

## High-Stakes Accountability Systems: Creating Cultures of Fear

Shelly Lynn Counsell  
*University of Memphis*

Brian L. Wright  
*University of Memphis*

### Abstract

A phenomenological case study by Counsell (2007) explored and investigated the phenomenon of what happened as Florida's A+ Plan intersected with the life histories of one beginning African American female third grade teacher and one veteran White female third grade teacher at demographically different school communities in one Florida school district. Habermas' theory of communicative action served as an instructive framework used to examine and contemplate two key emerging trends based on lived experiences of the various social (communicative) actors. In addition to the beginning and veteran third grade teachers, other participating social actors included third graders, their parents, other third grade teachers and school principals at the beginning and veteran teachers' schools as well as urban school teachers and personnel at urban schools in the same school district. Across the different social actors at each respective middle-income, low-income, and high-poverty school community, the emerging trends and patterns revealed: (a) a continuum of moral and ethical dilemmas specifically and (b) an overall continuum of fear in general. Social actors' varied lived experiences with fear in relation to high-stakes testing illuminated the following: (a) a fear of speaking out; (b) a fear regarding children's emotional welfare; (c) fear as it intersects with race; and (d) a fear of taking the test. From these testimonials, the continuum of fear toward the FCAT (according to third grade student reflections), proved to be the most serious (if not detrimental) consequence of Florida's high-stakes accountability system. These insights can help guide and inform future accountability decisions under the new Every Student Succeeds Act.

### Keywords

Educational policy, accountability, assessment, equity, social justice

### Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015 restores the responsibility for determining how to use federally required tests for accountability purposes to individual states. The ESSA is designed specifically to ensure that states (a) set

high standards that prepare children for college and career; (b) maintain accountability for designating resources to struggling students and

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#### Corresponding Author

Shelly Lynn Counsell, University of Memphis, Ball Hall 412B,  
3798 Alumni Ave, Memphis, TN 38152  
Email: slcnsell@memphis.edu

schools; (c) develop strong systems of school improvement; (d) preserve annual assessments without crowding out teaching and learning; and (e) increase young children's access to high-quality preschools (Executive Office of the President, 2015). Along with the widely accepted accountability measures employed by most states (i.e., English-language proficiency, graduation rates, and state achievement test scores) the new federal education law mandates that states must incorporate at least one "other indicator" as a key measurement at the student level (Blad, 2017). In light of this latest quest by the federal government to improve accountability and increase student achievement, it is crucial for state legislators, school administrators, and educators to reflect on the teaching and learning outcomes that resulted (both anticipated and unforeseen) from NCLB, Race to the Top, and state-related education legislation and how the "lessons learned" can now guide and inform future accountability decisions under the new law.

Throughout his presidency, President Obama held fast to his convictions that every student deserves a world-class education. Since the new law's overarching goal is to increase all children's access to an excellent education (needed to achieve social justice for all learners), states must then consider what kinds of assessments will (and will not) best support and advance high-quality learning and teaching. By doing so, states can use the negation to inform the affirmation, that is, what not to do (assessments that impede quality teaching and learning) are then used to inform what to do (assessments that support quality teaching and learning). Klein (2017) reports that while 16 states and the District of Columbia have thus far submitted state ESSA plans none have been approved by the Department of Education. Congress has further eliminated regulations created during the Obama administration to help clarify parts of the law (with encouragement from the Trump

administration), resulting in less clarity and more confusion.

As a case in point, this article examines the impact of Florida's A+ Accountability System on teaching and learning and what it meant for different learners and school communities. The insights gained can then be used to guide and inform the development of future state assessments and accountability systems that help to ensure that every child has access to an excellent education that can in turn, increase the likelihood of social justice for all learners, particularly in urban settings.

Habermas' theory of communicative action helps us to understand and explain how social systems (like public education) employ rationalized steering mechanisms to operate and manage organizations (such as public schools) in order to accomplish specific goals, outcomes, and mandates (e.g., increasing achievement based on test scores; using retention practice to end social promotion). Florida's system rationale for education has historically placed a heavy reliance on scientific assumptions that uniform measures can be developed and applied in order to substantiate direct evidence of student learning, teacher effectiveness, and school quality (Stone, 1999). Yet, ignored in this reliance on scientific assumptions are concerns about unfairness, which sadly, have not "altered the use, misuse, and abuse of tests for (mis)judging the abilities, capabilities, and potential" (Ford & Helms, 2012, p. 188), of our nation's children, but particularly those children from nondominant communities.

When education systems overemphasize limited measurements (test scores) to determine achievement regardless of individual lifeworld school cultures (the taken-for-granted meanings, goals, values, beliefs and lived experiences concerning schools, educational philosophy, learning, and teaching practice), the likelihood that disconnect, conflict, and opposition between systems and lifeworlds will result (Counsell, 2007; Counsell & Wright, 2015). If the

system succeeds in overwhelming the lifeworld, transposing the lifeworld rationale with the system rationale, and thus making the lifeworld subservient to the system, lifeworld colonization is complete (Habermas, 1987).

## **A Full Continuum of Experience: Turning Educational Lifeworlds Upside Down**

### **A Phenomenological Case Study**

Habermas (1987) insisted scientific knowledge and data alone is insufficient when constructing the full realization of the human experience (and unknown human potential). Phenomenological studies (Schram, 2003) investigate the meaning of the lived experiences of small groups of individuals as it pertains to the concept or phenomenon of interest (in this case, how different teachers respond to high-stakes testing). As teachers encounter practice in the present, they inform their experiences with past and possible future perspectives that translate into an individual's stock of lifeworldly knowledge. Since no two teachers' stock of lifeworldly knowledge are identical, teachers will likewise respond to high-stakes testing differently, thus revealing a continuum of experience and response across teachers (as well as other social actors) within and across school communities.

In order to study social phenomenon, the investigator must seek opportunities to: (a) observe human behavior; (b) examine social actors' multiple lived experiences; and (c) recognize language, through which meaning is constructed and conveyed (dialogue and reflections) as the central medium through which meaning is constructed and conveyed (Schram, 2003). This phenomenological case study traced the history of two different teacher's instructional practices across curricular content areas in light of high-stakes testing according to "intentions that contribute to it and give it character and direction" (McEwan & Egan, 1995, p. 180). Teaching

practices were revealed by: (a) participant interviews, (b) classroom observations, and (c) student products. The following sections describe and discuss the participants/school sites, data collection, and interpretive frames used to understand the phenomenon related to instructional practices and learning.

### **Participants and School Sites**

Counsell (2007) completed a phenomenological investigation in one large school district in Florida to examine what happened as the life histories of one beginning African American third grade teacher and one veteran White third grade teacher intersected Florida's high-stakes accountability system and what this meant for learners and teaching practice at different school communities. The African American beginning third grade teacher participant (with less than 5 years teaching experience) taught at a low-income school (62.8% enrolled in free/reduced lunch program) with a larger transient school population. The third-grade student demographics at the beginning teacher's school included 40 percent White, 31.9 percent African American, 18.8 percent Hispanic, 1.7 percent Asian, and 9.9 percent multiracial. The White veteran third grade teacher participant (nine years of teaching experience) taught at a middle-income school (only 14.2% enrolled in free/reduced lunch program) with a largely non-transient school population. The third-grade student demographics at the veteran teacher's school included 81.4 percent White, 11.7 percent African American, 4.4 percent Hispanic, 1.1 percent Asian, and 1.4 percent multiracial. The veteran teacher's school had always ranked as an A+ school based on FCAT scores (with the exception of only one B ranking in 1999-2000) since the inception of Florida's A+ Education Plan for school reform. The beginning teacher's school has experienced ongoing struggles, earning an A+ ranking in 2002-03, and 2004-07; a B ranking in 2003-04, 2007-2010, 2011-12,

and 2013-14; and a C ranking in 1998-2002, 2010-11, and 2012-13.

Additional participants (three third grade teachers, 143 third graders, 11 parents, and two school administrators at the beginning and veteran teachers' schools as well as one urban Pre-K teacher, one urban guidance counselor and one retired principal in the same urban school district) provided perspectives and insights in an effort to help illustrate how the full-continuum of their lived experiences with Florida's high-stakes testing were impacted.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A constant comparative method (Bogdon & Biklen, 2003) was used to collect and analyze ongoing data throughout the study. When two entities like schools and teachers are compared and contrasted, this can potentially lead to a rank and sort that positions one school or teacher over the other. For this reason, a comparative method helps the investigator to better understand the curricular decisions and pedagogical practices used by each teacher and what this meant for learner opportunities and outcomes within the context of their individual school cultures. Teachers' curricular decisions were informed by, but not limited to, what they believed were possibilities and constraints as they navigated and negotiated the various steering mechanisms (institutional policies and practices aligned with state standards) and accountability measures (test scores).

The point of qualitative inquiry, as noted by Eisner (1998), is to attempt "to understand what teachers and children do in the settings in which they work" (p. 11). By comparing and contrasting teachers and schools, the goal is to "learn about individual classrooms and particular teachers in ways that are useful to them" (Eisner, 1998, p. 12) and further help to guide and inform policies and practices nationwide. Data was obtained through unstructured, open-ended interviews with all adult participants. Student narrative essays by

143 third-graders at the beginning and veteran teachers' schools were written on the Friday prior to FCAT administration. Classroom observations of language arts and math lessons and student products were collected during one week in each of the beginning and veteran teachers' classrooms after FCAT (Counsell, 2007).

Three interpretive approaches were used to organize, examine, and analyze emergent themes and categories. The key approaches included: (a) Summary Sheets for adult interviews (Clarke, Shore, Rhoades, Abrams, & Miao, 2003); (b) matrices of interpretive categories conceptualized from raw data (Miles & Huberman, 1994); and (c) the eventual triangulation (structural corroboration) of data sources based largely on teacher interviews, classroom observations, and student products (Eisner, 1998).

### **Findings and Gained Insights**

Based on the collected data, the emergent trends and patterns in the Counsell (2007) phenomenological study revealed: (a) a continuum of moral and ethical dilemmas specifically and (b) an overall continuum of fear in general. Social actors' (teachers, administrators, parents, and third graders) varied lived experiences with fear in relation to high-stakes testing illuminated the following: (a) a fear of speaking out; (b) a fear regarding children's emotional welfare; (c) fear as it intersects with race; and (d) a fear of taking the test. From these testimonials, the continuum of fear toward the FCAT (according to third grade student reflections), proved to be the most serious (if not detrimental) consequence of Florida's high-stakes accountability system. According to the obtained data in this phenomenological study, the system of high-stakes accountability overwhelmed the lifeworld at the low-income and high-poverty schools, transposing the lifeworld rationale with the system rationale, and thus making the school

lifeworlds largely subservient to the high-stakes accountability system, and thus, the lifeworld colonization was complete as it pertained to teaching practices and student learning experiences.

### **A Continuum of Moral and Ethical Dilemmas**

Examining different social actors' lived experiences across school communities in the Counsell phenomenological study revealed a correlation between the extent of academic struggle and the extent of how communities responded to high-stakes testing. In other words, "the greater the 'perceived deficit' lifeworld needs of the school community (e.g., high student mobility/transfer rate, low socio-economic status, ethnic diversity) the greater the response by teachers and school administrators to make instructional and curricular accommodations designed to specifically increase test scores" (p. 262). Since social actors' perspectives also varied within individual school communities, a continuum of agreement/disagreement with the curricular and instructional responses likewise occurred. When school communities responded collectively in ways that individual members disagreed due to lifeworld beliefs and convictions about learning and instruction, moral and ethical dilemmas resulted.

### ***Can too much of a good thing really be bad?***

The White veteran teacher worked at a middle-income school with an 81 percent White student population in which parents actively volunteered at school and partnered to support the school community. Her school historically ranked as an A+ school and as a result, teachers expressed less pressure, greater autonomy, and empowerment to continue using the curricula and practices employed by educators prior to Florida's A+ Plan and the FCAT. The veteran teacher wanted to believe that Florida's high-

stakes testing resulted in positive outcomes such as narrowing the achievement gap; early identification for intervention; increased parent and educator awareness of individual learning styles and needs; raising expectations for all learners; and using assessment data to inform and guide instruction.

The flip side of this optimistic worldview is the counterview that, if taken to the extreme, the approaches (steering mechanisms) become more coercive and punitive (and developmentally detrimental) in nature. The veteran teacher simultaneously feared that a failure to use assessments, curricula, and teaching practice in developmentally appropriate ways could potentially lead to a misdiagnosis of ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and learning disabilities due to developmentally unfair expectations and practices. Similarly, an overemphasis on test scores (as the all-powerful steering mechanism) could de-emphasize extra-curricular activities that promote social, emotional, physical, and language (communication) development in favor of academic tutoring. In general, the veteran teacher exclaimed,

We're blasting the academics, but we're forgetting that children need to grow socially, emotionally, and cognitively. We got a whole person here, not just a brain. We got hearts, and feelings, moods and emotions, and needs. And at what expense are we developing the cognitive? What expense to the child? What are they missing out on? (p. 145 & 146)

As the newest version of an accountability system and steering mechanisms, the ESSA offers examples of "other indicators" like school climate and student engagement as possible accountability measurements (Blad, 2017). Some advocacy and interest groups have urged state legislators and bureaucrats to adopt more "whole-child" factors (a lifeworld perspective of developmentally appropriate practices and learning) to help reshape (or redirect) education

systems and steering mechanisms toward a greater lifeworld view; the same sentiment shared by the veteran teacher above.

### ***Can children miss what they don't know?***

The African American beginning teacher in the Counsell phenomenological study had just taught three years in third grade under the guise of Florida's third grade mandatory retention based on FCAT reading and math scores at the time of the study. The student population at the beginning teacher's school experienced greater mobility and diversity. Many of the beginning teacher's parents worked multiple jobs that meant they had less time to help the beginning teacher meet their children's learning needs; maintain ongoing communication with the teacher and school; and volunteer to support the school's efforts, programs, and events.

From the beginning teacher's perspective, the kinds of activities children enjoy most (such as large group projects) were the learning experiences and teaching practices her students experienced the least in her classroom. She insisted that, while teachers were readily aware of the instructional compromises made, students were essentially 'none-the-wiser,' asserting, "I don't think they know because you can't really miss what you haven't had" (p. 127). To illustrate her point, she suggested that students couldn't 'miss' science projects if they have 'never experienced' science projects. Clearly, the teachers at the low-income school faced many difficult choices and anguished over how the Florida's A+ Plan's system rationale for teacher and student accountability based on test scores impacted teaching practices, curricular decisions, and subsequent learning opportunities and experiences for students.

In fact, the dilemma faced by the African American beginning teacher regarding her selection of teaching practices and instructional decisions in response to the system rationale of accountability based on test scores within her school's increasing high-stakes culture (as

described above) is not uncommon or an isolated experience, particularly for African American boys. The National Institute for Early Education Research (2007) determined that low-income children representing historically marginalized groups like African American children are the least likely to receive high quality educational experiences. Stipek (2004) similarly found that didactic, direct instructional teaching dominated by isolated facts and basic skills within negative (coercive and generally punitive) social climates are prevalent in low-income schools serving minority populations.

Children from historically marginalized groups in low-income urban classrooms who are disproportionately subjected to skill-drill instruction and teacher-directed, text-based learning may in turn, become easily bored and less inspired than children experiencing high quality education opportunities and experiences promoted at the veteran teacher's middle-income school. Classroom cultures most often experienced by African American boys in particular, according to Emdin (2016) can best be described as "oppressed places" fixated on rules and discipline. Classroom settings that fail to intrinsically motivate learners that are too often encountered by African American children have higher rates of disciplinary action (Barbarin, 2013) with low-warmth and high-conflict learning atmospheres (Split, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). When the Education Week Research Center surveyed 634 teachers to gauge what they think should be measured to help assess school quality, teachers ranked social-emotional learning (23 percent) and student engagement (19 percent) as important "other indicators" (Blad, 2017). This emerging trend seems to suggest a growing opposition to the system's overwhelming emphasis on test scores without consideration of learner motivation, inspiration, enthusiasm, innovation, and creativity that are associated with high quality teaching and learning.

Research has likewise demonstrated pervasive trends that indicate low expectations, a predominant colonized worldview by the system rationale of accountability for African American boys that continues to persist (Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; McKown & Weinstien, 2008) and is ever-pervasive when learners' aptitude, capability, and academic potential is largely derived from the rank and sort steering mechanism of standardized test scores. As noted by Counsell & Boody (2013), the Pygmalion phenomena, based on the work by Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968) demonstrated clear correlations between high teacher expectations and increased student intellectual growth and performance compared to lower teacher expectations leading to lowered growth and performance. Elementary teachers' tendencies to harbor lowered expectations for African American boys may help to explain the pervasive academic achievement gap experienced by African American males that is only further exacerbated within high-stakes testing culture and system rationale of accountability with the most dire consequences for low-income, urban schools largely populated by African American students.

***Most dire consequences for the most vulnerable children***

Educators and school personnel at urban schools in Counsell's phenomenological study described struggles and challenges that were even more dire than those described by the beginning teacher. According to one White female Pre-K teacher at a high-poverty urban school, her school's response to Florida's A+ Plan and subsequent high-stakes testing steering mechanisms served to subvert the developmentally appropriate lifeworld view of the whole child with a colonized developmentally 'inappropriate' worldview driven by the system's accountability rationale for kindergartners and teachers:

Kindergarten teachers taking down centers (blocks, housekeeping); limiting social and communication skills; limiting building experiences and talking about it; less problem solving; and more seatwork. Recess trend is that in a lot of schools, recess is not allowed anymore – no recess after lunch at a lot of schools. There are developmental repercussions for no recess/outdoor play. All [children] learn the same thing at the same time and [schools] penalize anyone for not knowing. (p. 255)

The Pre-K teacher's professed counter worldviews are similar to the veteran teacher who warned that while high-expectations are great – unfair developmentally inappropriate expectations are detrimental. As a result, this Pre-K teacher chose to leave kindergarten 'in protest' after a 32-year career. This veteran Pre-K teacher refused to succumb to the system rationale of accountability based on test scores; the colonized worldview of kindergarten academic rank and sort; and the subsequent teaching practices and curricular steering mechanisms like the mandated 90-minute reading block in her kindergarten class. Altogether, the system rationale of accountability and the resulting colonized lifeworld view of rank and sort achievement based on test scores created a moral dilemma that the Pre-K teacher could not accept or resolve. She pleaded, "It's killing them! No joy anymore in kindergarten!" (p. 255).

Like the kindergarten teacher at a low-income urban school, a White female guidance counselor at another high-poverty urban school described similar 'perceived' disparities with a deficit worldview of life experiences and circumstances:

Our kids don't come from a print rich environment. High-income kids have a 30,000-word vocabulary and emergent skills – not our kids. Nutrition and exercise another factor – no access. No

major grocery store within walking distance of school. Convenience stores contribute to obesity / malnutrition. Now punishment for circumstances beyond child's control! (p. 253)

As this guidance counselor (and others) have suggested, a complete disregard for differences across learners while simultaneously holding all children, teachers, and schools accountable to the same standards, has essentially resulted in punishing children (and entire school communities) for having the aforementioned differences, albeit deficit views.

### **A Continuum of Fear**

As noted earlier, different social actors' lived experiences across school cultures and communities suggest that, "the greater the (perceived) lifeworld needs of the school community, the greater the response in making instructional and curricular accommodations designed specifically to increase test scores" and satisfy the system rationale of accountability. Social actors' lived experiences likewise reveal that the greater the colonization of the lifeworld perspective (as conceptualized by Habermas, 1987) by Florida's accountability system rationale, the greater the likelihood that various social actors experience fear in relation to high-stakes testing.

ESSA enables states and districts to decide how to intervene in their lowest-performing schools that largely serve historically marginalized groups (Klein, 2017). However, returning student and school performance measurement decisions (steering mechanisms) back to the states does not necessarily guarantee that individual states will enact education policies (steering mechanisms) that will increase every child's access to an excellent education (with a lifeworld whole child approach) that will in turn, better achieve social justice for individual learners. Civil rights advocates are concerned that the U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and the Trump administration will

not take a critical and careful review of state plans (accountability systems and steering mechanisms) needed to ensure that student performance in struggling schools is adequately addressed using high quality teaching practices, learning experiences, and opportunities. Hence, it is imperative to take into account the past lessons learned, according to the most relevant stakeholders – children, parents, and teachers.

### ***Fearful to speak out***

Research by Nichols, Glass, and Berliner (2006) demonstrated important trends that suggest that poorest states and those with greater numbers of students of color adopt more punitive accountability policies (steering mechanisms), like Florida's mandatory third grade retention, compared to states with largely White and more affluent student populations. Furthermore, correlation analyses conducted by Nichols et al. (2012) revealed a relationship between high-stakes testing pressure and student achievement in 25 states (Florida was not included) that suggested pressure to raise test scores is significantly and positively correlated with state poverty index. This means that, for the nation's poorest children, teachers working in low-income schools nationwide indicate that they feel greater testing pressure as a result of high-stakes testing accountability systems in contrast to their more privileged contemporaries working with affluent populations, much like the beginning and veteran third grade teachers in this phenomenological study. Not only has the system rationale of accountability colonized the worldview of education achievement based on test scores, an even more pervasive worldview of deficit, disparities, and disadvantage is colonized for struggling schools in urban communities where skill-drill and direct-instruction practices predominate as the best approach to narrowing the ongoing achievement gap according to biased standardized test scores. As noted by Ford and Helms (2012) "the notion that tests are colorblind, neutral, and unbiased measures is a



fallacy. [Moreover] adopting an assumption of equal opportunity to learn is naïve and an excuse to absolve decision-makers of accountability for the improper use and abuse of tests” (p. 187).

Throughout the completed interviews in the Counsell study, a ‘fear of ramifications for speaking out’ echoed among school employees at all levels. Out of sheer frustration, the Pre-K teacher admitted, “a lot of teachers are as outraged as I am but don’t join FCAR (Florida Coalition for Assessment Reform). They don’t speak out. It amazes and dismays me a lot” (p. 258). The inner-city guidance counselor was likewise not surprised by the lack of response by principals and offered the following explanation:

Principals are fearful of speaking out. Due to possible repercussions, they feel they cannot speak out to the press as a school employee without approval - only as a private citizen. That’s how government builds fear through intimidation. You mucked it up...now just shut up and do as we say. (p. 258)

She added, “There’s immense pressure on you if your district does not conform or promote FCAT and end social promotion at every grade level” (p. 258). The guidance counselor felt morally compelled by her professional beliefs (and lifeworld view of teaching and learning) to speak out and held all professionals culpable as participants (even if passive-compliant) for failure to speak up in opposition.

### ***Fearful of children’s emotional welfare***

In the Counsell phenomenological study, two third grade parents from the beginning teacher’s low-income school, eight third grade parents and one fourth grade parent from the veteran teacher’s high-income school also agreed to be interviewed. White parents of ‘struggling’ readers in particular (i.e., children with ‘below’ grade level performance) at the middle-income school experienced fear toward retention (considered the most dire steering mechanism by these parents) and high-stakes testing. Unlike

school district employees, these parents had no reservations about speaking out and they indicated no fear of possible ramifications. Unfortunately, parents at the low-income school lacked the financial resources (fiscal steering mechanisms) like the parents at the middle-income school, who were readily prepared to resort to private schooling, if necessary, to avoid negative consequences (such as mandatory retention) for their children that would result if they failed the FCAT.

One White mother shared that her son was sent home during FCAT math with a headache. She was adamant that her son never experienced migraines prior to third grade. As a pharmacist, she expressed clear concerns that children’s text anxiety would lead to increased medications for young children.

### ***Fear’s intersection with race***

While this guidance counselor expressed an outward concern and empathy for the unique challenges faced by many of the children at her urban school, she continued to employ a deficit worldview of the community she served, due in large part to the fact that her school’s families live far below the poverty line in a community with a higher crime rate. Absent in this teacher’s deficit worldview is the consideration of race as a factor that tends to circumscribe the schooling experiences of students of color, in particular, African American students, in favor of the belief that ‘economic class’ is the main culprit in a society that believes itself to be post-racial.

The guidance counselor further recounted that the daily life of these children and their families included, “Fear of eviction and homelessness; fear of abandonment by parents; fear of drive-by shootings; fear of illness; fear of going to bed hungry; and fear of abuse. Kids are at war!” (p. 256). For these third graders, mandatory retention meant their school was no longer a ‘safe haven’ from fear.

### ***Fearful of the test-taking experience***

Any continuum of complex lived experiences with high-stakes testing must include what third graders were thinking, saying, and feeling as well. Third graders in three classes at the middle-income school and six classes at the low-income school in the Counsell phenomenological study were provided with a sheet of paper with the typed question, “How are you feeling about next week (February 27-March 3) at school?” on the Friday prior to FCAT Week. This query was designed specifically to first, determine whether children were thinking about the FCAT as a high-stakes steering mechanism, and if so, what was their range of thoughts and feelings toward the FCAT and retention?

A statistical analysis of the 143 student narratives completed revealed that 87 students explicitly referred to taking the “FCAT” or “test” (e.g., “I feel nervous about the FCAT. It might be hard”). Another 53 students made references related to pass/fail or other comments suggesting a focus on FCAT testing (e.g., “How am I feeling a little excited to past third grade”) for a total of 140 students or 98 percent; only three students’ comments were unrelated. The most frequent emotional identifier used by 79 students was ‘nervous’ for a 55 percent statistical response rate with over 70 percent of the third graders expressing some level of fear toward the FCAT. Along the continuum of fear, children who expressed the most serious levels of nervousness, anxiety, or stress wrote comments such as, “so nervous, very scary, or nervous wreck” at one end of the spectrum. Feelings of confidence were indicated by comments like, “confident, not scared, or feel smart” at the opposing end.

Despite the confidence expressed by some children, the assumption that tests, as a scientific steering mechanism that objectively measure something of importance about the person, such as cognitive and academic abilities, continues to undermine the intellectual and personal development of millions of children

(Ford & Helms, 2012; Toldson, 2012). Students’ responses (as illustrated below) revealed a full continuum of fear toward the FCAT and retention across third graders at both the beginning teacher’s low-income and the veteran teacher’s middle-income schools irrespective of SES, gender, reading level, language, or race. Third graders most fearful responses included:

Child 1: “I am feeling so scared and nerves [sic]. Help!”

Child 2: “I am feeling so nerves. And may be a little excited. But a lot of scared! Please help me Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_!”

Child 3: “I am feeling like a nevis rek [sic]. Though part of me wonders what it’s like. I feel like my world has be terned [sic] up side down. It is very scary. The more informashon [sic] I get the more I’m skerd [sic]. I don’t want to take the teast [sic].”

Child 4: “I’m scared! I’m nerves [sic]! I don’t want to fall agian! I don’t want to be the oldest kid in the class!”

Third Grader 1: “I fill like an nevis [sic] reck [sic]. Like thars a knot in my stumik [sic], mist [sic] in wheth [sic] butrflis [sic] and a frog.” (p. 243)

While 66 percent of the beginning teacher’s class participated in the free/reduced lunch program, only 16 percent of the veteran teacher’s class participated as well. In spite of this difference, 15 out of 19 students (79 percent) in the veteran teacher’s class and 15 out of 17 students (88 percent) in the beginning teacher’s class indicated some level of fear toward the FCAT and retention.

### **Clashing Worldviews of Education**

After the Counsell phenomenological study was completed, both participating elementary schools earned an A+ ranking (steering mechanism) for that calendar year. In the veteran teacher’s third grade class, one student

with special needs earned a Level 1 FCAT Reading score and all remaining students earned Level 3 FCAT Reading scores or higher. At the beginning teacher's school, 13 third-graders (approximately 10%) earned Level 1 Reading Scores; it is not known whether any of these students were from the beginning teacher's class. The middle-income school continued to earn consecutive A+ rankings while the low-income school earned a B ranking in 2007-2010, 2011-12, and 2013-14; and a C ranking in 2010-11, and 2012-13 since the study.

### **Which Lifeworld View Matters Most?**

The Counsell (2007) phenomenological study's examination of different social actors' lived experiences with Florida's high-stakes testing accountability system across demographically different school cultures and communities revealed the emergence of a full continuum of human experience with the various steering mechanisms that are further complicated by issues of race, class, gender, ability, language, and disability. While distinct and definitive trends and patterns clearly emerged across the different groups in the study, there is no singular description, illustration, or consensus regarding high-stakes testing accountability systems and steering mechanisms across all actors and groups. The many complexities are best understood as an ongoing continuum of lifeworld experiences and worldviews about teaching and learning, individually and collectively within, and across groups.

Historically, American public education was created to serve and benefit White, middle-class children largely at the exclusion of other groups, namely, African American children. Corporate industry's worldview of education has always focused on the demand for an educated workforce. The ongoing partnership between public education and industry has long existed and has been a largely prosperous relationship, particularly for White America. The parents,

who actively opposed Florida's high-stakes testing, were White, middle-class working parents at the middle-income school who had benefited economically from their own public education experience. For various reasons however, their own children struggled in reading. The system that previously served and worked well for these parents as learners has now placed their own children at-risk for failure.

The African American mother at the low-income school did not fully benefit from her public education experience (or have the same access to an excellent educational experience) to the same extent as her White counterparts at the middle-income school; a concern expressed by President Obama throughout his presidency. She worked more than one job to meet her family's financial needs. This mother's efforts to ensure her child's access to a high-quality education that would in turn, lead to greater financial opportunity and mobility, was an ongoing struggle and reality, with or without high-stakes steering legislation, laws, or mandates.

Steering mechanisms in the form of educational mandates, policies, and procedures have long been employed throughout this nation's history to direct social systems to support the capitalist economy. Test scores have been a powerful steering mechanism used to track predominantly White students into honors classes, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) courses, and gifted classes while over-representing marginalized groups (including African Americans and Hispanics) in special education classes. The balance of power in our capitalist society has always favored the corporate business worldview of education.

Even if federal and state legislation (steering mechanisms) include language that declares an outward lifeworld view intended to increase every child's access to an excellent education, this goal will never be realized as long as states and school districts continue to employ rank and sort steering mechanisms according to

standardized test scores based on meritocratic assumptions about ability and performance. Failure to embrace a whole child worldview that guarantees every child equal access to high quality educational experiences will in turn, continue to contribute toward an ongoing deficit worldview of learners in urban settings used to justify teaching and learning inequities and disparities with subsequent life outcomes that in the end, trumps any sincere attempt to fulfill social justice for everyone.

In stark contrast to the White middle-class parents in this study, African Americans and their descendants worldwide have a universal legacy of cultures of fear, historically forced to endure, survive, and overcome realities (deficit worldviews and steering mechanisms) that other privileged groups would declare intolerable and unacceptable. The ESSA returns the responsibility for performance measurement to states and school districts. As noted by Daria Hall, the interim vice president for government affairs and communications at the Education Trust (an advocate for poor and minority students) warns that civil rights advocates must keep an eye on ESSA implementation:

We have to be really cautious because we know that states have a long track record of not making tough decisions when it comes to the interest of low-income students, students of color, English-language learners. If states are going to walk away from those students, we are going to lose whatever progress we've made with those students, who now make up the majority of our public school population (as cited by Klein, 2017, p. 3)

The recent National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) report, Task Force on Quality Education (2017) openly acknowledges the education nightmare faced by a multitude of parents and families in low-income and working-class African American communities (much like the African American

teacher's school and other urban schools described in the Counsell phenomenological study). The historical plight of African American families' ongoing struggle within ill-suited educational systems were never created nor developed with Black children in mind. As a result, it is imperative that both traditional and charter systems going forward are accountable and transparent about the quality of teaching and learning experiences they provide to the communities they serve.

Regardless of whether assessments and accountability systems are relegated by the federal or state legislatures, accountability assurances and steering mechanisms must employ authentic student performance measurements that serve to promote and support high quality teaching and learning needed to ensure that ALL learners have access to an excellent education. If we fail to heed the lessons learned in states like Florida, history will continue to repeat itself and as a country, we will again, fall short of our national goal to increase all learners access to high quality education and the desire to achieve the ultimate worldview of social justice for everyone.

#### **About the Author(s)**

**Shelly L. Counsell, EdD**, is an Assistant Professor and Early Childhood Education Program Coordinator in the Department of Instruction and Curriculum Leadership in the College of Education at the University of Memphis. Her research and publications examine a range of early childhood education topics related to constructivism, diversity, inclusion, democratic learning communities, reflective cultures of practice, inquiry teaching, and early STEM. In addition to high-stakes testing, she has also used Habermas' theory of communicative action as an instructive framework to examine Special Olympics, Head Start, and early/emergent literacy. Current research projects focus on collaborative partnerships designed to improve STEM/STEAM and language development/emergent literacy pedagogy and practices with early childhood inservice teachers, preservice teacher candidates, and young children within diverse, high quality public school classroom and early childhood program settings.

**Brian L. Wright, PhD**, is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education in the Department of Instruction and Curriculum Leadership in the College of Education at the University of Memphis. His research and publications examine the role of racial-ethnic identity in the school achievement of successful African-American males in urban schools preK-12. His current research projects include high quality early childhood education programs for all children, but especially those children living in poverty, culturally responsive and responsible school readiness for African American boys (preschool and kindergarten), literacy and African American males, African American and Latino males as early childhood teachers, and teacher identity development. He is the author of *The Brilliance of Black Boys: Cultivating School Success in the Early Grades* with contributions by Shelly L. Counsell.

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