

A National Perspective: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of The Impact of High Stakes Testing on English Language Learners In Major Urban High Schools in Texas

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyze the issues and challenges faced by English Language Learners (ELLs) and the public schools that absorb them. Ample research has been conducted on the intrinsic validity of standardized assessments, and separately, on the factors affecting the assimilation and integration of ELLs. However, the reliability of these assessments as a universally applied tool to measure student learning, and as a basis for determining school performance needs to be more closely examined. Quantitative data for this research will be gathered from ten (10) high schools in the major urban independent school districts located in Texas. Qualitative data will be derived from an on-line questionnaire focusing on respondents' views and opinions about the varied ways in which standardized assessments impact English Language Learners.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the issues and related challenges faced by English Language Learners (ELLs) and the public schools they attend. For years English language learners (ELLs) have been subjected to educational systems that did not expect them to achieve to the same standards as their native English speaking peers (Winograd, 2002). While we know that it can take several years to acquire the second language skills needed to be successful in school (Collier, 1989), too often English language learners who were born in the U.S. were still in English as a second language (ESL) classes and far behind grade level in the content areas by the time they reached high school (Freeman & Freeman, 2002).

One aspect that should be considered for this failure to reach grade level requirements is that language may be viewed as a factor of identity. It is possible that minority groups are insistent on retaining their ethnic language, as their “first”, and hold English proficiency more as an elective instead of an indispensable learning tool, which might render life in the adopted society only as slightly more convenient. If this is the case, schools are being held accountable for the consequences of a socio-cultural phenomenon that is beyond their limited powers to address.

Public schools are under close scrutiny. Since they are supported by public funds, there is an increasing demand for accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) now requires all students to be accounted for in any state’s assessment system, although that has not always been the case (Abedi, 2004). School districts are now required to clearly demonstrate that they deserve, and effectively utilize public funding. In itself, this is not a disturbing trend. Institutions that are wholly or partly supported by tax money should be accountable to the public that they have been created to serve. This is essentially a consequence of democracy. A government that is created by, and for the people, is so unlike an aristocracy that is not required to serve a constituency beyond the guarantee of protection from marauders or invading armies. The system of government that we have empowers the government to undertake measures that guarantee the common good. This goes beyond the guarantee of physical safety, since the term “common good” has a wider application, and implies a calculated sensitivity to every citizen’s pursuit of happiness. Thus, while education is not categorized as a fundamental right, it is perceived as primary among a bundle of values essential for every person’s quest for fulfillment and happiness. This explains why there is little argument about whether the government should be involved in education at all, and whether this is an endeavor better left to the private sector.

The government’s involvement in the serious business of education opens a wide avenue for the analysis and evaluation of results. In today’s world, it is not enough that public schools have adequate facilities, although this constitutes one level of analysis. It is important that schools are safe and teachers are qualified, although in the hierarchy of priorities considered for evaluating schools, these outcomes are not standard. Schools are judged principally based on the amount of learning that takes place in their classrooms, and being an internal act, the evidence of learning is analyzed from scores students obtain on standardized assessments.

Institutions are now facing an ever-increasing demand for accountability. Public schools have not been spared this trend, and there is pressure from every conceivable corner to make public schools accountable to their stakeholders. This means that it is not enough for students to learn in school. It is equally important that learning should occur in ways that are measurable. If students are unable to demonstrate what they have learned, it is presumed that no learning took place at all. The time when public schools are allowed to operate without proven success is over. Thus, it is appropriate to inquire about the valid manifestations of success and learning, and how they may actually be measured. Cultural construct renders school rankings flawed to a certain extent since they become less accurate as a measure of the faculty and administration's performance. Instead, they become unintended indicators of the ethnicity of the students to which schools cater.

High stakes assessment systems are meant to bring attention to the needs of ELLs, among others, who are most at risk of not reaching the educational goals set for them (Anderson, 2004). But what results do statewide accountability tests really produce for ELLs (Anderson, 2004)? Assessment systems usually produce both positive and negative consequences (Anderson, 2004). The positive and negative consequences of assessments are what is called 'washback' (Alderson & Wall, 1993), or how the results of an assessment affect the stakeholders taking the test (Anderson, 2004).

While quantifiable washback effects such as increased dropout rates or increased referral to Special Education have been researched, assessment washback is more complicated than numbers alone can tell us (Anderson, 2004). Students who qualify for Special Education may be allowed to take alternative assessments in lieu of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). It is interesting to note that while the number of African-American students and Hispanic students are over-present in Special Education, about eight to nine percent of ELLs are identified as receiving Special Education services in the United States (D'Emilio, 2003; June; Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Pendzick, & Stepherson, 2003). While these assessments are not on grade level, schools are expected to demonstrate that, based on students' scores on alternative assessments, improvement in academic performance is taking place. Data are needed that tell us more about the full range of intended and unintended consequences occurring in schools today (Anderson, 2004). Since school rankings affect student and faculty morale, they serve more as a force for the preservation of the status quo, than a force that drive improvement in student performance. Thus a school that works hard to ensure that learning occurs, and that their students progress academically, but which has a large proportion of ELLs, will risk being ranked as underperforming because the measure used to evaluate its performance is blind to this important demographic fact.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was initiated as a federal testing program at about the same time when ESEA came into existence. NAEP was tasked to report how the nation's students were performing on selected items at the three grade levels --- 4th, 8th and 12th. Brennan (2004) reported that there were fears that the NAEP might become a "high-stakes federal testing program" found in some European countries. He explained that, "to help preclude that possibility, it was written into law that NAEP could not report scores for individual students" (p.2). The NAEP evolved through the 1980s and early 1990s from a reporting of item scores to test scores

and then, on a trial basis, to a reporting of scores that addressed achievement levels (below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced). It is currently used to confirm state NCLB testing results which, according to Brennan, “is the de facto elevation of NAEP to a federally-mandated high-stakes testing program” (p.9).

Through the NCLB Act, policymakers in Washington seek to raise academic achievement in the nation by requiring schools to assess all students on specified content areas and report their progress toward proficiency. Focus of NCLB is on core academic subjects as defined in the law: “The term ‘core academic subjects’ means English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign language, civics, and government, economics, arts, history, and geography” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

The premise of NCLB is that our nation’s schools are failing, and therefore is necessary. To raise the achievement of all students in the nation and eliminate the achievement gap seen among students differentiated by race, ethnicity, poverty, disability, and English proficiency is the purpose of NCLB. Since this act redefines, the federal role in education policy which has traditionally been a state responsibility, it merits the attention of educators, parents and citizens. Also, because the NCLB Act has an impact on the teaching and the learning of the core content areas, including languages, language educators need to be informed about it.

There are four key elements in the NCLB Act (Rosenbusch, 2005):

(a) Accountability. States are required to establish a definition of student proficiency in the core academic subjects of Reading/Language Arts, Mathematics and Science through prescribed indicators and set a timetable to bring all students in all subgroups up to the defined levels of proficiency by 2013-2014. The school must report to parents their child’s progress in each targeted academic subject annually, and the state is required to report the results of students’ performance on the annual tests for every public school to parents and the community. Schools that fail to meet state-defined Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward their defined goals for two years are identified as needing improvement. Schools that have not met AYP after four years are subject to restructuring or reconstitution.

(b) Testing. States must develop and administer annual tests that define the proficiency that all students are expected to reach in Reading/Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science. States also must include a sample of students in fourth and eighth grades in a biennial NAEP in Mathematics and Reading to verify state assessments. NCLB requires that by School Year (SY) 2005-2006, each state must measure every child’s progress in Reading and Math in each of grades 3 through 8 and at least once during grades 10 through 12. In the meantime, each state must meet the requirements of the previous law reauthorizing ESEA (the Improving America’s Schools act of 1994) for assessments in Reading and Math at three grade spans (3-5; 6-9; and 10-12). By SY 2007-2008, states must also have in place Science assessments to be administered at least once during grades 3-5; grades 6-9; and grades 10-12. Furthermore, states must ensure that districts administer test of English proficiency to measure oral language, reading and writing skills in English to all limited English proficient students, as of SY 2002-2003. Students may still undergo state assessments in other subject areas (i.e.,

History, Geography, and Writing skills), if and when the state requires it. NCLB requires assessments only in the areas of Reading/Language Arts, Math, and Science.

(c) **Teacher Quality.** Public elementary and secondary school teachers who teach core content areas are required to be “highly qualified”, which is defined as having full state certification (maybe attained through alternate routes specified by the state), holding a bachelor’s degree, and having demonstrated subject matter competency as determined by the state under NCLB guidelines. States are required to develop a plan by the end of 2005-2006 to ensure that every teacher is highly qualified to teach in his or her core content area.

(d) **Scientifically-Based Research.** The NCLB Act requires that all educational decisions be informed by scientifically-based research as defined in the legislation. The NCLB Act funds for Reading First Grants, for example, are to be used for methods of reading instruction backed by scientifically-based research.

NCLB is a demanding law. The achievement goals are ambitious, and the burden on states and districts of declaring schools in need of improvement and then imposing sanctions on them is high. To try to meet these demands, states have a strong incentive to keep the numbers of schools and districts not making AYP as low as possible. Unable to change the fundamental requirements written into the law, states are using administrative methods to lessen the numbers of schools and districts not making the AYP – confidence intervals, indexing, and other techniques.

In conclusion, the mandates and key elements of the NCLB are geared towards improving the achievement of students in the different public schools of the United States. The measure of adherence is channeled through the AYP which the different schools and districts of the different states monitor and report. High-stakes testing becomes the measuring stick which gauges the achievement of students in the different core subject areas. Issues and concerns were centered on the ELLs regarding the different moves and accommodations given to this special subgroup of learners. Feedback regarding the issues and concerns of the different studies and researches include both positive and negative dimensions. In some areas, recommendations were given to possibly improve a certain strategy or action.

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