

# The Impact of Test-Based Accountability in the U.S. and Its Relevance for the Global Education Reform Movement : A Brief Review

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## ABSTRACT

The current study briefly reviews the influence of test-based accountability in the United States of America and its effect on global movements of education.

**Keywords :** Test-Based, Accountability, USA, Education, Move

## I. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature indicates that Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) has played a critical role in shifting education system worldwide (Friedman, 2002; Harvey, 2007; Sahlberg, 2012; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Ellis et al., 2019; Fuller, 2019). Although the term GERM was introduced first by Pasi Sahlberg several years ago (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019), the birth of international education reform idea was in 1980s (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Mundy et al. (2016) and Harvey (2007) claim that by tracing the development of the GERM, the origin of globalization of education policy arguably can be imputable to political agendas. This is exemplified in the outset of Chile's charter schools, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) in the U.S. and U.K. Education Reform Act (1988) undertaken by Augusto Pinochet, Ronald Reagan, and Margaret Thatcher, respectively.

This perspective is underpinned by Gorur (2016) and Verger et al. (2019), who assert that the notion of

globalizing the education policy is attributed to neoliberalism's influence, which has strived substantially to privatize education systems and restructure public schools prevalently. However, Friedman (2002) argues that competition and marketization in education came as alternative solutions for the failure of welfare and loss of faith in the Keynesian economic theory. Therefore, it seems that after about 35 years, Friedman's initiative was built on the wrong premise, and GERM has not brought about the desired change. Instead, it has resulted in destructive consequences (Sahlberg, 2012).

### Key Features of GERM

According to Sahlberg (2011), one primary trait of the GERM is the massive increase in international tests, namely, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Bieber and Martens (2011) point out that for about two decades, PISA findings and international comparative data have

been utilized by Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to steer education policy enactment actors across the globe. Similarly, Dang and Rogers (2008) and Zhao (2014) believe that due to the international school ranking, students in many Asian countries undergo intense pressure to enhance pupil attainment. Another deceitful facet of GERM is school parental choice. Although Egalite and Wolf (2016) assume that competition between schools would give rise to improve standards of education and allow freedom to families to opt for the school which meets their children's needs, school choice has brought forth inequity, segregated communities, and widened the gap between the socioeconomic strata (SES) (Gunter, 2018).

Moreover, Au (2009) insists that due to this global trend and disposition, there has been over-dependence on exam results as a key and only tool to measure the quality of education in many parts of the world. In the same vein, Baird et al. (2016), Meyer and Benavot (2013) underscore that large-scale international assessments (ILSAs) render national policymakers to emphasize on homogenization of curriculum since more attention has been paid to core subjects such as mathematics, science, and reading literacy on the expense of creativity and other learning objectives and activities. Addey et al. (2017), Komatsu and Rappleye (2017) have adopted a broader perspective that implicitly assumes that international performance comparisons are neither reliable nor valid. Furthermore, Sahlberg (2015) alleges that GERM has deprived patriotic policy actors and domestic teachers of following their unique trajectory in tackling educational challenges insisting that reforms and successful change are expected to come within the school community. In addition, one of the negative aspects of GERM is embarking upon a test-based accountability policy which will be addressed in depth later in the article. Taken together, these deficiencies and consequences of GERM are warning alarms, and

there should be a severe wake-up call not only to curb this movement from extending worldwide but also to put an end to it.

### **Beyond the Growth of GERM**

Brydon (2011) claims that this dramatic shift toward a knowledge-based economy does not occur coincidentally and cannot be influenced by neo-liberalism alone. Likewise, Mundy et al. (2016) maintain that alliances between governments and multiple non-governmental offices, among which the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Group of 8 (G8), the World Bank, the European Union (E.U.), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), technology companies, new philanthropies, and World Economic Forum, have acted as a powerful spur to trigger global international standards to transfer rapidly through strategic planning. By the 1980s, many national governments in developed countries adopted education reform notions proposed by international bodies such as the OECD, seeking solutions for their educational problems (Pal & Ireland 2009).

As a side of this, international organizations have imposed global policies on these countries (Schleicher & Zoido, 2016). One clear example of compelling local authorities to undertake external procedures is the mechanism that the World Bank uses through 'loan conditionalities, debt cancellation, and trade agreements' in return for the privatizing education system (Dale, 1999).

Simons (2014), in his analysis of governing practices in Belgium and Europe's education framework, implies that taking benchmarking for granted and pursuing examples of best practices without bearing in mind the distinction between the world of evidence and the world of politics is one more catalyst which sparks GERM to move forward. Interdependence and international treaties such as Early Childhood

Education and Care (ECEC) and Education for All (EFA) marked a significant advocacy for GERM in the view of the fact that those agendas put pressure on the national communities to respond and legislate new policies accordingly (Verger et al., 2012; Benavot et al., 2016; Mahon, 2016). The results of this study indicate that, analogous to viral infection, GERM can engender from several sources and happen in different ways. It has been shaped in a complex configuration. Therefore, there is a definite need for a systematic approach of counter-movements and consistent resistance inspired by collective intellectuals' acts to eradicate this GERM or at least to raise awareness and strengthen immunity.

### **Test-Based Accountability in the American Education Context**

Test-Based Accountability (TBA) policy was not until the beginning of 2002, and critical scholars have perceived it as an upshot of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which President George W. Bush signed as a direct attempt to enact educational policy reform (Song, 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), the accountability system was put into effect to ensure that underperforming schools would endeavor to evince sustainable progress statewide. Other researchers, however, who have looked at TBA, have found that this blueprint is one of the fundamental components of the GERM. It implies rendering pedagogical actors in the question of and responsive to student outcomes and school performance so that exam results are associated with rewards or sanctions for schools, teachers, and headmasters (Koretz, 2017; Hout & Elliott, 2011). A wider standpoint has been addressed by Olmedo and Wilkins (2017), who allege GERM is the leading driver behind espousing TBA in the sense that promoting school competition, league tables, rankings, and marketization are deemed to be key principles and essential policy tools through which families' school choices are informed.

Unlike Bergbauer et al.(2018), who argue that assessment with accountability enhances student achievement, Verger et al. (2019) conclude to date, empirical research on the impact of TBA systems on improving the quality of education has demonstrated contradictory results, and the positive effects are inconclusive. Similarly, Au (2007), Allan and Artiles (2016) point out that embracing TBA in the United States has led to employing unpleasant practices in schools that undermine the teaching standards. Thus, TBA appears to be still contested despite its manifest expansion across schools in the U.S. Hence, understanding this phenomenon thoroughly entails rigorous investigation through several lenses into the impact of TBA on students, teachers, and schools.

### ***TBA Impact on Students***

Ballou and Springer (2009) assume that School-stakeholder engagement, for instance, is a remarkable gain of implementing TBA in the American education system because parents of students have become more involved in their child's education. Although the TIMSS reports demonstrated that owing to the TBA policy in the U.S., grade 4 students' outcomes improved in mathematics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), Jennings and Rentner (2006) argue that states and school districts have employed diverse approaches in their testing program. Therefore student achievement is far more unlikely to be attributable to one particular factor. Ballou and Springer (2009) accuse schools of using ploys to manipulate results to meet the TBA-mandated requirements. Another weakness of TBA is turning the primary mission of education to teach to get appointed scores at the end of the year. In doing so, this narrow focus on specific subjects and standardized tests has minimized the opportunities for students who are so keen on social studies to pursue their interests and prevent them from a worthwhile experience of learning a great variety of branches of knowledge (Dee & Thomas, 2010).

Jennings and Rentner (2006) emphasize that another crucial effect of TBA on students is the school that does not show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) has paid much more attention to particular groups of students. In essence, both competent students and those who so far lagged behind the standards have been neglected. In contrast, more consideration has been given to students who are slightly below the standards, and there is a reasonable potential to bring them up to the target level in a year (Ballou & Springer, 2017). Similarly, two qualitative research conducted by Booher-Jennings (2005), White and Rosenbaum (2007) in elementary schools in Texas and Chicago, respectively, reveal that TBA has intensified more concentration on 'bubble students' who are close to reaching proficiency verge.

### **TBA Impact on Teachers and Teaching**

After TBA, schools in the U.S. were required to recruit and keep highly qualified teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As a result, it had become imperative for the states to decide whether their teachers were certified to be in the classroom or not. Based on the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), to be "highly qualified," teachers must be pretty knowledgeable about the content of the subject they teach and have sufficient educational experience in teaching as well. Nonetheless, Marszalek et al. (2010) assert that these two characteristics are not adequate to ensure successful classroom teaching in view of the fact that other vital determinants need to be taken into account, for example, teaching practices, curriculum alignment, and students from disadvantaged populations. Later, the federal government obliged the states to undertake a High Objective State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE) plan to comply with the certification requirements (Burdette and Muller, 2005). With this new education reform, teachers' performance has been evaluated through a point system where teachers must collect points and submit a portfolio of evidence to show their competencies (Burdette & Muller, 2005). Since student achievement

data plays a vital part in assessing teachers' professionalism associated with incentives, teachers have become more tempted to focus on core subjects and specific topics (Dee et al., 2010). Thus, it could be interrupted that even highly qualified teachers are expected to neither perform at their highest capacity in the classroom nor to deliver comprehensive multi-pronged education for their students. Besides, this evidence implies that even though TBA has contributed to raising teacher eligibility standards, it overrides the quality of teaching in the classroom. Thereby having great teachers does not necessarily mean having excellent education.

TBA has also regularly provoked teacher evaluation to improve schooling and student performance. Hazi and Rucinski (2009) point out that the increased effort to provide feedback for teachers to work on their weaknesses has generated undesirable consequences, and teachers have become frustrated because of unfair criticism. Relating the performance of the lowest-achieving students in the class with the teacher's competency and appraisal, irrespective of learning difficulties and disabilities, has been deemed an injustice from the teacher's perspective (Hazi & Rucinski, 2009). What causes more pressure for teachers is that their monetary incentives and capacities have been determined by the points they score on these evaluations (Ball, 2003). Furthermore, Lingard and Sellar (2012) maintain that this issue has become an intrinsic preoccupation and bother for public school teachers. Song (2019) states what is even more unfair regarding the evaluation system is that non-tenured teachers are evaluated much more than tenured teachers within the same school a year. Dee et al. (2010) believe that high-stakes tests and the allotted amount of class time have constrained teachers to use their best teaching practices, show students real-world examples and deliver interesting lessons.

### **TBA Impact on Schools**

Although recently, a considerable amount of literature has examined the effect of TBA on students and

teachers, there is little published data on the impact of such a reform policy on school leadership and structure. Hoxby (2002) addresses three critical challenges school management has been compelled to confront because of the TBA's requirements. A notable example of these concerns is hiring and terminating certain personnel. The other two inevitable difficulties are finding new ways to fund teachers and programs and developing reasonable strategies to counsel their students. Sabens and Zyromski (2009) accuse schools of assigning counselors a lot of paperwork irrelevant to their professions to achieve NCLB standards. Concerning expending, in the first two years of implementing TBA, the school budget grew up substantially (Hoxby, 2002). This was most likely based on the provision of more teachers holding master's degrees and more funding for math and reading programs (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2004). Ryan (2003) argues that the punitive measure of TBA system also has threatened public schools' endurance in the U.S. when they cannot make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). For instance, if a public school fails for two years, students are permitted to withdraw and enroll in a charter school within the same province. After three years of incompetence, an external educational institution can tutor the students. Schools that cannot prove progression for four years are coerced to replace school staff. Those for five consecutive years must be suspended, allowing the state government or a private company to take over the school leadership instead (Ryan, 2003). As privatization is a pivotal element of the GERM, these findings reaffirm the association between the GERM and TBA. In general, therefore, it appears to be that TBA has impacted schools, administrators, and counselors adversely.

### ***Conclusion and Implications***

Lastly, the overall image of the ramifications of GERM must call for constant cooperation between scholars, academics, teachers' unions, and policy actors at the international level to resist the infection of going more deeply into the education system around the globe

without critical scrutiny. The results of this study also indicate that although GERM can take multiple forms, market-orientated ideologies are its primary driver. Furthermore, these findings have significant implications for understanding how TBA has had far-reaching effects on the public education system of America. These data suggest that despite the value of the accountability system, test scores should not be the only measure for school reforms in the U.S. By the same token, these findings highlight the importance of exploring alternative strategic choices to improve the education system. The questions raised by this study are what America can learn from the top worldwide ranking education systems such as Estonia, Singapore, and Finland (OECD, 2019), which don't adopt principles of GERM, and how TBA can work more productively and wisely. Hence, these would be fruitful areas for further work. More and over, since school communities in rural areas are not expected to be as same as urban areas unless the state government takes local context into account, the TBA system will not be able to bring about change in the U.S.

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