
Teachers' Assessment Practices and Understandings in a Bilingual Program

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Abstract

This article examines the complexities surrounding the implementation of assessment policies and practices in a Portuguese-English bilingual program from the teachers' perspective. The findings suggest differences in assessment practices and understandings of assessment requirements between bilingual teachers and program specialists. Two factors that seem to contribute to the bilingual program teachers' practices are discussed. First, the school lacks a comprehensible approach to assess bilingual students and professional development for teachers. Second, teachers' personal factors such as English proficiency, preparation, and acculturation explain differences in their personal practices and understandings. These results are problematic because of the consequences it holds for bilingual students and the current political backlash against bilingual education.

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Bilingual education is threatened in the U.S. During the past three years, we have witnessed how California, Arizona, and Massachusetts overturned bilingual education through ballot initiatives (Crawford, 2002; Garcia, 2000). The national debates over bilingual education have called upon to document bilingual education programs' outcomes. However, bilingual education programs often lack a system for tracking students' performance. Even though these programs may have significant data available, the collection and compilation of assessment is primarily in the hands of the school administrators and it is not disaggregated due to the lack of human and financial resources and know-how (Abbate & Brisk, 2001; Torres-Guzman, Abbate, Brisk, & Minaya-Rowe, 2002).

This paper's purpose is to report on the initial stages of developing the assessment component of an elementary (Portuguese/English) bilingual program. Teachers and researchers worked together for two years on the program structure, curriculum, and instruction. In order to make decisions on assessment, we wanted to first evaluate the assessments that already existed from the teachers' perspectives. We followed a data-driven qualitative descriptive research design in order to discover the knowledge and awareness levels of the teachers' assessment practices. This research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How are K-5 teachers in a bilingual program assessing their students?
2. What do these teachers know about the school and district assessment requirements?

Assessment and Accountability

Since the 1960s, taxpayers and federal agencies have put more pressure on the accountability role of education (Stiggins, 2002a). Nowadays most states have developed academic standards and are trying to implement assessments to ensure that all students meet these standards (Elmore, 2002; University of Pennsylvania, 1998). States are also trying to establish an accountability system that “hold students, schools or districts responsible for academic performance” (Elmore, 2002, p. 3). In the year 2000, 49 out of 50 states have established standards-based education reforms (Cunningham, 2000; Escamilla, Mahon, Riley-Bernal, & Rutledge, 2003).

Educational assessment has different forms and purposes. Assessment can be used to drive and support teaching and learning, to diagnose individual student needs, to provide accountability information (on students, teachers, schools and programs), to use as selection and certification device, or to evaluate programs (Abbate & Brisk, 2001; Broadfoot, 1996; Grippe, 1994; Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Cabello, 2001).

Despite the multiple roles of assessment, teachers, administrators, and policy makers have different priorities. Policy makers, program planners, and school administrators need information on how the schools are performing according to target standards. Then, they can make decisions around allocation of funding and resources and evaluate the effectiveness of their school reform efforts. For these groups of people, standardized tests, given their relative low cost and easy administration when comparing them to other types of assessments, seem to give the information they need (Roeber, 2002; Stiggins, 2002a). Teachers, on the other hand, need assessment information that helps their day-to-day activities and decision-making. They need information to enlighten their instructional interventions, to diagnose students’ needs when learning particular subjects matter or skills, and to assign report card grades (Grippe, 1994; Stiggins, 2002a).

Standardized assessments seem to give important information to policy makers and school administration; however, they are unable to inform teaching and learning at the classroom level (Brookhart, 2002; Grippe, 1994; Roeber, 2002; Stiggins, 2002a).

Assessments that happen just once a year are not likely to be of much help to those who must make decisions every three or four minutes. Assessments that provide broad portraits of student achievement are not likely to help those who need high-resolution microscopes. Assessments that produce results two months after the test is taken are not likely to be of value to those who must make decisions right now. (Stiggins, 2002a, p. 20)

At the moment, there is an imbalance between the importance that standardized assessments have when compared with the importance given to classroom assessment. As states and school districts spend more money on standardized tests, no resources remain to ensure quality classroom assessment (Stiggins, 2002a, 2002b).

There is a call to have assessment systems that include both goals: (1) to inform teaching and learning at the classroom level, and (2) to hold schools accountable for improving students’ performance (Roeber, 2002; Schafer, 2002; Stiggins, 2002a). Assessment systems need to be holistic or coordinated (Reeves, 2002; Roeber, 2002) rather than fragmentary (Reeves, 2002). Fragmentary systems focus exclusively on a very limited set of variables, such as test scores, ethnicity, economic status or location of students. Holistic or coordinated systems include different kinds of assessments that are carefully selected to provide a more complete picture of students’ progress. Assessment systems should be both, *of learning* (to

provide evidence for public reporting) and *for learning* (to help students to learn more) (Stiggins, 2002b).

Teachers' Understanding of Assessment Procedures and Measurement

With the increased use of standardized assessment at state and district level, the locus of assessment moved further from the interaction between student and teacher (Stiggins, 2002a). The time teachers spend administering standardized tests increased from 15% in 1981 to 50% in 1991 (Daniel & King, 1998).

Assessment is one area that is part of the teachers' every day activities. It is expected that teachers have a deep knowledge of both externally-produced and teacher-produced assessments (American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education, & National Education Association, 1990). Several authors have studied teachers' knowledge of assessment and measurement. Plake, Impara, and Fager (1993) carried out a national survey with 555 teachers, measuring teacher competency level on educational assessment. Teachers reported competence on administering, scoring, and interpreting test results but not in communicating them. Teachers who had some measurement training scored higher than those who did not. These findings were supported by those of Impara, Divine, Bruce, Liverman, and Gay (1991). They tested 279 teachers on their ability to interpret test scores and compared their results according to their previous assessment course work. Teachers who had the ability to interpret test scores and who had taken courses on assessment had the highest knowledge of measurement and testing.

Wise, Lukin, and Roos (1991) surveyed 397 teachers. Most teachers (ranging from 72% to 92%, depending on the survey questions) rated their abilities on a number of measurement skills as good or very good. Teachers also mentioned that the factor with the greatest effect on their knowledge of testing and measurement was trial-and-error learning in the classroom, with formal course work as a distant second in the ranking. More recently, Daniel and King (1998) surveyed 95 elementary and secondary teachers about their literacy level on educational testing and measurement. They found that teachers have an adequate understanding of standardized tests and their interpretation of various types of standard scores. However, they lack knowledge of the psychometric characteristics of tests (particularly the concepts of reliability and validity and basic test statistics). Even though this knowledge is not detrimental to their day-to-day assessment practices, teachers could not make informed judgments about the merits of some standardized tests.

Assessment of Bilingual Students

The quality of the assessment of bilingual students has raised numerous questions and concerns (Abbate & Brisk, 2001; Escamilla et al., 2003; Lacelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994). Given the national trend towards the elimination of bilingual programs and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) that mandates proof of English proficiency for bilingual students through rigorous testing, bilingual programs that are still functioning are including more standardized test that are used in mainstream classrooms. These assessments are inappropriate measures when dealing with bilingual students (Abbate & Brisk, 2001). Bilingual students may have the content knowledge and the cognitive skills needed to perform successfully on assessments tasks but may not be able to demonstrate in English what they know. Assessing students who are learning English as a second or other language with the same instruments used to assess monolingual English speakers gives data of unknown validity that will not be very useful to determine bilingual students' learning (Lacelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994). Besides, standardized tests are not culture-free, especially for smaller language groups (Abbate & Brisk, 2001).

It is a common practice that bilingual students' performance is overlooked and misrepresented. In many states bilingual students are not required to take standardized tests until they have been in the educational system for at least a couple of years. Their progress is neither measured with standardized assessment nor with native language assessments (Brisk, 1998; Torres-Guzman et al., 2002). In many school systems, assessment data is not disaggregated by program, language groups, or individual students (Charles A. Dana Center, 1999; Escamilla et al., 2003). Even in some bilingual programs, students' data is not adequately collected and compiled (Abbate & Brisk, 2001; Torres-Guzman et al., 2002).

An adequate assessment system that takes into consideration the needs of bilingual students must address students' academic and linguistic development (Lacelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Bilingual education programs need to collect and analyze students' assessments in order to monitor students' progress and needs. This information will also help teachers to improve their instruction, and will guarantee the quality of the program outcomes (Torres-Guzman et al., 2002).

Methodology

This research is a qualitative descriptive study on bilingual education teachers' assessment practices and knowledge. Qualitative descriptive researchers aim to "collect as much data as they can that will allow them to capture all the elements of an event that come together to make it the event that it is" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). Qualitative descriptive research tries to portray an event or experience in its natural occurrence. Its goal is not to generate a theory, but a description of experiences.

Setting

This project was carried out during the school year 2001-2002 in a Portuguese-English bilingual program at an urban elementary school in a major northeast city. The program started in 1999 when more than 40 Brazilian students registered at the beginning of the school year. By law, the school had to offer a Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) program. During the first year, the bilingual program was carried out with limited resources, planning, and training. Most of the students in the bilingual program were recent arrivals from Brazil.

In 2000, a faculty member of a research university in a major northeast city received a three-year collaborative research grant² to help implement a quality Portuguese-English bilingual program at the school. The collaborative group used the guidelines of Portraits of Success (PoS), a project to identify and disseminate quality bilingual programs in the U.S. (Portraits of Success, 2003). When the collaborative grant started, it was the beginning of the second year of the bilingual program at the school. The beginning of the bilingual program's second year had similar characteristics as the previous year: 1) more Portuguese-speaking students arrived to the school, 2) some bilingual teachers left the school, 3) the principal had difficulty hiring teachers, 4) there were limited materials in Portuguese, and 5) the district bilingual department did not have contact with the school. During the first two years of the grant, the bilingual program teachers (four bilingual teachers, one English as a Second Language [ESL] teacher and one English literacy teacher) and the research team (one professor specialist in bilingual education and two graduate assistants) met weekly to plan language use, curriculum, materials, and instruction. For most teachers, the contact with the university research group was the teachers' first professional development around issues of bilingual education. In the school year 2001-2002, in order to start working around issues of assessment

in the bilingual program, this study was conducted to understand the ways teachers in the bilingual program were assessing the students and their knowledge of the externally-created assessments in the school.

Participants

Six teachers in the bilingual programs participated in this study (see Table 1). We have changed their names for confidentiality purposes. Three teachers were born in Brazil and moved to the U.S. several years ago. They are bilingual in Portuguese and English. The combined grade four-five teacher started working in the bilingual program in 1999. The kindergarten-1st grade teacher started working in the program in 2000. The 2nd-grade teacher was hired in the middle of the 2001-2002 school year and was the 2nd-grade paraprofessional the previous year. One teacher, a monolingual Portuguese speaker in charge of 3rd grade, started working in the beginning of the year 2001-2002 and left the school at the end of the school year. All the bilingual teachers had certification waivers (both elementary and bilingual education certifications); three of them were working towards their master's degrees. The certified ESL teacher was bilingual in English and Russian and was in charge of supporting all the teachers in the bilingual program. She started working in the school in 1998. Before working in the Portuguese-English bilingual program, she worked in the Vietnamese-English bilingual program that functioned in the school until 1998. In October 2001, a monolingual English-speaking teacher joined the bilingual program to support the students' English literacy development. She taught 2nd grade at the school for the past three years, and holds standard elementary certification. She started taking graduate level course that focused on bilingual students when she was appointed as the English literacy teacher.

Table 1
Bilingual Program Teachers' Characteristics

Name	In the bilingual program since year	Grade	Language (s)	Certification
Carolina	2000	K-1	Portuguese / English	Waived
Renata	2001	2	Portuguese / English	Waived
Paula	2001	3	Portuguese	Waived
Flavia	1999	4-5	Portuguese / English	Waived
Olga	1999	ESL 3, 4-5	Russian / English	ESL and Bilingual education
Andrea	2001	English literacy 3, 4-5	English	Standard Elementary

Data collection

To determine the extent of knowledge and practices with respect to assessment in the bilingual program, we collected data on the official requirements as well as on what the teachers

knew off hand without preparation or coaching and after having worked in the program for at least a year. The information was gathered through interviews with teachers conducted throughout the year, meetings with the principal and teachers, personal e-mail communications, and documentation collection and revision. There were two steps in the data collection. The first step of the project was to uncover the teachers' assessment practices and their knowledge of externally-created assessments. Two sets of interviews were conducted, one in October 2001 and one in June 2002. A different researcher conducted each set of interviews. We could not interview all grade level teachers during both sets of interviews (see Table 2).

Table 2

Teachers Interviewed by Grade Level and Time of Interview

Grade	Teacher interviewed	
	October	June
K-1	Carolina	Carolina
2	---	Renata
3	Paula	---
4-5	Flavia	Flavia
ESL	Olga	Olga
English literacy	---	Andrea

During the first set of interview, we asked the following open-ended question: "What do you know about assessment techniques used in the bilingual program? Please list all that come to mind." The teachers were also asked to classify these assessment tools according to their knowledge of whether they were required by the state, the city, the school, or whether they were informal assessment tools created by the teachers. The researcher took notes of the participants' responses and then typed them down. During the second set of interviews, we asked: "Which kind of assessment did you use during the year? Which were in-classroom assessments, school assessments, public school assessments, and state assessments?" The interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Besides the interviews, we also had two meetings with the teachers in which they referred to their assessments requirements. We took notes of the teachers' comments.

The second step in the project was to find the assessment requirements of the bilingual program. To obtain this information, we consulted three sources:

1. School district official circulars. Information on externally-created assessment requirements was obtained from the material that school gave to teachers in the form of the school manual, superintendent circulars and other photocopies of official materials.

2. School principal. We met with the principal in July 2002 and asked for externally-created assessments that were implemented in the school. Two researchers took individual notes and then compared for accuracy.

3. Personal e-mail communications with the school district bilingual coordinator. These were held between May and August 2002 to obtain information on the externally-created assessments requirements for bilingual programs.

Data Analysis

The data were organized into two areas: bilingual program teachers' assessment practices and bilingual program teachers' knowledge of externally-created assessment requirements. To analyze teachers' assessment practices we used interviews and meetings field notes. We analyzed each teacher separately and identified common themes to the teachers. To analyze teachers' knowledge on externally-created assessment requirements, we analyzed and compared the information obtained through the school district documentation, the bilingual department coordinator, and the school principal on externally-created assessment required per grade level. We then compared this with the assessments requirements that each teacher mentioned during the interviews.

Results

We report the findings that address our research questions in two distinct sections: bilingual program teachers' assessment practices, and bilingual program teachers' knowledge of program assessment requirements.

Bilingual Program Teachers' Assessment Practices

Assessment practices varied with respect to use of classroom and externally-created assessments, to the sense of ownership of the assessments, to reliance on externally-created assessments to inform about student performance, and between classroom teachers and specialists.

All teachers in the bilingual program (bilingual teachers and specialists) reported that they based their assessment practice mainly on teacher-created assessment (see Table 3). Even though bilingual teachers relied almost entirely on self-created assessments, a couple of times during the year they administered externally-created assessments required by the school for mathematics, reading, and writing. They were not in charge of correcting them. They were also in charge of administering and correcting an English proficiency observation scale. Specialists (ESL and English literacy) also relied heavily on self-created assessments but they were in charge of administering and correcting most of the externally-created tests required by the school.

Table 3

Teachers' Assessment Practices by Self-created and Externally-created assessment

Assessment Practices	Teacher					
	G K-1	G 2	G 3	G 4-5	ESL 3, 4-5	LE 3, 4-5
Self-created assessments						
Reading and writing	P	E/P	P	E/P	E	E
Mathematics	P	E/P	P	E/P		
Others (social science, science)	P	E/P		E/P		
Externally-created assessment						
Administer school district assessments for reading and writing	E	E		E	E	E
Administer school district observation survey for English proficiency	E	E		E	E	

Administer school district assessment for mathematics	P
Administer bilingual department standardized tests	E
Administer regular standardized tests in the bilingual program	E

Note. ESL 3, 4-5 = ESL teacher for grades 3 and 4-5; LE 3, 4-5 = English literacy teacher for grades 3 and 4-5; E = Assessment in English; P = Assessment in Portuguese.

The bilingual teachers (K-2nd, and 4th-5th grades) created assessments in Portuguese for their subject areas. The only externally-created assessment that the school had in Portuguese was for mathematics. In relation to self-created assessments in English, bilingual teachers had different practices. Renata (2nd grade) and Flavia (4th-5th grades) regularly created assessments in English. Renata also borrowed assessments from English textbooks. Carolina (K-1st grade) and Paula (3th grade) relied on the school district bimonthly English assessments. Carolina, the K-1 bilingual teacher, considered herself stronger in Portuguese than in English, and she felt more confident assessing in Portuguese. Flavia, the 4th-5th-grade teacher who felt confident in both languages, created assessments in both English and Portuguese. She considered the length of time that the students were in the bilingual program when determining the language of the assessment:

I tell them that if they are [in the bilingual program for three years] they should write in English. If they are second year [students], [I say to them] "try your best in English." First year [students] I really don't push them [to write in English]. (personal communication, June 21, 2002)

All teachers in the program created their assessments individually and felt lack of support to improve their assessments. Flavia, the 4th-grade teacher, noticed that the school writing rubrics were not useful for assessing bilingual students. She acknowledged that the program teachers did not know how to adapt the rubric to their students, but could not find support from the school to learn about it. During the interview, Andrea, the English literacy specialist, mentioned several times that her assessments were informal: "I tried to use as many critical thinking questions as possible, but I have to say that they are informal" (personal communication, June 11, 2002).

In relation to the use of standardized assessments results in their classrooms, Carolina and Paula (K-1st and 3th grades, respectively) mentioned that they never received standardized tests results. Renata and Flavia (2nd and 4th-5th grades respectively) mentioned that they received some of the test results and that they tried to interpret them. However, they did not receive any training on how to do that. Flavia compared her students' results with the ones they got the previous year, and with the results that monolingual students in mainstream classes received. Even though she was not fully informed on how to interpret the results, she found receiving the results helpful: "For me [it] is helpful [to interpret the test scores] because I look at [bilingual students' scores] and I compare them with regular education students. I can see how far the bilingual students have to go" (personal communication, June 21, 2002).

The two specialists, ESL and English literacy, were in charge of administering the standardized assessments. Olga, the ESL specialist, was in charge of administering most of the standardized test specifically required by the bilingual department. Andrea, the English literacy specialist, was in charge of administering the standardized assessments that were required in mainstream classrooms and that were also required for students in the bilingual program. Some of the assessments were individually administered and time consuming and were an

extra overload for Andrea. She mentioned that this was a problem for her, but that nobody else knew how to administer those tests.

The two specialists (Olga and Andrea) and two bilingual teachers (Renata and Flavia) had concerns about the administration of standardized tests to bilingual students. They mentioned that assessing bilingual students was very complex. Olga, the ESL specialist, decided that some assessments were not appropriate for bilingual students and she asked not to use them in the bilingual program. The teachers mentioned that most standardized assessments, the ones that were designed for monolingual students and those which were specifically for bilingual students, did not reflect what bilingual students could really do. Flavia, the 4th-5th grade teacher, mentioned that some assessments were difficult to interpret and could give a wrong understanding of the student. She mentioned that she did not like the Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELA-O), an English assessment that is required for all students in the bilingual program, because “sometimes you get frustrated because [the students] know the social language [but not the academic one], and it is so easy to give them the wrong grade” (personal communication, June 21, 2002). Andrea was concerned with the fact that some assessments did not consider receptive but only expressive English:

Part of the problem with these [standardized] assessments is how [you can] establish a comprehension level when the students cannot express what I know they have understood. However, this is an English test so you have to express something in English. (personal communication, June 11, 2002)

Bilingual Program Teachers’ Knowledge of Program Assessment Requirements

Externally-created assessment requirements information was disseminated to teachers through the school manual. According to the principal, all assessments mentioned in the manual were not made available to the school. The complete list of assessments for students in the bilingual program required in the school was difficult to locate in the school manual. It took us several hours to come up with a complete list of these assessment requirements. Table 4 shows the list of the assessments required in the bilingual program that was obtained from the school manual and the principal. It also shows the assessments that were mentioned by each grade-level teacher and specialists.

Table 4
Knowledge of the School Assessment Requirements by Teachers

Assessments Required by School	Teacher					
	G K-1	G 2	G 3	G 4-5	ESL 3, 4-5	LE 3, 4-5
Standardized assessments						
Observation Survey						
Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)				N	N	
Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI)				N	N	N
Language Proficiency Test Series (LPTS)				N		
Native Language: CLOZE						
MCAS-Reading				N		IC
MCAS-Math				N		IC
MCAS-Social Studies				N		IC
MCAS-Science				N		IC
Massachusetts English Language Assessment – Oral (MELA-O)			N	N	N	

Stanford 9				N		IC
Non-standardized Assessments						
Math Assessment	N	N	N	N		IC
Running Records				N	N	
Writing Assessment	N			N		IC
Portfolio	N	N		N	N	N

Note: Blank cells = Assessment requirements for specific grade level mentioned by both the superintendent circular and the principal; Black shadowed cell = Assessment not required in specific grade level; Gray shadowed cell = Assessment requirement for specific grade level mentioned in the superintendent circular but not by the principal, N = Name of assessment was mentioned by teacher; IC: Information on assessment was collected by the teacher after the interview.

We found different knowledge levels of assessment requirements in the bilingual program teachers. Bilingual teachers in K-1st, 2nd and 3rd grades mentioned some assessments required for their grade level, particularly the non-standardized assessments. Carolina, the K-1st grades teacher who had been in the program for two years, mentioned all the assessments that she was in charge of administering (writing and math assessments) and the portfolio that she had to collect at the end of the year. She had a vague idea of other standardized assessments required for her students. She mentioned, “the school has an English assessment at the end of the year, and they put the students in different steps... I don’t know if the school has more assessments” (personal communication, June 11, 2002). Roberta, the 2nd-grade teacher, mentioned that she knew the students had other tests, but she could not identify them.

The ESL specialist mentioned the standardized assessments that she was in charge of administering. Olga expressed concern about the way the assessment decisions were adopted in the school because teachers did not determine the assessments that they were going to use in the program, “[Frequently] somebody brings [assessment] materials, but you don’t know why. Who is the one deciding this? Is it the state? Is it the city? Is it [the principal]? But why?” (personal communication, June 19, 2002). Olga also mentioned that she was aware that the teachers in the program did not have a clear picture of the assessments used in the in the program, they did not know where to get the complete list of them, and that she would like to have a better way to receive them:

I was never really told about [externally-created] assessments. Maybe it is written somewhere but I have not been reinforced about it... I would like to have a meeting where I am told what I’m going to use, the purpose of the test, which [assessments] are for our own records, which are for promotion.” (personal communication, June 19, 2002)

Two teachers, 4th-5th grades and the English specialist, had a more complete picture of the assessments required in the program. Flavia, the 4th-5th-grade teacher, mentioned all the assessment requirements. She had been working in the bilingual program since its first year, and took leadership positions since the beginning. The literacy specialist, Andrea, also had some leadership position in the program. She was a liaison with teachers in mainstream classes and with the literacy coach. During the interview with Andrea, she only mentioned a couple of externally-created assessments. She revealed that she did not know all the assessments used in the program but that she would look for the information and would give it to us in the next days. A couple of days later, she gave us a list of assessments that she had gathered through the literacy coach. The list did not include the MELA-O. This might show that even the literacy coach, who seemed to have a complete view of the assessments requirements, was not aware of some of the special assessments for students in the bilingual program.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find about teachers' assessment practices in a bilingual program and their knowledge of school and district assessment requirements. The findings reveal that the three bilingual teachers (English-Portuguese), one monolingual Portuguese-speaking teacher along with two English-speaking specialist (ESL and English literacy) had different patterns of assessment practice and knowledge.

Bilingual students in the program were assessed through two forms of assessment: teacher-created assessment and externally-created assessment. Bilingual teachers relied their assessment practices almost entirely on self-created assessments. Specialists (ESL and English literacy), in addition to self-created assessments, were mainly responsible for standardized tests. While the specialist had the responsibility to administer, and in some cases correct, almost the totality of standardized assessments, classroom teachers were only required to administer a few externally-created assessments during the year.

Consistent with the program teachers' assessment practices was their knowledge of assessment requirements. With the exception of two teachers who took leadership positions, program teachers had a partial knowledge of their students' assessment requirements. The teachers were mainly aware of the assessments that they were responsible for. The fact that teachers did not have a complete view of assessments was consistent with the finding that the school did not deliver assessment information in a way that is clear and helpful for teachers.

In order to better understand the program teachers' assessment practices and understandings, we need to consider several factors that could have influenced the teachers. We separated them into factors at the organizational and at the personal level.

Organizational Factors

There were two factors at the school organizational level that could have affected the teachers' understandings and practices in relation to assessment: fragmentary assessment system and a lack of professional development that support teacher learning.

Fragmentary assessment system

The school seemed to have a fragmentary assessment system rather than a holistic one (Reeves, 2002; Roeber, 2002). The school lacked a sense of purpose for using the different types of assessment. The school system conceptualized teacher-created assessment as completely independent from standardized assessments; student progress was mainly established through standardized assessments while teacher-created assessment remained in the teachers' classrooms (Stiggins, 2002a). There were assumptions that standardized assessments were the most accurate way to obtain bilingual students' progress. However, bilingual program teachers as well as several authors suggested that this might not be true (Abbate & Brisk, 2001). In this school, standardized tests that could help inform teaching and learning at the classroom level were not considered (Brookhart, 2002; Gripps, 1994; Reeves, 2002; Stiggins, 2002a).

The school also lacked a comprehensive system to disseminate the assessment requirements. The school manual was reported as having the list of assessment requirements. However, this information was scattered throughout the manual. The principal had the most accurate knowledge of the assessment requirements in the bilingual program. The literacy coach knew the requirements for mainstream students, but not the ones specific for bilingual students. Assessment requirements in the school were communicated as explicit knowledge—

words that are communicated in the form of data and information—but not as tacit knowledge—skills, beliefs, and understandings (Fullan, 2001). The school did not have a coherent system to disseminate and make sure that people involved really understood these assessments, and took an active role in the assessment system (Reeves, 2002; Stiggins, 2002a). Finally, the school lacked a sense of purpose for using assessment as a way to demonstrate the effectiveness of the bilingual program and to use the results to make program policy and improvement decisions (Abbate & Brisk, 2001; Torres-Guzman et al., 2002).

Lack of professional development that support teacher learning

Program teachers created their assessments as the year progressed, “on the road” and based on their judgments. They also lacked the knowledge to interpret standardized tests. Even though there is more consensus on the importance of teacher learning and professional development in schools (Hawley & Valli, 1999; Little, 2001; Wilson & Berne, 1999), in this bilingual program professional development did not focus on making teachers “assessment literate.” Teachers are literate in assessment when they come to assessment situations “knowing what they are assessing, why they are doing so, how best to assess the achievement of interest, how to generate sound samples of performance, what can go wrong, and how to prevent those problems before they occur” (Stiggins, 1995, p. 240). Given the fact that the school had a fragmentary assessment system, professional development to improve teachers’ understanding of assessment was not an option.

Personal Factors

Besides the school organization factors discussed above, teachers’ personal factors also had a role in their assessment practices and understandings that make up for particular differences. Teachers’ assessment knowledge and practice varied according to their English proficiency, their teacher preparation, and their acculturation.

Bilingual teachers’ English proficiency

Teachers’ self-created assessment practices in English depended on their proficiency level in that language. Bilingual teachers who were stronger in Portuguese than in English (K-1st and 3rd grade) relied their English assessment on externally-created tests. Given the fact that these teachers did not know much about the English assessments used in their grade and they did not feel confident with their own English proficiency, they could not monitor their students’ English development. This affected their English instruction because the assessments were not available to help them to monitor the students’ English performance and their own teaching (Brookhart, 2002). Bilingual teachers who felt confident with their English proficiency (2nd and 4th-5th grade teachers) used more self-created assessments for English. They also tried to use the externally-created assessment results to understand their students’ English proficiency.

Teacher preparation

Most program’s teachers had limited knowledge of measurement and assessment procedures. Even though some teachers tried to understand the scores, they did not know what the scores meant, or if an increase in a score implied a real increase on the students’ English proficiency level. If we consider that all the bilingual teachers had certification waivers and did not receive any in-service professional development on assessment, it is not surprising that they lacked the knowledge on assessment and measurement (Daniel & King, 1998; Impara et al., 1991; Plake et al., 1993; Wise et al., 1991).

Acculturation

Teachers' acculturation to the American system seemed to have an impact on their knowledge of assessment. The Brazilian 4th-5th-grade teacher adapted to the American educational system and schooling and took leadership in the bilingual program since she started in the program. She was informed of everything that was happening in the program and was a liaison between the program teachers, parents, principal, and university collaborators. The American literacy coach felt comfortable with the system as well. She also took leadership roles as the liaison with the mainstream classes, trying to make the bilingual program less isolated in the school. Both teachers had the most complete view of assessment requirements in the program. These leaders understood that unless they look by themselves for the information they needed, it would not arrive. They were motivated to do so, and recognized the value and role of knowledge exchange with other school members (Fullan, 2001).

Conclusion

Although this study was limited to one school, previous research reveals that schools and districts often do not have a policy to assess the performance of students in bilingual programs (Torres-Guzman et al., 2002). Bilingual students participate in testing done for all students or in some cases they are exempted. Thus the data is not easily available just for bilingual students. As a consequence, bilingual programs cannot prove their effectiveness and the hard work that teachers invest in these programs. In addition, bilingual program staff cannot make informed decisions with respect to improvements (Brisk, 1998). Progress of students seems to be measured by how quickly they learn English and exit the program to be mainstreamed, but not by their academic accomplishment while attending the bilingual program. To the detriment of bilingual programs, teachers are not included in the assessment process.

Effective schools are ones in which principals and teachers focus on student learning outcomes and link this information to improvements in teaching and learning strategies. ... [Teachers and administrators] can demonstrate [to the public] what they are talking about. Taking control of your own data means taking charge of how the argument about standards and accountability is conducted. (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 99)

No Child Left Behind (2002) intends to change the lack of availability of bilingual students' performance by requiring annual assessments and desegregation of data. The particular assessments, however, may not be appropriate for incipient bilinguals because they mostly measure proficiency in English and through English. Moreover, this legislation excludes teachers' voices from the assessment process.

The lack of a comprehensive and fair assessment system is more problematic in these times when bilingual education programs are under attack. Bilingual programs need to closely monitor their students' performance and inform parents, school systems, and the educational community in general, of the quality of bilingual programs offered.

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