High-Stakes Testing and Latina/o Students: Creating a Hierarchy of College Readiness

Todd Ruecker

Abstract
This article examines how high-stakes testing policies can constrain the way teachers at predominately Latina/o high schools teach literacy and subsequently influence the success of Latina/o students at college. It is based on a year and a half study of seven Latina/o students making transition from a high school to a community college or university on the U.S.–Mexico border.

Resumen
Este manuscrito examina como políticas de pruebas de alto rendimiento pueden limitar la forma en que maestros en preparatorias predominantemente latinos enseña alfabetismo y subsecuentemente influencian el éxito universitario de estudiantes latinos/as. Está basado en un estudio de año y medio de siete estudiantes latina/os que pasan de preparatoria a colegio comunitario o universidad en la frontera México–Estados Unidos de América.

Keywords
high-stakes testing, No Child Left Behind, Common Core State standards, college transition, literacy, higher education, Latina(o)

“When I was sophomore I think I heard that at Johnson High School they wouldn’t put much pressure on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) because of the language. Because if they would give us a question, then they would give a Johnson student a question, they would understand it right away and we would struggle with some of the words because

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they’re not the words we would usually use, that’s why on this side of town, they focus more on the TAKS because, I don’t know if it’s because we’re Mexican or we don’t speak that much of English, but yeah, I don’t think it’s worth it.”

—Andrea, Samson High School Student

Politicians and the media have helped stir the U.S. public into a frenzy over a perceived crisis in our education system: our students cannot read or write and fare poorly in math compared to other nations. Trimbur (1991) has argued that these crises are strategically constructed, noting that they “perform certain kinds of ideological work by giving a name to and thereby mastering (rhetorically if not actually) cultural anxieties released by demographic shifts, changes in the means of production, new relations and conflicts between classes and groups of people, and reconfigurations of cultural hegemony” (p. 286). Under this analysis recent manifestations of education crises in the United States may stem in part from a response to a rapidly changing population: European Americans are expected to be a minority in the United States by 2042 as minority groups such as Latinas/os continue their rapid growth (Roberts, 2008).

As Trimbur (1991) indicated, standardized testing has long been connected with these “crises,” with low test scores often cited as evidence (p. 282). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that in response to the perceived crises of the past few decades, federal and state governments have dramatically expanded the use of high-stakes testing in U.S. elementary, middle, and high schools. With the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), then President George W. Bush took a decades-old accountability focus in Texas to the federal level. According to Suskind (2007), NCLB went beyond any previous education laws to increase the focus on testing within the U.S. schooling system, in many ways determining “the nature of every school-age child’s daily transactions with print” (p. 450). The act and its associated regime of high-stakes testing and sanctions has been heavily criticized by teachers in classrooms, researchers in academic journals, and national organizations like the National Education Association (n. d.) and National Council of Teachers of English (2007).

This article builds on work focused on the negative impact of high-stakes testing on minority students by examining the hierarchies it can create among high schools and the resulting disconnect between high school and college literacy instruction. It supports the argument that low Latina/o representation and success in higher education is “not the result of depressed aspirations or insufficient effort but rather the product of an inequitable distribution of resources, broadly defined, and opportunity structures that limit choice sets for Latino/a youth” (Irizarry, 2012, p. 293). Data come from a longitudinal study tracking seven Mexican/Mexican American students transitioning from a 95%+ Latina/o high school (Samson High School) to an 80% Latina/o community college (Borderlands Community College [BCC]) and university (Borderlands University [BU]) on the U.S.–Mexico border. In analyzing data from that study, I identified both curricular and extracurricular factors affecting the success of students as they transitioned to college, with the most negative curricular impact appearing to
be the dominance of test preparation at the focal high school. This article aims to explore this finding in more depth, drawing from student and teacher perspectives on the impacts of high-stakes testing of college readiness among the participants in this study. The following research question, a subset of broader questions used for the study, guided this focused analysis:

- How has high-stakes testing changed literacy instruction at a predominantly Latina/o secondary school and what impact do these changes have on Latina/o students as they transition into college?

The following section provides context for this discussion by presenting research examining the impact of high-stakes testing on literacy instruction, especially on high schools with large numbers of minority students.

**Impact on Teachers**

Much of the research on NCLB and its high-stakes testing agenda has focused on the negative effects on teachers and their criticisms of an increased quantification of student success (Assaf, 2006; Gebhard, Demers, & Castillo-Rosenthal, 2008; McCarthey, 2008; Pennington, 2007; Suskind, 2007). Perhaps this is as Pennington (2007) wrote, the title “No Child Left Behind” implies that teachers are not doing their job in that they are leaving a number of students behind. Because testing systems tend to focus on punitive sanctions, penalizing rather than rewarding, many teachers have felt increasingly vulnerable due to this testing focus, at risk of losing their jobs if their students do not meet required scores set by schools, districts, and states.

Research focused on NCLB’s impact on teachers and teaching has largely discussed how the law has stripped teachers’ agency, especially in low-income and minority-majority schools, and how some teachers have reacted to this challenge. Pennington (2007) used the concept of “figured worlds,” which recognizes that spaces like communities, schools, and classrooms are all unique and “bounded” in certain ways, interacting with the outside world but maintaining their difference, to analyze a veteran teacher Laura’s experience with NCLB. Laura explained that she used to enjoy coming to school as she was inspired by the creativity and unpredictability of the classroom, something that changed as she was restricted to using “scientifically verified” curricula. Pennington explored how Laura created agency for herself and argued that “teachers as individuals can improvise and create their own spaces for change” (p. 471).

Assaf (2006) reported on one reading specialist’s attempts to teach students social/contextual literacy along with functional, which went beyond the district’s focus on testing solely functional literacy. The focal teacher in the study, Marsha, explained that her discussions on readings traditionally encouraged students to make personal connections to reading and create their own meaning through interacting with texts. However, testing quickly transformed her curriculum: “Her reading instruction changed drastically, from rich and authentic discussions about books to a quiet, often subdued atmosphere of silent reading and mastery of low-level test skills isolated from...
real reading” (p. 164). Instead of indicating a preference for the more expansive instruction that Marsha returned partly to after the test, students pushed for functional literacy instruction because they felt the ongoing pressure of testing.

An article by McCarthey (2008) focused more on NCLB and writing instruction, something that has received less attention due to NCLB’s focus on reading skills. Utilizing Foucault’s framework of governmentality, her study focused on both high- and low-income schools. She argued that teachers in high-income schools have more freedom to teach and utilize agency because their students regularly meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals while “teachers and students in low-income schools have less power to resist the law and are monitored to a greater degree than teachers in high-income schools” (p. 464). She also explained that schools with high percentages of ELL students, like the focal high school in this study, are penalized further.

**Impact on Minority Students**

McCarthey’s (2008) study revealed that NCLB and associated testing policies have disproportionately affected low-income schools and schools with a large number of minority and linguistic minority (LM) students, two characteristics that tend to correlate. A number of others (Abedi, 2004; Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord 2004; Ambrosio, 2004; Causey-Bush, 2005; Lee & Wong, 2004; Jimenez, 2003; Paul, 2004; Stringfield & Yakimowski-Srebnick, 2005) have explored this issue from various angles.

Paul (2004) wrote about how NCLB left Latina/o and Black students behind in various ways. Like Booher-Jennings (2005), he explained that the act has led to an increased number of students of color being placed into special education programs since this group does not factor into a school’s overall accountability scores. Referring to Houston’s school system, which Bush hailed as a success and referred to as a model for NCLB, Paul pointed out that this “success” went with an “abysmal dropout rate” (p. 650). Given that the high school dropout rate nationwide for Latino males is the highest for any demographic at 50% (Paul, 2004, p. 354), it is likely that Latina/o and other students of color made up a lot of this dropout rate, especially in a system that requires students to pass a standardized test in order to graduate.

Ambrosio (2004) focused on a particular high school and especially on English Language Learners (ELLs). He explained that in this particular case, ELL students must take tests in English after 3 years even through researchers say that students need at least 4 to 7 years to acquire academic literacy. He acknowledged the salient point that simply allowing students to take the test in their home language is not sufficient because they are often not literate in their home languages. Also, he pointed out the stigmatizing effects of the school labels often used in testing regimes: “Having your school repeatedly labeled as “needing improvement” and your teachers pilloried as “not highly qualified” is humiliating and demoralizing. It provides a strong incentive for families to flee the school” (p. 711).

Booher-Jennings’ (2005) article “Below the bubble: ‘Educational triage’ and the Texas accountability system” was a disturbing exposé of how the increased pressures of testing lead schools to take extreme measures like giving up on certain students who do not demonstrate the potential to pass required tests. Booher-Jennings (2005)
discovered that teachers were more likely to refer students to special education so that their test scores would not be counted against their aggregate rates. She described the paradoxes of a data-driven education system, in that a large improvement in a student moving from 22% to 40% on the test is not seen as valuable as a moderate gain that pushes the student above passing rate, 70%. Booher-Jennings (2005) explained how the intense data-focus determined by high-stakes testing has corrupted the educational system: “The decision to distribute resources to those most advantageous in regard to aggregate pass rates—the bubble kids—is understood not as a moral or ethical decision but as a sterile management imperative” (p. 243).

Reporting on the initial findings of a study focused on K-16 alignment, Kirst and Venezia (2001) noted that policies like NCLB, crafted largely by legislators and others who typically have no education background, exacerbate the divide between high school and college: “K-12 policies, such as standards and assessments, are at the mercy of political forces, while state legislatures and governors often view higher education as comparatively untouchable” (p. 93). As they reported, this divide between high school and college contributes to a large need for remedial coursework at the college level. Inequitable high school access to advanced coursework, especially for minority students such as Latinas/os concentrated in low-income schools labeled “failing” by NCLB, perpetuates this divide.

While the literature has overwhelmingly focused on the negative impacts of NCLB, researchers have noted a few positive effects. In particular, NCLB provided additional funding for supplementary educational services (SES), which have been noted to have positive effects on achievement among underachieving students if implemented well (Farkas & Durham, 2007; Zimmer, Gill, Booker, & Lockwood, 2007). In a study commissioned by the Department of Education, Zimmer et al. (2007) found that African Americans and Hispanic students were more likely than European American students to participate in these added services and that they boosted math and reading achievement scores. Conversely, Dee and Jacob (2011) analyzed NAEP scores and found that NCLB had no impact on fourth grade reading scores, but a large effect on fourth grade math and a moderate effect on eighth grade math scores. Zimmer et al (2007) found that the school choice provisions that went with NCLB did not have a notable effect on achievement; however, other researchers noted that access to higher income schools gave low-income students the opportunity to access more qualified teachers (Desimone, Smith, & Frisvold, 2007). NCLB has also been praised for its increased focus on student achievement (and the associated achievement gap), more focus on ensuring more teachers are credentialed, and pressure on administration to offer more professional development and reduce class sizes (Hamilton, 2007).

**Method**

**Context and Participants**

The study took place across three educational institutions in El Paso, TX, a community of around 500,000 on the U.S.–Mexico border where Spanish is spoken in over 70% of the households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Samson High School (SHS) had
approximately 1,300 students, which was over 99% minority, with the vast majority being Latina/o (see Table 1 for school characteristics). Around 93% qualified for free or reduced lunches, 80% were classified as “at-risk” and 38.2% were classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). Because of its location close to the border, some students commuted daily from Mexico. In the years approaching the study period, the school continually felt extreme pressure due to state and national mandated testing, which came in the form of the TAKS, a test that every student needed to pass to graduate. The school had its 1st year of low performance in the late 90s and gradually progressed through stages of reform, reaching Stage 5, Year 1, a year before this study began.³ Turning to the postsecondary institutions, BCC served approximately 27,000 credit students on five campuses located throughout the county. It was a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with over 80% of students identifying as Latina/o. This study was conducted primarily on the Colorado campus, which served the lower income downtown area of El Paso. BU enrolled 22,600 students and was also an HSI with 77% of the student body identifying as Latina/o.

All but one of the student participants in this study identified Spanish as their first language and were drawn from senior mainstream English classes at the high school. Four (Bianca, Daniel, Joanne, and Paola) received all their education in the U.S. system while Yesenia entered in middle school and Mauricio and Carolina entered in eighth grade. See Table 2 for selected participant characteristics.⁴ Nine English Language Arts teachers at SHS were also interviewed as part of this study, seven of them Latina/o and two European American. Five of these teachers had started teaching at the high school in the past 5 years while the remaining were more experienced. The senior mainstream English teacher I worked most closely with, Mr. Robertson, had taught at SHS for almost 20 years.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The forms of inquiry used in this study included both ethnography and case study and the design was influenced by Sternglass’ (1997) and Leki’s (2007) longitudinal work of diverse students transitioning through postsecondary institutions. I spent a year at the high school volunteering in ESL and mainstream English classes before beginning data collection in order to gain a deeper understanding of the research site. During this volunteer period and through the data collection period, I played an

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student characteristics</th>
<th>% of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minority (overwhelmingly Latina/o)</td>
<td>99.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>93.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English proficiency</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk</td>
<td>80.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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active role in the classroom in a few different ways: regularly helping students individually and in groups on writing tasks and occasionally leading a lesson (see Ruecker, 2012 for more on this methodology and why I chose an action research design). Data sources for the study include researcher observation notes, student and teacher interviews, student writing samples, and both classroom and school materials (lesson plans, testing packets, and documents and posters aimed at exhorting students to do well on the TAKS). Student interviews focused on their background and home lives, their favorite and least favorite writing teachers and practices, the writing experiences they had in high school and college, their attitudes and experiences with standardized testing, and successes and challenges they faced both inside and outside school. Teacher interviews focused on pedagogical practices, types of assignments, hindrances to providing good writing instruction, use of technology, and opinions of the participant student in their class. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and triangulated with researcher observations, writing samples, and other collected materials. While interviews were the central focus of analysis, trends identified in them were corroborated through recursive reading of student writing samples from the whole study period and a repeated reviews of relevant institutional and classroom documentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years in United States (start of study)</th>
<th>Family status</th>
<th>HS Senior English</th>
<th>FYC 1</th>
<th>FYC 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>Whole life</td>
<td>Guardian of 3 siblings, lives in United States</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lived with mother and siblings in United States</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Whole life</td>
<td>Lived with grandmother in United States, parents separated</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Dropped (developmental)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>Whole life</td>
<td>Lived with cousin in United States, then with parents in Mexico</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>No writing class</td>
<td>No writing class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauricio</td>
<td>0 (attended school in U.S. from eighth grade)</td>
<td>Lived with parents in Mexico</td>
<td>A+</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paola</td>
<td>11 (always attended school in U.S.)</td>
<td>Lived with parents, later with boyfriend in Mexico</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Dropped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yesenia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Lived in United States with mother and siblings</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu’s (1986) framework of habitus, capital, and field guided the analysis of data for this study. Elsewhere, I have focused more consciously on capital (see Ruecker, 2012); however, the analysis and presentation of data in this article draws mainly on the concepts of habitus and field. The field may be considered the social sphere in which all interactions happen, the field in which individuals hold capital and develop their habitus. At the broadest level of analysis is the social field, which Bourdieu typically broke down into several levels: “the field of power, the broad field under consideration, the specific field, and social agents in the field as a field in themselves” (Thomson, 2008, p. 79). Turning to habitus, Maton (2008) has described it as both structured and structuring, arising out of previous experiences moving through and living in different fields while shaping future actions in these fields and others. He explained that habitus “focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking, and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others” (p. 52). In conducting initial analyses of data, it became clear that the field of SHS and the classroom fields embedded within it were not adequately developing the habitus in students necessary to succeed in the field of college, which included the subfields of classrooms where students were expected to engage in writing that differed significantly from the expectations for students at SHS (see Ruecker, 2012 for more on this). From closely examining the SHS teacher interviews along with those of the students, it became clear that high-stakes testing and associated sanctions played a salient role in the hysteresis (Bourdieu, 1977) that students experienced when their habitus did not match up with the new field of college. The next section will explore the results of these analyses in more depth.

Findings

High-Stakes Testing and Writing Instruction at Samson High School

From interviewing teachers and students about their experiences teaching and learning writing at SHS, it became clear that pressures related to high-stakes testing was a central force shaping both their experiences. This section focuses primarily on teachers’ perspectives, shifting towards student perceptions at the end of this section and in the following, which focuses on how students’ readiness for college writing was negatively impacted.

One Latina who had been teaching for just a few years, Ms. Padilla, described how her mainstream English classroom was monitored in order to ensure her teaching focused on test preparation:

I've had the lady from the state get me in such a state of panic to where I knew what her heels sounded like when she was walking and you know it was like we would do whatever she thought was best . . . One time she also came in, she ripped my lesson plan . . . I used to have my lesson plans on the wall so administrators could see what we were doing and the kids
could see what did we did yesterday. We don't anymore cause she ripped it up and said you're supposed to only be doing packets, only packets all the time. She would yell at me in front of the kids and so very traumatic.

This tactic of humiliating and discrediting new teachers in front of their students was not an isolated incident. Due to the pressure at the school, teachers would sometimes monitor each other. A more experienced Latino teacher, Mr. Cordero, recalled a fellow teacher coming in to question a student’s test-oriented writing when he taught mainstream classes his 1st year there. This outside teacher argued that because the TAKS asked for personal narratives, the student’s analytical-style essay would not be acceptable. However, speaking several years later as an advanced placement (AP) teacher, Mr. Cordero noted, “As far as the pressure that's placed on me and the pressure I feel from administration, there's virtually none. I feel very confident in what I do and the students I have.” The difference of monitoring between the mainstream and AP courses resulted from the fact that there was never a question of AP students passing the TAKS, while mainstream as well as students in the ESL classes needed more preparation in order to do so.

To understand the impact of high-stakes testing on the literacy instruction students received and its impact on their college readiness, it is important to look at the test in place during the time of the study. The TAKS had students complete two types of writing tasks after reading a few short stories. The first part of the writing portion had students write short expository responses (3-4 sentences long) in response to questions like this: “What does darkness symbolize in ‘My Father Sits in the Dark’? Explain your answer and support it with evidence from the selection.” On the other hand, the essay portion typically had an explanatory prompt, such as this: “Write an essay explaining how a person can feel connected to a special place.” As Beck and Jeffery (2007) showed, the benchmark papers for the TAKS exam always gave personal narratives as examples despite the explanatory nature of the prompt. Similarly, teachers at SHS had students practicing this mode of writing, in part because it was perceived as the easiest way for students to pass the test.

Another Latina with just a few years of teaching experience, Ms. Lopez, articulated the personal narrative focus when explaining the difference between her mainstream and AP classes: “With my regular students. Everything is more TAKS related. So we teach more of the narrative, that's because that's what they expect more on TAKS. Narrative essay, and because it's easier since English is their second language. It has been proven that it's easier for them to tell their own stories.” On the other hand, students in her AP classes were getting very different experiences: “. . . with my AP students I'm preparing them for that AP . . . We focus a lot on rhetorical devices, strategies, all of the rhetorical terms they're going to see on the test and we focus on the writing. Which is a literary analysis, it's an argumentative essay, the persuasive essay and the synthesis.”

The disparity between what was being taught in the AP and mainstream English classes was not the choice of teachers as they had been disciplined to teach in a certain way and threatened with their jobs if they deviated from this model. From Ms. Lopez’s
comments, it was clear that the curricula for the different classes was determined by the respective test: AP or TAKS. Multiple interviewed teachers were very aware that the incessant focus on personal narratives was not preparing students for college-level writing, with Ms. Padilla saying,

> Who does personal narratives in real life? Even in college in your intro to English 101 you might do that as one of the activities but personal narratives shouldn't reign our instruction or writing. And I think that's what's going to happen. We're going to have a whole generation of crappy writers cause they're not going to know what's out there. What are the other forms of writing?

Outside of the few AP and dual credit classes, the only English classes where there was relative freedom to teach a variety of writing were the senior-level classes, as students in those classes had already passed the version of the TAKS required for graduation. I spent a year immersed in senior English classes for this study, and students within those classes read parts of longer works including *Beowulf, MacBeth*, and *Lord of the Flies* (they never completed them due to a no-homework culture encouraged by the administration and a lack of books to take home). Largely because they were engaging in a completely new genre of writing, students struggled with the analytical, source-based essays required for *Beowulf* and *Lord of the Flies* more than they did with the personal statement required at the beginning of their senior year. They would often resort to plagiarizing from SparkNotes or other online sources to complete their work. The primary senior mainstream English teacher, Mr. Robertson, attributed these struggles to the limited nature of previous writing instruction at SHS, describing the institution as a “TAKS Academy . . . not a high school.”

As I asked students during their last semester at SHS about their perceptions of college writing, their limited knowledge was evident. Several identified length as the primary difference, expressing concerns about going from a habit of writing one-page essays to essays of 15 pages or more. Bianca thought it would be more “professional” with “more intense words,” that is, a more developed vocabulary. In addition to emphasizing length, Carolina said they would have to “have more information.” Paola asked in response to my questioning, “Are we going to have to write about books?” Concerned that the jump would be too large, Carolina consulted with me about whether or not it would be better for her to start at BCC instead of BU. It seemed clear that with the first 3 years of writing at SHS focused almost exclusively on writing short expository answers and one-page personal narratives, the students had little understanding of and preparation for the type of writing they would be experiencing at college.

**Transitioning to College**

Of the 7 students in this study, 4 began at BU and 3 at BCC. While students at BU consistently wrote more than their counterparts at BCC, the type of writing students did at both institutions generally differed greatly from the narrative writing they engaged in at SHS.
The standardized syllabus guiding the 1st-year composition (FYC) program at BCC specified that students “Draft [at least 5 major] essays of approximately 700 to 1000 words that focus on a thesis statement, with introduction, multiple body paragraphs which develop the major points indicated in the organizational plan of each essay, and an appropriate conclusion.” The EDNA (expository, descriptive, narrative, and analysis) modes approach dominated in the first semester FYC classes (1301) at BCC, with all four writing teachers interviewed for this study referencing this model when mentioning their 1301 classes. BCC’s second semester FYC class, ENG 1302, focused half on writing a major research paper and half on writing a literary analysis paper. Table 3 lists the writing that one student, Paola, completed (or would have completed if she had not dropped out early in her second semester) her 1st year at BCC.

While Paola and others students at BCC completed some narrative types of writing in their 1st-year classes, the majority of writing tasks were more analytical in nature, such as the article analysis Paola wrote in her 1st-year seminar. Her second semester writing course required students to engage mostly in source-based writing, including an extended research paper and one or two literary analyses. Another BCC student, Daniel, the only student who identified English as his first language, felt disadvantaged by SHS’s focus on test preparation:

I: And you mentioned the—you know, the TAKS as well. Do you feel that focus on the TAKS in high school helped or hurt your college success?

D: I think it hurt me ‘cause like—well it hurt most of us ‘cause like when you get thrown into college and you come from a place that focuses mostly on TAKS, while the other schools focus on everything else, you know what I mean?
Like, they don’t worry as much about TAKS. That they teach them all that stuff that they don’t teach us. And so when you get stuck in a room and the professor expects you to know what they know, you’re stuck and you’re like, “Okay.”

I: Okay. And what are some of those things that you thought you were missing out on?

D: Well like when you had to do essays and stuff like that. And, like, all the sourcing and everything. I know we touched based on it, like in Beowulf and things like that. But I mean, they want it from different places and know what I mean? It’s not just from one site or one place.

Daniel did not feel prepared to write for college and was now more aware of what they should have been doing in high school to prepare him. Like the rest of the BCC students in this study, Daniel struggled his 1st year and failed or dropped most of his classes, dropping out of school and bouncing between jobs before returning to a for-profit school a year later.

Students at BU engaged in more writing in both their FYC classes and across the curriculum, with little to none of this writing being personal in nature. The ENG 1311 (the first semester of a two semester writing program) class at BU took a community orientation, as students completed projects like an agency discourse observation memo, a rhetorical/visual analysis paper, which often focused on analyzing a website, an annotated bibliography, and a community problem report. For ENG 1312 (the second semester course), students began by writing a genre analysis in which they chose two texts, videos, pictures from different genres but on the same topic, and analyzed how the genres communicate in different ways. The next assignment was the largest assignment of the semester, a literature review and primary research report. For this assignment, students conducted both primary and secondary research to write a report that had some similarities to the IMRAD (introduction, methods, results, and discussion) genre common in scientific disciplines. In the latter part of the course, students composed extensively in digital environments, advocating policy change through a video documentary, an online opinion piece, and a website. The writing experiences of one student, Bianca, are depicted in Table 4.

Comparing Bianca’s writing experiences (and the rest of the students at BU) with Paola’s, it is evident that study participants at BU engaged in more writing their 1st year at college than their BCC counterparts. Unlike the presence of some narrative writing at BCC, Bianca did not report any narrative writing at BU. In addition to the analyses and research essays written for her FYC classes, Bianca and others wrote analysis essays in their history classes and research essays in their 1st-year seminar classes, essays that required them to utilize skills they had little experience with at high school. With practice, feedback, and lots of effort, they grew better at these new writing tasks; however, the participants consistently wished that they had more preparation in high school.

In a discussion centered on the impact of the high school TAKS focus on her college readiness, Bianca generally felt that it hurt her, explaining that the writing focus in high school was very different:
I: Do you feel the high school focus on TAKS helped or hurt your college success?
B: It hurt. Hurt! It helped and it hurt. It helped because of the TAKS, we used to do some reading and some stuff like that. But it hurt because they only focus on the TAKS instead of focusing on college work. So it hurt more than it help.
I: Okay, so the type of work that the TAKS asked for was very different?
B: Yeah because like on the TAKS, for the reading, the topics are really not cool. And like when you come to college, it’s like topics that you have to look for information that will help you or will make like a point. An idea or something. And in high school, you just have to write like the clouds were red. I don’t know.

Like Daniel, Bianca and the other study students saw a clear disconnect between the type of writing they had done in high school because of the TAKS focus and the type of writing they were expected to do at college. In comparison to the more personal writing of high school, college writing asked for them to “look for information that will help you or will make like a point.”

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Latinas/os are the fastest growing demographic in this country and it is vital that schools and policymakers work to ensure that they succeed in increasing numbers. Unfortunately, as seen in the previous discussion, rigid standardized polices like NCLB and the incoming CCSS offer a “one size fits all” package that fails to account
for the huge differences between a well-funded predominantly European American suburban Dallas school and an underfunded predominantly Latina/o school a few feet away from the U.S.-Mexico border. At SHS, high-stakes testing pressures exacerbated a culture of low expectations surrounding Latina/o students by limiting literacy instruction to teaching to a test that was poorly aligned with college literacy expectations and overly penalizing a largely ELL student population. As a result, all students in this study experienced some level of hysteresis upon transitioning from the field of high school to the field of college, which Bourdieu has described in the following way:

The hysteresis of habitus, which is inherent in the social conditions of the reproduction of the structures in habitus, is doubtless one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them which is the cause of missed opportunities . . . (cited in Hardy, 2008, p. 134)

As students transitioned from years of writing one-page personal narratives to writing analytical essays of three or more pages, they did not have the habitus that students from other schools had in order to make this jump to a new field and subsequently struggled more than they should have had to.

Findings from SHS provides a vivid illustration of how schools that primarily serve a largely ELL and low-income Latina/o student population are often, in the words of Foucault, (1977) “disciplined,” and consequently prevented from adequately preparing their students for college-level literacy. Many teachers in the high school clearly understood that they were “structuring their students’ college prospects from the moment that students enter school” (Oliva, 2008, p. 127) and they knew what was necessary in order to develop a habitus in students suitable for success in college. However, teachers’ agency was constricted by the mechanisms put in place in larger fields at the state and national levels by legislators and others lacking the necessary qualifications to develop informed educational policy and, in this case, unfamiliar with the unique situation of the borderlands. The few students I interviewed who had the opportunity to study briefly at another school witnessed stark differences between their literacy experiences at SHS and elsewhere.

It is important to note here that this study is limited, as is most qualitative research, in that it focuses on a few students and teachers at one high school in a specific geographical context. However, the stories of Latina/o students at SHS likely mirror the experiences of many Latina/o students at high schools across the country. As Fry (2005) found in a report conducted for the Pew Hispanic Center, Latina/o students are disproportionately situated in low-income schools like SHS. Twenty-five percent of Latina/os are situated in the quarter of U.S. public high schools where more than 45% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches compared to only 8% of African American students and 1% of European American students (Fry, 2005, p. i). Only 42% of Hispanics meet college-readiness standards in both English and Math in contrast to 66% of European American students (Smith, 2012). ELL students, common at SHS, are further disadvantaged, with only 5% of students under this designation in Texas
(the majority of whom are Latina/o) qualifying for “college ready” compared to 38% of low-income students overall (Smith, 2012).

As it shifted to the TAKS from the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) in 2003, Texas is now in the process of transitioning to a new test called the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The Obama administration has crafted the Race to the Top Initiative and has granted increasing numbers of states requested NCLB waivers. The CCSS is replacing NCLB as the new national movement to ensure consistent standards across all schools and give all students equal opportunities. As noted by one school principal who was an early supporter but now skeptic of the new standards, high-stakes assessment and associated sanctions are not going anywhere (Burris, 2013). Large consortia like the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) have formed to develop standardized CCSS assessments that span a large number of states. ELLs are only mentioned as an afterthought in the new CCSS, with a brief mention that “it is possible [for them] to meet the standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening without displaying native-like control of conventions and vocabulary” (p. 6). As long as policies like CCSS and their associated tests are constructed from a mainstream European American perspective with a mainstream European American student body in mind, they are likely to continue disadvantaging students who come to the classroom with a different culture and different set of skills and who may need a different type of instruction. In the words of one teacher I interviewed at SHS,

I think that if you gave that standard to teachers they would be able to understand a little bit better whether the kid meets that standard or not. Rather than someone who's never met the child. Somebody who is 50, 60 years old in Austin who has absolutely no idea of our culture, of our background.

It is important to set high expectations for students in high school so they are ready for college; however, national standardized policies have done little to address low higher education attendance, retention, and graduation rates among Latinas/os despite decades of promises. Without the voices of Latina/o educators working in a variety of contexts contributing to the creation of these standards along with a continued ignorance of the broader social inequalities that shape the success and failure of Latina/o college-bound students, these students will continually be left behind. With the impending implementation of the CCSS across most states and a new era of assessments being developed, researchers need to turn their attention to the effects of this new educational movement on Latina/o students and their teachers at all types of schools. Will teachers be constrained in the same way they were under NCLB? Will the CCSS proponents’ mantra of “college and career readiness” be realized for all students, including Latinas/os still learning English? Although their voices were largely absent from the creation of the standards, hopefully researchers and educators can join forces in shaping the CCSS into something that will effectively serve the increasingly diverse and multilingual 21st-century student striving to achieve their college and career ambitions.
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Notes

1. Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. This test was Texas’ form of high-stakes assessment and part of high school graduation requirements since 2003 and has recently been phased out in favor of a new test, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR).

2. All institutional and person names are pseudonyms to protect their identities. This study had IRB approval from all three institutions.

3. According to the “Title I School Improvement: Stage 5” Document published by the Texas Education Association (TEA, n. d.), a school at this stage is required to restructure, which “requires major changes in a campus’ operation. The LEA oversees the implementation of the campus’ restructuring plan for alternative governance that was developed during Stage 4. The LEA must continue it’s [sic] increased oversight and responsibility of the campus’ reform efforts.” The requirement for “Alternative governance” can be met in a number of ways: (a) Reopening the school as a charter school, (b) replace most or all of the school staff responsible for not meeting AYP, (c) bring in a private management company to run the school, (d) turn over operations to the state educational agency, or (e) “Any other major restructuring of school governance arrangement that makes fundamental reforms.”

4. The high school portion of this study was conducted with 10 students but two did not matriculate to college and one dropped out of the study her first semester at college. In this report, I focus primarily on the seven students from whom I have complete data through their first year at college.

5. As of writing, Texas, along with several other states, has not signed on to the CCSS. Nonetheless, high-stakes assessment has long played an important role in Texas and will certainly continue to in the foreseeable future.

References


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