

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: Testing the “Low” Class: Standardized Assessment in the Lives of Hispanic ELL Students

J. Ryan Monroe, Doctor of Philosophy, 2006

**Dissertation Directed by: Dr. Sarah Shin
Associate Professor
Language, Literacy and Culture Ph.D.
Program**

The purpose of this study was to describe how standardized assessment was situated in the lives of seven fifth-grade boys of Salvadoran immigrant families who had been identified as English language learners (ELLs). The researcher used a critical ethnographic approach in which he worked as an ESOL teacher in an Hispanic, high-ELL school for one year. Through participant-observation, interviews and home visits, the researcher documented how school personnel and families understood standardized testing and how test scores were used.

ELL students were found to spend excessive time on tests designed for native English speakers. Implementing assessment accommodations was labor-intensive, but the documented accommodations were either not implemented, were logistical outcomes of another accommodation or were not thought to provide valid data. Accommodations believed to be valid were not implemented. Students' individual results from some tests were either not provided to teachers or were difficult to access. Student achievement data were presented to staff in ways that led to inaccurate interpretations.

The testing program was also found to have had large washback effects at the school which compromised the assessments' consequential validity. Language proficiency test scores were used to isolate ELL students into classes with learning disabled students. Science and social studies were eliminated from the curriculum because they were not tested. A fledgling bilingual program was dismantled when the school failed to reach performance goals. Students missed 18% of their ESOL classes due to testing.

Parents in the study knew almost nothing of the school's testing program and the uses of their children's scores. Families assumed that U.S. testing had similar purposes and reporting as El Salvador. Parent meetings were implemented to address these misunderstandings.

Despite the emphasis on testing, the flexible ESOL program allowed the researcher to provide students with communicative, empowering instructional activities.

It is recommended that ESOL teachers act as allies with the school community and recognize that their work is not politically neutral; that testers assure consequential validity of their instruments; and that schools foster open communication regarding how tests are used. Finally, lawmakers must, at a minimum, change NCLB as it pertains to ELL students.