



The Case of High-Stakes Tests

Heather Davis

Exploring Test Motivation, Confidence, Anxiety, and Coping in High School

With increased emphasis on high-stakes graduation tests reinforced by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, the pressure to perform has skyrocketed, with students and teachers feeling collective pressure to excel. This changing culture surrounding testing in schools spurred Dr. Heather Davis, assistant professor in social and cultural foundations at The Ohio State University, to explore test motivation in high school students. Every state currently requires some type of exam for graduation, and other tests are conducted at different grade levels, Davis explains. The pressure to perform at a high level on these types of exams leads most, if not all, students to experience at least some test anxiety. With more and more testing, students are expected to meet increasingly higher state standards, and students are required to meet these higher standards in order to be promoted or to graduate. “Every test-taker arrives for these exams with a different set of experiences, and those experiences predispose him or her to certain reactions when presented with the test,” Davis adds.

Impact of Test Preparation and Parental Support

In 2004, Davis received funding as a P-12 Scholar to study high school students' emotions and emotion regulation during test-taking. Davis's research can have a profound impact on how teachers prepare students for these high-stakes tests, how parents support their children when they face the tests, and how the student manages his or her reactions to testing. "This impact is important in light of the high-stakes tests facing all students," says Davis.

In 1995, the Ohio Department of Education shifted from input measures of accountability to output measures when a state graduation test was implemented. The push for requiring passage of tests for promotion or graduation is based on the rationale that accountability

should be tied to output measures. In the past, most states, including Ohio, measured school success based on input regulations, not output. For example, a school's quality might be determined by the number of books in its library or the number of

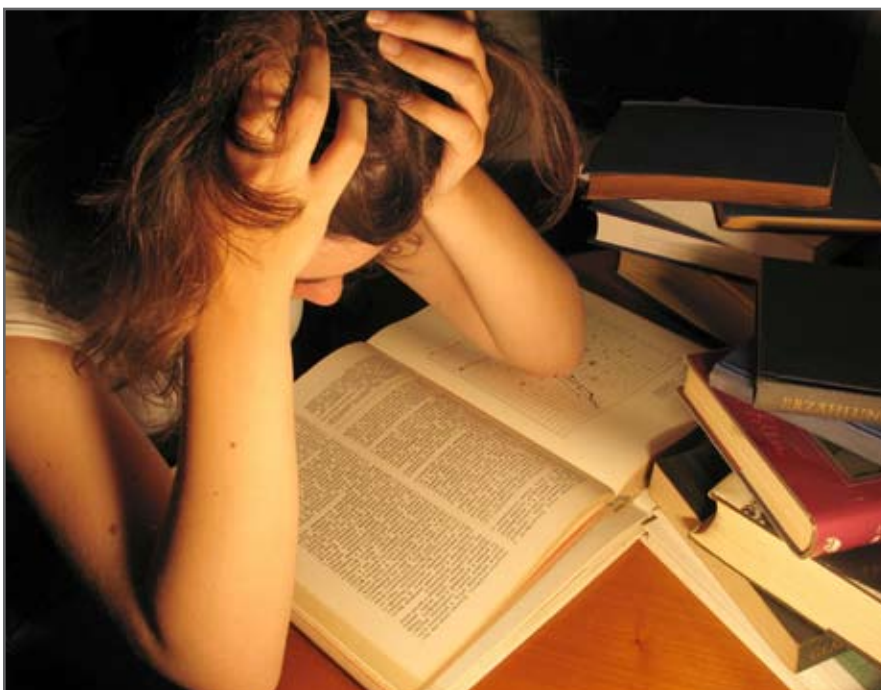
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fully certified teachers. The 1995 predecessor to the current Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) required students to demonstrate only a minimum level of competency in order to receive their high school diploma. The OGT, adopted in 2002, requires students to

meet a more stringent graduation standard. These high-stakes tests can bar students from graduating, thus closing the door on many opportunities for continued education, training, and careers. Failure to successfully pass these exams has possibly led to an increased dropout rate and an increased rate of students taking the General Educational Development (GED) test.

"The national move from minimum competency tests to high-stakes tests occurred in a relatively short amount of time,"

Davis explains. "These tests are not only important for students to graduate, but also have severe implications for the school if standards are not met," she continues. For example, after not meeting standards for 2 years, a school is labeled as "needing improvement," receives technical assistance, and must offer its students the choice of transferring to higher performing schools. After 3 years of not meeting standards, there are opportunities for mandated supplemental instruction. Should 4 years pass without standards being met, relevant staff could be replaced, a new curriculum implemented, administrators could be changed, or the school day or year could be extended. After 5 years, all or most of the staff could be replaced or major restructuring, such as a state takeover, could occur. Clearly, these tests have high stakes



for the schools as well as the students, although little is known about the impact of these policies on the actual development, learning, and achievement of students.

Studying the Testing Experience

Prior to Davis’s research, most studies of test-taking and test-performance were conducted with college students. In order to achieve a broader understanding of the true experience of testing, Davis gathered data from a diverse sampling of students—diverse not only in terms of gender, race, or socioeconomic background, but also regarding their identification with academics (why they choose to complete school tasks) and their feelings of belonging toward their schools. The K-12 population is required to attend school, while college students can make the choice to further their education. Although college students can choose what school they want to attend, few students in K-12 have the opportunity to choose their institution of learning, which may have a direct impact on students’ feeling of belonging within the school. Identification with academics, coupled with feelings of belonging within the school, can affect test anxiety.

Davis says that previous studies on test anxiety have focused on the nature of that anxiety and on how students cope with or regulate their anxiety during the testing process. The purpose of Davis’s study was to examine



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the affective consequences of high-stakes test-taking on high school students, expanding on current research by exploring the relationship of students’ beliefs about tests and coping with tests to explore the emotions of anger and pride in addition to anxiety. Current literature was also expanded to examine the relationship of these emotions to two forms of motivation: identification with academics and school belonging.

From Wishful Thinking to Well Prepared

“The judgments students make about tests and their ability to

manage tests are related to the emotions they experience while taking the exam,” Davis says. “Judgments are often made rapidly and without conscious awareness, but emotions are affected,” she continues. “Test anxiety is directly related to the degree to which the student views the test as important. The more important the test is in the eyes of the student, the greater the chance for anxiety.” To understand the true experience of high school students in high-stakes testing situations, Davis studied 576 9th- and 10th-grade students from seven suburban schools surrounding a large midwestern city. These students were asked to complete four brief surveys relevant to the research.

Davis reports that the surveys were conducted during a 2-month period surrounding the administration of the state’s

The emotional baggage that students bring to test-taking is real and matters.

graduation test. Students taking the survey were instructed to think about the tests they take in high school, including the graduation test, when responding to the survey. Several trends were consistent across the collected data. In general, says Davis, findings show developmental trends with 10th-grade students demonstrating more confidence and experience with tests than ninth graders did. Several findings suggest that girls and nonwhite students may be more susceptible to experiencing unpleasant emotions while taking tests, as evidenced by a slight increase in their beliefs about the importance of tests.

Davis points out that many times children hear the phrase “focus on the task” when taking an exam, playing a sport, or performing on an instrument. For some students, that phrase calls them to task and improves their performance. Other students experience increased anxiety when told to focus on the task. There may be up to six different approaches to test-taking that students may bring with them on test day: Wishing for a Miracle, Under Control, Perspective, My Fault, Hopeless, and Well Prepared. Some of these approaches appear to be more adaptive. For example, students who can put tests into proper perspective

may believe that since they have prepared throughout school for this graduation test, they need not worry because they will succeed. In contrast, students who feel hopeless when faced with an exam, says Davis, may have experienced a great deal of failure in the past and may need assistance to help them believe the tests are important and that they can do something to be successful.



Other students may have unrealistic expectations about their levels of test preparation and may procrastinate more than prepare, says Davis. They might feel overconfident about what they know and feel genuinely shocked when faced with the ac-

tual exam, she explains. According to Davis, these students may not have sufficient judgment to truly prepare for an exam on their own and may need to be challenged about what it means to prepare for a test. “Mapping students’ study time and comparing it with their actual test scores can be a concrete way to demonstrate the impact of studying to these students,” she adds.

Finally, some students reported frequently “wishing for a miracle” when taking tests. These students concurrently reported a great deal of anger during testing. Davis suspects these students might understand that tests are important, but do not feel in control of their success. They appear to wish a miracle would occur that would magically make them pass the exam or remove them from the testing situation (e.g., a fire drill or a snow day to forestall the test). Because they may not understand the purpose of the test or what will be on the test, they may blame teachers for not preparing them. These students may need assistance with considering what might be asked on a test so they can be more prepared with test-taking strategies and coaching to feel successful according to Davis.

Learning to handle assessment will breed future success.



Teaching FOR the Test

The Office for Faculty and Teaching Assistant Development has to consider these approaches when preparing faculty and teaching assistants to handle struggling students and to approach test-taking with their students. As a land-grant institution, The Ohio State University is committed to helping all students experience success in college. Davis says that some students experience great academic success in high school, but college is different. Students who felt very prepared in high school might need new skills in the area of study, test preparation, or perspective, for example.

Davis says that the emotional baggage that students bring to test-taking is real and matters. Students' thoughts about whether they are in control, whether the test matters, or if they can handle the test shapes how they prepare, study, and approach the test. Davis encourages teachers to help students think about those things. When approaching and creating tests, teachers also should try to understand that

their students will have diverse learning styles, so no single strategy will work. It would be helpful albeit time consuming for teachers to take the time to identify and differentiate the test takers in the room. Finally, Davis says that at transition points such as middle school to high school or high school to college, and for significant tests such as graduation tests, students might try to apply strategies that worked in one setting to this new setting. Students might not understand their responsibility and the teacher's responsibility in terms of test preparation, Davis explains. In those situations, she says, teachers can help call to the forefront what might be different in this situation.

Davis's research in the schools included a feedback session with each school to share information about the patterns or trends identified in each school and how they compare to other schools in the city. She also shared some implications for teachers and parents. The way students approach tests must be identified and discussions about

testing and upcoming tests must occur. After testing, students must be engaged in reflecting on both their performance and their experiences during the test. Finally, parents and teachers must be cautious about over-emphasizing the importance of tests, Davis suggests. Of the six clusters, four already view tests as important and are doing their best to cope with them.

Davis says that tests are an important educational tool; therefore, students should be taught how to become successful test-takers. Through reflecting on the six different approaches to test-taking, Davis encourages students to observe the strengths and struggles of each. Once students understand what type of test-taker they are, says Davis, they can benefit from her research. Whether the test is a paper-and-pencil mathematics exam, a state graduation test, or a solo recital performance, learning to handle assessment will breed future success. ■