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Testing English Language Learners: Another Special Case of Bias

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Book Reviewed:

Menken, K. (2008). *English learners left behind: Standardized testing as language policy*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, LTD.

At a critical time in U.S. history, when a new Obama administration seeks political change, Menken's book, *English Learners Left Behind: Standardized Testing as Language Policy*, provides salient research and recommendations to address the outcomes of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Her discussion exposes discriminatory testing practices that need to cease if U.S. schools are to attain the mission to "teach every child." As Menken's introduction so clearly states: "An immediate effect of NCLB test policy is that English language learners are overwhelmingly failing the tests, labeled as deficient and low performing, and barred from educational advancement." (p. 35).

National policy makers, state administrators, school leaders, and teachers would benefit from this book to understand their role in what Menken proposes is a not so "hidden agenda" that neglects the educational attainment of English language learners (ELLs). Menken's research provides solid evidence that U.S. policies and resultant school practices have serious consequences for ELLs because they cannot pass state tests designed for English native speakers, and so fail grades or end up in remedial programs, and, as a result, drop-out in alarming numbers.

Menken's shows that the problem affects a critical mass of children. For example, using data from the New York City Department of Education she reports that in 2005 annual enrollment of 1,055,986 students, with 42% speaking a language other than English, yet:

Only 33.2% of ELLs passed the English regent exams, as compared to 77.9% of all students passing.

For Math Regents, the ELL citywide pass rate is 55.5% as compared to an overall pass rate of 81.5%.

From 1999–2005 the dropout rate for ELLs increased from 16.5% to 30.5%, whereas the dropout rate for English speakers is 16%, and has not changed in 6 years. (Menken, 2008p. 44)

Federal and state policy makers who are involved in revisions of NCLB would benefit from the information provided by this book as a basis for recrafting legislation pertaining to ELL

students. Special attention should be given to the limitations of tests and translated tests for showing evidence of student learning and growth (Abedi & Dietel, as cited by Menken, 2008). In chapter 2, Menken provides a historic reminder that, as new waves of immigrants arrive in the United States, standardized tests become gate keepers in spite of their “known” bias against racial, ethnic, and language minorities (Harris Stefanakis, 1998). During WWII, when intelligence tests determined educational placements, linguistic minorities were often placed in classes for the mentally retarded (Valdez & Figueroa, 1994): “In this way, testing is repeating its historic use as a sorting mechanism, using the rhetoric of science and neutrality to systematically discriminate against immigrant students who are ELL and promote the status of native English speakers as superior” (p. 34).

Chapters 3 and 4 summarize Menken’s interview research in 10 New York City schools and chronicle the impact of No Child Left Behind on ELLs. In her analysis, she provides alarming facts that: (a) bilingual programs have decreased and English-only programs have increased, so NCLB is a “de facto English-only language education policy”; (b) ELLs are required to pass five regents exams to graduate from high school. Typically, ELLs have low scores, often do not pass, thus increasing the numbers that drop out of school or seek alternative degree programs (p. 59).

Why are ELLs failing tests and being pushed out of U.S. educational opportunities? Chapter 5 exposes the “discriminatory” effects of state tests that require language proficiency, content area learning, and cognitive academic vocabulary that few ELLs can acquire in a few years of ESL classes. In chapter 6, Menken, meticulously analyzes test items in English, Spanish, and Chinese for English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies from state tests in New York, California, and Texas. She shows that the complexity of language usage and vocabulary exemplify that an ELL may know the content for a test item required but cannot “decode the vocabulary” of the question so cannot produce the information known. As Menken summarizes:

The linguistic complexity of standardized tests and the lack of sufficient accommodations explain why ELLs do not perform as well as native speakers. . . .

The validity of their scores is questionable. As a result, standardized tests administered to ELLs are not a valid basis for high stakes decision-making. (p. 96)

How are standardized tests affecting the lives of English language learners? Menken offers teacher and student accounts of how ELLs *are* left behind on a daily basis:

- Given the language difficulty of the tests, ELLs retake and fail the test, thus prolonging the time they are in high school.
- Students who have completed high school requirements and just attend regents preparation classes in hopes of passing standardized exams lose time and opportunities.
- ELLs who have been admitted to college, but fail the regents, and therefore cannot get a diploma, drop out or seek an alternative diploma. (Menken, p. 117)

Similarly, teachers who work with ELLs are pressured to “teach to the test.” They use old tests as practice and focus their teaching on how to read and answer test questions, whether in

English, Spanish, Chinese, Math or other subjects. Teachers in Menken's study readily admitted that they realigned their curriculum to prepare their students for the tests and rarely present any other materials.

This book is a vital contribution to research on U.S. language policies as well as research on assessment. More important, it offers key recommendations (Chapter 9) to expand language policies to promote success for "a wider range of students including ELLs." The recommendations that Menken suggests for policy makers to follow and educators to enact are to

Support schools in the development of a language policy, which may include native language instruction. Match the testing policy to the language policy, so bilingual students have bilingual testing options and multiple measures for assessing their abilities.

Shift the paradigm for ELLs on opportunities to learn, which means getting resources for schools to support superb instruction that offers support for English and native language development, as well as high quality materials, faculty, and technology.

Move away from an over-reliance on tests, and toward the use of multiple measures of student achievement (portfolios, grades, classroom performance assessments) when assessing a student.

Redesign the accountability system to include district, school, and classroom assessments so that portfolios and performance assessments, more accurate pictures of growth over time, yield accurate results for ELLs.

Include ELLs in the accountability system in ways that are valid, which suggests showing results of testing in both languages, or in content areas and in language proficiency. Assessment information should help students and teachers see what is known and what needs to be learned. (pp. 185–186)

Menken has developed a strong argument and blueprint for the new administration to address the significant challenge of a linguistic minority "achievement gap" in U.S. schools with measures focused on better assessment and language policies. It is critical that Obama administration leaders take political action to truly address the inequities through new policies and practices at a national and state level.

This book is a first step in compiling critical research in the assessment and education of ELL students, but the content and focus are designed primarily for researchers. A more practical approach to disseminating this message would provide greater clarity and reach more audiences, including practitioners. Perhaps two new resources could be created—a handbook for educators and another for policy makers. In general, this work needs to become accessible to a broader audience of educators and politicians in order to promote the critical message that "current testing policies harm English Language Learners and more effective educational and assessment approaches are needed."

References

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