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English Learners Left Behind: Standardized Testing as Language Policy

reviewed by Penelope Wong – May 30, 2008

Title: English Learners Left Behind: Standardized Testing as Language Policy

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Kate Menken's *English Learners Left Behind: Standardized Testing as Language Policy* is an illuminating work that addresses a topic which until now has had little attention: the effect of the federal education policy of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) on the lives of English Language Learners (ELLs) in terms of their educational experiences, particularly their language learning experiences, in the U.S. public school system. Using a mixed qualitative and quantitative research design, Menken provides data from interviews, observations, state, district, and school policy documents, standardized test results, and other sources (i.e., graduation and drop out rates) to illustrate how ELLs in ten high schools across the boroughs of New York City experience extraordinarily high failure rates on the high-stakes graduation exit exams (in English) that they must pass in order to receive a high school diploma and/or be admitted to college. In short, Menken convincingly illustrates that the standardized testing required by NCLB “. . . is in actuality a language policy, even though this is rarely discussed and nor is the law presented to the public as such” (p. 5).

The text is divided into three parts: (1) “Language Policy Context,” (2) “Standardized Tests in Daily School Life,” and (3) “Expansion and Recommendations.” In the first section Menken sets the stage for the reader to understand the lasting and often pernicious impact NCLB has on ELLs. By examining the history of U.S. language policies in education, the testing movement, the multilingual diversity among public school students, and the various kinds of language programs offered to ELLs, Menken demonstrates how the constellation of these variables created the conditions that contributed to the adverse impact that the federal legislation of the NCLB testing policy had on so many ELLs.

By focusing on New York City which has some of the most accommodating policies for ELLs in the U.S., due to its long history of bilingual education and the fact that it is one of the few states to offer translations of the high school exit exams known as the Regents Exams, Menken is able to paint a vivid picture of the conflict that results

between local language education practices (in schools) and external, top down policies in the form of federal legislation. In short, since the inception of NCLB, Menken notes a precipitous decline in the number of ELLs enrolled in bilingual programs and the disproportionate number of ELLs failing the statewide exams in English and math compared to their English-speaking counterparts.

In the second part of the book, Menken uses sample questions from English language arts exams that are administered in New York and California and from math exams that are administered in Texas and New York to illustrate the linguistic complexity of the English used on these tests. The examples are compelling, and Menken clearly demonstrates that for subjects other than English, such as math, sophisticated English language skills are required. In essence, subject area exams are *both tests of the content and English language skills* and make abundantly clear why ELLs perform so poorly. Even when ELLs can take an exam in their home language, they still face formidable challenges. One example that Menken provides is particularly revealing. One of the teachers she interviewed had the following experience:

The math item stated in English “Multiply $(5xy^2)$ and $(5x)$.” However, the Spanish version stated, “Multiplique $(5xy^2)y(5x)$.” The use of “y” in the Spanish version instead of “and” confused many of his students, who thought that “y” was another symbol in the algebraic formula. (p. 92)

Besides these issues Menken touches on the less quantifiable effects of standardized testing on ELLs, such as lowered self-esteem because of the number of times they must retake the exam and the increased incentive for ELLs to drop out of high school or seek an alternative diploma (i.e., a GED) because of an unlikelihood of passing the exams. Finally, Menken demonstrates how the standardized testing of ELLs also creates language hierarchies among the various language speakers in New York City. The five languages in which the New York Regents exams are translated are Spanish, Chinese, Haitian, Creole, and Korean. However,

the top five languages spoken by ELLs in New York City are (in order of largest to smallest): Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Urdu, and Bengali. Test translations are not offered in Urdu or Bengali even though these languages are more widely spoken than either Haitian, Creole, or Korean. (p. 167)

Clearly, Urdu and Bengali speakers are at a disadvantage since none of the standardized tests are offered in their languages. In fact, Menken estimates that “20% of the total ELL population in New York City [are] at a great disadvantage because no extra help is offered to speakers of languages other than five for which there are Regents exams in English (p. 167).

While it is clear that ELLs face immense disadvantages in having to take high-stakes exit exams, Menken does note some of the positive aspects associated with ELLs having to pass the Regents exams. Specifically, some teachers feel that since implementation of NCLB, there have been higher expectations of ELLs and higher

standards of what they should know. Additionally, some note that ELL classes have become more rigorous; this is a contentious point, however, because Menken found that in essence ESL classes became typical language arts classes for native speakers essentially teaching to the test. Such classes might assist students in passing a standardized exam but not acquiring the English language in a linguistically appropriate manner.

By the end of the second section of the text, it's easy to feel depressed about the plight of ELLs in the context of NCLB. However, Menken offers hope in the form of some practical solutions in the final section of her book. She contends that "language planning" is a misnomer because of the ad hoc and myriad of ways in which the various constituencies in education are engaged in interpreting and implementing NCLB and its testing requirements. Essentially, NCLB "results in a de facto language policy" in which

[I]ndividuals at every layer of the educational system are involved in language policymaking, from the federal government to the state commissioner and into classrooms, as federal policies are interpreted, negotiated, and localized. Teachers are the final arbiters of language education policy implementation. (p. 180)

Noting the simultaneous "top-down" and "bottom-up" implementation of NCLB, Menken embraces these conditions to make some concrete recommendations that might address some of the challenges ELLs face in having to take these exams.

While Menken does a wonderful job of providing a "wake-up" call to educators about an overlooked dimension of ELL students, I would have liked to have seen a little more data on some of the constructive ways that bilingual schools are combating NCLB in their own ways. For example, one of the focal schools in her study increased instruction in Spanish for the Latino ELL students by enrolling them in Spanish AP courses as a "strategy to help improve their performance on the English Regents exams" (p. 123). The approach has been so successful with ELLs "increasing their pass rates by 50 percentage points" that it is now being implemented in schools across the region . . . " (p. 124). It would have been helpful to learn more about this particular strategy, the schools in which it was implemented, and the results. In another instance, Menken cites an example of a dual language program in Maryland,

where instruction was equally balanced between English and Spanish prior to mandatory testing. After the introduction of high-stakes tests in English, the school became worried about poor performance, and decided to increase the amount of English instruction offered by adding two and a half hours of English phonics every day. (p. 166)

It would have been extremely insightful to learn how the ELL students fared with the increased English instruction. Did their standardized test scores increase? Decrease? How about the other language? How did the skills of their other language fare?

Despite these oversights, Menken's analysis of ELL's educational experiences in the current high-stakes testing climate is thoughtful and unique. Perhaps most importantly, her work addresses an issue that has until now been relatively ignored. This is a must read book for all educators of K-12 students, but most importantly for those working with ELL students.

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