Theory Into Practice, 57:119–126, 2018

ISSN: 0040-5841 print/1543-0421 online
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2018.1425817

Chandler Patton Miranda
Hua-Yu Sebastian Cherng

Accountability Reform and Responsive Assessment for Immigrant Youth

Immigrant students, one of the fastest-growing populations in US public schools, have been linguistically and culturally disadvantaged by accountability policies that rely only on standardized tests. Recent changes to these policies allow for the use of performance-based assessment tasks (PBATs) as an assessment indicator to supplement standardized tests. In this article, we explore how 1 highly successful high school that works exclusively with recently arrived immigrant teenagers has incorporated PBATs into its curriculum. We find that school leaders, teachers, and students agree that the use of rigorous performance assessments accomplishes language learning, content mastery, and test preparation simultaneously.

Introduction

Immigrant students have been linguistically and culturally disadvantaged by recent accountability systems (Jaffe-Walter, 2008). Recent school accountability systems often rely heavily on standardized test scores to make determinations about student learning, teacher effectiveness, and school success, yet neglect to consider other important variables (O'Neil, 2016). Those critical of these accountability systems argue that an unbalanced reliance on standardized tests has unintended consequences. For example, when teachers feel pressure to *teach to the test*, or adapt their teaching practices so their students can perform well on high-stakes assessments, they have less time to teach other content areas not explicitly tested (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995). This type of accountability system has a disproportionately negative impact on immigrant students and English learners (ELs) (Amrein & Berliner,

Chandler P. Mirandais a doctoral candidate at New York University. Hua-Yu Sebastian Cherng is an Assistant Professor of International Education, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University.

Correspondence should be addressed to Chandler Patton Miranda, Doctoral Candidate, New York University, 82 Washington Square E, New York, NY 10003. E-mail: chandler.p.miranda@nyu.edu

2002; Dabach, 2014; Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Valenzuela, 1999).

Under the most recent policy of school accountability, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), schools can incorporate assessments other than standardized tests in their accountability systems to better determine the depth and breadth of student learning. Performance-based assessment tasks (PBATs), like portfolios, may reduce some of the negative impacts of high-stakes assessments on immigrant students and ELs (Holme, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010; Ou, 2010; Papay, Murnane, & Willett, 2010; Reardon & Kurlaender, 2009). PBATs are responsive assessments that evaluate problem-solving skills and the ability to defend original statements using textual evidence and to synthesize content from multiple disciplines, among other things. The use of PBATs has not been well studied but has been suggested as a means for reducing stereotype threats and the drop-out rate, and as an alternative way to demonstrate content mastery (Holme et al., 2010). This key change in accountability policy may be particularly beneficial when educating and assessing immigrant youth (Gijbels, Dochy, Van den Bossche, & Segers, 2005).

This article explores how teachers at one high school that serves only newly arrived immigrant youth adapt their practices to prepare students for both high-stakes standardized tests and PBATs, which are both required for graduation.

Immigrant Students in US Schools

Immigrant children come from a variety of backgrounds. Approximately half are proficient in English when they arrive in the United States, or come from privileged backgrounds. It is the immigrant students who do not speak English and are from poor families that public schools are struggling to serve well, particularly at the high school level. High schools with large populations of recently arrived immigrant teenagers are often underresourced and largely unsuccessful at helping these students learn English, pass state exit exams, and, ultimately, graduate.

ELs are often overrepresented in special education classes and often miss important content instruction when they are pulled out of content courses to attend English support classes (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Short & Boyson, 2012). Research also finds that immigrant students report feeling unimportant, insignificant, and invisible in public schools where they are the minority (Larson & Ovando, 2001; Lee, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Olsen, 1997; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002). This social isolation within a school can inhibit a student's academic and social success (Carter, 2005; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Kroger, 2006). Even before entering the classroom, more overt forms of discrimination further disadvantage immigrant youth and their chances of academic success (Yoshikawa, 2011). Schools have illegally turned away immigrant students when they attempt to register and have encouraged students to leave school before earning a diploma (Lukes, 2015; Mueller, 2016).

Accountability Policy and Assessment

Despite immigrant students being the fastest-growing group of students, there is little inquiry that explicitly examines how immigrant youth fare under US school accountability policies. However, work on ELs suggests that some accountability systems are more equitable than others. Scholars have argued that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) ties accountability and language policy together in ways that favor the learning trajectories and life needs of children who speak English as a first language (de Jong, 2013; Meier, 2004; Menken, 2008). NCLB accountability policies demand that ELs be tested upon their arrival to the United States and each year after. Schools serving ELs are expected to show that their students make annual yearly progress and show proficiency in English as soon as 3 years after arrival in the country (Menken, 2008). Evidence suggests that NCLB significantly reduces ELs' chances

of earning a diploma because of an increased reliance on high-stakes exit exams nationwide (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Evans & Hornberger, 2005; Fine, Jaffe-Walker, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007). The impacts of the NCLB accountability measures are not surprising. The pace at which students learn English depends on their age, premigration schooling experiences, and socioeconomic status in the United States. Multiple studies indicate that even the most advantaged ELs will take 4 to 8 years or more to learn the level of English necessary to perform well on standardized exams (Cummins, 1981; Collier, 1987; Ramsey & Wright, 1973; Solórzano, 2008).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA), which will go into effect during the 2017–18 school year, may offer school districts and states the opportunity to correct for an overreliance on high-stakes tests by requiring them to design accountability systems with multiple indicators (AEE, 2015). Although NCLB only allowed for test scores and 4-year graduation rates as accountability indicators, ESSA allows high schools to use test scores, 4-year and extended-year graduation rates, and "at least one indicator of school quality of success that allows for meaningful differentiation among student groups" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2015, p. 1). The law permits states to use assessment systems that incorporate performance-based assessments in lieu of, or in conjunction with, traditional standardized tests.

Research on test-based accountability has revealed ways in which teachers and schools adapt the curriculum to better prepare students for high-stakes exams. Studies showed that teaching to the test, or allowing high-stakes exams to drive instruction, results in the teaching of formulaic approaches to test taking and the rote memorization of facts and dates (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014). Studies also suggested that performance-based assessments, like portfolios, may help to reduce the negative impact high-stakes assessments have on ELs by allowing alternative methods for students to demonstrate content knowledge (Holme et al., 2010; Ou, 2010; Papay et al., 2010; Reardon & Kurlaender, 2009; Stecher, 2010). However, few studies of school accountability examine the impact of the use of both high-stakes exams and performance tasks in schools. Fewer still look at the use of multiple assessment types in terms of educational equity for either ELs or immigrant students. This article examines one school's responsive assessment practices.

Immigrant Students at International High School

International High School (IHS) admits 9th- and 10th-grade students who have recently arrived in the United States and speak little to no English. Students remain enrolled at the school until 12th grade, or until they have met all graduation requirements. Nine out of 10 live in high-poverty neighborhoods and qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. One in 3 has experienced interruptions in their formal education. Other obstacles include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), long separations from immediate family, interruptions in their formal education, and undocumented status (Suro, Súarez-Orozco, & Canizales, 2015).

IHS is part of a network of 27 schools in the United States that have garnered the attention of scholars, nonprofits, and philanthropists for their consistent and continued reporting of student achievement indicators far above the status quo. Schools outside of the Internationals network that have attempted to implement similar programs have not generated consistently equivalent outcomes (Short & Boyson, 2012). The dramatic contrast in EL graduation rate between national high schools and high school within the Internationals network makes them exceptional cases, or sites of possibility, to build theory about school accountability, assessment, and equity for immigrant students (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Weis & Fine, 2004).

Instructional Choices and Assessments: "You Can't Fake a PBAT"

At IHS, preparing for PBATs is a rigorous and highly individualized process for both the mentor

teacher and the student mentee. The logic behind this rigor is to help guide IHS students in their written language development and oral presentation skills. Each adult in the school mentors 3 to 6 students weekly. The relationship between mentor and mentee can last from 1 to 3 years, depending on when the student begins working on PBATs and when he or she graduates. The mentorship begins when a content teacher identifies a student's high-quality class project that can be refined and made *graduation worthy*. Then, the mentor and mentee work through up to six additional drafts of the article to ensure it meets the rubric outcomes. Teachers norm and standardize the rubrics at the school level and then send a representative teacher to work with teachers from 15 other schools in the Internationals network to continue the process. To graduate, students must write essays of 6 to 15 pages in four content areas and orally defend each of them. They must also write personal statements of 1 to 3 pages, complete a semester-long internship, and create a native language project.

In contrast to the time and effort spent at IHS to prepare students for the PBAT, teachers spend much less time preparing students for an English language arts (ELA) exit exam. The exam includes a multiple-choice section based on readings and two essays: one that asks students to make an argument on an issue and one that asks them to identify and explain literary elements from readings. At IHS, the perception is that the PBAT preparation process more than prepares students for the exit exam.

Students often fail the test several times, but this does not concern teachers and administrators. One teacher explained that the it is not test preparation that is credited for higher pass rates later in the year, but that students are "better prepared for the test after 6 more months of full immersion, PBAT preparation, and what we do in class." Teachers are not fearful that low test scores will reflect negatively on their teaching, unlike in other schools. Instead, they believe that the slow and steady approach of project-based learning and PBAT preparation will ultimately result in the passing of the test without slowing down students' content learning.

The teachers at IHS embrace spending more time on the PBAT and limit time dedicated to testing preparation. The PBAT is perceived as a more rigorous assessment of student skills and knowledge. One teacher explained it in this way:

> You can't fake a PBAT. … With [standardized tests] you can get lucky, … guess on a few questions, … and squeak by. I have trained kids to take the state history test who speak no English. You can't give a kid a script for a PBAT.

Students echo this sentiment and report that PBATs allow them to study a topic deeply. As a result, they become more confident in writing, speaking publically, and defending arguments in English. One student explained:

> The PBAT is better. In the PBAT you have to present what you learned in school, in class. With the exit exam, they are going to ask you a question about something you never learned about. With the PBAT you got a chance.

A well-designed PBAT project set clear expectations for students. IHS has developed rubrics for each project to standardize expectations for both students and teachers. Guided by these rubrics, teachers at IHS work with discipline teams to develop projects before sharing them with other teachers in the school or the students. This allows teachers to incorporate peer feedback before beginning a project with students.

Students depict the exit exam as a guessing game and the PBAT as a rigorous but fair process. One fifth-year senior, who did not graduate on time due to incomplete PBATs, still describes the PBATs as "easy, because we do them in class," compared to the exit exam, which is

> a bunch of stuff we have never seen before. On the test, you have to sometimes guess. The teachers do test prep and stuff, … but that does not guarantee that if you go to that class you are going to pass.

When I asked if showing up for a PBAT guarantees a passing score, she explained that it did not.

> Last time I presented, I didn't pass the math PBAT because I did it all on the computer. They asked

> me, "Now do it on your own, without the computer." I got to the graphing part and got lost. So, I failed the presentation part. I had to present again to show that I knew how to do the calculations.

The oral presentation of a PBAT can result in a passing grade or a delineation of *needs revision* on either the written or oral component of the assessment. When this occurs, the student and mentor go back to work to incorporate feedback from a panel of three teachers. This cycle of revision and feedback helps students develop both their content knowledge and written and oral language skills. Needing to make revisions on a PBAT does not feel punitive or confusing to students, like a failing grade on the exit exam might. Instead, it is an indicator of their mastery of a topic at a particular moment in time.

Teaching Content and Language Simultaneously: "Trying to Find that Balance in My Teaching"

Given the PBAT assessment's content and language requirements, every teacher at IHS is both a language and content teacher. The approaches teachers take to teaching English include scaffolding strategies such as delivering short, simple instructions multiple times and projecting instructions on the classroom wall. Students with more advanced English skills are asked to translate instructions for other students. In the 9th- and 10th-grade, the process is like "watching paint dry," remarked one teacher, "but it works." The teacher went on to say that:

> I used to be like, how are they ever going to learn this stuff if we don't teach them English first. In my first few years, I really pushed to teach them more grammar, but after 6 years of watching the process, I am a believer. They actually do learn the content and the language at the same time. It seems slower, but it is actually faster in the end.

One teacher explained that it could take several years to develop projects that accomplish both content and language goals well. New teachers, many who reported feeling overwhelmed when first asked to teach content and language simultaneously, are often assigned mentor teachers who provide curriculum and project plans so they can "focus on being good teachers." When prompted to describe the process of adapting instruction to meet the PBAT requirements, one teacher stated:

> I have definitely cut back on content. I think my struggle as a history teacher is that they are going to college; they are not native to this country, and I worry that they are at a disadvantage not knowing what the Great Depression was about. But now with the PBAT are they going in more prepared? Knowing what a thesis is? What arguments are? How to cite their sources? How to write an MLA page? Yes. And do they need to know that in college? Definitely. I am just trying to find that balance in my teaching.

The process of preparing students for a PBAT, particularly among teachers who were accustomed to test-based accountability, was difficult, but ultimately rewarding.

Content and language learning continues with the mentor teacher. It is during this 1-on-1 time that the mentor can address the student's specific needs. When the student is ready to orally defend their PBAT, their mentor teacher sits on the panel. Mentor teachers are able to offer context to other teachers and outside observers on the panel who may or may not know that student well. They are able to offer insight into a student's work ethic, and their strengths and weaknesses, further individualizing the process. At the end of each panel, students are asked to fill out a written reflection and orally reflect on the process at the end of the panel. Students often report feeling nervous at the beginning, but more confident when they realize how well they know the content they are presenting. When students are not well prepared and are asked to revise their PBATs, they can identify where they need improvement.

Responsive Assessment for Immigrant Students

This article demonstrates how one school's instruction and assessment practices can encompass the particular learning needs of immigrant and ELs.

We find that teachers have embraced the use of the PBAT as an appropriate and responsive form of assessment for their immigrant students. They have adapted their instructional choices to better prepare students to produce PBATs. Teachers across content areas are using project-based learning techniques to simultaneously teach both content and English, and they agree that students develop better language skills while preparing for PBAT requirements than for the state ELA exit exam. They also believe that students are better prepared for post-secondary opportunities.

That teachers modify instruction based on the assessment is consistent with prior literature. What is new is that teachers and administrators are not resistant to these changes. As an assistant principal at IHS explained, "It is no secret that assessment drives instruction." However, he goes on to say, "I just happen to like this assessment, so I don't have a problem with that." Findings from this study show that systems of accountability that include more than just standardized tests can be rigorous in terms of content mastery and also address the special language needs of immigrant students. As the ESSA, the newest federal education accountability policy, allows stakeholders to consider multiple forms of assessment, schools should consider shifting away from complete reliance on standardized tests as their form of assessment. Instead, they should incorporate rigorous performance-based assessments, particularly given the increasingly diverse student populations and their learning needs.

References

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2015). *Every student succeeds ACT primer: Accountability*. Retrieved from http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/every-student-succeeds-act-primer-accountability/

Amrein, A. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2002). High-Stakes testing & student learning. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *10*(18), 1–74. Retrieved from http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/viewFile/297/423

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1978). *Organizational learning, A theory of action perspective*. Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Artiles, A. J., Rueda, R., Salazar, J. J., & Higareda, I. (2005). Within-group diversity in minority disproportionate representation: English language learners in urban school districts. *Exceptional Children*, *71*, 283–300. doi:10.1177/001440290507100305

Carnoy, M., Elmore, R., & Siskin, L. (Eds.). (2003). *The new accountability: High schools and high-stakes testing*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Carter, P. L. (2005). *Keepin' it real: School success beyond Black and White*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Collier, V. P. (1987). Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes. *TESOL Quarterly*, *21* (4), 617–641. doi:10.2307/3586986

Cummins, J. (1981). Age on arrival and immigrant second language learning in Canada: A reassessment. *Applied Linguistics*, *II*, 132–149. doi:10.1093/applin/II.2.132

Dabach, D. B. (2014). "I am not a shelter!": Stigma and social boundaries in teachers' accounts of students' experience in separate "sheltered" English learner classrooms. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, *19*, 98–124. doi:10.1080/10824669.2014.954044

Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (2014). *Beyond the bubble test: How performance assessments support 21st century learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Darling-Hammond, L., Ancess, J., & Falk, B. (1995). *Authentic assessment in action: Studies of schools and students at work*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

de Jong, E. J. (2013). Policy discourses and US language in education policies. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *88*, 98–111. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2013.752310

Evans, B. A., & Hornberger, N. H. (2005). No child left behind: Repealing and unpeeling federal language education policy in the United States. *Language Policy*, *4*, 87–106. doi:10.1007/s10993-004-6566-2

Fine, M., Jaffe-Walter, R., Pedraza, P., Futch, V., & Stoudt, B. (2007). Swimming: On oxygen, resistance, and possibility for immigrant youth under siege. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *38*, 76–96. doi:10.1525/aeq.2007.38.1.76

Gándara, P., & Hopkins, M. (Eds.). (2010). *Forbidden language: English learners and restrictive language policies*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gijbels, D., Dochy, F., Van den Bossche, P., & Segers, M. (2005). Effects of problem-based learning: A meta-analysis from the angle of assessment. *Review of Educational Research*, *75*, 27–61. doi:10.3102/00346543075001027

Hodges, E. V., Boivin, M., Vitaro, F., & Bukowski, W. M. (1999). The power of friendship: Protection

against an escalating cycle of peer victimization. *Developmental Psychology*, *35*, 94–101. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.35.1.94

Holme, J. J., Richards, M. P., Jimerson, J. B., & Cohen, R. W. (2010). Assessing the effects of high school exit examinations. *Review of Educational Research*, *80*, 476–526. doi:10.3102/0034654310383147

Jaffe-Walter, R. (2008). Negotiating mandates and memory: Inside a small schools network for immigrant youth. *Teachers College Record*, *110*(9), 2040–2066.

Jaffe-Walter, R. (2016). *Coercive concern: Nationalism, liberalism, and the schooling of Muslim youth*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Jaffe-Walter, R., & Lee, S. J. (2011). "To trust in my root and to take that to go forward": Supporting college access for immigrant youth in the global city. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, *42*(3), 281–296.

Kroger, J. (2006). *Identity development: Adolescence through adulthood* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Larson, C. L., & Ovando, C. J. (2001). *The color of bureaucracy: The politics of equity in multicultural school communities*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Lee, S. J. (2005). *Up against Whiteness: Race, school, and immigrant youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Lukes, M. (2015). *Latino immigrant youth and interrupted schooling: Dropouts, dreamers and alternative pathways to college*. Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters.

Meier, D. (2004). *Many children left behind: How the no child left behind act is damaging our children and our schools*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Menken, K. (2008). *English learners left behind: Standardized testing as language policy*. Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters.

Mueller, B. (2016, March 1). Westbury schools agree to alter enrollment policies for immigrants. *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/nyregion/westbury-schools-agree-to-alter-enrollment-policies-for-immigrants.html

Noguera, P. (2003). *City schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the promise of American education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

O'Neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. New York, NY: Crown.

Olsen, L. (1997). *Made in America: Immigrant students in our public schools*. New York, NY: New Press.

Ou, D. (2010). To leave or not to leave? A regression discontinuity analysis of the impact of failing the high school exit exam. *Economics of Education Review*, *29* (2), 171–186.

Papay, J. P., Murnane, R. J., & Willett, J. B. (2010). The consequences of high school exit examinations for low-performing urban students: Evidence from Massachusetts. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *32*, 5–23. doi:10.3102/0162373709352530

Ramsey, C. A., & Wright, E. N. (1973). Age and second language learning. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *9*(1), 115–121.

Reardon, S. F., & Kurlaender, M. (2009). *Effects of the California high school exit exam on student persistence, achievement, and graduation*. Policy Analysis for California Education, PACE. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED510168

Short, D., & Boyson, B. (2012). *Helping newcomer students succeed in secondary schools and beyond. Report for the carnegie corporation*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved from http://www.cal.org/resource-center/publications/helping-newcomer-students

Sirin, S. R., & Fine, M. (2008). *Muslim American youth: Understanding hyphenated identities through multiple methods*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Solorzano, R. W. (2008). High stakes testing: Issues, implications, and remedies for English language learners. *Review of Educational Research*, *78*, 260–329. doi:10.3102/0034654308317845

Stecher, B. (2010). *Performance assessment in an era of standards-based educational accountability*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco, M. M. (2002). *Children of immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Suro, R., Suárez-Orozco, M. M., & Canizales, S. L. (2015). Removing insecurity: How American children will benefit from President Obama's executive action on immigration (A Report by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute at USC and the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education at UCLA). Los Angeles, CA: The Institute for Immigration, Globalization & Education.

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: US - Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Weis, L., & Fine, M. (2004). *Working method: Research and social justice*. New York: NY: Routledge.

Yoshikawa, H. (2011). *Immigrants raising citizens: Undocumented parents and their children*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Additional Resources

1. **Barlowe, A. & Cook, A. (2016) Putting the focus on student engagement.** ***American Educator*****, 4-12. Retrieved from https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2016/barlowe-and-cook**
   This article examines how parents in some schools are opting out of standardized tests and calling for more responsive assessments for their children. The authors provide evidence of how one network of schools has been developing performance assessments in response to this perceived need and provides examples of the types of rubrics used to grade performance assessments.
2. **Hauser, B. (2011).** ***The new kids: Big dreams and brave journeys at a high school for immigrant teens*****. New York, NY: Atria Books.**
   This book provides a rich description of a school very similar to the one described in this article. It provides insight into the lives of immigrant teenagers and the responsive nature of the school. This narrative demonstrates how a school can be responsive to both students' social emotional and academic needs. When these responsive components are in place, responsive assessment is a natural next step.
3. **Snow, C. (2004). The four spokes of the second language learning wheel. In O. Santa Anna (Ed.),** ***Tongue-tied: The lives of multilingual children in public education*** **(pp. 214-220). Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.**
   This chapter, written for educators, provides evidence and rational for using multiple indicators of both language and content learning for students who are learning English. Snow answers common questions that single language speakers often ask about students learning a new language. She provides insight into what is required for assessment to be responsive for immigrant and English learning students.