

Chapter XXIII

Reporting Race and Ethnicity in International Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The study of racial-ethnic group differences on educational tests has yielded a substantial body of research internationally in the last decade. In this chapter, I map current research about racial-ethnic minorities and educational testing in the English-language educational assessment literature. From an initial search yielding 420 articles, 78 were identified for further analysis. The results show that (1) although researchers often do not define terms like race or ethnicity, the socially constructed nature of race and ethnicity is assumed (2) racial-ethnic group categorizations shift depending upon national context and (3) comparative studies can result in focusing attention on racial-ethnic groups while drawing attention away from testing policies that are implicated in creating such results. Such results underscore how cross-national literature reviews can enrich studies of race-ethnicity and educational test performance.

INTRODUCTION

Internationally, the last decade has brought enormous changes in the field of assessment. While many countries have long-held domestic assessment procedures, there has been a global movement towards national standards and international comparative test data (Oakland &

Hambleton, 1995; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Lowe, 2000). These changes in educational testing are potentially important given the changes in the demographics of student populations in many countries and the internationalization of higher education (Apple, 1999; OECD, 2007). While several important reviews have been conducted to examine the frameworks being used to under-

stand racial-ethnic group performances in specific country contexts (Stevens, 2007), the role of testing companies (Clark, Madaus, Horn, & Ramos, 2000), how demographic changes impact racial-ethnic¹ groups (Suarez-Orozco, 1991), and the impact of government testing policies (Tomlinson 1997, 1998, 2005), these reviews have tended to not take a cross-national perspective. My goal in this chapter is to map current conversations about racial-ethnic groups and educational testing in the English-language educational assessment literature. In undertaking this review, my research questions were as follows:

- What frameworks are being used to address racial or ethnic student test performance?
- What discourses are embedded in those discussions?
- How might we extrapolate future research directions from these findings?

In this chapter, I first describe several important changes in higher education that provide a rationale for the study of cross-national discourses on racial-ethnic student achievement. Reforms initiated from the 1960s through 1980s in numerous countries have opened access to higher education to groups who were previously excluded (Coates & Krause, 2005; Healy, 2008). At the same time, changes in immigration patterns have brought new immigrant populations to Europe as well as traditional “receiving” countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States. These changes have resulted in the diversification of the student population in schools. Along with these changes, governments have adopted policies to address the diversification of their populations. Finally, in this changing landscape, we have seen more attention to internationally comparative studies of student achievement and government “accountability” demands, resulting in an increased demand for educational test instruments and the subsequent growth of the testing industry. Following this background discussion, I then describe the re-

sults of a literature survey that I conducted of the English-language testing literature found in academic journals. Following discussion of the research results, I then suggest several implications for researchers and test designers regarding the reporting of test data by racial-ethnic groups.

GOVERNMENT ASSESSMENT POLICY AND DIVERSITY

Traditionally, educational testing has been the subject of domestic policy, with countries developing assessments that reflect the structure of their national educational system (For good reviews of national assessment systems, see regular profiles in the journal *Assessment in Education*). However, since the 1980s there have been a number of significant changes in educational systems internationally as UNESCO and the World Bank have promoted educational reform in developing countries (Jones, 1992). At the same time, the United States, United Kingdom, and other Western governments have taken a more active role in domestic educational policy.

Calls for greater accountability in the United States and United Kingdom, for example, have been notable since the Thatcher and Reagan/Bush governments used test results on international achievement tests to push through various reform policies (Leathwood & Phillips, 2000). When European and U.S. schools did poorly in international assessments, it was argued that nations were losing their competitive edge (c.f. *A Nation at Risk*). Without making school systems accountable for turning out workers ready for the competitive global marketplace, supporters argued that national economies would languish. The accountability movement not only resulted in the proliferation, popularization, and commercialization of testing but also became a platform for educational reforms such as school choice and the introduction of other market-based aspects to national educational systems (Tomlinson, 1998).

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