

# Teaching and Learning in Texas: Accountability Testing, Language, Race, and Place

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*ABSTRACT: This article examines education law and cultural conditions for teaching and learning in Texas, the state that provided a model for the federal No Child Left Behind Act signed in 2002. Accountability testing is a primary feature of Texas education law and has an enormous impact on public school culture. Of particular interest is Houston, one of the largest cities in the US, where more than half of public school students are identified by the school district as English language learners. The article investigates how students enrolled in a developmental English course use their own writing to advocate for change. The students attend an urban, Hispanic-serving, open admissions university and often are described as Generation 1.5. In particular, the article focuses on the case study of one student and his response to being identified as an English language learner.*

## Introduction

My study begins with the cultural and legal contexts of teaching in Texas. Yet it seems insufficient merely to document how state law and cultural conflicts influence our teaching here. Instead, I use this background to describe teaching basic writing not as an act of either enculturation or resistance, but as an active process that both uncovers systemic issues that affect our students and also facilitates an opportunity for students to speak back to those issues and to discover new methods and models more conducive to undertaking their own preparation for college-level writing. As part of this investigation, I focus on a Fall 2003 semester basic writing and reading class that chose “education” as its generative theme (Shor). In particular, I concentrate on the story of Noah, a Latino student, (whose name I have changed to protect privacy), and his struggles with systemic inequality in Texas public schools. Rather than paint Noah as a victim of circum-

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stance, however, I document Noah's own metamorphosis as he moved from public high school experiences to college basic writing.

First, though, I present critical background for viewing the roots of the current situation in Texas public education. While at first glance this background may seem local in nature, it is helpful to remember that policies first introduced in Texas are now part of the 2002 federal No Child Left Behind Act. The shape shifting demanded of my students locally in Texas as they make the transition from standards-based education to college basic writing will be required of many of our students now that standards have become a national mandate (Zancanella and Noll).

### **Don't Mess with Texas**

The voices of the status quo will say, let's continue to ignore the problem.  
I say, let's fix it.

--Texas Governor George W. Bush,  
1998 Speech to Texas Education Agency  
(cited in Valencia, Villarea, and Salinas 290)

In 1998 Texas Governor George W. Bush proposed that a single state-standardized reading test be used to determine promotion from third grade to fourth grade for Texas public school children. This proposal became law in 1999, and four years later, in 2003, the first cohort of third graders took a new high stakes reading test, the TAKS, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills to determine their eligibility for promotion to the fourth grade (Valencia, Villareal, and Salinas 290-91). TAKS superceded the previous accountability test, the TAAS, Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. The Texas Education Agency explains the differences between the two tests as follows: "TAKS covers more subject areas and more grades than did the TAAS" (Texas Education Agency).

The year 2003 is also notable in recent Texas history because the state legislature voted to pass a new congressional, mid-decade redistricting plan proposed by Republicans, just a few years after the 2000 census-based congressional district map was drawn. Although Texas will soon become a majority minority state, that is to say, a state where the majority of citizens are members of minority groups, the revised redistricting plan creates districts that clearly favor white Anglo voters by carving out districts often several hundred miles long that include majorities of white voters in areas in which state legislators once served chiefly people of color (Bernstein, "Hammer").

In the spring of 2003, Democratic state representatives tried to block the plan by leaving for Oklahoma during the 78<sup>th</sup> legislative session, thus breaking the state-mandated quorum for voting on the plan. In the summer, when the plan was brought up for vote to the state senate during a special legislative session called by Governor Rick Perry, eleven Texas state senate Democrats left once again, this time for New Mexico. Nonetheless, one of the senators broke with his colleagues and returned to Texas. The redistricting plan passed and became state law, though it continues to be challenged not only by Democrats, but also by people of color, poor communities, and progressive advocates (Bernstein “Hammer”).

The state legislature passed other bills in the 2003 session that, collectively, seemed to respond to Anglo worries about the impending loss of Anglo majority status. For example, a new law passed that requires all Texas public school children, regardless of citizenship status, to begin their school day by reciting not only the pledge of allegiance to the American flag, but also a pledge to the Texas state flag: “Honor the Texas flag; I pledge allegiance to thee, Texas, one and indivisible” (Gillespie “Flag Pledge”).

Not incidentally, the legislature decided that college tuition would no longer be regulated by the state—meaning that individual public universities could raise tuition as high as they so desired (Coleman). But perhaps most relevant for this study, the legislature mandated that, beginning in 2005, “college readiness” would be determined for public school students as early as the eleventh grade by yet another level of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills high stakes testing (Sunset Advisory Commission). If Texas public school children, residents, or citizens, are “one and indivisible” in any regard, it is in their continual experiences with high stakes testing, a program that one Texas public school teacher of my acquaintance calls “No Child Left Untested.”

Valencia, Villareal, and Salinas, citing data on the results of the Texas state-mandated assessments, emphasized that the “data on race/ethnicity have demonstrated a pervasive and unwavering pattern: Mexican American and African American students—compared to their White peers—have significantly higher rates of failing the TAAS [which preceded TAKS] exit-level test” (288).

As Raul Ybarra suggests in his study of cultural dissonance for Latino students in basic writing courses, “...we need to find other means of helping students overcome their feeling of disaffiliation with school” (49). In Texas, as elsewhere, the disaffiliation of Latino students with school is culturally

embedded, written into state law, and exacerbated by the circumstances of distressed, inadequately funded, under-resourced public schools. When Bush moved from the Texas state house to the White House in January of 2001, he brought his educational mandates with him, appointing Houston Independent School District superintendent of schools Rod Paige as education secretary. Shortly thereafter, a coalition of Republicans and Democrats passed the “No Child Left Behind Act” into federal law. The cycle of state-mandated tests faced by Texas public school children thus became required for all children enrolled in US public schools (Metcalf).

### **Taking Texas to TAKS**

In Texas, the public school curriculum is focused on fulfilling state-mandated test objectives. The third grade CLEAR English Language Arts Curriculum for the Houston Independent School District, anticipating the first TAKS writing test in the fourth grade, offers the following advice:

Students should be able to select an appropriate form and organization strategy to write a composition in response to a prompt. The composition must maintain focus. In order to select an appropriate form, students need to have experience with a variety of forms of writing (A7).

Although this directive is presented for third graders in anticipation of their fourth grade year, these goals foreshadow objective 4 of the eleventh grade TAKS writing test, using the language of writing process pedagogy.

Objective 4 states, “The students will, within a given context, produce an effective composition for a specific purpose.” While this objective requires students to “write in a voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose” and “organize ideas in writing to ensure coherence, logical progression, and support for ideas,” directives for mechanics and proofreading are highlighted in subsequent sections of Objective 4:

Writing/writing processes...proofread writing for appropriateness organization, content, style, and conventions. Writing/evaluation...evaluate writing for both mechanics and content.  
(Texas Education Agency, *11 Exit Level English Language Arts*, 32)

Objectives 5 and 6 also emphasize mechanical correctness, as opposed to organization and content. Objective 5 requires the student to concentrate on writing “as correctly and clearly as possible. . . . This means that when a student writes a composition, he or she is able to follow the rules of correct spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar usage, and sentence structure.” Objective 6, “Revision and Editing, assesses the student’s ability to both improve and correct passages created to resemble student writing” (Released Tests).

In examining the tests more closely, one notices immediately that “editing” in this case means local, sentence-level editing. On the 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade tests for 2003, no questions are asked about the possibilities of moving or eliminating or clarifying paragraphs or paragraph structure. Students are not allowed to offer their own suggestions for improvement, but instead must select the “correct” response from a multiple-choice list.

While the emphasis of the tests seems to focus on a process-based approach to writing, “correctness” in standard written American English is emphasized over and over again (Released Tests). Correctness is clearly a desired goal for success in student writing (Delpit). Nonetheless, assessing a student’s writing ability based on one writing sample produced in a high-stakes testing situation is more problematic, especially for English Language Learners (Valencia, Villareal, and Salinas; Leki; Blanton). Moreover, funds for public schools depend on students’ performance on the TAKS, a mandate that is echoed in the NCLB legislation. Both in Texas and nationally, distressed public schools are denied funds when students score poorly on standardized tests. This portion of the mandate presents high stakes indeed for all concerned parties (Katz; Bernstein “Test Case”; Guerrero; La Celle-Peterson).

In Houston alone, Latino children constitute 58.1% of the public-school-aged population (Houston Independent School District). Although not all of these students would be categorized as English Language Learners, 55.8% of the students enrolled in the Houston Independent School District fall into the following categories (although home language is not listed): 28.9% Limited English Proficiency, ESL 8.3%, or 18.6% bilingual (Houston Independent School District).

### **Gone South: Teaching Basic Writing in Houston, Texas**

In the fall of 2003, I began my third year of teaching basic writing at

an urban open-admissions public university in Houston. As a white Anglo Jewish northerner who had taught writing in public and private universities and colleges in Pennsylvania and Ohio since 1986, I was still quite new to the South. I was fortunate, however, in fall of 2003, to be involved with a federal Title V grant specially designed to “close the achievement gap” for Latino college students in Texas. Because of the experimental teaching encouraged by the grant writers, I was able to create and teach a linked course in basic writing and reading skills. All but two of the students in the course identified as Latino, and many of the students would be identified as English language learners or generation 1.5 students. The latter group of students is tentatively defined by Harklau, Siegal, and Losey (citing Rumbaut and Ima) as “immigrants who arrive in the United States as school age children or adolescents and share characteristics of both first and second generation” (4).

Many of the students in this class, although they had lived in the US for much of their lives, were considered residents of Texas, but were not naturalized US citizens. As legal US residents living in Houston, these students, like US citizens, paid 8.25% sales tax, but they attended under-funded public schools and, unlike US citizens, they were not able to vote. In addition, some students may have been undocumented, an “illegal” status characterized by instability since discovery by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (a bureau of the Department of Homeland Security which absorbed what was formerly the INS) could lead to deportation (Farris).

In any case, my students, like many graduates of Texas public schools, found that their education had focused on preparing them for passing state-mandated standardized tests. However, their schooling had not prepared them for the intellectual inquiry demanded in college reading and writing courses (Hillocks; McNeil; McNeil and Valenzuela; Blalock and Haswell; Bernstein “Test Case”).

Since this fall 2003 basic writing course was linked to a course in reading skills, the writing assignments were focused primarily on course readings. This approach was clearly new for the students, since reading and writing were generally considered separate areas of study in their previous work—and since their preparation for TAAS (which preceded TAKS) did not generally prepare them to read, analyze, or write critically about longer, more sustained texts.

After working through the course readings by means of writing and discussion, most of the students found themselves returning again and again

to the systemic problems of K-12 education. They found that other themes suggested by the course readings (and of initial interest for course focus), such as racism and discrimination, were embedded in the readings on education. While initially, several students resisted the theme of “education” as a topic for study and investigation, as well as a matter for self-reflection, these students related that previous teachers had asked them to think about education mostly in terms of individual experiences, not in terms of systemic issues.

In fact, most students had not previously read or discussed the idea of education as a systemic process— and had not explored the social construction of their own subject positions within that system. Despite all of the clear social inequities faced by the students in my fall 2003 basic writing course, there also was evidence of strong motivation and resilience. Students learned how to set high goals for themselves for intellectual achievement and remained engaged in helping to plan the work of the course.

The reading and writing in this course focused largely on literacy and education, moving back and forth between historically contextualized narratives (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs; “Graduation” by Maya Angelou) and contemporary analyses (an excerpt from Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*; Jean Anyon’s study “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work”; a series of *New York Times* articles on dropout rates in the Houston Independent School District).<sup>1</sup>

The *New York Times* articles seemed particularly compelling for these students. The articles documented how an audit of Houston public middle and high schools, some of which were mentioned by name and were schools that the students had attended, not only lied about dropout rates and college matriculation numbers, but also encouraged attrition for students who were likely to score low on standardized tests (Schemo “Questions”; Schemo “For Houston Schools”). What students previously had intuited about their own situations and those of their peers had been documented in a national newspaper:

Now, some [in Houston] are questioning whether the [Texas] miracle may have been smoke and mirrors, at least on the high school level. And they are suggesting that perhaps Houston is a model of how the focus on school accountability can sometimes go wrong, driving administrators to alter data or push students

likely to mar a school's profile—through poor attendance or low test scores—out the back door. (Schemo "Questions")

In response to these findings and to their own reflections and class discussions, students wrote narratives and analyses themselves, reflecting on their readings and past experiences in order to contemplate the future. For their last essay in the course, students collaborated on a list of topics that would be appropriate for a culminating assignment in the course. This list included such items as:

- What does education have to do with survival? Why do you think so? Why does reading Anyon's article (and perhaps the work of Douglass, Jacobs, Kozol, Angelou, and/or the *New York Times* articles) help to strengthen your understanding and analysis of this issue? Who would benefit from reading your analysis of this issue? Why?
- Were Anyon's classifications of social class and schooling ever discussed in your previous education? Why or why not? What are the results of these classifications on your own schooling? Why do you think so? What changes need to be made? Why? Why does a reading of Anyon's article help to deepen your understanding of these questions? Who would benefit from reading your analysis of these questions? Why?

Students responded to their own calls for action by citing personal histories and course readings, and by advocating for change (all names in the following excerpts have been changed).

Gabrielle, who left Mexico to attend high school in the United States, wrote about her first day of high school in Houston:

As soon as I arrived to the school I expected some one to help me translate or to introduce me to teachers. But instead a student walked me to every single class to show me how to get there and at what times. I felt so lost and confuse because of the immensity of the school. The firs three periods of classes made me feel so ignorant and stupid, no other words I could speak more than "I don't speak English." Very few people helped me to translate what the

teacher said. I remember how his cold words stroked my ears with force, and his refined dialect perplexed my mind with a revolution of questions. Regardless of the shocking day I passed I did not give up. I saw my self—trapped with no escape, but I also visualized that everything had a merit an effort and a recompense.

Martin was intrigued by Anyon's suggestion that schools segregated by social class "contribute to the development of certain potential relationships to physical and symbolic capital, to authority, and to the process of work" (188-89). To better understand this concept, he wrote:

The thing that I get from this quote is that history can repeat itself. The one thing that I can think of is my family repeating history over and over. Well, my family on my dad's side repeat history all the time. The males from the S\_\_\_\_ side never graduated from high school. When I found that out I needed to change history myself. I want to start a good and new history for my family. I am proud to say that I was the first S\_\_\_\_ male to graduate from high school. So know the young S\_\_\_\_ males have some one to look up to, to finish high school.

Caroline was moved by her reading of slave narratives and immediately understood the relevance of these readings for herself and her peers. Contextualizing the issues with which she and her classmates struggled regarding the inhumane conditions faced by previous generations, Caroline's essay begins: "We come from a legacy of people who when they were told education had no value or that it meant nothing still made an effort to learn." Her essay continues to document the efforts of Jacobs and Douglass and the importance of their narratives for twenty-first century college students. Caroline concludes:

As much as Harriet and Douglass suffered to provide us with the significance of education we must prove to them that we have learned the true meaning of education. From learning a language not native to our own to making history through a painting, knowledge gets us places that we didn't know existed. Each day is a celebration to honor those that gave us the key to a new life.

At times, the students' writing conveys a sense of personal struggles and frustrations. Nonetheless, the students noted a developing sense of agency, an ability to view their own stories as part of the larger struggle that they discovered in their readings. They learned that they were not the only ones concerned with systemic change in school structures that would provide an equitable education for all students.

Joan, a white middle-class fourth grade teacher with whom I worked in the Houston public schools, reinforced this sense of agency. As an interested insider, Joan was concerned with how students developed as writers along the continuum of accountability testing required by the state, especially since her fourth grade students were preparing for their first TAKS test in writing. The students appreciated Joan's involvement with their own writing and several of them initiated a correspondence with her in order to better focus their own sense of audience and purpose. In addition, the students were intrigued by how a real audience—and a Houston public school teacher—would respond to their efforts to speak back to the system. Joan did not disappoint them. Addressing the students in a group letter, she wrote:

You have to stop the vicious cycle we have seen in education. Many of you said that the poor schools get poor teachers, poor material, and poor students. It is up to each and every one of you to break the cycle. You have to demand an equal education for your brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, and your own children.

“Learning is a process that takes time and is never ending because we learn something everyday.” “Education should be provided equally and at equal levels for everyone. Learning is learning and it is only fair that everyone receive a fair education in an inner-city school as well as a suburban school.” “Education is the key to success.” “Education is about survival and the skills needed to survive are taught through past mistakes and learned from experience. Education helps people to survive in our ever changing world.” “The most important thing in life is education and without an education, you are worthless.” These are your words, not mine. Walk the walk. Make a difference. The future of education depends on it.

Joan stressed self-advocacy and community activism throughout her letter, using the students' own writing to emphasize the significance of the challenges that they had already set for themselves.

## **Learning: The Story of Noah**

In order to investigate my perceptions of this course in more detail, I followed the progress of another student from the fall semester class, Noah, who struggled all semester with reading and writing. Although Noah would need to repeat the writing portion of the course with me in the spring semester, his goals remained constant and clear. As our case study developed, I shared research and drafts of this article with Noah. In particular, I emphasized the question that grounded my inquiry: how might students make sense of their own subject positions as English language learners within an urban public school system that emphasized state-mandated accountability testing?

As seen through the lens of practitioner-inquiry research, Noah's story was particularly interesting to me because it provided an opportunity to investigate "how teachers and students co-construct teaching and learning across classrooms and across contexts" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 44). As Cochran-Smith and Lytle suggest, "When teachers redefine their own relationships to knowledge about teaching and learning, they often begin to reconstruct their classrooms and to offer different invitations to their students to learn and to know" (52).

Noah was a first-year college student of traditional age whose first language was Spanish; he moved to the United States from a small town in Mexico at the age of nine, just before fourth grade. Like the other students in the fall semester, Noah was part of the first generation in his family who had an opportunity to attend college, and he contemplated becoming a teacher himself. Having graduated from high school in the top ten percent of his class, however, Noah now felt frustrated by his lack of adequate preparation for college. At the same time, as he read and thought about the assignments, he began to recognize his own experiences in the context of the course readings.

Because Noah's US schooling took place in Texas urban public schools, his situation seemed even more complicated than that of the typical English language learner. Valencia, Villareal, and Salinas cite considerable research to discuss how education for English language acquisition is delivered to Texas public school students who are identified as English language learners (ELL). Initially, these researchers suggest, most children are assigned to "transitional bilingual education (TBE)":

In Texas, for example, ELL children in bilingual programs are classified as “English-proficient” when they demonstrate *oral fluency* by obtaining a score at the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher on a standardized English language assessment measure. (Texas Education Code, 1999, 275)

Nonetheless, “TBE programs last only about two to three years,” Valencia, Villareal, and Salinas recount, noting that exit criteria for such programs are based on oral proficiency, rather than proficiency in academic English. Using oral proficiency alone as the sole measure of English language acquisition tends, not unexpectedly, to have a negative impact on students’ development of reading and writing skills, which will be required not only for future tests but also—and even more critically—for success in further education.

After encountering this research as part of our case study, Noah noted in our discussions that the conditions of schooling described by Valencia, Villareal, and Salinas clearly illustrated his own circumstances. As Noah related, he was not punished for or forbidden from speaking Spanish in school, as previous generations of US-educated Latino children had been (Anzaldúa, Valencia). However, as a student who did not yet speak English, Noah found that there were other difficult consequences for entering a school system focused on accountability testing.

Similar to the circumstances that Gabrielle recounted in her essay, Noah received no assistance in dealing with language issues as he began fourth grade (Valdés). Although the school told Noah that he would be enrolled in a program to learn English, this program never materialized. In fourth grade, Noah’s language arts classes were taught in Spanish, while the teacher would speak in English to the other teachers in the school, if not to her students. Fourth grade math was conducted entirely in English, which Noah did not yet understand. As a result, he found it difficult to pay attention and often fell asleep in class.

In fifth grade, an Anglo teacher who spoke only in English to the students (but in Spanish to their parents) taught Texas history using only books written in English, which many of the students still had difficulty understanding. The Spanish translation of the Texas history textbook remained off limits to students. By sixth grade, Noah reported that, since he did not speak much English, his teacher initially tried to help him. However, his teacher’s assistance was not consistent and Noah was often sent down to

the lower grades to help take care of the younger students. At the time, Noah stated, he was happy about this situation, but “it wasn’t good overall because if I’d stayed [in the sixth grade] I would have learned more English.” In addition, because Noah’s neighborhood in Houston had a high crime rate, his parents were afraid to allow him to play outside, which Noah understood as yet another lost opportunity to learn English.

At this juncture, Noah’s story seems to follow the pattern described in Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*, rife with the lost opportunities and the silences endured by students who do not conform to state-mandated standards, students that Schemo describes as “push[ed] out the back door.” However, in high school, Noah made a remarkable discovery. He described himself as “a student who likes to try different things,” who, perhaps because of the challenges he faced in learning English, understood that he needed to be “alert and pay attention to what’s going on.” He was especially fascinated by “how things worked” and this interest led him to try his hand at skills such as carpentry, electronics, and art. An art teacher at Noah’s high school eventually hired Noah to help renovate an old shed into an art studio in the art teacher’s backyard, thus drawing together many of Noah’s interests.

Noah’s art teacher soon became his mentor. Since advanced classes were closed to students who were not identified as meeting high English proficiency standards, Noah enrolled in art classes. Noah found that “art helped to relieve stress and express emotions.” Art was also a means of learning English for Noah, as his mentor continually emphasized. Because becoming an artist meant creating a portfolio, Noah’s mentor suggested that “art is writing as well as painting.”

By the fall of 2003, when he first enrolled at the university, Noah understood that “if I didn’t go to college, I wouldn’t have the opportunity to express my feelings and nothing would change about my life.” In that first semester, he felt often that college was too hard for him and that he “didn’t know how college worked.” In addition, Noah was depressed by the difficulties that he continued to have with English. However, by the spring semester of 2004, Noah related that he knew that he would need to “be strong and keep fighting for my education—keep working, keep fighting, keep going.”

Noah expressed relief that he was not alone in his struggles to learn English in Texas public schools. Nonetheless, Noah also noted his disappointment that the problem continues to be so widespread. Perhaps such discussions might seem dispiriting for students caught up in the mechanisms of inequitable public schooling in Texas, and yet when these issues

were exposed as systemic problems rather than individualized notions of “success” or “failure,” Noah’s investment in his own education grew that much stronger.

Noah enrolled in a second semester of basic writing, this time linked with an introductory American Studies course that offered a cultural studies perspective. This six-hour course was designed for students who need to repeat the basic writing course, usually for reasons of English language acquisition and proficiency. In this second course, he discovered the work of Howard Zinn who, in *A People’s History of the United States*, defamiliarizes the study of United States history by presenting a more inclusive point of view. Noah used this opportunity to continue to fill in the gaps in an education that had focused more on readiness for standardized testing rather than on preparation for college study.

In the brief samples that follow, I include writing from two of Noah’s essays, one from each of the two semesters in which he has been my student. In a late semester essay for the fall 2003 linked reading and basic writing course, Noah wrote about the implications of Jean Anyon’s study “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work” for his own schooling. In his essay written at midterm for the spring semester linked American studies and basic writing course, Noah focused on Howard Zinn’s presentation of the history of Christopher Columbus’ voyages to the Caribbean. Noah’s essay contrasted Zinn’s version of Columbus’ voyages with more traditional versions as presented in high school (and earlier) and in reading prompts for state-mandated standardized tests. Following are excerpts from those essays:

*November 2003*

In my high school I think that we didn’t have some of the resources because we use to borrow the cafeteria and library from a middle school next to my high school. We used to cross a bridge every day to eat. When it was time to do big projects we would cross the street to go at the library or if you were looking for a book for your reading classes, even though we use the cafeteria to do our test (TAAS). It was very cold inside and students were complained. In my English class I saw that boxes in my classroom arrived, but they stayed for two weeks without being opened, but when the teacher finally opened them we saw that they were books. I remember we didn’t use them all the school season. When I read

this quote from Anyon's article "available textbooks are not always used" (Anyon 177). It attracted me because it brought memories from my high school. The teachers only ordered books just to have nice bookshelf, instead of giving them to the students so that they could learn. I think that Anyons tries to say that teachers' work based on what they think they know, but I believe that a classroom should be book based. Such that the students work to what the book say. What Anyon says about a Working-Class Schools, is true...

*March 2004*

Public schools give us the TAAS test, which seems to include material that I think is not beneficial for College. In the reading section of the TAAS tests there were stories about Christopher Columbus. One of the stories was not making sense by knowing the real story as when I read "Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress" Columbus said "they would make fine servants" (Zinn 3). This is a quote where students are not going to find on these readings on the TAAS Test, so I think if we give them a well-rounded acknowledgement of Columbus would benefit students more. They would be better prepared in their education. That would be given the ability to interpret Columbus in their own way...

I do not know why public schools hide many things as history like Christopher Columbus, but working as a teacher I would do every thing to help students to get a better understanding on history and know more about history. When is time to be on the next level (college), students can be prepare to do a big step and move forward without difficulties.

What stands out for me in these samples of Noah's writing is his growing awareness of how his reading and writing were shaped by standardized testing. In his fall semester essay, Noah identifies how the problems of education for test preparation interfered with his schooling, especially in terms of reading. As Noah continued to think through this interference, he considered how students were not given full or accurate information about history. Since the state accountability tests focus on short reading passages, there is neither time nor space enough to allow for multiple perspectives. As Noah suggests, this truncated version of the Columbus story is presented to students as "history."

In his conversations with me in the spring semester, Noah speculated that one of the reasons that students described their schoolwork as “boring” might be “because their reading level in English was low.” He noted that as a result of a more concentrated focus in reading and critical thinking, his interest and comprehension in reading in English had improved considerably since beginning college.

As a result of his own evolving processes, in the second semester, Noah’s writing focused on the problematic nature of the reading section of the state-mandated test. The readings for the test were generally short and did not allow for interrogation or discussion. Test preparation followed the same pattern, with much focus on systematically responding to questions and how to identify correct answers. Critical analysis of the reading was rarely, if ever, a subject of classroom inquiry.

Noah perceived the problem as one of instructional focus. He had discovered in his first year of college that his professors placed more value on critical thinking, analytic reading, and persuasive writing than on “finding the right answer.” In that regard, he suggested that students needed solid preparation for college that focused on more intellectual aims, rather than on preparation for testing. Rather than conclude in despair, Noah grounded his reflections in advocacy for future generations of students in his community. As Noah challenged himself to make sense of his reading in order to fashion his thoughts into writing, he also considered the necessity of changing the content of schooling in order to achieve a more felicitous outcome.

### **Closing Concerns**

Goodman suggests (and Noah concurred) that:

development [of quantitatively measured standard usage conventions] does not follow a straight line from one writing episode to the next. . . . Development reflects the growing experience of the writers and their personal histories within a specific cultural context as they begin to control written language to express their meaning . . . (Vygotsky 1986, 200)

This articulation of the development of the writing process illustrates yet another concern expressed by Noah and his peers. The written product of a single standardized test might not necessarily reflect the most accurate

measure of student progress or success in writing. Yet this written product (as well as standardized tests in additional subject areas) had determined whether or not students would graduate from high school. As students found their own situations reflected in Schemo's *New York Times* articles, they related stories of friends and relatives who had dropped out of high school in part because of continued test failure.

As Noah's story suggests, literacy develops within a specific cultural context rather than in isolation. Bored by reading and frustrated by writing, Noah and his peers reported that they had not usually read novels or book-length nonfiction narratives in high school and had very rarely written essays that had allowed them to explore their own interpretations of a longer text. When expected to complete such tasks as part of their college course work, the students were at a loss as to how to respond.

Because the focus of their education was preparation for accountability testing, Noah and his classmates recognized that they were not provided with the opportunity to develop the literacy skills necessary for writing, reading, and critical thinking (Hillocks; McNeil; McNeil and Valenzuela). Yet these students eventually discovered that they could in fact succeed and progress when they had access to a variety of approaches to learning, rather than one standardized methodology that was meant to apply to all students regardless of their needs and desires.

Learning self-advocacy and self-efficacy can benefit students as they face the transitions between moving away from standards-based education to the intellectual challenges and long-term goals of becoming fluent in academic discourse (Sternglass). Such fluency is more than acculturation to college demands, but rather a means of speaking back to a system that has been shown to limit the educational horizons of students in greatest need. In this way, students who are survivors of such systems can re-create their own subject positions as advocates for their communities rather than as victims of the powers that be.

Moreover, as Siegel and Fernandez suggest, "critical approaches to the study of literacy education examine the ways in which literacy instruction participates in the production of these persistent inequalities but also how literacy instruction may become a site for contesting the status quo" (73). As we encounter more and more students who have been impacted by the ramifications of No Child Left Behind, we need not give into our own frustrations and despair (Meyer).

Instead, we can use our own positions as teachers and researchers to

not only challenge systemic inequalities as they are written into education law, but to advocate for change as well. As a transplanted Northerner who found myself living and working in the swamps of southeast Texas, I was inspired by the resilience of my students in the face of the hurdles that they encountered throughout their education. In light of their dreams, I owed them nothing less.

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### **Note**

1. The excerpts from Angelou, Douglass, Jacobs, and Kozol can be found in the textbook *Breaking Boundaries* by Carol Comfort. Students were also required to read one full-length narrative for the course by either Douglass or Jacobs.

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