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Confounded and Compounded by Language: English Language Learners and High Stakes Testing

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CONFOUNDED AND COMPOUNDED BY LANGUAGE: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND HIGH STAKES TESTING

elizabeth park

Research literature has suggested that the language background of students may impact performance on standardized assessments. The results of data analyses from several locations nationwide support the findings of existing literature, which indicate that assessment results may be confounded by language background, particularly those with limited English proficiency. Abedi. (2003, p.x)

It's Saturday morning. I'm in a classroom in the school where I've taught for ten years, with adolescents who sacrificed their weekend morning sleep to be at school by 9:00 a.m. They're here for a prep course focused on the upcoming annual high stakes standardized test taken by every eighth grader in the state. Among the group are students new to the country and the language. They're variously called English Language Learners (ELLs), ESL (English as a Second Language) students, or Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, depending on the context. ELL, the most recent designation, emphasizes student agency, and is my preference. LEP is generally used in analytical contexts, when students are referred to in terms of their needs. ESL often describes curriculum and curricular material. In practice, distinctions aren't so clear, and the terms are often used interchangeably.

There's irony to this moment. I am often enraged at these tests, particularly when I think of Abedi's (2003) research, which clearly indicates that the language component of high stakes testing in any subject area—literature, writing, math, or science—creates interference that prevents ELLs from demonstrating what they know. In our state, only the newest ELLs take the test in their first language, and only if that language is Spanish. Those newcomers, who may or may not have experienced high stakes tests in their first countries, will deal with the pressures of this testing process on top of the confusion of adjusting to a new culture. The others, who've been in the country for over a year, are required to respond to the same prompts as mainstream students; even when extra time is allowed, the compounded challenge of taking the test and taking it in a language that isn't completely clear to them can be confounding. Sometimes it seems that they have to be

Ginger Rogers, doing everything Fred Astaire did, but backwards while wearing high heels.

The test I'm preparing my students for is part of the accountability movement that Shore and Wright (2000) discuss in their work on audit culture in education. These researchers describe the migration of this phenomenon from business to education and situate it in a Foucauldian sense as an extension of governmental power intended to create self-governing subjects. Our administrators are now subjects, and teachers are on their way to subjecthood. The adults of the school will be held accountable, not the students. However, student performance on the test is the indicator of school success or failure: it is the mercury that may indicate a fever, though it isn't the fever itself. And if, as may happen this year, the school's test scores once again fail to meet levels defined as acceptable by federal and state laws, our school may be a candidate for state action. If the state takes the school over, the administration will be the first target for change.

There is another factor to the accountability mix: the community. We are a small town in New Jersey, one in which there is a strong sense of "us" and "them." "Us" shifts deictically and can define those who are of European or African ancestry, those who are members of a long-established Puerto Rican group, those who are legal immigrants from a number of Caribbean, Central, and South American countries, and those who are here illegally. As a poor community, we are at times defensive, at times embarrassed, and at times angry. Those emotions can be directed by any group of us at any other group of us, or at outsiders. Property values are a large part of this complexity. When test scores drop, so do property values; housing in our town is comprised largely of single-family dwellings that are the major financial asset of most of their owners. The owners vote in school board elections, and their ballots can reflect their dissatisfaction.

I have lived in the town for 20 years; as the mother of a racially mixed family, I chose to be here mostly because of the cultural and racial diversity. I have never taught at another school, except for the colleges at which I've been an adjunct. In the middle school, I've occasionally taught English Language Arts to students in the mainstream, but most of my work has been teaching ESL classes to immigrant students. The latter is the work that moves me deeply. I'm entranced by the mystery of how human beings learn new languages, and compelled to know as much as I can about how that happens. I believe profoundly that reaching native-like proficiency in a new language can be among the most difficult cognitive and affective challenges a person can face. When I watch my

ELL students reach new understandings of how to express themselves in English, or see them embrace a new way of interpreting English texts or speech, I'm thrilled. I've seen them struggle, and I've struggled with them. My struggle may be empathetic; it may be analytical as I strive to identify strengths on which to help my students build learning; or it may consist of exploring different methodologies to find the right combination of teaching practices. My students' struggles open a door into a new world, creating an intellectual puzzle with affective components for me.

At the prep course, I discuss the kinds of writing tasks the students will see on the test. I explain how the testing rooms will be organized, and the process of distributing testing materials. We talk about how they may not speak during the test, or look ahead in the testing booklet. I distribute index cards, and on them I ask the students to write down whatever worries them about the test. Then I ask them to fold the cards several times and write their names on the outside. I collect the worries in a bag and place it at the front of the room, saying they may have their worries back at the end of the session. One of the students remarks that it's a "cool" idea. I've done this in previous years, and students seem to benefit from concretizing worry and being able to put it aside.

The work for today's session is responding to a prompt that introduces characters and a problem. Students are to write a short story describing how the main character solved the problem. After describing the type of prompt, and leading a discussion on how to respond, I distribute paper, pencils, and a sample prompt. The students begin writing.

This is a perfect opportunity to do some focused observation. Over the years, I've learned that watching students and reflecting on what I've seen creates layers of rich understanding and offers insights I couldn't otherwise have. Students also find themselves more comfortable when they know their teachers watch them, not as spies or with intrusive intent, but with care and concern. Aoki (in Pinar and Irwin, 2005, pp. 193-195) explains how "pedagogical watchfulness" can be a way of witnessing that gives students a sense of connection and grounding when their worlds are sundered. Another layer of this phenomenon is the presence of a "friendly but unobtrusive observer," as Wyatt-Brown (1993, p. 302) describes the observation strategies James Britton used as a teacher and D. W. Winnicott used as a child psychologist. Hall (2000) writes "...culture in our modern urban settings is best understood discursively as an 'open text'... Identity is not already there; rather, it is a production, emergent, in process" (p. xi). It is this

emergent identity I'm looking for as I decide which student to observe more closely for a few minutes.

My gaze falls on Roscío.¹ She is staring out the window, clearly not engaged in the task at hand. She seems aware that someone is watching. She turns to me, and I try to pack encouragement and understanding into the smile I give her. I want it to be like a cartoon suitcase, bulging with clothes in the middle, a shirtsleeve or two protruding from openings that strain against buckled straps. I will my smile to communicate that I understand, that I will not reprimand her, that she is safe.

Three months ago, at 7:00 a.m., Roscío arrived at school after two days' absence. One of the teachers found her at her locker, where by all the rules she had no business being; students aren't admitted to the building until 7:30 a.m. When Roscío didn't respond to the teacher's questions, the teacher became insistent. When she still didn't respond, the teacher pressed her even further. That's when the vice principal intervened, taking Roscío to one of the Spanish-speaking guidance counselors. Roscío told the counselor she'd come to school early because she didn't want to be alone anymore. Her mother had died in the local hospital the afternoon before, and Roscío had then made her way home and spent the night alone in the apartment she and her mother had shared. Our guidance counselor drove her from school that morning to her sister's home, where she still lives.

Over the course of the next day, we learned more about Roscío's home life. She'd lived for most of her 13 years with her father in Veracruz. Her parents divorced when Roscío was seven, and her mother came to the U.S. to be near older children already living here. Roscío traveled from Mexico to visit her mother from time to time; apparently relations were cordial all around. Then her mother was diagnosed with a terminal cancer. The family decided Roscío should spend time with her mother while it was still possible, so she traveled to the U.S. and moved into her mother's tiny apartment. It was there Roscío spent the night alone after her mother's death, keeping a solitary vigil she finally broke by walking to school the following morning.

When I look at Roscío across the classroom during our prep session, I wonder how she interprets the school's focus on preparing for the test. I wonder

¹ While these stories are true, the students' names and certain other factors that might divulge their identities have been changed.

if she had testing experiences of this kind in Mexico, and if so, what they might have meant for her. Here, though the stakes are high for the school, the results of these tests will have little academic impact on ELLs. Instead, teacher recommendations, local school guidelines about time spent in the program, and the results of assessment tools specifically designed to measure English proficiency will determine Roscío's placement for next year. In the classroom where I'm preparing students who don't speak English to take a test that may determine the fate of the school, I look again at Roscío and ask myself what I'm doing here. Why have I taken on the responsibility for showing these students what they will be facing in a month or so, for trying to give them instruction in how to take the test? I don't believe in standardized tests. I don't believe that young people should be subjected to the kind of pressure that can make them freeze, cheat, or just give up.

I think of a student from Ecuador who enrolled in school two days before the test. Placed alongside her ELL peers, given pencils and a test booklet in English, she looked around her, put her head down on the desk, and wept for the entire day. She was reacting as much to the atmosphere of her new school as to the prospect of a test in a language she didn't know.

The culture of the school changes during the weeklong battery, when each day is assigned its content area. The change is a response to the "secure" nature of the tests. The atmosphere becomes military at best, prison-like at worst. Regulations are distributed. Teachers are warned that state examiners may appear unannounced to look for infractions of the myriad rules. Stories are told of teachers in unspecified nearby districts who lost their teaching licenses because students were observed to be conversing before everyone in the room had completed a test section. The week before testing, all classroom posters are covered, lest they remind students of the steps of the writing process or hint at ways to interpret text. Administrators make the rounds, performing official inspections, ticking off what must be removed or covered, and announcing that on their return they expect to find a classroom that passes muster.

Students are called to a meeting in which they're informed that if they are tardy on a testing day, they will spend the day doing silent work and take the test the following week. They're told they may not leave their desks during the test. They're told that if they're disruptive in any way they'll be escorted from the classroom and assigned to in-school suspension. They're told the penalty for cheating will be out-of-school suspension. In both cases they'll take the test the week after their classmates do. They're told that opening a test booklet before the

teacher announces the test has started could invalidate all of the tests for the entire school, that the school could then be fined tens of thousands of dollars, and that the test would have to be readministered.

As I contemplate this harsh reality, I think of Alberto. He offers a picture of a student caught in the web of “pernicious insistence on measurable standards, high stakes tests, and accountability that has filtered down to even the youngest children and their teachers” (Silin, and Lippman, 2003, pp. 67-68).

I watched Alberto for months, hoping to understand him better. He spoke Spanish to his fellow students but never uttered a word of English in class. This isn't unusual newcomer behavior; Krashen is credited with calling attention to this “preproduction” stage of second language acquisition (Facella, Rampino, and Shea, 2003). It's a period of anywhere from a few weeks to a year, during which new ELLs may use silence as a language-learning tool. Instead of talking, they observe and listen, gathering data about their new environment and its language.

When I learned that Alberto's parents had left him in Ecuador with his grandparents when they came to the U.S. six years before, I felt he might need extra time to adjust to what was essentially a new family. When I found him cheating on quizzes and copying his classmates' assignments, I withheld judgment. When I asked him to read a poem to me in Spanish, he froze. I began to suspect that he was illiterate. Then, bizarrely, I received a report that he'd made the only perfect score in the class on the weekly online tracking assessments. I was certain it was either a fluke, or that he'd broken the code—or that a friend had. It wasn't long before it was discovered that another student had figured out the programming and shared the secrets with several others, including Alberto.

Determined to understand his problems, one day I invited Alberto to sit next to my desk and asked the students to write about their homes in their first countries. Separated from others whose papers he could copy, Alberto wrote nothing. I asked him to stay after class to talk about it. By then, I was convinced that he was unable to read or write. My observations had also convinced me that he had developed some very sophisticated perceptual and communicative techniques, often bypassing verbal communication so skillfully that you didn't notice he hadn't spoken.

I told him, in my broken Spanish, “*Yo se que el trabajo de la escuela es muy dificil para ti.*” (I know that schoolwork is very difficult for you.) He nodded, and with a half smile his face expressed a sadness that was piercing. Then I told him, “*Y tambien yo se que tu eres muy inteligente.*” (And I also know that you are very

intelligent.) Tears welled in his eyes and he began to sob. I wondered if anyone had ever acknowledged to him how hard he had worked to bluff his way through seven years of schooling without reading or writing. I was filled with respect for this young man who was mustering ways to cope, and I began to lobby hard for the special help he deserved. A year later Alberto was transferred into special education classes.

I glance at the clock. It's time, according to the script the state provides, to announce that the class has ten more minutes to work. I scan the room, gazing at my test prep class, and sigh. I do know why I'm here. I'm here to know these students and to know their stories, to provide some sanctuary from a threatening environment in which being too intimidated to perform academically becomes more than a possibility. I'm not yet ready to take on the government agencies that mandate unreasonable and unreliable assessment measures, but I can help prepare students by teaching them what to expect.

I must remember this as the test marches toward us.

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