HIGH-STAKES, STANDARDIZED TESTING AND EMERGENT BILINGUAL STUDENTS IN TEXAS: A CALL FOR ACTION

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ABSTRACT

Public schools in the U.S. today are educating more students from language and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds and from lower socioeconomic groups. Schools, however, have a long history of providing inequitable educational opportunities that disadvantage low income students and students of color who are increasingly segregated in under-funded schools. High-stakes, standardized tests have long been a part of Texas education policy even though decades of research show this testing to be a deeply flawed policy that further exacerbates already existing educational inequalities and disadvantages minoritized students. This article contributes to this body of scholarship by offering an overview of findings from an ethnographic study examining how emergent bilingual students experience high-stakes accountability in a public high school in El Paso, Texas. The article concludes by looking to the role that teacher educators and educator preparation programs can play developing agency among in- and pre-service teachers to reduce the dominance of the testing system and test-centric instruction in Texas public schools.

The shifting demographics of Texas, a trend that many argue serves as a bellwether for the larger nation, has received much attention (Evans, 2018; Murdock, et al., 2014). Public schools in Texas offer a microcosm of this change: during the 2018-19 school year, Hispanic students accounted for 52.6% of the overall public school population in Texas (compared to 47.2% in 2007-08); 19.4% of the state's public school students were identified as English Language Learners (ELL) (compared to 16.9% in 2008-09); and 60.6% of Texas public school students were classified as economically disadvantaged (compared to 56.6% in 2008-09) (Texas Education Agency, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). Latinx students are the fastest growing population in schools in the United States today (Datnow, 2016) and while most emergent bilingual[1] students in U.S. public

[1] I draw from García, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008) and use the term "emergent bilingual" to highlight the language assets students have while developing proficiency in English. However, when referencing the data and policies of districts and agencies in this paper I use their labels to draw attention to the deficit-oriented frameworks that are continually and broadly used.

schools are elementary school students, a majority of public school districts nationwide have ELLs in high school (Bialik, et al., 2018). And again, for the first time in more than 50 years, a majority of public school students in the U.S. are economically disadvantaged (Layton, 2015). These populations of students, in Texas and nationwide, are projected to grow. In this increasingly diverse context, research shows that public schools continue to fail students of color and economically disadvantaged and emergent bilingual students, as evidenced by their lower rates of entry into, and completion of, postsecondary education; their lower rates of high school completion; and their disproportionately poor performance on high-stakes, standardized assessments (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Menken, 2008; Valenzuela, 2005; Valencia, 2011; Zacher Pandya, 2011). As Krochmal (as cited in Evans, 2018) explains, these demographic shifts require "major improvements in education and opportunities for kids…to be able to compete successfully in the global knowledge economy of the 21st century" (para. 5). This paper situates Texas education policy – specifically the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) end-of-course exams – within a conversation about literacy education and the preparation of economically disadvantaged Latinx emergent bilingual students for a rapidly changing and complex world beyond K-12 schooling.

High-stakes standardized tests have long been a part of Texas education policy (Walker Johnson, 2009) and have been studied extensively, though less so through ethnographic methods (Sloan, 2007) or with emergent bilingual students. Through my two-year ethnographic research study funded by the Greater Texas Foundation, I aimed to understand how these tests shaped the schooling of emergent bilingual students in a public high school in El Paso, Texas. Situated on the U.S./Mexico border, 82% of the population of El Paso County identifies as Hispanic, 73% of households speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census, 2010), and 27% of students in its largest school district are classified as ELLs (Texas Education Agency, n.d.e.). Statistical data present information on emergent bilingual students' achievement on state assessments; however, these data paint a partial and deficit-focused portrait of who students are and cannot account for why students perform as they do or how teaching and learning changes as a result of high-stakes, standardized testing (Au, 2007; Williamson, 2017). As a literacy/biliteracy scholar in a public university on the U.S./Mexico border, nearly all the graduate students in my university courses are full-time teachers in Title I public schools in the region and they speak passionately about the constraints state assessments place on their teaching and the negative effects tests have on their Latinx students. Once extensively studied, high-stakes, standardized testing as an educational policy remains deeply problematic. And yet it continues and seems to receive less and less scholarly attention today. Why is this? And what can be done to reverse this educational policy that has such a detrimental impact on the schooling of Latinx students whose families are classified as having low socioeconomic status, in particular?

The state of Texas has long tied particularly high stakes to its state exam (Texas Education Agency, n.d.a). Passing scores on STAAR end-of-course exams are required for graduation from high school, making the test a gatekeeper to both postsecondary education and most secure and sustaining career paths, given that a high school diploma or its equivalent is a requirement for participation in the military, most trade schools, and employment in many sectors of the labor force. My ethnographic study asked how emergent bilingual students experience accountability, what desires they had for their education/schooling, and whether/how the STAAR exams affected these plans. This article provides an overview of my study findings to date, focusing in particular on the ways state-mandated high-stakes, standardized testing disadvantaged emergent bilingual students at my field site, posing challenges for their participation in a rapidly changing and complex world beyond high school.

I begin by examining scholarship on multiliteracies, testing, and language and continue with a discussion of the ethnographic context of this study and the methodology used and data collected. A review of the findings follows, and the article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings.

Review of Literature

Multiliteracies

Literacy has always been a social practice and cultural form shaped by and shared between members of a group (Collins & Blot, 2003; Heath, 1983; Street, 1995). As society changes, literacy does as well (Kalantzis, et al., 2016). A multiliteracies approach to literacy accounts for the way in which new information and communications technologies and social diversity shape engagements with literacy and increase "the intensity and complexity of literate environments" (NCTE, 2013, para. 1). Multiliteracies scholars and practitioners argue that our rapidly changing, technological, and complex society demands "that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies" (NCTE, 2013, para. 1). These demands require schools educate "new 'kinds of people'" who are better able to adapt to this new world and the world of the future (Kalantzis, et al., 2016, p. 6). These "new basics" of literacy require innovative, flexible, collaborative problem-solvers and risk-takers "capable of applying divergent ways of thinking" and who are "more discerning in the context of much more and ever-changing complexity" (Kalantzis, et al., 2016, p. 6). Mehta and Fine (2019) refer to this as "deeper learning" – a learning that integrates "the cognitive and the affective, the short-term and the long-term, and the individual and the social" (p. 12).

High-Stakes, Standardized Testing

Many schools, particularly those that are under-resourced and serve low-income students, often of color, struggle to incorporate a multiliteracies or deeper learning approach, centering instead skills-

based literacy instruction while excluding, and viewing as deficit, the rich and diverse out-of-school literacy and linguistic practices of students (Haddix, et al., 2017; Heath, 1983; Kinloch, et al., 2017; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). High-stakes, standardized testing works to exacerbate educational inequities and produces a "stratified system of basic skills and scripted instruction" for historically marginalized students that "helps reproduce a stratified labor force for…the deeply unequal social structure that characterizes the neoliberal global economy" (Lipman, 2008, p. 58). And, as Lipman argues, in such a society students need the very critical literacies they are being denied in order to "survive and challenge…deep inequalities and structures of power" (p. 62).

As a school-based language and literacy practice, high-stakes, standardized tests pose particular challenges for students from racial minority, language minority, and low-income backgrounds (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Valenzuela, 2005) and, because of this, push teachers and schools toward test-centric instruction to help boost students' scores (Au, 2007, 2011). Test-centric instruction constrains reading and writing practices in schools by separating literacy practices into discrete and isolated tasks that are not shaped by social context (Williamson, 2017). These technical views of literacy "disguise the ideologically loaded nature of standardized literacy assessments," which privilege a White, middle-class, monolingual variety of the English language" and disadvantage "linguistically diverse students in Texas who may speak and write non-dominant language varieties, particularly Spanish and Black English" (Williamson, 2017, p. 70). Tests reveal cultural biases that reflect "the dominant-culture standards of language, knowledge and behavior" (Solórzano, 2008, p. 285; see also Au, 2016; Mahon, 2006; Valenzuela, 2000), disadvantaging non-dominant students. Additionally, because end-of-course exams use English to assess students' content knowledge, they pose linguistic challenges to emergent bilingual students and make it impossible to separate language proficiency from content knowledge and thus have less validity "because language impacts the results" (Menken, 2010, p. 122-123; see also Mahon, 2006). Tests also divert scarce monies away from high-quality curricular resources and toward tests and test preparation materials (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001) and narrow and homogenize curricula and instruction (Au, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hampton, 2005; McNeil, 2000a, 2000b; Menken, 2008a, 2008b), erasing the unique learning needs of diverse students (Harper, et al., 2007; Menken, 2008a, 2008b). These tests are "party to a larger logic that fosters alienation toward schooling through a systematic negation of…students'… culture and language" (Valenzuela, 2000, p. 524) and they "undermine community struggles to center their culture, language, and history in the curriculum" (Lipman, 2008, p. 55). The standardization of language and literacy through high-stakes testing often crowds out opportunities for more critical, culturally-based, and inquiry-driven teaching and learning (Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Pennington, 2004; Westheimer, 2015; Zacher Pandya, 2011) and transforms literacy practices "from multifaceted, culturally responsive, socially constructed, and highly contextual" to ones "that are more monolithic and independent from the local literacies already present" (Sloan, 2007, p. 27).

HIGH-STAKES, STANDARDIZED TESTING IN TEXAS

High-stakes, standardized testing has been a nationwide mechanism of school reform since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), through the educational policies embedded in NCLB, and mirrored in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), are based on reforms adopted in Texas many years prior (Valenzuela, 2005) when the Texas Legislature "began constructing an educational system that would place higher and higher stakes on students' performance on standardized tests" (Walker Johnson, 2009, p. 1). Davis and Wilson's (2015) analysis of the shift in tests over time shows "the evolution of standards-based accountability in the state. The shift from basic skills to minimum skills to academic skills, then to knowledge and skills, and most recently to academic readiness implies an upward ratcheting of academic expectations and an effort to ensure closer alignment to college and career preparation" (p. 358). Beginning in 1986, a passing score on the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) was a requirement to graduate from high school (Texas Education Agency, n.d.a). Since then, Texas has phased in three different assessments: the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was introduced in 1990, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) was introduced in 2003, and the assessment currently in use, the STAAR, was introduced in 2012 (Texas Education Agency, n.d.a). A passing score on each of these state assessments has at times been required for grade level advancement in elementary and middle schools and for graduation from high school.

When it was first introduced, the STAAR included a battery of 15 end-of-course exams: algebra I, geometry, algebra II, biology, chemistry, physics, English I reading, English I writing, English II reading, English II writing, English III reading, English III writing, world geography, world history, and U.S. history (Texas Education Agency, n.d.c). In 2013, just one year after it was first implemented, the 83rd Texas Legislature enacted a bill that reduced the number of STAAR end-of-course exams from 15 to 5 (Texas Education Agency, n.d.b). High school students currently take five end-of-course STAAR exams: English I, English II, Algebra I, biology, and U.S. history (Texas Education Agency, n.d.d), and they must pass three of these five exams to graduate from high school[2] (Texas Education Agency, 2017). While emergent bilingual students in elementary and middle schools are offered a range of accommodations for taking the STAAR exam in a language they are still learning, those in high school are afforded significantly fewer: only the use of dictionaries and extra time to complete tests (Texas Education Agency, 2016). They are not given the option of being assessed in their native language.

Recently, concerns about the STAAR test have surfaced. This past 86th legislative session in Texas, two state senators sponsored Senate Bill 2400 to temporarily halt STAAR testing (Menéndez, 2019), given concerns raised by researchers about how the STAAR measures reading comprehension (Johnson, et al., 2013) and concerns that the tests are not grade-level appropriate

[2] SB 149, signed by Governor Abbott in May of 2015, revised the state's assessment graduation requirements and reduced from five to three the number of STAAR end-of-course exams a student needed to pass in order to receive a high school diploma. Specific provisions determined by an individual graduation committee are required in place of these two exams. (Texas Education Agency, 2015). During the 85th legislative session in Texas, SB 149 was renewed until September 1, 2019 with the passage of SB 463 (Swaby, 2017) and during the 86th legislative session, SB 213 was passed to extend this date to September 1, 2023.

(Szabo & Sinclair, 2012). State representatives also introduced House Bill 736 "to effectively repeal the STAAR test by eliminating the requirement to use public school assessment instruments as a criterion for promotion or graduation or to make certain accountability determinations" (Landgraf, 2019, para. 1). Neither of these bills made it out of their respective education committees before the legislative session ended. Several other measures were passed, however, that will impact high-stakes, standardized testing in Texas schools. Among them is House Bill 3, which "calls for an 'assessment instrument study,'… [requiring] the Texas Education Agency to work with a public institution of higher education to determine if each State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test is written at the appropriate grade level" (Teach the Vote, n.d., para. 2). While this close examination of the STAAR exams is much-needed, the testing-related legislation that was passed only tinkers with, rather than dismantles, a deeply flawed system.

Research Context and Study Methods

Ethnographic research involves regular and sustained interaction with people whose lives and perspectives we want to understand within the context(s) where they take place. Ethnographic methods include observations conducted in multiple settings over a lengthy period of time, open-ended interviews with study participants, and analyses of a variety of documents produced by participants and institutions in the study. These multiple data sources, and the rigorous analysis and triangulation of them, mediate bias and ensure the accuracy of the data collected (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Ethnographic methods can illuminate multiple stakeholder perspectives and document the complexity a subject studied (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). That ethnographic methods are designed to capture complexity, including complexities not initially anticipated by the researcher, makes ethnography an essential approach for understanding and documenting complex social processes.

The findings reviewed in this paper come from data collected during 22 months of participant observation across multiple sources, individual interviews and focus group sessions, and document analysis. Data included nearly 140 hours of participant observation and field notes; audio recorded open-ended interviews with 23 individuals including students, teachers, counselors, district and school administrators, and a STAAR test editor and two test STAAR graders; 8 focus group sessions with students in an arts-based literacy course (described below); policy documents, test preparation documents and other curricular materials, and student work; English I and II STAAR tests; and district reports and state assessment data. Student interview and focus group questions asked about experiences with STAAR testing, out-of-school literacy practices, and photographic projects in the arts-based literacy course I designed for study participants and taught. Interview questions with teachers, administrators, and the STAAR test editor and graders focused on curricula and pedagogy, state assessment policies, and student performance on and the content of STAAR tests. The collection and analysis of data was an iterative process. Data analysis involved

open coding, analytic memos, and focused coding (Saldaña, 2016). All data were triangulated to cross-check findings and validate patterns (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

I approached this study from the perspective that just as education is not neutral, neither is research (Lather, 1993; Tuhiwai Smith, 2004). Tuck's (2012) concept of "desire-based research" reminded me to find ways to understand the "complexity, contradiction, and self-determination of lived lives… by documenting not only the painful elements of social realities, but also the wisdom and hope… so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered" (p. 19-20). As a literacy scholar and educator, I incorporate critical media literacy, multimodality, and youth digital literacies as topics of study into the literacy courses I teach, and I seek examples through my research and teaching of in-school literacy practices (visual and otherwise) using students' worlds as platforms for critical inquiry and learning. The arts-based literacy course I included in the study design aimed to provide an informal bilingual/biliterate space to center emergent bilingual students' lives using visual texts. Our course used photography and writing as entry points for students at my field site to explore topics of relevance to their lives. Inviting students to participate in language and literacy practices markedly different from those in their English classes created opportunities for them to be agentive actors. Students produced images and narratives that countered common deficit discourses about emergent bilinguals, immigrants, and youth of color, revealing instead their vitality, assets, and potential (Bach, 2020b).

In the high school that was my field site, 91% of the students were Latinx, nearly 90% economically disadvantaged, and 15% emergent bilinguals. Emergent bilingual students were placed in one of three sheltered English classes, self-contained grade-level classrooms taught by teachers certified to provide language and content instruction for students learning English (Wright, 2015). The Beginning English class focused on supporting students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English and had no STAAR exam. Students then took sheltered English I and then sheltered English II, both of which had an end-of-course STAAR exam. A non-sheltered English III course followed, with no STAAR test requirement. These courses comprised the English as a Second Language (ESL) program. At my field site, only 25% of students classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) passed the STAAR English I exam in the Spring of 2018 (district-wide only 18% passed) and only 19% passed the STAAR English II exam (district-wide 20% passed).

At the time of this writing, data analysis on this project continues. In the section that follows I provide an overview of some of the study's central findings to date.

Overview of Study Findings

State-mandated high-stakes, standardized testing and policies at the level of the district and high school disadvantaged emergent bilingual students at my field site in different ways.

TEST-CENTRIC INSTRUCTION

To begin, test-centric instruction was expected and pervasive because of the challenge STAAR tests posed for students (Bach, 2020a). To improve students' passing rates, district training sessions and in-school English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings emphasized that STAAR tests should drive instruction in the classroom. In one professional development training for ELAR teachers across the district, district administrators emphasized the need for teachers to use STAAR tests as model texts to guide instructional activities and be used as formative assessments to prepare students for the STAAR exam. Observations in each of the English classes for emergent bilingual students confirmed the central role STAAR test competencies and writing prompts played in literacy instruction. In one of the PLC meetings at my field site, a district superintendent was invited to give a 45-minute workshop guiding teachers through a specific test taking strategy for their students to use when taking the reading portion of the STAAR exam. In his workshop, this administrator acknowledged this particular strategy was only to help students be "successful on a test" and that he was assuming ELAR teachers had "already taught them the skills they need…in terms of how to be successful in terms of English" (Field Note, February 28, 2017). Classroom observations and interviews, however, revealed teachers and students found little utility in this test-centric instruction, which comprised almost the entirety of content taught in the English classes for emergent bilingual students, other than to help students pass the STAAR exams. Conversations with a teacher and student revealed the challenges and consequences of intensive STAAR test-centric instruction. The ESL teacher, Ms. Rodriguez,[3] acknowledged, "our instruction is more aligned to testing than proficiency on the subject…I'm teaching ESLs and in one year they need to pass a test. What else can I do? You don't give me those six years for them to build up a language" (Interview, June 6, 2017). María, a junior when we first met, echoed this point when she told me,

Yo siempre he pensado que el tipo de educación que tenemos ahorita es nada más para los exámenes…Te enseñan ciertos temas y tienes que aprenderlos para el examen. Y cuando pasas el examen echas toda la información y vuelves a aprender nueva información. Aprendes o, más bien, memorizas nueva información para el siguiente exámen. [I've always thought that the type of education that we have right now is just for the tests…They teach you certain topics and you have to learn them for the exam. And once you pass the exam, you throw out all that information and learn new information again. You learn, or rather, you memorize new information for the following exam] (interview, May 23, 2017).

DECONTEXTUALIZED AND FORMULAIC LITERACY PRACTICES

Classroom observations of all three English classes for emergent bilingual students revealed test-centric language and literacy instruction. The decontextualized literacy practices promoted by the STAAR and practiced in class ignored "the complex intersection of students' backgrounds and

[3] All study participants' names in this article are pseudonyms.

interests with the goals of reading, writing, and communicating" (Moje, et al., 2017, p. 4). This partitioning of literacy into isolated tasks prevented emergent bilingual students from learning *through* literacy (Bach, 2020a). In particular, writing instruction centered on teaching and practicing the formulaic essay structures valued on the STAAR English I and II exams, which tested expository writing and persuasive essays, respectively. Through classroom observations, document analysis, and conversations with STAAR test graders and a STAAR test editor, it became clear that mastering a formulaic and prescribed essay structure was more important than the content of what students wrote in their essays. To be sure, students needed to respond to the STAAR essay prompts in their writing; however, the examples they provided as evidence in their essays and the development of their ideas through writing were less important than demonstrating mastery of a formulaic essay structure. The relative irrelevance of students' examples in support of their discussion in their essays, a decision made by the State and communicated to students, "teaches students that any reasons they propose in support of a proposition need not be examined for consistency, evidentiary force, or even relevance" (Hillcocks, 2002, p.136). The development of students' ideas through writing was further constrained by the limit (presumably to facilitate grading) placed on essay length: a maximum of 1750 characters (computer-based exam) or 26 lines (paper exam). In these ways, writing, a potentially powerful communicative tool and process to develop ideas, was reduced to mimicking a formulaic structure to demonstrate mastery of a genre of writing with little value outside of school. Rather than *a tool for* learning, writing was used as *a test of* learning. Further, learning how to write a persuasive argument or provide information in an expository essay, however formulaic, demonstrates "how power flows through seemingly simple academic tasks" (Moje, et al., p. 16). Being taught to write where "the goal is to argue or to persuade a reader to change perspective" (p. 16) rather than engage, collaborate, or understand, as Hull and Stornaiuolo's (2014) study with youth across four countries demonstrates, is less aligned with the goals of transnational citizenship which emphasize empathy, interdependence between peoples and nations, appreciation for plurality, and understanding (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Guerra, 2008). These are necessary skills and aptitudes for an increasingly complex and connected world.

Online Language Learning

Test-centric instruction also constrained the in-school language practices of emergent bilingual students. Focused instruction to develop emergent bilingual students' English language proficiency was delivered through several online programs, making language learning a solitary process void of social interaction (Bach, 2020a) that is antithetical to the way people learn or develop language proficiency (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Of the 19 observations I conducted, 15 involved between 30 minutes to an hour of individual work with online language development and reading programs in a class period that lasted 90 minutes and generally replaced teacher-guided instruction. Marketed as an evidenced-based approach that could boost students' reading levels, which could, in turn, help raise student test scores, this solitary language instruction delivered via programs purchased by the school district separated language from its function – to communicate and make meaning – and was not as helpful in developing oral proficiency in English as engaging in actual conversation, as

students attested and research shows. Social interaction is central to learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Language is learned through authentic interactions, and purposeful social interaction is central to language development (Menken, 2013). Language socialization research shows children become competent members of a community through linguistic interaction (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Gándara and Contreras (2009) argue that narrow definitions of English proficiency overlook important aspects of language learning. Emergent bilingual students "seldom receive the kind of specialized language instruction they need" (p. 125) and instruction focusing primarily on decoding and using simplistic forms of English is insufficient in preparing emergent bilingual students for a fuller range of discursive contexts in which they will need to use language.

Monolingualism, Rather than Bilingualism

This fuller range of discursive contexts in which students use language may also include multilingual contexts – sites where bilingualism and biliteracy are valued and valuable. In a culturally diverse society and knowledge-based economy shaped by new global patterns of migration, fluency in more than one language is an asset. Yet, the school that was my field site did not have a dual language (English-Spanish) program for emergent bilingual students. The emphasis on monolingual instruction, rather than instructional programs to develop emergent bilingual students' English language proficiency while simultaneously supporting the (continued) development of their academic literacies in Spanish, is a form of subtractive, rather than additive, education, which further disadvantages emergent bilingual students. Language acquisition research has long showed how print-based literacy in one's native language supports the acquisition of print-based literacies in another language (Ellis, 1994; Gándara & Contreras 2009). As Kalantzis, et al. (2016) point out, "learning academic forms of the first language creates an invaluable resources for learners in a multilingual and globalized world, providing the basis for interactions in this language later in life in professional, commercial, educational and other public settings" (p. 491). Additionally, much research shows that emergent bilingual students who learn in both languages at school perform better academically "than students whose social and cognitive development is hindered by sudden immersion in a language in which they are not natively competent" (Kalantzis, et al., p. 491). In a school that was more than 90% Latinx and nearly 90% socioeconomically disadvantaged located in a borderland region where Spanish and English are used interchangeably, bilingualism and biliteracy are valuable assets that can be leveraged for work and in postsecondary studies.

Test-Centric Instruction Masks Obstacles

Lastly, my study finds that teaching to the test hides some of the obstacles faced by emergent bilingual students in taking the STAAR exams, and, I argue, it is intended to mask these very obstacles. The six years of language learning Ms. Rodriguez references above is rooted in long-established findings from language acquisition research on the number of years needed for an individual to acquire academic proficiency in another language (five or more according to Cummins, 2000). Yet the State demands the rapid acquisition of English academic language

proficiency from newcomer students in order to achieve proficiency on the reading and writing competencies assessed on the STAAR English I and II exams and punishes emergent bilingual high school students if they do not by denying them their diploma. State education policy requires emergent bilingual high school students be assessed on a particular set of literacy competencies valued in school in a language they are just beginning to learn. Schools, school districts, and students themselves are judged by these test scores. Because of the high stakes attached to students' performance, teachers in under-resourced schools that serve low income and minoritized students from different language and racial/ethnic groups who disproportionately perform poorly on these tests have little option but to teach to the test and are instructed to do so. Citing pressure their school was under from the school district to raise students' STAAR test scores, a counselor at my field site said the message to teachers was "[the district and the school] don't care what the populations look like, [raise test scores], make sure that it gets done" (Interview, January 31, 2017). The needs of particular student populations, such as emergent bilingual students, are deemphasized, and learning is equated with raised test scores. Teaching to the test is not the same as gaining proficiency in a subject area. Teaching to the test in order to raise test scores is an attempt to help student meet graduation requirements and prevent a school and district from being penalized by the State.

Some of the challenges emergent bilingual students faced were rooted in district and school policies and resource scarcity at the level of their school. At the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, a district-wide policy change at the end of the previous school year allowed individual high schools to decide whether to eliminate the non-credit Beginning English class in order to help emergent bilingual students graduate in four years, which my field site chose to do. Newcomer students with little to no English proficiency were then placed directly in a sheltered English I class and given the STAAR test in a language they were in the very beginning stages of learning. This change coincided with a marked increase in newcomer emergent bilingual students that school year, resulting in class sizes of 30-35 emergent bilingual students in a class the principal acknowledged should have been capped at 18, pushing the school out of compliance. Repeated requests from the principal to the district for an additional ESL teacher were not immediately answered, and Ms. Rodriguez, while still responsible for her own classes, was also aiding the long-term substitute teacher (who had no ESL certification) with the ESL classes she had been assigned during lunch and prep hours and after school. From multiple and shifting district initiatives and state mandates teachers needed to manage and meet, to large class sizes with students of mixed-level English proficiency, Ms. Rodriguez found a way forward by complying with instructional mandates and employing test-centric instructional practices so as to best help her students pass the STAAR exams so they could graduate.

Concluding Discussion

In an increasingly globalized world, marked by "new information and communication technologies…the emergence of global markets and post-national knowledge economies…and unprecedented levels of immigration and displacement", schooling is a high-stakes process that imparts the skills needed in a global economy and "profoundly shapes the current and future well-being of children" (Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 345). Public schools in the U.S. today are educating more students from language and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds and from lower socioeconomic groups. Schools have a history, which continues today, of providing inequitable educational opportunities that disadvantage low income and students of color who are increasingly segregated together in under-funded schools (Government Accountability Office 2016; Valencia 2011). Rather than more direct social or economic interventions to address social inequality that much research documents negatively affects academic performance, state and federal policies position high-stakes, standardized testing as the tool to mediate this inequality (Kantor & Lowe, 2006, 2016; Mehta, 2015), even though decades of research show high-stakes, standardized testing to be a deeply flawed policy that further exacerbates already existing educational inequalities and disadvantages non-dominant students (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Au, 2016; Mahon, 2006; Solórzano, 2008; Valenzuela, 2000, 2005). These tests promote rote, standardized teaching and learning and monolingualism in schools and do not develop higher-order thinking skills that are rewarded and needed in a globally connected, inequitable, and complex world, nor the critical literacy skills required to survive and change it. Test-centric instruction masks the challenges emergent bilingual students face in meeting state accountability standards in resource-poor schools and it intends to mask these very challenges. If the goal is higher academic attainment for language and racial/ethnic minority students in schools, high-stakes, standardized testing is not the mechanism. The most recent testing-related lawsuit filed in California in December, 2019 further underscores the breadth and severity of the problem of using testing to mark ability and deny access. Brought by students and advocacy groups, the lawsuit challenges the University of California system's use of SAT and ACT tests as requirements for admission, arguing that these tests are deeply biased (research shows performance on them is strongly linked to a family's socioeconomic status), and that the university system's reliance on them to determine admission "illegally discriminates against applicants on the basis of race and wealth, and thereby denies them equal protection under the California constitution (Nadworny, 2019, para. 9).

There are many meaningful ways to envision change. There is a plethora of diverse, rich, and important scholarship on how to maintain critical and culturally sustaining teaching within a high-stakes, standardized testing system (e.g. Paris & Alim, 2017), and critical research in the field of assessment that could be used to inform test design (e.g. Schissel, et al., 2018a, 2018b). Recent education workers' strikes across the country offer examples of using collective organizing and protest to demand changes to testing systems, even within states, like Texas, that have laws preventing teachers from striking (Greenhouse, 2018). Agency is at the core of each of these examples. Williamson (2017) points out that, "so rooted in Texas history" is the high-stakes,

standardized testing system "that current teachers educated in public schools lived through this entire system as students" (p. 69). This long history, now deeply woven into the DNA of schooling in the state, perhaps contributes to its continuation.

Drawing from my own experiences teaching in an educator preparation program, I close this article with a series of questions – questions that I am pursuing as I continue my research and teaching and contribute to program development in my university's teacher education program. How might teacher educator programs work to better develop a sense of agency among their in- and pre-service teachers? How might students' course readings, activities, and projects help guide pre- and in-service teachers so they may come to see themselves as knowledgeable and agentive actors capable of, and responsible for, implementing and advocating for change in their classrooms and schools and outside of them? What would these strides towards teacher agency look like in undergraduate and graduate coursework in teacher education programs? In the broader framework of these programs? How might we ourselves, as educators and scholars, better model our own agency to our students and leverage our own expertise to work and advocate for change? What could this teacher/educator/student work and advocacy look like at the level of the public school or university? Within a local community? At the level of the State? How might scholars of education forge connections with other stakeholders (in- and pre-service teachers, administrators, parent organizations, community advocates, local school boards) to develop collective strength and build on work that is already being done locally and across the state to reduce the dominance of high-stakes, standardized testing in Texas public schools?

Literacy is a communicative meaning-making practice. It is a tool to engage the world and not just an academic practice, a skill to learn, or an end result. As teacher educators we must acknowledge the role we play in perpetuating the inequalities produced through schooling. When we model our own agency and use literacy practices to work towards dismantling educational policies that harm students, we show our pre- and in-service teachers that there are pathways to change. In a world we know to show dramatic and growing inequalities, there is tremendous urgency to this work.

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