

The Implications High Stakes, State-mandated Academic Tests on the Educational Future
of LEP Students

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the implications of high stakes state-mandated testing on the educational future of language minority learners. It sets off with a definition of high stakes state-mandated testing and proceeds with an in depth review of the incidence and ramification of high stakes testing and its impact on Less English Proficient (LEP) learners. The paper equally chronicles some direct consequences of the institutionalization of high stakes state-mandated testing on students in particular, and school districts in general.

Implications of High-Stake Testing

It is estimated that by the year 2056, most Americans will trace their descent to almost everywhere but white Europe (Munoz, M.). School districts must therefore find a fair and equitable way to test ELL students. “Language minority students are expected to become mainstream, but educators are not prepared to deal with instructional requirements of diverse learners” (Fradd, 1992).

“Assessment is the process of gathering data about what a student knows and what the student can do” (Ovando, 316). The main purpose of assessments is to make academic decisions about that particular student. Though assessments were designed with the learner in mind, their implications are not always positive. There are many reasons why this is the case.

Discussion.

Valencia & Guadarrama (1995) define “high-stakes testing as the exclusive or near-exclusive use of test scores to make significant educational decisions about students, teachers (prospective and incumbent) and schools.” (P. 562).

Supporting this definition Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley (2001) assert that high-stakes testing are tests used to award or deny the high school diploma; test used to promote or retain students.

Research seems to point to the fact that high-stakes testing has a direct and in the main negative impact on achievement for all students but most especially for LEP students. The consequences for high-stakes and/or large-scale assessments for students with disabilities or from language minority backgrounds demand an appreciation of certain contextual realities, which are not usually considered. Heubert & Hauser (1999) intimated that no matter what stakes are attached, students will inevitably bear the consequences either directly or indirectly. Besides, others have argued that the effects of high-stakes testing simply represent an acknowledgement of current educational trends students with disabilities must now face.

One of the important impact high-stakes testing has on LEP students is the issue of equality. Equality in education becomes an illusion when high-stakes testing fail to address the realities and educational needs of the society for which it is administered. McDonnell, McLaughlin, and Morison (1997) present a global overview. First, since most high-stakes tests were not standardized with the needs and characteristics of the disabled in mind, these tests can be quite unfair for this population. Second, high-stakes testing is based on the premise that all children can achieve to high academic standards. This argument, however, is not fact or research. “The expectations of those advocating

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Standards-based reform currently exceeds the limit of existing professional practice and expert knowledge. (p.64). Commenting on how high-stakes test are discriminatory Reigeluth (1997) confirm that because students differ greatly in ability (ranging from

severely learning disabled to highly gifted), as well as in mastery of learning skills, prior knowledge, home environment, and so forth, it seems likely that standards that are challenges for some students will be easy for others. Therefore, uniform standards cannot be uniformly challenging (rigorous) for all students. (p. 203). It is obvious that some language minority students face other issues associated with minorities that should receive particular attention. For example students who are homeless, poor, hungry, disabled, have limited proficiency in English need policies to address their needs if they are to have equal opportunities to learn.

The implications of high-stakes tests on school districts, teachers and students are increasing in magnitude. Valencia et al (2002) affirm “state-mandated achievement tests are heavily used to hold districts, schools, teachers and students accountable for meeting specific standards of academic performance. Among the affected, Valencia (2000b) is quick to point out that high-stakes testing has been shown to have important consequences for students particularly racial and ethnic minority students of low socio-economic (SES) background.

From the assertion above it is clear that these tests come into play when students are denied promotion or a high school graduation because of their low performance on tests, or when a school is totally reorganized because of recurrent low test scores.

Apart from leading to school closure or deprivation of funding which will affect LEP students most, high-stakes testing critics warn can distort and narrow the purpose of schooling to the quest for test scores.

There is evidence that students suffer negative outcomes in high-stakes testing environment and even so that language minority students will suffer most. Pedroza (1997) reported that in 1993, 90% of students in 333 schools identified in Texas' lowest performing schools were largely Hispanics or African-American.

Extending this implication to capture the depth of this phenomenon Sacks (1999) illustrates the connection between race, class and student achievement when his research report reveals that on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) 81% of white students passed the tenth grade exit test (allowing the award of a high school diploma) and only half of the poor and minority students scored at this level.

One sure impact of high-stakes testing is the fact that they affect the way LEP students' view school and their ability to succeed. Shepard (1991) explains this when he says that high-stakes testing is harmful to disadvantaged children (like LEP'S) because they are assigned greater amounts of "deadly boring drills for longer periods" resulting in an increasing negative attitude to school work by these low achievers. (p. 236)

Even when these students remain in school they are placed in remedial programs that affects their self-esteem as these programs now carry stigmas of failure. Following this perspective Darling-Hammond (1994a) declares that high stakes testing

can result in disproportionately large percentages of low income and minority students being placed in low instructional tracks or in remedial programs.

The direct consequence of such programs is the negative effect it has on the educational future of the LEP. Some of the reasons were traced to the loss of interest in school activities. Smith, Edelsky, Draper, Rottenberg and Cherland (1987) describe the effects of standardized tests on elementary school students. The authors report that such tests were harmful to students' psychological well being revealing that during test weeks, teachers reported an increase in absenteeism, physical illness, worry, wetting, and refusal to participate.

When students keep away from tests their educational future is on the way to being compromised. For LEP students they take the easy way out. Natriello & Pallas (1999) noted consistently negative consequences of high-stakes testing for secondary school students. They note disproportionately large percentage of poor and minority students in Texas, New York, and Minnesota were reported to have failed the state's tests leading to graduation, leaving the potential for drop out as a realistic response. Assessments are mostly created on the political level. They are therefore subjected to political influences. While testing occurs on the classroom level, it is not always planned on such a level. "While many teachers would like to think that what goes on in the classroom is far removed from politics, nothing could be further from the truth" (Ovando, 309). Teachers have to live with the pressure of teaching towards the state-mandated core-content standards.

Other factors that affect the students' welfare include the fairness (reliability), validity and above all the purpose of said assessments. In addition, most tests use the "general monolingual English student population as the comparison group. There is no consideration of the cultural differences between the general population and ELL students" (Silva, TSL 529 Lecture 7).

Unfortunately, the results of these assessments may hurt ELL learners more than it services them. The results may be truly harmful. Schools –both administrators and educators- are in turn held accountable whenever the test results are negative. These schools and their educators are made to pay the price for such "failure". This is especially true of districts that accept funds under the NCLB Act that was passed in 2001. This law requires annual testing and was opposed by many states because it requires them "to bring 100 percent of students up to proficiency levels in reading and math by 2014" (Dillon, 2003)–which is a truly unrealistic expectation. One problem for ELL students arises from the fact that states are required to include ELLs in state measurement. This is of course unfair despite the fact that Title I of the NCLB allows testing ELL students in their native language; however, this is not always feasible as students come from different backgrounds and speak a plethora of foreign languages.

Standardized tests, which are often multiple choices, norm-referenced, machine-scorable instruments, cannot adequately reflect ELL academic content achievement (Carl, K. & Rosen, M). These tests do not adequately measure one's knowledge. The vast

majority of high-stakes tests are written and administered only in English, which in turn leaves ELL students at a disadvantage.

Because growing national attention on accountability in education has heightened the seriousness of such tests' consequences--both for individual students and for schools and districts--federal lawmakers are proposing legislation to help ensure that states deploy such tests fairly and appropriately (Carpenter, S., High Stakes of Educational Testing). United States legislation and education have emphasized the role of high-stakes testing in reform movements made to increase the schools' accountability along with the improvement of student achievement. English Language Learners (ELLs) represent an increasing percentage of students enrolled in U.S. public schools (Kindler, 2002), this group of learners must be considered when such initiatives are implemented (ERIC Digest, Nov. 2002).

While No Child Left Behind now mandates the inclusion of ELLs in high-stakes tests, in the past most states have typically exempted students who have been in the United States or in an ESL/bilingual program for less than 3 years or who have not attained a certain level of English proficiency (Holmes, Hedlund, & Nickerson, 2000). As a result of ELL students not being included in state tests, they have not been included in the designing of instruction and planning. As a result, some feel that ELLs have not felt the benefits offered by education to raise standards and learning. On the one hand, it may seem beneficial to include ELL students in testing, but on the other hand, there are possible and potential problems that can occur. When ELLs take standardized tests, the

results tend to reflect their English language proficiency and may not accurately assess their content knowledge or skills (Menken, 2000), therefore weakening the test's validity for them. If a student cannot fully demonstrate their knowledge because of language, it would be an unfair assessment for them. If students are not proficient in the language, they won't do well on the test, not necessarily because they don't know the subject matter of the test, but because they don't know enough English to read the test (Ovando, et al., chap. 8).

Results

An editorial in the Yale University's *Education Week* states that the NCLB "standards for accountability are arbitrary and punitive since it penalizes schools with higher number of poor students and ELLs". Schools are therefore encouraged to compete against each other and are forced to cheat, by misrepresenting their test results. Some schools will go to great length to exclude ELLs and students with special needs. The assessment becomes a deadly game of entrapment, thus paying more attention to the results (mere numbers) than it does to the learners (real human beings with real needs) for which it was designed. "Testing adds greatly to school burdens... results tend to be used primarily for administrative purposes" (De Avila, E. 1990).

At the State level, most assessments that were put forth are multiple-choice and traditional when it comes to measuring students on their knowledge of content. Because teachers feel the pressure to teach to the test, they often do so at the extent of "more meaningful and substantive learning material" (Ovando, 313). And since these tests are

administered in English, they often assume that ELLs are proficient enough to pass them (which are not always the case). So how does one determine if a particular ELL student failed the tests? Did the students simply not understand the language, did they misinterpret directions, or did they actually lack the skills necessary to pass such test? Those are all different issues and depending on which area the student needs help, the outcome of the test will affect his or her placement into the proper classroom. But the truth remains: there is still a fair assessment to be devised in order to place students in the proper learning environment.

On the local level, because of the pressure from the state, some schools often present a distorted picture of their test results since they do not want to be dubbed as a low-achieving school or district. “The educational system must, at all costs, avoid the use of test results to limit services, programs, and funding, for language minority programs,” (Silva, Lecture 7). Though some schools allow for modifications for their LEP and ELL population (such as the use of bilingual dictionaries or the giving of test directions in the student’s native language), still “these accommodations vary from state to state” (Ovando, 315). Thus, all ELLs do not have equal access to education even when compared to their own ELL peers in another district or another state.

Placement is another major reason why testing is implemented. One dangerous aspect of testing is that the results often determine on what level the ELL learner will be placed. “Students’ learning problems are [thus] ‘solved’ in terms of what the diagnosis concludes they lack” (Shafer, L. 1999). The ELL student is then seen as a sick patient

with a disease that must be cured in order to function in the general monolingual mainstream society.

Conclusion:

One of the most common underlying problems with testing is that “testable or viable decision making models consist with the need to serve children who do not understand the language of the schools have not been forthcoming” (De Avila, E.). Validity is thus a very tricky issue. How can one measure the fairness and equity of a test if the test itself is not fair? The obvious is that no one test is fair when administered on its own. In order to assess students in a fair and equitable way, other factors must be taken into account. Therefore a single measure cannot accurately reflect student learning or ensure that students have mastered all the standards set for [their success]” (Ovando, 313).

Another problem is the fact that most states lack the funding and expertise to carry out fair testing to all of their students. And since funding and test results are often connected, in the hands of the “wrong individuals, such as politicians with a hidden agenda or a biased public, these test results may create more problems for the ELL students and programs” designed to help them (Silva, Lecture 7).

Bilinguals are not the simple sum of two monolinguals but are a unique combination and integration of languages (Baker, C). The argument is whether or not the importance is to compare one student against another or to simply see what a child’s strengths and weaknesses are.

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