

English Language Learners on the Texas-Mexico Border: An Ethnographic Study Examining State Education Accountability Policies

This project is a three-year ethnographic study to examine how state education accountability policies in the form of standardized tests affect English Language Learners (ELLs) in public high schools in El Paso. Recent state policy changes in the form of new exams, and new high school graduation requirements tied to these exams, have created new data that need to be examined. This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How are recent policy changes around standardized testing affecting ELLs? (2) How do students navigate this testing terrain to develop strategies to pass the English I and II STAAR exams? (3) What instructional approaches do English teachers use with their ELLs to help them develop the academic language and literacies necessary to pass these combined reading and writing exams in order to graduate from high school and be prepared for college-level academic work?

Understanding how students and teachers navigate these tests is of particular importance given the unique challenges that ELLs face in completing high school and continuing on to post-secondary education (Menken, 2008; Valenzuela, 2004) and the growing number of ELLs in schools across Texas and the nation (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Murdock, Cline, Zey, Jeanty, & Perez, 2014). El Paso offers a unique context for this study given its location on the Texas-Mexico border, the high percentage of households (73%) that speak a language other than English at home, and the percentage of the population (nearly 25%) that lives below the poverty line (U.S. Census, 2013). These statistics point to the ways in which many students in this region are multiply disadvantaged: they are immigrants and migrants, they are ELLs, and they negotiate daily the multiple factors poverty generates that negatively impact academic achievement.

While statistics document ELL's scores on state assessments, what is less understood is why such a disproportionately high number of ELL students do not acquire the academic language and literacies necessary to pass state exams or how those students who do pass surmount the above-mentioned challenges. As a methodology, ethnography is an essential tool for uncovering complex social phenomenon so that effective solutions to social problems can be devised. Ethnographic methods are designed to capture complexities, including those not anticipated by the researcher, and to uncover multiple stakeholder perspectives. In order to better capture students' experiences, this project incorporates photography as a research instrument for students themselves to visually document their lives and encounters with schooling and assessments. These photographs will be analyzed as data and, with the students' help and permission, may be used as a visual platform to both contribute to and initiate conversations about the academic achievement of ELLs on the border in different community, policy, and academic circles.

In addition to contributing to academic scholarship and educational policy conversations about the growing accountability movement and its effect on underserved and historically marginalized students, data collected in this study will be used to inform the content of a graduate level course in UTEP's College of Education, *Teaching Writing with Diverse Learners*. Fellowship funds will be used to provide eight public school teachers with tuition-free access to this course as a professional development opportunity aimed at improving the academic language and literacies of ELLs in area schools. The development of this course in conjunction with findings from this study will additionally serve to further enhance the College of Education's Teacher Education Program for pre- and in-service teachers who work with such populations in this area.

Works Cited

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