

Falling Through the Crack In the Gap¹

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Jorge, a 17 year old junior at Academic Alternative High School, stood outside the classroom where he had just finished the current round of the required California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program. Jamar, a fellow junior, yelled from across the passage, “Yo, Jorge. Wha’sup!” pushing his way through the sea of students moving toward the cafeteria.

Jorge and Jamar have been friends since seventh grade and hang in the same circles. “Ah Jamar. Where’s Roy? I ain’t seen him today at all,” Jorge asked.

“Yeah, he’s not here today. Stayed home ‘cause of the test.” Both boys have friends who have taken this road on many test days.

Jorge also knew that the test results wouldn’t impact his transcript or his ability to graduate. “Man, he didn’t need to do that. The test ain’t nothin. It don’t count. Why did he make so much out of it?”

Jamar explained as best he could, “I think it was when Mr. S. told us that the school’s graded on how we do and he asked us to really try hard to do a good job. He has been tryin to help with test takin skills, you know like hints and stuff. Roy wants the school to do good so he decided to stay home. Roy has trouble reading English and he has trouble with the directions to the questions. He don’t know what to make of it and he can’t ask for help during the test, so he knows he can’t do good so...”

Jorge related his own story, “Yah I get it, and I guess I understand what he’s about. I have trouble too. I went to school a couple of years before we came here. They put me in a special class, but as soon as I could speak well enough to go into regular school they moved me, but I still have a lot of trouble with classes that are mostly reading and writing. Math is better but the directions and word problems are killers. One of my teachers gave me a Spanish translation of a chapter, but I couldn’t really read it any better than English. I really felt dumb.”

Jamar explained Roy’s problem, “Man, think about my homeboy Roy. He came from Zambia and speaks some weird language called Bemba or something. In Zambia he only went to school for a few weeks and came here when he was about 15 or 16 years old. He really can’t read his language or English and he isn’t dumb and he works hard but he can’t really do it. It’s not fair to test him along with everyone else. Maybe if the teacher could sit with him and help him read or something... like he was blind or something.”

Jorge thought about it and added, “You know that if they did that they would have to do it for people like me too. We could have a whole room of us.”

“At this school we could fill the multipurpose room. I’m just glad this part of the test is over. Math tomorrow,” Jamar observed. Jamar reached out and hung his arm around Tina’s shoulder. She laughed and greeted him. “Tina’s my girl today.” Jamar told Jorge.

“Sure,” Tina giggled. “How you guys doin’ on the test?”

“Ok, I guess,” Jorge answered. “We was just conversatin’ about it. Hey is it true that you Hmong people didn’t have a real written language back in the day?”

¹ Based on *The Power of Words: EL Preparation for High Stakes Testing*, by Connie Parsons, 2007.

“Yeah, that’s true, my mother can’t read at all. She never even went to school and my dad can only read a little Hmong. I didn’t go to school much when we lived in the refugee camp. I really didn’t go to school until we moved here. Man, it is really tough trying to figure out what they want you to do on these tests. I never heard some of these words and I am guessing what they mean... got to go. There’s Nao Vang.” Tina waved and rushed off trailing Nao.

The boys moved off toward the cafeteria for a late lunch. Teachers travelled against the current and headed for the office and the staff room. Roseanne and Scott stood half in a locker in a lip lock. Ms. Boude told them to break it up. They laughed and headed out toward the cafeteria.

Discovery High School

Discovery High School, a WASC accredited Continuation High School, served students 16 year old or older who found it difficult to succeed in a larger comprehensive high school setting. In a small setting of 150 or less students, Discovery High School creates an alternative learning environment to help the students acquire the academic skills needed to earn a high school diploma, pass the high school exit exam, promote life-long learning, gain self-esteem through academic success, and become responsible, caring citizens in a complex and diverse society.

DHS tried to design programs that built on each student’s strengths. Nine fully credentialed teachers taught in their subject areas. All teachers on campus were Crosscultural, Language, and Academic Development Certificated (CLAD or SUADI). DHS also had a transition teacher for students who were transitioning from some type of special education to regular high school classes. Tutoring for students was also provided by community members using the Help One Student at a Time or HOST program. Students had to do C or better work in order to receive a credit in any subject area. DHS required 220 credits for graduation along with passing the California High School Exit Exam.

The DHS student body was diverse: the make-up has varied slightly from year to year but on average was 38% Hispanic, 37% African-American, 16% White, 5% Asian, 1% Native American, 1% Pacific Islander, and 2% Other. Students were Christian, Moslem, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh with a few other belief systems represented. All DHS students were credit deficient upon enrollment. Some had been in high school for three or four years but they averaged 64 out of the 220 credits required to graduate. Reading levels are as low as pre-school and as high as the second year of college. In any school year the population continually changed as students transferred in and out, or completed their studies and graduated. Students were usually at DHS for one year or less.

Later in the Staff Room

In the staff room, two teachers, Mr. Sems, who taught English and English Language Learners, and Ms. Boude, who taught World History, were anxious about the test. Both taught students with freshmen and sophomore credits but had been in high school for three to four years. They knew that many of their English Language Learner students and had a lot of trouble reading and writing.

“I wonder how the kids did on the test. I tried to get them to buy in and take it seriously ... but I couldn’t tell if they did or not. Some of them finished awfully quickly

and others struggled until time was up. I worry about some of my English Learners. Some are really low performing in English, like Roy who seems to have taken a couple days of unscheduled vacation,” Sems said as he unwrapped his sandwich. “I know the district could pay for translations of the test into first languages but I don’t think these kids would benefit. Some of them, like Roy or Tina, come to us with no real school experience.” Sems sighed and began to eat.

“I know what you mean.” Ms. Boude, an intense woman, replied. “The counselor told me that we have had more than 15 different first languages spoken in our school in the past year. Our students speak everything from Bemba to Ukrainian, with a large number of Spanish and Hmong speakers. Both our English Learners and many of our native speakers are socio-economically impacted. Talk about the achievement gap population! What are we going to do for these kids? I think that the rate of graduation in five years is great and even our second language kids do pretty well on the exit exam after they’ve been here for a couple of years. The four-year graduation requirement is not working for our students.” Boude shook her head and picked at her food.

Sems studied a chocolate chip cookie, “I think our students are as bright as other students but some have major challenges in language and are disruptive and disinterested because they don’t see how they can compete. I was reading a research paper by Virginia Collier who said it takes four to twelve years of language study to be able to use the second language in academic thinking. She also said that students who understand academic language in their first language can translate that knowledge to their second language more quickly. A lot of our kids don’t understand basic academic language in their first language, and they don’t have seven years of intensive training necessary to acquire it in their second language. In their book, August and Hakuta say the lack of understanding of academic terms is one of the biggest reasons students don’t succeed on standardized tests. I searched for a word list to use in my classes. You know there isn’t even an accepted list of words used on these tests. In fact, I found so many lists of academic words that I kind of invented my own list of most frequently listed words.”

“I know.” Boude smiled and nodded. “I got your list for social sciences in my box. I don’t have time to teach every word on the list for grade level. They missed so many in first through eighth grades. We are really playing catch-up. If I went that far back, I’d do nothing but teach vocabulary.”

Sems absently folded the plastic sandwich bag, “That is a problem. Time works against some students. There are so many questions and so few answers that I really don’t know where the education establishment should start. I wish people who make the rules of this game better understood the players.”

The principal of DHS, Dr. Hsu, came in as the teachers were talking. He cleared his throat to get the teachers attention, “Hello. I know you are busy but I just got an e-mail about the Achievement Gap Committee meeting. They are looking for a few more people to add to the committee. Our school has four reps now. Miguel’s mother Ms. Rouso, Dan’s father Mr. Free, of course Ms. Boude, and me. If any of you are interested, let me know, and I will forward the schedule to you. Here is the agenda and goals.”

“Is the committee discussing the problems of the second-language learners, Dr. Hsu?” asked Sems.

“Yes, that’s an area we’re looking into, but I don’t think the district gets the parent turnout among second language parents. Some say it’s cultural and others say it’s

because they are embarrassed. We all know that this is a continuing problem in our educational system,” Dr. Hsu’s voice trailed off a little and then he continued, “and we need to get a handle on it.” Dr. Hsu left a flyer and departed.

Lunch ended quickly and everyone returned to their classrooms to work with their students and ponder the problems of education.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How should schools deal with the EL population that comes to school as older students without academic work in their first language?
2. What should an education look like for students who are considered high-school age but are not high-school qualified?
3. Should NCLB allow for five to six years of high school for EL populations who are not academically proficient in English and still count them as graduating?
4. How do we help a school that has a majority of low-performing EL students and also is impacted socio-economically?
5. Are there better methods of assessing the skills of students than high-stakes tests?
6. Should some populations of students be excused from testing or be given a different type of test to test their level of performance in a different way?

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