



High Stakes Education: Inequality, Globalization, and School Reform

reviewed by [Donna Marie Harris](#) - August 30, 2005

Title: High Stakes Education: Inequality, Globalization, and School Reform

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What impact will accountability via high stakes testing have on urban schools? In her timely new book, *High Stakes Education: Inequality, Globalization, and School Reform*, Pauline Lipman attempts to address this most pressing question. She begins by analyzing the impact of the 1995 Chicago School Reform Act through which Mayor Richard M. Daley gained control of the city's schools and appointed Paul Vallas as the school district's Chief Executive Officer. The Vallas administration mandated standardized testing, implemented curriculum standards, and ended social promotion in grades 3, 6, and 8 in order to raise achievement.

This strategy of educational improvement begun during the mid-1990s, replaced prior approaches in the late 1980s when parents and community residents were active in school reform through participation on local school councils. Lipman contemplates whether this top down corporate strategy of school reform through standardization and regulation improves educational opportunities, especially for African American, Latino/a, and low income students. The Chicago story is significant since many cities are similarly positioned and are confronting pressure from state and federal accountability policies to promote more equitable classroom experiences and improve student outcomes.

Lipman makes an important contribution to the urban school reform literature because she embeds her analysis about accountability within the larger social, political, and economic context of Chicago. She shows the importance of examining the macrolevel context in which educational policies are created and the microlevel contexts in which they play out. From this contextual analysis, the reader can understand how urban redevelopment interfaces with education policies. Chicago, like many former industrial centers, has been confronted with transforming itself to compete in a global economy where both high wage, high skill jobs and low wage, low skill jobs have replaced unionized manufacturing jobs that provided sufficient wages and comprehensive benefits. In order to attract global business, Chicago has moved forward with transforming its downtown and adjoining communities. Schools play a pivotal role in sustaining the new global economy in that they provide the skills and credentials for future employees in the new economy.

Given the conditions of urban areas, Lipman effectively appraises how Chicago's educational, economic, and social policies interact and exacerbate race and socioeconomic disparities. She shows how inequalities in Chicago's housing and economic sectors are related to those in education. For example, Chicago's redevelopment policies directed resources to its downtown and adjacent neighborhoods in order to attract global businesses and their middle class employees. However, other neighborhoods serving the poor and people of color were not provided similar resources to revitalize their communities. The resulting gentrification displaced many low income and African American and Latino/a residents. Educational investment also favored middle class residents in gentrified or newly gentrified neighborhoods where the majority of new, magnet programs with rigorous academic curricula were implemented and the construction of new schools was targeted. Education programs targeted to African American and Latino communities focused primarily on remediation, vocational education, and military academies. Although the district planned to implement Math, Science, and Technology Academies in its neighborhood high schools, the program was eventually abandoned because of the inadequate preparation of students entering from middle school and insufficient professional development.

Despite the hope that accountability and standardized testing would create significant improvements in teaching and learning, Lipman paints a more troubling state of affairs in the Chicago public schools. She acknowledges that the 1995 school reform efforts produced gains in average test scores; however, this school improvement strategy was fraught with contradictions for schools, teachers, and students. The quest to homogenize student experiences across schools and classrooms did not equalize instructional experiences and outcomes. Instead, among the four preK-8 and K-8 schools in Lipman's study, the pressure to help students achieve on these tests narrowed the curriculum. Many teachers in low performing schools were compelled to focus much time on test preparation, with the encouragement of school district officials. As a result, students in low performing schools were exposed to basic skills curricula. It was also difficult to sustain efforts to broaden a school's academic focus with initiatives such as bilingual education, critical literacy, and innovative math curricula. Although teachers and administrators in these schools desired to expose their students to innovative academic curricula and instructional strategies, many found it difficult to compete with the demands of the accountability system because of the dire consequences faced by students. Recognizing that students' access to future opportunities was predicated on their performance on the standardized tests, many teachers abandoned efforts they considered to be effective teaching when their students were retained because they did not achieve proficiency. The stress from the accountability system diminished the morale of many Chicago public schools teachers and had the unintended consequence of pushing out many veteran and competent teachers.

In light of the basic skills curricula and routine instruction promoted by Chicago's school reform efforts, the author demonstrates that poor students of color and their families confront the harshest consequences as a result of accountability. Looking beyond gains in test scores, Lipman argues that Chicago Public Schools are more highly stratified when curriculum differentiation is legitimated by an accountability system which results in limited numbers of students having access to rigorous academic curricula. At the same time that gentrification facilitated access to quality housing and rigorous academic curricula in middle class communities, it limited access to affordable housing and high quality educational opportunities for African American, Latino, and low income communities in Chicago. As a result, students in middle class schools were exposed to an education that developed the

critical thinking and advanced math and literacy skills needed for high status positions in the new economy. Their peers in nonselective neighborhood schools were offered a drastically different experience with curricula focusing on basic math and literacy skills and a school environment that emphasized obedience to authority-the skills needed for low wage workers in a transnational economy.

The book has a methodological limitation in that Lipman and her research team collected data at different periods of time and for different durations of time. Although data collection overlapped, it was not congruent. For example, researchers collected data in two schools for four academic years between 1997-1998 and 2000-2001. A third school was visited for three years between 1995-1996 and 1998-1999. And a fourth school was only visited for one academic year in 2000-2001. As a result, school-level responses and a school's status may have been affected by the nature of the accountability system at a given time. As Lipman suggests, "CPS policies are a moving target, constantly being revised, renamed, and tweaked" (p. 195). Although the author describes variation in accountability policy, it is not possible to equate school-level responses if data was captured during different intervals.

Being able to collect data across years allows for researchers to develop trusting relationships with school personnel resulting in access to information about controversial matters such as those confronted in Chicago. It also allows for researchers to validate themes found among respondents. But the data must be comparable to allow researchers to draw larger conclusions.

Despite its limitations, *High Stakes Education* provides provocative insights about urban school reform and its relationship to changes in local, national, and international economies.

Lipman's analysis shows that accountability via high stakes testing policies including *No Child Left Behind* may be limited in promoting educational and social equity. Rather, they have the potential to reinforce and exacerbate preexisting racial and socioeconomic differences in education, housing, and employment. The author challenges the accountability discourse in which the state is abdicated of responsibility for reform and individual schools, teachers, students, and parents bear full responsibility for student success in a system in which there is unequal access to resources in and outside of schools. In her conclusion, Lipman offers an alternative to current accountability systems by showing how urban school reform can address unequal access to resources and power internal and external to schools.

This more democratic strategy incorporates the participation of administrators, teachers, parents, and communities and uses instructional strategies that empower students by tapping into their cultural knowledge and skills.

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