

Standardized Testing in the Lives of ELL Students: A Teacher's Firsthand Account

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Facing standardized tests has become a frequent school experience for immigrant children who are learning the English language. Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, schools must make sure all their students, including English language learners (ELLs), pass standardized tests or else face consequences such as state takeover or privatization. Such high-stakes testing programs are encouraging schools to drop untested subjects from the school day, cancel English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, eliminate native-language instruction, and focus on lower-level academic skills. While schools may provide special accommodations for ELL students in an attempt to make the tests more valid, often the accommodations provide little actual help. Parents of ELL students are ill-informed and confused about the testing program. In many cases, the consequences of low test scores are inappropriate to the purposes of the test. For example, schools with large numbers of immigrants are often labeled failures despite the progress their students make. Sometimes low test scores cause ELL students to be assigned to remedial classes with students with learning disabilities, segregating them from high-performing peers.

I saw all this firsthand when I went back to teaching ESL during the 2004-05 school year. In order to do my dissertation research, I took a teaching position at an elementary school in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC, in the heart of a Salvadoran immigrant community. Seven of my fifth-grade ESL students and their families agreed to participate in the study. I observed the children on a daily basis as they did their schoolwork, interacted with classmates, and took tests. I visited them at home and got to know their families. The students and I discussed testing experiences together in small groups after completing standardized assessments. I kept a journal as a participant-observer at the school and also interviewed teachers and administrators.

Time Lost to Testing

ELL students in the fifth grade classroom where I was assigned took five different standardized tests during the school year, some of them more than once. During the course of the year, my students missed 33 days of ESL classes, or about 18% of their English instruction, due to standardized testing. We ESL teachers did not have our own homeroom class; rather, we worked within other teachers' classrooms or removed students from classrooms to work with them separately. This enabled the school to assign ESL teachers to other duties without incurring the cost and complication of hiring substitute teachers. As a result, I was often pulled from my teaching to administer tests and accommodations, which were labor-intensive. When assigned to other tasks, I had to cancel ESL classes, even though instruction in the English language ought to have been considered of primary importance for the children.

Families' Perceptions

While testing and testing accommodations had an overwhelming presence at the school, I discovered that the families of the students in the study had little information on the testing program, and in the absence of information, they made assumptions based on their own experiences with testing in El Salvador. What little information the parents got came from children, their own and others. Parents were aware that their children took tests at school, but did not know when. Some parents believed that report card grades were test scores, as is the practice in El Salvador. They were unaware of the amount of time spent on testing, which tests were taken, or the purposes of the tests. Some parents believed that there was a limited set of facts that their children could memorize in preparation for testing, as was the case in their own student days. The newcomer children and some of the parents believed incorrectly that in order to be promoted to the sixth grade, they had to pass the state test. The students also believed incorrectly that the state test determined what ESL class they were placed into.

Surprisingly, the parents had not been informed that a well known testing company had used their children as test subjects in the development of a new language proficiency test. Families did not receive their children's scores on the test or any acknowledgement of their participation. Parents did not know that their children's scores on one English test had been used to justify placing them in a class with students with learning disabilities. They did not know that their children's ESL classes had been cancelled 33 times due to standardized testing. They did not know that science and social studies, untested subjects, had been dropped from their children's daily schedule. While each student had an Accommodations Document signed by their parents in Spanish on file, none of the parents knew of the accommodations their children received or even what the document said.

Hard Questions

After spending a year teaching ESL, I have come to believe that local, state and national educational leaders have some serious questions to answer about testing programs for ELL students:

- Do the tests really provide information that helps ELL students' learning?
- Are the test scores used in ways that support ELL students' academic progress?
- Are the data gathered from standardized tests worth their cost in lost instructional time?
- Are parents of ELL students being properly informed about these testing programs and the consequences for their children?
- Do the accommodations that schools provide for ELLs actually make the tests valid and are they used consistently across schools and districts?
- Does NCLB as currently written serve to support or impede the learning of ELL students?

I believe that honestly facing these hard questions will lead to advancements in the schooling of ELL students.