

## **Descriptive Analysis of Four Exemplary K-3 Spanish Reading Programs in Texas: Are They Really Exemplary?**

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### ***Abstract***

*This study describes common features of four third-grade high-performing Spanish reading programs in Texas. The objective of the study was to describe these schools in order to better understand how successful schools approached teaching reading in Spanish at the early grade levels and to share this information with elementary school bilingual educators across the state. The criteria for selection for the study consisted of an average of a 90% pass rate for two consecutive years on the reading portion of the Spanish TAAS at third-grade, the largest number of test-takers, and the lowest LEP exemption rates. The schools selected represent three US-Mexico border schools and one non-border urban school. The methodology used was qualitative, based on site visits, a semi-direct interview protocol, K-3 classroom observations, and document analysis. While each school was found to have its own unique set of characteristics, the four schools shared the following six features: explicit support for Spanish-literacy and biliteracy; high expectations; skills-driven reading instruction beginning in Kindergarten; shared understanding of the Spanish reading program; alignment between Spanish and English reading programs; and explicit targeting of the TAAS test. The state-mandated Spanish reading curriculum and TAAS Spanish reading measure are discussed in light of the findings, and their policy and research implications. This last topic is further elaborated on and updated in the addendum.*

### **Introduction**

This study attempts to identify and explain possible reasons for the academic successes of the English language learners in four schools in the state of Texas. Specifically, this study focuses on the efforts of these four schools in teaching English language learners to read Spanish in the early grades (K-3). This undertaking is particularly significant for a number of reasons. First, the number of Spanish-speaking children in Texas schools is growing and demographic projections show that this trend will continue. Second, primary schools in Texas providing bilingual education programs are now being held accountable for their students' performance in Spanish reading through the mandatory administration of the Spanish Test of Academic Achievement and Skills (TAAS). Further, beginning in the year 2002, third-grade students who do not demonstrate mastery in reading on the TAAS, either in English or in Spanish, must be considered for retention. Consequently, as researchers, we see the need for direction on how to build a successful Spanish reading program in the early elementary grades and a study of the highest-performing schools in early Spanish reading might provide needed direction.

Further impetus for the current research is found in the many studies that have highlighted the lower levels of academic achievement of language-minority children, in particular, Spanish-speaking children, and demonstrated that these children are at a greater risk of poor literacy development in both their native language and their second language (Durgunoglu, 1998; Verhoeven & Aarts, 1998). That Spanish-speaking students have had lower levels of academic achievement has remained largely unchanged since the 1970's. Educational research conducted from the 1970's to the present has shown that Spanish-speaking students have lower levels of academic achievement than white non-Hispanic students (Arias, 1986; Congressional Budget Office, 1987; De La Rosa & Maw, 1990; Orfield, 1986). The gap between Latino children's academic achievement in reading and writing and that of Anglo students has been shown to begin early and grow as the children progress in school (Haycock & Navarro, 1988; Kao and Tienda, 1995).

Scholars who have attempted both to identify reasons for this gap and to identify reasons for successful academic achievement have described the forces that influence the development of literacy in bilingual, bicultural contexts as interactive (Au & Jordan, 1981; Boggs, 1985; Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Durgunoglu & Verhoeven, 1998; Moll, 1986; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Trueba, 1987a, 1987b). These forces include knowledge, recognition, and acceptance of culture within the context of the classroom. Moreover, there are forces that exert their influence upon the classroom from outside the context of the classroom. Economic, political, and social forces within a community served by a school interact to influence the literacy development of students in the classroom, especially those students outside the dominant culture. Durgunoglu and Verhoeven (1998) see these interactive forces that influence the development of literacy in bilingual, bicultural context as "... strands of a tightly woven tapestry in which each strand...[or each specific force] shows its colors in many different places in the weaving. The political and economic factors in a culture or community provide the background color that underlies the whole weaving, sometimes clearly visible, sometimes less so" (p. 290). The skeins of yarn that make up the tapestry's weft and warp intertwine to form a wall of vibrant complexity, which complicate any research endeavor that attempts to identify and describe literacy development in bilingual, bicultural contexts.

In the first part of this paper, a brief review is provided of a small number of empirical studies aimed at revealing the features of effective early Spanish reading programs. A description of the present study is then provided, highlighting what we believe to be a set of common features shared by each of the four Texas schools studied. The discussion compares and contrasts what was found in the present study with previous studies, including relevant literature. The conclusion calls for a more comprehensive research framework to guide future studies on this topic.

### **Recent Studies**

During the 1980's and 1990's, research in the U.S. on the effectiveness of bilingual education was a top priority for education policymakers. Little attention was actually paid to conducting empirical research related explicitly to the reading components of bilingual education programs. We were only able to identify a handful of research studies focused on how to teach Spanish-speaking students to read in Spanish in the early elementary grades. We sought studies that offered evidence of improved reading ability in Spanish as determined by the students' performance on some type of achievement test or measure. The purpose of this review is to draw

the reader's attention to the range of factors cited that presumably positively influence Spanish reading development. This brief review will also provide insight into factors that are not addressed which should be included in researching the issue at hand.

Prince (1987) conducted a longitudinal study in which she sought to describe the administrative, curricular, and instructional practices that underlie the success of the Spanish reading programs at three schools in Connecticut. The schools were situated in large, urban areas in which Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican children received schooling. The researcher used qualitative methods (e.g., staff interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis), in conjunction with students' tests scores, to identify the effective features of the reading programs. The researcher reports the following characteristics as central to the schools' success at first and second grade: numerous opportunities for the children to write, strong academic curriculum which paralleled the district's English curriculum, well-defined instructional plans, highly-trained teachers, access to curricular materials, strong administrative support, strong support for native-language instruction as a bridge to learning English, and integration and acceptance into the mainstream school structure.

Mace-Matluck, Hoover, and Calfee (1989) conducted a six-year longitudinal study on the teaching and learning of Spanish reading among children in the early grades (K-3) attending school in distinct regions of Texas. The research team's main goals were to examine what constitutes a favorable learning environment for students from Spanish-language backgrounds and what instructional sequences and events promote successful and efficient learning of language and reading skills. Among the more salient findings the researchers reported was that literacy skills in Spanish were enhanced by instruction that: engages students, limits interruptions, increases the quantity and quality of decoding instruction, and uses smaller numbers of students in instructional groups.

What is particularly striking about their findings is the attention the researchers paid to site or locale. Mace-Matluck, Hoover, and Calfee (1989) conclude: "Spanish-literacy, . . . , was more advanced at certain border sites where substantial non-school support for Spanish was available. Factors outside of the school play an important role in maintaining or fostering development of the non-English home language. Prominent among these are locale and the extent to which the language is used in the community and the wider environment, as well as the role of the home language in the affairs of the home and of the community; attitude of the student and others toward the maintenance of Spanish; and the extent to which written materials and formal usage are available to the students in the home language" (p. 214).

Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) conducted a four-year longitudinal study on a school in a Spanish-speaking barrio of Los Angeles, California. Their principal question was: how do we improve the literacy attainment of Spanish-speaking students learning to read in their native language? The researchers were keenly aware of the interplay between local knowledge and research knowledge for bringing about school change. They realized that improving the Spanish reading ability of the students at their research site would entail much more than simply offering the teachers access to a theoretical and empirical knowledge base. The researchers understood that the teachers and the administrators, and students and their families constituted a unique and living socio-cultural milieu.

As the researchers offered their research knowledge and expertise to the school stakeholders, a

dynamic unfolded: there was a shift in the school's early literacy culture. The authors describe the change as follows: "As with other cultural shifts, it is not possible to pinpoint the precise moment at which any particular change occurred or became institutionalized. Nor can we say with certainty what were the precise factors responsible for these changes. Yet, however we characterize the changes or explain their emergence, there is no doubt that, by the fall of 1987, Benson Elementary School's early literacy program was far different from what it was in 1984, the year in which the original study was completed" (p. 4).

The changes that transpired over the course of the study that apparently led to improved Spanish-literacy development among the students include: literacy-learning opportunities beginning in Kindergarten, a balanced literacy program (e.g., equal emphasis on decoding skills and comprehension), home-parent involvement, and careful pacing of reading instruction. The researchers conclude by stating that this is not a formula for solving the reading problems of all Spanish-speaking children in the U.S. It is interesting to note that Goldenberg (1994, p. 84) later acknowledges, as did Mace-Matluck, Hoover, and Calfee (1989), that:

"... Spanish-speaking children learning to read in Spanish in the United States face a far different sociolinguistic context with respect to both written and oral forms of language than children learning to read in English do. Whereas written texts of many types are easily accessible to the English speaking child, Spanish speakers have fewer such opportunities, despite the existence of Spanish-language periodicals and books."

Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Ivory and Slavin (1997) conducted a three-year empirical study to demonstrate the effectiveness of a Spanish reading program known as "Bilingual Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition" (BCIRC). This program is an adaptation of the more widely-known and used "Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition" program (Stevens, Madden, Slavin, & Farnish, 1987). The study was conducted in El Paso, Texas, which is contiguous with Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

BCIRC is characterized as a reading program for successfully developing Spanish reading and writing development in young native speakers of Spanish. Cooperative learning techniques, including heterogeneous grouping, are a central component of this approach to developing literacy skills. Its three principal elements include direct instruction in reading comprehension, Treasure Hunt activities (e.g., worksheets with comprehension questions, making predictions, story retelling), and integrated language arts and writing. All activities follow a set series of steps: teacher presentation, team practice, independent practice, peer preassessment, additional practice, and testing.

The researchers found that students who participated in BCIRC performed better on certain reading and writing measures in English and Spanish. The authors conclude by stating: "Qualitative as well as quantitative evidence showed that one form of cooperative learning, Bilingual Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition, is an effective means of improving the performance in Spanish and English of students in transitional bilingual education programs at the critical point of transition from their home language to English" (p. 17).

In sum, these few studies, each of which is linked to some measure of effectiveness in terms of the student's reading performance in Spanish, highlight a number of features, which characterize the school's reading program. At one extreme, Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Ivory and Slavin

(1997) focus exclusively on the instructional dimensions of BCIRC. Prince (1987) goes beyond instructional features to include the quality of the teaching staff, administrative support, and the acceptance of the Spanish-speaking children into the school mainstream. Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) would add the role of beginning reading instruction in Kindergarten and home-parent involvement. Mace-Matluck, Hoover, and Calfee (1989) go outside the school walls to include the site or locale variable or the linguistic vitality of the Spanish-language in the community.

### The Present Study

The objective of this study was to identify at least three schools in the state of Texas that had achieved an average pass rate of 90% at third-grade on the reading portion of the Spanish version of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), and to describe features common to these schools. We sought to identify schools with this pass rate for two consecutive school years, 1996-1997 and 1997-1998. Additional criteria included those schools with the lowest LEP exemption rates and the largest number of student test-takers. School performance test data were accessed through the Texas Education Agency (TEA). It is important to note that in a school with such a pass rate, 90% of its students are meeting the minimal level of competency (70%) in reading mandated by the state. This pass rate is considered exemplary by the state's accountability standards, but does not constitute all of the criteria used for rating schools.

Initially, our intent was to identify one school from each of the following sites: a rural district away from the U.S.-Mexico border, an urban district away from the U.S.-Mexico border, and a U.S.-Mexico border district. Unfortunately, we were unable to identify a rural school away from the border area that met our criteria. To represent a small rural school, we selected one from a fairly isolated region situated along the border in the Rio Grande Valley, hereafter Site 4. While this school did not meet the 90% pass rate on the Spanish TAAS in reading, it was the highest-scoring smaller, rural-like school.

**Table 1--Percentage of Students Passing TASS in Reading**

Site	96-97	97-98	98-99
1. Border: Rio Grande Valley	89.9 n=69	91.7 n=72	90 n/a
2. Urban: East Texas	91.1 n=45	100 n=43	96 n/a
3. Border (not in Rio Grande)	73.5 n=34	96.1 n=26	100 n/a
4. Rural: Rio Grande Valley	81.6 n=49	78.1 n=32	74 n/a

**Note: the number of test-takers for 1998-1999 was not readily accessible**

We successfully identified a school within a border district (Site 1) located in the Rio Grande Valley and a school within a major urban district (Site 2) which met our criteria. We also decided to include another border school (Site 3), not in the Rio Grande Valley, because of a marked increase in its test scores from 1996-97 to 1998-99. In summary, our search resulted in three border schools and one urban school. Table 1 summarizes each school's passing rates on the reading portion of the Spanish TAAS in grade 3 between the years 1996-1999.

The four schools described in this document represent the highest-scoring schools in Texas on the Spanish TAAS in reading that met our criteria. The assumption was made that the children taking the Spanish TAAS in third-grade were meeting minimum expectations because they had received adequate preparation from Kindergarten until the time they took the test in third-grade. Thus, our principal task was to try to describe the Spanish reading programs that served these children.

## **Methodology**

Site visits were conducted at each school for purposes of data collection. Each site visit was approximately two-days long and was conducted by two researchers. The site visits included audiotaped interviews with key administrators, the schools' K-3 bilingual teachers, and other individuals who had knowledge of the Spanish reading program and of the local community. The researchers observed K-3 classrooms in order to understand how Spanish reading instruction was delivered and also reviewed documents that were made available by school personnel. An effort was made to keep the data collection as uniform as possible from site to site.

At each of the schools, the following elements of were examined through interviews, observation, and document analysis:

- Community and school climate - general information about the community and language use, including student demographics.
- Philosophy - the district's or school's philosophy or beliefs regarding learning to read in Spanish.
- Language policies - information that either explicitly or implicitly reflects the district's or school's language policies, most of which are tied to the type of bilingual education program the school has chosen to implement.
- Initiatives - recent initiatives taken by the district or school to promote reading in Spanish.
- Staffing - teacher and staff characteristics which support the Spanish reading program.
- Program design - general description of the Spanish reading program.
- Instruction – methods of teaching observed during site visits.
- Materials - different kinds of didactic materials used for teaching the children to read in Spanish.

- Assessment - assessment and evaluation activities used by the school, with special reference to the Spanish TAAS in reading.
- Professional development - description of the kinds of professional development activities teachers have been provided for enhancing the Spanish reading program.
- Perceptions of success - the reasons why the staff members believe they have experienced success in teaching their students to read in Spanish as measured by the TAAS.

Once the data were collected, all of the taped interviews were transcribed and coded in accordance with the method suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Data collected from the classroom observations and from the analysis of available school and district documents were used to corroborate data from the taped interviews. Once a narrative description of each of the four schools was constructed, including a description of each school's Spanish reading program, the narrative was forwarded to a key person at each school site for review and comment. The objective of this procedure was to check for the trustworthiness of the descriptions generated by the two researchers.

### **The Four Schools**

Site 1 is situated in the central Rio Grande Valley and has a population of 28,500. Located immediately behind the school is low-cost public housing for migrant families, referred to as the "Labor Camp" or a "Colonia," which is home to nearly half of the students. This elementary school opened in 1991, and is one of seven in the district. It serves over 900 students from Kindergarten through fourth grade. The student population is 99.6% Hispanic; 69% of the student body is Limited English Proficient (LEP); and 92.9% are "economically disadvantaged", as defined by the state.

The students are served by 54 teachers and 17.8 full-time instructional assistants. Seventy-eight percent of the teaching staff are Hispanic, and twenty-two percent are White; and all of the bilingual teachers are Hispanic. The average number of years of teaching experience of the faculty is approximately seven years; however, an administrator reported that the bilingual program has a less experienced staff due to turnover in recent years.

The school has received numerous official accolades for high student test scores; and numerous plaques, framed certificates, and banners line the walls in a wide hallway outside the library. The TEA recently awarded this school with accountability ratings of "Exemplary" (1996-1997, 1997-1998) and "Recognized" (1994-1995, 1995-1996). In addition, the school has been recognized as a high-performing Title I school and awarded an "Exceptional Status" by the Division of Migrant Education. The central location of displays for these awards gives visitors the sense that this school is proud of its established history of academic success based on student test scores.

Site 2 is situated in one of many urban, working-class neighborhoods which comprise the northern portion of the school district. A casual drive through the vicinity reveals clean, modest homes, a handful of strolling teenagers, sporadic gang tags, and small businesses serving Spanish-speaking customers. There is some indication that Spanish is widely used and valued in this area. Spanish is spoken openly in public places; one teacher stated that when she first moved

to the area from the Midwest, that she could hardly believe how many people spoke Spanish openly on the bus. Many local radio stations broadcast exclusively in the language, and some magazines and newspapers are also available in Spanish. Many of the merchants at a local mall are bilingual. Moreover, there is some evidence of businesses in need of bilingual professionals (e.g., banking and retail management). One teacher noted that speaking Spanish in the community served by the school is more valued than in other school communities in the area. The Spanish-speaking community served is primarily of Mexican origin. According to the teachers at the school, some of the parents never acquire English, and employment can be secured that does not require proficiency in the language. Some of the children arrive in Kindergarten speaking only Spanish, even though they may have been born in the U.S. Based on teacher interviews, the parents want their children to become bilingual, and the teachers in the bilingual program view the local variety of Spanish as a foundation on which to build self-esteem and biliteracy for life-long learning.

The school is fairly modern, built in 1993 to meet the demands of the growing student population in the area. With nearly 800 students, three main student groups are represented: 84% Hispanic (primarily Mexican), 14% White, and 2% African American. The LEP population for 96-97 was nearly 49%, and the school's economically-disadvantaged students were nearly 90% of the population. The school community has been characterized as fairly stable, with relatively low mobility.

Site 3 is on the U.S.-Mexican border in a semi-urban setting. A brief drive through the neighborhoods serving the children revealed small, clean, modest homes uniformly built, and access to modern businesses along the expressway. From the right vantage point of the neighborhood, one can easily see the Mexican side of the border. Because the school district is situated on the border, Spanish is spoken by many in everyday communication. Spanish radio, television, and newspapers are readily available, and the local public libraries have made it a point to purchase books in Spanish. English is also used in this area; bilingualism seems commonplace. Teacher interviews revealed that most of the parents had little formal schooling in Mexico and were not highly educated.

Of the 713 students enrolled at this elementary school, nearly 95% are Hispanic, 3% African American, and 2% White. Over one-third of the students are English language learners (i.e., limited English proficient). Eighty-five percent of the students are economically disadvantaged and mobility is approximately 16%. School attendance is high, at approximately 97%.

Site 4 is in a rural community situated along the banks of the Rio Grande, about 50 miles northwest of McAllen. According to a document provided by the school, this county is the third most impoverished in the United States. An international bridge joins this community with another in Mexico. While there is fluid movement between members of the two communities, many Mexicans live and work on the U.S. side during the week and return "home" for the weekend. The community has a population of 9,803 and faces serious unemployment issues. The homes, stores, and ancient mission found near downtown give the appearance of a town lifted directly from the interior of Mexico. Spanish is the language used most often in the home and community, while the use of English is limited primarily to the schools.

This school is one of four elementary schools in the district and has a student population of 482 in grades K-3. The student population is 100% Hispanic. Eighty-six percent of the student

population is classified as LEP, and 92.3% of the students are classified as economically disadvantaged. According to state provided statistics, the mobility rate of the student population is 15.4%.

The school is located on a large campus, which houses two other elementary schools. Even though all three schools are physically situated next to one another, each of the three schools has a separate staff and serves different grade levels (e.g., K-3 or 4-6). The campus was divided into three separate schools over the last ten years because the "school-within-a-school" model was thought to better serve the needs of the students and their families.

## **Findings**

Whereas the features described below were shared across the four sites, it should be mentioned that there were many equally-robust features that were unique to the individual sites (e.g., the personalities of the staff). That is to say, there were site-specific features that certainly contributed to each site's success on the Spanish TAAS in reading; however, the following were common to all the sites.

### *Feature 1: Explicit support of Spanish-literacy and biliteracy*

Teachers and administrators, and in some cases parents, voiced clear, unequivocal support for the development of students' literacy in Spanish. Educators at all four schools spoke directly, even passionately, about their support for quality bilingual education. Biliteracy was viewed as crucial for the English language learner at all four sites, especially since all were located within communities where Spanish was widely used and valued. Spanish-literacy was viewed as important to the development of pride in the children's language and culture or, as one teacher mentioned, the language of "home and heart." Many also viewed the development of bilingualism as a future asset, especially in terms of future economic opportunities or life in a multicultural society.

A litany of direct quotes citing individuals' support of bilingualism could be listed; however, just as important were the efforts made by the schools in support of bilingualism. The schools' efforts included school-based initiatives specifically targeting reading in Spanish, opportunities for professional development for the bilingual classroom teachers, strategies to inform the community about their bilingual education programs, and efforts to include and inform the parents of English language learners in the affairs of schooling. Two central concepts of an initiative at one school exemplify the efforts made to support their bilingual program: "(1) high quality subject matter instruction, without translation, in the first language of the students; and (2) development of literacy in a student's first language."

Schools also demonstrated their support for Spanish-literacy and bilingualism by offering professional development opportunities to teachers. In most instances, these professional development opportunities were provided in Spanish, including materials and professional articles. One superintendent explained that, because the bilingual teachers had had limited experience with grade-level materials in Spanish and had received all of their teacher education in English, professional development in Spanish was crucial to helping students develop higher levels of Spanish proficiency.

Also noteworthy were the levels of Spanish proficiency of the bilingual classroom teachers. All

of the bilingual education teachers at the four schools were proficient in Spanish and, with one exception, were native speakers of Spanish or were raised in families for whom Spanish was the first language. In addition, many teachers were themselves once English learners in bilingual classrooms in the United States.

Although there was ample evidence of school and community support for Spanish-literacy at the four schools at the time of this study, one administrator described a recent public campaign that had been undertaken by the school district to address negative community perceptions of the bilingual program. She recounted how, generally, the community was not supportive of a bilingual program that, it was felt, offered English language learners instruction that was inferior to English instruction. This sentiment was especially strong among recent immigrants to the U.S. from Mexico, who were afraid that the bilingual program was not teaching their children English rapidly enough.

As a result of these community sentiments, however, the school district initiated a substantive public campaign to inform parents about the bilingual program in order to garner their support for the program. At the same time, however, the district also concentrated educational resources toward improving the quality of the instruction in Spanish and improving the quality of the educational materials utilized in the bilingual classrooms.

Three of the four schools demonstrated their support for Spanish literacy through their efforts to shift the focus of their bilingual education programs from a more traditional, transitional model to dual-language, or two-way immersion, models. One school made the transition from an early-exit (K-2) bilingual education program to a late-exit (K-5) model, and now is implementing a dual-language bilingual program in which biliteracy is the understood goal. One school is located in a district with an established vision statement, which highlights bilingualism for all students. In this district's monthly bulletin, the vision statement reads: "All students who enroll in our schools will graduate from high school fluently bilingual and prepared to enter a four-year college or university." These shifts signify, according to an administrator at the school, the district's effort to further support the Spanish-speaking student. According to one bilingual coordinator, this shift signifies an effort to support Spanish-speaking students "in philosophy, in education, in materials, and everything that they need."

This support for bilingualism was also reflected in the efforts made to create a welcoming environment for the parents of the English language learners, who may not speak English themselves, in order to inform them about the educational programs. Parent meetings are held in Spanish and any information which students take home is also available in Spanish. One of the schools even served as a site for a Spanish-literacy program operated for parents by a local community college. At all the schools, offices were managed by administrative assistants who spoke Spanish. In three schools, the entire administrative staff was bilingual, and in one school a European-American principal has made a concerted effort to learn Spanish by attending intensive language institutes in Mexico in order to communicate more effectively with students and parents who may not speak English.

### *Feature 2: High expectations*

Whereas there are many in education who think students who come from backgrounds of hardship (most frequently related to a family's low income) have valid reasons for failing, none

of the people we spoke with at the four sites accepted such reasoning. The phrases "Where Excellence is Expected" or "no excuses" exemplify the attitudes shared by administrators and teachers at each of the four sites. At each site, administrators and teachers held high expectations for all students, and these high expectations were communicated clearly to parents and students. All of the schools have instituted some sort of school-wide, comprehensive tutoring, intervention, after-school, and/or summer program, all of which are designed to help students, including English language learners, who struggle in the classroom.

One administrator stated that she believed that the school had developed a belief/value system that simply didn't allow for any excuses for children not meeting the state's academic standards. The principal summarized this sentiment: "I don't care where [the students] come from. I harp on that constantly. We have no control over the family environment, we have no control over what goes on at home to a certain extent. We have 100% control over what happens here in school. And there are no excuses. If they are from a low economic home, they are still going to come here and they are still going to learn. I think it's just the thinking [of the teachers]."

According to another administrator, "...there is no talk here about the misery of 'those' people. Teachers are not allowed to talk about how poor our students are, or how they are from single parents, or how they didn't get education in Mexico...what we call the misery index."

The high expectations that teachers and administrators voiced concerning their students were commensurate with the high expectations that they held for themselves. After working to improve their teaching practices through increased professional development and availability of educational materials, a teacher from one school commented, "We used all the resources available and teachers worked to improve the bilingual classes, but the most important factor [in making our Spanish reading program more effective] was that we just expected more of ourselves and our kids." In each of the four schools, there was ample evidence of a dedication on the part of teachers and administrators to do whatever they could to ensure that English language learners become successful readers. Teachers demonstrated their determination by working after normal school hours tutoring students or working in after-school programs, and by showing their willingness to experiment with new techniques to help struggling readers achieve.

### *Feature 3: Shared understanding of the Spanish reading program.*

Whereas it has already been mentioned that teachers and administrators at each of the four sites voiced their clear support for the bilingual program at their schools, equally apparent was their ability to clearly articulate the overall goals of their Spanish reading program. Time and again, teachers and administrators, and in some cases parents, could consistently and clearly describe the nature of "the reading program" in place at their respective schools. It appeared that teachers and administrators at each of the sites were "on the same page." At each site, similar vocabulary was used to describe classroom practices, and similar expectations of students were spelled out. The descriptions offered by teachers and administrators about their reading programs were also consistent with what was observed taking place in the classroom.

This shared understanding of the reading program appeared to facilitate strong cooperation among the teachers, both vertically (between grade levels) and horizontally (within grade levels). At each of the four sites, bilingual classroom teachers within grade levels met regularly to plan, exchange ideas, share materials, and discuss other instructional issues. According to a teacher at

one school, "We learn a lot from each other that we know will be appropriate for our school and for our students. Everybody's very willing to share and nobody's really put off because [a teacher]'s doing it. We're eager to learn from each other." At some of the sites, this cohesion was based on a shared history of working together for an extended period of time, while at other sites it was facilitated through administrative practices, such as the arrangement of common planning times or the mandating of grade-level meetings. This cohesion within grade levels also provided support for new teachers.

Teachers at the four sites demonstrated an ability to articulate an understanding of where they fit into the reading program as a whole. This understanding of the Spanish reading program was facilitated by administrators who provided opportunities for teachers from the various grade levels to meet and discuss specific curricula for each particular grade level and how each grade level could support the others. This vertical contact between grade levels was further enhanced through assignments to committees that established curricular goals.

*Feature 4: Alignment between Spanish and English programs.*

Although this investigation focused solely on Spanish reading instruction within the bilingual program, it became quite apparent at each of the sites that the bilingual education programs and the "regular" educational program worked in unison. At each of the sites, teachers met as a grade level, not as bilingual teachers and regular teachers. One teacher stated, "In English and in Spanish we are doing the same things because we work together and we plan together."

According to one administrator, "Our Spanish program and our English program have always gone hand in hand. Just because we weren't accountable for our Spanish TAAS scores didn't mean that we weren't pushing our Spanish-language reading." Teachers demonstrated awareness of what levels of literacy were being attained by students across the grade level, in English and in Spanish. There was significant evidence that one set of expectations was in place for all students, regardless of their language of instruction. Alignment was communicated through the literacy initiatives, which targeted both Spanish and English reading goals.

Organizationally, one school worked to create what the district bilingual coordinator called a "seamless curriculum." According to a document provided by the school, the idea of the seamless curriculum is to "create a single curriculum that can be taught in either English or Spanish. The focus is on teaching and learning in two languages and on assuring comparability in all aspects—staff development, reading and other content area materials, computer hardware/software, assessment, literature, etc." At several of the sites, teachers within grade levels worked on and developed thematic units on which both bilingual and regular classroom students worked.

*Feature 5: Explicit targeting of "skills" involved in reading beginning in Kindergarten*

The design of the Spanish reading programs at each of the four sites was based on an early introduction to formal, explicit instruction in reading, especially in the area of "phonics," or decoding instruction. Several teachers and administrators used the term "academic" to describe their Kindergarten programs. This academic focus in Kindergarten, according to the teachers and administrators, helped construct a foundation upon which the Spanish reading program was based. First-grade bilingual classroom teachers at each of the sites commented that their "job"

(i.e., teaching the students to read) has been made much easier because of the work of the Kindergarten bilingual classroom teachers. According to many teachers, "almost all" of the students arrive in first grade already reading. One first-grade teacher said that this early focus on phonics means that "kids are coming out of Kindergarten reading words already...so by the time we get them, we're very able to take off on actual reading."

At one site, teachers commented that they do not wait until first grade to begin to teach reading, as is done in some other schools with which she was familiar, where, according to these teachers, the direct teaching of reading is seen as "developmentally inappropriate." Classroom observations at each of the sites revealed that this "academic" focus in Kindergarten reading instruction took the form of direct and explicit instruction in letter-sound relationships, syllable formation, and the construction of words or phrases based on simple syllables. At one school, Kindergarten students were asked to memorize sight words in order to prepare them for entry into the school's basal anthology series in first grade.

The decoding instruction in the four schools in this study was focused on building up the learners' decoding skills or moving from smaller units of language (e.g., letters, syllables) to larger units (e.g., words, sentences, stories) through the use of structured phonics, or decoding program materials. In interviews, teachers expressed the belief that the children need to develop a basic foundation first in order to become proficient readers. This foundation was seen to be established through direct instruction of skills. In Kindergarten and first grade, word analysis skills used to "decode" syllables and words were the focus of instruction, whereas in the later grades (i.e., second and third), comprehension strategies were the focus of instruction. The bilingual education teachers across the four sites were remarkably consistent in their approaches to developing young Spanish readers.

*Feature 6: Explicit targeting of TAAS through analysis of TAAS data and practice testing*

At each of the sites, a substantial amount of energy and resources was devoted to preparing teachers and students for the yearly TAAS administration. Both administrators and teachers conducted official reviews of the TAAS data, directed either at the school level or the district level. Extensive reviews of the previous year's TAAS data strongly influenced the curricular goals for the schools. In some cases, the achievement of these curricular goals was monitored through administrative reports or reviews of lesson plans. At several of the sites, the analysis of the TAAS data determined the types of professional development teachers were provided, and at some of the sites, this analysis determined the types of materials that were ordered to support classroom instruction.

One school was required by the district to construct a "Campus Action Plan" (CAP). This CAP included specific yearly instructional goals for teachers that were directly linked to the students' performance on the TAAS in the previous year. Each school in this district must set its goal as a 90% passing rate for all students, in all subjects, regardless of the language in which the students take the test. This allows the district to monitor the progress towards meeting this goal. However, the schools decide how these goals should be met instructionally.

At another school, the principal spends her summers studying the previous year's TAAS data. In August, at the first teacher in-service day, inter-grade and intra-grade level teachers are able to see what reading objectives they are and are not meeting on the TAAS. Specific TAAS

objectives are then targeted throughout the year. These specific objectives are also targeted through explicit school initiatives, expected outcomes, formative assessments, check point dates, persons responsible, resources, and progress reports.

Preparation for TAAS also included students taking practice TAAS tests. In one case, second-grade students took what the school called a "baby" TAAS at the same time as the rest of the students were taking the actual TAAS. The results of the practice TAAS have a strong influence on the types of instruction students receive in the classroom. At another site, students took a TAAS-like assessment every six weeks; whereas at one school, third-grade teachers administered mini-practice tests every two weeks "to make sure we have gotten all the TAAS objectives." At another site, third-grade students completed a TAAS-like reading comprehension passage daily.

At one school, TAAS objectives are explicitly targeted for coverage as early as Kindergarten, and are organized around a calendar broken down by week and day. Each month, each grade level writes their TAAS plan, which includes targeted objectives and the materials, drill, practice exercises, and pre-evaluation activities that will be carried out to meet these objectives. One teacher reported, "We teachers have become experts in TAAS." Another teacher at this same site stated that teachers have become so familiar with the TAAS objectives that they are able to practice, modify, and adopt refined approaches to teaching targeted objectives. Ultimately, the teachers claim they are able to "guide [the children] to the mental processes of what [the text writers] are expecting." According to one veteran teacher: "We emphasize [the TAAS] quite a bit. We know we have to do well on it. But we know that the TAAS isn't everything, and if our students are achieving at a high level, then we want to take them as high as we can and surpass it even if it's not being tested on the TAAS."

When the principal of this school was asked if teachers or administrators feel pressure from the TAAS, the principal responded, "A lot of pressure. Yes." A teacher at the same school stated, "I stress the importance of the TAAS test to the students. I tell them that I take tests too, and I even tell them about the Exit TAAS for a high school diploma." Another teacher felt that stressing the importance of TAAS lets the students know what they are responsible for learning and what teachers are responsible for teaching.

## **Discussion**

### *Feature 1: Explicit support of Spanish-literacy and biliteracy.*

Explicit support for developing the Spanish reading ability of the students appears to have its foundation in the school, home, and community. None of the previous studies reviewed at the beginning of this paper pay much attention to the value attached to learning to read in Spanish held by the teachers, staff, and administrators within the school and district setting. Each study, in fact, is set within a school context of early-exit transitional bilingual education. Consequently, reading in Spanish was viewed mainly as a vehicle for learning to read in English and not as an ability to be cultivated over the long term (e.g., K-6).

At our sites the vast majority of the teachers and administrators were bilingual themselves, many of them native Spanish-speakers, and viewed bilingualism and biliteracy as a part of who the learner is and also as a resource. Each school tended more toward an additive orientation to bilingualism as evidenced by their move away from early-exit transitional bilingual education

programs. As Escamilla (1994, p. 21) argues, "The larger school context can greatly impact what goes on in bilingual classrooms within the school". This is also in line with Collier's (1996) finding of effective two-way bilingual education programs as being environments where equal status between the two languages is achieved or at least is an explicit goal. In sum, the sociolinguistic environment of the school may have increased students' motivation to read in Spanish.

Support for developing the Spanish reading ability of the students also appears to have been available from the home and immediate community. Teachers and administrators reported that parents wanted their children to be bilingual and biliterate. We did not directly interview parents. Consequently, the uses for reading in Spanish, in the home and community, are unknown to us.

On the other hand, three of the four sites are along the Texas-Mexico border where spoken Spanish is widely used in and outside of schooling. This is congruent with the finding of Mace-Matluck, Hoover, and Calfee (1989) which highlights the influence the site variable appears to exert on Spanish reading development. Children living in these linguistic environments are afforded richer access to the Spanish-language, which broadens their oral language development, a critical factor in learning to read in any language. August and Hakuta (1997) state: "Considerable evidence is now accumulating that good readers arrive at school with greater ability to use oral language in ways that are adapted to the needs of nonpresent listeners that linguistically mark relations across utterances, and honor genre-specific rules for organizing discourse" (p. 56).

It is worth noting that among the states in the Southwest, language shift (e.g., the replacement of Spanish with English) is slowest in Texas (Hernández-Chávez, 1996). It may be that the children are retaining their Spanish-language long enough to facilitate their Spanish reading development. As August and Hakuta (1997, p. 41) recommend, more research is needed to understand "whether there are risks associated with the loss of familial languages by young children."

Even in the urban site, we were impressed with the level of academic Spanish proficiency of the students and teachers we heard during our classroom observations. Recall, at this site, all of the bilingual teachers, except one, were native speakers of Spanish. Some of the students' parents never learned English, or needed to, even for securing employment. Some students arrived in Kindergarten speaking only Spanish, even though they were born in the U.S. Interestingly, Prince (1987) and Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) also conducted their studies in urban settings, Hartford, Connecticut, and Los Angeles, California, respectively.

According to Durgunoglu and Verhoeven (1998), Fradd and Boswell (1996) and Solé (1980), if the use of the minority language offers opportunities for economic gain, the language will also enjoy a higher status. The school personnel we interviewed did not provide a resounding and unambiguous economic motivation for learning to read in Spanish. In other words, the teachers did not report that learning to read in Spanish was critical to their students' future economic well being. Nor was there any observable efforts on the part of native English-speaking children at the school sites to learn to read in Spanish, which could be considered a mark of prestige for the Spanish-language.

*Feature 2: High expectations.*

Having high expectations of both the learners' achievement and of teachers' fulfilling their teaching responsibilities does not appear to be a feature that has been highlighted in the studies reviewed related to teaching children to read in Spanish. This characteristic, however, has been widely cited in other relevant literature as contributing to student achievement. Ladson-Billings (1994), for example, maintains that teachers of successful learners of color "believe that students are capable of excellence, and they assume responsibility for ensuring that their students achieve that excellence" (p. 18). Scheurich (1998), in his study of highly successful schools, states: "Although many educators and schools commonly espouse this belief, especially in their mission or vision statement, few, in my experience, are truly committed to enacting it. In fact, to say of the educators in these highly successful schools that they are truly committed to success for all is an understatement. They are fiercely committed, not just to holding out high expectations for all children but for achieving high levels of success with all children" (p. 461).

We believe that the schools we studied each had their own way of conveying high expectations to both the students and teachers, but all were supportive ways. For example, at the Rio Grande Valley site, the teachers received continuous support from the school's curriculum specialist in reading. If a child was not progressing, the teachers received the support they needed to try something different. At the urban site, in contrast, it was the teachers who, among themselves, sought to find the way to best reach each child. They relied on each other for the support they needed to reach each child. Overall, the schools refused to let any child slip through the cracks; underachievement was not an option, at least not without a good fight.

*Feature 3: Shared understanding of the Spanish reading program.*

The shared understanding that the administrators and teachers conveyed about how their Spanish reading program worked is a characteristic of these schools that is tangentially treated in Prince (1987). Prince, for example, asked whether or not regular classroom teachers could describe and demonstrate that they support the bilingual program at their school. However, she does not report what she found.

The Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) study was essentially concerned with describing the process teachers went through to reach a consensus regarding how to teach children to read in Spanish. In this sense, their teachers also demonstrated a shared understanding of their program. Similarly, Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Ivory and Slavin (1997) mention that extensive teacher staff development was undertaken at their site. Mace-Matluck, Hoover, and Calfee (1989) make no reference to this factor.

It may well be that the collective awareness of teachers and administrators about their reading program is more akin to holding themselves accountable for the success of all children. Again, drawing on the thinking of Scheurich (1998, p. 475): "This means that just succeeding with the children in one's classroom is not sufficient; each teacher must work together with administrators and other teachers to ensure success for all children."

At our sites, what Kindergarten teachers did to develop the Spanish reading skills of the children did, in fact, matter to the third-grade teachers and teachers used mutually agreed upon strategies. In this way, all of the K-3 grade level teachers forged a clearer understanding of how they were collectively going to assist the children in developing their ability to read in Spanish. In turn, success (or lack of success) was not attributed exclusively to the efforts of the third-grade

teachers, the grade at which the TAAS is first administered. All teachers who had taught these learners were accountable.

*Feature 4: Alignment between Spanish and English programs.*

The alignment we observed between the Spanish and English reading programs essentially leads to a discussion of equity in terms of how each reading program was valued and supported by the school personnel. Prince (1987) cited three program characteristics that she believes supported the schools' Spanish reading programs where she conducted research: principal support, integration and acceptance into the mainstream school structure, and access to curricular materials. Several researchers have cited the role of the principal as crucial to the success of language-minority-education programs (e.g., Carter & Chatfield, 1986). According to Goldenberg and Sullivan (1994), the principal's role is crucial and is fundamentally to provide support and exert pressure.

Each of the four principals we interviewed fulfilled these two criteria. It was the school principals who created the expectation and needed opportunities for teachers to plan together whether they were teaching children to read in Spanish or English. It was also the principals who reinforced the value that teaching the children to read in Spanish was just as important as teaching children to read in English. Similarly, the principals sought to distribute resources (e.g., materials for teaching reading, computers and software, professional development opportunities) equitably. In short, the Spanish reading program was integrated and accepted into the mainstream school structure. However, there is one marked discrepancy between the English and Spanish reading programs that was voiced at each school; the availability of Spanish reading materials. The school librarians reported in their interviews with us that there were not enough Spanish reading materials for the children. The reasons most often cited were that books in Spanish were not widely available for purchase, too costly, or of inferior quality (e.g., poorly-bound books). There was a marked commitment on behalf of the librarians to seek them out, nonetheless. Teachers responded by building their own personal classroom libraries (at their own expense), carefully translating materials, and openly sharing resources with one another.

While the schools in this study appear to have offset the lack of quality reading materials in Spanish, the scarcity of Spanish reading materials in schools and local public libraries is a national problem (Goldenberg, 1994; González-Jensen, 1997; Pucci, 1994) that may negatively influence the Spanish reading development of young children in the U.S. What is bewildering is why books in Spanish are so scarce in the U.S. Spanish is one of the world's most widely-spoken languages, and the most widely-spoken language in the Western Hemisphere. In short, this situation illustrates how teaching children to read in Spanish transcends the school grounds.

*Feature 5: Explicit targeting of skills involved in reading beginning in Kindergarten.*

The Kindergarten teachers across each site explicitly taught academic reading skills (e.g., phonics, syllables, sight words) in order to prepare students for the rigors of Grade 1 reading instruction. Teachers also read to the students and engaged them in some meaning-based reading activities. Nonetheless, the emphasis, across grades K-3, was towards the teaching of explicit linguistic elements and skills. This was not only our impression; recall that a description of each school's Spanish reading program was reviewed by a key person at each site to ensure accuracy.

Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) initially found an anti-academic orientation to literacy development in Kindergarten at their research site. Reading instruction had no place in this school's Kindergarten program. It was viewed as developmentally inappropriate. Teachers began teaching letter sounds around the middle of the school year or later. On the other hand, that staff also held the deficit-oriented belief that low-income, Spanish-speaking children, offspring of marginally-educated parents, were not ready for literacy instruction.

Goldenberg and Gallimore facilitated and witnessed the gradual acceptance among teachers of the importance of providing young readers with a broader set of literacy experiences and a more academic orientation to reading in Spanish. While the new orientation appears to have included a phonics, syllabic, and sight-word component, the children were also encouraged to read in Spanish through the use of classroom-made predictable books (i.e., libritos). This represented a major shift in the literacy culture of the Kindergarten teachers at this school.

The National Research Council (1998) publication, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, recommends that Kindergarten reading instruction encompass both the mechanics of reading (e.g., practice with the sound structure of words, recognition of letters, and purposes for reading) and the development of text comprehension (e.g., talk about books, reading strategies, and the development of conceptual knowledge). The sites we observed emphasized the mechanics part of the reading experiences described by Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) and the recommendations of the National Research Council (1998).

Similarly, none of the teachers delivering instruction at Grades 1 through 3 readily described their approach to teaching reading in Spanish as balanced between the explicit teaching of the units of language and daily experiences with exploring reading in a broader sense. There was, however, an emphasis placed on the development of reading strategies (e.g., making inferences, predicting, summarizing). What appeared to be lacking were equal opportunities to respond to literature, capitalize on the prior knowledge and culture of the learners, and use reading for inquiry and research. Overall, our impression of the reading programs we examined is that they all more readily used synthetic (e.g., from part to whole) and analytic (e.g., from whole to part) reading methods (see Freeman & Freeman, 1998 for a more complete description of these approaches). The "whole" in this case did not generally represent an authentic text or story.

This focus on decoding and skills development may prove detrimental to the students' reading development over time, however. Several researchers have argued that an over-emphasis on skills-based instruction, at the expense of the reading of texts, impedes the natural literacy development process of English language learners later in school (Anderson & Joels, 1986; Barnitz, 1985; Edelsky, 1986; Franklin, 1986; Rigg & Enright, 1986). Goldenberg (1998), for example, reasons that children in grades two and three need numerous opportunities to read familiar stories and books as a way for the young readers to confirm what they know about print and its conventions. As they refine this knowledge, and engage regularly with whole texts, they better position themselves for transitioning into reading as a means to learning.

In an article central to this discussion, Dressman (1999) unpacks the development of the reading curriculum mandated by the state. Briefly, Dressman maintains that the reading curriculum in question is premised on a skewed body of reading research which emphasizes phonemic awareness and discrete reading skills. Dressman (1999) states: "A close reading of these curriculum policy statements and their supporting evidence shows their propositions to be

not so much research based as research laced. Reading them, I was unable to detect any sign of a thorough review of literacy research of the past 30 years that could be named as the foundation, or base, of the policies named in them" (p. 279).

Further, the Spanish reading curriculum is essentially parallel to the English reading curriculum mandated by the state. This is problematic on three counts. First, and providing Dressman is correct in his analysis, the English reading curriculum mandated by the state does not rest on a sound research foundation (see addendum for references and elaboration). Second, it assumes that the social context for teaching children to read in English is essentially the same as teaching children to read in Spanish. For example, there are reading skills the learner must master related to literary response, recognizing various text types, conducting inquiry and research, increasing knowledge of his/her own culture as well as the culture of others, and reading for different purposes. However, there is also a serious problem obtaining reading materials in Spanish to support the mastery of these objectives. Thus, it should not be surprising that schools teaching reading in Spanish spend more time teaching print awareness, phonological awareness, letter-sound relationships, vocabulary development, and comprehension skills or what is basically the balance of the mandated curriculum.

Lastly, a parallel, grade-level curriculum gives the impression that a child who is being taught to read first in Spanish will be able to transition into reading in English without losing any ground. Using fluency as an example, the curriculum calls for the "typical" fourth grader to read approximately 90 words per minute. Is it reasonable to assume that a fourth grade English language learner who has transitioned into English reading can achieve this level of fluency in a school year? This is clearly pushing (or ignoring) the issue of what knowledge and skills about reading transfer from Spanish to English. As August and Hakuta (1997) maintain: "Studies of the nature of what can be transferred from first-to second-language reading need to take into account not only the level of first-language reading, but also the level and content of the second-language reading material" (p. 52).

*Feature 6: Explicit targeting of TAAS through analysis of TAAS data and practice testing.*

Concerning the explicit attention each school paid to preparing for the TAAS, it is undeniable that teachers and administrators felt obligated and pressed to teach to the test. Much hinges on the schools', teachers', and students' performance on this high-stakes measure. As researchers, we are not concerned that the schools guided their instruction by the TAAS, provided that the Spanish reading test has an ample degree of validity as set forth by Messick (1989, p. 5): "... validity is an inductive summary of both the existing evidence for and the actual as well as potential consequences of score interpretation and use. Hence, what is to be validated is not the test or observation device as such but the inferences derived from test scores or other indicators' inferences about score meaning or interpretation and about implications for action that the interpretation entails."

Prince (1987), Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) and Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Ivory and Slavin (1997) each conducted their studies based on mandated district or state reading tests. None of the researchers, however, review or question the validity of the Spanish reading measures on which their findings rely.

To our knowledge, outside of the education agency responsible for the development of the

Spanish TAAS, there is no empirical evidence (e.g., impartial review of the test by a researcher) that would support the validity of the reading portion of the Spanish TAAS. On the contrary, there has been some recent research on the English TAAS which questions the measure's validity.

Hoffman, et al. (in press) conducted a survey of 200 reading teachers, most of whom taught at the elementary level in low-income, minority communities in Texas. The researchers report that the majority of the reading teachers surveyed (1) challenged the validity of the test, especially for minority students and English language learners; (2) did not believe that increases in test scores were the result of higher levels of student learning but rather of teaching to the test; and (3) reported that if a subject is not going to be tested, it will not be taught.

In a separate study conducted by McNeil and Valenzuela (2000) on the use of the TAAS in Texas, similar concerns were raised regarding the validity of the TAAS and the negative social consequences associated with its use. Relative to the present discussion, these researchers maintain that the TAAS reduces the quality and quantity of curriculum and instruction and is aimed at the lowest level of skills and information. McNeil and Valenzuela also argue that at some schools reading instruction has been reduced to practice with reading texts much like those that are used on the TAAS short excerpts. They also maintain that students who received reading instruction for several years that was tied to TAAS practice materials were unable to read a novel two grade levels below their own.

Both Hoffman et al. (in press) and McNeil and Valenzuela (2000) raise concerns about the possibility of the TAAS being used in other states. To wit, the TAAS has become an important part of the presidential debate with implications for the nation. Greenberger (2000, p. A18) reports, "In emphasizing education, Bush is relying heavily on his Texas record-and that record is rooted firmly in the TAAS. TAAS-like tests are also part of Bush's presidential plan."

Such a political strategy could be premature given questions surrounding the test's validity. Further, students' performance in reading in Texas has not significantly improved between 1992 and 1998 as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Ballator, Jerry, & Rogers, 1999). Naturally, significant improvement in reading on the NAEP test would help support the validity of the TAAS.

It should be borne in mind that none of these findings are specific to teaching reading in Spanish. Nonetheless, the Spanish version of the TAAS is designed to be comparable in content to the English TAAS and both are designed to assess the state curriculum, which arguably lacks a sound research foundation (Dressman, 1999). Thus, there is little reason to believe that the ramifications and consequences of using the TAAS are much different for the teaching of reading to Spanish-speaking children. The meaning of the learners' Spanish reading test scores (e.g., minimal competency) and the school ratings that are generated by the test scores (e.g., exemplary) may not be valid for making the high-stakes decisions for which they are used (e.g., retention or showcasing a school).

In sum, the teachers and the administrators at the schools we identified as exemplary were unquestionably committed to doing the best they could for the children. The educators valued learning to read in Spanish, held the students and themselves to high standards, equitably supported the reading program and understood their Spanish reading program. We view the first

four features as essential building blocks for any successful Spanish reading program.

On the other hand, the four schools' use of a skills-based approach to teaching reading and the explicit targeting of the TAAS Spanish reading objectives, in our estimation, are features motivated by the state education agency and beyond the control of the teachers and school administrators. In agreement with other researchers, we would not encourage schools to focus on teaching reading skills at the expense of providing balanced opportunities for children to experience reading authentic texts, beginning in Kindergarten. Is it poor educational practice to teach to a test? In our judgment, much depends on how valid the test is. Until we know more about the validity of the Spanish TAAS reading subtest used at third-grade, and the integrity of the curriculum it purports to measure, our findings must be considered with these two caveats in mind.

## **Conclusion**

The development of English language learners' Spanish reading ability in a bilingual, bicultural context is an extremely complex process that is ultimately influenced by a great number of forces, many of which reside outside the walls of the classroom. These forces interact, often in synergistic ways, blurring the lines between cause and effect. To better understand the ways in which English language learners successfully acquire Spanish reading skills in the early grades requires a broader theoretical matrix from which to launch research. This better understanding should help us forge improved related policies.

Durgunoglu and Verhoeven (1998) suggest the examination of economic and sociocultural forces, in addition to educational factors, to understand the process by which students become or fail to become bilingual and biliterate. Factors such as language policy, size and geographic location of the community, and the economic benefits of knowing two languages each shape what we see in schools and classrooms. The linguistic vitality (e.g., patterns of language shift or maintenance) of the Spanish-speaking communities due to immigration and back migration, and community Spanish-literacy patterns, also add to the complexity of studying this issue. There are educational factors such as the program design, teacher qualifications and commitment, the quality and availability of instructional materials, the integrity of the curriculum, and the validity of the tests used to measure reading ability that each influence how well young Spanish-speaking students learn to read in Spanish.

For this reason, we suggest that there is no simplistic answer to what may have contributed to the apparent positive student outcomes on the Spanish TAAS. We attempted to observe and report on salient features of the school context, but this was beyond the scope of our study. At a minimum, a more complete investigation would entail an inter-disciplinary research team consisting of professionals with backgrounds in educational psychology, administration, and curriculum and instruction, as well as ethnography, linguistics, and economics. Only then will a clearer picture emerge of teaching children to read in Spanish in the U.S. which can appropriately inform related policy mandates.

In the interim, every effort should be made to ensure that mandated Spanish reading curricula and related assessments rest on the most current theory, research, and practice and, most critically, a consensus among at least three entities: the state education agency, teacher training and research institutions, and the local education agency. When there is evidence that neither

researchers nor teachers support a mandated curriculum or test, this must not be taken lightly. The only way to minimize such a scenario is to implement curricular and testing mandates with the prior endorsements from the teacher training and research institutions and the local education agency. This implies active participation of each of the three entities in the development of the Spanish reading curriculum and test. Resulting student outcomes, positive or negative, then become the shared responsibility of all educators.

### **Addendum**

*The authors submitted the attached addendum to elaborate on various issues raised during the research symposium.*

Following is a more complete discussion related to the research-base of beginning reading instruction in Spanish, the related Spanish reading curriculum, and the Grade 3 Spanish reading TAAS each of which is being called into question by the authors.

First, the reader should be keenly aware of the controversy surrounding the research-base being advanced by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). TEA purports that the Texas Reading Initiative, aimed at beginning reading instruction, is a research-based reading program in English. The document in question is Number CU7 105 01 and published by TEA. Several researchers

(Dressman, 1999; Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 2000) have recently taken issue with the selective nature of the research-base of this and other related documents (e.g., white papers). The main concerns these researchers set forth are: an over-emphasis on phonemic awareness and reading skills (decoding), the selective use of researchers and reading research, and a hastiness to shape related policy based on this research. Other researchers have come to the defense of this document, and thus the debate is ongoing.

Nonetheless, our fundamental concern revolves around the total exclusion of components and features of a research-based beginning Spanish reading program by TEA. As it stands, there is no discernible or explicit research-base underlying beginning Spanish reading instruction as advocated by this agency. In short, the (questionable) research-base for teaching beginning reading in English also serves as the research-base for teaching beginning reading in Spanish. The only relative statement in the document in question appears in the introduction, "Research also shows that for children whose first language is not English, instruction in the first language may be needed as a foundation for learning to read and write in English." A cursory review of the reference section of the Components and Features of a Research-Based Reading Program document reveals that only a handful of the references relate to reading instruction for English Language Learners and or the teaching of reading in Spanish. In sum, we maintain that if a group of researchers with expertise in early Spanish reading instruction had been convened to conceptualize such a document, the outcome may have been different.

Similarly, and in light of the fact that the reading curriculum in Spanish is essentially a translation of the English reading curriculum, we feel that the readers should accept our findings with some tentativeness and caution. From our vantage point, the only appropriate course of action

would have entailed the development of a Spanish reading curriculum by experts in this field. Perhaps there may have been some overlap between the two curricula, perhaps not. This is not known. Moreover, the reading curriculum mandated by TEA makes no allowances for transitioning the learner from reading in Spanish to reading in English. While this criticism is somewhat beyond the scope of this study, we do feel that it places the integrity of the English and Spanish curriculum in a questionable light.

Finally, let us elaborate more fully regarding the validity of the Spanish TAAS, with special reference to the third grade reading portion of the test. To our knowledge, there has been no research conducted by outside impartial reviewers that would support the validity of the Spanish TAAS. All research efforts have been centered on the end of level TAAS in English. In fact, the *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* published a special issue (2000) that raises questions about the validity of the end of level English TAAS. In response the *Applied Measurement in Education* (2000) journal published a special issue defending the test in question.

Once again, the research focus is on English not Spanish. In our estimation it would be foolhardy to make a judgement about the validity of the Spanish TAAS based on the contested validity of the English TAAS. Available from the TEA website is a document (Chapter 14: Spanish-Version (TAAS) that is slightly over one page long that describes the test development (translation) process of the Spanish TAAS. First, the use of translations of tests is a controversial practice (see for example, Valdes & Figueroa, 1994; Olson & Goldstein, 1997). Second, research examining the concurrent validity of the Spanish TAAS has not been forthcoming. Third, it would seem difficult to establish a passing standard on the Spanish TAAS when more than half the children being served by bilingual programs in the state are receiving instruction from inadequately certified bilingual education teachers (see the University of Texas Charles A. Dana Center analysis of State Board of Educator Certification Data, 2000).

In sum, an explicit effort to develop a research-based approach to teaching reading in Spanish is poorly articulated by TEA. Similarly, the Spanish reading curriculum and the Spanish TAAS in reading are neither research-based or validated to a degree that would compel us to forgo these words of caution.

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