Rural Teachers' Perceptions of How High-Stakes Testing Impacts High School Students

by

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Rural Teachers' Perceptions of How High-Stakes Testing Impacts High School Students

As the culture of high-stakes testing increasingly takes on a greater presence in the modern school system, there is simultaneously a mounting debate on whether its presence is advancing or hindering the learning of today’s students. Additionally, there has been a greater focus on trying to understand the effects of high-stakes testing in urban or highly diverse school systems rather than their rural counterparts. Meanwhile, 20% of the United State’s public school students are enrolled in rural school districts (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). This means that a large percentage of American schools are being left out of the high-stakes testing debate, and therefore studies that focus on the particular circumstance of rural schools are becoming increasingly imperative.

The root of my desire to study the effects of high-stakes testing in rural settings originated from spending a significant portion of one summer in Highland, Kansas. The small town’s claim to fame is its community college, which draws most of its students from northeastern Kansas’s high schools through its athletic programs. My experiences with the young adults who grew up in and around this town inspired me to wonder how high-stakes testing fits into this type of small town culture. Many of the people I met were college-aged but had never had any interest or intention of attending college, not even the community college that was within walking distance of their homes. Instead, their various professional aspirations included becoming a welder, driving for a local truck company, working for the local branch of the Kansas Department of Transportation, and serving as a local sales representative for a national company that sells hunting gear specially made for women. If these were the fulfilling aspirations of these young, small town community members, what did high-stakes testing ever mean to them? Did a culture of high-stakes testing benefit their educational career? Did it
prepare them for their future careers and lifestyles, which are essential to the productivity and safety of their local community? Was high-stakes testing the optimum format of evaluating the achievement of these students and the local high school?

Standardized testing is a test format in which all participants are required to answer the same questions, or a selection from the same set of questions, in exactly the same way. It is scored in a consistent way so that results can be used to compare the relative performance among individual students and among groups of students (“Standardized Test,” 2013). High-stakes testing is a form of standardized testing in which the results are used to make critical decisions concerning students, teachers, schools, and school districts. These tests are often implemented to ensure the accountability of schools and educators, and to determine punishments, accolades, advancement, and compensation regarding the students, teachers, schools, and school districts involved (“Standardized Test,” 2013). Standardized testing and high-stakes testing in particular are used in a variety of educational settings, but in this study I will be focusing on their presence, implementation, and effects in rural education settings.

To define rural schools, I am using the definitions released by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2006. According to their standards, there are three subcategories of what are considered rural territories: fringe, distant, and remote. Because I want to highlight the effects of high-stakes testing on rural schools, I will center my study on schools that are considered remote and distant, and consequently the most disconnected from urban locations. A remote locale is a census-defined territory that is located over 25 miles from an urbanized area with a population of 50,000 or more, and over 10 miles from an urban cluster with a population between 25,000 and 50,000 (NCES, 2006). A rural distant locale is located between 5 and 25 miles from an urbanized area, and is between 2.5 and 10 miles from an urban cluster (NCES,
2006). In studying the most extreme categories of urban locales, I hope to accentuate the characteristics of rural schools and thus create a strong base for considering their population’s relationship to standardized testing.

High-stakes testing aims to hold educators, schools, and school districts responsible for quality education. However, as noted earlier, standardized testing has an incredible power to influence what is considered quality education, what constitutes achievement, and what students should be learning in school. What if these standards of achievement do not correspond to the goals of rural education? What if standardized testing is driving rural students away from the education that would most benefit them, and driving them towards arbitrary standards of achievement that do nothing to support their future career goals and life aspirations? By valuing particular academic and career paths, are we devaluing other paths that are necessary and treasured within rural communities? I assume that there is a broad range of career goals and personal aspirations within the youth of rural communities. Of course there are rural students who dream about becoming astronauts, doctors, and CEOs and there are certainly rural students who achieve these goals, but there are also students who hope to take over their family business, work local construction jobs, manage a daycare, or farm the land that has been in their family for generations. There is no question that educators, schools, and school districts should be held responsible for quality education, but how we define quality education and how we measure achievement in rural settings should consider the characteristics of rural communities, the goals that rural educators have for the students, and the aspirations that rural students have for themselves.

Throughout this thesis, questions will be asked to create increased understandings of high-stakes testing in rural settings. How does high-stakes testing present itself in rural
education, and what effect does it have on the learning and achievement of rural students? How do the goals of high-stakes testing compare to the goals of rural education systems and the aspirations of rural students? And finally, is high-stakes testing the best means of measuring the achievement of students, educators, schools, and school districts, particularly in rural settings?

The ultimate intention of this study is 1) to understand the testing culture of schools in northeast Kansas and how the high-stakes testing culture fits, or does not fit, into rural education and; 2) to urge educational policymakers to developing ways of measuring achievement in all schools that promote quality education while correlating better with the characteristics of the community, the goals of the educators, and the aspirations of the students. The study will begin with a review of previous literature that discusses the aspirations of rural youth and the effects of high-stakes testing in rural settings.
Literature Review

In looking for research related to the topic of this thesis, it was found that not much literature exists which directly corresponds to its focus and purpose. In fact, not much current literature exists on several facets of this study including the aspirations of modern rural youth, the college and career readiness of rural youth, the effects of school experiences on aspirations of rural youth, and specifically the effects of high-stakes testing on rural high school students. Thus, for the purpose of reviewing current literature, this thesis aims to look at each aspect separately, find associations between them, and weave a modern story of how high-stakes testing is believed to impact rural high school students.

Aspirations of Rural Youth

Meece, Hutchins, Byun, Farmer, Irvin, & Weiss (2013) present a modern look at the educational and vocational aspirations of rural youth, how well these aspirations are aligned, and how the family, individual, and school influence these aspirations. To perform the study, researchers recruited youth in grades 9 through 12 from 73 schools across 34 states. All of the schools were labeled rural fringe, rural distant, or rural remote. Within each of these schools, students were administered a paper and pencil questionnaire asking them to identify their educational and occupational aspirations. Results were then categorized, assigned numerical values, and compared to determine the alignment of students’ educational and occupational aspirations.

Meece and her associates were inspired to perform this study based on some interesting perceptions of modern rural schools. First, they questioned the alignment of traditional expectations of rural education and current educational mandates by reflecting on the ideas presented by Brown & Schafft (2010), Corbett (2007), and Farmer et al. (2006) that, “rural
schools are traditionally expected to provide youth with strong educational foundations to sustain rural culture, lifestyles, and economies” (Meece et al, 2013, p. 177). Using the same studies, they noted that “current educational mandates emphasizing national curriculum standards, standardized assessments, and college preparation may be preparing youth for a future very different from where they currently live” (Meece et al, 2013, p. 177).

In addition, Meece and her colleagues note that, “Rural youth often experience a tension between moving away to pursue educational and vocational opportunities not supported in their home communities, while remaining close to family and community” (Meece et al, 2013, p. 177). They worry that conflicts like these could significantly influence and create unrealistic expectations for the aspirations of rural youth (Meece, et al., 2013, p. 177).

Meece and her associates also found that “students attending schools in rural remote locations were less likely than their counterparts in rural fringe/distant schools to aspire to college or graduate/professional school” (Meece, et al., 2013, p. 181). They found this to be significant because it shows that the aspirations of students differ, at least in part, depending on the location of their education. Secondly, findings indicated that youth who aspired to remain in their rural community or had positive perceptions of local career opportunities still tended to underestimate the amount of postsecondary education they would need to achieve their vocational aspirations. Based on the work of Farmer et al. (2006), Gibbs et al. (2005), Howley (2006), and Schafft (2010), Meece and her colleagues recognized that “successful rural schools are able to provide youth not only with a pathway toward the future but also with ways to remain connected to their communities” (as cited in Meece et al., 2013, p. 185).
High-Stakes Testing in Rural Settings

There has also been a small amount of research done on high-stakes testing in rural settings. Jones and Egley (2004) looked specifically at how rural elementary school administrators perceived impacts of high-stakes testing as being both positive and negative in comparison to elementary school administrators in suburban and urban locations. They focused on the perceptions of these administrators because “perception is the basis of our reality and affects the beliefs, values, and actions of those in leadership positions” (Jones & Egley, 2004, Introduction section, para. 3). Regardless of actual testing outcomes, perceptions of the tests and the way tests are addressed in the curriculum is what matters for the success of students. Although this study focused on rural education at the elementary level, it has general and meaningful connections to the larger picture of high-stakes testing in rural education.

Jones and Egley’s (2004) study found the following:

Some of the major concerns cited by principals were that high-stakes testing: (a) damaged developmentally appropriate practices; (b) narrowed the definition of school success to increased test scores; (c) increased the pressure on principals, teachers, and students; (d) lowered teacher morale; and (e) relied on rewards and punishments that were unfair (Perceptions of Testing section, para. 1).

These are immediate and devastating concerns within the modern school system, and although they are based solely on perceptions, Jones and Egley (2004) point out that perceptions influence what people consider to be reality, and thus they have an overwhelming effect on what a person in a leadership position believes and how they will take action.

Jones and Egley (2004) also found that there is a significant disconnect between politics and education, because even with the best interests of children at heart, reforms do not always
work the way they are supposed to. Tyack and Cuban (as cited in Jones & Egley, 2004) argued that because reforms created at federal and state levels often have little knowledge about the complex, existing frameworks of schools, districts, and communities; administrators become burdened with adapting and implementing the reforms to match their schools. If the reforms do not translate well into existing frameworks, then educators blame the reformers and reformers blame the educators. Jones and Egley argued that there is a possibility of this going on with the state and federal reforms such as the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” which mandated certain standards of adequate yearly progress measured by assessments generated in each individual state (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). As a result, states had the impossible task of developing uniform sets of reforms and standardized tests to be used in hugely diverse districts across the state, and administrators were tasked with implementing them in ways that best suited their unique district. Thus, educators have critiques of the educational reforms and reformers have critiques of the way their programs are being implemented.

Jones and Egley (2004) did find that rural administrators found test results to be more helpful assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their teachers than their urban counterparts. However, “the testing has had a greater impact on rural administrators' ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers.” (Jones & Egley, 2004, Removing, Attracting, and Retaining Teachers section, para. 2). Meanwhile, the tests have had little to no effect on administrators’ ability to remove low-performing teachers (Jones & Egley, 2004). So even if administrators are able to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their teachers using high-stakes testing, the tests are also creating the negative consequence of administrators being forced to focus less on recruiting new teachers, and more on retaining and reforming those they already employ. Jones and Egley (2004) believe it would be valuable for legislators to think about policy-making that
fosters rural development by providing market-based incentives and investment in people so that rural schools would have a better chance at attracting and retaining high quality teachers.

Fortunately, Linn and Gronlund (as cited in Jones & Egley, 2004) noticed that administrators and instructional leaders are increasingly using a more diverse set of procedures to evaluate the effectiveness of their teachers and the performance of their students, rather than just the formal versions of high-stakes tests. The fact remains though that if administrators perceive the need to take actions further than formal high-stakes tests, then those alone must not be perceived as adequate. While some state testing programs allow for these types of informal assessments, others may not be so flexible.

Powell, Higgins, Aram, & Freed (2009) also found issues with standardized testing, specifically related to the No Child Left Behind Act. Although many states have been granted waivers from NCLB standards (Center on Education Policy, 2014), these studies provide yet another example of how standardized testing is viewed to negatively impact learning, especially in rural school districts. Powell and her associates point out the various reasons why rural districts face increased challenges such as high mobility rates related to poverty, declining enrollment, “difficulty hiring and retaining highly qualified teachers (U.S. GAO, 2004)”, and the fact that one student’s test score can have a much greater impact on the academic performance of a rural school than its urban and suburban counterparts. Based on these reasons, Powell et al. argue that the No Child Left Behind Act must affect rural school districts much differently.

For their study, Powell and her colleagues surveyed Missouri elementary public school teachers in May of 2006 and Maine elementary teachers in the spring of 2007. Their goal was to discover how these principals and teachers viewed the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on curriculum and instruction, use and availability of resources, and how it affected them and
their students. First of all, the study found a significant change in how much instructional time had been allotted to certain subjects. The time allocated for teaching reading, a subject that would be tested by the No Child Left Behind Act, increased significantly, while the time allocated to science, a subject not tested by the No Child Left Behind Act, decreased significantly, even though a great majority of survey respondents agreed that science education is critical at the elementary level. The teachers surveyed in Maine also pointed out that social studies, arts, and other electives such as foreign languages, music, health, and theater received decreased emphasis to the point that some sections of instruction were cut entirely. A concern that critical subjects are being placed on the back burner for the subjects that are being tested on was clearly exemplified in this survey.

Swan, K., Hofer, M., & Swan, G. agree that the practice of teachers is limited by the climate of high-stakes testing and that students will only achieve what they term “meaningful student learning” “when teachers are ambitious in looking beyond test score outcomes” (2011, p. 215). For their study, they implemented a project into two fifth grade classrooms where the students would create digital documentaries about 19th century Irish immigration. The goal of the project was to engage students in meaningful student learning based on the three criteria created by King, Newmann, and Carmichael (2009): “construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school” (as cited in Swan et al., 2011, p. 115). Immediately the researchers identified several issues associated with implementing the project, including a great deal of pressure coming from administrators to achieve above-average student test scores. As a result, the schools’ curriculums were so tightly mapped that it was a challenge to fit this ambitious type project into their schedule. Swan et al. used this as a prime example of how testing standards and
their effect on curriculum structure is limiting not only the practice of teachers, but the opportunities granted to students in their classrooms.

What Swan and her colleagues found through their study was that the use of digital documentaries was a promising format for engaging students in the type of learning that was meaningful and authentic. It also provided a strong model for teachers to implement this standard of learning into their classrooms. However, they still came to the conclusion that to do so, teachers would have to be, in the words of Grant (2007), “ambitious” by pushing “hard to create opportunities for powerful teaching and learning despite contextual factors” (as cited in Swan et al., 2011, p. 122). Citing King, Newmann, and Carmichael (2009), the researchers recognized that the high-stakes testing climate decreases time for instruction in certain subjects such as social studies, while professional social studies and history education organizations are simultaneously increasing their expectations about student learning (as cited in Swan et al., 2011, p. 122). What these researchers found to truly help students was not instruction confined by mandated, high-stakes testing, but alternative, progressive, and creative means of engaging students in educational subject matter that has value beyond what their teacher or a test requires of them. The fact that researchers are finding high-stakes testing and the resulting curriculums to be so restricting, we must question its presence in modern education and possibly look to new methods of bringing about greater student learning.

**Purpose of Study**

Given the literature on aspirations of rural youth and high-stakes testing in rural education, this study aims to examine a small population of rural teachers and discover their opinion on how high-stakes testing affects their students in relation to their aspirational goals.
Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to discover how teachers working in rural high schools perceived high-stakes testing to positively or negatively affect their high school students in relation to a range of aspirational goals. High school teachers teaching in rural remote and rural distant high schools in northeast Kansas completed an online survey about their perceptions and were given the opportunity to explain their answers through open-ended responses.

Survey Participants

For this study, rural schools were selected based on their proximity to the Kansas State capital, Topeka, located in northeast Kansas and by a label of rural remote. To be considered rural remote, a school must be located in a census-defined rural territory that is located over 25 miles from an urbanized area with a population of 50,000 or more, and over 10 miles from an urban cluster with a population between 25,000 and 50,000 (NCES, 2006). Using this strategy, twenty-two rural remote high schools in northeast Kansas were recruited using information from the National Center for Education Statistics online school search (NCES, 2012). The K-12 School Report on the Kansas State Department of Education website (NCES, 2012) was used to identify the names and emails of the principals at each of the identified twenty-two schools. Although contact was only ever made directly with these principals, the actual subjects of the study were identified as teachers employed in these selected rural remote high schools. All teachers employed at the schools whose principals agreed to participate were potential subjects for this study.

After the schools were identified, the twenty-two principals were contacted by email to request their assistance in this study by forwarding the survey to all of their teachers. A copy of
this email can be found in Appendix A. If all principals and all teachers had agreed to participate, there was a potential to receive survey responses from approximately 300 rural teachers in northeast Kansas. Once the principals of rural remote high schools in northeast Kansas had agreed to participate in the study, a second email, addressed to teachers, was sent to the principals. They were instructed to forward this email, which contained information about the survey, to the teachers employed at their schools. A copy of this email can be found in Appendix B. There were no links to the teachers' personal information, including their emails, because contact was only ever directly made with their principals. The email asked the teachers to participate in the study by filling out an online survey. Participation was entirely voluntary, no rewards were given for the completion of the survey, and all survey responses were completely anonymous. The email included a link to the online survey on Qualtrics. Upon clicking the link, participants were asked to give their informed consent for a study about how the results of high-stakes testing align with the goals of rural teachers and the aspirations of their rural students. Upon agreeing to the informed consent information, the teachers were directed to the remainder of the survey about how they see the high-stakes testing culture presenting itself in their classroom and how they feel it is aligned with the aspirations of their students. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix C. In the email to the teachers, it was requested that they complete the online survey as soon as possible. Two weeks before the survey’s closing date, and seven weeks after it was originally distributed, a second email was sent to the principals, to be forwarded to their teachers, reminding and encouraging them to complete the online survey.

By the survey’s intended date of closure, only nine teachers had completed the survey. In order to obtain a more representative set of data, it was decided that the survey would be opened to additional high school teachers in the same area of northeast Kansas, but with a label of rural
distant. To be considered rural distant, a school must be located in a census-defined rural territory that is located between 5 and 25 miles from an urbanized area with a population of 50,000 or more, and between 2.5 and 10 miles from an urban cluster with a population between 25,000 and 50,000 (NCES, 2006). Using the same procedure as before, information from the National Center for Education Statistics online school search was used to recruit twenty-five additional schools and utilized the K-12 School Report on the Kansas State Department of Education website to identify the names and emails of the principals at each of these schools. These principals were then contacted by email to request their assistance in this study by forwarding the survey to all of their teachers. If all of these principals and their corresponding teachers had agreed to participate, the potential was to receive survey responses from approximately 500 additional rural teachers in northeast Kansas. After two weeks, a second email was sent to the principals, to be forwarded to their teachers, reminding and encouraging them to complete the online survey. By the survey’s date of closure, forty-eight surveys had been started and thirty-four had been completed.

**Obtaining Institutional Review Board Approval**

This study, with IRB number 14-0575, was ruled exempt by the non-biomedical University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board (IRB) on April 14, 2014. As a result of the need for additional survey participants, a modification to the original IRB was submitted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board and was ruled exempt on June 18, 2014. Both the faculty advisor and the researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative’s Group 2 Social and Behavioral Research training prior to the commencement of the study. All of the collected survey data was stored in Qualtrics’ HIPPA-compliant secure database, as well as password-protected documents on the researcher’s
personal computer that met the required measures for Level II Data Security as per the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education’s Technology Services.

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected using a survey created through Qualtrics survey software. The survey consisted of questions designed to align with the study’s original research questions. Survey respondents were asked how they believe high-stakes testing affects their students and if they consider it to positively or negatively affect their students based on their differing aspirational goals.

Data Analysis Procedures

The qualitative survey data was analyzed for themes using the constant comparative method of grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. “The purpose of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to generate theory more systematically” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 102) and with a higher level of credibility than merely inspecting qualitative data for theoretical categories or common themes. The four stages of the constant comparative method are, “(1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105).

In accordance with these stages, the first step taken in analyzing the study’s qualitative data was to read through all of the survey responses and identify key points, organizing them into as many categories of analysis as possible. For example, each time a teacher mentioned high-stakes testing as a source of stress for students, this response would be compared to the previous mentions of stress, and then assigned the existing corresponding code. However, if a new idea
was raised that did not compare to any previous key points, then a new category with it’s own classifiable code was created.

As this process continues, the “constant comparison of incidents very soon starts to generate theoretical properties of the category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 106). Thus, as per the second step of constant comparative theory, each key point was no longer compared to previous key points, but to properties of the categories that had been developed. As a result, the properties became readily integrated and associated theories were developed for each category. Step three of the constant comparative theory involved solidifying the details and uniformities of the emerging theory, as well as reducing the original list of categories for collecting and coding data. Lastly, in step four, the finalized categories become the major derived themes of the overarching theory and the notes taken throughout the comparison process become part of the discussion to support those themes and compare them to findings in existing literature.
Results

This chapter shares the results of a survey distributed via email to teachers employed by rural remote and rural distant high schools in northeast Kansas. The goal of the study was to get the perspective of teachers working in rural high schools related to how high-stakes testing positively or negatively affect their high school working environment and the impact they have on their students’ post-secondary aspirational goals. The teachers were given the opportunity to explain their answers through an open-ended response format and those findings are also shared.

Characteristics of Survey Participants

Twelve rural high school principals agreed to forward the survey to the teachers employed at their high schools, and thirty-four rural high school teachers completed the survey. However, because the survey did not require a response to every single question, not all thirty-four teachers answered every question. As a result of teaching in schools with low student enrollment, many of the educators teach multiple grade levels and subjects. Of the thirty-four teachers, five teach ninth and/or tenth grade, four teach eleventh and/or twelfth grade, two teach ninth through eleventh grade, three teach tenth through twelfth grade, and twenty teach all four grade levels. The subjects they teach include the four core subjects: history/social studies (5), science (7), math (3), and language arts (10). They also teach the following electives: physical education (1), visual and performing arts (3), business or technology (3), college preparation (4), special education (1), speech/foreign language (5), librarian (2), and agriculture education (1).

When asked which high-stakes tests they help their students prepare for, twenty-four teachers responded with one or more of the five core Kansas State Assessments in Math, Reading, Writing, Science, or History, Government, Economics, and Geography. Ten teachers responded that they help prepare students for, “None of the above,” and one teacher included that he/she
helps students prepare for the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), and American College Testing (ACT) tests.

**What effect does high-stakes testing have on rural education?**

First, survey respondents were asked, “How do you prepare your students for high-stakes tests?” Fifty-nine percent (20) responded that they taught content that would be on the test in class, fifty-six percent (19) responded that they taught test-taking skills in class, forty-seven percent (16) responded that they gave students homework with content that would be on the test, and only twenty-six percent (9) responded that they gave students practice tests during class. Other teachers mentioned having review periods and maintaining a solid curriculum throughout the year. One teacher in particular maintained an “emphasis on student thinking, problem solving, communication and understanding the responsibilities of global citizenship,” while another made sure “students are learning the skills that they need to be successful after high school.”

Eight of the survey questions were based on a Likert Scale (Likert, 1932). In three of these questions, survey takers were asked to rate the extent to which high-stakes testing affected selected aspects within their school from lesson planning to school climate to student stress levels. Their answer choices were “very negatively,” “negatively,” “no effect,” “positively,” and very positively.” In order to streamline these results for the purposes of discussion, the answer choices have been condensed into three options: “negatively,” “no effect,” and “positively.” One additional question asked respondents if they believed their students set goals that matched their abilities. Their answer choices were “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” As before, these answer choices have been condensed into three options: “agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” and “disagree.” The
remaining four survey questions based on the Likert Scale consisted of three answer choices in their original form. The results for these Likert-scale survey questions are shown in Tables 1-4, which are discussed below.

As shown in Table 4.1, when asked how high-stakes testing affects them as educators, 16 (47%) teachers responded that high-stakes tests had no effect on classroom instruction and lesson planning. As for motivation towards their job, 16 (48%) of the teachers surveyed responded that it is affected negatively by high-stakes testing. The most significant statistic is that 18 (55%) survey respondents, a decided majority, believe that high-stakes testing negatively affects their job satisfaction.

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you feel high-stakes testing affects you as an educator?</th>
<th>Negatively</th>
<th>No Effect</th>
<th>Positively</th>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom Instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesson Planning</td>
<td>12 (35%)</td>
<td>16 (47%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom Atmosphere</td>
<td>16 (48%)</td>
<td>16 (48%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>18 (55%)</td>
<td>13 (39%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation Towards Your Job</td>
<td>16 (48%)</td>
<td>15 (45%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 4.2, survey respondents seemed to have stronger attitudes when responding to how high-stakes testing affects their colleagues, rather than themselves. Five additional aspects surveyed included their colleagues’ classroom instruction, their colleagues’ lesson planning, their colleagues’ job satisfaction, their colleagues’ motivation towards their job, and school climate. In all five categories, a majority of survey takers responded that high-stakes testing had a negative effect. The greatest of these majorities included 23 (70%) of the
respondents who agreed that school climate was negatively affected by high-stakes testing, and 26 (79%) of the respondents who believed their colleagues’ job satisfaction was negatively affected.

Table 4.2

How do you feel high-stakes testing affects these additional aspects within your school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>aspect</th>
<th>Negatively</th>
<th>No Effect</th>
<th>Positively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your Colleagues’ Classroom Instruction</td>
<td>22 (67%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
<td>5 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Colleagues’ Lesson Planning</td>
<td>17 (53%)</td>
<td>8 (25%)</td>
<td>7 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Colleagues’ Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>26 (79%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Colleagues’ Motivation Towards Their Job</td>
<td>22 (67%)</td>
<td>9 (27%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Climate</td>
<td>23 (70%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
<td>4 (12%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, the surveyed teachers were asked how high-stakes testing affects their students in terms of behavior, academic success, motivation towards school, stress levels, and preparation for their future. Results are shown in Table 4.3. For behavior, academic success, and preparation for their future, 17 (52-53%) respondents agreed that there was no effect. As for student motivation towards school, 23 (70%) respondents agreed that high-stakes testing had a negative effect, and a substantial 32 (97%) respondents believed that student stress levels were negatively affected by high-stakes testing.
Table 4.3

*How do you feel high-stakes testing affects your students?*

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Negatively</th>
<th>No Effect</th>
<th>Positively</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>15 (45%)</td>
<td>17 (52%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Success</td>
<td>10 (31%)</td>
<td>17 (53%)</td>
<td>5 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Towards School</td>
<td>23 (70%)</td>
<td>9 (27%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress Levels</td>
<td>32 (97%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for Their Future</td>
<td>10 (30%)</td>
<td>17 (52%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*How do the goals of high-stakes testing compare to the goals of rural education systems and students?*

The remainder of the survey asked respondents how they felt high-stakes testing impacted students, with specific reference to their post-secondary aspirations. These results are shown below in Tables 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6. When asked how they believed high-stakes tests affect their students, Table 4.4 shows that most respondents (50%) felt that high-stakes testing had no effect on students who aspire to attend a four-year university, college, or academy.

Table 4.4

*Overall, do you think high-stakes testing positively or negatively impacts the majority of your students who aspire to attend a four-year university, college, academy, etc.?*

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Negatively</th>
<th>No Effect</th>
<th>Positively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Responses:</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage:</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast, Table 4.5 shows that a majority of the respondents (55%) indicated that they
thought high-stakes tests negatively impact students who aspire to attend a technical college, vocational school, or trade school. This is a significant increase from the 44% of teachers who believe high-stakes tests negatively impact students who aspire to attend a four-year university, college, or academy.

Table 4.5

Overall, do you think high-stakes testing positively or negatively impacts the majority of your students who aspire to attend a technical college, vocational school, trade school, etc.?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Negatively</th>
<th>No Effect</th>
<th>Positively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Responses:</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage:</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This majority slightly increased for the final category shown in Table 4.6, as 17 (61%) teachers responded that they think high-stakes testing negatively affects the majority of students who aspire to join the work force or military.

Table 4.6

Overall, do you think high-stakes testing positively or negatively impacts the majority of your students who aspire to join the work force or the military?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Negatively</th>
<th>No Effect</th>
<th>Positively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Responses:</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage:</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, as we move along the spectrum of post-secondary aspirations, teachers believe there are increasingly negative impacts on those students.

The very last question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the question, “Overall, do you think high-stakes testing positively or negatively impacts your students’ post-secondary aspirations?” The results of this question can be found in Table 4.7. Although only 25 of the 34
teachers responded to this question, a majority of the respondents (52%) indicated that they believe high-stakes testing negatively impacts students’ post-secondary aspirations.

Table 4.7

*Overall, do you think high-stakes testing positively or negatively impacts your students’ post-secondary aspirations?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Negatively</th>
<th>No Effect</th>
<th>Positively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Responses:</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage:</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Is high-stakes testing the best means of measuring achievement in rural settings?

A number of survey questions were open-ended allowing for teachers to explain their answers to previous questions, as well as go into more depth about how high-stakes testing negatively, positively, or doesn’t affect high-stakes testing in rural school of northeastern Kansas. The responses to these questions were analyzed to find themes. Six common themes were found:

1. High-stakes tests are invalid assessments of student progress and potential.
2. High-stakes testing places increased pressure on students and teachers.
3. Time and focus on teaching valuable content and learning processes is lost to time and focus on preparing and administering tests.
4. Continued poor performance on high-stakes tests is discouraging and may prevent students from setting and achieving higher aspirational goals.
5. High-stakes testing does not necessarily assist in preparing students for life outside of school.
6. High-stakes testing is useful for setting high expectations, holding teachers accountable, and promoting positive instruction.
Theme 1: High-stakes tests are invalid assessments of student progress and potential. When asked about how high-stakes testing affects their students, sixteen teachers had something to say about the inability of high-stakes testing to effectively evaluate their students. What they believed to be downfalls of the tests were not limited to a single aspect of testing, but instead crossed a range of aspects associated with high-stakes testing. One teacher pointed out the inability of tests to consider unique reasoning:

“Many intelligent students simply do not test well. These tests are questionable as to what information is addressed. We teach students to have an opinion and to think independently. The test expects all students to think the same in order to select the response the test writer expects. The students could see another viewpoint on the question or response and a multiple-choice test does not give the opportunity to express why they selected their response.”

Two other teachers mentioned alternate reasons for why some students might not test well, and one of them suggested that things that take place outside of school, which teachers have no control over, might also negatively impact students:

“There are some students who do not test well or may have an intellectual or learning disability that will not fare well in the high-stakes testing process. Also, not all students have time to study for these tests, and not all students read at the level necessary to comprehend the test questions.”

“Often times students will do poorly on a test, not because of the teacher or being unprepared, but because of outside influences and problems.”
While many of the respondents agreed that teachers, and even many students, realize there is little to no real value in the use of high-stakes tests, a few mentioned that this viewpoint is not matched by those tasked with evaluating adequate yearly progress in education:

“The state assessments are not worth a hoot. We know it, the kids know it but John Q. and the powers that be think they have a purpose and we can't get them convinced they are wrong.”

Another respondent reinforced the sentiment that teachers are in widespread agreement that high-stakes tests are invalid, explaining that true evaluations of students require more than what testing can provide:

“Everyone knows high-stakes testing is not an authentic or valid way to assess student progress or potential. It is a quick way to do it, but the results are not accurate because truly assessing potential and progress takes time and a variety of different types of assessments.”

Overall, there seemed to be a general consensus that high-stakes testing is not a valid way of assessing student performance, progress, or potential. This is not to say that every respondent felt this way or that no teacher attributed any positive aspects to state testing. However, a significant portion of the teachers did agree that there are critical issues associated with high-stakes testing and that students could be better assessed in alternative formats.

**Theme 2: High-stakes testing places increased pressure on students and teachers.** In addition to the understood inability of high-stakes testing to evaluate students in an effective way, twenty-four teachers suggested that high-stakes testing also puts excessive pressure and stress on teachers and their students. Though the stakes are not necessarily high for individual
students whose scores don’t directly impact them, one teacher recognized the chain of events that produces stress at all levels:

“There is a lot of pressure from administration to have students perform well on these tests. That means teachers putting a lot of pressure on the students to perform well on these tests.”

Another teacher advocated for the attempt by teachers to prevent testing from affecting classroom instruction, but ultimately recognized and bemoaned where it inevitably and consistently comes into play:

“We try to not allow testing to effect classroom instruction, however, planning/scheduling time to practice with students who were absent is crazy. Using the library for actual library purposes during the testing window is nearly impossible. Multiply minimal library open days times all teachers and it becomes a stressful fight to achieve second semester objectives.”

Many respondents especially felt the effects on their colleagues. One in particular reflected on the adverse feelings and attitudes they had experienced.

“While I do my best to encourage colleagues, the actuality of fear and resentment of high-stakes testing saps their energy and enthusiasm. Dismayed and discouraged describe the general attitude.”

A group of three teachers came to similar conclusions about how blame, competitiveness, and fear of job loss, associated with the results of their students’ performance on high-stakes testing, create strains on teacher attitudes and relationships:

“Many teachers are tired of high-stakes testing and feeling as if their job is constantly in jeopardy if their students do not do well.”
“I do think that it negatively affects school climate, as teachers are comparing how the students did with one teacher compared to the rest. There is a negative competitiveness that seems to arise.”

“The results can produce lots of blame that is not helpful in reaching our goals.”

Although no specific evidence was used to support their claim, one teacher brought up a biological effect of stress that would have dire consequences for educators and their students:

“Brain studies show the brain performs worse under stress and I see it with my colleagues who have dealt with high-stakes testing.”

However, not all of the teacher respondents felt like the stress associated with high-stakes testing was exclusively undesirable and harmful. Several respondents, including this one, noted the benefits of presenting stressful situations to students in the form of high-stakes tests:

“In my opinion, some stress can be a positive thing. It can teach students that the working world does have deadlines, demands and stress that we all must learn to deal with.”

Though the teacher respondents generally agreed that the stress of high-stakes testing produced negative or harmful effects, others supported it as a method for teaching students of all aspirational goals how to deal with inevitable future stressors.

**Theme 3: Time and focus on teaching valuable content and learning processes is lost to time and focus on preparing and administering tests.** Preparing for and administering multiple high-stakes tests throughout the school year takes significant amounts of time. Twenty-two teachers responded to survey questions with negative sentiments about how this significant loss of time affects what students of all levels and aspirations are able to learn and accomplish:
“The focus has become too much on the test and meeting someone’s arbitrary benchmark for achievement, that learning and student development is lost. No time for anything else that is not on the assessment.”

Without differentiating between the different aspirational levels of students, many teachers noted the failure of high-stakes testing to promote and assess important characteristics in successful students such as curiosity and creativity:

“Having taught primarily college preparation classes, I strongly feel that government mandated testing has a negative impact on both students and the educational environment. Curiosity, being the basis of education, is both discouraged and diminished in a classroom which focuses on state testing.”

“High-stakes testing lumps learning and its students into a large category. High-stakes testing does not help students tap into their creativity or to learn to think for themselves. There is one answer and one answer only. How does this help students to think outside of the box?”

Though many teachers focused on the content and skills that are being left out in order to spend enough time on what’s being tested, other teachers noted the effects that high-stakes tests have on subjects that aren’t specifically tested:

“The pressure of high-stakes testing places so much support on math and reading that other subjects such as fine arts are viewed as less important.”

Some teachers recognized differences in how high-stakes tests affect students with different aspiration goals. One teacher addressed how it affects students who plan on attending a four-year college or university:
“Teaching to the test is not teaching them the critical thinking and thought processes they are going to need when they get into higher level courses.”

Other teachers focused on how the tests negatively affect students who plan on attending alternative forms of secondary education:

“Many of the students who attend Tech. colleges, vocational schools have learning styles that are not compatible with high-stakes testing. The class time spent on testing would be much better spent allowing those students to continue experiencing their chosen field in a "hands on" situation.”

Overall, teachers tended to agree that despite various academic abilities and aspirational goals, the preparing and administering of high-stakes tests takes time away from classroom instruction that could be better spent teaching valuable content and practicing the skills necessary for all students after high school graduation.

Theme 4: Continued poor performance on high-stakes tests is discouraging and may prevent students from setting and achieving higher aspirational goals. At nineteen, a majority of responding teachers addressed the negative effects that high-stakes testing might have on students’ attitudes toward school and furthering education, especially those who tend to perform poorly. One teacher recognized the effects as early as elementary school:

“Due to the negative attitude that permeates high-stakes testing experiences, students are disgusted and weary of the drill. A fourth grade child mentioned that after testing was completed for this year, "it was finally time for some fun learning." The kids get it. And, they regret it.”
By the time they reach high school, teachers recognize that students tend to retain this type of resentment towards high-stakes testing, but at this level they begin to see how their attitudes are increasingly affected by how well they perform on the tests:

“The results are often very upsetting to them, since it is more a reflection of their abilities rather than a reflection of how hard they can work at studying for an exam.”

“Students panic before taking the test, and then panic when they find their results, as a result they gain a negative feeling towards their ability in school. This leads to more behaviors and less academic success.”

Teachers are also aware that testing time is especially stressful for those students whose academic drive and desire to succeed is not reflected in their test results:

“Low scores tend to frustrate students who may have the persistence to achieve at a high level, but not the innate ability to score high on a test given on any particular day of the week.”

Several of the survey respondents agreed that repeated low scores and negative attitudes towards high-stakes tests could potentially have greater, more long-term effects on students’ post-secondary aspirations. One teacher felt that continued low performance on high-stakes tests could influence students to choose not to go to college:

“Some students begin to believe they are just ‘bad at taking tests’ and may not even want to attempt the ACT or SAT for college entrance. I think more students just become discouraged about our educational system and may decide to not attend college.”

Another teacher felt that high-stakes tests could prevent students from choosing to participate in any type of post-secondary education:
“I believe that some students, who score poorly, think that the score indicates they are not good enough to go to any post-secondary school.”

One teacher who responded to the survey also seemed to think that the effects go beyond their choices in furthering education, but ultimately in their career goals as well:

“Some students will give up on their journey to be trained in their life long goal.”

These responses reflect the view of teachers who believe high-stakes testing disenchants students’ opinions about school and their own academic potential, even to the point of influencing their post-secondary aspirational goals and career choices.

**Theme 5: High-stakes testing does not necessarily assist in preparing students for life outside of school.** In addition to potentially having an effect on student plans and goals following graduation, sixteen teacher respondents also seemed to think that the focus on high-stakes tests negatively detracts from preparing students for whatever those post-secondary aspirations may be:

“High-stakes testing puts pressure on the teacher to teach what they feel isn't necessarily important for successful living outside of high school.”

“We're not preparing students for the real world. We are preparing them to take a test.”

Respondents frequently suggested that the focus on high-stakes testing detracts from students’ preparation for the future. One teacher discussed how this would affect college-bound students in particular:

“Teaching to the test is not teaching them the critical thinking and thought processes they are going to need when they get into higher level courses. When all high school has taught you to do is memorize and parrot back the correct answers, they will only be that much more behind when they get out.”
Teachers also recognized that these effects are not limited to post-secondary education, but to students’ future in the workplace as well:

“More time with memorization, less classroom time spent doing projects and developing creative and critical thinking skills necessary to do the upper level creating and thinking required at college. You cannot test someone's creative ability. That is becoming an increasingly important skill in our job market, as manual repetitive labor that can be done by machines or done by people overseas will go away. But the more time we spend preparing for tests the less time we teach kids how to innovate and create.”

Some teachers found what they believed to be a meaningful disparity between high-stakes testing and the skills required for technical colleges and vocational school:

“This is a hands-on, specific skill type of environment where these types of tests are not found. If all we do is teach kids how to take a test, we are not helping them develop the skills they need.”

Though many respondents focused on how high-stakes testing affects future educational goals, others applied the effects to students who choose not to pursue post-secondary education:

“Much of the required content in high-stakes testing is not what is needed to be successful in the armed forces or the workforce. Skills needed to be successful here is not assessed by the old standards or current tests.”

Another teacher noted an additional explanation for why high-stakes testing doesn’t necessarily prepare students for their post-secondary aspirations.

“Many of these kids don't test well or they don't see the point of taking a test that does absolutely nothing for their future. They are happy being a welder--they will make more money in a year than I will make in two or three years!”
Some students are simply not interested in attending college or pursuing goals that are more closely related to the skills evaluated by high-stakes testing. This teacher noted that this does not necessarily mean students must be disappointed with choosing career paths other than those that require a college education.

**Theme 6: High-stakes testing is useful for setting high expectations, holding teachers accountable, and promoting positive instruction.** The overwhelming response to most survey questions reflected negative views of high-stakes testing. However, when prompted for ways in which high-stakes testing might positively impact students, twenty-seven teachers had at least one positive thing to attribute to the tests:

“The one benefit is that teachers have to be very self-aware about what they're teaching and how to create lessons to get to that result.”

Another seasoned teacher agreed that Kansas state testing has been beneficial to students in terms of holding teachers to standards that have motivated their increased effectiveness over the course of the few decades that she has been teaching:

“The tests themselves, particularly in ELA, in Kansas are very good. Remember, I have been doing this for a long time. At the beginning of my career, there was not the emphasis on curriculum and strident success that there is now, and the tests have motivated us to improve in many areas.”

A few teachers credited high-stakes tests with the ability to show students where they are at academically, what they are good at, and what they need to work on:

“It may prepare them to be able to "TAKE" tests, as well as show them their strengths and weaknesses in different parts of their education.”
Other teachers believed there were positive effects associated with high-stakes testing during K-12 education that could directly and positively impact the success of college-bound students on future important tests that can determine where they are able to go to college and how much financial support they will receive:

“The more kids test, the less fear they have of testing, so in some ways maybe doing a lot of testing will help them relax on the ACT--after all ACT scores earn you college scholarships.”

Other teachers concurred with the reasoning that K-12 high-stakes testing does prepare students for further testing they will likely experience at some point in their lives. For example, one teacher reasoned that testing, as well as fundamental academic skills, are necessary and part of the curriculum at tech schools as well as any type or level of professional career:

“Taking tests will be something that students in tech schools will have to do also. Being able to read, write, and think critically are crucial for all professions.”

Another teacher mentioned the incorporation of tests into serving in the military and participating in the modern work force:

“The military has testing too. They look for certain skill sets and aptitudes to invest their money into too. The military will pay for medical school, but only if you pass the MCAT and get accepted into medical school first. Yes another high-stakes test! For the work force there is a simple math test to be accepted for a quick shop check out person, a typing test to be a dispatcher, a test for driving for a Commercial driver’s license, and a test to become a police officer or fireperson. Life is indeed full of "high-stakes tests.”
Some teachers moved beyond the benefits of practicing test taking, and recognized high-stakes tests as practice for dealing with stressors students may be forced to deal with as members of the work force:

“It may help prepare them for the stresses of the working world: meeting deadlines, emergency situations, etc.”

When prompted, teachers do see benefits to high-stakes testing. These benefits include opportunities for students to discover what their academic strengths and weaknesses are, learn how to take tests, and figure out how to best deal with stress.

Summary

Though a number of teacher responses attributed positive affects to high-stakes testing, the overall attitude towards the majority of testing and the effects it has on students was negative. Teachers want their students to learn how to deal effectively with stress and how to perform well on tests that determine their future, but they value other things as considerably more important.

There were six common themes found in the interview responses: high-stakes tests are invalid assessments of student progress and potential, high-stakes testing places increased pressure on students and teachers, time and focus on teaching valuable content and learning processes is lost to time and focus on preparing and administering tests, continued poor performance on high-stakes tests is discouraging and may prevent students from setting and achieving higher aspirational goals, high-stakes testing does not necessarily assist in preparing students for life outside of school, and high-stakes testing is useful for setting high expectations, holding teachers accountable, and promoting positive instruction.
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover how rural high school teachers in northeast Kansas perceive high-stakes testing to affect their high school students positively or negatively with specific reference to their range of post-secondary aspirational goals. Previous research indicated that students in rural schools do tend to have slightly different post-secondary aspirations and expectations, and that high-stakes testing produces negative effects in rural settings. However, few studies have attempted to discover if and how these two concepts might influence each other, and how rural teachers perceive the relationship of these concepts to affect their students.

Discussion of Survey Results

There were three main research questions that motivated this study. How does high-stakes testing present itself in rural education, and what effect does it have on the learning and achievement of rural students? How do the goals of high-stakes testing compare to the goals of rural education systems and the post-secondary aspirations of rural students? And finally, is high-stakes testing the best means of measuring the achievement of students, educators, schools, and school districts, particularly in rural settings? Each one of these research questions is discussed below.

What effect does high-stakes testing have on rural education? In 2013, Meece and her associates found that “students attending schools in rural remote locations were less likely than their counterparts in rural fringe/distant schools to aspire to college or graduate/professional school” (Meece, et al., 2013, p. 181). These findings suggest that the aspirational goals, and quite possibly the education, of students differ depending on their location. Though the current study did not compare results between rural remote and rural fringe/distant schools, teachers did relay
the belief that high-stakes tests in rural education have the potential to negatively impact the aspirations of students who desire to pursue post-secondary education.

Powell, Higgins, Aram, & Freed (2009) found a significant change in how much instructional time had been allotted to certain subjects, noting that time allocated for tested subjects increased significantly, while the time allocated for non-tested subjects decreased significantly. They also found that social studies, arts, and other electives such as foreign languages, music, health, and theater received decreased emphasis to the point that some sections of instruction were cut entirely. This concern that critical subjects are being placed on the back burner for the subjects that are being tested was reflected in the current study’s results as well. Teacher responses under Theme 3 reported an increased focus on math and reading while other subjects, such as fine arts, were seen as less important. However, teachers also noted a shift in focus away from important content and skills. They claimed that all the time and effort it takes preparing for and administering standardized tests takes valuable time away from the classroom that could be better spent teaching students to think critically and creatively, encouraging their curiosity, engaging them in new material, and allowing them to explore their interests in future careers.

**How do the goals of high-stakes testing compare to the goals of rural education systems and students?** Under the influence of Brown & Schafft (2010), Corbett (2007), and Farmer et al. (2006), Meece and her colleagues claimed that “rural schools are traditionally expected to provide youth with strong educational foundations to sustain rural culture, lifestyles, and economies” (2013, p. 177). However, they went on to note that “current educational mandates emphasizing national curriculum standards, standardized assessments, and college preparation may be preparing youth for a future very different from where they currently live”
(Meece et al, 2013, p. 177). Therefore, the modern education system and the motivations of high-stakes testing may be in conflict with the traditional practices of rural settings. This sentiment was mirrored in Theme 5 of the survey responses. Teachers suggested that the focus on high-stakes testing negatively detracts from preparing students for their post-secondary aspirations, whatever they may be. However, they do attribute the most positive affects to students who plan on attending a four-year university, college, or academy, while they note that the skills needed to be successful in the armed forces or work force are not assessed by high-stakes testing, and they are especially not relevant for students who are content working local, well-paid jobs that do not require a college degree.

Another critical role of educators is to prepare students for their futures. A significant part of this is helping high school students create realistic expectations about the educational requirements they will need to acquire for the vocations they aspire to, no matter where they fall on the spectrum. The findings of Meece and her colleagues indicated that youth who aspired to remain in their rural community or had positive perceptions of local career opportunities still tended to underestimate the amount of postsecondary education they would need to achieve their vocational aspirations. They also worried that the “tension between moving away to pursue educational and vocational opportunities not supported in their home communities, while remaining close to family and community” could significantly influence and create unrealistic expectations for the aspirations of rural youth (Meece, et al., 2013, p. 177).

Though survey respondents did not mention the exact tension that Meece and her colleagues spoke of, Theme 4 did expose the understanding that high-stakes tests in rural education have the ability to promote incompatible post-secondary aspirations. Several teachers reported that students who fail to perform well on high-stakes tests become discouraged,
determine that they are not capable of pursuing one or more types of post-secondary education, and ultimately choose not to continue education or the pursuit of their ultimate career goal.

One responsive action rural educators could take is to remove the stressors that discourage students, encourage them in their capability to attend college, and directly support them in ways that move them towards this goal. However, the current study suggests that it might also be helpful for educators to avoid focusing purely on high tests scores and college attendance, and instead seek to understand all of their students’ vocational aspirations, including technical/trade schools, other non-university type programs that provide post-secondary education, military enlistment, or immediate assimilation into the work force. The survey responses of teachers indicated that high-stakes testing does not affect students in the same way. They noted that students who perform well are motivated to continue education after high school, while students who repeatedly perform poorly become disenchanted about continuing education. If students are affected so differently by high-stakes testing, which teachers have found to ultimately affect their post-secondary aspirations depending on their scores, then shouldn’t educators teach, assess, and encourage these students differently as well? It is not directly in the power of educators to remove high-stakes testing, but perhaps they could put less focus on testing scores, continually remind students that standardized tests are not valid assessments of their potential, encourage them in ways that develop their full potential, and push them individually towards their highest, attainable goals.

Is high-stakes testing the best means of measuring achievement in rural settings? In 2004, Jones and Egley’s study found the following:

Some of the major concerns cited by principals were that high-stakes testing: (a) damaged developmentally appropriate practices; (b) narrowed the definition of school
success to increased test scores; (c) increased the pressure on principals, teachers, and students; (d) lowered teacher morale; and (e) relied on rewards and punishments that were unfair (Perceptions of Testing section, para. 1).

These are immediate and devastating concerns within the modern school system, and although they are based solely on perceptions, Jones and Egley (2004) point out that perceptions influence what people consider reality and how they choose to respond to it. Using this current study as an example, teachers’ perceptions of high-stakes tests and the way they address them in their curriculum matters to the success of students. That is why it was so imperative, that through this current study, we developed narratives for how teachers perceive high-stakes testing. When the five major concerns of Jones and Egley’s study are compared to the six common themes of the current study, three major areas of overlap are revealed. First, Jones and Egley found that high-stakes testing “damaged developmentally appropriate practices.” This concern mirrors Theme 3 of the current study, which recognizes how the teaching of valuable content and learning processes is being lost to the time and focus it takes to prepare and administer tests. Second, the tests “increased the pressure on principals, teachers, and students.” Theme 2 describes this exact sentiment concluding that high-stakes testing places increased pressure on students and teachers. Finally, Jones and Egley found that high-stakes tests “lowered teacher morale.” Though none of the themes directly mirror this concern, themes 1 through 4 address the perceptions that high-stakes tests are invalid assessments of student progress and potential, they place increased pressure on students and teachers, they take time and focus away from teaching valuable content and learning processes, and they allow continued poor performance to discourage and possibly prevent students from setting and achieving higher aspirational goals.
All of these themes portray an avenue for, or provide an example of, lowered teacher and student morale.

Tyack and Cuban (as cited in Jones & Egley, 2004) argued that reforms created at federal and state levels often have little knowledge about the complex, existing frameworks of schools, districts, and communities, therefore administrators are burdened with adapting and implementing the reforms to match their schools. With so much diversity within the existing framework of rural districts, let alone suburban and urban districts, it is difficult to imagine that such reforms could conform to all of these molds. Tyack and Cuban (as cited in Jones & Egley, 2004) noted that if the reforms do not translate well into existing frameworks, then educators blame the reformers and reformers blame the educators. One teacher in the current survey agreed with this sentiment saying the results of high-stakes testing “can produce lots of blame that is not helpful in reaching our goals.” This was also reflected in several survey responses where two teachers seemed to be doing the blaming. One responded, “The test in Kansas is written by people at KU that don't know the difference between testing math or reading.” Another said, “These poor products produced by CETE (Center for Testing Excellence at KU) are not good for kids and it is with great disappointment is see the Kansas State Board has decided to have the same group produce the next generation of State assessments.” Neither creating reforms that are not adaptable to the diversity of school districts across a state, nor placing blame on the poor results of these reforms is conducive to the ultimate goal of both educators and reformers, which is to improve education for all students.

Jones and Egley (2004) did find that rural administrators found test results to be more helpful evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of their teachers than their urban counterparts. Several teachers from this study expressed a similar idea, claiming that evaluations based on
their students’ scores on standardized tests has encouraged them to improve in many areas such as effectively covering the curriculum, focusing on what is most important, and being intentional about how and what they are teaching. If teachers are not doing these things, the hope and belief of administrators is that it will show in the test results, and they will then be able to address the strengths and weaknesses of each of their teachers.

**Strengths and Limitations**

Through this study, the voice of teachers can be heard. We often hear the voice of policymakers and education analysts because they are in charge of creating policy and creating the high-stakes tests to be utilized in schools. We also hear the voices of taxpayers and government officials who are willing to support current methods of measuring adequate yearly progress, regardless of how much they actually know about their implications or effectiveness. However, through this study we are able to hear the perspective of educators who work under the subsequent effects of pressure, stress, and curriculum restriction that are associated with high-stakes testing. These are the professionals trained in content and methodology, who know what is best for optimizing student achievement, and who see the effects of high-stakes testing on day to day practice. However, an important voice is still absent from the conversation. Because this study focuses solely on the perceptions of teachers, it may not fully reflect the views of students who are actually being affected personally by high-stakes testing.

This study also lacks a comparison of rural schools to its suburban and urban counterparts. The survey found evidence to support six common themes of the effects of high-stakes testing in rural high schools. However, there is no counter evidence from suburban or urban high schools to determine whether or not those same themes do not also exist, and at what extent, in those locales.
Another limitation of this study is its extremely small focus. To begin, the study was narrowly aimed at rural high schools in northeast Kansas. Rural schools across the United States are very diverse, and this study is limited to only those schools in a small corner of a Midwestern state. In addition, the response rate for the survey was very low. From about 800 potential survey takers, only 34 teachers completed the task. That equates to a 4.25% response rate, which could be attributed to poor timing of the survey distribution as well as unfamiliarity with the survey’s distributor. The first date of distribution occurred at the end of the school year, thus catching teachers when they are in a time crunch to wrap up the years learning objectives and prepare for and administer summative assessments. Work required outside of these goals is not made a priority. The second date of distribution occurred over the summer when many teachers are not contractually obligated to answer their school emails, let alone be motivated to participate in a survey with no immediate or direct benefits.

Implications for Further Research

Future research demands the voice of students. We know how educational policymakers, standardized test developers, administrators, and teachers feel about high-stakes testing, but we also need to study the perceptions of students themselves. They are the ones actually taking the tests and it is their education that is being directly affected. If we are to know how high-stakes testing is affecting the academic success and post-secondary aspirations of modern students, then their voice must be heard.

In addition, this study was narrowly aimed at rural high schools in northeast Kansas. However, rural communities and their respective schools across the nation are incredibly unique and diverse. To derive a more informative, complete picture of the effects of high-stakes testing
on rural education, future research must be spread to many diverse rural locales throughout the United States.

Future research could also include a longitudinal component. In order for the results to be more conclusive, we need to hear the voice of students who are in college, in technical school, in the work force, in the military, etc. because that is how we can see where recent graduates are at and how they are doing, how they are adjusting to the career path they have taken, if they are using the skills they received from standardized testing, how they felt about testing in school, if it helped prepare them for their current position, or if it distracted from time they should have been learning. One teacher responded to the survey saying, “Our students often start attending post-secondary training opportunities, and then drop out, or sometimes graduate with less than applicable training in irrelevant fields. Do not be impressed with the number [of students] that start post-secondary areas. Focus instead on the grad rate, employment rate, and job satisfaction rate.” This is a very important point to make because when evaluating the post-secondary aspirations of students, it demands considering how successful students were in actually achieving them, and future research could take this into consideration.

**Conclusion: Implications for Policy and Practice**

Based on the perceptions of rural remote and rural distant teachers in northeast Kansas, this study suggests two important implications for the future of high-stakes testing in rural schools. First, new formats for evaluation should be developed that avoid discouraging students while they are in a stage of dramatic growth and self-discovery and while they are trying to make decisions that will affect the rest of their lives. Second, more time and effort should be spent helping students develop and plan for ambitious, yet realistic, post-secondary aspirations.
Meece and her colleagues showed that rural remote students tend to choose lower aspirations than their rural fringe counterparts. Meanwhile, the teachers in this study believe that by using high-stakes testing as an evaluation technique, we are discouraging students who do not test well and whose aspirations might not fit the agenda set by the current educational mandates that emphasize national curriculum standards, standardized assessments, and college preparation (Meece et al, 2013). As a result, we may be increasing the disparity of aspirations between rural students and their counterparts in more populated locales.

Instead of discouraging students with high-stakes testing, which many teachers believe is not even a valid form of assessment, we should be developing new or improved formats of evaluation that assess progress and development as well as encourage students to pursue post-secondary aspirations that align with their personal strengths as determined through academic assessment. One of the main goals of teaching is to prepare students for successful futures, and part of that is helping them prepare for their postsecondary aspirations and future careers. If rural remote students are choosing lower aspirations than their rural distant and fringe counterparts, then educators need to discover why and take action to directly benefit rural students. Based on current educational mandates, the first reaction is to encourage all students to attend college. Yet, these educational mandates are also emphasizing the national curriculum standards and standardized assessments that our discouraging our students in rural schools. If students do not want to attend college and show an aptitude for success following different routes, then educational mandates should encourage them on that path and allow time and space for educators to support them as well.

The surveyed rural teachers in this study also believe that high-stakes testing takes valuable instruction time that could be better spent developing critical thinking, creativity,
curiosity, and post-secondary aspirations. This sentiment is coming from rural teachers who are already stretched to teach multiple subjects and grade levels as a result of their school’s small enrollment rates. If new educational mandates could place less time and resources on testing national curriculum standards, then these teachers could put more time and effort into helping students develop and prepare for ambitious, yet realistic, post-secondary aspirations.

Perhaps instead of demanding a one-size-fits-all approach to education and success, the educational system should work on creating a new system of standards and assessments that can be more easily differentiated in diverse school systems, while still setting high expectations, holding teachers accountable, and promoting positive instruction. Teachers in this study suggested using project and performance-based assessments, portfolio assessments, and differentiating assessments for students based on learning styles, post-secondary aspirations, etc. The new educational mandates would allow educators in rural areas to focus on preparing students for realistic goals that maximize their potential, rather than force one agenda that does not align with the goals of rural education.
References


Appendix A

Letter to Principals

(This letter was emailed to each principal of the schools recruited for this survey.)

[Date]

Dear Principal [Insert Last Name]:

My name is [Researcher Name] and I am an Honors student in the Middle Grades program in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For my Honors Thesis, I am researching how teachers of rural schools in northeast Kansas perceive the impacts of high-stakes testing on the educational experience of their high school students and how they feel it impacts their students’ attainment of post-secondary aspirations. With this knowledge, I hope my research will help those involved in education better understand the impact high-stakes testing has on rural high school students, and I hope it will promote further research on how high-stakes assessments impact rural students. The location of this research is especially meaningful to me because I grew up in northeast Kansas and attended Shawnee Heights High School in Tecumseh, Kansas.

I am contacting you for your help in connecting me with your teaching staff. This assistance will be exceptionally invaluable because my research will not be possible without the voice of teachers. Upon your consent, I would send you an email to be forwarded to your ninth through twelfth grade teachers of all subjects. The email would include information about my research, a consent form, and a link to an online survey. If your teachers choose to participate, they will click on the link and be taken to an online survey. It will first require them to select a box signifying that they have provided their informed consent before they are allowed to move on with the remainder of the survey. The survey is completely voluntary and participants will be allowed to stop at any time. It will take approximately 20-25 minutes. The deadline for submitting the survey will be June 15th of this summer, therefore giving your teachers the opportunity to complete it following the end of the school year, if they so choose. I will also be sending you a second email June 1st to be forwarded to your teachers, reminding and encouraging them to fill out the survey if they have not done so already. Survey responses will be kept strictly confidential, and digital data will be stored in secure computer files at UNC. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include any name or any other individual information by which your teachers could be identified; and the risks of participating in this study are minimal. I have attached the recruitment letter the teachers will receive to this email for your review.

As you know, this is an important topic and the success of my research depends upon your consent and the voice of your teachers. If you would like your school to participate, please contact me, [Researcher Name], at [Researcher’s Email Address] to request the email to be forwarded to your teachers.
Additionally, the results of my honors thesis will be available in early December. If you would like a copy of the results of my project or have any questions, please contact me at the information provided above.

Thank you in advance for your careful consideration of this request. It is my hope that through my final thesis paper, I can provide valuable research relating to the critical subject of high-stakes testing in rural education.

I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,

[Researcher Name and Contact Information]
Appendix B

Letter to Teachers

(This letter was emailed to each principal of the schools recruited for this survey, and they were asked to forward the email to all of the teachers employed at their school.)

[Date]

Dear High School Teacher:

My name is [Researcher Name] and I am an Honors student in the Middle Grades program in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For my Honors Thesis, I am researching how teachers of rural remote and rural distant schools in northeast Kansas perceive the impacts of high-stakes testing on the educational experience of their high school students and how they feel it impacts their students’ attainment of post-secondary aspirations. With this knowledge, I hope my research will help those involved in education better understand the impact high-stakes testing has on rural high school students, and I hope it will promote further research questioning whether or not it is the most favorable assessment strategy for rural education. The location of this research is especially meaningful to me because I grew up in northeast Kansas and attended Shawnee Heights High School in Tecumseh, Kansas.

This is why I am contacting you for your help, which will be exceptionally invaluable to my study. This research will not be possible without your voice. If you choose to participate, clicking on the link below will take you to an online survey, which begins with information about the survey and will require you to provide your informed consent before moving on with the remainder of the survey. The survey is completely voluntary and you will be allowed to stop at any time. It will take approximately 20-25 minutes and may be completed online. I would like for you to complete the survey as soon as possible. An email will be forwarded to you, by your principal, in the beginning of July reminding and encouraging you to fill out the survey if you have not done so already. Survey responses will be kept strictly confidential, and digital data will be stored in secure computer files. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include any name or any other individual information by which your teachers could be identified; and there are no risks associated with participating in this study.

The results of my honors thesis will be available in early December, and I will be sending a copy of the results of my project to your principal. If you would like a copy of the results directly or have any questions, please contact me, [Researcher Name], at [Researcher’s Email Address].

Thank you in advance for your careful consideration of this request. It is my hope that through my final thesis paper, I can provide valuable research relating to the critical subject of high-stakes testing in rural education.

I look forward to receiving your survey responses soon!

If you would like to participate in this important study, click on the link below:
[Survey Link]

Sincerely,

[Researcher Name and Contact Information]
Appendix C

Teacher Survey

My name is Ellie Steuart and I am an Honors student in the Middle Grades program in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For my Honors Thesis, I am researching how teachers of rural schools in northeast Kansas perceive the impacts of high-stakes testing on the educational experience of their high school students and how they feel it impacts their students’ attainment of post-secondary aspirations. With this knowledge, I hope my research will help those involved in education better understand the impact high-stakes testing has on rural high school students, and I hope it will promote further research questioning whether or not it is the most favorable assessment strategy for rural education. The location of this research is especially meaningful to me because I grew up in northeast Kansas and attended Shawnee Heights High School in Tecumseh, Kansas. That is why I am contacting you for your help, which will be exceptionally invaluable to my study. This research will not be possible without your voice. Your participation will require approximately 20-25 minutes and may be completed online at your computer.

By checking the box below and completing this questionnaire:
- I understand that participation in this survey is voluntary and I have the right to stop at any time.
- I agree to participate in this study, and state that I am at least 18 years of age.
- I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential, and digital data will be stored in secure computer files. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified.
- I understand that the risks of participating in this study are minimal.

The results of my honors thesis will be available in early December. If you would like a copy of the results of my project or have any questions, please contact me, Ellie Steuart, at esteuart@email.unc.edu.

Please feel free to print a copy of this consent page to keep for your records.

Informed Consent
  • I give my consent to participate in this study and agree to the terms listed above. (1)

Q1 Which grade level(s) do you teach? [Check all that apply.]
  • 9th Grade (1)
  • 10th Grade (2)
  • 11th Grade (3)
  • 12th Grade (4)

Q2 Which content area(s) are you teaching this school year? [Check all that apply.]
  • History/Social Studies (1)
  • Science (2)
  • Math (3)
Q3 How many years have you been teaching?

Q4 Which high-stakes tests do you assist in preparing your students for? [Check all that apply.]
- Kansas Mathematics Assessment (1)
- Kansas Reading Assessment (2)
- Kansas Writing Assessment (3)
- Kansas Science Assessment (4)
- Kansas History, Government, Economics, and Geography Assessment (5)
- None of the above (6)
- Other (7) ____________________

Q5 How do you prepare your students for high-stakes tests? [Check all that apply.]
- Teaching content that will be on the test in class (1)
- Teaching test-taking skills during class (2)
- Giving students practice tests during class (3)
- Giving students homework with content that will be on the test (4)
- Other (5) ____________________

Q6 How often do you prepare your students for high-stakes testing?
- More than 5 Times a Week (1)
- 3-4 Times a Week (2)
- 1-2 Times a Week (3)
- Once a Month (4)
- Once a Quarter (5)
- Never (6)
- Other (7) ____________________

Q7 How do you feel high-stakes testing affects you as an educator? [Consider the ways testing in other subject areas aside from your own might also affect you.]

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Q8 Please explain your responses to question 7.

Q9 How do you feel high-stakes testing affects these additional aspects within your school:

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<td>School climate (5)</td>
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Q10 Please explain your responses to question 9.

STUDENT ASPIRATIONS AND EFFECTS OF HIGH-STAKES TESTING

Q12 What percentage of your students do you think will go on to achieve the following:

- Graduate from high school (1)
- Achieve higher education at a 2 or 4 year university, community college, military academy, etc. (2)
- Achieve higher education at a technical college, vocational school, trade school, etc. (3)
- Join the work force or the military (4)

Q13 Do you believe your students set goals that match their abilities?

- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q14 Please explain your response to question 13.
Q15 How do you feel high-stakes testing affects your students?

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Q16 Please explain your response to question 15.

Q17 In your opinion, how does high-stakes testing positively impact students who aspire to attend a four-year university, college, academy, etc.?

Q18 In your opinion, how does high-stakes testing negatively impact students who aspire to attend a four-year university, college, academy, etc.?

Q19 Overall, do you think high-stakes testing positively or negatively impacts the majority of your students who aspire to attend a four-year university, college, academy, etc.?
  - Positively (1)
  - Neither positively nor negatively (2)
  - Negatively (3)

Q20 In your opinion, how does high-stakes testing positively impact students who aspire to attend a technical college, vocational school, trade school, etc.?

Q21 In your opinion, how does high-stakes testing negatively impact students who aspire to attend a technical college, vocational school, trade school, etc.?

Q22 Overall, do you think high-stakes testing positively or negatively impacts the majority of your students who aspire to attend a technical college, vocational school, trade school, etc.?
  - Positively (1)
  - Neither positively nor negatively (2)
  - Negatively (3)

Q23 In your opinion, how does high-stakes testing positively impact students who aspire to join the work force or the military?

Q24 In your opinion, how does high-stakes testing negatively impact students who aspire to join the work force or the military?
Q25 Overall, do you think high-stakes testing positively or negatively impacts the majority of your students who aspire to join the work force or the military?
   o Positively (1)
   o Neither positively nor negatively (2)
   o Negatively (3)

Q26 Overall, do you think high-stakes testing positively or negatively impacts your students' post-secondary aspirations?
   o Positively (1)
   o Neither Positively nor Negatively (2)
   o Negatively (3)

Q27 Please explain your response to question 26.

Q28 Are there any means of assessing performance, other than high-stakes testing, that you would prefer or feel would better support your students in attaining their post-secondary aspirations? Please explain.