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# The relationship between the CAHSEE and quality of education for Raza students

Jessica M. Rodriguez  
*San Jose State University*

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CAHSEE AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION  
FOR RAZA STUDENTS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Mexican American Studies

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jessica M. Rodriguez

August 2008

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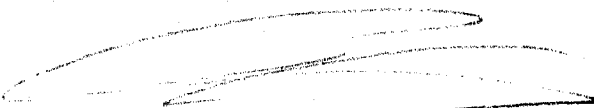
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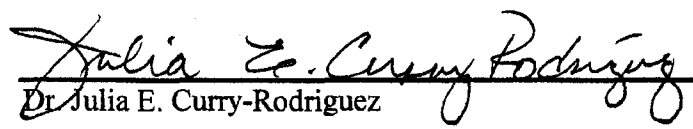
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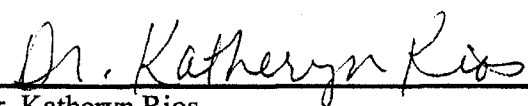
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Dr. Marcos Pizarro




---

Dr. Julia E. Curry-Rodriguez



---


Dr. Katheryn Rios



---

Dr. Louis Holscher

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY



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Rhea I. Williamson 07/07/08

## ABSTRACT

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CAHSEE AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION FOR RAZA STUDENTS

by Jessica M. Rodriguez

This thesis addresses the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) and its effects on Raza students. The objective is to understand the relationship between the preparation for the CAHSEE and the preparation of students to become complete learners. This study finds that the emphasis placed on the CAHSEE forced teachers to change their curriculum to focus on the exam, taking away from students' overall quality of education. Intervention courses created to ensure passage of the exam, limit students' exposure to classes as well as on higher order and critical thinking skills. This study also finds that the CAHSEE negatively affects English language learners because they are at a disadvantage due to their lack of mainstream academic language. This study recommends California look into alternate forms of assessment that would ensure that all students have the skills necessary to succeed after high school while narrowing the achievement gap.

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## DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this thesis to two women, who although they are not here physically, are always supporting me spiritually.

In Memory of

Grandma Ramona Peña  
&  
Coach Lupe Contreras



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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My first experience with the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) was when I was asked to teach the Intensive Intervention Program at a continuation high school in Southern California. Although I do not have a background in English I was asked to teach the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the CAHSEE. I took on this challenge knowing little about what the CAHSEE entailed or the subject matter covered in the exam. As I familiarized myself with both the students and the CAHSEE, I became interested in how the CAHSEE affects students. I saw how much work my students were putting into preparing for the exam and witnessed the disappointment they felt when they found out that they had not passed; some students did not pass by only one point. In reviewing the students' previous scores, I noticed a trend. For many of my students, the more times they took the exam, the lower scores they received. This sparked my interest and thus I wanted to research the CAHSEE further to understand how it is affecting Raza students in the educational system.

The education system in the United States has proven time and again to be inferior for students of color and for students of lower socio economic status (Valencia, 2002). Historically, legislation has hindered the ability of minority students to succeed in post secondary education. Tracking has been used in high schools as an unwritten barrier that often prevented students of color from succeeding (Valencia, 2002). In the State of California there has never been such a dramatic barrier to students of color achieving high school success as the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). The CAHSEE was introduced in 2002 and has negatively affected post high school possibilities for

minority students. Moreover, the CAHSEE also affects the quality of education students receive while in high school because of the demands placed upon teachers and schools to ensure passage of the test as a sign of academic success.

California became a majority-minority state in 2000. Thus the state provides a perfect opportunity to understand how this type of exam affects students of color. Understanding the impacts in California will provide important information about how Chicano/Latino students in particular are affected because they represent the largest minority group in the state. The CAHSEE not only has negative implications for individual students, but it also has policy and social implications for the future of California's educational preparedness. The CAHSEE was initially designed to ensure that all graduating high school students could provide a level of mastery of the basic academic skills in order to close the achievement gap. A close examination of the exam practices, however, suggest it is widening the achievement gap between students of color and White students.

The CAHSEE is a newly added requirement in California high schools with many aspects that have not yet been researched. The relationship between the CAHSEE and Raza students is important to explore because these students will be critical to the economic well being of the state and nation as adults. Research has shown that Hispanic/Latino students do not pass the first time they take the CAHSEE at a disproportionately higher rate than White and Asian students (HumRRO, 2007). An important concern from these findings is increasing the achievement gap between Raza and White students. Increasing this gap may also augment ethnic power relations when

students are merely learning how to pass a test rather than becoming complete learners. Because a larger number of Raza are not passing the exam the first time they take it, they are being tracked into a path where the curriculum is based on lower standards and where they have access to a smaller variety of courses, and less opportunity for teachers to broaden the curriculum to engage students in the learning process. Therefore, Raza students are often receiving an inferior education compared to their White counterparts due to the emphasis put on the passing scores on the CAHSEE.

The focus of this study is to determine the relationship between the preparation for the CAHSEE and the preparation for students to become complete learners. The term “complete learner” was derived from the vision statement of the school site researched in this study. The vision of this school is that “All students will be effective communicators, quality producers, self-directed learners, critical thinkers, and responsible citizens.” For this school, an effective communicator is one who demonstrates proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The student demonstrates proficiency in visual communication and technology skills and is able to identify and respond to a variety of texts at appropriate academic grade levels. A quality producer sets, pursues, and accomplishes realistic and challenging performance standards. This student creates a finished product to appropriate standards, and analyzes and uses models and/or rubrics to evaluate and check progress. Self-directed learners seek and utilize resources necessary to develop and complete a quality performance or product. They meet deadlines and remain focused on tasks, while assessing their performance or product. A critical thinker is one who demonstrates proficiency in fundamental skills in math, reading, literacy, and

writing. This student develops higher order questioning skills, analyzes information, and synthesizes solutions related to the subject matter and high stakes testing, while applying a variety of techniques in problem solving. Lastly, the school expects their students to become responsible citizens who choose to follow established standards of behavior, work cooperatively with others, and show respect for others and self through language and behavior. These Expected School wide Learning Results (ESLR) are the foundation of what I call a “complete learner”. This study attempts to understand how, if at all, the CAHSEE affects students becoming complete learners.

#### Explanation of Terms Used in This Study

This study contains terms and acronyms that are explained here, in order for the reader to have a complete understanding of them throughout the document. First of all, testing scores were categorized dichotomously into “pass” –“no pass” in lieu of the term “fail”. This was done because the term “fail” carries a negative connotation that I wish not to pass onto any student who did not pass the exam. A student who has successfully completed classes yet does not pass the exam has not failed. On the contrary, this study finds it is the legislation and enacted testing procedure that is failing the California high school students.

**CAHSEE:** California High School Exit Examination.

**EL or ELL:** English language learners are students whose first language was not English.

**ESLR:** Expected Schoolwide Learning Results: effective communicator, quality producer, self-directed learner, and responsible citizen. This is the foundation of what this research describes as a “complete learner”.

**Raza:** used to encompass people of Chicano, Latino, Hispanic, Mexican, or Mexican-American backgrounds. I did not ask students of these backgrounds how they identify themselves, rather I chose to use this term as a conventional practice in Chicana/o Studies and to provide a common term for the students addressed in this project. I also use the term Chicano/Latino or Hispanic, when citing scholarship that uses those terms.

**SDAIE:** Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English. These are courses designed to improve students’ English skills, across disciplines.

Through the rest of the document, this research shows that the quality of education Raza students receive is being negatively affected by the emphasis placed on the CAHSEE. In reviewing data, it is shown that Raza students do not pass the CAHSEE at a higher rate than White students, thus placing them in a track focused on CAHSEE test strategies and content. The literature review will give a foundation of which we can understand why Raza students might perform worse than White students.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section describes the background literature currently available for the CAHSEE. Because the exam is a new addition to the education sector, there are limited published studies reviewing and assessing its effectiveness. The literature review will provide an analysis of the data available on student performance on the CAHSEE, an analysis of testing and race, and an overview of the impact testing can have on student skill development.

### Background Information on the California High School Exit Examination

The California High School Exit Exam was first introduced and passed by the California State Senate in 1999 with SB2X. This bill would later be included in the national No Child Left Behind Act enacted by President George W. Bush in 2002. The premise for this test was to "ensure that all high school graduates have achieved a solid foundation of knowledge and skills in English -language arts and mathematics, based on state adopted content standards" (California Department of Education [CDE], 2006) . It is thought that this exam was needed to ensure that students would have the skills necessary to succeed as productive members of society while closing the achievement gap that exists between students. Proponents of the exam argue that the CAHSEE tests for knowledge that would lead students to succeed after high school. The CAHSEE is a non-timed two-part exam including both Math and English Language Arts (ELA). Thus, in theory, students can take as much time as they need in order to finish. A passing score for each section is 350; students must pass each portion of the CAHSEE to receive a high school diploma. According to The California Department of Education, "All public high



school students must take the CAHSEE for the first time in grade ten. Students who do not pass the CAHSEE in grade ten will have two opportunities in grade eleven and up to three opportunities in grade 12 to pass the exam.” California began implementing the exam in the 2002 school year. Within the first four years, the test was contested through different lawsuits (e.g. *Valenzuela v. O’Connell*) delaying the mandated start date for the exam. After a long court battle, the high school class of 2006 was the first graduating class required to pass the CAHSEE to receive a high school diploma. If a student has met all other requirements for graduation but does not pass any one section of the exam, the student is not able to receive an official high school diploma. Individual school districts decided whether to allow these students to participate in graduation ceremonies, award them a certificate of completion, or offer another alternative to a diploma.

As a stipulation for the exam, the state of California is required to have an independent evaluation each year of the CAHSEE. This report is done by the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) and gives statistics on passing rates aggregated by different demographics and offers recommendations on how to improve the exam. These reports can be found on the California Department of Education’s website along with teacher resources and practice exams. The following section explains the breakdown of passing rates and drop out rates provided by the evaluation of the CAHSEE, done by HumRRO.

#### Passing Rates for 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Students in the Class of 2006

In order to understand the disparity amongst groups of students, one must first look at the rate by which certain groups of students pass this examination. These rates

come from the “Summary of Results” from the California Department of Education (CDE, 2006) and reflect scores from the first time 10<sup>th</sup> grade students taking the English Language Arts (ELA) section of the exam throughout California. This study provides statistics broken down by race, class, and language. In Table 1, we compare students by race. White students pass at the highest rate of 88% with Asian students closely following with an 85% passing rate. African American students pass at a 63% level, while Hispanic/Latino students pass at a 62% rate. Table 2 shows there is a greater disparity when comparing students of different economic status. This study defines an economically disadvantaged student as one who qualifies for free or reduced lunch. Non-economically disadvantaged students passed at an 87% rate whereas economically disadvantaged students passed at a 60% rate. While these rates are alarming, the most significant difference comes with language, as seen in Table 3. English-only students pass at an 82% rate while English Language Learners (EL) pass at a 39% rate.

The statistics are similar for the passing rates on the math portion of the exam. 90% of Asian students passed the math section the first time taking the exam and White students passed at an 87%. Latino/Hispanic students passed at a somewhat higher rate than African American students with a passing rate of 61% and 54%, respectively. Economically disadvantaged students passed at 61% compared to 85% of non-economically disadvantaged students. Again, English learners (49%) had a lower passing rate than their English Only peers (78%). These statistics are an important starting point because the class of 2006 is the first class that was directly affected by the CAHSEE and thus it can be accurately assessed whether the achievement gap is shrinking.

*Table 1: Passing rates for 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in the class of 2006 broken down by race.*

<b>Race</b>	<b>Number Tested ELA</b>	<b>Number Passed ELA</b>	<b>Percent Passed ELA</b>	<b>Number Tested Math</b>	<b>Number Passed Math</b>	<b>Percent Passed Math</b>
Asian	42,302	35,811	85%	42,237	38,529	91%
Hispanic/Latino	183,260	113,042	62%	183,037	111,710	61%
African American	35,805	22,422	63%	35,507	19,318	54%
White	162,818	143,949	88%	161,699	140,287	87%

(CDE, 2006)

*Table 2: Passing rates by class*

<b>Class</b>	<b>Number Tested ELA</b>	<b>Number Passed ELA</b>	<b>Percent Passed ELA</b>	<b>Number Tested Math</b>	<b>Number Passed Math</b>	<b>Percent Passed Math</b>
Economically Disadvantaged	180,642	108,473	60%	180,079	109,209	61%
Non- Economically Disadvantaged	200,691	175,092	87%	199,914	170,090	85%

(CDE, 2006)

*Table 3: Passing rates by language*

Language	Number	Number	Percent	Number	Number	Percent
	Tested	Passed	Passed	Tested	Passed	Passed
	ELA	ELA	ELA	Math	Math	Math
English Only	277,584	226,410	82%	275,823	215,424	78%
English Learner	81,027	31,757	39%	80,909	39,789	49%

(CDE, 2006)

#### Passing Rates for the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Students in the Class of 2007

Although the goal of the CAHSEE is to close the achievement gap, it continues to achieve the opposite and continues to remain the same over time. Passing rates for Hispanic/Latino students, economically disadvantaged students, and English language learners in the class of 2007 continue to remain relatively low while White, non-economically disadvantaged, and English only students' scores either improve or remain the same. On the English-language arts section of the exam, Hispanic/Latino students passed at a 65% rate while White students passed at an 89% rate. Economically disadvantaged students had a passing rate of 63%, while their counterparts passed at an 88% rate. Once again the most dramatic difference came with language; English language learners passed at a 42% rate, while English only students passed at an almost doubled rate of 83%. Six years after the implementation of the CAHSEE, Raza students pass at a much lower rate than their counterparts.

Similar differences between scores can be found on the mathematics section of the exam. As we see in Table 4, when comparing students by race, Asian students scored the highest with 92% of the students in this subgroup passing and White students came in a close second with an 87% pass rate. Hispanic/Latino students still passed at a much lower rate of 62%, emphasizing a considerable difference when compared to both their Asian and White peers. Table 5 shows economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students faced another wide difference with a passing rate of 61% and 85% respectively. Again in Table 6 we see English learners passed at a 49% rate, while English only students passed with a 78% rate. (CDE, 2006)

*Table 4: Passing rates for 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in the class of 2007 broken down by race*

Race	Number Tested ELA	Number Passed ELA	Percent Passed ELA	Number Tested Math	Number Passed Math	Percent Passed Math
Asian	42,485	36,455	86%	42,342	38,819	92%
Hispanic/Latino	191,434	124,700	65%	190,746	118,610	62%
African American	38,105	24,570	64%	37,822	20,754	55%
White	163,223	145,644	89%	162,069	141,079	87%

(CDE, 2006)

*Table 5: Passing rates by economic status*

Economic status	Number Tested ELA	Number Passed ELA	Percent Passed ELA	Number Tested Math	Number Passed Math	Percent Passed Math
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Economically Disadvantaged	190,899	120,660	63%	189,870	116,618	61%
Non-Economically Disadvantaged	212,480	187,336	88%	211,403	180,698	85%

(CDE, 2006)

*Table 6: Passing rates by language*

Language	Number Tested ELA	Number Passed ELA	Percent Passed ELA	Number Tested Math	Number Passed Math	Percent Passed Math
English Only	283,498	234,043	83%	281,785	220,409	78%
English Learner	82,573	35,014	42%	81,978	39,879	49%

(CDE, 2006)

Similar to the classes of 2006 and 2007, the passing scores for Chicano/Latino students for the class of 2008 remain relatively low. According to the Summary of Results, "On both parts of the CAHSEE, the passing rates of Hispanic/Latino and African American students were lower than the state passing rate." The same can be said for economically disadvantaged students and English language learners (CDE, 2006). There has been no evidence to show that there is significant improvement for these first time test takers. It is important to remember that these are only data and there has not been research yet on correlations and we do not know about causality

Some might argue that these statistics are not as important as graduation rates because these students are predicted to pass at a higher rate by the end of their 12<sup>th</sup> grade year. Yet the data for the first time test takers are the most important to analyze because they are predictors of which students will then be placed in the state mandated parallel and intervention classes that focus more on passing the exam than receiving the same quality of education as their peers who have already passed the exam, creating another gap not measured by the data.

#### Potential Effects on Drop Out Rate

One of the anticipated outcomes of the CAHSEE is that the drop out rate will rise due to the number of students not being able to pass the exam or students giving up as a result of their scores on the CAHSEE. As of 2008, California has had no tracking system in place to keep record of high school drop outs; there is no way of finding out if students dropped out of school altogether, changed schools, moved out of the state, or received a GED (General Education Degree). This makes it difficult to calculate how the drop out rate has been affected by the CAHSEE, but according to the "Independent Evaluation of the CAHSEE: 2007 Evaluation report", by looking at the drop out rate for the class of 2002, which is the year the exam was administered but not required, to the drop out rate for the class of 2006, we can see that the drop out rate has indeed increased.

Graduation rates declined by about 4 percentage points for the class of 2006 (the most recent data available), the first year students were required to pass the CAHSEE to obtain a diploma. Similarly, dropout rates increased, most markedly in Grade 12. (HummRRO, 2007, p. 6)

With the number of dropouts on the rise, it is interesting to see how many of these drop outs are Raza students. According to the California Department of Education, in 2002

the drop out rate for Hispanic students was 14.6% while the drop out rate for White students was 6.7%. Comparing that to the class of 2006 we can see that while the percentage of students who drop out rises in both groups we can see a larger increase with Hispanic students, where the Hispanic drop out rate was 19.7% and the White rate was 8.9%.

In the HumRRO report (2007) it states “The number of dropouts in Grade 12 increased from 14,202 in 2002 to 24, 097 in 2006.” That is a 71% increase in the dropout rate for students in grade 12 alone. The link between the dropout rate and the CAHSEE has not yet been established due to the lack of tracking in the education system until recently. It is important to look deeper into the drop out rate and understand how there could have been such a dramatic increase in dropouts for the first year that the CAHSEE became mandatory. One reason for this increase may be that students who may not pass the CAHSEE chose other options such as entering the workforce instead of completing their high school education. One author writes, “The relationship between higher standards and dropout rate is not hard to understand. Researchers have found that early disaffection with school programs that fail to meet their needs...cause students and their families to look on early labor market entry as a rational alternative to continued schooling” (Valenzuela, 2004, p. 44). This may be the case with the CAHSEE.

#### Schools with High Densities of Students of Color

According to an independent evaluation of the CAHSEE by HumRRO, there is “a persistent and perplexing problem” which is the “finding of a strong relationship between the density of minority and low income students in a school and low performance on the



CAHSEE” (HumRRO, 2007, p. 8). For example, statistics show that a Chicano/Latino student going to a school that has a high density of Chicano/Latino students will do worse on the exit exam than a similar student that attends a school with a low density of Chicano/Latino students. The same can be said for other minority students and economically disadvantaged groups. The review states that

Students in demographic groups with low pass rates (minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities) in schools with a high proportion of similar students continue to have lower passing rates than students in these groups in schools with fewer similar students. (2007)

This is crucial to discuss because it goes against a common theme that blames the victim. For example, many people think that Chicanos and Latinos do not succeed because they either do not try hard enough or because it is in their culture. This finding shows that there are many factors that are intertwined and make it difficult for certain students, in this case Chicanos and Latinos, to succeed in the educational arena. (HumRRO, 2007)

Similarly, scores for Hispanic students in schools where they were 14 percent or less of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment were nearly 20 points higher than scores for Hispanic students in schools where they were more than two-thirds of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment. Similar mean score differences were found for low-income students, for English Language learners, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, for students with disabilities (HumRRO, 2007, p. 4).

Most of the schools that contain a large number of Chicano/Latino students are at times in low-income communities and have a large number of English language learners. This can be a reason why Chicano/Latino students pass at lower rates than White students. As I will discuss, there are many biases in standardized testing that provide an unfair disadvantage for English language learners and students of lower socio-economic status. It is no wonder that students at schools with higher densities of Chicanos and

Latinos pass at a much lower rate than if those students who go to a school where they were not the majority. Schools in poorer communities tend to be in communities of color, which are linked to under-funding and less resources and in turn an inferior education for minority students. The lower CAHSEE scores merely demonstrate the inequalities in our educational system, not the inability of Chicano/Latino students to succeed in the educational system. The CAHSEE and NCLB were created to close the achievement gap and to shed light on the inequalities in our system, but neither has served as a solution for the problem. On the contrary to what the proponents of the CAHSEE claim, by attaching high stakes to testing we are, in a sense, punishing our students for something beyond their control, the language they were taught, the economic position they were born into, and the inferior schooling that they receive.

The data and findings from these published works indicate lower rates of passing among Raza, economically disadvantaged, and English Learning students. Overall, drop out rates also increased during this time. High schools with larger student compositions of students of color, economically-disadvantaged, and English learning status were more likely to have students not pass the CASHEE the first time it was administered to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. Aside from demographically skewed student population, other test-related factors may be at play. Therefore, the following provides a more in-depth discussion of the literature on high stakes testing.

#### High Stakes Testing

High stakes testing became popular during the late 1980's (Johnson et al., 2008) and yet the debate remains as to whether or not standardized testing is a valid assessment

of what students have learned. Proponents say that this is the only objective way to really test the knowledge students have acquired during their schooling, while opponents argue that not only is the test biased and ineffective but that it takes away instructional time from teachers. Graves (2002) argues that testing is not teaching and testing takes away from the “ideal” students, which among other things creates a learner who is able to continue to grow and learn. Graves (2002) writes, “I state the case in terms of ‘learner’ because the evidence is clear that regardless of skill the learner of the future must continually be able to learn new things in the course of a lifetime” (p. 23). The learner that Graves discusses, is one that is socially engaged and ready for college because of its ability to continually learn, with its higher order analytical skills. This is important to remember in regards to the California High School Exit Exam because students are being prepared to pass this test and while some pass the first time, many do not. The more times the students have to take the test, the more time is wasted and taken away from students’ access to new curriculum and building upon the material that they already know. Graves (2002) writes,

Sadly, one of the greatest tragedies of our modern-day schools is the proliferation of alliterate children, who can read but choose not to because there’s no real opportunity to engage with books. The pronounced emphasis on testing has created an enormous imbalance between skills and the purposes behind those skills. In short, children repeatedly lose a sense of the function of reading.” (p. 2)

This tragedy is at its height today with the increased rate both of student testing and such high stakes, which have implications for both the students and the schools. When students focus solely on testing strategies and learning content in order to pass a test, they lose their ability to become the “ideal learner” that Graves introduced.

## Racism in Testing

We have seen how the CAHSEE has disproportionately affected Raza students, specifically those in schools with a high density of minority students. This section discusses the racist and classist foundation of testing, helping us understand why minority and economically disadvantaged students do not succeed on standardized tests. Achievement and standardized testing has had a history of bias based on race or ethnicity. Tests, such as the SAT, have undergone major reconstruction to be viewed as “fair” or less discriminatory. This change in test practice was done as a result of years of opposition from those arguing the validity of the tests. This example should in itself make one skeptical of using standardized testing as a measurement of achievement and yet it continues today.

To understand the biases of standardized tests, we must first look at the foundation of testing. The testing movement has been attributed to an English biologist named Sir Frances Galton; also known for openly discussing his racist ideology. One author described him by saying, “Galton was also a racist and classist in his ideology and in his work” (Valencia, 2002, p. 256). In using Galton’s work and ideology as a foundation for the testing movement, it is important to question whether his personal beliefs were passed on to standardized tests. With the large number of minority and economically disadvantaged students not passing the CAHSEE, we are seeing the implications of this foundation. When minority students do worse on tests than their White peers, it has led to the assumption that they are academically inferior. This

ideology has led to the creation of a two-tiered curriculum, in which minority students are placed in a tracking system that leads to the entrance into the workforce.

Standardized testing assumes that each student has mainstream cultural competency. The creator(s) of these types of exams assume that all students are equipped with the same background knowledge, thus creating cultural biases. Valencia writes that, "Test bias in the case of race/ethnicity is often referred to as *cultural bias*" (Valencia 2002, p. 262). Along with the assumption of cultural competency, one critique of standardized testing is that students of color were left out of the trial samples. One study suggests that

In addition to the issues of omission of minority students in the standardization samples, allegations of culturally biased items, and failure to appropriately assess language minority students, critics during the late 1960's and early 1970's also argued that the observed mean-level differences of performance on intelligence tests between, for example, White and African American students were due to an inherent bias in the overall structure of the test themselves. (Valencia 2002, p. 262)

Once again, the CAHSEE is comparable to the intelligence tests from the 1960's and 1970's; the bias of each exam leads to lower test scores for students of color. These test scores lead to the educational gap we see today.

Racism in testing has led to curriculum change for minority students. This change has been validated by the idea that since these students score lower on intelligence tests, they are innately inferior. "Historical analysis of intelligence testing and curriculum differentiation in 1920's and early 1930's Los Angeles public schools informs us that deficit thinking in relation to the schooling of Mexican American boys and girls was influential in shaping very limited educational and occupational opportunities for these students" (Valencia, 2002, p. 259). The use of standardized

testing in the 1920's and 1930's is comparable to the tracking system created by the CAHSEE; each in their own way prepares students to become laborers.

### When Testing Lowers Content Standards

Testing and test biases, lead to students being placed in intervention courses focusing on the CAHSEE. This section discusses the content standards covered by the exam, showing that we are actually lowering our standards for students. The CAHSEE's content is based on middle school state standards. The ELA portion of the exam tests "up to" tenth grade standards, while the math portion tests 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade math and some Algebra 1 (EdSource, 2006, p. 2). We see here that although the premise of the exam is to make sure that every high school graduate has the basic skills necessary to function in society, if you look solely at the content standards upon which the exam is based, you will notice that we are actually lowering the bar in regards to standards. "A massive effort is under way to ensure that all children will achieve. Unfortunately, it is at the point of measuring progress that the President's effort will stumble. Standards, instead of being raised, will be lowered" (Graves, 2002, p. 32). By lowering standards our educational system is asking students to go back and re-learn material taught to them years earlier. This is a consequence faced by students who do not pass the exam the first time as they are then placed into a tracking system that focuses on raising their test scores. The more times a student does not pass the exam, the longer they will be exposed to these standards. As Garcia and Gopal write,

The potential implication is that factors that contribute to students' achievement may be related more to access to content standards more than poor academic skills. The academic focus may be better suited by increased access to college preparatory classes rather than increased remediation. (2002, p. 13)

As discussed as in an earlier section, because Raza students do not perform well on this form of standardized testing, they are put into remedial classes which prevent these students from taking courses that would enrich their learning and prepare them for college. Teaching students to pass a test is simply that, to pass a test. "Testing is not teaching. Instead of preparing children for tests, teachers need to teach the skills that will, in fact, make them better readers" (Graves, 2002, p. 33).

#### Comparing the CAHSEE with "Texas Style Accountability"

The national No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 was based primarily on the state of Texas' accountability system and used the "success" of Texas as a way to validate their decision (Valenzuela, 2004, p. 7). Angela Valenzuela's book, *Leaving Children Behind: How "Texas Style" Accountability Fails Latino Youth* analyzes the way in which Texas' accountability system, which is similar to California's, is detrimental to Latino youth in three main ways. According to Valenzuela those ways are

...for attaching high stakes consequences-in the areas of retention, promotion, and graduation- to a single measure of students' academic abilities; for attaching high stakes consequences to schools and districts and thereby encouraging a reductionist, test driven curriculum; and for promoting a uniform and objectionist way of knowing, to the detriment of other cultures, languages, and approaches to knowledge.  
(2004, p. 2)

We should compare the CAHSEE and California's accountability style to that of Texas for multiple reasons. First of all, Texas has had a similar exit exam in place for over a decade. This gives California a glimpse into where the state may be headed if they continue using this form of testing. We can also understand how the CAHSEE came to be in California because as McNeil writes,

Even more important to the immediate future, the Texas testing system has, by force of federal law, become the driving education policy for the entire nation. It was the model for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2002, a law that dramatically shifts control over public schools to the federal government (2004, p. 58).

Texas' high school exit exam is called the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and has been under high scrutiny since its implementation (McNeil, 2004). One of the critiques of this high stakes test, by which a high school diploma is granted, is that it is only a single faceted assessment, not a comprehensive one. Valenzuela (2004) writes, "We insist that students have a right to be assessed in a complete and fair manner, using as many criteria as may reasonably indicate children's cognitive abilities and potential" (p. 2). This argument is supported by the idea that standardized testing alone cannot measure a student's ability or potential because, as she later writes, "The very notion of a mainstream, standardized educational experience implies a systematic disregard of children's personal, cultural, and community based identities" (p. 4). This is true for many Raza students because testing assumes a sort of standard cultural competency while also expecting that students are all exposed to the same materials and experiences asked in the exam.

In trying to make a more just system of accountability in the state of Texas, a group tried to introduce a bill seeking a sliding scale, which would add other factors such as grades and courses taken, as an assessment of a students' ability to receive a high school diploma. In defense they argued, "The burden should be on the state to demonstrate that *less* information is better and that current failure rates are adequate, reasonable, and acceptable" (Valenzuela, 2004, p.8). This argument shows the inadequacy of one test's ability to prove what students have achieved. This led to a



movement in Texas that fought for a more just form of assessment in Texas schools. The court case, *GI Forum et al. Vs. Texas Education Agency et al.* (2000) was the stepping-stone used in order to “promote the use of multiple compensatory criteria for academic assessment” (Valenzuela, 2004, p. 5). This was the premise of the movement because, as stated before, more information is usually a better determinant of students’ achievement overall compared to their ability to perform well on one test. The movement towards a fair assessment practice came short due to pressure coming from the President’s office urging Congress to vote down a bill asking for changes in the current accountability system in Texas. In hindsight, the movement was shut down because the President’s office was going to use the Texas style accountability as the basis for the NCLB Act and felt that any opposition would be seen as weakening the national legislation (Valenzuela, 2004, p.7).

One positive affect that a multi-faceted approach to assessment would have on the quality of education students receive would be that students who otherwise might not excel on a standardized test would have the chance to show in other ways what they have learned. One study states that, “Decisions based on multiple criteria rather than on test scores in isolation also have been shown to have a smaller adverse impact on minorities and women (Valenzuela, 2004, p.7). This is especially significant for California to explore more in depth because of the adverse effect the CAHSEE is having on minority students. One of the recommendations of an independent evaluation of the CAHSEE was to do exactly that, look into an alternate way of evaluating students. HumRRO’s recommended that, “California should continue to explore alternate routes to

demonstrating proficiency. Programs that consider grades and other factors besides test scores, introduced in Massachusetts and Washington, provide examples for consideration” (HumRRO, 2007, p. 10). The authors of this report are recommending the same thing that people in Texas were asking for, a fair method of assessment. Regrettably, their recommendations were not acted upon. So the question now is, will California follow in the footsteps of Texas or will they take the recommendations of HumRRO? Because the CAHSEE falls under the NCLB Act, it seems as though no changes will be made to the current practice anytime in the near future.

Valenzuela predicts that if other states follow the same path to high stakes testing as Texas, they will be sure to find the same results. She writes that states “will find that an accountability system based on standardized testing reduces educational quality, produces unnecessary failures, and fakes its claims to more equitable schooling” (2004, p. 58). These are the outcomes that California should be aware of since we are following in the footsteps of Texas’ form of accountability.

#### Student-Teacher Accountability

As we have seen, standardized testing is problematic in various ways but tests such as the CAHSEE have been upheld primarily because of its claim to hold individuals accountable for their own success. “Accountability...is being driven by high stakes testing, a form of testing in which test results hold important consequences or students, their parents and teachers, schools, districts, and administrators” (Valencia 2002, p. 287). The CAHSEE in particular was created to hold students accountable for their education and thus their success after high school. This theory of accountability puts all the

responsibility on the individuals without regard or accountability for the institution as a whole. This is a way in which policy makers can take the blame off of the inequalities that the structure of our education system creates and thus put the blame on the individual students. When looking at accountability from the bottom-up, it starts with the students to the teachers, the schools to the district, and so on. California has adopted this form of accountability but when looking at why students are not performing well, we must also take into consideration the inequalities in the system. Who will hold the people on top accountable? Who will hold the system together as a whole? As Linda McSpadden McNeil states,

No one is held accountable for under-resourced classrooms, for dangerous school facilities, for exceptional literature collections, for significant and engaging student projects-or their absence, for enduring connections (or for deep cultural divides) between the school and the children's communities. School administrators, and, by extension, teachers are held accountable to produce scores on the state test (2004, p. 60).

There are many flaws in the educational system that standardized testing does not take into account. While it is holding individuals accountable, who is being held accountable for the many inequalities between schools? The court case, Williams vs. California called for the state to pay more attention to "low-achieving elementary, middle, and high schools that have deteriorating facilities, inadequate textbooks, and teachers who lack required credentials" (EdSource, 2006, p. 6). This court case has already established that there are grave discrepancies amongst schools throughout the state, leading us to question how these might affect student test scores. This question was already asked in Texas:

The question is whether the current conditions in Texas schools are merely the entrenched legacies from years of low teacher pay and scarce and unequal funding, or whether the system in place is further lowering educational quality and creating new

inequalities. To know the answer we must look inside the classrooms, inside the schools, and inside the workings of the state to see what mechanisms lie behind the numbers ” (McNeil, 2004, p. 87).

There is no balance in this system of accountability and if we wish to reach our ultimate goal of closing the achievement gap, we must look at the causes of it. The CAHSEE is like a Band-aid for the wounded education system; once we take the Band-aid off the problem will still exist.

### Testing and “Latino” Students

We have discussed different issues regarding testing and accountability and we have found that testing affects groups differently. In this research it is important to understand how testing has affected Raza students in the past, in order to see how it affects them now. Linda McSpadden McNeil (2004) analyzes how the Texas style of accountability, similar to the CAHSEE, produces unfair outcomes for Latino students in Texas. She argues the importance of these findings because Texas was used as the model for other states’ accountability systems.

In discussing different variables that lead to students not passing the exit exam in Texas, McNeil writes, “In this state, schools in Latino and African American neighborhoods are historically the least well resourced, the most likely to have been assigned teachers unqualified in their subjects, the least likely to have community resources that enrich children’s lives outside of school” (2004, p. 90). The same can be said for Raza students in California and there is a direct link between these factors and the success rate on the CAHSEE.

There is a positive correlation between higher CAHSEE passing rates and a higher percentage of teachers with subject-area credentials in math and English, but at risk students were less likely in general to have teachers with subject-area credentials. Students in schools with low CAHSEE pass rates were “11 times more likely to be in a school with critical shortages of fully credentialed teachers” and schools with high concentrations of English learners, economically disadvantaged, Latino, and African American students were more than likely to report having math teachers without subject-area credentials (EdSource, 2006, p. 6). Adding up all those factors we can see how Raza students are at a distinct disadvantage, especially those students who are English learners and/or economically disadvantaged. These factors along with the passing rates demonstrate that Raza students are greatly affected by the CAHSEE and as it has been shown that “students who failed CAHSEE suffer severe consequences such as remedial instruction, required summer school, and enrollment in special classes. Legislative regulations require academic interventions for students who fail CAHSEE” (Garcia and Gopal, 2003, p. 11). The high number of Raza students not passing the CAHSEE for the first time due to the factors I discuss here are suffering the consequences. Out of the subgroups discussed in this section, English learners are the most affected by the CAHSEE and thus need to be looked at in more depth.

#### Language Acquisition as a Predictor of Testing Success

As proven by the passing rates for English language learners compared to English only students, a major problem facing Raza students in California comes with language acquisition. Statistics have shown that those students whose first language is not English

pass at a drastically lower rate than their English only peers, thus making them more likely to drop out and more likely to be placed in intervention classes. Some proponents of the exit exam and NCLB alike say that these pieces of legislation were created in order to shed light on disparities in education so that English Language learners work towards closing the achievement gap. In theory, this sounds wonderful. Who could argue with the fact that there are disparities in our educational system? Who would argue against not “leaving children behind”? But in reality, standardized testing widens the gaps, especially for English language learners.

It has been found that one reason why English language learners do not perform as well as English only students is because they have less access to the same curriculum. The curriculum a student receives depends on the level of English a student has acquired. According to the article, Paul Garcia and Malati Gopal (2003, p. 13), “recent research suggests English learners do not have equal access to rigorous curricular content standards” Without access to higher content standards, Garcia and Gopal argue student performance on the CAHSEE is negatively affected. The article goes on to say, “Instructional effects of exit exams may exacerbate achievement differences between language-minority and language-majority students,” thus widening the gap that already exists between the two. This article researched the CAHSEE for two years after its implementation and noted that it has “not demonstrated to be an effective instrument to increase student achievement, improve educational reform, or close the achievement gap between language-minority and language majority students. Instead, this high stakes test has led to misguided educational practices that have masked a fundamental civil right, the

opportunity to learn" (Garcia and Gopal, 2003, p. 2).

According to the independent evaluation of the CAHSEE, one of the most surprising findings was that many English language learners had been enrolled in a school in the United States for a long time (HumRRO, 2007, p. 86). While there are a large number of English language learners that have been in the education system for some time, the study still showed that students who had been enrolled in English language development programs in the last few years had lower passing rates than the students who had been in the programs for a longer amount of time. The State of California allows that the "minimum time period for English instruction before taking the CAHSEE is six months" and students who do not pass the exam can defer the requirement for up to 24 months (Garcia and Gopal, 2003, p. 3). But according to the same article, "Research on second-language acquisition theory found it takes 4 to 7 years for English Learners to gain academic language skills in English," (2003, p. 3) which goes to prove that English language learner students, who have not been in the education system in the United States for at least 4 years, are being given a high stakes exam in which research has proven they do not have the language skills necessary to pass. This legislation also assumes

that classroom teachers have the expertise and resources needed to prepare students to meet new learning standards and that students are capable of learning the requisite material within a generally narrow time frame. Both assumptions are wrong.... including ELL students in the same accountability regime designed for English speakers will remain problematic well into the next decade (McNeil, as cited in Valenzuela, 2004, p.51).

It is shown in various ways that English language learners are at a large disadvantage in regards to the exit exam, and yet there have been no changes in the legislation to help these students pass. Until there is a change in the way we approach this situation, these students will continue to have low passing scores.

### Curricular Change as a Response to the CAHSEE

We have discussed the various reasons why students do not pass standardized tests, but what are the consequences facing teachers? For teachers, testing adds another thing to fit into their curriculum and with high stakes added, it creates a sense of urgency, adding pressure to change their curriculum to fit these tests. According to George W. Elford, "...external standardized testing has taken over. The schools' own curricula have been moved to the background" (Elford, 2002, p. 26). This section discusses how curriculum is affected by testing.

One result of standardized testing is the added amounts of time teachers have to focus on the test. Not only does the test itself take away time from other aspects of curriculum, but the test preparation takes a significant amount of time. As Graves asks, "How can reading, learning, or any other aspect of curriculum be improved if there is such a significant loss of teaching time?" (2002, pgs.2-3). In order to reach students, curriculum must appeal to them and "good teachers know the interests and passions of their students and know how to put good books in their hands. Testing has deprived teachers of the time they need to teach the skills that will enable children to become better readers" (2002, p. 2). Instead of teaching to the individual student's needs, standardized testing has created a change in curriculum to one that addresses the same



standards regardless of the individual student's needs. This drive towards a standardized curriculum is what Elford refers to as "Curriculum Alignment."

According to the "curriculum alignment" theory, all teachers in a particular grade level should be teaching the same materials on the same timeline as all the others. Thus, "a curriculum that does not teach the contents of the test at the appropriate grade level is not aligned properly. The appropriate grade level is determined by the grade level of the test in which the content is tested" (Elford 2002, p.28). This method of curriculum change is problematic in various ways. First, this system assumes that all schools have the same resources and all the teachers have the same qualifications to teach these standards. Secondly, this approach leaves little room for teachers to be creative with their curriculum thus having less ability to reach their students. This is not the only result of standardized testing. According to Elford, another impact is what he refers to as "cram curriculum" which results from intense test preparation.

Elford defines "cram curriculum" as the "process of intense preparation, using techniques refined in commercial test prep programs" (2002, p.29). He goes on to say, "Sadly, the most prominent result of test-based reform has been the alarming growth of the cram curriculum" (p. 32). Examples of these types include programs such as outside SAT preparation courses that often lead to the same sort of program on campus and during school hours. These also include the intervention programs associated with the CAHSEE. Classrooms have changed due to the current accountability system where curriculum has been modified "from learning content, ideas, and skills to learning how to take a standardized test" (McNeil, as cited in Valenzuela, 2004, p. 89). It has been proven

that the longer students stay in a system based on this form of accountability, the less they will have learned and the less they will carry with them onto the next grade level (McNeil 2005).

With the high rate of Raza students not passing the CAHSEE the first time taking the exam, the number of students involved in this type of learning is alarming. McNeil also addresses the impact of race on the testing of students in Texas. She states: "Thus, each year a child of color was in this system of schooling, the gap between his or her education and that of more affluent students was growing, not shrinking" (p.92). The same can be said for Raza students in California. This change in curriculum and how it affects students is the primary concern of this thesis; I am looking to find out how teachers have changed their curriculum due to the preparation for the CAHSEE.

In reviewing the literature and data available on the CAHSEE, it has been shown that high stakes testing has been, and continues to be problematic for minority students. Although the exam was created to test for knowledge that would help students succeed, ultimately closing the achievement gap, through the data collected by the independent evaluator of the CAHSEE we see that there are major disparities, for first time test takers, with regards to race, class, and language. It also shows that students, in demographic groups that have low passing rates that attend schools with a high proportion of similar students, perform worse on the CAHSEE than students in schools with fewer similar students (HumRRO, 2007). These findings set up the foundation for this research, showing us that there is a problem that needs to be addressed in future research. I then used the available literature to help us analyze the CAHSEE and problems associated

with it. I used Texas' style of accountability as a predictor of what may happen in California, because of the similarities in the structure of the accountability system.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on teachers. The objective is to examine how teachers are affected by the CAHSEE policies and practices in their classrooms and professions. I use qualitative research methods; specifically I interviewed teachers that are directly and indirectly affected by this test. I chose to interview teachers instead of students or administrators since my research is focused on how curriculum is affected by the preparation for the CAHSEE. I felt it was necessary to talk to the teachers themselves to figure out how, if at all, their classes are different because they have to focus on preparing students to pass this particular exit exam. Another reason I chose to interview teachers is because teachers are the heart of the schools. They are the glue between the curriculum and the students' learning. Because teachers are with students every day, they have a close connection with them and can provide a better sense of the overall picture of how this test preparation affects the students' learning.

In doing this research I sought to answer one main question. What is the relationship between the preparation for the California High School Exit Exam and the preparation for students to become complete learners? The answer to this question would help me answer my overall question; what is the relationship between the CAHSEE and the quality of education for Raza students? In this work I define a complete learner as one who exemplifies all of the Expected School Wide Learning Results, designated by the individual school. These are effective communicators, responsible citizens, critical thinkers, quality producers, self-directed learners, and collaborative workers. In my definition I also add that the complete learner is able to take a broad variety of courses

from different disciplines. This research attempts to determine if through the implementation of the CAHSEE, teachers lost the ability to prepare their students to become these complete learners.

I interviewed five English teachers, five math teachers, two science teachers, and two social studies teachers all from the same high school in Southern California. This specific high school is located in a suburb in Southeast Los Angeles County. There are more than 2800 students enrolled in the school. Eighty-three percent of the students are Hispanic, 10% White (not Hispanic), 3% African American, 3% Asian-Pacific Islander, and 1% other. More than half of the students are identified as Socio-economically disadvantaged and 25% are classified as English Learners. Due to the large percentage of Latino students, this school is a good model to understand how the preparation for the CAHSEE affects Raza students' ability to become complete learners, which I defined as a student who meets all of the Expected School Wide Learning Results and who is exposed to a variety of curriculum. This high school has a very high overall passing rate for the CAHSEE and thus I was interested in understanding how students are affected by this test in a school that is deemed "successful" with regard to the CAHSEE.

The first step in this research was to contact the principal at the school and obtain permission. Once granted permission to do research, I selected teachers to participate. I contacted one teacher from each of the subjects and asked them for a list of teachers in their department. From that list I began making phone calls, asking teachers if they would be able to participate in a short interview. The list was finalized once I had the consent of the specified amount of teachers for each department, selecting them on a first

come first serve basis.

The interviews went very well and the teachers were more than willing to share their experiences with me. I was concerned that some of the participants might be worried that administrators of their school and/or district would see their answers. I made sure that the participants understood that their identity would be kept strictly confidential. Due to the sensitivity of this project, in which participants are discussing issues related to their jobs, the participants will not be identified with the data.

Once we discussed the basis of my research and discussed how I would keep their identities confidential, we began the interviews. The interviews were held as a dialogue guided by my interview questions (see Appendix A). I began each interview by asking them what their experience had been with the CAHSEE in order to understand the degree in which each teacher was involved in the preparation for the exam. I also asked them about their teaching strategies and if the CAHSEE has affected those in any way. We discussed specific examples of how their teaching style has changed due to the exam and how it would be different if they did not have to prepare for the exam. Although these questions guided the interviews, some teachers brought up issues that others did not.

In analyzing the data I first separated the interviews by subject. I then went through each interview and looked for responses that would address my research question. I highlighted those responses and then looked for the common themes among the interviews. The analysis was very straightforward and precise because all of the teachers gave very clear responses and gave many examples.

## Limitations

This research is based on one school and is not representative of California as a whole. If given more time and resources, I would have interviewed all English and Math teachers and more Science and Social Science teachers. In taking these limitations into consideration I chose a school that I considered to be the best-case scenario; the school was in a district that had only a small number of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students not passing the CAHSEE. In my view, although these particular students are not as affected by the drop out problem as others in California, it is important to show that even the best-case scenario still has a tremendous effect on the quality of education that these students receive. The lack of data and research on the CAHSEE has created an overabundance of research possibilities. Although this study is not able to address all the variables involved with the CAHSEE, it does provide insight to one aspect that, along with other research, can be used to understand the affects of the CAHSEE as a whole. Future studies need to examine lower performing schools and find out how the CAHSEE affects those students. In addition, research should focus on immigration status as a variable in CAHSEE scores. With such information it would be possible to compare Latino immigrant students with other recent immigrant groups.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In the first two chapters I discussed the ways standardized testing is problematic. Previous research has found that Raza students are at a disadvantage when taking a standardized test because of the cultural biases it contains. In particular, English language learners face greater difficulties due to their varying levels of English proficiency. Teachers are also affected by testing; they are forced to change their curriculum, focusing on test taking strategies and content. I used this review of literature to guide me in creating my methodology. I interviewed five teachers from each of the two subjects tested and four from subjects not tested. I wanted to see to what degree each of the disciplines was affected by the CAHSEE and how that in turn affected the quality of education students received.

My research attempts to determine the relationship between the preparation for the CAHSEE and the preparation for students to become complete learners, based on the Expected School Wide Learning Results as well as being exposed to a broad variety of curricula from across disciplines. Using my research question as a guide I was able to conclude two main findings. I first found that because teachers were forced to change their curriculum, they lost the time to be creative with their courses, hindering the extent they were able to engage their students. The teachers most affected by the CAHSEE were also the most affected by curriculum change. Along with curriculum change, these courses aimed at the CAHSEE limited students' exposure to elective courses, which would have contributed to them becoming complete learners. The students most affected by the CAHSEE, were English language learners. These students were at a disadvantage



when taking the exam, leading to a high number of EL students not passing the CAHSEE the first time, placing them in the intervention track.

Finding 1: Curricular changes in response to the CAHSEE hinder students' ability to become complete learners because; 1) teachers are changing mainstream curriculum to focus on the CAHSEE, 2) intervention and parallel courses do not go beyond middle school content, and 3) students are not able to take elective courses that would make their learning experience more complete.

#### *Impact of the CAHSEE on Curriculum*

What I was most interested in was how, if at all, teachers had to change their teaching style or curriculum as a result of this exam. I found that English teachers were the most affected in terms of changing curriculum. The math teachers were not as affected as the English teachers, but said if not for the exam they would be able to use more hands on approaches to math and spend more in depth time on certain standards. The science and social science teachers I interviewed were the least affected by the exam. In most of these cases, the teachers were not affected at all and did little to no test preparation in their classes, in regards to the CAHSEE. Most of these teachers based their answers either on what they have heard from other teachers or students and what they perceived happened in other classes. As mentioned in the literature review, "the first subjects to be affected were the subjects tested" (McNeil 2005). The examples I give here are testaments to the fact that testing has changed curriculum as well as the way teachers approach teaching.

One of the most interesting things I found in the study was the disconnect amongst teachers. I noticed that even in one particular department, there were answers on both ends of the spectrum. I will use the English department as an example. Out of the five English teachers, only one was very much in support of standardized tests and felt that the test itself was fair. One of the first things she said in the interview was, “We don’t teach to the test in our classes here. We integrate the skills that they need to be successful on the test.” She went on to say that, “There is a thought out there that schools have tossed out their curriculum and in place have put in this test prep program. That is definitely not the case here. We have a strong standards-based curriculum, which includes the skills necessary for the test.” I was surprised by this answer because I had previously interviewed an English teacher who stated, “I was told even further than I was last year, stop and focus on this...we are ok if you stop teaching the curriculum completely and focus on all the strategies they need to pass the exit exam.” What the latter English teacher says contradicts the view of the first teacher in her assumptions that their school does not teach to the test.

Curriculum must change over time in order to stay current, but what is happening with the CAHSEE is that teachers were forced to change their curriculum in order to incorporate testing skills. Although this may not be intentional in most cases, it is still happening. For example, one of the English teachers was explaining to me that her curriculum was changed dramatically due to the exam. She says, “Because our scores (for ELL students) have been so low, they actually have been encouraging us to change our curriculum a little bit. I was even told this year that I could stop teaching so much

from our literature book and start focusing on exit exam strategies.” She goes on to discuss how they do not get a chance to read the same novels they used to and they do not get to spend as much time as she would like to on other aspects of her previous curriculum. This particular teacher instructs the SDAIE classes, also known as “sheltered” students. The teacher defined these students as having both parents whose primary language is not English. She tells me that her curriculum for these classes has been the most affected. She states,

When I got those classes this year, I was told even further than I was last year, stop and focus on this...we are ok if you stop teaching the curriculum completely and focus on all the strategies they need to pass the exit exam because our second language learners’ scores are so low and have been in the past few years that if our group doesn’t improve this year we are going to be in some sort of improvement plan... It’s scary. It’s scary being a teacher at the sophomore level right now.

Interested in why this teacher felt scared to be a teacher at this level, I asked her to expand on her comment. She explained,

Because a burden falls on us, and if our scores aren’t raised, what are they going to blame it on the teachers? Are they going to, I’m not saying the teachers aren’t trying, but if they keep saying every meeting we have, sophomore teachers it’s up to you. It’s up to you on this exit exam. We need to get their scores up. And I’m being told not to even teach curriculum, just to focus on it. Which I don’t just focus on it because we have other things as well, a few. But it’s scary. It’s scary to think that if that comes back and we don’t, is it my job at stake? Is it my credibility as a teacher that’s at stake? I don’t know. I don’t know what they could do from that.

This teacher’s fear comes from the high stakes placed on the CAHSEE. With the pressure coming from the top down, this teacher is feeling the pressure from administrators to get her students to pass the exam. While the administrators are receiving pressure from the state because CAHSEE scores are linked to the funding they receive. This trickling down pressure eventually leads to teachers being forced to change their

curriculum. As this teacher explained, the future of teachers is also at stake with the CAHSEE. They do not know what will happen to their jobs if students scores do not increase, thus leading to the possibility of teachers teaching to the test.

This example, of the teacher whose classes are SDAIE, shows how dramatically the curriculum changes for low performing subgroups such as English language learners (in this case almost all of the schools EL students speak primarily Spanish). This point exemplifies the disconnect between theory and practice. In theory, the exam is supposed to ensure that all students have the basic skills necessary, yet only some students are being noticeably affected. In this case, Spanish speaking EL students are being affected much more than their English only peers. While the English Only students who have passed the exam are reading novels and going about their educational experience undisturbed, a higher percentage of EL students are being taught to pass a test. As discussed in the literature review, language acquisition is a strong predictor of testing success and as a result, EL students who do not pass the exam might indeed have the skills they are testing for, yet they cannot be determined by a standardized test. In this case, the students' academic achievement is being hindered by this exam.

With such high stakes placed on the CAHSEE, it is no wonder why so much time has been put into changing curriculum to focus on certain exit exam standards and strategies. Somewhere in the middle of all that, new innovative strategies for teaching youth gets lost. As one English Teacher says "...the effort and the concern and the time we are putting into modifying our curriculum to the exit exam could be even better spent making our curriculum more dynamic." When asked for examples of how they would be

able to make their curriculum more dynamic, teachers shared what they used to do prior to the exit exam, including a very interesting project in math where students would take an object, such as a cereal box, and enlarge it to make a replica that would double or triple the proportions. This hands-on experience let students practice various skills while being able to see their skills put into action. As one of the teachers explained to me, her students, and specifically her Latino students, needed to see relevance in what they are learning in order for them to really be engaged. These types of projects can show students the relevance of what they are learning. The enlargement project not only showed the relevance of the materials they were learning, but also gave them something tangible to work with. Furthermore, students living in an era of technology must constantly be engaged in their learning in order for them to really comprehend the material. The problem with this is time; in the midst of teaching standards and strategies for the exit exam, many teachers find it difficult to incorporate these types of projects into their curriculum. One social science teacher, for example, explained to me that although not directly affected by the CAHSEE, her classes are still affected by standards and other testing. She says,

That's what is hurting us because we don't have room anymore to be as creative. Like when we used to do projects and we used to have students, or I did, have them create a Time magazine project and focus on one individual in history at a certain time period. We don't have time for that anymore.

Assignments such as the enlargement and Time magazine projects that the teachers discussed can make a positive impact on students' learning experience, yet due to testing, such as the CAHSEE, they are not taking place in the classroom. And as we have discussed, Raza students are greatly affected by this by virtue of their low passing rate the

first time they take the test. They are required to spend more time working on test strategies and focus more on the standards that are on the CAHSEE. In addition, many of them do not get to take the classes that are the least affected by the CAHSEE.

When teachers are required to change their curriculum to focus on the CAHSEE, not only are they taking out the creative aspect of these courses, they are also lowering the standard for the content, which they are teaching. Students first start taking the test in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and according to most of the teachers involved, the test reflects, at most, 8<sup>th</sup> grade content standards. Students are not being asked to learn new material but rather they are being asked to go back a few years in their education and re-learn material to which they have already been introduced. This is taking a step back from the direction we are trying to take in our educational system. Every year that the student does not pass the CAHSEE, they remain stalled on the educational ladder and in their growth process. One teacher offered this opinion during the interview, “We are obviously not advancing tenth graders by spending our great amount of time exposing them to middle school material. It is review and we could be spending that time a little more productively by giving them higher order thinking skills.” This idea is crucial to discuss because higher order thinking skills can be the difference between producing a student who can go on to succeed in college or in another career path and a student who is forced to take a job that requires the smallest amount of thinking. Raza students already face this problem with the high number of students dropping out or being tracked into certain classes, but the CAHSEE further underscores this inequality.

As mentioned before, the disciplines most affected by the exam are English and

math, respectively. Science and social science classes are affected on a limited basis by the preparation for the CAHSEE. When asked what types of things she would be doing if she did not have to prepare for the CAHSEE, one teacher said,

I know there are things I can be doing with that time. I guess a specific example that comes to mind right now is silent reading, SSR. Reading is an integral part of mastering the English language and our students don't do it. They just don't... that is something I have always embraced as a teacher and that I know I have had to put aside because of the exit exam. That 15 minutes that I take to do exit exam practice I could have them read and I could be doing more with that silent reading but I can't. And now I have to rely on the fact that they will read at home. Yeah, I give them logs and I try to hold them accountable, but I'm not there watching them so I can't ensure that it is happening.

Not only does silent reading improve language acquisition but it also improves students' reading comprehension. It is ironic that a test showing that students need improvement in reading comprehension is the same test that takes away from students' ability to improve in the subject.

A math teacher explained how his teaching style has changed over the years because of standardized testing. He states:

I would do tessellations with the lower kids because it's hands on and it's fun and it's a little math but at least it brings in an element of art into math and geometry. And then for the higher class, my pre-calculus type classes I have an enrichment. I am a national board certified teacher, and I produced this kind of enrichment curriculum with the reflective property of the conics sections. And I'll never do that, that takes at least three weeks to develop to get them to a point where they can synthesize and analyze and predict and there's not time for that. I just can't.

It is unfortunate that in this situation, a national board certified teacher is not able to use the skills he has attained to enrich the curriculum he is presenting to the students because he no longer has the time needed, due to testing. He has learned creative strategies to engage his students in order for his students to reach their full potential, but he does not

have time to put them into practice. We went on in the conversation to discuss how teaching, overall, has changed with testing. He says,

It was a much better job when teaching was more autonomous and less centralized; now it's testing, testing, testing and taking away the teaching time and you just focus on what it takes to get the kids to score well on the test. I don't have time to develop enrichment projects or anything like that. It's all standards, standards, standards.

This is one example of how the shift to standards and testing has taken away the ability for teachers use their full potential to create and implement a rich curriculum that will engage their students.

When talking about the preparation for the CAHSEE, all of the science and social science teachers discussed how their curriculum was not affected by this exam at all. During this discussion a science teacher said, "Science is not in the exam. It's not part of the exam, so it hasn't really affected any of my teaching or instruction" As was the case in Texas, the subjects tested were the most affected by curriculum change. None of the science or social science teachers did any CAHSEE test prep in their classes, and in turn their teaching style has not been affected. When asked if the CAHSEE had affected teaching style, a social science teacher said, "Not that I can think of, no." Because these teachers are not directly affected by the CAHSEE, most of their interviews were short in time.

#### *CAHSEE Intensive Intervention Program*

The state of California has set aside special funding to provide intervention for those students who do not pass the CAHSEE. Each school is mandated to provide certain interventions for struggling students and each high school has the ability to format these



interventions based on the individual school and what would work best for the students. This particular high school has many different interventions in place to help students who have not passed the CAHSEE. When a student does not pass the exam during their sophomore year, they are put into an intervention or parallel class the following year. These courses are called either Math or English Standard Review and are usually taught by a credentialed teacher, although there are exceptions to this. These courses are strictly standards-based and work solely on the information needed for the students to pass the exam. Although students do receive elective credits on their transcripts for these courses, they take the place of such electives as art, foreign language, choir, and athletics. These courses are mandated and once a student does not pass the exam, they are automatically enrolled in these parallel courses. As one math teacher said, “they are mandatory. The kids don’t have a choice. They are put in these classes whether they like it or not. ”

If the student still has not passed the exam during their junior year, they will again be put into parallel classes along with one-on-one tutoring. So a student, who, in the worst-case scenario still has not passed either portion of the exam, in their senior year, will have an English, Math, parallel English, parallel Math, and two one-on-one tutoring classes. In response to a question dealing with these intervention classes, one teacher answered, “Beyond our intervention classes we have an intensive tutoring program for the 12<sup>th</sup> graders. They practically work one-on-one with a credentialed teacher, to be perfectly honest with you. So it’s not that we are not trying our very, very, hardest to get every single student to pass this. ” Many of the teachers stated that these interventions are in place with the students’ best interest in mind. As one English teacher said, “you have

to look at the fact that it doesn't matter how many electives she has if she doesn't graduate from high school." This is one way that teachers are taught to rationalize the intervention classes. In a way, they are trying to work within the system in order to get as many students as possible to pass this test as fast as they can so that it does not interfere with the rest of their coursework. But one teacher brought up a good point when she asked, "what if a particular student can excel in, lets say art?" Having a student find what they are good at can lead to more positive things, which in turn can positively affect the way they approach different aspects of their education. Placement in an intervention class, although it will help them pass the exit exam, will hinder their ability to grow both personally and academically since there are academic subjects other than English and math. In discussing this issue, an English teacher gave an example of how not being able to take electives can affect students,

...it does impact their ability to have those classes and especially students with learning disabilities who could shine in some of those classes. I mean they may have real artistic ability; you know might find a niche. So that can have a bigger impact for kids that would really benefit from those classes, but they aren't going to be able to take them because, for some of our kids, you know, four of their classes, they have math intervention, they have an English intervention, they have a regular math class, and a regular English class, that's four classes right there. Then you have PE and science. There's no elective involved there. For some kids they are impacted even more than others but then again what's the bottom line. Yeah it very much is a Catch-22.

Although this specific example given by this teacher deals with students with disabilities, it can also be said for all subgroups of students who have low passing rates on the exam, such as Raza students and English language learners.

Being in these classes also leads to negative feelings for these students in two main ways, 1) they are isolated from their peers, thus sending the message that they are

different and, in a way, inferior to their peers that passed the exam, and, 2) we are also sending a message to their peers that these students have “failed” something and thus they are being punished by being placed into these extra courses. One English teacher discusses this issue by saying: “Socially they (exit exams) are a stigma for them, just on that line. Because everyone knows they are in a remedial English class or remedial math. And depending on how bad they failed or how many times, they could be in one or they could have two during the day. And that’s never fun.” If we are trying to get our students to perform at their highest ability and to receive the highest quality of education possible, the premise of the NCLB, we are not accomplishing this with the CAHSEE and in fact we are hindering our abilities to do so. Without the CAHSEE, many of these students would be able to take courses across the board through different curricula and would be able to get a greater understanding and a broader knowledge base which would in turn help them to become successful members of society.

As the teachers stated, these intervention classes are in place with the students’ best interests in mind, which might hold true at the local level. Individual schools might have the students’ best interests in mind and they are willing to do as much as they can to help students pass, but it is also important to take into consideration the fact that these intervention courses are state mandated and that passing CAHSEE scores are reflective of a school’s performance. So why would schools not want to do anything possible to get each student to pass? I wanted to find out if these intervention classes were taking away from students’ learning and I found that some of the teachers viewed these classes, and the CAHSEE as a whole, as an incentive for students to try harder and as an incentive for

students to pass the CAHSEE. When asked the question about these classes, one math teacher said, "I think that can be used as an incentive. If a student clearly understands that they will miss out on some of their electives to take these parallel classes, then maybe that can be an incentive for them to take the test a little more serious." Regardless if these courses are used as an incentive or not, the most important issue is the learning that is going on in these courses.

There are differences in the way teachers in different departments perceive intervention courses. When asked about these classes, one math teacher said, "I don't feel like they are missing out because they are still in a classroom setting, you're still learning, you're still developing as a student and a young adult." While an English teacher's take on it was very different as she explained,

Once the test is taken, from what I hear, curriculum kind of stops for a while. And they just throw in filler activities. But from what I've seen when I walk into those classes on my breaks, no learning is going on at all, none. Because the whole purpose was for students to pass the test, they are in there, once they take the test they don't think they need to be doing anything else.

The sole purpose of these courses is to help the students pass the CAHSEE. While this teacher asks a good question about what happens when the student passes the exam, we must also look at what is happening during these courses. How much learning is really going on? When I asked a math teacher if the preparation for the CAHSEE affected her teaching style she said, "When I did teach for the California exit exam, which works but the education system sees very bad upon it, is drill and kill. Drill and kill, drill and kill. Until they get it. But that's what works for them. That's not really affective with the ESLR's but it is what works for them and helps them pass the test." Again, we see the

pressures from the high stakes attached to the test forcing this teacher to resort to a “drill and kill” type of teaching style, which entails doing the same things over and over again until they get it right.

#### *Ability to Take Elective Courses*

Another way that I define a complete education is the ability for students to take a broad variety of courses. The school I researched offers many wonderful elective courses from graphic art, art history, technology, administration of justice, woodshop, automotive, Psychology, and Chicano Studies. This high school is one of a very few that offers a Chicano Studies course. Having the opportunity to take this course, for many Raza students, is the first time they will be exposed to their history. Being able to learn about one’s history is essential in developing a sense of self, something that has been left out of the public school system, in regards to Raza and other marginalized students. This is an empowering experience for most of the students but this is considered an elective and something that is a privilege for students. Apparently, this privilege is also one that can be taken away at the drop of a dime. One teacher said “a few of my kids who were in Chicano Studies were pulled out of Chicano Studies because they didn’t pass the CAHSEE so they had to be given this prep class, this English prep.” The preparation for this exam is not allowing students the opportunity to take courses that have the potential to be very beneficial and empowering, which in turn would be better for the students’ overall educational success.

Another example of how students who do not pass the CAHSEE are not able to gain the skills necessary to be well-rounded students is the case of the students who

cannot take computer classes. In the age where understanding technology is not a privilege but a must, students who do have computer experience are at a distinct advantage over those who do not. One of the teachers I interviewed was also a teacher of a specific program called Business Academy that prepares students to be able to emerge into different business opportunities after high school. She shared this example with me:

I've had students in my business academy classes, which I teach, who cannot have the elective for the computer component because they don't have any elective left their junior year. So most definitely it has, it's not until their senior year that they get more than two electives. Sophomore year they only have one, junior year they have two electives at our school. There is no room for electives when they are on that track for exit exam, because that takes it up.

In this case, the CAHSEE is limiting the development of students into complete learners prepared for life after high school in that students are not able to take the courses that are an integral part of the mission of the program. These programs were created to provide a space in the educational system for students to get hands-on experience in the business world so that they can achieve success after high school. This experience is something that is not accessible to students without programs such as this business academy.

Describing how the CAHSEE has affected her curriculum, one English teacher says,

It cuts into my curriculum for sure. It eats up curriculum that could be a lot more rewarding, a lot more interesting to them and truly make them quality producers and effective communicators, you know there is no real opportunity for the students to be speaking in these CAHSEE parallel classes, its all test prep. And of course the time is taken away doing the test prep kind of exercises in other classes just any class, math English, whatever. You know, that eats into the curriculum too. And as a teacher, honestly I hate teaching to the test. So when people find out that I picked up this class they are really shocked because they know that's how I feel...but I see the importance in that they have to pass in order to graduate and I just want them to graduate.

I also had this discussion with another English teacher, and she talks about her fears with the CAHSEE and how it might lead to teachers teaching to test. She says,

The most unfortunate thing, and the biggest fear that I would have, or an educator overall, is that it would be very easy just to teach to the test, no one would fault you for that either. You can just teach to the test and everybody would be happy. But it is not meeting those expectations and its not ethically right. If we are truly trying to make a learner, a complete learner, then we need to give them a complete education, not just teach them to the test.

It is unfortunate that this legislation forces teachers to teach to test, because there is so much lost in the process, as we have seen in the previous sections. The loss of curriculum, creativity, and relevant course material, are all reasons another course of action needs to take place in order to effectively reach students, and allow them to reach their full potential.

This section has revealed that along with the high stakes for students attached to the CAHSEE, comes pressure for schools to have high passing rates. This leads to teachers having to change their curriculum to meet the demands of the administration, which is merely responding to the pressure from the state in regards to funding. When teachers are forced to change their curriculum the students are not being exposed to dynamic materials that would otherwise enrich their learning and better prepare them for college or the workforce. This leads into the next finding, as the students being the most affected by this curricular change, are the English language learners.

Finding 2: Every teacher interviewed said that English language learners, most of which were Spanish speakers, were the most negatively affected by the CAHSEE and were at a distinct disadvantage when taking the exam because of their lack of academic language.

### *The Impact of the CAHSEE on English Language Learners*

One special sub group of Raza students that needs particular attention is the English Language Learners. When I asked how the CAHSEE prep affects Latino students, the majority of the teachers I interviewed said that it was hard to say because the majority of their students were Latino, but every teacher that I interviewed mentioned that the students most affected by this test are the English Language Learners. This is of particular importance for the Chicano/Latino community because, according to the school report card, 98% of this school's English language learners' primary language is Spanish. With the majority of California's English language learners' primary language being Spanish, we must explore how these students are affected by both the outcomes of the CAHSEE as well as how they are affected by the preparation for the exam.

According to Garcia and Gopal, "research on second-language acquisition theory found it takes 4 to 7 years for English Learners to gain academic language skills in English."

(2003) This contradicts the requirements that the state has put on EL students in regards to the CAHSEE in which the minimum time period for English instruction before taking the CAHSEE is six months. "CAHSEE legislative requirements defer ELL students from passing the test for up to 24 months." (Garcia and Gopal, 2003, p. 11) When these students have only been in the country for a few years, it is no wonder there is such a large number of EL students who do not pass the CAHSEE the first time they take the exam. The fact that they have not had enough time to acquire the English language should not be a reason these students do not receive the same quality of education as their



English-only peers.

One comment I hear often from people is that if students cannot speak English proficiently they should not receive a high school diploma in the first place. An English teacher explained to me that there is a difference between academic English and conversational English. A student can be proficient in conversational English while struggling in academic English. Another English teacher gave me an example of one of her students who had yet to pass the exit exam. She says,

There is one girl who is in my class right now who is ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in the junior class and she is bright, she is articulate but she is a second language learner and she doesn't have all the nuances of the language; not that the test is unfair, the test is a fair and reasonable test. But the kids who have just been here just a year or two they are at a distinct disadvantage. They are not on the same playing field as the rest of the kids.

Although this teacher believes that the content of the exam is fair, she recognizes that it is biased in the sense that these students, although they have the ability to speak the language, were at a disadvantage because they did not know all of the little things the test assumes that students know. One of the examples that a teacher shared was how one year the essay question asked the students to describe the life of a boomerang. The teacher explained, "The year they had to write about the boomerang; there was a thing about a boomerang flying through the sky or something. And the majority of our students did not have any idea what a boomerang was. And some kids thought it was an airplane." When asked about the situation another English teacher made a good point in saying, "and what English teacher would even think to introduce that word? Boomerang, I don't even know if that's an English word. Boomerang! That would be way low on my list of words to

introduce to English learners.” This was the same teacher who said that the test was fair and that they did not teach to the test at all at that school.

Examples like this one demonstrate the biases authors refer to when discussing the validity of this sort of assessment, specifically in the racism in testing section of the literature review. Another English teacher gave another example of how the essay question could be misinterpreted. She said that one of the essay questions asked, “What outstanding characteristics does this building have or this place have? And these were all kids who had failed it already. And most of them wrote about Disneyland because there were characters at Disneyland.” This is an example of how one word can make the difference between a high school diploma or not. These students mistook the word characteristic for character, maybe these students read the question too fast or maybe they did what they had been taught to do, use context clues to figure out what a word really means. Regardless, if a student does not complete the essay section of the CAHSEE, they will most likely fail the ELA portion of the exam and will have to continue to practice their test taking abilities in further intervention and parallel classes.

In answering the question of why some students, such as English language learners and Raza students, might have a more difficult time answering questions on a standardized test, one teacher said,

They assume a lot of cultural literacy and so how can you be asked to analyze something on a topic that you’ve never even heard about. Just because it is a part of a culture that you’re not familiar with, you know? How can that determine the level of a learner you are? You know, because you haven’t been exposed to it. I know there was a question on one test, I don’t know if it was the CAHSEE, but it was a question about some aspect of boating, well if you have never been boating and if you have never been to the ocean, gosh how can you answer that question? You know, so, yeah there are a lot of cultural literacy that is assumed in some of the questions in standardized

testing. So yeah I can see how the cards would be stacked against certain groups because they've never been exposed to that concept, so how can they answer the question?

As discussed in chapter 2, under the section *Racism in Testing*, this idea of cultural literacy is a major reason why so many Raza and African American students, as well as economically disadvantaged students are passing at such low rates; because they have not been exposed to some of the things that the creators of the test assume that they have been.

With so many examples of how students could not write the essay portion of the CAHSEE, due to their inability to understand the question, it is important to look closely at the reasons why. The essay is critical and counts towards assessing a student's score on the exam. The essay section of the English Language Arts portion of the CAHSEE is supposed to tests students' knowledge of essay writing and grammar. If a student cannot understand the question they are being asked, how could they possibly answer an essay question correctly? This can be a very sensitive subject, especially for English Language Learners, because of all of the test anxieties they already face. In regards to the CAHSEE, one English teacher said, "It's a definite anxiety creator. They have enough tests already. You know, the tests they take to determine their level as an ELL student...they have other barriers to their learning." I was interested in knowing the breakdown of language demographics so I asked the teacher what were the primary languages of the students in her classroom and she explained that,

Mine are nearly 100 percent Spanish speaking. I do have students from countries other than Mexico. El Salvador, Colombia, I'm thinking this year those are the other two countries I can think of right now. They are mostly from Latin American countries or Mexico.

During the interviews, I asked teachers how the CAHSEE has affected Latino students. Most of the teachers said that it was hard to tell the difference since most of their students are Latino, but most of them brought it back to the ELL students. One English teacher said,

Latino students in general? Well going back to the ELL population there has been the negative effect in that some of them have been in this country for less than a year, two years, and how can we expect them to pass a test in a language they don't understand. That's like us going to another country and asked to pass a test. It just doesn't seem fair. Even though we know that academically they are capable but they just don't have the language development yet, so I think in that way it is negatively impacted.

I asked this teacher if she had any examples of students who have been affected by the CAHSEE. She gave me a few examples of student stories but was most bothered by one of her EL students:

Well I had one girl last year, she was in my... class and she was an ELL Student, and she had great speaking skills.... I mean her BIX...the ability to speak in the second language and CALP is their ability to function academically in a language. So her speaking, her understanding of it and her being able to answer you, it was awesome. You can tell that she was really bright and intelligent girl but she couldn't pass this test! And she was like two points away, one point away; I mean it was devastating because she really deserved to pass. She ended up in my... class as a 5<sup>th</sup> year senior. She wanted to try it again, and nope! She didn't pass until finally she took the July test...this last July test and she passed.

This section has shown that although many English Language Learners are proficient in the subject material, as shown through their coursework as well as through teacher evaluations, they do not perform well on the CAHSEE because of the language barrier they face. Standardized tests assume all students have the same level of mainstream cultural competency while disregarding language acquisition theory. The student examples shown by the teachers, demonstrate the extent to which students can be

affected, while also showing that the CAHSEE is not able to assess all students accurately.

#### Overall Analysis of the Impact of the CAHSEE

As discussed in the introduction, the focus of this study is to determine the relationship between the preparation for the CAHSEE and the preparation for students to become complete learners. The term “complete learner” was derived from the vision statement of the school site researched in this study. The vision of this school is that “All students will be effective communicators, quality producers, self-directed learners, critical thinkers, and responsible citizens.” For this school, an effective communicator is one who demonstrates proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The student demonstrates proficiency in visual communication and technology skills and is able to identify and respond to a variety of texts at appropriate academic grade levels. A quality producer sets, pursues, and accomplishes realistic, challenging performance standards. This student creates a finished product to appropriate standards, and analyzes and uses models/rubrics to evaluate and check progress. Self directed learners seek and utilize resources necessary to develop and complete a quality performance or product. They meet deadlines and remain focused on tasks, while assessing their performance or product. A critical thinker is one who demonstrates proficiency in fundamental skills in math, reading, literacy, and writing. This student develops higher order questioning skills, analyzes information, and synthesize’ solutions related to the subject matter and high stakes testing, while applying a variety of techniques in problem solving. Lastly, the school expects their students to become responsible citizens who choose to follow

established standards of behavior, work cooperatively with others, and show respect for others and self through language and behavior.

These qualities are part of the Expected School Wide Learning Results (ESLR) that was established in the mid 1990's as a result of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation process. A team was assembled of staff, students, and parents in order to create a vision of what students should exemplify as graduates of that school. The way in which this school measures these qualities is through the culminating Senior Project.

The ESLR's are painted on the awnings, hanging on posters, and are posted in every single classroom. I was interested in seeing how this exam affected the school's ability to meet their vision statement. What I found was that most of the teachers agreed that they were able to fit the ESLR's into anything and everything they did, but the CAHSEE was a barrier to the extent in which they were able to incorporate these skills. Most teachers explained that the CAHSEE merely assesses their test taking abilities. When discussing how the CAHSEE affects teachers' ability to prepare students to become complete learners based on these expected school wide learning results one math teacher said,

I hope its something that is minimally intrusive into their education. That's the idea. The idea is that they are going to take it and then "hey, I took that test, I passed, no big deal" and they go on with their high school career like it was nothing.

This is one misconception that many people have when it comes to the exit exam; they believe that it is only one small hurdle that students must overcome in order to reach their goal of a high school diploma. Unfortunately, for many Chicano/Latino students,

especially English language learners, this is not that case at all. For example, the student discussed earlier that had to come back as a fifth year senior and still did not pass the exam until the summer after.

A math teacher gave an example of a student, who was obviously proficient in math, because she was taking a math analysis course, and had not passed the CAHSEE. Math analysis is a course designed to cover both pre-calculus and trigonometry. She said, "So in my class this year I had one girl who was in my math analysis class who was also in the math standards review class. That's a big difference. Pre-calculus and a basic... a basic algebra class." Clearly, in this case, the CAHSEE is not a measurement of a student's knowledge base, and while she could be advancing her knowledge in other areas, she is forced to take an intervention class to ensure that she passes the exam. Along with the suggestions made by HumRRO, student examples like this should be taken into consideration while looking for alternative forms of assessing students.

#### The Senior Project as an Alternative Form of Assessment

Through the literature review, we found that alternate ways of assessment need to be sought in order to create a more valid form of assessment. The independent evaluation of the CAHSEE also recommended that California "continue to explore alternative routes to demonstrating proficiency" (HumRRO, 2007, p. 10). The school that I researched has its own way of assessing if students have attained the skills necessary to not only survive after high school, but also to be competitive in society in general. This alternative form of assessment is developed as a senior project. In order to receive their high school diploma, students in the district, must complete the senior project, at the minimum of an

adequate level. This project is a multi faceted assessment tool, used to measure the extent to which a student has encompassed all of the Expected School Wide Learning results while incorporating the academic skills they have accrued over their four years of high school. In one of my first interviews, a teacher brought to my attention that the senior project is a much more valid way of assessing a students' worthiness of graduation. This led me to ask the rest of the teachers to compare the CAHSEE with the senior project as a valid assessment of students' worthiness to graduate and to evaluate which would be a better test of the ESLR's. All teachers interviewed agreed that the Senior Project was a better assessment of students than the CAHSEE. One teacher explained to me the senior project process:

Every high school in the district requires students, in each grade, to complete assignments that help us evaluate how they are progressing toward reaching specific district goals, for the Expected School Wide Learning Results. They are also required to complete a senior project in order to pass English and thus graduate. Students in grades nine through eleven prepare for it by tackling assignments based on specific learning goals in each subject for each grade that help develop the necessary research and presentation skills. At the beginning of their senior year, students choose a topic, design a project around it, and conduct research. They present their finished project before a board of [school] staff and community members. ”

The senior project is a reflection of four years of preparation, as students in each grade level complete mini projects that grow each year, in preparing the students to be able to complete the larger senior project.

When asked which of the two forms of evaluation best assesses the students as complete learners based on the ESLR's, one teacher had this to say,

The senior project, I can tell you, reaches all of them. And it's because it is a multi faceted assessment and its authentic. It measures things in degree and it measures different skills. Not just one skill, the ability in a quiet testing situation, and to perform well and to bubble in, basically just bubble in. That alone is an anxiety and



this, the three part senior project they have to write and if writing is not their forte they can do an adequate job there and they have an opportunity to speak and if speaking is their strength. But if speaking is not their strength and neither is writing they can go out on the field and do something. And they get credit for all three things and every student is strong in one of those areas. Some are strong in all and some are two out of three but it is an effort to make for a complete student and that I would be willing to say, teaching senior project has been one of the things that has made me feel as if the students who go through this process and remained members of my classroom have earned their high school diploma. Not the exit exam. I wouldn't say that just by virtue of them passing they deserve a diploma. But I'm telling you by all of them doing the senior project I think they deserve a diploma, just for that alone.

All the teachers say that the senior project is a much better measurement of both students as complete learners based on the ESLRS as well as a students' worthiness to graduate. Thus when we have students who can pass the senior project and not the CAHSEE this is reason enough to re-think the CAHSEE as a valid measurement. Yet, the CAHSEE is taking time away from students being able to do more activities such as the senior project. When students spend a good amount of time trying to pass a test they do not have the opportunity to put their full effort into things such as the senior project. One of the teachers discussed this scenario with me and she says that sometimes there are students who pass the senior project but still have not passed the CAHSEE. She says,

And this year I am facing the reality of having students who have passed school and will continue until June, but may not pass the exit exam, so they may not graduate. That is the biggest paradox of this whole thing. So the guy who passes the exit exam but couldn't even have the study skills to pass high school, pass his courses and get through the high school process, we are going to put them at a higher value or say that they are more capable than someone who is an excellent student or at least a very hard worker and can't pass the test. I mean it's just an unfair result. That's what is flawed about it. Someone can pass it and still not have the overall skills to be a good student.

Students in their senior year are already busy with other activities. Pressure is added when students have to balance their time between focusing on the CAHSEE and

preparing their research for their senior project. In this case we have seen the impact the senior project has played in this particular high school and we can see that it makes a big impact on creating complete learners. Time spent away from this can be seen as time away from our ultimate goal, which is to produce a productive member of society.

#### CAHSEE Preparation and its Affects on Students' Engagement in the Learning Process

We have discussed the way in which teachers have been affected by the implementation and preparation for the exit exam and I was also interested in knowing whether or not the teachers have noticed any change in the students' engagement or involvement in the learning process due to the CAHSEE. Because some of the teachers said that the CAHSEE was some sort of incentive I wondered if this manifested itself in the educational process as a whole. I wondered if students were more or less engaged or involved in their own learning experiences. I found that most of the teachers did not notice a difference in the way the students approach their schoolwork in other classes and could not say for sure if the CAHSEE positively or negatively affected their school work as a whole, but the teachers that were the most affected by the CAHSEE noticed that their students were minimally engaged in the learning process. One of the English teachers explained to me how difficult it is to get students engaged in regards to the CAHSEE. She says "Students, I feel they need to be led, and I almost have to use a cheerleading type of motivation technique to get them engaged. Nobody... loves testing, and many students have test anxiety and other phobias and misconceptions about testing to begin with. So trying to make them excited about a test that is full of anxiety is difficult." Given all the test anxiety and other phobias that this teacher discusses it seems as though

the CAHSEE is not a good way to engage students. It leads to more work for teachers and less learning for students because time and energy are wasted being used to motivate students to learn and for students to get excited about learning. There are simpler ways to get students engaged, such as projects and other hands-on activities. I asked another teacher if there would be a difference if she did not have to prepare her students for the CAHSEE, in terms of students' engagement and she said,

Oh, heck yeah! Because then I would be using a whole different curriculum and I would have a lot more freedom. And I would have time to do what I think would be truly rewarding for them as students. Um, so yeah, definitely, it definitely stunts your curriculum in what you can do and the amount of stuff that you can get through in a semester or in a year. So yeah definitely.

Her enthusiasm alone showed me that if the CAHSEE was not in place, teachers would be able to expand on their curriculum in order to really engage these students and help them learn new and exciting things. The preparation for the CAHSEE is another obstacle teachers have to overcome with all of the other bureaucratic requirements they face, and in turn the students suffer and receive a below-par educational experience. This is not to say that this is the fault of teachers, but rather this policy requirement impedes on teachers ability to do their job at the capacity that they normally would.

Overall, these findings show that standardized testing is problematic for a large segment of California students. Students with economic and cultural disadvantages, including English learners, and economically disadvantaged students are at increased risk of not passing the CAHSEE and thus limiting their ability to become complete learners. Teachers and students experience detrimental effects of standardized testing used as proxy to measure intelligence and subject mastery.

By implementing the CASHEE and its testing protocols, teachers are forced to change curriculum to accommodate the standardized test. In doing so, students are deprived of more challenging educational opportunities. Some students will have less opportunity to become complete learners and thus, will have lower prospects of becoming higher paid members of a working class.

This section described the relationship between the CAHSEE and the quality of education students receives. The findings show that the CAHSEE is not a valid measurement of the ESLR's as opposed to the Senior Project, which was created to measure them all. The senior project is a culminating project where students work every year to build the skills necessary to produce quality work. This finding supports the ideas developed by Valenzuela and the independent evaluators of the CAHSEE, as they recommended alternate forms of assessment.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

High stakes testing such as the CAHSEE leaves Raza students at a great disadvantage in society, not only because they are at a higher risk of dropping out or not receiving a diploma but because as a result of not passing the exam the first time they take it, they are receiving an inadequate education. Through the required parallel and intervention courses students are limited to a curriculum focused on the exam and are not exposed to material improving their higher order thinking skills. These intervention courses have proven to be inadequate in that they focus on lower level standards and focus on exit exam content and test strategies.

Selecting a study site (i.e., school district) with a 98% CAHSEE passing rate and a high school with a negligible percentage of seniors (15-20) still trying to pass the test, provided deeper insight into the student learning experiences as the teachers revealed that the quality of education students receive is being affected by the emphasis placed on the CAHSEE. Although graduation rates are not affected by the CAHSEE, students are nonetheless negatively impacted. There is a faulty association made by school administrators, teachers, students, and parents that since almost all students eventually pass the exam, the quality of their education is superior to those of students who do not pass the exam. On the contrary, the interview data analyzed show the school's high passing rate is due to significant energy and resources being diverted to the interventions in place to have students pass the test. The school believes that by implementing these test-passing interventions they have proven to have the students' best interests in mind. Regardless of the reasoning, when a school diverts its teaching focus to passing a

standardized test, the quality of education suffers. As the findings show, teachers were forced to change their curriculum and were less able to incorporate new teaching styles they felt would better engage students. Teachers can no longer teach new material because they are focused on a singular standardized test. There is no external validation indicating this standardized test can measure student knowledge of basic high school-level concepts. So, although the reason for the CAHSEE is to test for skills necessary to succeed after high school, it has not yet been proven that it reaches its goal. As quoted by Valenzuela, "Decisions based on multiple criteria rather than on test scores in isolation also have been shown to have a smaller adverse impact on minorities and women" while also arguing that it should be up to the state to prove that a single test is a better assessment (2004, p. 7). There has not been any evidence that the CAHSEE tests the ability of students to be successful after high school, unlike the Senior Project that was specifically designed with that goal in mind. This leads to the conclusion that alternative forms of assessment ought to be sought.

Using this school as a representation of the best-case scenario for Raza students, with regards to the CAHSEE, because the school is predominately Raza, and that the passing rates for the CAHSEE are so high, it can be inferred that students across California are receiving a drastically inferior education than their White peers. The students who must take the remedial intervention and parallel classes are those who do not pass the exit exam the first time they take it. Clearly, because Raza students fail the exam at a higher rate than other ethnic groups within California, they have to take these remedial intervention and parallel courses more than their White or Asian peers. Despite

the intent of the No Child Left Behind legislation, Raza students throughout California are receiving an inadequate high school education that adds to an already large achievement gap. Being the test is fairly new, further study is needed to determine the long-term educational and professional successes of these students who spend most of their classroom time with a curriculum that focuses on the CAHSEE.

The number of parallel classes a student is enrolled in depends on the sections the exam the student still needs to pass. For a sophomore student who has not passed both sections of the exam, by junior year she will have two English courses and two math courses, leaving room for only two others. Since how the student still needs to take science, social science, and other required courses she does not have the ability to take other electives. This takes away from students being exposed to different curricula from across the disciplines. Both the lack of exposure to a broad variety of courses and teachers having to modify their curriculum, lead to the inability of teachers to cover curriculum that will allow their students to become complete learners. This affects their overall quality of education.

In the research site, English language learners, who are mostly Spanish speakers, are being affected most dramatically by the CAHSEE. Research on second language acquisition has found that it takes at least 4 years for English learners to become proficient in English yet the CAHSEE only requires that students have 6 months of prior English instruction before they are required to take the exam (Garcia and Gopal, 2002). These students are at a great disadvantage, not knowing the dominant language of this country. Adding the new barriers of the CAHSEE only increases those inequities. This

study demonstrates that EL students have strong academic skills that they are not always able to demonstrate through the constraints of the CAHSEE, but have shown to their teachers in classwork and projects.

The outcome of accountability systems, such as the California High School Exit Exam, is such that they not only widen the achievement gap that already exists in California but they will also help produce students into laborers, as they will lack the higher order skills needed to compete in the workforce. This change in curriculum and in the quality of education for Chicano/Latino students sets the stage for what these students can become after high school. Without the necessary skills such as those described in the expected school wide learning results, we will become a society that produces students who do not have the analytical or critical thinking skills that are necessary to succeed in society after high school.

With the population in California growing steadily, Raza students in California are going to be in a unique position, setting an example for students in other states. States that are in the process of developing systems of assessment will look towards California as an example. With population growth, California could see an increase in the number of Latinos in higher positions of power, with the ability to make change. Unfortunately, if high stakes testing continues in California it will lead to an education system that produces Raza students to become merely part of the workforce, relegating them to an underclass, and will continue to reinforce the unequal way in which institutions are run.

Because of all the problems associated with standardized tests, and the CAHSEE in particular, there have been recommendations to explore alternative routes, other than a



single measurement assessment. Through this research, I was able to find a multi faceted approach to assessment that not only measures content standards, but also measures a complete learner. The state of California should look further into systems such as the senior project because it is a valid assessment of what a student has learned.

Since the CAHSEE is a fairly new requirement there are few studies that have researched the effects of the exam. This study is an integral part in understanding the CAHSEE but still leaves many unanswered questions. In the future I would like to add to this research in order to understand difference aspects of the CAHSEE, specifically how to address the needs of Raza students. The next step in this process would be to interview administrators in hopes of understanding the pressures they face because of the emphasis placed on CAHSEE scores. These findings could help explain some of the findings in this research. To fully assess the situation we must also address those directly impacted by the CAHSEE, the students. I wish to look at how this exam affects students' self esteem and their overall view on education. The exit exam is something very real for students and for some it is something they have to deal with year after year. With this research on how the exam affects teachers, and with the future works focused on administrators and students, we will be able to better understand the situation along with the implications for our state.

Overall, the high stakes attached to the CAHSEE, along with the pressure on schools to have high pass rates, have created a system in which students who do not pass the CAHSEE the first time do not receive the quality of education they would receive otherwise. The data showed that Raza students are not passing the exam at a much higher rate than other students, thus placing them in a track focused on passing the exam. This

problem needs to be addressed by both policy makers and educators, in order to create a fair system that still holds people accountable for their education. The only way this can be done is by searching for alternate forms of assessment that do not hinder students' ability to succeed.

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## Appendix A

### Guiding Questions:

- 1) What has your experience been with the California High School Exit Exam?
- 2) Has it affected your teaching?
- 3) How would your teaching style be different if you did not have to prepare your students for this exam?
- 4) Describe your students' involvement /engagement in the learning process.
  - a. How is this affected by preparation for the CAHSEE?
- 5) What impact has testing had on student performance?
- 6) Can you give me clear examples?
- 7) In particular how has the preparation for this test affected Latino Students?
  - a. Clear Examples.
- 8) How does the preparation for this test affect your ability to prepare your students to become complete learners based on the Expected School wide Learning Results?
- 9) Do you notice any difference between preparing Latino students for this exam with other non-Latino students?
- 10) 2<sup>nd</sup> time taking the test
- 11) Do extra CAHSEE classes take away from making students complete learners?
- 12) How do you compare the CAHSEE to the Senior project as a measure of the ESLR's?
- 13) ELL students?
- 14) Do you have any last thoughts on the California High School Exit Exam and its preparation?