

The Significance of the TAAS Test for Mexican Immigrant and Mexican American Adolescents: A Case Study

Angela Valenzuela

The University of Texas at Austin

This article draws primarily from a 3-year qualitative case study to offer evidence that high-stakes testing is one among a number of alienating features of schooling. The focus is on low-achieving Mexican-origin students attending a segregated, urban high school located in Houston, Texas. The data show that the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test often discourages regular-track, Mexican American and Mexican immigrant students from completing high school or considering a college education. The required, English-only nature of the exit test is also highlighted as a key reason why limited-English-proficient, primarily Mexican immigrant, students fail to meet the passing requirement at high rates. High-stakes testing is characterized herein as embedded within a larger logic that systematically negates Mexican youths' culture and language.

Although proponents of the current system of accountability in Texas see it as a system that has brought attention to previously underserved children (e.g., Sklar & Scheurich, 2000), I submit that this system reflects yet another way in which children and their communities are objectified or treated as objects. The summaries captured in the current Special Issue help illustrate how this system of high-stakes testing—from its development to its implementation—is something that has been done to rather than with minority youths and their communities. This treatment not only makes students feel as though they are not cared for, but such objectification is part of a very long history of cultural disparagement and dismissiveness in our public school system. Operating under the guise of technical rationality, high-stakes testing is thus party to a larger logic that fosters alienation toward schooling through a systematic negation of these students' Mexican culture and language.¹ Unproductive relations, divisions, and conflict between acculturated Mexi-



can American youths and their immigrant Mexican peers derive from this form of schooling.

In the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) case, I offered expert testimony that centered around the inappropriateness of the TAAS exit-level test for Mexican-origin youths. In the case of Mexican American youths, I argued that testing is one among a number of alienating features of schooling that often discourages regular-track (i.e., non-honors and non-college bound) youths from completing high school or considering a college education (Valenzuela, 1999a). Because of the relevance of their commentary, I also build in teachers' voices into this account. In the case of immigrant, limited-English-proficient (LEP) youths, I argued that the English-only TAAS exit-level test does not reflect students' true abilities and is thus inappropriate. To argue these points, I draw not only on my case study of a large, comprehensive inner-city Houston school (Valenzuela, 1999b) but also on other relevant scholarly work and state reports. Before addressing these, a brief description of my guiding framework coupled with reflections on my specific role in the case are in order.

The Seguín High School Study

In my 3-year case study of Juan Seguín²—a Houston Independent School District (HISD), predominantly Latino high school—I demonstrate how a subtractive cultural assimilation process (commonly referred to as “Americanization”) is consequential to youths' academic achievement and schooling orientations, particularly for those located in the regular track (i.e., nonhonors or non-college bound).³ Rather than schooling consisting of an adding on of a second language and culture for students, it subtracts these, leaving Mexican-origin youths vulnerable to academic failure. Even students' folk understandings or expectations of what a meaningful education should be—embodied in the concept of *educación*—is dismissed and, hence, subtracted.

Educación includes content mastery, but in addition, it refers to the education of the whole person. Within this framework, a well-educated person (*ser bien educado*) knows how to live in the world as a respectful, social, and caring human being, observing of others' dignity (Valenzuela, 1999b). One can therefore possess book knowledge but be poorly educated (*ser mal educado*) from a Mexican perspective if deficient in this manner (Valenzuela, 1999b). This person-centered orientation is diametrically opposite the propensity of schools such as Seguín to objectify youths and their families, treating them as objects to be shaped into the dominant, monocultural mold.

From a Mexican cultural perspective or thought world, high school students are therefore regularly subjected to *schooling* rather than to education (Valenzuela, 1999b). That is, rather than basing pedagogy on relation or trusting relationships and attending to children's social competence in the world, the school's pursuit of technical mastery makes it seem uncaring. Particularly among regular-track youths who must weather an impoverished, test-driven curriculum that exclusively focuses on basic skills, widespread alienation is apparent, and students either tune out, drop out, or are pushed out at alarming rates. Seguín's dropout rate hovers annually around 50% (Valenzuela, 1999b).

Withdrawing students for inattendance is a highly common bureaucratic procedure that Seguín uses to trim down its numbers by identifying students with high numbers of absences and then purging them from the record. Student may reenroll, but it is up to them to share the news with their parents who must, in turn, attend a conference with school officials before reenrolling them. More typically, students either avoid the whole situation and continue skipping school—or accompanied by their parents, seek enrollment elsewhere.

According to the director of the only alternative school in the surrounding area, approximately 15 students per day seek enrollment into her school after having been pushed out of Seguín. The school is typically filled to capacity and is unable to accept many of these youths. No one at Seguín keeps track of these youths' whereabouts.

Besides their frequent psychic and emotional withdrawal from school, cultural subtraction fosters and exacerbates divisions between regular-track, higher-performing, Mexican immigrant and lower-performing Mexican American youths. This is an unfortunate consequence because acculturated Mexican American youths lose access to those among them who are not only the most oriented toward school but who also register, on average, higher achievement levels (i.e., grades).

Despite higher grades, immigrant youths—the majority of whom are LEP—pass the TAAS test at very low rates. In two advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) classes that I surveyed, for example, at least half of the students had not passed all three portions of the TAAS test. TAAS data provided by the school beginning in 1991 through 1993 suggest an even higher failure rate among first-generation youths. In light of fairly extensive evidence that immigrant students consistently outperform their Mexican American counterparts when grades are the measure (for a review, see Valenzuela, 1999b), their poor test performance is not only inconsistent but also a poor reflection of their true capabilities of which their ESL teachers are well aware. I therefore maintain that, at least with respect to LEP youths, this high fail-

ure rate may be directly attributed to the test and not to their abilities—suggesting, in particular, the formidable language barrier that the test represents.

Immigrants' average higher academic achievement levels are linked to their prior schooling experiences in Mexico (Valenzuela, 1999b). This association is consistent with sociolinguistic evidence in other studies that find that the more students are schooled in their first language, the greater their conceptual grasp of academic subject matter and tasks (Cummins, 1984; Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988). The greater their grasp of academic subject matter in their native language, the easier it is to transfer this knowledge to academic tasks in a new language. It is additionally significant that when those few students are fortunate enough to have attended secondary school in Mexico and then to have subsequently entered our public school system, they become members of an elite group indeed, because they often demonstrate fully developed capabilities (McNeil & Valenzuela, in press; Valenzuela, 1999b). However, stereotypes, low expectations, testing, tracking, and other barriers (e.g., their legal status as immigrants) abound, thus limiting their chances.⁴ My present critique of the relevancy and harmful effects of high-stakes testing is thus situated within this conceptual and empirical backdrop.

My Role as an Expert for the Plaintiffs in the TAAS Case

In June 1998, Mr. Kauffman contacted me because he felt that I could contribute positively to the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund's case against the state. Given that I had just finished writing my book on Seguin High School (Valenzuela, 1999b), I informed him that although my research did not focus specifically on the 10th-grade exit-level TAAS, I still felt comfortable testifying on its appropriateness, particularly for LEP youths.

During my deposition (Valenzuela, 1999c) as well as during the trial, state attorney Geoff Amsel attempted to narrow my testimony by suggesting that I was not truly an expert on the TAAS test because my scholarly work did not focus specifically on this subject. Although I feel that I was able to counter his hostile lines of questioning quite well, I knew that I still had to answer for myself why my study did not center itself around testing issues that were, in fact, replete within my own data. First and perhaps most important, my study focused on ninth graders who were a year (or more) away from taking the TAAS exit-level test.⁵ Through their experiences, I was able to see and thus focus on broader institutional forces that reconstitute the current social order

and about which social reproduction theorists have been writing (e.g., Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1981). I further reasoned that inasmuch as the TAAS test was a part of this larger and highly uneven terrain of educational opportunity, I knew I had much to contribute to the case.

Before addressing the specifics of my testimony, I should say at the outset that it appears primarily in my expert witness report, given that Judge Prado did not allow any evidence specifically from Seguin High School into trial. That is, the empirical evidence appearing below was never conveyed on the stand because both the state attorney and the judge concurred that because I would not identify the actual name of the school that I studied, my testimony was irrelevant.⁶

On the stand, I was nevertheless able to convey my general argument, based on broad-ranging sets of evidence (e.g., extant scholarship, discussions with teachers and administrators throughout Houston and the state of Texas, my own observations) that the TAAS test seriously underestimates immigrants' actual capabilities largely because of its English-only content. Mr. Amsel's response to this was that I have no statewide data to support this contention. My response to him was that because the Texas Education Agency does not regularly collect the type of information that would enable in-depth analyses of LEP youths, my testimony on this matter was the best available. Except for this general presentation of my argument, most of my time on the stand was spent either defending my credibility as an expert or answering general questions pertaining to issues surrounding LEP youths or the Mexican American educational experience. I thus welcome this opportunity to disclose further my sense of the relevancy of high-stakes testing for language-minority youths.

The discouraging impact of the TAAS. The required exit-level TAAS test is one of a number of inflexible school structures that discourages Mexican immigrant and Mexican American youths alike from pursuing higher educational opportunities (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Romo & Falbo, 1996). Romo and Falbo's (1996) ethnographic account of Austin Independent School District youths (both LEP and non-LEP) found that the TAAS test was one of the key barriers keeping otherwise sufficiently motivated youths who aspired to someday work in skilled occupations from obtaining a high school diploma. My study of Seguin High School youths in Houston yielded similar results.

Acculturated, Mexican American youths. Several days after the TAAS test was administered at Seguin in October 1993, I spent several days ascertaining teachers' and students' sentiments about the test (October 22, 1993, field notes).

In a faculty lounge conversation involving three teachers, two in the English Department and one in the Math Department, none had anything positive to say about the test. The two English teachers complained that they were tired of teaching the five-paragraph, persuasive essay and that they were happy to move on to some “real teaching” now that the test was over. The math teacher complained that the test was unfair to “this population” because “even if they’re born here, they don’t always have an understanding of the vocabulary.” He further commented that students need to be able to read well to do well on the math because they are written as word problems. They also complained about the duration of the exam. “Three days of examination!” one said. “You’d think they were taking the bar,” said another. Their bitterness about the exam was palpable. As they spoke, a fourth teacher entered the lounge and sat next to them, nodding his head in agreement. Joining the conversation, he sneered, “I suggest we all join the teacher’s union because it won’t be long before our jobs are on the line.” His words triggered a discussion about their dismay with the leadership within the Texas Federation of Teachers (TFT) because of the TFT’s position on the TAAS test—a position that had appeared on a pamphlet distributed to all teachers from a rival union, the Texas State Teachers Association. They expressed disagreement with the TFT’s position that teachers’ careers should depend on their students’ test scores when they have no control over which students are placed in their classes. In a frustrated tone, the math teacher said, “How can we be held responsible for what should have been taken care of in elementary and middle school?” One of the English teachers told him not to worry because they had a new principal that year and how, as a result, he would not be held to a very high standard. This teacher’s comment helped me to reconcile teachers’ concerns with a memo that the principal had sent out to all teachers in early October 1993. It expressed his desire to increase the school’s passing rate to 30% (scores in previous years had never exceeded a 19% passing rate, making Seguin one of the lowest-performing schools in the district).

In a hallway conversation that day with Ms. Carter, a sophomore English teacher, she noted that one of her better students, a Mexican American named Roy, finished the exam, she felt, “too quickly—even for a good student.” Roy told her that he got tired of taking the test and that it was just too much pressure. “So I asked him if he finished it,” Ms. Carter continued, “and he said angrily, ‘No, it finished me.’” Ms. Carter then noticed that he had defaced his exam. “Do you remember what he wrote?” I asked. She said that because of the rules, she could only peek at it but that he had extensively critiqued the actual test questions. “You bet I got on his case for that afterwards, but I’m not sure it sunk in because the only thing he wanted to talk about was how ‘dumb’ the questions were and how ‘dumb’ schools are that teach those ‘dumb’ ques-

tions.” Ms. Carter shook her head and smiled, saying that she just could not reason with him. “Roy’s got enormous potential,” added Ms. Carter, “but I’m just afraid that his anger will get the best of him and that he’ll drop out of school.” “What do you think would help him?” I asked. “Not the TAAS,” she quipped, turning into her classroom and off-handedly urging me to talk to some of her students about the test. Despite the awkwardness of the moment, I took advantage of her suggestion that I enter to speak with them.

Only three students—all Mexican Americans, those nearest me in the entrance of her classroom—noticed Ms. Carter’s suggestion. “It was hard,” an overaged-looking female commented. A second female disagreed but said that it was probably because her math teacher took so much time out “every day” to prepare students for the exam. I probed her on exactly how much time was spent preparing for the exam. She said that between 15 and 30 minutes every day since the beginning of the semester was devoted to test preparation. “My teachers didn’t, but I still hope I passed it,” the first female commented. The third student, a male, said in a plaintive tone, “School’s so boring.” I asked him whether he meant TAAS or schooling. “What’s the difference?” he responded. “And it just hangs over you,” the overaged-looking female said, adding that she wished that she could finally pass the test and go on with her life. She then shared that this was her second time to take the exam. “It’s like you can’t think about nothing else, like your future until you pass the test,” she said, biting her lip. She said that she would rather spend her time thinking about college or something else having to do with her future.

This view that the TAAS test postpones consideration of the future was echoed in a conversation that I had with a group of Mexican American ninth graders I interviewed a day earlier. In my study (Valenzuela, 1999b), I referred to them as “Wannabe’ Male Toughs.”⁷ Although ninth graders, they nevertheless convey the sense that their futures are held hostage until they pass the TAAS test, suggesting that its discouraging impact begins even earlier than the 10th grade when they first become eligible to take the exam (also see Haney, 2000, who from analyses of state data, makes this very argument to help explain why the minority dropout rate before Grade 12 has increased since the mid-1980s when high-stakes testing was first introduced in Texas).

When I first encountered this group of Mexican American males in the vice principal’s office, they had just gotten in trouble for wearing bandanas to school. According to the assistant principal, these youths belonged to neighborhood gangs and the bandanas they wore around their heads reflected their gang colors. During the time that all three were serving on-campus detention, I was granted permission by the detention officer to interview them. They welcomed this interruption from their hours of required, silent seat work. We conversed outside on a lunch table.

At least one of the three males, named Eloy, indicated to me that he was interested in someday going to college. Although the other two laughed at him, he stood his ground: "Hey, my cousin went to college, and he says I can do it—anyone can do it if they want." I directed my attention to the other two to see why college seemed like such a remote possibility to them. Tobías, a large kid with a baby face, said that he "can't" really think about his future. Struck by the word, *can't*, I asked him, "Why not?" His response was that he did not want to be disappointed if he could not go because he could not pass the TAAS test. We then had a conversation about whether one could go to college if one had not passed the TAAS test, and we collectively arrived at the conclusion that no college would accept a student without a diploma, although one could go with a GED.

They then offered examples of various people they knew who were basically "skipping" high school and going on to take the GED and enrolling in the community college. Inferring that they, too, saw this as an alternative mobility route, I shared with them my view that this was a risky choice because a college degree was still no guarantee and that a GED means less in the job market than a high school diploma. "Besides," I said, "you learn more in school than if you're not in school—which helps you in college." Eloy then teased me, making me feel naive: "Hey Miss, maybe *you* could learn more but not *us*. Our ass is fried—or we wouldn't be here!"

These experiences confirm that many Mexican American students who are located in the regular, non-college preparatory track must contend with a number of bureaucratic hurdles that are at times heaped upon personal problems that no amount of testing ever brings to light. Moreover, as Roy's situation suggests, the test itself and the kind of schooling implicated within it may be objectionable. Although these "'Wannabe' Male Toughs" were perhaps among the more marginal youths in my study, they were nevertheless similar to most Mexican American youths I interviewed in a certain key respect: Most expressed a desire to go to college "someday," but evidence of concrete, conscientious planning systematically failed to compliment such expressions. Instead, the notion of going to college was always couched in nebulous and noncommittal terms. In an interview with Seguí's vocational counselor, she conveyed students' predicament succinctly: "Students who have not passed the TAAS do not want to take college entrance exams because they do not want to be disappointed about not being able to go to college because they can't graduate from high school." Seguí's low passing rates, in effect, means that the majority of students never seriously entertain the notion of a college education.⁸ If gaining a foothold along a college-going path is difficult for Mexican American youths, it is even more so for LEP, mostly immigrant youths.

LEP youths. Exemplifying well the subtractive elements of schooling, Mexican immigrant students are typically less informed about what it takes to graduate from high school than are their Mexican American counterparts, who are typically more knowledgeable about how the system works. Along these lines, one of Seguin's well-loved art teachers complained that the LEP students are systematically "hoodwinked":

Yeah, because they come and they do everything that is expected of them, in fact, they show up everyday, they work very hard in their classes, but nobody really informs them that unless they pass the TAAS test [they can't graduate from high school], and there's no way for them to find this information out because it's not being disseminated, and no one informs them on what it really means to be at the high school level and what they need to do. These kids will end up going to school for 4 years and then they will turn on to the street.

Observations from teachers allude to both a dropout problem among LEP youths as well as questions of equity surrounding the TAAS test itself. The director of Seguin's ESL program had the following to say about a severe decline in the number of students in her program (from 600 to 300 students) from one year to the next:

The thing that discourages them now is the TAAS test. They may be a senior or filled up all the credits. They may be passing every class up to graduation, but that TAAS test is really knocking them out. So, a lot of them will disappear. They will not stay another year of schooling; instead, they will go out to work. Then, they will come back and attempt to take the TAAS test again.⁹

The director thus attributed a significant portion of the decline in the number of ESL youths to the TAAS test itself. However, she also alluded to counselors' insensitivity and a crass bureaucratic attitude already familiar to regular-track, Mexican American youths. Stated differently, both groups of students are objectified by this larger system that negates them both as individuals and as cultural beings with distinct experiences, needs, and desires that accompany their differences (Valenzuela, 1999b). In a parallel manner, the test is similarly postured against the needs of LEP youths.

ESL and Spanish-language teachers are unanimous in their view that if only the test were offered in Spanish, many more of their students would pass the test. This presumption is tenable when one considers that the scores of LEP youths statewide on the exit-level test were virtually identical to the state's special education subpopulation in 1997 to 1998. Moreover, the scores of these two subpopulations are not only the lowest among all subpopulations (including economically disadvantaged, at-risk, minority, and all students, generally), they also experience the least amount of

improvement in passing rates annually statewide (Texas Education Agency, 1998). At Seguin, only 21% of all students passed all three sections of the TAAS test during the 1993 to 1994 year. Two years later (1994-1995), scores had marginally improved to a 35% pass rate. Utter silence on these otherwise egregiously low pass rates among LEP youths at community, district, and state levels attests not only to the Latino community's weak political power (see Note 5) but also to a larger political commitment to privilege the English language even if some children are hurt by this emphasis. Such indifference might be acceptable were the numbers of youths in this category a minute fraction of the total. According to Ruiz de Velasco and Fix (in press), however, one in five students nationwide is the child of an immigrant, and 40% of all foreign-born youths in schools are LEP. Moreover, two thirds to three quarters of all children from non-English-speaking homes speak Spanish as their primary language.

In the HISD (1999), those who have been identified in all grades as LEP numbered 58,321 (27.6 %) during the 1997 to 1998 academic year. Relying on 1998 statewide student assessment data from California, Ruiz de Velasco and Fix (in press) found that LEP youths in later grades not only do significantly worse on standardized tests than their LEP counterparts in earlier grades, but they are also less likely to receive some form of bilingual or ESL instruction, suggesting an unevenness in the distribution of resources. As conveyed in the account offered by Seguin's ESL director, such unevenness not only exists at Seguin but can get engineered by bureaucratic fiat.

Notwithstanding these disparities, stories abound in many schools, including Seguin, of talented students who prevail against all odds but who cannot pass the TAAS test. One such student was Luz María, a Mexican immigrant female student located in the all-English, regular track, who I came to know during her senior year. A gifted musician and an A and B student with a 3.0 grade point average, her plans were to attend college after graduating from high school. She worked after school as an apprentice in a flower shop and was part of a group of musician friends who had all planned to leave home together to attend college at Southwest Texas State University. Only under this condition would her parents agree to the idea of her leaving home. However, not passing the TAAS test after six attempts completely derailed her from her plans. Much to her dismay, the reading portion of the exam was the only portion she was unable to pass. Not only did Luz María not go to college, but she also never graduated from high school despite having earned all her credits for graduation. Had her plan worked, she would have been the first person in her entire extended family to have ever attended college. While giving her a ride to her home one afternoon, I listened to her express deep frustration with her difficulties in learning English sufficiently

well to help her comprehend the long passages in the reading section of the TAAS test. Despite having taken two remedial “TAAS Reading” courses for two consecutive semesters, her reading skills were still not up to par.¹⁰

I have spoken with teachers across the HISD who witness how the college-going aspirations of their LEP students plummet upon learning either vicariously or through personal experience that the TAAS test represents a formidable barrier. I personally had the opportunity to interview a large group of Mexican immigrant students in an ESL history class on this subject. In a conversation with approximately 5 male and 5 female students, with others stepping in and out of the conversation throughout a half-hour time period, they expressed to me tremendous concerns over their futures. What was distinctive about this conversation in comparison to those that I was having around that time with Mexican American youths were their college-going aspirations. Although I already knew from my earlier data-gathering efforts that regular-track immigrant youths were a distinct, higher performing group in comparison to their Mexican American peers, I still found myself impressed with their maturity and with their unmistakable sense of urgency about their situation. Their level of comfort with me and with each other was apparent in the manner in which they spoke—each interrupting the other and a frequent completing of each others’ sentences. Not surprisingly, this produced a collage of thoughts, some reflective, that found their way into my field notes that day (May 3, 1993):

Of the ten students, more than half of them were intensely interested in the possibility of going to college. One, with a scar on her cheek, said that if it doesn’t work out here in the U.S., she’s willing to go to Mexico to go to college though she would have to leave her family here. Another, a male whom I had seen earlier that day in the attendance office, said that he’s embarrassed to speak English because of his accent and because of all the mistakes he makes. It was painful to hear how teasing from other students in school and in their classrooms discourages them from improving their English-language abilities. I think all of them nodded their heads or said something in agreement when he mentioned this. The one with the scar said, “*Sí, es horrible! Se ríen de nosotros cuando intentamos hablar el inglés!*” (“Yes, it’s horrible! They laugh at us when we try to speak English!”). English is such an incredible barrier.

The conversation then jumped to experiences they were having in those classes they were taking where only English was spoken. One young female asked me to imagine what it is like to be in a class and not understand anything that the teacher is saying. And then to imagine that you are afraid to ask the Chicanos for help because either they don’t want to or can’t because they don’t speak Spanish. In addition, she asked me to imagine that your peers laugh at you when they hear you speak. “*No, no, yo sé, yo sé!*” (“I know, I know.”) I assured them, that I know how tough it is for them to be in that situation.

They all then discussed how even if they passed the TAAS test, how they had found out from each other that they couldn't even go to college unless they paid out-of-state tuition rates which are way beyond their means. A second female wearing a ponytail said that there was no way that her family was ever going back to Mexico. Nor would her parents ever let her return without them. She asked me what options remained for her? There was so much discussion in the air and I felt so bombarded that I somehow never answered her.

Thus, for ESL youths, there is a tight link between performance on the TAAS test, their academic competencies in the English language, and their hopes of a brighter future, particularly college matriculation. None of these youths questioned the English-language nature of the test, yet virtually all expressed in some form their concern about the rapidity with which they were expected to learn English. Because of the way in which Texas Education Agency and our public schools systematically overlook this issue of the English-language nature of the exit exam (Spanish-language versions exist at all other levels), it is no wonder that these youths lack either a sense of entitlement to a Spanish-language test or a sense of indignation over this requirement. In fact, when I asked these students exactly whether they felt the exam was unfair because it is in English, none expressed that it should be otherwise. Instead, they felt that opportunities to learn the English language should be more plentiful. One even mentioned the possibility of afterschool English-language courses, both for themselves and their parents. More opportunities to interact with native English speakers were also mentioned. This latter suggestion, however, erupted into a tirade against Chicanos and Chicanas, who were characterized as frequently annoyed by and disrespectful toward English-language learners like themselves. Layered over this concern was also a more general one that the structure of schooling makes it difficult for them to learn English. Even as they disapproved of their own penchant to speak mostly Spanish amongst themselves (hence forestalling their learning of English), they simultaneously understood that their placement in the ESL curriculum reinforced this tendency. A sense of hopelessness and anxiety surfaced among them when they considered the worthwhileness of simple placement in classes where only English is spoken, particularly for the more recently arrived. Hence, because of the structure of the curriculum and the counterproductive attitudes and ways of being that develop therein, their prospects for upward mobility were significantly narrowed.

Conclusion

Taken together, these findings implicate the TAAS test itself as an important factor (beyond economically disadvantaged status, overagedness, and

poor achievement) that may be added to the at-risk category—particularly for students on the margins of the curriculum. My question for the state was, and still remains, as follows: How are the state's interests served by an accountability system that minimizes opportunity for youths of high promise? The words and sentiments of numerous educators whose concerns I have built into my ethnographic account ring loudly even now as I grapple both with the cultural chauvinism embedded within Texas's high-stakes testing policy and its damaging, lifelong consequences to Mexican youths. In the words of one Seguin ESL teacher, "If the state were really interested in how much our students actually know, what difference should it make whether the test is taken in either English or Spanish?"

I, by no means, suggest that all youths would benefit from a Spanish-language version of the exit-level test. Some Spanish versions could prove too difficult for all but the best educated native speakers from Mexico or Latin America. Yet, as is common with other subpopulations (e.g., special education students), Spanish-language modifications could be provided in the belief that these students will eventually master English. In fact, professional standards dictate that students be tested in a manner that accommodates for "disabilities" of any kind, including LEP (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). To do anything less constitutes test abuse as well as a violation of students' rights.

I worry about Mexican American youths like Roy who resist current arrangements in counterproductive ways. Assuming that Roy is one among others who have expressed their disenchantment with the exam, a next step might be for the state to disclose to the public information on the numbers of youths resisting such testing as well as the content of their resistance. That is, the kinds of things that students say or draw on their exams alongside a record of critical incidents that have specifically arisen out of problems with the exam could be part of each school's normal reporting function to the state. Although this action will do little to overturn the current system, the effects of high-stakes testing on the individual psyche and human spirit—not only for economically disadvantaged youths but for their teachers as well—is a worthwhile endeavor.

A remaining concern is with the objectification of students, which affects, in particular, Mexican American, regular-track youths who are disaffected from the curriculum and alienated from the Mexican immigrant youths in their midst. Because schooling is rarely, if ever, responsive to the assets they bring to the classroom, including the wealth and richness of their community and cultural heritage, this outcome is not surprising. Layered over this is a system of testing that casts a pallor on their college-going aspirations at the ninth-grade level before they even qualify to take the test.

In short, the state's current system of accountability both sanctions and contributes to an already culturally subtractive status quo. This means that test reform is but one step that will enhance the public good. First and foremost, an opportunity to learn at a challenging level must be equalized and expanded at all levels. To date, the measurement of these differences in opportunities through the use of TAAS scores, unfortunately, has not produced either a plan or timetable for massive investments in schools.

If anything, the current system of testing narrows opportunity for our youths. What it means to be educated in our society has so little to do with any awareness or understanding of the communities and national origins of the children that the schools are increasingly supposed to be serving. If schools are to become more about education than about schooling and how children are to be treated, the objectification of youths through testing must be seriously addressed.

Notes

1. I use the terms *immigrant* and *first generation* to refer to Mexico-born persons, whereas the term *Mexican American* signifies second- and third- (or later-) generation youths. I use the term *Mexican* to refer to all persons of Mexican heritage when no distinction based on nativity is necessary. Evidence provided herein are based exclusively on the experiences of youths of Mexican heritage.

2. The name of the school is a pseudonym, as are the names of students and teachers.

3. My conclusions were based on extensive analyses of both quantitative and qualitative evidence. In November 1992, I administered the survey to all 3,000-plus students in the school. It was 10 pages in length and contained questions pertaining to family structure, generational status, curriculum track placement, student and parent involvement in the school, teacher caring, school climate, English and Spanish language proficiency, self-esteem, prior schooling experiences, educational aspirations and expectations, and parents' educational attainment. Immigrants, or first-generation youths, comprise 45% of the entire student body with varying lengths of residency and a median number of 10 years living in the United States. Immigrant and U.S.-born youths are fairly equally represented in both the regular and advanced (honors and college-bound) tracks. Analyses by track placement yielded no statistically significant differences in grades between immigrant and nonimmigrant youths located in the privileged rungs of the curriculum (i.e., honors, magnet program, or the upper levels of the Curriculum Technology Education program). Only 14% of the entire student population is enrolled in the college preparatory curriculum. Except for 6% of students classified as special education, the remaining 80% are located in the regular track, which is further subdivided into two separate tracks, namely, the English as a Second Language (ESL) program into which immigrants are channeled and the all-English curriculum.

4. A caveat is in order here. Not all immigrant youths come with advanced academic skills. Those who come to the United States with limited or discontinuous prior educational experiences are indeed among the most vulnerable to academic failure (Valenzuela, 1999b).

5. A combination of factors accounts for my focus on ninth graders. With a 50% dropout rate and with 25% of ninth grade students experiencing retention, I found Según to be steeped

not only in inertia but to also mirror state trends. Because of these two factors, half of the school's population at any given time is composed of freshmen. With a facility capable of handling no more than 2,600 students, space is a chronic issue for a student body that has exceeded 3,000 students annually. Although the school's high dropout rate tends to assure adequate space by late fall, this problem exemplifies larger, unresolved issues that have brought the local Mexican-origin community into conflict with the school and district (Valenzuela, 1999b). Particularly for regular-track students, these include a scarcity of resources, few opportunities for individualized attention, overcrowded classrooms, and a depersonalized, bureaucratic orientation that combines with the subtractive elements of schooling to alienate them from the curriculum.

6. My experience in court, I believe, raises important ethical and practical issues that researchers must face. First, I felt bound by written confidentiality agreements between me and the students and school personnel I studied. Second, I also felt that revealing actual names could bring harm to certain individuals: the principals, teachers, or students I interviewed. I asked myself whether a compelling community interest could or should override these concerns. In the end, I felt ethically bound to honor my commitments and my concern for the participants in my study. Although this decision turned out to be costly from a litigation perspective, circumventing these considerations was impossible.

7. Because my study included a focus on social capital residing in peer networks as well as divisions between groups of students, my research strategy included interviewing youths' friendship groups, most of whom were ninth graders (Valenzuela, 1999b).

8. Analyses of Seguín TAAS data from 1991 to 1993 show that after controlling for track placement, passing the TAAS test is significantly correlated to youths' educational aspirations. (Tables available upon request.)

9. Cross-national data point to a higher dropout rate among first-generation, Latino immigrants vis-à-vis their U.S.-born counterparts (e.g., Rumberger, 1995.)

10. Elsewhere, McNeil and Valenzuela (in press) are critical of "TAAS courses" (e.g., "TAAS Math," "TAAS Writing," "TAAS Reading," toward which Houston Independent School District students are directed if they experience difficulties passing the TAAS test). Instead of youths acquiring a sensible presentation of academic content grounded in a disciplinary perspective, TAAS courses teach isolated skills and fragments of fact.

References

- Cummins, J. (1984). *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. San Diego, CA: College-Hill Press.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (1983). *Theory and resistance in education: A pedagogy for the opposition*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.
- Haney, W. M. (2000). The myth of the Texas miracle in education. *The Education Policy Analysis Archives* [Online serial]. Available: <http://epaa.asu.edu>
- Heubert, J. P., & Hauser, R. M. (Eds.). (1999). *High stakes: Testing for tracking, promotion, and graduation*. Committee on Appropriate Test Use, Board on Testing and Assessment, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Houston Independent School District. (1999). *District and school profiles, 1998-99*. Houston, TX: Research and Evaluation Department.

- LeCompte, M., & Dworkin, A. (1991). *Giving up on school: Student dropouts and teacher burn-outs*. Newbury Park, CA.: Corwin Press.
- McNeil, L., & Valenzuela, A. (in press). The harmful impact of the TAAS system of testing in Texas: Beneath the accountability rhetoric. In M. Kornhaber & G. Orfield (Eds.), *Raising standards or raising barriers? Inequality and high stakes testing in public education*. New York: The Century Foundation.
- Romo, H. D., & Falbo, T. (1996). *Latino high school graduation: Defying the odds*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Ruiz de Velasco, J., & Fix, M. (in press). *Overlooked and underserved: Immigrant students in U.S. secondary schools*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Rumberger, R. (1995). Dropping out of middle school: A multilevel analysis of students and schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, 583-625.
- Sklar, L., & Scheurich, J. J. (2000). *Accountability for equity: Can state policy leverage social justice?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Cummins, J. (1988). *Minority education: From shame to struggle*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Texas Education Agency. (1998). *Comprehensive biennial report on Texas public schools: A report to the 76th Texas legislature*. Austin, TX: Author.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999a, November). Expert report. Submitted to plaintiffs' counsel, Albert H. Kauffman. *GI Forum et al. v. Texas Education Agency et al.*, 87 F. Supp.2d 667 (W. D. Tex. 2000).
- Valenzuela, A. (1999b). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youths and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999c, March). Deposition. *GI Forum et al. v. Texas Education Agency et al.*, 87 F. Supp.2d 667 (W. D. Tex. 2000).
- Willis, P. (1981). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Angela Valenzuela is Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and Faculty Associate at the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research and teaching interests are in the sociology of education, minority youth in schools, educational policy, and urban education reform. Dr. Valenzuela is also the author of Subtractive Schooling: U.S. Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring (State University of New York Press, 1999). Her book is the winner of this year's American Educational Research Association Outstanding Book Award.