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Abstract

This article contributes to an emerging body of literature on the impact of high stakes testing accountability policies on implementation and teaching practice. It uses a theory of implementation, sense-making, to highlight the process by which policy and context shape teacher decision making. We focus on teachers in bilingual classrooms in an urban district in Texas where we found that teachers make decisions in an environment that exerts both formal and informal pressures to limit the curriculum they offer their students and privilege test preparation. Teachers struggle to reconcile their context, constituted by their students' specific pedagogical and linguistic needs, with the pressures of their high stakes testing environment.

Keywords

bilingual education, high-stakes accountability, policy implementation

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Introduction

High-stakes accountability policies began to appear in U.S. classrooms in the mid-1980s as states moved to reform education by holding schools, teachers, and students accountable for student achievement. These policies became federal law in 2001 with the passage of the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB), which brings together strains of the standards-based reform movement and the accountability movement, requiring states to adopt uniform standards assessments and using negative incentives to prod districts and schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP; Simpson, LaCava, & Sampson, 2004; Hamilton & Berends, 2006).¹ Texas was an early proponent of high-stakes testing and accountability and, with its diverse student population, has given scholars and policymakers alike the opportunity to examine the various consequences as the policy has been implemented.

Most recent research has focused broadly on the implementation of NCLB in districts and schools. Part of this work has examined the effects of specific components of the law, such as the requirement that schools must hire highly qualified teachers (Birman et al., 2007), provide supplemental services after 2 consecutive years of failing to meet AYP (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005; Zimmer, Gill, Razquin, Booker, & Lockwood, 2007), and allow for school choice after 2 years (Kim & Sunderman, 2004). Other work has considered how high-stakes accountability generally and NCLB specifically have affected school districts (Cohn, 2005), teachers (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speigman, 2004; Hamilton, Berends, & Stecher, 2005; Herrera & Murry, 2006; Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield 2004; Wright & Choi, 2005), and different student groups, particularly minority students (McNeil, 2005; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vasquez Heilig, 2008; Valenzuela, Prieto, & Hamilton, 2007; Wright, 2002).

Despite the proliferation of studies on accountability policies and NCLB, little work examines the process by which accountability policies are implemented at the classroom level. It is important to fill this gap in the literature because it has been generally accepted that the key to policy implementation is what happens when policies enter schools and administrators and teachers must make sense of and implement them as part of their daily practices (Coburn, 2001, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 1990; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Honig, 2006). The goal of this study, therefore, is to identify the mechanism by which high-stakes accountability policies are implemented, or translated into practice, through teachers' decision-making process. To do so, we dig into the implementation literature to shed light on how the high-stakes nature of the accountability system shapes teachers' sense-making processes.

In our analysis, we will draw on sense-making theory, which draws our attention to how individuals make sense of competing external mandates in their work context (Coburn, 2001; Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Weick, 1995).

In this article, we focus on how NCLB and the Texas high-stakes accountability system shape the decisions of teachers in bilingual classrooms in a large urban school district in Texas. We chose to hone in on bilingual teachers for three reasons. The first is that English language learners (ELLs) have very unique needs: In addition to new content, they are learning a second language, and teachers must adjust their instructional methods to make content understandable (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Cummins, 1979, 1981, 1991; Echeverría, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Krashen, 1981, 1985, 1996). This means that teachers working with ELLs, particularly bilingual education teachers, not only must impart new content matter to their students but also must develop their students' first (in the case of bilingual education) and second languages. The second reason is that ELLs are the fastest growing student population in Texas and several other states (Payán & Nettles, 2008) and therefore it is important to improve our understanding of how federal and state policies affect this group in particular. The third reason is because other studies have argued that NCLB and other accountability measures are particularly problematic for ELLs (Menken, 2006, 2008; Palmer & Lynch, 2008; Reyes & Rorrer, 2001; Valenzuela, 2000; Wright, 2002; Wright & Choi, 2006) despite the claim to serve low income and minority students (Department of Education, 2001a, 2001b).

It is important to understand how accountability policies permeate classrooms more generally because several of the policies' consequences have been negative, particularly for racial and linguistic minority students. By identifying the mechanism that translates policy into practice, we hope to identify possible sites for improvement as the Obama administration considers revisions to (or replacement of) NCLB when it comes up for reauthorization in 2010. To understand how accountability policies shape implementation, we argue that researchers must zoom in on the context in which teachers make sense of and subsequently implement federal and state policy mandates. Focusing at this level, we contend that via the TAKS test, NCLB and the Texas accountability system more generally, have created formal and informal pressures for bilingual teachers to narrow the curriculum they teach their students, particularly as test time approaches. We also argue, however, that teachers are not simply automatons who implement policies with no regard for their specific students' needs; rather, teachers make sense of the competing demands of formal and informal policy pressures on one hand, with what

they believe to be authentic pedagogies on the other. What follows is an explanation of the theories that ground our analysis, the methodology for collecting and analyzing data, and our analysis of the data. We conclude by discussing the implications of this present study for educators and policymakers.

Theoretical Framework

High-stakes accountability policies were meant to create incentives for administrators and teachers to change the way they worked to improve student learning and for students to perform better in school (Elmore, Abelman, & Fuhrman, 1996; Fuhrman, 1999; O'Day & Smith, 1993; O'Reilly, 1996). Unlike standards-based reform, which focused more on the process of teaching (Spillane, 2004; Spillane & Zeulli, 1999), high-stakes accountability reform set a performance bar that schools had to meet within a defined period of time and then created a set of sanctions for those schools that did not meet the established performance benchmarks (Stecher, Hamilton, & Gonzalez, 2003). Though we have learned a great deal about accountability generally and NCLB in particular, there is much less research on the process of implementation, which is key to understanding why high-stakes accountability policies have led to certain practices in schools and classrooms.

Although research on accountability and NCLB has produced mixed results, there is a great deal of evidence that the policies as implemented have negatively affected classroom practices. Some work has found that accountability policies have positive (Bishop & Mane, 1999; Wolf, Borko, Elliot, & McIver, 2000) or mixed (Balfanz, Legters, West, & Weber, 2007; Firestone, Mayrowetz, & Fairman, 1998; Greene, Winters, & Forster, 2004; Stecher & Chun, 2001) consequences for students. But a growing number of studies argue that high-stakes accountability policies have had negative consequences, particularly for lower SES students, minorities, and ELLs (McNeil, 2000; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vasquez Heilig, 2008; Menken, 2006; Valenzuela et al., 2007; Wright, 2002; Wright & Choi, 2006).

Another shortcoming of the literature on high-stakes testing and accountability is that it has tended to focus on the consequences at an aggregate level. For example, much work has examined the policies as they play out at the state level (Goertz & Duffy, 2003) or at the district and school levels (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Jacob, 2004; McNeil et al., 2008; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004). And though some studies have queried teachers and administrators about the impact of accountability policies (Achinstein et al., 2004; Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Koretz, McCaffrey, & Hamilton, 2001; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Valli & Buese, 2007), they have not examined *how* teachers and administrators implement policy.

Work that points to the negative consequences of accountability focuses on the policy's tendency to limit what and how teachers teach. In other words, how, facing the pressure for their students to pass, teachers "narrow the curriculum." These studies contend that schools and teachers feel pressures to emphasize those subjects that are tested to the detriment of untested subjects and to focus on the format in which standardized tests present material—teaching to the test (Gunzenhauser, 2003). These negative findings have emerged from both mainstream (English-speaking) classrooms (Booher-Jennings 2005; Hamilton, Berends, & Stecher, 2005; Hamilton, Stecher, & Klein, 2002; Luna & Turner, 2001; Nichols and Berliner, 2005; Sullivan, 2006), and classrooms with large numbers of ELLs (Au, 2007; Menken, 2008; Wright & Choi, 2006). One study also argued that low-performing, high-poverty *districts* are vulnerable to adopting scripted curricula that emphasize lower order thinking skills (Achinstein et al., 2004). Going even further, Shohamy (2006) describes teachers as "'soldiers' of the system" who implement policies with "no questions asked with regard to their quality, appropriateness and relevance" for their language minority students (p. 78).

The main shortcoming of much of this is that it does not investigate the mechanism linking policy and how teachers make sense of and implement policy. In other words, these studies do not help us understand how teachers turn policies into practices. Sense-making theory provides the missing link, illuminating the process by which teachers make sense of policy, either individually or socially, and then implement it in the classroom (Coburn, 2001; Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Weick, 1995).

Sense-making offers a window into how teachers mediate new policies through the lens of their preexisting beliefs and knowledge and, together with institutional theory, helps explain how policies permeate the classroom walls in the first place. Scott (1995) argues that there are three ways these messages enter organizations such as schools: regulative, normative, and cognitive means. Regulative refers to formal or explicit rules and procedures, whereas normative and cognitive means are both implicit: normative means are the pressures that teachers experience to adopt a certain practice, and cognitive means refers to the "normalization" of some set of beliefs or practices (Scott, 1995, as cited in Coburn, 2001). In this way, teachers feel various pressures to adopt certain practices and to focus on particular outcomes—and some of these pressures are inconspicuous because they quickly become standard practice within schools and classrooms.

Though existing work on implementation and sense-making goes a long way in explaining unexpected policy outcomes, it is notably silent on the issue of context. How does the local context affect what policies get implemented and how they get implemented? For several years, scholars have

emphasized the impact of contextual factors, arguing that, “one reason for the pattern of [implementation] failure is that context and cognition have not been considered together in developing, researching, disseminating or using educational innovation Context is either viewed as a hindrance or ignored” (Jacob, 1997, p. 3). What’s more, several studies demonstrate that context does matter for how policies are implemented (Achinstein et al., 2004; Datnow, Borman, Stringfield, Overman, & Castellano, 2003; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Dumas & Anyon, 2006; Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 2005; Louis, Febey, & Schroeder 2005; Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2004; Wells & Serna, 1996) but focus at the school or district level and therefore do not speak to how teachers wrestle with new policies.

Here, we go to the next step by considering how the classroom context—students and their unique needs—shape teachers’ decision-making processes. For many, it is obvious that *who* the students are affects what goes on in the classroom (Achinstein et al., 2004; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Datnow et al., 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Rustique-Forrester, 2005), yet students remain absent in most theories of implementation. We contend that teachers must reconcile their preexisting knowledge and beliefs with new policy messages and that the particular needs of their students shape teachers’ beliefs. So, as policy messages enter the classroom through explicit/formal and implicit/informal means, teachers must balance the pressures of accountability with what they believe to be best for their students (Figure 1).

In this way, the decisions teachers make about what and how to teach reflect the tension created by the intersection of accountability policies and their own knowledge and beliefs about their particular students. It is important to remember that although teacher practice is neither wholly determined by nor independent from policy and organizational mandates, these mandates do shape the sense-making process and our model attempts to explain how. The fact that our study takes place in bilingual classrooms is important, therefore, because the unique linguistic and pedagogical needs of ELLs constitute the context that shapes the teachers’ beliefs and how they make sense of policies.

Method

Data Collection

We conducted ethnographic interviews with third- and fifth-grade bilingual teachers (and one fourth-grade teacher) at six schools. Through the open-ended

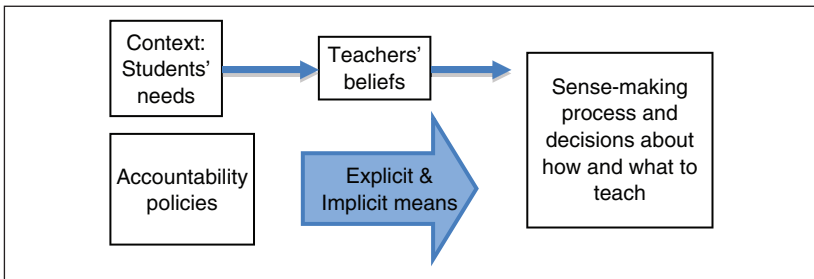


Figure 1. Model of teacher decision making

ethnographic interviews, we hoped to shed light on the ways that teachers of ELLs framed their thinking in terms of issues such as language of instruction, curricular content, and materials as they tried to make sense of the various district, state, and national policy mandates facing them in the current high-stakes accountability environment. The research questions for the study included the following:

Research Question 1: How does the TAKS test affect teachers' curricular choices for their students?

Research Question 2: How does the TAKS test affect teachers' decisions about how to present material to their students?

The goal of open-ended interviews was to understand how participants made sense of the realities they face in the classroom, and for this reason, to the extent possible, we allowed participants to direct the interview topics (Mischler, 1991; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). However, certain guiding questions helped shape our interviews and start participants off (see appendix).

We selected 6 schools (a purposive sample) based on the level of support and understanding the principal provided with regards to bilingual education. Two of the schools had principals who were highly knowledgeable and supportive of bilingual education, 2 had principals who were relatively neutral or noncommittal regarding bilingual education, and 2 had principals who were unsupportive of bilingual education and/or lacked knowledge of how best to serve bilingual students. Schools were selected with the assistance of the district's director of bilingual education and a well-respected bilingual principal in the district. School principals were asked to recommend teachers for the study; thus our method of selection is a variation on the "snowball" method in which each participant is asked to recommend others to participate

Table 1. Demographics of schools in study

	% LEP	Economically disadvantaged	No. of teacher interviews
School 1	58.3	92.2	4
School 2	35.7	93.5	1
School 3	42.3	90	3
School 4	49.8	94.4	3
School 5	54.0	94.4	3
School 6	44.3	91.5	2
District	23.6	60.3	16
State	15.8	55.6	

(Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). See Table 1 below for demographic details on the selected schools.

For our teacher interviews, we chose to focus on Grades 3 and 5 because mandates from both from bilingual education policy and assessment/accountability place particular importance on these grades. In the district we studied, Grade 3 often is considered the “transition” year for bilingual students, the year in which they are expected to gradually move into academic instruction in English. Grade 5, meanwhile, is the last year in which bilingual support is provided to ELLs.² As children leave elementary campuses and move into middle school in this district, they only have access to English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, and their teachers are not required to speak the students’ first language or to be trained in sheltering content area instruction. At the same time, the third and fifth grade TAKS reading tests and the fifth grade TAKS math test have extremely high stakes for children: if students do not pass, they can be retained in grade. The same tests are also high stakes for schools in both the state and national accountability systems, and low scores can lead to sanctions, including school restructuring, as mentioned above. We hypothesized that teachers in these grades would have strong views and much to contribute to a conversation about local, state, and national policies, and the ways these have affected their teaching.

Thus during the spring of 2006, one-on-one interviews were conducted with a total of 16 teachers. Of the 16 teachers interviewed for this study, 9 were third-grade teachers, one was a fourth-grade teacher (at one school, none of the third-grade teachers was able to participate, and the principal suggested we include a fourth-grade teacher; this interview was in line with the others and so the data were retained for analysis), and six were fifth-grade teachers; there was never more than one fifth-grade bilingual education teacher at any of the schools in our sample. The average length of interviews was 45 min; interviews were digitally audiotaped and then transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the methods of traditional ethnographic research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1981). After all interviews were transcribed, we hand-coded the data. Interestingly, there was little difference in tone or topic between educators in schools where leaders were highly supportive and informed about bilingual education and educators in schools without such strong administrative supporters of bilingual programs.

Using qualitative research software TAMS Analyzer, we coded the teacher interviews more closely with an emerging set of broad categories that included “curriculum” and “policy.” Subcodes emerged for each of these larger codes. Subsequently, we looked for patterns within and between the variations within the “policy” codes, defined as “teachers talking about the impact of outside policy impositions (such as accountability/testing requirements, language policies, etc.) on their classrooms,” and the “curriculum” codes, defined as “teachers talking about what they teach and how they decided what to teach.” For the “policy” codes, by far the largest single subcode was “testing,” to the point that nearly all instances coded of “policy” talk were actually talk about TAKS testing. For the “curriculum” codes, we found three subcodes to be useful: “materials,” “literacy/reading,” and “other subject areas.” Themes emerged as we looked at the co-occurrence of different codes. The three themes discussed below were immediately apparent and pervasive throughout the data set.

Limitations

To triangulate our findings, we had intended to include classroom observations in the study, thus offering evidence of what teachers were doing and not just what they said they were doing. We had planned to spend time in the classrooms of 6 of our teacher participants; however, due in large part to testing pressures, the interview process took longer than expected, and access to classrooms for observation was limited. For instance, one principal whom we contacted in early January was willing to allow her teachers to be interviewed but not until after they had completed the first round of TAKS testing in late February. Principals were unwilling to allow us access to observe in classrooms at all during the months of March and April, and a few teachers explicitly told us that during those months we would not see “normal” classroom operations anyway due to the impact of pending TAKS tests.

Without having observed the teachers in action, we can talk only about participants’ impressions and assertions; we cannot talk about their actual classroom practices. Furthermore, although an effort was made to seek out as

wide a range of perspectives as possible with a limited sample size, this study is limited by the small number of participants (Principals: 6; Bilingual Teachers: 16) and the fact that each was only interviewed once. Nonetheless, we are certain that what we have identified is worthy of further study and that we would be remiss to hold off on sharing our findings despite their limitations.

Findings

In the following section, we discuss how bilingual teachers decided what and how to teach in the face of the high-stakes TAKS test. We found that bilingual teachers felt both explicit and implicit pressures from the district and their campuses and that they tempered the pressures with efforts to incorporate authentic teaching based on what they believed was best for their students. The bilingual teachers tended to respond to test pressure in two ways that reflected whether the messages they were receiving were explicit or implicit. First, we found that bilingual teachers experienced the pressures of high-stakes testing through regulative or explicit means, where grade level teams altered the daily schedule and weekly/monthly calendar to maximize time spent preparing for subjects on the looming tests. Second, we observed that the teachers faced a combination of explicit and implicit (normative) pressures to choose, develop, and/or use materials according to their format or content similarity to the state tests and to design lessons that revolved around teaching students skills and strategies to prepare them for TAKS.

Despite the explicit and implicit pressures that the bilingual teachers faced, they also recognized the dilemma confronting them given their context, that is, the pedagogical and linguistic needs of their ELL students. Furthermore, almost all of the bilingual teachers spoke with sadness about a loss of “love for learning” that pervaded classrooms. For this reason, the vast majority of the bilingual teachers interviewed in this study demonstrated heroic efforts to engage authentically with students and learning and to balance the pressures to teach to the test with opportunities to address their students’ unique needs.

Tested Subjects Only: Calendar and Schedule Manipulation

Teachers in bilingual third- and fifth-grade classrooms in Texas face tremendous explicit and implicit pressures from districts, their own schools, and even from colleagues to get children to pass the TAKS tests. A common complaint of classroom bilingual teachers reflecting explicit pressures was the lack of time allotted to fulfill the expectations of the state curriculum. Time pressures appeared to intensify for the bilingual teachers we interviewed when

they dealt with the need to prepare students, particularly those at risk of failing, for the spring TAKS tests. One fifth-grade bilingual teacher succinctly expressed the challenge that time presented, saying that,

And we just don't have enough time in the day. We don't have enough time. There's not enough time. Like I said because it is a test district, we focus on the kids who need testing, who need to pass So the scheduling is very difficult.

Because of time constraints, teachers and schools constantly were faced with the decision about how to prioritize what they taught—and what might not be taught at all—from the curriculum, and when they would teach it. One third-grade bilingual teacher stated, “The child has to pass,”³ implying that ensuring children pass the test must be her first priority. A fifth-grade bilingual teacher described attempting to motivate her students by telling them, “It is a state law that you have to pass these tests.” Given the sense of absolute necessity and the limited time teachers have with students in the classroom, it should not be surprising that schools were encouraging or even requiring teachers to modify their schedules and plans to prioritize TAKS success and, as a consequence, giving less attention to students' bilingual development as required by the district's transitional bilingual education policy.

Teachers in the TAKS grades were directed to maximize time throughout the year to provide instruction that specifically prepared children to pass the TAKS. This explicit pressure led the bilingual teachers to make several common decisions affecting what and how they taught. First, they said they spent less time on non-tested school activities such as social studies, particularly as TAKS testing was drawing near. The bilingual teachers we spoke to even admitted to neglecting subjects not tested in their own grade. Writing, for instance, is tested in fourth grade, so this fifth grade bilingual teacher felt pressure to spend less time on it:

I've neglected social studies. I feel like I've neglected writing because they're not tested. I remember in college saying I would never do that . . . but . . . there's so much pressure put on me. They're like, it's my job. It reflects on [me]. That's what the district cares more about: are they doing well on the test?

They did not take this decision lightly, however, and were aware that they were skipping over material that they should have been teaching—and likely

would have been teaching had they not faced the pressure to focus on TAKS material. This ambivalence reflected how they made sense of policy pressures and their own beliefs as they struggled to best serve their bilingual students.

An important difference between bilingual and mainstream teachers is that bilingual teachers must provide ESL instruction *in addition* to regular content such as math and reading. By definition, students in a bilingual program are simultaneously learning content material, such as math and science, and a new language. The unique linguistic needs of ELLs mean that teachers must use pedagogies that give students access not only to new material in science or social studies but also to a new language. Although it is beyond the scope of this present study to fully explain the pedagogical needs of ELLs, much research has addressed this issue (e.g., Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Cummins, 1979, 1981, 1991; Echeverría et al., 2004; Krashen, 1981, 1985, 1996), supporting our contention that bilingual teachers experience increased tensions between their students' needs and policy demands. This research also highlights the importance of strong and consistent ESL instruction, which the teachers said they were not able to provide to their students.

We found that that with the pressures of TAKS, teachers felt they did not have enough time to provide strong ESL instruction, particularly if their students were to be tested in Spanish.⁴ (For further analysis of the phenomenon of reduced/eliminated ESL instruction in the schooling of students tested in Spanish, see Palmer & Lynch, 2008). For example, one third-grade bilingual teacher said, "you know, I do [ESL] two or three times a week but sometimes especially when TAKS gets near, it kind of gets pushed behind that." Another bilingual teacher echoed the same challenge: "I have [an ESL curriculum]. I do like it, but to tell you the truth, it's really hard for me to find time to put something away and pull out ESL." A fourth-grade bilingual teacher expressed her frustration with the demands to prepare students to take the high-stakes test, compounded with the time necessary to provide language support both in students' primary language and in ESL. She reflected,

I almost think the ESL instruction . . . is sort of unrealistic in a TAKS grade level where there are three tests, and in a bilingual classroom where things do take longer.

As explained above, eliminating ESL instruction in a classroom full of ELLs undermines children's broader educational needs, and the presence of the TAKS appeared to be driving bilingual teachers to redefine those needs to fit the content of the test.

A second consequence was that bilingual teachers gave up a significant portion of their time developing and then carrying out specific plans for TAKS preparation⁵ in response to explicit pressures from their schools. In one school, as a fifth-grade bilingual teacher explained, “it was an hour, forty-minutes of our day that we had to focus on TAKS camp.⁶ That’s not including all the TAKS we do before that, all the TAKS for homework, everything.” When asked whether the TAKS camp focused on reading and math combined, she responded, “This is just reading. Math, the same thing is going to start next week [now that students have taken the reading TAKS]. We’re going to have TAKS camps for math.” Because this study was conducted in the 1st year that a science TAKS test carried high stakes in the fifth grade, the teacher added that because “this is the first year that science really counts We’re going to have a science camp.” A third-grade bilingual teacher at another school explained his school’s choice to focus on TAKS preparation for the final 6 weeks before the test: “We really don’t even get into like TAKS style teaching until January. And in January we have six weeks till the test.” He described,

We do TAKS camp for forty-five minutes each day, where they kind of switch teachers based on their skill level. . . . So it’s meant that I’ve had to put a lot more test taking than I would otherwise.

Even after the students had taken the TAKS test, schools coordinated tutoring for children who did not pass, pulling them from class to give them additional TAKS practice, while their classmates did other activities. One third-grade bilingual teacher explained that all her students, “except for recent immigrants,” received ESL instruction “because my kids, my non-passers get pulled out at that time . . . my students who didn’t pass the TAKS test. They get pulled for interventions, reading interventions.” It seems particularly ironic that recent immigrant students missed out on the ESL lesson to receive supplemental preparation for their retake of the TAKS. These were only some of many examples of teachers describing their own or their campus’ manipulation of students’ schedules to allow for maximum preparation time for the high-stakes test.

The problem of time also appeared on the scale of the entire school year, with bilingual teachers describing how during certain months they were encouraged to focus more on testing than during other months. Interestingly, this was not uniform across the schools. In one school, the beginning and end of the school year had the most TAKS emphasis, as one fifth-grade teacher described,

When the school year starts, you have like two or three weeks getting to know your kids, and then it's gotta [snaps fingers], and start doing TAKS stuff. And then for the last two months of school, and last month for sure, is this heavy hitting of TAKS.

In another school, the bilingual teachers described they felt the most pressure during the 2 months immediately prior to testing, in other words, the winter months. For another school, TAKS preparation endured the entire school year, but in waves, beginning with an intensive focus on reading in the fall, then a complete change of gear to focus on math and ending with science as the year comes to a close. A third-grade bilingual teacher from this school explained that as the reading test approaches, "there's no subject other than reading . . ." Then after the reading test is over, "It's the same with math, we do the Scott Foresman [reading curriculum] because we have to do it. But after that, once the ninety-minute block is over and they have their independent reading time, it's all math." Overall, teachers were quite open about this aspect of their decision making, noting that they felt that manipulating their daily, weekly, or yearly calendar was not really a choice but rather necessary to satisfy the often explicit pressure from their schools to emphasize TAKS-tested subjects and TAKS preparation, even to the detriment of other material.

The bilingual teachers, however, far from acting as automatons, made decisions that "made sense" given the combined explicit and implicit pressures they faced to get children to pass the TAKS. The need for a curriculum that meets bilingual children's language needs often struggles to compete with the demand to succeed on the TAKS as was clear in our interviews. It is the responsibility of policymakers and administrators to structure policy to allow teachers to make decisions that serve the actual language and curricular needs of their bilingual students.

Test-Centered Teaching Materials and Pedagogies

Another area where the bilingual teachers we interviewed confronted both explicit and implicit pressures due to the TAKS test was in choosing class materials and adopting certain pedagogies. As we listened to the bilingual teachers, we noted that most of them said they chose materials based on how well they matched not only the test content but also the test format. They also explained that they made pedagogical decisions in the shadow of the TAKS test. Because teachers do have discretion in choosing some of their materials, here the pressure to teach to the test was not always explicit in that the

message did not always come directly from the school's leaders. Rather, the message to adopt certain materials and pedagogical practices was implicit—it had attained “taken-for-granted status” (Scott, 1995, p. 146; as cited in Coburn, 2001).

We found that at both the third- and fifth-grade levels, bilingual teachers either chose or were given teaching materials that mirrored the TAKS format and that explicitly presented TAKS content and/or “strategies.” As one third-grade bilingual teacher explained,

I teach with the goal of getting the kids to pass the test rather than to get them to be successful in reading, writing, and math in general. I have to hit specifically those goals, that format.

The need for materials that reflected the format and content of the test was particularly strong in reading. Another third-grade bilingual teacher spoke about beginning the year with “little leveled readers” (i.e., trade books such as those published by Rigsby) but by winter moving on to “actual reading selections” (by which she meant practice TAKS reading passages followed by multiple choice comprehension questions, not authentic reading selections):

Some of them have been from the released (TAKS) test,⁷ others are from the book—I don't have it handy right now. It's called, “Read and Understand.” I've got a second-grade copy, and a third-grade copy. I like the selections because they're followed by comprehension questions that are already made. And they hit the different objectives. (Third grade)

Many of the bilingual teachers reported using sample TAKS passages to teach reading in the weeks and months leading up to the reading test. Acknowledging the limitations this placed on their ability to teach “real reading,” teachers nonetheless described their reading instruction in detail as teaching the “strategies” for the TAKS:

As you get to the point where you're just preparing for TAKS as we were this whole nine weeks and the nine weeks before it seemed like reading time pretty much became just TAKS prep time. (Fourth grade)

I feel like with a lot of the kids it's all about strategies because you know.

Interviewer: The reading instruction becomes strategies? Right. (Third grade)

And so this year, I've not been able to do any just general reading education. It's been geared more towards the TAKS test than any more general global aspect. That has really irked me and it's really saddened me because I feel that I've done them a great disservice. They're not going to take TAKS test after they exit school. Of course they'll have to take TAKS test to finish and get a high school diploma, but that doesn't make them, help them become viable citizens when they go and get a job. (Fifth grade)

Finally, a fifth-grade bilingual teacher, in response to the interviewer's request for more details about the "strategies" she had said she used with recent immigrant students, responded:

Do you want to know reading strategies? Are you asking me for TAKS reading strategies? Because that's pretty much all we do for the first We just TAKS the kids to death.

As is clear, the way the bilingual teachers discuss the test and their teaching betrays how the pressure to focus on TAKS has shaped their practices through implicit or cognitive means⁸ by becoming a taken-for-granted part of the culture of schooling in the upper elementary grades. Indeed, TAKS-related materials and professional developments were presented throughout the interviews as teachers explained the way they taught and discussed other aspects of their classroom, school, and district. For example, a fifth-grade bilingual teacher described a district-led teacher training where the teachers were given material to take back to their classrooms, noting that it was "a math training, math TAKS strategies training." And a third-grade bilingual teacher described her school's efforts to provide equitable materials to bilingual classrooms, noting, "Even if they get let's say TAKS practice books, we get them in Spanish . . ." It is a strong message when the district or school hands out materials geared toward test preparation, rather than offering bilingual teachers support in the instruction of math or reading more generally. Bilingual teachers' description of the ways they incorporate TAKS-related materials into their instruction reflects how they made sense of the message from the district, balancing it with their own best judgment about the materials needed for bilingual instruction.

Just as bilingual teachers are choosing materials in TAKS grade reading classrooms to conform to the content and format of the test, teachers similarly

choose pedagogies to match the expectations of TAKS. Thus, in response to explicit and implicit pressures to present students with isolated knowledge and test strategies, bilingual teachers select more highly directive teaching styles, leaving behind the space they may have otherwise provided for children to develop critical thinking skills, formulate and defend their own opinions, and build their independent problem-solving skills. A fifth-grade bilingual teacher explained that she presented math as simple procedural knowledge, rather than as concept-based knowledge, saying:

I've had to do more of that rigorous, more sort of dictatorial teaching and . . . so where I have to tell them, "This is what it's going to look like. This is what you need to use," versus "Here's multiplication, how do you apply that to this?"

Or as another fifth-grade bilingual teacher described her math instruction,

I would hit them with computation and then go into what does that look like in TAKS versus let's do some computation and then let's get some real world connections.

Other bilingual teachers echoed this reflection, lamenting that they felt compelled to teach skills as isolated pieces of knowledge, rather than as one part of a set of interrelated ideas. Yet their choice to teach this way reflects their struggle with the contradictory pressures of their bilingual and high-stakes context; these teachers' make their decisions after careful thought.

An issue specific to upper elementary transitional bilingual classrooms was the challenge of balancing the language needs of recent immigrants with those of children who were already beginning to work in English. Because the teachers prepared children to take the TAKS in one language only (see Palmer & Lynch, 2008 for further analysis of this issue), they had to find creative ways to meet the needs of two separate language groups within a single space and a limited amount of time. A fifth-grade teacher in a mixed-language bilingual classroom complained that she did not have sufficient time to teach her small group of recent immigrants in Spanish as she wished she could to best prepare them for TAKS:

We have fifth graders who . . . need to take the TAKS in Spanish and they need to pass but they get it [instruction] in English and they get very little limited [Spanish instruction], ten minutes, five minutes.

She went on to explain that with her limited time in a small group with the children in Spanish, she focused entirely on the test, helping the students bridge the TAKS “strategies” she had just taught from English to Spanish, rather than engaging authentically with them in Spanish around texts or ideas.

Thus TAKS-focused instruction led this bilingual teacher to impoverish her students’ instruction in two languages: The bilingual students in this particular example are offered neither high-quality instruction in Spanish that would allow them to build their academic language and concepts nor high-quality ESL—modified instruction in English—that would allow them to learn to access academic concepts in English. They are simply expected to sit through English instruction that the teacher acknowledges is beyond their comprehension, awaiting the few minutes with the teacher in which they can focus on the TAKS preparation they “need” in Spanish.

Loss for Love of Learning: “It Kills the Buzz, the Learning Buzz”

The fact that all of the teachers we interviewed admitted to making decisions that limited the curriculum they taught because of the pressures of TAKS should not obscure the reality that the teachers struggled with their decisions. As was clear in the interviews, teachers’ beliefs about how and what to teach their bilingual students very often flew in the face of the various pressures to prepare their students pass the TAKS. An important belief was that they should make learning fun and motivate their students to engage with and enjoy the material, and the teachers struggled to make sense of the discrepancy between this belief and the various pressures from their environment to focus on the test.

One bilingual teacher highlighted this tension as she described the difference between her previous experiences teaching a non-TAKS grade (kindergarten), and her subsequent experiences teaching third grade:

I’ve taught kinder . . . I just felt like it was fun . . . the children seemed to be learning and picking up. I know that they say as they get to the higher grades, they seem to lose it somewhere along the way. But maybe it’s because testing starts. And it starts turning them off because where’s all the good stuff? . . . It’s not there anymore. They keep blaming it on everything else, but is it because that’s [test preparation] all we’re doing? I don’t know. I don’t like the TAKS.

In comparing her prior experiences in a non-TAKS grade with her current teaching experiences, this teacher implies that the monotonous learning that

has resulted from TAKS preparation might contribute to longer term disillusionment with school.

Unfortunately, the sense that testing had driven the excitement and passion out of learning was common among the teachers. In a different school, a third-grade bilingual teacher responded to the interviewer's query about whether TAKS testing had changed her teaching:

I was just talking with the [reading] coach yesterday about having lost a lot of the fun reading. I used to be able to pick up books that interested me, and reading was exciting to the kids. And get them involved, and doing thematic units and things like that. Also go with the interest of the kids. What is the kid interested in? Develop something around that.

A fifth-grade bilingual teacher at yet another school adamantly echoed this sense of loss:

It's draining. It's boring. It's frustrating. It takes all the fun out of actually learning something and enjoying it. You know it's like, "Okay, here's another [TAKS practice] passage. Ay-ay-ay." There's no real enjoyment out of reading something about you know Africa, not in a TAKS passage form, that's not enjoyable you know. It kills the buzz, the learning buzz.

In addition to their sense that test preparation was making learning less meaningful, the bilingual teachers recognized that the test pressures affected their students too. The same former kindergarten teacher quoted above reflected on how her decision to focus on test preparation had caused her third graders stress, admitting,

We have to give them the test and I do everything I need to do to make sure that the children pass the test. It's just that . . . what it does is terrible. It scares a lot of children too. It's hard and stressful. Stressful for us. Really stressful for them.

As a fifth grade bilingual teacher commented, "I think that's a lot of pressure for a ten-year-old."

In classrooms with bilingual children aged 8 through 11, the teachers above (and many more throughout the data) volunteered their sense of sadness for a loss of agency over the learning process, for a loss of the

excitement for learning and discovery that drives students to want to succeed in school.

Several of the teachers stopped themselves at a certain point, making comments such as, “I think I’ve said more than I should” or “This isn’t going anywhere, is it?” thus implying that they did not feel free to voice these emotions openly. The sense of constant surveillance and of loss of control over curriculum-related decision making, appears to emerge in part from the combination of pressures related to the high-stakes test.

The assertions of their own beliefs and lamentations of the losses they felt took place throughout our interviews with bilingual teachers, intermingled with their explanations for why they chose to limit curriculum, materials, and pedagogy to TAKS-centered work. The tensions bilingual teachers faced as they made these difficult decisions were apparent throughout and provide evidence of their ongoing sense-making process.

Defending Authentic Learning

I tell them, “My goal is to help you become a productive citizen. Whether that is, whatever it is that you do. That you stand on your own two feet with an open heart and an open mind.”

And it really makes them feel good when they can do well and they see what I’ve been trying to teach them is something above and beyond just some silly TAKS test. (Fifth grade)

Our findings contradict Shohamy’s (2006) claim that teachers are but soldiers of the system who implement policies handed down from above without considering their students’ needs. Instead, we found a more complex situation: The bilingual teachers balanced competing demands from accountability and testing policies on one hand and their beliefs about how to best serve their students on the other by finding ways to keep authentic learning alive in their classrooms. Despite their sadness over the loss of autonomy, despite their admitting to making decisions that distorted curriculum and pedagogy in their classrooms in the face of the TAKS test, nearly all of the bilingual teachers interviewed here expressed their own commitment to authentic learning, to knowing and serving their students as individuals, and to the ideal of education as a way to improve their students’ hopes for the future. In this way, teachers attempted to buffer their students from some of the negative consequences of high-stakes accountability. For example, the fifth-grade bilingual teacher above, after lamenting the high pressures faced

by 10-year-olds and describing her teaching as entirely “TAKS-focused,” volunteered her expression of caring for her students by way of redeeming her classroom as a place where children still felt safe and loved and where learning still happened.

Similarly, the third-grade bilingual teacher below asserted passionately that conversation was the “cornerstone” of his classroom:

. . . because I want my kids to be critical thinkers. I want them to be incredibly analytical because I don’t want to teach to the test and yet if they’re analytical thinkers it doesn’t matter what question they’re going to come across; when they take the test they’re going to know how to deal with it critically and analytically.

Although he spent considerable time describing the 45 min per day spent in “TAKS camp” for the 6 weeks prior to the test, he later reiterated his commitment to teaching his students to be critical thinkers, “because I feel like it’s the way to give them that real education and prepare them for that test.” Like these 2 teachers, most bilingual teachers interviewed appeared to take on a role of buffer, protecting their children from the emptiness they saw as “teaching to the test” and offering authentic learning experiences whenever possible around the corners of their days—even when they felt that much of their daily schedule was out of their hands.

When the bilingual teachers described their goals and objectives for their students, there frequently emerged a tension between meeting district expectations and state/national testing requirements on one hand, and fulfilling what they saw as important goals of educating their bilingual students on the other hand. These comments often emerged at the end of the interviews when we asked teachers about their use of “Accountable Talk (AT),” a district initiative sponsored by the Pittsburg-based Institutes For Learning. AT is a research-based form of academic discussion that engages learners around ideas in structured ways. The purpose of the initiative is to teach children to listen to one another’s ideas and to push one another to justify their thinking, make connections, and to build on others’ ideas (Michaels, O’Connor, Hall, & Resnick, 2002).

We found that the bilingual teachers who understood AT generally liked it and saw it as one small way that the district was sanctioning teaching students beyond the test, to talk and think for themselves. The following third-grade bilingual teacher illustrates this tension between district and accountability policies. She tried to follow the objectives dictated in the district’s curriculum “in case anybody from the district comes in,” and lamented, “I feel like I lost

a lot of freedom.” But she went on to assert that in the end, “really you have to look at the child and decide what the child needs.” Then, when the interviewer asked her whether using AT in her classroom conflicted in any way with test preparation, she admitted,

It takes a lot longer to sit there and have the kids discuss, I guess in a sense [Accountable Talk] takes away time, but I feel like it doesn't because I feel like it's so important for them, for their growth as people⁹ to be able to communicate with each other.

To this teacher, the more important consideration is not whether AT conflicts with test preparation but whether it helps children grow as people and learn to communicate. This sort of reaction is indicative of how teachers struggle to make sense of the discrepancy between what they believe they should do and what they feel they must do.

In the end, teachers are responsible for the learning that takes place in their classrooms. It is heartening to know that even when bilingual teachers feel that many decisions are out of their control, they still find ways to balance the testing pressures with their context—their own knowledge about their students' growth and well-being. Even in the face of strong incentives to care mainly about test scores, these bilingual teachers authentically care about their students (Valenzuela, 1999).

Conclusion

Since the implementation of high-stakes accountability policies, there have been studies demonstrating that one consequence of these is that teachers respond by narrowing the curriculum they teach their students. We found similar results in this study—that the teachers felt pressured to adjust and limit their instructional focus, including what subjects they teach, what topics they cover, what materials they use, and how they organize and present material, to prepare their students for the TAKS tests. This study differs, however, from previous work in several important ways. First, we look beyond the consequences of what has been implemented and build on existing theory to explain how policy messages permeate the classroom and shape teacher decision making, thus leading to certain negative consequences. We also take a step toward situating policy implementation in the local context, arguing that implementation at the classroom level is mediated not only by teachers' preexisting knowledge and beliefs but also by who the students are and what teachers believe specifically about their students. Finally, we focus on

bilingual classrooms, honing in on how this particular context shapes how teachers implement high-stakes accountability policy.

In our interviews with third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers, we found that they spoke of the considerable tension they experienced between what they believed to be best for their students, and what they felt their campuses were requiring them to do in their classrooms to prepare their students to take the TAKS test. In other words, for these teachers, it mattered *who* their students were when the time came to decide how to make sense of the various explicit and implicit pressures to prepare their students for TAKS. These bilingual teachers told us about how they wrestled with the apparent contradiction between their knowledge of their ELL students' pedagogical and linguistic needs, and their campuses' requirements to tailor their instruction and materials to the content and format of the test.

Two main concerns emerge from this study. The first is that our findings confirm previous work indicating that accountability policies based on high-stakes testing disproportionately hurt language minority students (McNeil, 2005; McNeil et al., 2008; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999, 2000). When ELLs are denied access to strong ESL, writing, or social studies instruction, we as policy makers and educators are not serving them well. This is particularly the case given that recent research highlights a strong connection between ELL students' exposure to rich, grade-level curriculum and their likelihood of graduating from high school prepared to enter college (Callahan, 2005). Likewise, when these students' days are filled with tedious, monotonous practice TAKS passages, they are not engaged in their learning and are more likely to lose interest in school (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Finally, when schools and teachers choose materials based on their resemblance to a multiple-choice format standardized test, we are not offering our ELL students multiple points of entry into content or English, which is what they need to learn both language and content (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Cummins, 1979, 1981, 1991; Echeverría et al., 2004; Krashen, 1981, 1985, 1996).

A second concern arises from our finding that teachers feel they must choose between providing appropriate instruction and instruction based on test preparation. As the implementation literature argues, teachers are neither blank slates onto which policy makers can impose new mandates nor are they immune to the pressure of the severe consequences of our accountability system as currently structured—their agency is limited by formal and informal structural constraints (Sewell, 1992). Our findings paint a more complex picture of teachers' decision making in the context of high-stakes accountability than most studies provide, confirming that teachers approach

new policy messages not as automatons but rather through the lens of their own knowledge and experience and with the best interests of their particular students at heart. In an environment where pressures emanating from state and federal policy mandates pushed them to focus on test preparation, the teachers we interviewed refused to be “soldiers” of the system and instead sought out pockets of agency by seeking ways to bring authentic teaching back into their classrooms. That said, their daily struggle with policy messages suggests just how strong the incentives built into the accountability system are, particularly for those teachers whose students have unique needs, such as ELLs.

The challenge of teaching ELLs is here to stay (Payán & Nettles, 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008) and so lawmakers must carefully consider the possible adverse consequences of legislation as they move forward to reauthorize NCLB and to reform state accountability systems. As such, what now follows are several policy recommendations based on our analysis. At both the state and federal levels, we urge policymakers to be aware of the negative incentives that many accountability policies create for teachers to limit what they teach their students. One way to address this unintended consequence is to eliminate or at least moderate the punitive sanctions attached to the accountability system, particularly in light of recent work suggesting that high-stakes testing may not be an effective mechanism to improve instruction and learning outcomes (Supovitz, 2009). Policymakers should lower the stakes by measuring students’ growth over time, rather expecting all students to meet the exact same goals. The use of a growth model would allow teachers to meet students where they are academically, instill in the accountability system the “patience” needed for organizational and instructional improvement to occur (Levitt & March, 1988; Loeb, Knapp, & Elfers, 2008; Stecher et al., 2003), and give schools and teachers credit for improving student learning.

Another recommendation for reforming state and the federal accountability system is to focus less on punishing educators and more on supporting them. A contradiction built into the accountability system is the assumption that educators are not doing a good job (Stecher et al., 2003) and yet are meant to shoulder the burden of improving the country’s school system. Our findings support what other research has found: that educators strive to do their job but their jobs have become more complex with the increase in federal and state oversight (Valli & Buese, 2007). Not surprisingly, research has found that teachers improve their practice when they are supported, such as when they have time to plan collaboratively (Young, 2006) and receive appropriate professional development (Gallucci, 2008).

Therefore, we recommend that policymakers find ways to support rather than punish teachers and administrators.

Finally, we recommend that federal and state policies address the unique needs of ELLs. Given that it takes 4 to 7 years, on average, for a student to acquire academic English (Thomas & Collier, 2002), we suggest that students should be able to take state assessments in their native language or with native language supports until they are proficient in academic English, even if that is beyond the grade when bilingual education is mandated.

Appendix

Guiding Interview Questions for Teachers

General

1. Do you believe that bilingual education is an effective way to teach English Language Learners? Why/why not? (What do you see as its strengths/weaknesses?)
2. In what ways does your school support or not support bilingual education?
3. In which language do you instruct reading? Does it vary by student? How do you decide which language to use?
4. Do you have any strategies that support reading instruction in both languages (English and Spanish)?
5. Schedule: How do you fit primary and second language instruction throughout the day? How is this determined?
6. Tell me specifically about the components of your reading instruction. Do you do, for example, shared reading, read alouds, guided reading? What else? What materials do you use most?
7. How do you teach students to read in English?
8. How do you decide when your second language learners are ready to transfer to an all-English classroom?

Policy-specific

9. Tell me about RISE. What is your understanding of what it is, what it's for, how it works/doesn't work, who came up with it, and so on?

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

10. What has RISE meant for you and your students? For example, has RISE changed the way you teach? Has it had positive/negative effects on student learning?
 11. Tell me about TAKS reading test. What is your understanding of what it is, what it's for, how it works/doesn't work, who came up with it, and so on?
 12. What has TAKS reading meant for you and your students? For example, has TAKS changed the way you teach? Has it had positive/negative effects on student learning?
 13. How do you determine what language your students take TAKS reading test in?
 14. Tell me about Accountable Talk (AT). What is your understanding of what it is, what it's for, how it works/doesn't work, who came up with it, and so on?
 15. What has AT meant for you and your students? For example, Has Accountable Talk changed the way you teach? Has it had positive/negative effects on student learning?
 16. How do you use AT within your reading block?
 17. Do you use AT in English, Spanish, or both?
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1. Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is the metric by which states can show the federal government that their schools are moving toward the mandated goal of 100% proficiency in math, science, and reading by 2014. States can set their own standards for AYP, as long as they move toward the ultimate goal of 100%. This, of course, means that each year, more students of each subgroup must meet the minimum proficiency requirements in each content area (Department of Education, 2001).
2. The state only mandates bilingual education through elementary school and most elementary schools in Texas end after fifth grade; bilingual education continues

into sixth grade only when sixth grade is in an elementary rather than middle school (Texas Education Code §29.053).

3. According to Texas law, ELLs may take TAKS tests in Spanish through fifth grade if they are enrolled in a bilingual education program. Students who have recently arrived in the United States only have a 1 year exemption from taking TAKS tests, regardless of what grade they are in.
4. Texas state law authorizes local campus educators to decide whether students enrolled in bilingual education will take the TAKS test in Spanish or in English. Once a student either has exited a bilingual program or enters middle school (bilingual education is only mandated in elementary school), he or she must take TAKS in English. Recent immigrants are exempted from taking the TAKS for 1 year.
5. In our study schools, TAKS preparation consisted of activities that focused specifically on developing test-taking skills and strategies.
6. A common practice throughout the schools we studied, TAKS camp is when extended periods of time are set aside, sometimes during the day or even on weekends, to practice test-taking skills.
7. Texas Education Agency (1996a, 1996b) releases tests from previous years that teachers then can use for instruction.
8. As mentioned above, cognitive means refers to the “normalization” of some set of beliefs or practices.
9. Emphasis added.

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