What About Elementary Level Teachers: A Closer Look At The Intersection Between Standardization And Multilingualism

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Abstract

The specialized literature in the field of education has not focused in what ways the multilingual classroom setting exacerbates teachers' tension concerning the need to comply with standards, on the one hand, and the aspiration to embrace diversity, on the other hand. That is to say, there is a need to understand how teachers adapt to confront the tension between standardization and multilingualism.

Understanding teachers' experiences will be important to inform policy with regards to the implementation of standardized testing in multilingual settings and how these affect the cultural rights of minority students. The way teachers surf or navigate the tension will inform to what extent cultural rights of ethnic minority students are jeopardized due to the increasing interest in standardization.

Therefore, the purpose of this grounded study is to explore the adaptive process of elementary teachers in multilingual classrooms as they confront the tension between meeting the educational needs of multilingual students, while complying with the mandated standardization requirements in Miami public schools. The study adds to the vast literature on standardized testing by providing information about teachers' experiences in highly multilingual settings, such in the public schools in Miami Dade County.

Key Words

Standardized testing, multilingualism, multiculturalism, teachers, grounded theory

Introduction

Standardized tests affect teachers' teaching strategies and educational experiences in different ways. Teachers are pressured to meet state mandated standards, while also serving increasingly diverse and multilingual student populations (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Teachers may have entered the profession somehow motivated by the idea of helping a heterogeneity of students (Bernaus et al., 2008), but they also have to test and drill students with one-size-fits all instruments in order to achieve homogeneity. As a result, teachers confront a tension between their career aspirations related to embracing multiculturalism, and the need to meet mandated standards that do not account for the needs of multicultural and multilingual students (Chick, 2002).

Teachers are one of the most important factors in students' achievement (Rice, 2003; Rockoff, 2004). There is sufficient evidence to sustain

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that "policy investments in the quality of teachers may be related to improvements in student performance" (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 1). However, the specialized literature in the field of education has not emphasized in what ways the multilingual classroom setting may exacerbate teachers' tension concerning the need to comply with standards, on the one hand, and their aspiration to embrace diversity, on the other hand. There is a need to understand what the adaptive process teachers experience to confront the tension between standardization and multilingualism looks like.

Understanding teachers' experiences is important to inform policy with regards to the implementation of standardized testing in multilingual settings because teachers are key implementers of education reform, though education specialists many times overlook them (Lanier, 1984). In addition, understanding teachers' experiences may help us to understand how to reduce teacher stress and burnout, and it may also suggest best practices concerning teaching multilingual students. In addition, the study adds to the vast literature on standardized testing by providing information about teachers' experiences in highly multilingual settings, such in the public schools in Miami Dade County.

Therefore, the research question of this grounded theory study is, "What is the adaptive process of third grade elementary teachers in Miami Dade Public Schools, whose multilingual students have to sit for the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA)?" Specifically, this study will explore the curricular modifications, differentiated instruction and utilization of alternative resources by teachers in Miami Dade highly multilingual third grade classrooms. The perception of teachers about standardized testing will be also an important element of this study and will be an important descriptive element of teachers' experiences and strategies.

Conceptual Framework
Standardization and the Exacerbation of Stratified Knowledge

More than thirty-five years ago, Anyon (1981) referred to a different form of structural inequality promoted by educational systems. The author argued that school systems stratified knowledge, which exacerbated and perpetuated structural inequalities. Anyon found that despite similar curricula, schools serving students from lower socio-economic backgrounds demanded less from students. The dominant narrative, according to Anyon, that suggested that poor children were not capable of learning as much as more affluent students, represented another way of social stratification and a manifestation of structural inequalities.

In addition, Kozol (2005) also claimed that inner-city schools in the United States often focused only on managerial skills, leaving professional skills for 'richer' students. Anyon (1981) also referred to how schools replicate existing social inequalities by teaching working class students those skills that are appreciated in the types of jobs they could – allegedly – aspire to. Unfortunately, both Kozol and Anyon (1981) showed very clearly how social class determined what students could and could not learn; there seemed to be clear hidden structural forces that perpetuated and reproduced social inequalities in a subtle, yet scary fashion.

Standardized tests exacerbate the stratification of knowledge. For example, Au (2009) argued that "that social studies teachers are feeling the pressures of high-stakes testing, and that these pressures are causing social studies teachers to alter their classroom practices and curriculum" (p. 43), reaffirms that it is usually children belonging to poorer backgrounds who see a more profound shrinking

of their curricula. Thus, standardization promotes the stratification of knowledge Anyon referred to by, de facto, determining what some students will learn and what others won't, given that teachers and children need to focus much more on the basic skills included in the tests.

Regrettably, as Ogbu (1992) suggested, rather than embracing the differences, which arise from the interactions between the majority and minority groups, standardized tests drive for homogenization lead to the imposition of dominant cultures, over those of minority students. Standardized tests, as I will explain in different sections of this paper, seem to have an even worse impact on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, even when – perhaps – well intentioned, the push towards standardization and homogeneity appears to negatively impact those, whom it is intended to protect.

Impact of Standardized Tests on Language Minority Students

Language diversity is an important issue in current educational discussions concerning minority students. Some scholars defend the idea that homogenization of languages promotes a stronger sense of community (Hirsch, 1987); this, they claim, has strong reconciliatory and restorative functions in educational systems that host different cultural, social and economic groups. In addition, Hirsch stated that there are benefits to the standardization of a national language: essentially, this is a sine qua non requisite to become a modern and industrial state. Schlesinger (1991) also warned against the growth of bilingualism, claiming that "bilingualism shuts doors. It nourishes self-ghettoization, and ghettoization nourishes racial antagonism" (p. 108).

"Language is often an essential element in ethnic and cultural identity, so it has

particular symbolic importance in terms of group identity" (EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011, 2011, p. 169). Bederman, in his book on the impact of globalization in international law, argued that "Nothing defines culture as much as language. Along with ethnicity and religion, language can ultimately delineate and specify a culture. (…) Cultures and language are so closely intertwined that there is a strong sense that language must be protected, in order to preserve distinctive cultures" (p. 123). UNESCO also considered the importance of language and culture as instruments to achieve social cohesion and inter-cultural understanding. For example, in the 2011 EFA Global Monitoring Report it was claimed that "schools that are unresponsive to the social, cultural and linguistic concerns of indigenous people or ethnic minorities are likely to be seen not as centres of expanded opportunity, but as vehicles for domination" (EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011, 2011, p. 160).

Hence, if standardization promotes instruction in English, rather than fostering the acquisition of knowledge in the native language of minority students, is not it at the service of cultural domination? Does standardization exacerbate the achievement gap? which according to Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to the discrepancies in standardized test scores as a dichotomy between white and black students, white and Latino/a students, white and native American students, and white and recent immigrant students, and others?

Literature Review

Standardized testing has been vastly studied within the specialized literature in the field of education policy. In order to explain why my

current study is meaningful, I will describe a brief overview of the literature. This will allow me to show an important gap in the literature that needs to be filled. The literature review will cover three main dimensions. First, I will refer to the impact that standardized testing has on teachers' choices regarding time allotment to areas covered - and those not covered – by the test. Second, I will refer to the issue of teaching to the test; that is to say, teachers' strategies to adapt their teaching style to the type of questions included in the test. Third, I will refer to studies that have looked at the impact of standardized testing on teachers' stress level. Last, I will explain in what ways my study adds to the existing knowledge in the field.

Impact on Classroom Practices

More than fifty years ago Furst (1963) anticipated that standardized tests implied a risk in the assignment of time to fulfill the schools' different objectives. This author showed how standardized achievement tests exerted too much control over curriculum, teaching, and learning. Moreover, he even mentioned that teachers would end up "teaching for the test." Unfortunately, as Furst envisioned, different strategies to improve tests scores have been used for decades now.

In this sense, Barickman showed forty years ago that many New York teachers emphasized vocabulary in tenth and eleventh grades because it was commonly held that it was significantly easier to improve Regents' test scores on vocabulary, but not on composition (Barickman, 1978). In addition, and most recently, Koretz (2002) described a work of Stecher and Baron in which they demonstrated that the assignment of hours to the different subjects was determined, at least partly, by the standardized evaluations. In the case of Kentucky, for example, Stecher and Baron

showed that fourth grade teachers were dedicating 5.2 hours per week to science, a subject that was evaluated in that year group by a standardized state test, whereas the fifth-grade teachers were teaching science only 3.5 hours per week because that subject was not tested in fifth grade. Inversely, the teachers of fifth grade were assigning 6.4 hours to the teaching of the mathematics, since that subject that was tested that year, compared to 4.9 hours that the teachers of fourth grade were dedicating to the teaching of mathematics, which was not tested that year (Koretz, 2000). Over the past years, many other studies have also shown how teachers feel pressured to spend more time in those areas included in standardized tests (Koretz et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014; Elacqua et al., 2016; Jennings & Bearak, 2014; Darling-Hammond et al., 2015)

There are no studies, though, that explore the impact that the FSA has had on Miami public school teachers. The population in the city of Miami is extremely heterogeneous; hence, this study would help understand whether teachers, when confronted with a highly multilingual and multicultural class setting, modify their practices and time allotment to test requirements.

Teaching to The Test

Over the last years, several authors have explored in what ways teachers purposefully tried to prepare their students to test specifics (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Blazar & Kraft, 2017; Welsh et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2014). For example, Hoffman et. al (2001) analyzed teachers' efforts to teach test-taking strategies. In their study, the researchers reported that teachers in Texas public schools spent the last weeks prior to the tests in teaching specific strategies that their students needed. For example, teachers focused on explaining to their students how to mark correct answers in

multiple-choice questions; in addition, they would also drill with tests from previous years, so that students would apply what they know to the format of the test's questions. In a similar way, Jones et al. showed that teachers in North Carolina also reported similar behaviors (Jones et al., 1999).

While both studies showed interesting results, they failed to fully account for what motivated teachers to focus on particular specifics. That is to say, as the studies were based on surveys, rather than in-depth interviews as it is in my case, the richness of teachers' rationale is limited.

Teacher Stress

There is some research that suggests that the disconnection between the homogeneity imposed from the policy-makers and the diverse cultural reality in classroom setting is stressful for teachers, and it contributes to teacher burnout (Berryhill, 2009). Teacher burnout is a serious issue in two ways: First, it is important because teachers matter as ends on themselves. Second, it is also important because a ripple effect of teacher stress is that it negatively impacts students' performance; a burned-out teacher can rarely satisfy the learning needs of the students (Miller, 1995).

Within the specialized literature there are several survey-studies that have explored the impact that standardized tests have had on teachers' stress levels (Nathaniel et al., 2016; von der Embse et al., 2017; Skaalvik et al., 2016; Saeki et al., 2015). For example, Jones et al., (1999) showed that around 77% of the teachers surveyed, expressed a higher level of stress due to the fact that their students were sitting for standardized tests.

Similarly, Koretz et al. (1996) also explored the phenomenon of teachers stress in Kentucky and Maryland. In both cases, teachers explained that the standardized test impacted their overall stress level, mainly because they felt that the outcome of their students, somehow determined the perception that school principals would have about them. Lastly, Abrams et al. (2003) also tried to understand the impact that standardized tests had on teachers' stress levels. The researchers found that, "In comparison to teachers in low-stakes testing programs, a greater proportion of teachers in high-stakes environments reported feeling pressure from district superintendents, principals, and, to a lesser extent, parents to improve student performance on the state test" (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003, p. 25). According to the research team in this study, teachers perceived standardized tests in Florida as high-stakes.

Therefore, my study will shed some light over the impact that high stakes standardized tests had on Miami's public-school elementary teachers. It would be interesting to understand whether the multilingual aspect of the student population exacerbated – that is to say, if it acted as a moderator – of the level of teachers' stress. After all, it is not farfetched to hypothesize that multilingualism could represent an additional challenge for teachers' efforts to prepare all students for the same test in English.

In conclusion, even though standardized testing has been vastly studied, my current research would add to the existing knowledge. The idea of carrying out a grounded theory approach is somehow innovative for this particular issue, as most of the existing literature was based on survey studies. In-depth interviews provide richer data than what could be achieved by quantitative studies. In my opinion, the impact of standardized testing on teachers' strategies is too complex to be captured, in all of its dimensions, by a survey-based study. In addition, the population of the current proposal

is also meaningful on its own. The variegated characteristics of Miami public schools pose additional challenges to teachers. That is to say, unlike what happens in states like Kentucky or North Carolina, the high levels of multilingualism within Miami classrooms could require additional adaptive efforts from the teachers.

Methodology

Grounded theory focuses on generating – or discovering - theoretical ideas of hypothesis from the data – rather than having these specified beforehand -. According to Strauss & Corbin, "a grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of phenomena it represents" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 23). In this study I was interested in exploring teachers' experiences and strategies. In addition, I aimed at developing my own theory concerning how teachers surfed the tension between standardization and multilingualism. Consequently, I believed that in order to discover my own theory, the grounded theory approach would be the most helpful qualitative design.

I analyzed the data from the in-depth interviews, at the same time I included more participants into the study. From the start-point I knew that the number of participants depended on the information I gathered from the initial interviews. The idea was to collect data and then analyze it before finishing the data collection. Rather than including many participants, I chose to focus on four, but interview them several times. This allowed me to create feedback mechanisms to make sure that my interpretations were accurate; in addition, it also allowed me to explore new facets of the problem, which I had not think of the first time I interviewed each participant.

Sampling

Miami Dade County provided me a unique opportunity because the student population in many of its schools represents a very high level of demographic diversity. According to the County's website, Miami-Dade County Public Schools is the fourth largest school district in the United States, comprised of 392 schools, 345,000 students.

In order to begin my sampling, I identified participants through key informants. Key informants are individuals who have knowledge or have experienced the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, for this study I approached people I knew from my doctoral program, who then referred me to the participants I included in this study.

The size of the sample varies in grounded theory; but this number is usually determined by the principle of theoretical saturation. As mentioned above, rather than including a high number of participants, I chose to focus on four different teachers, who I interviewed at least three times each. In order to triangulate the information, I gathered from the interviews, I also carried out class observations and reviewed official documents from Miami Dade County, concerning the FSA.

Interviews

In this study, I interviewed four teachers, in depth, at least three times. The interviews' length ranged from 42 to 81 minutes. All of the interviews were carried out in the month of February of 2017. This was something I strategically thought of, because I wanted to make sure that the time-distance between the interview and FSA test which is administered in , did not affect my findings. All of my participants were female, and their teaching experience ranged from 10 to 21 years of experience; they all worked at Miami Dade

public schools and served multilingual students. I named the three participants with pseudonyms: Miss Hamilton, Miss Jefferson, Miss Madison and Miss Washington. I chose founding fathers last names because I learned to admire how well they surfed the tension between their diverse student population with the push for heterogeneity from Miami Dade County.

Data Analysis Strategy

Grounded theory is, perhaps, the most popular technique in qualitative analysis. Even though many authors agree on the core elements of grounded theory, there is some disagreement as to the particularities of the methodology, as explained above. For example, while Glaser and Strauss (2009) focused on the idea that theory emerges by constant comparison, Charmaz adopted a much more constructivist approach, arguing that the categories and the theory are really researchers' constructions. I somehow agree with Charmaz criticism to the realist approach used by Glaser, Strauss and Corbin; after all, during this process I felt that what mattered was what I, as the researcher, constructed.

Hence, during my data analysis I followed Charmaz' emphasis on the interpretation of the researcher; I agree with her that how the researcher constructs, interprets and reflexes is key to the grounded theory approach. On the other hand, my coding strategy followed a different route: I was more faithful to Corbin and Strauss' a much more prescriptive approach to grounded theory, in which they give very detailed steps that should be followed.

I used the codes to categorize the data; within each code there were different dimensions or subcategories. I understood coding as the process of organizing data into categories that were alike. Therefore, codes were developed into a code structure.

My coding structure was dynamic. There was a progressive move from very descriptive

coding to more theoretical type of analysis and coding of the data. As Charmaz (2014) explained, "the systematic application of grounded theory's analytic methods will progressively lead to more abstract analytic levels" (p. 125). The codes created helped me categorize the data that was collected on the ground.

It is important to highlight that there is a sequential series or stages in the coding processes of grounded theory stages. Strauss and Corbin (2008) identify three different stages – Charmaz, on the other hand only refers to two -. For this project, I decided to use the typology of Strauss & Corbin (2008). According to these authors the three stages are open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

Sometimes, researchers can create a coding paradigm (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which helps to visually display the interrelationships of the axial coding. All of this is aimed at building, generating or discovering the theory. Following the model used by Morrow and Smith (1995) in their grounded theory study, during the axial coding phase of the project I came up with this model to try to find connections between the different properties of the codes. Each of the boxes in Figure 1 contains some of the families of codes. Nonetheless, following Harry et al. (2005), I would also like to sustain that "any visual representation of a complicated cognitive process is a vast simplification of the way that researchers actually arrive at interpretations" (p. 4).

In addition, in the case of my study I tried to visually represent the relationship between the four core categories (or concepts) I ended up having. In each of the colored boxes I have the list of the families I included for that particular category. Even though I will describe this relationship in the following section, I include the diagram here, as Figure 2.
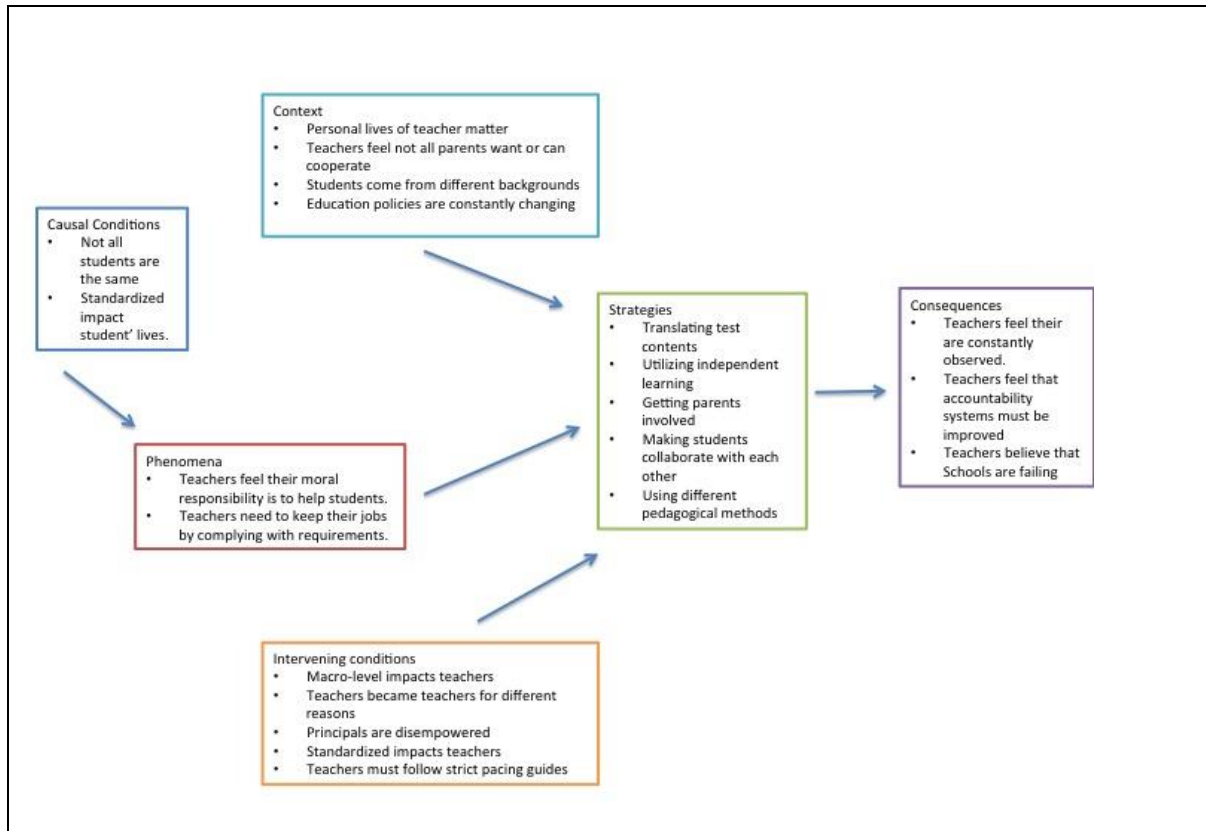
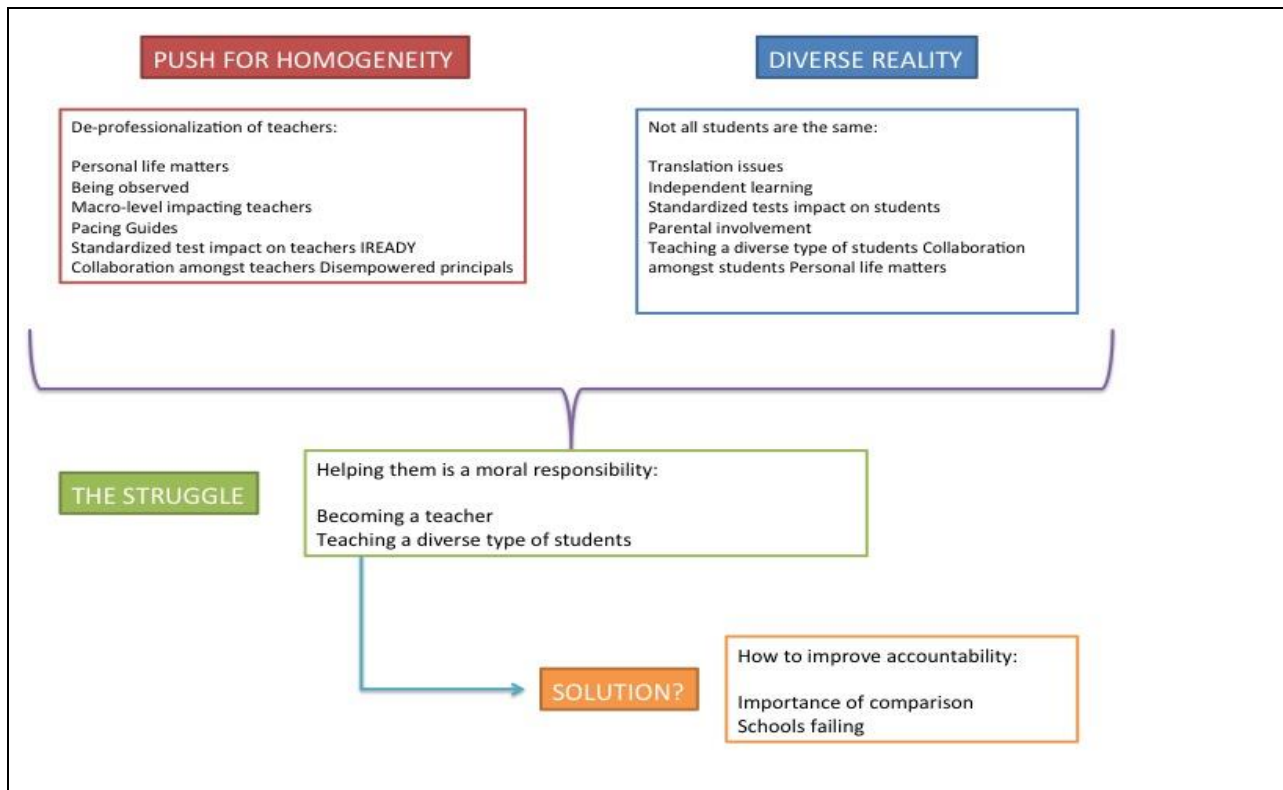*Figure 1.* Connecting code categories in a coding paradigm

Figure 2. Connecting the four main categories

Findings

Some of the most common words that I could use to describe the findings are: struggle, discontent, need for change, tension. Unfortunately, the findings confirm some of the pseudo-hypothesis I had in my head. In order to organize the findings, I will subdivide this section into four main parts.

In the first part I will refer to what I have called "Push for Homogeneity"; secondly, I will refer to the idea of a "Diverse Reality". The third part of my analysis will have to do with the idea of "Unwrapping the Struggle". Lastly, and in order to provide something more than a pessimistic diagnostic, I will finalize this section with the subdivision "Finding a solution".

Push for Homogeneity

Over the past years, there has been an increase in the intervention of the District and even the State in everyday life school issues. The teachers I interviewed agreed that the numbers of visits from District representatives have increased over the past years. For example, Miss Madison explained that sometimes she would receive surprise visits of "district people, state people, the principal, the AP and the math coach; all at the same time!". Miss Jefferson explained that the visits were even more often in lower-performing schools. Quite frustrated she explained that in the low performing school where she worked "you have a lot of accountability and so there were people in the building at least once, if not three times a week…". Lastly, Miss Washington added that "since NCLB everything changed, we no longer know who our direct boss is. Is it the school Principal or do we report directly to the District?"

The teachers found many issues with regards to these constant visits. There were some practical problems; for example, teachers felt that when the visits came, their lessons were usually interrupted. Many times, district representatives would ask them for the lesson plans or other materials, such as the calendar they were asked to use; therefore, teachers had to stop what they were doing, in order to hand to the visitors, the papers they needed. For example, Miss Washington noted that before she knew how to organize herself because she knew how she liked things to be; but, now, she complained, she had to think how district representatives liked things to be organized. Nonetheless, there were also deeper and denser repercussions of the issue of 'being observed'.

In one of the interviews, Miss Madison commented that teachers would do anything just to put on a show for the visitors. That is to say, rather than using their own professional judgment they made sure they did what the visitors would have wanted them to do. This is clearly linked to Foucault's idea of the prisoners fearing the constant look from the guards in the Panopticon.

Miss Hamilton explained that sometimes her students could not understand the contents that she was supposed to teach during that week. Obviously, that put her in a conundrum; one hand her judgment indicated her that she should spend an additional week teaching those contents. Nonetheless, on the other hand, she was concerned that if visitors came, they would ask her why she was behind on the pacing guides. This illustrates the linkage between standardization and teacher stress that other existing studies, for example Jones et. al (1999), had referred to.

The pacing guides were one of the things that received the greatest attention in all of my interviews. I was able to review some of the guides. There were two things that struck me. The first one is the degree of precision as to what had to be taught on each specific day in all schools in the District. The pacing guides have contributed to a sort of regime in which teachers because disempowered relative to those at the District level; teachers' work became more automatized, as they became obedient followers

of District – or sometimes even State – mandates.

Even when all teachers knew they were not obliged to follow the guides on a week-by-week basis, they all felt compelled to follow them. As Miss Jefferson explained, "I know… well the district says it is recommended, but if you go in and you are not in the pacing guides, then 'Why are you not in the pacing guide?' Technically I am not supposed to be, I can choose. But here everyone wants you to follow the pacing guide". In addition, Miss Washington added: "I remember an incident with another teacher, she came to crying to me. She thought the pacing guide was wrong, but nobody would hear… She felt powerless!"

On the other hand, the other thing that I was concerned with was the fact that the vast majority of the materials that were 'highly recommended' to the teachers were from McGraw-Hill Publishers. In this sense, though, Miss Hamilton explained that she felt she had some freedom not to use the materials that were recommended, all other teachers felt it was not worth fighting back against the "highly recommended" materials in the guides.

Another prominent feature of most of the interviews was the software i-READY. This is a program, which was built for the implementation of the Common Core. The software offers practice for students and it also generates reports for teachers, based on the students' performances. Amongst the teachers I interviewed there were mixed opinions. While Miss Madison expressed that she felt the software was very useful as it offered a lot of tools for her, such as lesson plan suggestions to help individual students, Miss Hamilton did not think it was very useful. In fact, she commented that "Some kids do not do well in this program because they don't like technology, but in the classroom, they do well". In this sense, Miss Washington added that she felt her students would just click, without really paying attention to what was in the screens.

Nonetheless, all the teachers did agree that there should not be so much pressure as to when and how use the software. That is to say, rather than being an imposition, all teachers felt that they should be able to decide, autonomously, how to use the software. Rather than seeing the software as an interesting tool, the participants agreed that most teachers in the county now see it as an additional imposition from above; another clear manifestation of the need to homogenize not only the performance of the students, but also the pedagogical approaches of the teachers.

Essentially, what was very clear from all the interviews is that teachers felt that more and more the macro-level was penetrating their every day practices. The participants agreed that one of the main problems with this involvement was that District representatives were not sensible to contextual factors that affected, for example, students' scores. For example, Miss Madison referred to the fact that in the thrust to compare teachers, there was no sense of empathy towards those teachers whose students belonged to very low socio-economic backgrounds, and therefore, did not have private tutoring as more affluent students had. Miss Madison considered that this was something that was not considered when teachers' scores were published on public websites. In addition, quite bluntly, Miss Madison added:

> "It seems that above nobody cares about the differences. It's a sad reality… they have the merit pay… the same teacher receives those… they are magnet schools and you are comparing them to schools that serve lowers SES students… You are comparing apples to oranges…"

Ultimately, teachers experienced standardization and the thrust for homogeneity as a way of de-professionalization. The need to raise scores somehow automated teachers' roles, forcing them to teach for the test, especially during crunched time. Just as Koretz (1996)

showed, Miss Madison expressed how frustrating being inside the classroom could be, especially when all the focus is placed on test scores.

Similarly, Miss Jefferson described she felt constrained; not being able to do teach students what she thought they needed. For example, she explained that rather than moving forward on reading skills, she felt that her students needed one whole year of intensive phonics; nonetheless, she could not do that, because of test requirements. Miss Jefferson also added she would like teaching to be fun as it used to be; according to her, the push towards homogeneity and standardization took away her enthusiasm with regards to the profession. On a similar note, Miss Hamilton also reflected on how standardized tests impacted her own well-being; in that sense she added that:

> "At first, I thought I did not care about the tests, but now I am sleeping less and less, you know? My students say that I am shouting more these last weeks than before. I guess it is because the test is coming and we all have to perform well".

Miss Washington also added: "I need to teach for the test! That is what my principal expects. If my students fail, I fail. If I fail my principal fails and if the principal fails, we end up working in a failing school!". Therefore, these findings allowed me to better understand other existing studies in the literature, such as the ones of Hoffman (2001) and Jones et al. (1999) cited in the literature review section, which described that teachers modified their behavior due to standardized tests.

Diverse Reality

The push towards homogenization confronts a completely different reality in the classroom of many public schools in the United States, which is characterized by diversity and heterogeneity. Most of the teachers explained different

strategies they developed in order to surf the tension between standardization and diversity.

All the participants in the study agreed that standardized tests have a lot of negative impacts on their students. Miss Madison, for example, explicitly described nasty situations she experienced in her class:

> "I had kids who had thrown up before the test... So there goes the test if vomit is all over it! The kids get so filled up that they get anxious... or you have the kids that don't care and act on purpose to get invalidated..."

Most of the students that struggle the most with standardized tests are those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds. There are contextual factors that make these students' educational experience rougher. Miss Jefferson explained how some of her students needed to go to school in order to have breakfast. In addition, Miss Madison also described how many times her students experience dangerous situations in their neighborhood, which do not allow them to concentrate properly.

Another student characteristic, which intensifies the impact of standardized tests on minority students, is the fact that English is not their first language. Miss Hamilton explained that some of her non-English speaking students had reading skills in their own native language; nonetheless, that was something the 'system' did not recognize. In this sense, she expressed that:

> "If I could use the Spanish book, some of them would be able to do well in a reading test. What are we really testing, you know? Many of my students have the reading skills, but they simply do not have them in English. Are we testing reading skills, or reading in English?"

Miss Madison noted that non-English speaking students are able to use an English-Spanish dictionary. Nonetheless, she questioned, what is the use of the dictionary if they cannot read in English? Translating most of

the words, she felt, would make it very hard for them to grasp the meaning of a passage. Therefore, all the participants of the study acknowledged that non-English speaking students were at a special disadvantage *vis-a-vis* English speaking one. Hence, going back to Ogbu (1992), most of my interviewees considered that the current approach to standardized tests, turned these into dangerous instruments that could attempt to suppress cultural diversity.

Another important contextual factor that talks about the diversity within the student population has to do with their parents' own educational backgrounds. Parental language skills have both direct and indirect impact on the language acquisition of non-English speaking students.

Sometimes, parents' usage of the language at home is very rudimentary, this, according to Miss Hamilton, affects the way in which offspring speak. For example, when referring to a third grader from Mexico, Miss Hamilton explained that:

> "So, for example, for this little girl from Mexico, she tested very low in ESOL. She has a speech impediment, but it is not really an impediment… it is how their parents speak. It has nothing to do with her education, it is a learnt behavior…"

Nonetheless, there are other indirect ways in which the parents' education experience affects the ones of their offspring. For example, Miss Madison explained that sometimes parents of some of her non-English speaking students have more than one job. Therefore, even when they would like to prioritize the education of their offspring, they simply cannot do it. In a similar manner, Miss Hamilton also described that many of her students have parents that want their offspring to move forward, but they do not know how to help the kids. In addition, she adds, unlike other

parents with higher incomes, they cannot afford hiring private tutors. Lastly, Miss Washington added that at the beginning of the school year she likes to offer help to her students' parents, so that they can get more involved in the schooling of their offspring; nonetheless, even though all parents appreciate the help, hardly any make use of it.

Therefore, it was very clear that the participants considered that standardized tests impact students' lives negatively, and that the impact was even greater for lower socio-economic and non-English speaking students. Miss Madison thus claimed that the push for heterogeneity seems to be blind to the high degree of diversity that exists in Miami Dade Public Schools. How can we aim at standardization when the playing field has not been leveled? This is a question I will try to address in the discussion section.

During my interviews, I was happy to learn that teachers did not stay just with the problem (i.e., the tension between standardization and diversity). I was happy to learn different approaches the participants implemented in order to find a way of minimizing the impact of standardized tests on lower SES and non-English speaking students.

All participants agreed about the importance of differentiated instruction. During my observation to Miss Hamilton's classroom I could see how she used differentiated instruction to give students specific skills they lacked for the FSA. During the differentiated instruction Miss Hamilton sat with one of the groups, while the other four groups of students learnt on their own. Sometimes, Miss Hamilton assigned one student as the 'teacher-student', other times she would ask them to share their work upon its completion. Miss Jefferson also pointed that she tried to use differentiated instruction as much as she

could. Nonetheless, she pointed out that it was hard to do it given that she was on her own inside the classroom.

Unfortunately, all teachers agreed that in the past they used to have more human resources, which facilitated differentiated instruction. For example, Miss Madison explained that in the school where she worked at, for more than ten years, there used to be three special education teachers in the school; therefore, sometimes she would ask one of them to help her during differentiated instruction. Nonetheless, she narrated, that over the years the school ended up having only one special education teacher. Therefore, she could no longer count with that help.

The Struggle

One of the strongest phrases I heard during the interviews came from Miss Hamilton. With teary eyes, she stated: "Helping them is a moral responsibility". What Miss Hamilton expressed with that phrase is the struggle many teachers, who teach multilingual students that have to sit for State mandated tests, face. Teachers, on one hand, want to embrace and uplift students' diverse multilingual background. All of the participants agreed they would like to help these minority students understand that their multilingualism is an asset, rather than burden. Nonetheless, on the other hand, they have to comply with the push for homogeneity generated through standardized testing. Teachers thus struggle to reconcile these two issues, which are in tension; but as Miss Hamilton explained, it is not something easy to resolve:

> "This is really a struggle. On one hand, I have to keep my job, you know. I have to do what I have to do. But, then I have the children. Helping them is a moral responsibility. Why should I do something that is not good for them? Why not help them as much as I can?"

The participants surfed the struggle in different manners. For example, Miss Jefferson told me she tried not to talk to the kids too much about the test. On the other hand, Miss Madison and Miss Washington talked to them about the tests, but minimized the impact it had. For example, when referring to a girl whose first language was Spanish, Miss Madison told me "I had to lie to her, I had to tell her it was not important… and it was important".

All of the teachers expressed they would like more support from their principals when surfing the struggle. Notwithstanding, they all agreed that principals are also disempowered and mostly try to align their interests with those of the district. In this sense Miss Jefferson explained that "sometimes school principals just prefer to do what they are told to do. I understand them, although I do not like that, sometimes". Miss Jefferson was also quite empathetic to her principal when she stated that her principal did care about the negative impact that standardized tests had on her multilingual students:

> "Yes, and I think they do, but it is above them because they have pressure from their own superintendent, who asks her 'What are you going to do to bring your school up'?"

All of my participants taught multilingual classrooms (in all four cases the vast majority of the students came from different Hispanic countries – some only speaking local dialects – and in the case of Miss Washington 10% of her students were Haitian); in addition, all of my interviewees spoke Spanish. Therefore, I asked them if they used Spanish to help those Spanish-speaking students, who were not able to understand English. Three of them, Miss Washington, Miss Jefferson and Miss Madison, affirmed they would never use Spanish in language arts and/or reading, as it was not allowed. They would only use it when teaching

science or math. Nonetheless, Miss Hamilton taught differently.

During my interview with Miss Hamilton, she explained to me with a guilty voice that she cheated to benefit the kids. That is to say, she told me that several times she spoke to them in Spanish, when they did not understand her explanation in English, and also used the Spanish version of the reading materials, so as to help her students understand what the passage was about. Miss Hamilton was not proud of what she did, but she told me that she was "a teacher for the kids and whatever I do I am going to do it to benefit the kids. I am not going to benefit anything else". When I asked her if she did not think that speaking to them in Spanish was just expecting less from them, she answered quite firmly:

> "I work my butt off. I go home, and I work, and I read, and I have expectations for my kids, ok?"

I think, at that point I fully understood not only what her moral responsibility was, but also, what the struggle was all about...

The Solution

Most of the interviews revolved around problems. For example, all the participants referred to the negative impact that standardized tests had on their multilingual students, and on them as teachers. In addition, all the participants agreed that there seem to be an increasing trend towards homogeneity, which clashes the diverse reality they have in their classrooms. Unfortunately, all the participants also agreed that those responsible of making decisions at the higher levels were disconnected to the reality teachers had, and they seemed not to care about the diverse and specific needs students had. It is fair to say that most of the content of the interviews was quite depressing. After all, I was giving voice to key actors who experienced first-hand the tension between

multilingualism and standardization; homogeneity versus heterogeneity!

Therefore, in order to move beyond the diagnosis and try to think about the treatment, I always ended all the interviews with the same question. I asked all of my participants what they would do if they became the district's decision-maker concerning standardized tests. I have to admit I was a bit surprised by their responses.

The first surprise I encountered was that all teachers agreed they would keep standardized tests. I am originally from Argentina; I have worked most of my life there, too. Throughout my more than fifteen years of experience in the field of education most teachers working in public schools in Argentina - and the Unions of course – rejected and resisted   the spread of standardized testing. Therefore, I was surprised that all of them wanted to keep the tests.

Even though they all agreed upon the idea of keeping the tests, they had different opinions as to what to do with them. For example, Miss Hamilton said she would not change the tests very much. She knew the tests were horrible on most of the students – especially, those whose first language was not English -; nonetheless, she understood, standardized tests were needed to hold teachers accountable.

On the other hand, Miss Jefferson said that she would keep the tests, but would not make them be high-stakes. That is to say, she would only want tests for comparison issues, to help everybody have a sense where they were, compared to the norm. Reminiscing the past, she remembered that:

> "I, you know... I was brought up here in Miami and I am a product of Public Schools and I remember doing test, but it was more to know where you were at compared to the rest of the school, your classmates. It was not high-stakes... It was more like 'Your child is working at the 76th percentile, that means that out of 100

students...' I remember my parents getting those reports, but it was never..."

In addition, she also added that she would like to explore much more what other countries were doing with standardized tests. She acknowledged that standardized tests were not really working, as implemented, in the United States, so she wondered:

"What is it we are doing wrong? I don't know! I don't have the answers! I would like to go to those countries, Finland for example and maybe they don't have standardized tests... But what are they doing? We need to find out! There are a number of things they are doing differently, like the number of hours of school, when it begins and when it ends... I don't know..."

Miss Madison felt that standardized tests in the upper grades should mimic what was happening in kindergarten or in first grade. That is to say, the test would be useful in drawing a general picture of how things were working, but they would have any teeth, as all high-stakes tests have. In addition, she also proposed using pretesting and posttests.

Miss Washington also expressed the need to imitate what was being done in early childhood education. She thought that tests should be used as one additional element to make a diagnosis of students' performances and needs. Nonetheless, tests, she thought, should be only regarded as an additional indicator, just as important, for example, as teachers' observations of students' behavior.

Lastly, another interesting finding has to do with the idea of disempowered teachers. As mentioned above, it seems that one of the consequences of the push for homogeneity has to do with the de-professionalization of teachers. If I had any doubts about that, all hesitation was erased when asking this final question.

Both Miss Hamilton and Miss Jefferson looked at me and asked me if they had the power to decide what to do with testing. For example, Miss Hamilton said: "Can I make that decision?" Those responses illustrated the idea of disempowerment Darling-Hammond (2007) has referred to; it became clear to me that teachers have begun to get used to the idea that their voice did not count. Unfortunately, teachers have become used to the fact that they have to comply with that they are commanded to do, having little or no say, if they disagreed.

All in all, my findings helped me to understand the different dimensions of the impact of the standardization on teachers' experience. I have substantively explained that there is a clash between the macro-system, which constantly promotes standardization and homogeneity, and the diversity and heterogeneity that teachers experience in many schools at Miami Dade County. Through these interviews I was able to understand, and thus describe in this paper, the struggle that teachers serving highly multilingual classrooms experience, when confronting standardization. In addition, I was also able to explain what teachers think could be done in order to overcome this tension.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this last section of the paper I decided to include three main reflections. The first one has to do with teachers' fear of being constantly put to the test. The fact of being constantly observed and made accountable for, affects their own well-being. In addition, I also thought it was interesting to link this idea of the growth of standardization to Dewey and his conception of the process of teaching and learning. Lastly, I also wanted to add a possible solution to the problem.

Fearing the Look from Above

Foucault (1977) thought that individuals were affected by everything that surrounded them. According to the French sociologist there are structural inequalities that limit individual free will.

I believe that teachers are affected by a variety of forces that exist at different levels. That is to say, while teachers' strategies and experiences are directly affected by the multilingualism of their students, they are also affected by the accountability mechanisms their own school principals could implement in the schools they are working at.

Teachers seems to respond to different forces that exist in these different levels; unfortunately, many times there is a disconnection between what the macro-system thinks that happens, and what is the reality of the micro system. That is to say, while policy-makers at the macro-system seem to value the importance of homogeneity, the micro-system shows that reality is much more diverse and complex. Unfortunately, teachers become hostages of this disconnect between the micro and macro levels.

An ecosystem is made up of different parts that are interrelated to each other through multiple relationships; consequently, changes in one part of the system affect other parts of it. That is to say, decisions made by policy makers at the Miami Dade County affect the dynamics of teachers' micro-system (i.e., schools). Within the ecological paradigm, Trickett and Kelly (1985) introduced the principle of adaptation. As Prilleltensky & Nelson (2010) explained in their introductory textbook to the field of community Psychology, individuals must learn to develop coping mechanisms and learn new skills to fit within the social system. That is to say, rather than becoming docile bodies as Foucault would claim, other scholars think that the adaptation principle is a way of balancing what 'the system' pretends with what individuals want for their lives.

In my study, it became very clear that even when teachers did not agree with many of the decisions being drawn 'above', they had to adapt to those policies. Why would they do that? Simple, because teachers are afraid of the consequences of "being observed."

The Destructive Power of Testing

The twentieth century will be known for many things. Some will remember it as the century in which men defied the laws of gravity and intensified research in the outer space. On the other hand, many others will stress on world wars and describe the last century as the bloodiest and cruelest centuries of all times. Lastly, it could be also stated that during this century there was a clear unification of the idea of nation-state, which was possible due to the spread of some ideals such as nationalism and patriotism. It was during the First World War, when feelings of nationalism were out bursting and during one of the cruelest moments in time, that Dewey stated that: "Obviously a society to which stratification into separate classes would be fatal, must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equable and easy terms" (Dewey, page 68).

As a researcher, one of the things that affected me after carrying out these interviews is the question, "To what extent do standardized tests, such as the FSA, allow students to be equally exposed to opportunities not only of learning, but also of showing how much they know?" That is to say, following Anyon (1981), I wondered if standardization did not contribute to the stratification of knowledge. After all, it seemed quite clear that the students from the lower socio-economic backgrounds were those that see their curriculum being narrowed.

Even when national standardized tests can have many different positive outcomes (for example, it could be used as an accountability tool to improve the overall education system), it also has the characteristic of homogenizing students. To what extent is this desirable?

From Gardner's (1998) point of view, the idea of treating all students as agents that learn in the same way would very likely be atrocious: "we need to take differences among individuals very seriously. Rather than teaching all students the same content in the same way, and assessing them in the same way, we now have the opportunity (especially through technology) to individualize education" (p. 24).

In addition, standardized tests also affect one other key actor in the process of teaching and learning: teachers. Several countries have incorporated merit-based teacher salaries' reforms, which peg the amount teachers are paid to standardized tests' results (Perazza, 2008). As it was explained above, as standardized becomes more and more high-stakes, teachers are somehow induced to teach to the test and drill the contents of the test (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Unfortunately, this creates a tension between their career aspirations as teachers - and how they conceive the importance of embracing multiculturalism in the teaching and learning experience - and the need to meet mandated standardized tests' scores.

Most teachers I know – and in my fifteen years of experience in the field of education I have met a lot of them -, enter the profession because they want to help students. The core of their interests has to do with trying to leave their print on thousands of students they gladly work with. It is fair to say their approach may vary but I am sure most – if not all – the teachers want the best for all their students. Teaching is a very demanding – usually underestimated – profession. It takes passion and a true vocation to be able to work as a teacher for many years. That is why I think it is so painful to see the puzzling situation to which teachers serving multilingual students are exposed to, when all that matters is testing!

Rather than fostering an educational system that promotes the well-being of all its main actors – teachers and students – we have moved towards a depersonalized mode of governing by numbers. In this systems teachers' voices are not heard. In addition, they are asked to do the impossible: reconcile homogeneity with heterogeneity. Setting homogeneity as a goal, implies a whole set of premises, which are at odds with the values of most of the teachers I have met.

The teachers I know are interested in making sure that diverse students such as Aladdin, Mulan, Pocahontas, Sofia, Esmeralda, Hercules and Tiana are able to learn and to move forward. The teachers I know – and especially those I met – understand that their different students need different things; they are willing to complicate their professional lives by adapting their teaching styles to what each and every student they have needs. They do not do it because they are asked to behave in that way, they do not address the diversity of their students just because they were told to do so during their training. They do it because they feel that "helping them is their moral responsibility."

An Alternative Route
As a scholar, I advocate for the revaluation of local knowledge, as a way of presenting an alternative to the top-down approach in education. I argue that we need to find ways of democratizing the accountability systems in education. If we want to empower minority students, it is important to closely monitor what their needs and interests are. There have been some pilot experiences, for example Lingard and a team of researchers worked with the Department of Education of Queensland: the PETRA initiative. The goal of the project was to find alternative modes of accountability systems – different than the traditional and dominant top-down approach -, in order to empower local educational communities. As described in the website of the project:

> "The PETRA team worked with select groups of teachers and students to strengthen school community

relationships through community-based research projects conducted by students, acknowledging the funds of knowledge in communities. The PETRA project also created a Learning Commission in the community that took submissions from all of these groups as part of a process towards this new conceptualization [of accountability systems]"

In this paper, I referred to the situation of minority students, Bouvier and Karlenzig (2006) expressed that current accountability mechanisms are incompatible to the aboriginal educational model; therefore, they suggest, "The indigenous knowledge, values and norms that are inherent to aboriginal education, could inform the development of meaningful alternatives that are, it is hoped, much more perceptive of the human qualities of education and the pluralism of modern societies" (p. 29).

In the conceptual framework of this paper I have explained the close connection that exists between language, culture and power. In order to prevent the genocide of minorities' cultures it is important to inject diversity into schools – especially public schools -. In doing so, teachers need to champion the importance of embracing and uplifting multiculturalism. If we want to engage teachers, it is important to hear their voice.

Research needs to become much more rooted in communities' needs. The community-based approach to research promotes the involvement of dissident and usually unheard voices. That is to say, rather than focusing on what the mainstream discourses determine to be 'truth', we should go back to teachers' communities and allow them to teach us what they think is 'true' and what is not. That is to say, rather than treating teachers as docile bodies we should allow ourselves, as researchers, to be illuminated by what they have to teach us.

Scholars such as Sleeter (1991) and Banks (2007) have argued that multicultural education represents a technology for the empowerment of minority students. I argue that students' experiences and cultural characteristics need to be represented in all the different stages of the educational process; that does include assessment! Assessment tools, which are standardized and centrally administered (either from a national or an international agency), seem to be at a worse position than local communities, so as to make the educational experience more democratic and sensitive towards cultural diversity. On the contrary, if teachers' communities were allowed to participate in the design of accountability systems, then we would be incorporating those individuals that actually work with those students we are so desperately trying to help.

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