Research Summary:


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The study examined the transition from the TAKS to STAAR in South Central Texas, which allowed researchers to observe both the social practices and commitments related to test-centered literacy curricula, and the impact of external assessment on instructional practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 K-8 educators from nine different school districts. Three participants answered additional questions to clarify initial findings, and a focus group was held with three participants to discuss how the content of STAAR related to their campus. A third set of data was comprised of artifacts available on the TEA’s website during the transition period.

Analysis of data revealed three primary themes. The first, focused on practices such as instruction on test-taking strategies and frequent benchmark testing. The second theme centered around the transitional experience, in which educators were confused on how to increase rigor, and unsure about how to adapt practices to an unfamiliar test. Third, it was found that a commitment to transfer avoidance, a need for managerial partitioning, and the acceptance of overreaching inferences were necessary to maintain a *data-driven economy*, in which test scores represented the quality of literacy teaching and learning. Examination of these themes revealed: a.) that there was little distance between classroom learning and test items, b.) that external assessment led to a perceived need to break down literacy components, and c.) that a data-driven economy justified and maintained test-centered practices.

As mentioned in the article, the study is limited by its reliance on the perspectives of small group educators, as it does not include other data sources such as classroom observation. However, the author provided a critical and carefully constructed framework that would benefit further research. Also, this research offers insight into how assessment policy effects educators’ decisions within their classroom, school district and professional communities. Additional findings, such as the ability of standardized assessments to mask students’ literacy struggles and abilities, and that students placed value on themselves based on their test-aligned reading levels, implicates complementary research into the impact of test-centered practices on learners’ environments.