

Research Brief

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Summary of *More than a Test: Teacher Sensemaking of Educational Policies and Assessments to Inform Mathematical Opportunities in Elementary Classrooms*

Brief prepared by Rosa Del Carmen Chavez, with assistance from Fran Kipnis, California Education Partners

This research brief summarizes the dissertation, *More than a Test: Teacher Sensemaking of Educational Policies and Assessments to Inform Mathematical Opportunities in Elementary Classrooms* by Rosa Del Carmen Chavez.¹ The dissertation discusses a study focused on understanding the “multilayered relationship between educational policies and students’ mathematical identity development by highlighting the role that teachers play in making sense of and drawing on policies to shape mathematical learning opportunities in 3rd and 4th grade classrooms” (p. iv). The study specifically focused on how third and fourth grade teachers’ understanding of accountability policies and federally mandated assessments “shaped their instructional practices, and ultimately the learning opportunities of Latinx students” (p. 40). As the study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study also investigated how pandemic policies impacted teaching and learning.

The research questions included:

1. How did third and fourth grade teachers make sense of educational policies to inform their instructional decisions?
2. What learning opportunities were made available for students in the classroom based on teachers' sensemaking of educational policies?
3. How did students perceive and make sense of their learning opportunities in the classroom to construct their own mathematical identities?

The qualitative study was conducted primarily in California and Texas. Both states have large Latinx populations and influence federal educational policies. At the same time, there are often on “opposite spectrums” (p. 24), operating under different structures and mandates. The study data included interviews with 34 third and fourth grade teachers primarily from California and Texas and two classroom case studies. The classrooms were in a Northern California district - one in a 4th grade dual-language classroom, and one is a regular 4th grade classroom. The case studies consisted of 49 video observations, 19 student surveys and 8 student interviews. Classroom data was not collected in Texas due to the Covid restrictions at the time.

Findings

- **There were differences across states in how teachers were making sense of policies and assessments to shape their instructional practices. The differences centered around three main themes: 1) accountability policies, 2) language practices, and 3) virtual learning.**

Accountability

- Texas teachers reported more knowledge of state assessment policies than California teachers. Reflecting the California policy to allow districts flexibility on the use of the state assessments, California teachers reported less knowledge of accountability policies, and there was less emphasis on the state test for instruction.
- California teachers were able to make more agentic instructional decisions due to reduced need to draw on and center state tests in their instruction. They were able to adapt their teaching methods to the context of students' lives. Texas teachers reported that the emphasis on state assessments and the pressure to ensure acceptable test scores did not allow them to make decisions about their own instruction.
- Teachers across both states felt that high-stakes assessments had too much power in education and were not appropriate reflections of what students were capable of. However, these same teachers also felt that assessments were necessary to hold teachers and students accountable.

Language practices

- Across states, several teachers talked about how they dealt with tensions related to state and district assessments when the language of the assessments was different from the language of instruction.
- Because of the continued emphasis on English-language proficiency, teachers unintentionally expressed negative language ideologies for linguistically diverse students.
- Teachers' experiences as emergent bilinguals shaped their ideologies and sensemaking.

Virtual Learning

- Texas state policies required their teachers to shift to hybrid, hi-flex teaching earlier in the 2020/21 school year than California policies. In addition, Texas required teachers to administer the state's STAAR assessment at the end of the school year, while California assessment policies were more flexible.
- As a result, California teachers could focus on planning and instruction for distance learning while Texas teachers needed to plan for both distance and in-person learning. In addition, California teachers were less constrained by the state's assessment policies and able to restructure the format of their virtual classrooms to meet the needs of their students.

- Some teachers reported that the hyper focus on recovering learning loss due to the pandemic led them to feel disconnected from students. They reported feeling that students were being reduced to data and scores to measure their learning loss.
- **The case study teachers' ability to construct lessons centered around providing opportunities to learn² was reflected in the learning opportunities reported by students.**
- While the two California teachers in the case study classrooms spoke to a district focus on district benchmarks as important for accountability, they remained committed to their own educational philosophies and engaged in student centered practices.
- The dual-language teacher embraced translanguaging practices defined as “an approach to language pedagogy that affirms and leverages students’ diverse and dynamic language practices in teaching and learning” (p.1)³, shaped by her own experiences as an emergent bilingual.
- The majority of students across both classrooms reported that teachers were more likely to engage in practices that nurture productive engagement with mathematics. These students also reported a productive mathematical disposition and more positive conceptions of their own mathematical identity.
- Students also reported feeling that it is important to pass the state assessment test.

Dangers of data-driven instruction:

The author argues that “we need to reimagine what we want educational systems to be accountable for and to whom” (p. 113). High-stakes assessments are problematic for both students and teachers. A focus on achievement scores can constrain teachers from instruction that meets the needs of their students and “reduce students to a score” (p. 113). Accountability Policies should move towards using multiple measures that de-emphasize assessment scores, and allow for more teacher agency in instruction.

Policies shape student math identity:

Classroom instruction is impacted by state education policies. Policies focused on high-stake assessments can lead students to associate their worth and their learning abilities with their performance on a test. This can limit how they continue to engage with mathematics. For this reason, teachers need the skills to engage in critical sensemaking of the role of policies and assessments in their instruction. Teacher preparation programs should provide opportunities for teachers to engage in this critical sensemaking, and provide alternative strategies for assessment that support productive mathematical disposition.

Policy decisions must include teachers:

To be valued as professionals, teachers need the ability to develop engaging lessons for their students that are not timed or limited by high-stakes assessments. However, teachers are rarely included in policy decisions related to the development and utilization of assessments. Teachers are expected to implement policies yet are not involved in their development. State and local educational agencies should seek teacher input in development of curricula and assessments that will allow teachers to assess for learning and improving student engagement with mathematics.

²Gresalfi, M. S., & Cobb, P. (2006). Cultivating Students’ Discipline-Specific Dispositions as a Critical Goal for Pedagogy and Equity. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 1(1), 49–57.

³Vogel, S., & García, O. (2017). Translanguaging. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1448&context=gc_pubs