Sick Children, Alternative Assessments, and What Happens at Home During Testing Time: Mexican-American Parents’ Voices on High-Stakes Schooling

Elaine Hampton
University of Texas at El Paso

Reynaldo Reyes III
University of Texas at El Paso

Abstract

This mixed-method study conducted in a border city between Texas and Mexico examines Mexican-American parents’ beliefs of the value of high-stakes testing and their perspectives of its effects on their children. Parents expressed their appreciation of assessment, but they also desired alternatives to the current high-stakes testing programs. They were concerned that the quality of the curriculum their children received was negatively affected because of the focus on testing. Unsolicited and numerous responses from the survey participants called for an extension to the study to examine the parents’ perspectives of the testing program’s impact on their children’s physical and emotional health. This led to further exploration of the alarming information about children’s stress-induced physical and emotional consequences.

Introduction

Texas was a pioneer in the use of standardized tests for making high-stakes decisions such as student graduation and ranking and publicizing a school’s “quality” based on a single score. In the 1980s, Texas began an educational reform movement to hold schools accountable where policy makers designed and implemented a system of standards and high-stakes testing. The use of one instrument ensured efficiency as the data could be quickly projected into charts comparing schools and districts. As Texas legislators moved into national offices, the nation followed suit, and high-stakes testing became a major component of federal legislation signed into law by President George W. Bush, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (www.ed.gov/nclb).

Educational research documenting the reductionist effects that high-stakes testing has imposed on schools across the country is abundant. A leader in the effort, Linda Darling-Hammond (1991, 2007), compares the narrowing curriculum in U.S. test-driven schools to curriculum focusing on critical thinking and problem solving in schools in higher-achieving countries. She notes that the NCLB requirement for increasing layers of test scores showing adequate yearly progress sets a statistical target that is unreasonable and results in successful schools tagged as failures. More than 40 percent of the nation’s schools were placed in some category of failure from 2002 – 2006, affecting how schools educated and prepared their students for such high-stakes accountability.

The reality is that all students are impacted by high-stakes standardized tests; however, children from families who are minority, poor, or non-English speaking are especially disadvantaged (Valenzuela, 2005), including Latino students. Despite reform efforts to meet all the educational needs of Latino sub-populations and the disparity of school success between Latinos and all other student groups, a great number of this population is becoming more disenfranchised by the current state of U.S. public schooling (Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). The use of
high-stakes testing is especially threatening to socially and economically marginalized Mexican-American students (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Krashen, 1994), exacerbating the complexities and difficulties they experience in their efforts to reach school success (Valencia, 1999; Romo & Falbo, 1996).

There are also statistical complexities involved in schools serving minority youth, such as English language learners. Wright (2005) found that as students in this category become proficient, they are moved to another category, leaving the new learners in a category on their own and still required to meet the higher proficiency levels required to avoid the failure categories. Therefore, many Mexican-American communities with a significant number of English language learning students will be unfairly represented via this NCLB reporting system.

These disparities initiated our desire to examine the phenomenon of the impact of high-stakes standardized testing on minority youth from the perspective of the home. Although not an ethnographic study itself, this study provides a place for researchers to begin to explore questions on what Latino-Mexican-American families believe about high-stakes testing and the ways it impacts their children. One of the recommendations we have as a result of this study is more qualitative research, such as ethnographies and case studies, to probe deeper into this phenomenon of what occurs at home during high-stakes testing time and what educators and policy-makers need to know about it.

So that reform efforts can be made to empower Mexican-American parents, their children and their communities, it is important to increase our understanding of how parents view the practice of high-stakes testing and how it is currently affecting their children’s school-going experiences. Such knowledge may contribute to a better understanding of what Mexican-American parents value in their children’s education, as well as how schools and educators can prepare their children for the rigors of a high-stakes testing climate in which we currently exist.

Research Design

This study was a mixed methods design that used quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data to answer the research question, What are the attitudes of Mexican-American parents towards high stakes standardized tests? We used the sequential process of a mixed methods approach to gathering our data (Creswell, 2005).

We began with a survey to answer our research question on Mexican-American parent attitudes and opinions toward high-stakes testing in El Paso, Texas and its impact on their children (We refer to the parents and caregivers throughout this paper as parents with the understanding that other caregivers may serve in the role of parent). We then followed with structured interviews of participants of Mexican-American descent in the same geographical area of the city where we conducted the surveys.

Survey Methodology

The survey we used for this study was adapted from a similar study done by the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) with parents of third graders in Colorado public schools in 1992 (Shepard and Bliem, 1993). (Permission was granted from CRESST to modify and administer the survey.) The descriptive data analysis and presentation is also modeled after the CRESST study.

In the El Paso study, there were 340 survey respondents. The participant selection process meets standards for randomness based on a population meeting these qualifications: 1) participants chosen with Hispanic surnames, 2) the study participants were located in the El Paso border region between Texas and Mexico, 3) the participants indicated that they were caregivers of school-aged children.
The participants were contacted by telephone and, if they were parents of school-aged children, invited them to participate in a 5 – 10 minute survey about their attitudes regarding the Texas state testing system. Only participants with Hispanic surnames were considered. Although we are fully aware that a Hispanic surname does not always indicate a participant’s connection to Mexican-descent roots, we considered the geography and history of the El Paso region to qualify our determination that participants were of Mexican-descent. Over 95 percent (N=340) of those contacted agreed to participate. Participants could select Spanish or English for the survey. Only 15 percent selected Spanish. The responses were tallied and percentages for each response were computed.

**Interview Methodology**

The initial research design was simply to duplicate Shepard and Bliem’s (1993) study with a Mexican-American population in the Texas-Mexico border region. Although the data and implications from this earlier study by Shepard and Bliem (1993) were important, we saw the need to add to this data with information specifically from the Mexican-American community. However, during the survey process, a strand of interesting information emerged.

While taking the surveys, a number of parents volunteered more information about the impact of the testing program on their children. Twenty of the 340 participants described adverse health impacts on their children, which they attributed to the stress surrounding the testing program in this community. These impacts included upset stomach and anxiety attacks. Though anecdotal at that point, the evidence pushed us to deepen the study with this focus in mind.

Since this strand was not in the initial design, the research assistants did not pursue this topic with the participants during the survey. So we wanted to know, “Could these negative physical and emotional effects on children be occurring to other families in the area?” This led us to extend the research by interviewing additional parents who were members of the same Mexican-American community as the survey participants and ask the focused question, “How has the Texas testing system affected you and your children?”

We interviewed Mexican-American parents in various El Paso communities and neighborhoods. University graduate students assisted with conducting the interviews and were instructed to interview parents or guardians of a neighbor “three dwellings to the left of their dwelling” or, if that was not logical, a similar dwelling. They asked the neighbors if they had children in the public schools and if they would share information about how the testing program (known as TAKS in Texas – Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) affects them and their children. If there were no children in that home, the students went to the next home, and so on. No parent who met the criteria refused an interview. The research question was asked in English, and all of the 41 participants responded in English with Spanish phrases included – a common practice in a bilingual city. The interview data were transcribed, coded, and grouped into themes after constant comparative analysis (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) was done of the content.

**Results/Findings**

We discuss the results and analysis in light of the three themes that emerged from the perspective of these Mexican-American families: 1) Accountability is necessary, but a variety of alternative assessment strategies are more valuable than the use of a single determinant of student success. 2) The high-stakes testing environment engenders a sense of discouragement brought on by the narrowing of the curriculum and forcing teachers to resort to teaching to the test at the cost of creative and innovative pedagogy. 3) Parents frequently discussed the physical and psychological
distress their children experienced when dealing with the pressures and consequences of high-stakes tests.

**Survey Results**

The results from the Colorado study are similar to the results of the El Paso survey. However, El Paso area parents expressed stronger opposition to using the test to fail students or to prevent graduation. Findings from the El Paso survey study show that 50 percent of the Mexican-American parents favored the use of state-mandated, standardized tests, but 69 percent oppose using such tests to determine whether their child is promoted to the next grade. The results (shown as percentage of responses) are provided in Table 1. The Texas test is Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

![Table 1](image)

(Questions adopted from Shepard and Bliem’s (1993) CRESST study)
These survey data indicated that the Mexican-American parents have an understanding of the limits of using a short answer test to make important decisions about their children and their schools. A large majority opposed the use of this one instrument to fail a child or to deny graduation. There was also strong opposition to using the test to determine school funding or to determine teachers’ pay.

**Parents’ Preferences for Reporting Assessment Information**

Question #10 on the survey asked the parents to rate different assessment instruments to indicate how useful they felt these instruments would be to provide important information to the family about the child’s progress. The use of the state test and the practice tests were rated highly by only about 10 percent of the parents, while alternative forms of assessment were rated much higher as shown in Table 2 below.

![Table 2](image)

**Interview Results**

Of the 42 interviews, comments supporting the test came from eight parents. One of these mothers said that her children do well. “If they wouldn’t be passing them….I might think differently about this test.” She stated that the test is good because, “It does measure how much they know and what the teachers are teaching them.” However, even she began her comments about how her children get very stressed and anxious and how she worries about how much pressure they put on themselves. Two other parents called the tests a “necessary evil,” but did credit the tests for making teachers teach better. Two parents said their children were well prepared because the school provided a strong program for them and they loved to read.

In the rest of the interviews, 36 (86 percent) of the parents expressed concern about and opposition to the high-stakes testing system. Three major themes emerged from our analysis:
1) the high stakes testing was causing physical and emotional distress in their children, 2) parents felt that the tests were narrowing the curriculum and what and how it was being taught, and 3) parents wanted alternative forms of assessment for their children with less reliance on a test that determines and defines so much. Stress on the students was the dominant theme and mentioned in 27 of the 42 interviews. This information mirrors the quantitative data from the parent survey.

The Physical and Emotional Climate Under the Pressure of Testing

The following comments by parents reveal that their children experienced various stresses during testing time. One mother noted that her daughter wants to eat a lot more when she has to take the TAKS test. She believes that “It’s one of the reasons that school children are getting a lot of stress that leads them to have more health problems such as obesity.” Loosing sleep was another common concern, one parent admitting “it is stressful for the girls to the extent that they cannot sleep at night. I can’t sleep either.” This parent even commented how one of her girls was so stressed that they [the parents] sent her to counseling.

Six parents said that their children get sick during the testing weeks, and one said her son pulled his hair out last year during the testing week. The parents’ voices quoted below show their concern. The following are examples of the types of anxiety that both parents and children endure during TAKS time:

• “When the test date is approaching, she is very anxious, has trouble sleeping, she gets irritable more easily, has stomach pains and constipation.”
• “My daughter has a very hard time with tests. She becomes very nervous and anxious. My children do very well on their report cards during the year, but the TAKS test tells a very different story.”
• “Every year he throws up, he has diarrhea, he is sick.”
• “The school called me last year. She had a nervous breakdown during the test. I had to pick her up. She was shaking and crying, and it took three hours to calm her down.”
• “I still get nervous for my girls to see them leave the morning of the test and see their scared faces leaves me worried all day.

A parent who was also a teacher told us, “I see it in my own class; I teach fifth grade. The kids come in on the day of the test and are totally freaked out. I have a student that is so anxiety ridden that he has real panic attacks. I don’t think this will tell us if a student is prepared to move on to the next grade!”

These Mexican-American parents describe their children suffering psychological and physical backlashes from high-stakes testing and the stress associated with this time during the school year. Although certain amounts of stress may help students be productive and recognize accountability, excessive amounts of stress may have negative effects on children. MacLean (1990) and Sylwester (2003) explain the role that stress plays in brain functions. When the human experiences stress-related emotions such as fear and devaluation, the brain downshifts to its core in order to respond in the most basic way. In doing so, the individual is not accessing the more advanced thinking centers of the brain. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a stressful testing environment strips from the child the opportunity to function at an optimum, or even normal, level.

This emotional setback in learning opportunities is exacerbated by the reduction in curriculum quality discussed in the next section, which makes even more problematic the teaching and learning climate that is created in schools, which is most that are under a high-stakes accountability system.
Narrowing the Curriculum

I think that a child should be encouraged to love school and continue on with their education; however, the consequences that this test brings to not only my child but to other families in this situation are hatred towards school and education – Parent

Consistent messages came from the parents about their desires for rich educational experiences for their children. They reported that the focus on test preparation did not encourage those experiences. One parent told about her son being taken out of band to be put into a test drill class. Oddly enough, the school called this test drill class “enrichment.” Another mother said her daughters were threatened about being removed from a health magnet program, which they loved, to be in a test preparation program. The parents bemoaned dittos, drills, and test prep books.

Several comments were about “real teaching,” which we interpret to mean teaching that was meaningful and effective for the students on levels beyond the usefulness for tests. “What happened to real teaching, teaching students about our world, rather than teaching strategies on how to pass a test?” Learning happens through a deeper struggle with concepts as they are situated in real world contexts (Wiggins, 1998) where understanding develops in multiple and interrelated streams. The parents credited the test with a shallow curriculum where students were being “bombarded” with fragmented information and test taking strategies rather than a curriculum that allows for reflection and understanding. One parent said the following:

Kids are getting bits and pieces of everything just to pass the test. No time to absorb and have a deep understanding in order to digest what they are learning. My child has only been in school for six weeks. In his homework for math, he is to cover more than five concepts such as … this pattern of numbers, counting money, draw the time on a clock, is the equation greater or less than one, and odd or even numbers. I don’t believe that in six weeks my child has learned all these concepts. I think it just shows them strategies to pass the test.

It is particularly disconcerting that some students opt out of school rather than face the test. A parent of a daughter in eleventh grade expressed anger because her daughter wanted to give up. “She feels so stressed out that she is already making plans to get a GED instead of a diploma.” Three other parents expressed this concern about their children opting to drop out because of the tests.

Romo & Falbo (1996) found similar instances in their study of “at-risk” Latino students who were trying to graduate from high school. The students found so many obstacles, including what was then the state-mandated test (TAAS), impeding their way to graduation that, ultimately, many dropped out. They suggested that that the tracking system contributed to the lack of preparation of Mexican-American students because of the curriculum they were exposed to and how “teachers and administrators have low academic expectations for students in the non-college-track programs and fail to train them up to the level of skills they will need to get a good job in the future” (p. 66).

Historically, Mexican-American children have been disproportionally tracked into low-ability courses (Donato, 1997), which have affected their access to a curriculum and teaching-learning dynamics that would adequately prepare them for assessments. When they scored low on those assessments, they were continually kept in those lower-track classes for remediation purposes. Such classes typically have less challenging curriculum and lower expectations from teachers. For so many Mexican-American students today, their underperformance in schools still stems from “the gross inequities in instructional quality, resources, and other support services are conveniently
ignored when testing takes precedence over pedagogy; another is that teachers’ creativity is diminished when they have to ‘teach to the test’ and are discouraged from implementing more engaging pedagogical practices” (Nieto, 2003, p. 56).

**A Call for a More Just Assessment System**

“One assessment! It’s like all that hard work he did during the year doesn’t mean anything.” Parent

Most of the parents expressed a respect for accountability to have some way of understanding how their children and schools were doing academically. However, consistently, the concern was that one instrument could not provide this information adequately. Valencia (1999) has suggested “for Texas and other states that utilize such practices, high-stakes testing violates a major principle of measurement, which holds that test scores represent a very small sample of behavior and thus should always be used in conjunction with other sources of assessment” (p. 129).

Some parents recognized that these tests are not a true indication of who their children are as learners or what they are learning. One said, “I don’t feel these tests tell me much of anything, other than that my children, luckily, are good test takers”. Another parent mentioned, “It can’t tell me if my son is smart or if he needs help. It just tells me if he knows how to take a test or even if he guessed right.” Further elaborating on the fact that one test does not reflect true learning, another parent said,

For me and my child, I don’t think it does him justice. I don’t think it’s indicative of how and what he’s able to do. And, like I stated earlier, there are other ways, and you have children who can think on their own, but when they come to a test, it affects them differently. So with that, I think the people in the state of Texas, they need to look at other ways of evaluating children.

Other parents also talked about how the success of their children should not be measured by one test score alone and that grade promotion should not be based on this test. One parent said “The educational success of our children can definitely not be measured on one state test” while the other mentioned “I cannot believe they would fail my son based on a test score and not on how well he is doing in class.”

The survey data also showed parents’ preference for assessments that look at the performance throughout the year, that provide teacher’s input, and that provide information through multiple tools and reports. The majority did not want test results used to fail children or deny graduation. The parents of this study believe that their children exist in an unfair system that is used to cause an unfair advantage to their children who might be failed and denied graduation.

**Conclusion**

The level of test-induced pressure endured by children in schools today is unprecedented. With the re-authorization of NCLB, policymakers must look closely at what high-stakes testing has done to schools, their teachers, and most importantly the children. It is especially critical to consider the negative repercussions of high-stakes testing on Mexican-American students because of the historical and present marginalization that so many experience at all levels of schooling, especially in the middle and high school grades.

It has been shown that students who do not perform well on such tests are essentially “pushed out” of the system because schools do not want them to bring down their scores (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Many of these schools are located in disadvantaged urban and rural areas with high concentrations of Latino students and other students of color. Parents like those in this study
are providing insight to what many teachers may not see or what policy-makers do not want to hear. We cannot afford to ignore what the parents of such students have to say about the climate of high-stakes testing in the era of No Child Left Behind and what it is doing to their children and their schools. One of the many consequences recognized by Darling-Hammond (2004) is that more and more states are showing high school completion rates for African-American and Latino students similar to those before 1954. Is high-stakes testing one of the culprits marginalizing these student populations out of our schools systems? And what can further studies outside of schools and into the homes of such students tell us about what such tests are doing to them, their families, and their attitudes toward school? We recommend further qualitative studies based on the results and implications of this present study.

Ultimately, we must be concerned that if any environmental factor adversely affects our children’s health, we are obligated to pursue the causes and effects. This urgency is exacerbated if the cause is from an educational experience. Ultimately, we believe that such emotions associated with high-stakes tests and preparing for them take away from any natural curiosity or desire to learn and explore for the children in schools today. The parents of studies such as this one may provide a critical link to providing additional support for struggling students, especially if they know that their voice is being heard. Parents and caring educators may provide insight, support, and strategies to children on how to effectively navigate the pressures involved with high-stakes testing in their schools. With the knowledge that children are dealing with excessive physical and emotional stress during testing time, policymakers who are concerned about the academic success and engagement (or disengagement) of Mexican-American students in schools must acknowledge that what happens at home and outside of schools in this era of high-stakes accountability is critical to recognize. To do otherwise is to discount that the manner in which students experience school is not important, but only that ultimately one test score counts.
References


