This is a book review of Kate Menken's *English Learners Left Behind*, which details the difficulties faced by "English language learners" under the testing regime faced by NCLB, with special emphasis upon problems the author observed and researched in New York State.

(crossposted at [Docudharma](https://www.dailykos.com/))

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This book is the product of research conducted in New York State on "English language learners," students caught in the public school system whose command of English is not "up to grade level" and who typically speak another language at home. Menken's research combines interviews, observations, test questions, test performance data, and other accumulated data about the public schools. The emphasis in all this research is to observe how "English language learners" cope with the high-stakes standardized testing structure of New York State, and with the high-stakes testing regimes of the No Child Left Behind Act as applied nationwide. She reveals a set of data which are both peculiar to New York, in which a set of "Regents' exams" count as high school exit exams, and generally applicable to the United States as a whole.

Menken's book aims to describe the educational realities faced by "English language learners" under the No Child Left Behind Act, and to suggest ways in which the educational system can be changed to better accommodate them. Menken's conclusion is this: although there may be benefits to the expectations attached to the No Child Left Behind Act, said benefits are outweighed by the fact that, since NCLB mandates "high-stakes" tests, said tests constitute de facto language policy, and drive public school curricula in ways broadly detrimental to "English language learners."

Valenzuela (1999) makes the argument that educational policy in the United States serves to subtract from students their linguistic, cultural, and community-based identities, instead of building on these aspects of diversity as assets. (99)

It is estimated that approximately 5,119,561 ELLs were enrolled in United States public schools during the 2004-2005 school year; this represents approximately 10.5% of the total public school student enrollment and reflects a 60.8Z% increase over the reported 1994-1995 enrollment (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006a). During this same period, the growth in enrollment of all students in public schools increased by only 2.6%. (21)

The growth in the total population of ELL students cannot be blamed, suggests the author, upon the failure of assimilation, as James Crawford notes that "the pace of Anglicization (of immigrants) has never been faster." (21)

The first part of this book deals with the specifics of NCLB and its application to "English language learners." As NCLB insists that students be tested in English whether they know the language or not, "English language learners" are inevitably going to register poorly on such tests. The pressures of "Adequate Yearly Progress," to which all schools must cleave in order to avoid sanctions, oblige public schools to reduce the number of students under their purview which are "English language learners." Each school must improve the aggregate of test scores so as to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" goals, and thus pressure is put upon "English language learners" to learn English quickly so as to become "English proficient." Thus:

It becomes clear that high-stakes testing places great pressure on ELLs and their teachers to speed up the process of English language acquisition; this is part of new language acquisition policy whereby English acquisition is promoted through standardized testing. Yet from second language acquisition research we know that it typically takes an English
language learner at least five to seven years to acquire the academic language in English needed to perform to the level of native English speakers on assessments (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997).

(In this regard, Menken is respectful of the main pretext given by advocates of bilingual education -- that learning in one's primary language will "transfer over" to learning in a second language when one is ready to think in that second language.)

So, as Menken reports, there are rather high failure rates for such students at English-language standardized tests, and high dropout rates in general for "English language learners." The author tells us that "just 33.2% of ELLs passed the English Regents exam (in New York) in 2005, as compared to a pass rate of 77.9% of all students taking the English Regents exam in the same year." (44) The dropout rate for New York City for the 2002-2003 school year is, moreover, 30.5% for high school senior ELLs, with another 37.9% of high school senior ELLs scheduled to take a fifth year of high school.

(Inquiries about "English language learners" should be forthcoming in the state of California, as well, given recent data given front-page attention by the Los Angeles Times which reveals that nearly a quarter of California’s students drop out.)

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The second part of this book deals with the data its author has collected around the real people who make up these statistics. Chapter 4 of this book deals with "the linguistic challenges that standardized tests pose for English language learners," and is a line-by-line critique of the language of standardized tests, much of which is completely opaque to those learning English for the first time. One interesting point made here is that the Math Regents' test given in the state of New York requires of students a broad knowledge of English -- so for "English language learners" it is an English test as well as being a math test.

Generally speaking, under the nationwide regime of high-stakes testing, dropout rates have increased among "English language learners," and more students are being retained (forced to repeat grades) and forced out of school (99). To explore this reality, in Chapter 5 Menken characterizes her interview data on ELL students as fitting into several "human story" plots: 1) students retaking the tests over and over again until they are passed, 2) prolonged time in school, 3) testing as an incentive to leave school, to return to their home countries, or to take the GED, 4) interruptions and challenges to the schooling process, and 5) stories of the "thrill of
victory" and the "agony of defeat." (97) In the book, Menken describes a number of such stories which she recorded in her research on New York public schools.

In general, the primary change in school practice for "English language learners" is this: as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, a large portion of the standard curriculum of many schools has become a "teach to the test" curriculum, and this has invaded the English as a Second Language classroom as well. This has resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum to the material of the tests and a new definition of English as a Second Language that is more similar to English language arts classes taken by native English speakers. (107)

Menken sees this as generally being bad for "English language learners."

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The solutions proposed in the last part of this book are to take place on the school level: Menken suggests that schools need to have two things in place to counterbalance NCLB:

- a strong, coherent, clearly articulated and implemented schoolwide language policy
- Top-down educational policies that support local language policies and practices

These recommendations, as Menken recognizes, mean that schools must resist the tendency under NCLB to "teach to the test," and they must, contrary to initiatives such as California's Proposition 227, implement bilingual education of some sort. It is hard for me to see how Menken's proposals will take any sort of flight in a good number of school districts throughout America without a serious and thorough repoliticization of schooling.

-- Analysis and Commentary --

(Autobiographical note)

For a small portion of the 1990s, I was a substitute teacher in a small number of districts in southern California which had genuine bilingual programs. I enjoyed this work, and it paid well enough to pay the bills -- $125/day at its best times. Unfortunately I never felt like I was "of the system" enough to be able to put together an entire years' worth of innovative, bilingual curriculum (though I tried mightily at times), so I never actually went on to become a full-time public school teacher. However, I was good at putting together individual days' worth of bilingual curriculum; days in which I could organize real learning experiences, were joyful, and free of cheap ploys like "show the kids a film," unless that was on the prescribed lesson plan. I didn't care much for the imposition of Proposition 227 upon schools in 1998, in the wake of a failed campaign to stop it; the requirement that teachers in "immersion" classes spend large portions of the day speaking in English seemed to me to be a waste of time, in situations where teachers could have taught a lot of valuable things in Spanish (the main alternate language in my community). "Structured English Immersion" seems like a good idea if you forget that your students are learning academic English and not conversational English – though I'm sure the teachers in such programs are doing the best they can. I don't know whether it would still be any good for me to go back to substitute teaching in the current era of standardized test-mania. (I may have to find out, as funds are getting low and it's not even August yet.)

Critique of the book

This is a good, meaningful book on New York schools, with meaningful applications for US schools in general. It seems to draw some of its energies from the comprehensive, ethnographic studies of school done by Texas researchers Linda McNeil and Angela Valenzuela. At many points its main points are drawn from its citation of other research; the firsthand research upon which it is based is still basic to its main points, though.

As Menken points out, the US does not have an intentional language policy. NCLB has scrapped the "Bilingual Education Act" that existed with the 1994 version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, yet bilingual education still persists in isolated locations. Instead, with NCLB and its promotion of "teaching to the test," we have a de facto language policy.

If we were somehow to have an intentional language policy in this country, we'd first have to admit to ourselves that "English language learners" were actually worth teaching. We'd have to make a commitment to their schooling process that went beyond mere compliance with the court mandate established in the 1974 case Lau v. Nichols, which decreed that the public schools actually had to HELP "English language learners" learn English, rather than just letting them
"sink or swim" in a classroom whose curriculum was directed toward those who knew English already. We'd have to invent bilingual curricula as standard practice to be implemented by bilingual teachers teaching in schools with good bilingual libraries.

If we were to have a real language policy for the schools, America would have to get over its collective distrust of immigrants who can't speak English, of languages which aren't English, and of academic language in general. Is that really so tall an order?
Tips for English language learners (11+ / 0-)
May we learn their languages too!

"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" -- Jorma Kaukonen

by Cassiodorus on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 08:49:14 AM PDT

NCLB tests are anti-science, music & arts (7+ / 0-)
Immigrants make huge contributions to America in math, science and the arts but the NCLB tests are loaded to tests English language skills even in the math tests. That's wrong and counterproductive.

Educational tests need to measure broad learning, not a narrow set of English language skills.

Thanks for another excellent, thoughtful, intellectual diary.

"It's the planet, stupid."

by FishOutofWater on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 09:01:27 AM PDT

Indeed! (nmi) (2+ / 0-)

"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" -- Jorma Kaukonen

by Cassiodorus on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 09:31:05 AM PDT

A personal experience (4+ / 0-)

My son had an experience with this three years ago when he was in 10th grade. About a month into the school year, a new boy joined his math class. The boy's name was Roberto, and he had just moved from Guatemala. He spoke almost no English.

There was no English help for Roberto, except for an ESL class. He was put into classes and just expected to manage as best he could.

The math teacher sat Roberto next to my son and instructed my son to help him. "You're good at math and your last name sounds Hispanic," she told my son. Truth be told, our last name is Portugese, two generations removed, and no one in our family speaks Spanish.

My son spent the rest of the semester teaching Roberto enough English to get through math. It was a wonderful experience for our son, and I am so grateful that he had it. He started out thinking that Roberto was stupid because he didn't understand the problems, but as time passed, he discovered that Roberto was very bright and had no trouble at all with the math once he understood the language. It was an "Ah-ha" moment for our son.

But my point here is that this kid was thrown into 10th grade with virtually no help with the language at all, and another student was tasked with teaching him enough to get by in his class.

We could do better than that.

I never thought I'd miss Nixon...

by DixieDishrag on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 09:59:42 AM PDT
thanks DixieDishrag (2+ / 0-)
-- that's a meaningful story!

"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen

by Cassiodorus on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 10:09:22 AM PDT
[ Parent ]

As a bilingual teacher myself (3+ / 0-)
I think your son's math teacher did the right thing, given the resources she had.
Of course, assuming anything about your son's language ability from his surname
was wrong, but it seems to have worked out for the best. Peer coaching is
powerful. Much better than leaving the child isolated by the language barrier.

by Flintcitylimit on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 11:03:22 AM PDT
[ Parent ]

Thanks Flintcitylimit! (nmi) (2+ / 0-)
"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen

by Cassiodorus on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 11:40:19 AM PDT
[ Parent ]

Oh, given the resources she had (1+ / 0-)
or should I say the lack thereof, I think the teacher absolutely made the right
decision.
And given the insight that my own son got from the experience, it was a good
thing for him too.
But what if he hadn't been willing to help this kid? What if he had "copped an
attitude" and refused? What if he hadn't been able, for whatever reason, to help?
He has no teaching credentials. He was a 10th grader for goodness' sake!
I just don't think it's fair to kids with a language barrier to depend on this catch-
as-catch-can method of getting them through.

I never thought I'd miss Nixon...

by DixieDishrag on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 02:03:37 PM PDT
[ Parent ]

On one hand (1+ / 0-)
we tell immigrants that they must learn English. On the other we do everything
we can to make sure that learning it is a difficult as possible.

My dad's folks came from Lebanon a hundred years ago. For whatever reason,
they settled in a German area of town. When dad went to school at age 4, he
spoke Arabic and German. There were no ESL/ELL classes but he was not the
only one with this problem and he and his multilingual classmates did just fine.

Now the climate for immigrants is so toxic that they are encouraged to self-isolate
in order to avoid criticism and abuse. Then we penalize the kids by taking away
every program that would help them become productive members of our country.
When they fail, we say, "Aha! See those stupid people can't even learn English
and graduate from school!" To be honest, I don't know why anyone wants to
come here anymore....

-7.62, -7.28 "We told the truth. We obeyed the law. We kept the peace." - Walter
Mondale

by luckylizard on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 11:49:34 AM PDT
America must get over -- (1+ / 0-)
its collective distrust of immigrants, otherwise the wound in the social fabric will remain unhealed...

"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen

by Cassiodorus on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 11:58:34 AM PDT

[ Parent ]

We have overcome (1+ / 0-)
other waves of immigration, not without strife, but we have gotten past them. Why is this so different? I wonder if it's the constant drone of the media that feed it all in real time... all the time?

-7.62, -7.28 "We told the truth. We obeyed the law. We kept the peace." - Walter Mondale

by luckylizard on Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 12:23:25 PM PDT

[ Parent ]

Sorry I'm too late to tip or rec. (1+ / 0-)
Thanks for highlighting the issue!

"No his mind is not for rent, to any god or government. Always hopeful yet discontent, he knows changes aren't permanent. But change is." -Neil Peart

by Boisepoet on Fri Jul 18, 2008 at 11:49:27 AM PDT

THANKS FOR DROPPING IN! (nmi) (1+ / 0-)
"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen

by Cassiodorus on Fri Jul 18, 2008 at 12:27:15 PM PDT

[ Parent ]