

When the Test Fails: Testing and Educational Equity for Emergent Bilinguals

A response to: Peggy Hickman and Shernaz B. García's
"Elementary Principal Leadership for Equitable Learning
Environments for Diverse Latina/o Students"

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In the decade and a half since the passage of No Child Left Behind, there has been a massive proliferation of testing in public schools. The overreliance on testing as a measure of "accountability" has distorted our understanding of learning, narrowing it to what can be measured by a #2 pencil on a bubble test.

Peggy Hickman and Shernaz B. García's "Elementary Principal Leadership for Equitable Learning Environments for Diverse Latina/o Students" (*NYS TESOL Journal* 1[2], 2014) is an important reminder of "the problematic nature of such a narrow view of schooling" (p. 61). For emergent bilinguals, the use of test scores as a measure of learning is all the more problematic because of the myriad cultural biases implicit in standardized tests.

Working as a high school English teacher for 15 years in a large New York City public school with a student population of over 3,000, 40% of whom were classified as English language learners, I learned firsthand the devastating impact of high-stakes tests on emergent bilingual students. I remember, for example, grading the English Regents at the end of my first year of teaching. One part of the exam required students to write an essay about the nature of boyhood friendships after reading two literary passages that focused on this theme (a topic that, by its nature, was outside the experience of at least half of the test-takers). As I read the essays, I began noting student after student writing about two characters from one passage: "Heck" and "Fra-yunk," neither of whom I remembered from my reading of the text. Returning to the passage, I came across the following dialogue:

"Let's go swimming. I know a rock pit back in the woods. It's got an island in the middle."

"Okay. I'll have to get my bathing suit."

"Heck, you don't need a suit. There's nobody around."

...

All that summer we were together. My days started with Tobey calling from the road. "Fra-yunk . . . hey, Fra-yunk . . ." (*Comprehensive Examination in English, Session Two, Part A, June 2000, p. 3.*)

Suddenly, it made sense. Using grammatical cues, my students had used deductive reasoning and logically concluded that "Fra-yunk" and "Heck" were the heroes. After all, their names made as much

sense to the students as “Tobey” or “Frank.” This was a small mistake, but it reminded me that for my students, such tests were a maze to be navigated using linguistic and cultural cues that had as much to do with learning as a crossword puzzle has to do with writing a novel—and that “standardized tests” reflect what Hickman and García (2014) refer to as an “informal curricula that transmitted values of the dominant culture and marginalized students’ experiences” (p. 69).

Not only are these test scores poor measures of student learning, but also they are poor measures of the quality of a school. As Hickman and García (2014) argue, referring to the two schools examined in their study, “in these two schools, ‘high performing’ in the sense of academic performance on state accountability assessments was achieved, but with little attention given to effective, evidence-based programs and practices for Latino/a ELLs with diverse academic needs, including disability” (p. 81). The reverse is often true of schools deemed “low performing” by equally arbitrary means. I learned this firsthand, in 2012, when my school found itself on a list of “persistently low achieving” (PLA) schools in New York State because our four-year graduation rate was slightly below the city average. This is partly because passing the English Regents is a graduation requirement for all students, no matter how recently they have arrived in the United States. To measure a school with students from over 70 countries and over 37 languages spoken on the basis of one statistic alone misses the thousands of stories that lie behind the “data.” To be privy to such stories is what makes working in education meaningful. Indeed, as Hickman and García (2014) argue, true equity must go beyond narrow understandings of language acquisition or the assessment of student proficiency as determined by a test score.

The importance of seeing students as more than a test score and understanding the myriad struggles they face both in and outside of the classroom was brought home to me by a story in *The New York Times* (Leland, 2014) about one particular student at the Brooklyn high school where I taught for 15 years. He was profiled as one of the 68,541 unaccompanied minors picked up by immigration agents at the Southwest border in the past year (up 77% from the year before). This student, Alejandro, was from a town in Honduras where gangs had killed seven or eight children in one month this past spring—and threatened to kill him and his brother if they did not join. Alejandro, who had witnessed his uncle’s murder in 2011, has a long and difficult road to navigate as he tries to gain political asylum in the United States, build a relationship with his father, whom he had not seen in years, and try to meet high school graduation requirements—including passing the English Regents exam. No test can possibly assess Alejandro’s learning or academic success without this context. Reading Alejandro’s story, I was reminded yet again that the struggle for equity in education must go hand in hand with a commitment to social justice beyond the classroom.

It is not surprising that the growing movement against standardized testing has often been led by teachers (and parents) of emergent bilinguals at schools that are most committed to embracing intersectionality and community-centered learning, as Hickman and Garcia advocate. In such schools, the “informal curricula” inherent in evaluating individual performance on monolingual standardized tests comes into conflict with a culturally relevant curriculum based on dual language instruction and collaborative learning. Furthermore, standardized tests, by their nature, hold all students to a “standard” that is often not developmentally or pedagogically appropriate for English language learners and students with special needs. Thus, the experience of taking the test is even more painful for such students—even when there are not high stakes. For a student newly arrived in the United States to be subjected to a test that is designed for students proficient in English is a profoundly demoralizing experience. For teachers of emergent bilinguals, who are committed to community-centered learning and respecting the intersectional experiences of their students, it is equally demoralizing to be forced to subject their students to the stress inflicted by such tests.

In some cases, these experiences move teachers and other members of the school community to action. Two examples spring to mind: Castle Bridge School in Washington Heights in Manhattan and the International High School in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn (Hagopian, 2014). Last year, Castle Bridge was the

site of an organized resistance from parents (with support from educators at the school) who refused to subject children in kindergarten through second grade to new standardized tests—created solely to evaluate teachers under the new teacher evaluation system implemented by the State of New York. Castle Bridge parents and educators were particularly sensitive to the negative impact that such tests at Castle Bridge, a dual-language school, would have on their children—particularly as they were offered only in English, thus undermining and contradicting the school’s commitment to bilingual education. Meanwhile, at the International High School, teachers refused to administer a new ELA test, likewise designed (without ELL students in mind) to measure student learning for the purpose of evaluating teachers under the new system. These tests were traumatizing to students and antithetical to the progressive pedagogy, culturally relevant curricula, and collaborative model of education espoused by the school.

If schools are to become meaningful sites of learning, social justice, and educational equity, resisting the drive to reduce all learning to what can be measured on a test is crucial. Hickman and García (2014) provide an important reminder of the importance of working toward creating “equitable and socially just educational contexts” (p.61).

References

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