannot make a generalization for either school in this study nor for the district involved. From this study it is evident that among respondents, reading instruction is affected by CAT scores. It would appear from the responses of the teachers that district mandates probably affect reading instruction more than the CAT scores. The district requires the use of the CAT scores, in part, to form skill groups in

each reading classroom. These test scores help to determine individual school reading plans. The district-wide use of a basal series emphasizes the skills that are found on standardized tests. Every teacher admits to spending several hours of instructional time in preparing their students to take the CAT, especially during the academic quarter of testing. Teachers admit to preparing more tests using the CAT format to familiarize students with that type of testing. Teachers also admit to emphasizing skills that appear on the CAT during reading instruction.

## Final Thoughts

Both of the schools that I studied have large minority populations. An issue that has not been discussed in this study but one which is gaining attention in minority communities is that of the impact of standardized test scores on expectations of minority students. Minority students' achievement on these tests has been the focus of the media and certain politically motivated groups and individuals in recent years. Standardized tests are based on minimum standards of achievement. In the rush to show improvement, especially in minority populations, schools are emphasizing those skills from standardized tests in their classroom instruction in order to show improvement in scores. In this atmosphere of teaching to the test, higher level thinking skills, which are not adequately emphasized on standardized tests, are being increasingly ignored. This is a disservice to minority students and a form of institutional racism (Lomax, West, Harmon, Viator & Madaus, 1995).

Today, nation-wide, standardized tests are attaining a role in reading instruction that they were not created to have. Funding issues are increasingly becoming tied to test scores. In Florida, the state legislature has voted to give vouchers to parents in low-performing schools (based on test scores) so that their children may attend private schools where the education is supposedly better ("Florida Vouchers," 1999). The money for those vouchers will come from money appropriated for public schools. I am concerned that as these tests gain importance, the individual needs of the student will be lost in the race to improve skill performance for specific standardized tests.

As the importance of standardized tests increase, I am concerned that we will see even more departmentalization of reading instruction rather than integration of reading throughout the curriculum. This is evident in the answers given in this study. Administrators and politicians need to show the public that students are spending "x" amount of time on reading instruction. The school district studied requires very specific amounts of time for reading instruction and teachers tend to use that time in specific reading blocks, much of which is spent on teaching skills in isolation. The importance of basal series becomes more important in the test-driven school districts because basal series and standardized tests are married to each other ( Shannon, 1989).

Test score pollution becomes another important issue with the growing influence of standardized tests. It will be tempting to place more students in special reading services to increase classroom scores because those students are either not tested or, if they are, their scores are not included in the data (per school district officials). Increased

importance placed on standardized testing may cause teachers to deviate from standard directions regarding help given to students and time limitations on tests which of course will distort the test findings and make them invalid. This concern was verified in a study by Haladyna, Nolen, and Haas (1991) and I have found through informal discussion that teachers in the district studied are aware of instances where teachers have changed answers on tests or given students extra time to complete a test.

What is the purpose of reading instruction? What do we, as a society, want from our schools in regards to reading instruction? We currently have and appear to be increasing our reliance on skill-based reading instruction as we concurrently place more importance on

standardized reading tests. Higher level thinking skills are not emphasized on standardized tests. Literacy is too important to be left to a "one approach fits all" system of reliance on any one reading program; theorists have shown this not to be a workable solution to our literacy problems (Shannon, 1989). Skill-based instruction often consists of worksheets and one-way instruction from the teacher to the students (Emerson, 1996). This ignores Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural model of reading instruction, which emphasizes the importance of the interaction between students and their environment in the learning process (Moll, 1990).

While many publishing companies may claim diversity of instruction is built into their programs, there are no quick fix solutions, and there are no uniform programs that will fulfill the needs of every child. If one program or reading series could satisfy the

needs of each child each teacher would be using that program in every school in the nation. Teachers need to use a variety of resources to successfully teach reading, they need to rely more on their own professional judgment, and they need to see each child as an individual learner. To ensure that every child becomes literate in our society will take time and extra effort on the part of teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

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## Appendix A

### Standardized Test Questionnaire
### (Pilot Study)

This questionnaire is being used for a pilot study dealing with the use of standardized test reading results in elementary classrooms of the Omaha Public School District. The study is being performed by graduate students from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. All information is confidential, the grade(s) that you teach is all that the researchers need to know about you as a respondent of this questionnaire. Please answer each question as completely as you feel is necessary on a separate sheet of paper and attach the answer pages to this paper. Thank You!

1. What grade or grades do you teach?

2. What standardized tests are used in your building that deal with reading in part or entirely?

3. Are you required in any way by the district or by your building principal to use the reading results of standardized tests in your classroom? If so, please explain.

4. Do you feel a need to "teach to the test"?

5. How much time do you use in preparation for standardized reading tests in the classroom?
(# of hours).

6. If standardized reading test results are used for grouping purposes in your classroom or for pull-outs, how is that done?

7. How did your school rank (high, middle, low), in the Omaha World-Herald ranking of schools (For reading) in 1997? Did you experience any feedback from administrators, fellow teachers, parents , or students? What were you feelings and or concerns regarding the publishing of the test scores in the paper?

8. Please explain your personal attitude toward and concerns about standardized reading tests?

thank-you for your time and effort in participating in this survey.

## Appendix B

## Questionnaire

### Standardized Reading Tests and Reading Instruction

I am a graduate student from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. This questionnaire is a part of my masters thesis dealing with the use of standardized reading test scores in elementary classrooms. Your identity will remain anonymous. Please answer each question as completely as necessary to convey your thoughts. Feel free to use additional pages. **The questionnaire should take about thirty minutes to complete.** If you are interested in the results from this study you can contact me at UNO. Though I have their permission, the Omaha Public School District is not involved in this study nor is the district sponsoring this study.

I will collect these from you on ----------

Thank you for your time and participation in the study.

Michael White

Graduate Student, UNO

**P.S. I have included this book mark and snack as a "thank you" for your participation in this study.**

**Professional Background**

1. How many years have you been teaching?_____

2. When did you receive your bachelors degree?_____

3. Have you returned to school for graduate education?___ _____
If yes, describe any graduate courses you have taken.

Do you have a masters degree?_____ If so, in what area?_____

4. What types of programs, seminars, or workshops have you participated in that deal with reading instruction?

**Your Classroom**

5. How many students do you have in your class?____ How many of these students would you describe as being

successful in reading? _____ How many students would you describe as struggling in reading? ____

How many of your students receive special services? SPED ____ Title I ____

Has the make-up of your class changed in recent years? _____ If yes, how?

**Reading Instruction**

6. How much time do you spend per week on reading instruction? Please explain.

7. How would you describe the ways you teach reading?

How did you decide to teach in those ways?

8. Which of the following describes the materials you use in teaching reading? (Complete all that apply.)

| | **How often?** | **How do you use these materials?** |
|---|---|---|
| **Basal only** | | |
| **Basal & Other Materials** | | |
| **Stories from other sources** | | |
| **Informational sources such as: books, magazines Internet** | | |

9. Are you required to group your students for reading instruction? ____ If yes, who/what decides?

District ___ Principal ___ Other:_____

If you group your students for reading instruction, how do you decide the make-up of the groups?

**Please explain your answers.**

By skill needs ____

By test scores ____

By random selection ____

By self-selection ___

By other methods or combinations ___

What kinds of instruction do children receive in these groups?

What materials are used?

**Reading Assessment**

10. If your students will be taking the California Achievement Test (CAT) this year, how do you think they will do?

Throughout the school year, how many hours do you estimate you use to prepare students for the CAT? Please describe (practice once a week, all year; prepare in month before tests; etc.)

11. Are you required in any way to use reading test scores from the CAT in classroom reading instruction,
for example, required grouping?_____ If yes, how?

12. If you are **not** specifically required to use the test scores, do you utilize them?_____
If so, how?

13. Do you find yourself altering your reading instruction in any way because of the CAT scores? _____
If so, how?

14. What other forms of assessment do you use in your evaluation of students' reading?

How do you use these assessments (e.g., grades, to plan instruction, grouping)?

15. What do you feel is (are) your best assessment tool(s) in evaluating student reading performance? Please explain your response.

**Attitudes and Beliefs**

16. What are your feelings concerning standardized reading tests? Please explain.

17. Have your feelings changed in recent years? Why?

18. How do you feel about the publication of standardized test scores in newspapers? Please explain.

19. How much independence do you feel that you have in the way you teach reading? Please explain.