

# Journal of Teacher Education

<http://jte.sagepub.com>

---

## **Rethinking the "Gap": High-Stakes Testing and Spanish-Speaking Students in Colorado**

Kathy Escamilla, Lorretta Chávez and Peter Vigil

*Journal of Teacher Education* 2005; 56; 132

DOI: 10.1177/0022487104273791

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://jte.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/56/2/132>

---

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education \(AACTE\)](#)

**Additional services and information for *Journal of Teacher Education* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://jte.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://jte.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

# RETHINKING THE “GAP”

## HIGH-STAKES TESTING AND SPANISH-SPEAKING STUDENTS IN COLORADO

**Kathy Escamilla**  
**Lorretta Chávez**  
**Peter Vigil**  
University of Colorado

*This article challenges the pervasive notion that linguistic and ethnic diversity are causes of the perceived gap in achievement in schools highly affected by Spanish-speaking students participating in programs of bilingual education. The study examines existing data from the state of Colorado with regard to student achievement and compares these data to teacher and policy maker perceptions about Latino Spanish-speaking students and bilingual education programs. Results indicate that teachers and policy makers largely adhere to the notion that there is a gap in achievement between Spanish-speaking students and other Colorado students and that language in particular is a problem. Student-achievement data from the Colorado Student Assessment Program, however, indicate that Spanish speakers in English-language acquisition/bilingual classrooms are among the highest performing students in their schools. Furthermore, findings from this study challenge teacher educators and teachers to be more critical in interpreting the results from high-stakes tests.*

**Keywords:** *high-stakes assessment; second-language learners; Latinos; Spanish achievement; achievement gap*

Culture consists of the understanding of knowledge shared by members of a group of people. Much of this knowledge is not conscious knowledge; it is largely tacit and taken for granted—once learned it becomes what one sees with, but seldom what one sees.

Barrera (1992, p. 12)

During the past 5 years, we have been involved in a series of research projects designed to document the impact that the high-stakes testing program in Colorado is having on students who are English-language learners (ELLs) or limited English proficient (LEP).<sup>1</sup> In Colorado, the high-stakes testing program is known as the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). Our research documents the number of students who are ELLs in Colorado,

the types of instructional programs they are served by, and the types of assessments schools are using to identify and reclassify these students; our research also examines the impact that this purported educational reform is having on the academic achievement of ELL students (see Escamilla et al., 2000; Escamilla, Chavez, Fitts, Mahon, & Vigil, 2003a; Escamilla, Chavez, Mahon, & Riley-Bernal, 2002; Escamilla, Mahon, Riley-Bernal, & Rutledge, 2001).

The demographic data and political landscape in Colorado mirror other states in the United States. Demographically, there is a large and growing number of ELL students (more than 70,000 from 2001 to 2002). The vast majority of these ELLs speak Spanish as a first language (more than 85% in Colorado). ELLs are

---

heavily concentrated in urban school districts in the state (more than 25% of the ELLs in Colorado are in one school district). Additionally, ELL students who speak Spanish are predominantly Latino in their ethnic membership (Escamilla et al., 2003a).

Added to the above, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has reported to the public that there is a large and persistent gap in achievement between Latino students and other Colorado students, most predominately between Spanish-speaking ELLs and other Colorado school children (Lenhart, 2003; Mitchell, 2002). Furthermore, reports to the public by officials at the CDE attribute this perceived gap in achievement between Latinos, ELLs, and others to "language handicaps" in general and to bilingual education in particular (Lenhart, 2003; Mitchell, 2002).

The premise that there is a gap in achievement that can at least partially be attributed to Spanish-speaking Latinos and bilingual education programs is, no doubt, partially responsible for the various political debates about whether bilingual education programs in Colorado and the United State should continue to exist or be replaced by English immersion and/or other programs. These political debates led to a proposed amendment to the Colorado Constitution. Titled English for the Children in Colorado, Amendment 31 was proposed and subsequently defeated by Colorado voters in November 2002.<sup>2</sup> However, the debate about how to best educate Spanish-speaking students and Latinos continues. The debate has been intensified by the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Under No Child Left Behind, all students in Grades 3 through 8 must be assessed annually in reading and mathematics, and results of this testing must demonstrate that schools with disadvantaged students are making progress in meeting state content standards. Furthermore, ELL students must take state assessments in English after they have been in U.S. schools for 3 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Politicians, policy makers, and educators seem to accept without question the existence of a gap in achievement. There seems to be no

debate about the existence of a gap, therefore, the major policy and instructional program questions center on how to "close" this gap. Colorado, as other states, has witnessed a flurry of activities and initiatives designed to assist schools in closing the gap. Activities include the CDE's (2002) creation of a special task force to close the achievement gap and the Denver Public School's (DPS; 2003a) special task force Closing the Achievement Gap: Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners. In addition, individual school reports across the state are laying out schoolwide goals designed to reduce the gap in achievement between ELLs and others and/or between Latinos and others.

The purpose of this article is twofold. The first purpose is to question the veracity of the assumptions that Latinos, particularly Spanish-speaking Latinos, are the reason for this "achievement gap" and that bilingual education is a contributing factor. The second purpose is to suggest that there is a need for teachers, administrators, and policy makers to become critics of high-stakes testing data rather than mere consumers of the data. We argue that politics and high-stakes testing aside, many of our teachers, administrators, and teacher educators have become part of the culture of schooling in the United States that sees language differences as problems to be eradicated rather than resources to be nurtured and developed. They/we have become members of a culture that tacitly accepts deficit notions of linguistic and cultural diversity. We have taken for granted that differences in high-stakes testing outcomes must mean that Latinos and Spanish speakers are underachieving and, therefore, the reason that a gap exists. We have been so socialized to see language as a problem that we have difficulties seeing and understanding counterevidence.

Our findings encourage teachers and teacher educators to help teachers in training and practicing teachers to look beyond simple explanations and current assumptions about school-achievement data and what they mean. We need to become critical examiners of high-stakes testing data rather than mere consumers of the results of these data.

---

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In a seminal study on orientations in language planning, Richard Ruiz (1988) proposed that there are three basic orientations toward language diversity and that school programs for linguistically diverse students are based on attitudes that communities and countries have toward these orientations. Briefly, the three orientations identified by Ruiz include "language as a problem," "language as a right," and "language as a resource." The language-as-a-problem paradigm views linguistic diversity as a problem to be solved. Non-English-language groups, in this orientation, are perceived to have a handicap to be overcome. Learning English quickly is thought to be the best antidote to overcome this handicap. The language-as-a-right orientation similarly views language as a "problem" with regard to school achievement but acknowledges that students and communities should not be discriminated against on the basis of language and that ethnic communities should have a right to use their native language(s) in communal life. In other words, children and parents have a right to use their native languages in their homes and communities; however, such usage contributes to low achievement in schools. The language-as-a-resource orientation views linguistic diversity as a national resource that should be nurtured and developed in schools as well as in the larger society. The assumption that language is a resource to be managed, developed, and conserved would tend to regard linguistic diversity as an important source of expertise for an individual, a community, and a nation.

Ruiz (1988) and others have posited that school programs in the United States have historically embraced the language-as-a-problem paradigm. We would add that this attitude has been enhanced by the high-stakes testing movement that limits the evaluation of academic achievement to a single high-stakes test offered in English only. This new reform has strengthened the notion that ELLs and Latinos are the causal factors in underachieving schools. Opponents of wide-scale, standardized tests have argued that one of the major reasons for outcome differences between language, ethnic,

and economic groups on high-stakes tests is that the tests were created for one population of students (e.g., native, English-speaking, middle-class students) and are being used on populations of students for whom they were not intended. Both Black and Valenzuela (2004) and Jones, Jones, and Hargrove (2003) have argued that giving tests to populations of students for whom they were not intended has had the effect of creating a façade of science. That is, the use of "valued, scientific" instruments produces knowledge viewed as "legitimate and objective" that serves to justify student deficits, especially for special populations such as ELLs.

Ruiz (1988) and others have argued that although school policies and practices exemplify the language-as-a-problem orientation, educators purport to believe that language is in fact a right and a resource. In other words, practitioners and policy makers say one thing and do another. No doubt, the orientation that language is a resource has gained some ground in the past decade, as seen in the growth and expansion of dual-language programs both for ELLs and native English-speaking students (Lindholm-Leary, 2003). However, nationally and in Colorado, dual-language programs represent less than 1% of the educational programs provided for Spanish-speaking Latino students (Escamilla et al., 2003a).

Ruiz's (1988) theory is useful in demonstrating how policy has been created by the pervasive and persistent view that linguistic diversity is the problem. Research on the outcomes of high-stakes assessment for ELLs has deepened this viewpoint. If language is the problem, and contributes to a gap in achievement, then the logical solution must lie in creating education programs focused on more and better English and on less Spanish (or other languages). Ruiz's theory is useful in understanding how educators in urban schools with large numbers of Spanish-speaking Latinos can come to accept, without question, that there is a gap in performance between students at their schools and students at other schools and that this gap can be attributed to ELL students, particularly Spanish-speaking students and the use of non-



English languages, particularly Spanish, in school programs such as bilingual education.

The study discussed herein was conducted in the state of Colorado. However, it is important to note that the issues and concerns about the use and interpretation of high-stakes tests for special populations is a national issue and many researchers have raised concerns similar to those raised in this article (see, e.g., Abedi, 2001; Black & Valenzuela, 2004; Jones et al., 2003; Menken, 2000; Rivera & Stansfield, 1998).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Ruiz's (1988) orientation that linguistic diversity is viewed as a problem by U.S. educators serves as a useful framework for the research questions posed by this study. We wanted to examine how educators and policy makers in Colorado have come to accept, without question, the premise that Latinos in general and Spanish-speaking students in particular, as well as bilingual education programs, are the reason for the gap in achievement on CSAP assessment tests. This concern generated the following three research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What is known about the K-12 Latino and Spanish-speaking population in general and their participation in programs of bilingual education in Colorado?

*Research Question 2:* How do teachers and other educators in schools with large numbers of Spanish-speaking ELL and Latino students describe CSAP achievement outcomes and results at their schools?

*Research Question 3:* Is there a gap in achievement between Spanish-speaking ELL Latinos and other students at selected urban schools that are highly affected by linguistic diversity?

## METHOD AND FINDINGS

### *Research Question 1*

To address Research Question 1, we gathered data from the CDE (2003) Web site pertaining to the 2001-2002 school year and compared these data to data reported to us by Colorado school districts for the same school year (Escamilla et al., 2003a). The following data were reported:

1. In the 2001-2002 school year, there were approximately 164,500 students who were identified as

Latinos/Hispanics in K-12 programs statewide (CDE, 2003);

2. 53,000 of these Latinos identified Spanish as a first language or language spoken in their homes (CDE, 2003);
3. Comparing data reflected in Numbers 1 and 2 above indicates that more than two thirds of the Latino students in Colorado schools identified English as their only language;
4. Approximately 17,000 of the K-12 Latinos who are Spanish speakers are in school programs that identify themselves as bilingual. This is roughly 10% of the total Latino population in Colorado (Escamilla et al., 2003a);
5. Approximately 12,500 Spanish-speaking Latinos are in DPS programs labeled as English-language acquisition (ELA), which is an early-exit, short-term bilingual program. This means that 73% of all Spanish-speaking Latinos in Colorado who are participating in some type of bilingual program are in a single school district (Escamilla et al., 2003a).

Although the above data are purely descriptive, they are telling in a number of ways. First, the vast majority of Latinos in Colorado speak English and no other language. Thus, if there is a gap in achievement, it is doubtful that it can be attributed solely to Spanish or a language problem.

Second, only about 10% of the total population of Latino students are in bilingual education, and only about 30% of the Latinos who speak Spanish are in bilingual education. Again, the vast majority of Spanish-speaking students are not in bilingual programs. If there is a gap, then bilingual education cannot possibly be the major cause.

Simple descriptive statistics raise serious questions regarding the contention that Spanish or bilingual education can be the reasons for an achievement gap in Colorado. Most Latinos do not speak Spanish as a first language, and of those that do, only one third are in bilingual education programs.

Notwithstanding the above, the CDE issued a report in February 2003 (Lenhart, 2003) that states that ELL/LEP children in Colorado are floundering, especially Spanish-speaking Latino children. The report went on to say that the gap in student achievement between ELL students and others is large and that the Latino drop-out rate is higher than ever. In discussing the report at a meeting attended by the commis-

sioner of education for the state of Colorado, deputy commissioners, members of the state board of education, and the state director of ELA, Lenhart said that "the time has come for innovations and accountability. Old programs, such as bilingual education, need to be replaced by new techniques and standards. New programs need to be based on scientifically based research." The report contains a set of data, released to the press and educators at the meeting, that was meant to document the gap in achievement between ELLs and other Colorado students. Furthermore, the data separate out Spanish-speaking ELLs from other language groups as a way of demonstrating that the gap is larger for Spanish-speaking students. Finally, it was stated that the need to separate out Spanish-speaking ELLs from other ELLs was to demonstrate program effects (e.g., bilingual education) and their effect on achievement (Lenhart, 2003). Data were presented for Grades 3 through 10 for the content areas of reading, writing, and math. An example of the data included in the report, for fourth-grade students, is included in Figure 1.

At first blush, the documents produced by the CDE (see Figure 1) seem to provide objective evidence that there is a gap in achievement between children taking the fourth-grade CSAP reading test who speak English and those who do not. However, let us address each of the assertions by CDE vis-à-vis Figure 1.

*Assertion 1.* There is a gap in achievement between ELLs and all Colorado fourth graders. Although this may seem revealing, in fact, it is no surprise, for one would never expect children who do not speak English to do as well on English achievement tests as those who do. The state is simply reporting the obvious. However, on closer examination, problems with the data become apparent. These problems center on reporting that children are simultaneously LEP and proficient on the CSAP. For example, in the year 2000, 121 Spanish-speaking ELL/LEP students and 67 speakers of other languages were reported to be proficient on the English CSAP. How can a student be simultaneously limited and proficient in English? The same problem surfaces for 2001 and 2002 where hundreds of

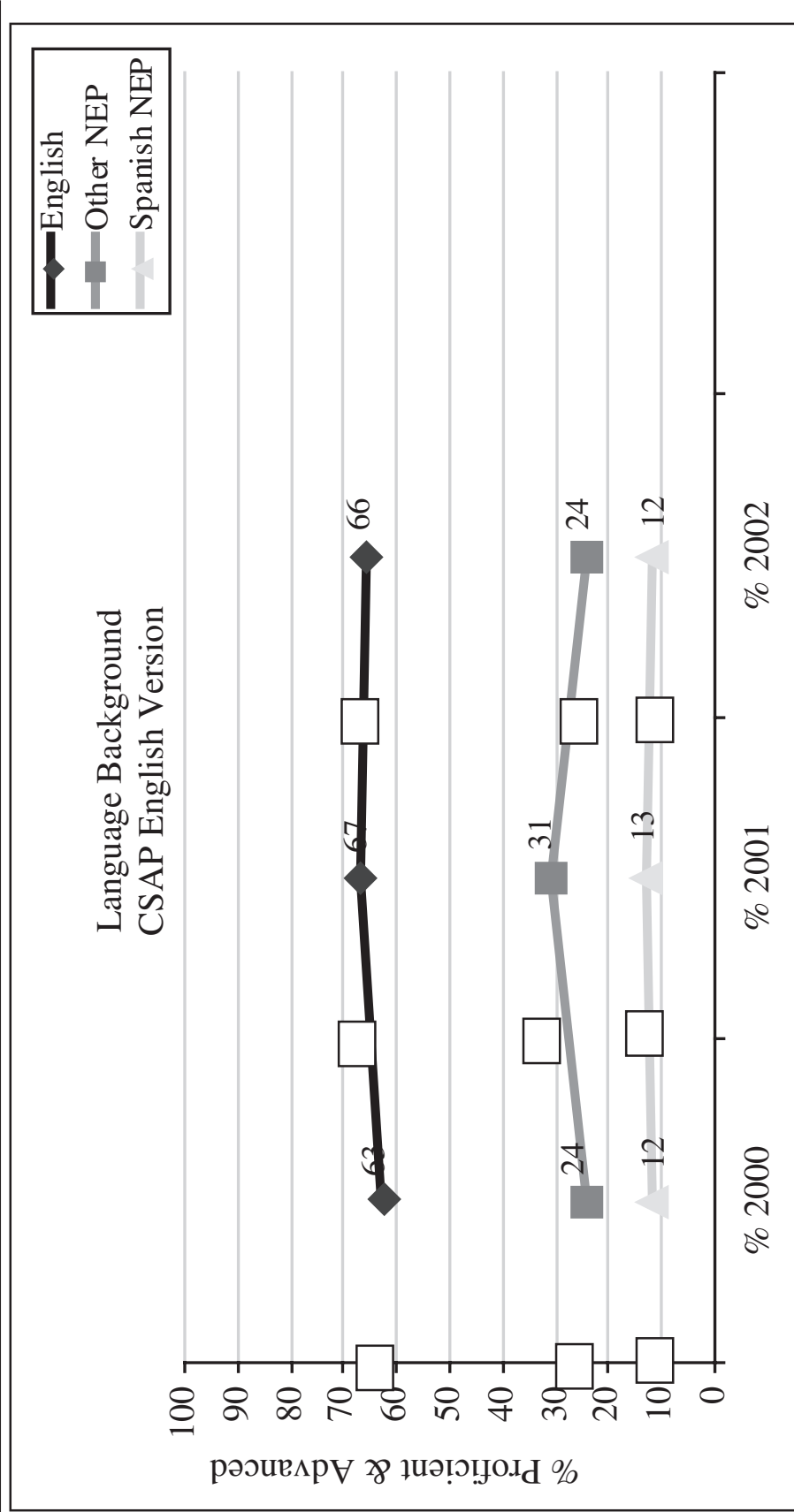
Spanish speakers and other language groups are reported to be both limited in English and proficient in English. Data in these charts appear to reveal as much about data reporting and recording problems at CDE as they do about achievement gaps.

*Assertion 2.* The gap in achievement is wider for Spanish-speaking students than for other students because of bilingual education programs. It is important to note that programs of bilingual education are provided to Colorado students in Spanish and English only. However, as demonstrated above, only about one third of all Spanish-speaking students in Colorado are in bilingual programs, two thirds are in English-medium programs. Data shown in Figure 1 above (as well as in all other tables in Lenhart's [2003] CDE report) are not disaggregated by program participation. The data are simply reported by language group. Spanish-speaking students in Colorado are more likely to have participated in all-English programs than bilingual programs and yet these data are offered as "proof" that bilingual education is one explanation for an achievement gap.

The above examples seem to indicate that neither the extant data from the CDE (2003) Web site nor data from the CDE's report (Lenhart, 2003) match the CDE's own assertions about the perceived gap. What is more perplexing than the failure of the CDE to match data with conclusions, however, is why the education community in Colorado did not challenge the veracity of this report. Have we been so socialized to believe the language-as-a-problem paradigm that we cannot examine official documents for counterevidence? As discussed in the following section, schools and teachers tend to assume that data such as those presented by the CDE are completely accurate and irrefutable. In fact, in many cases, teachers and administrators express the same ideas about achievement gaps as the policy makers in the state.

## **Research Question 2**

To address Research Question 2, we wanted to examine how teachers and other educators perceived and discussed CSAP results at their



Fourth-Grade Reading State Summary Table	Total Students 2000	Number Proficient or Advanced 2000	Percent Proficient or Advanced 2000	Total Students 2001	Number Proficient or Advanced 2001	Percent Proficient or Advanced 2001	Total Students 2002	Number Proficient or Advanced 2002	Percent Proficient or Advanced 2002
English	49,430	31,345	63	49,713	33,186	67	50,154	33,249	66
Other LEP	276	67	24	370	114	31	415	98	24
Spanish LEP	1,005	121	12	1,236	160	13	2,369	280	12

**FIGURE 1: Fourth-Grade Reading Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), State Summary 2000 to 2002**

SOURCE: Lenhart (2003).

NOTE: NEP = non-English proficient; LEP = limited English proficient.

individual schools and school districts. During the fall of 2003, 35 teachers from two local school districts were enrolled in a graduate assessment class at the University of Colorado. Participants in this class were all teachers at schools that are highly affected by Spanish-speaking ELL and Latino students. One of the school districts (DPS) enrolls the largest number of ELL students in the entire state and has a student population that is more than 55% Latino (DPS, 2003c; Escamilla et al., 2003a). The other school district (Boulder Valley) is also heavily affected by ELL students and is ranked ninth in the state in terms of numbers of ELLs (Escamilla et al., 2003a).

During the first class session, teachers were placed in groups and asked to respond to the following questions:

1. What was your school rating last year?<sup>3</sup>
2. Why do you think you received this rating?
3. What do you know about how this rating was determined?
4. What are you doing in response to the rating?

Results from all groups to the four questions were summarized and the following were noted as patterns:

1. All teachers in the class (both from Denver and Boulder), with one exception, worked in schools that had been rated as low or unsatisfactory during the 2001-2002 school year. The lone exception was rated as average.
2. Teachers as a whole believed that their schools had received this rating because they had large numbers of ELL students, because they had large numbers of Latinos, and because their students were by and large poor. Teachers also mentioned that the student populations at their schools are highly mobile and that this could be a contributing factor to their rating outcomes.
3. Teachers believed that their schools had obtained these ratings because the CDE based the ratings primarily on the CSAP outcomes in English and did not consider other criteria. Teachers expressed frustration with regard to this policy and made this clear in their responses.
4. Teachers said they felt that they were under a great deal of pressure to improve the English CSAP scores at their schools and, therefore, were looking at ways to "get Spanish speakers into English faster." Getting students into English faster was explained as "earlier transitions to English," "more time devoted to teaching ESL [English as a second language] during the school day," and "less empha-

sis on Spanish literacy." They also mentioned that their schools were having staff development sessions on "closing the gap" and on "improving Latino parent involvement."

Teachers' responses to these questions clearly indicate that they believe that their low and unsatisfactory ratings on the state's school accountability reports could be attributed to the fact that they are teaching in schools with large numbers of Spanish-speaking ELL students who are also poor. In short, Spanish speakers were responsible for the gap.

The reader should note that none of the teachers made negative or disparaging remarks about the students in their schools. Many commented during the course of the semester that the ELL and other children at their schools were a delight to teach and were "smart" and capable of learning. However, these teachers repeatedly stated that lack of proficiency in English and the ethnic composition of their schools were the reasons for their low school rankings. It is interesting that many teachers' perceptions mirror the comments of CDE officials as well as district officials.

We submit that although this group of graduate students represents a small sample of Colorado teachers, it is significant for several reasons. First, the state of Colorado does not require that teachers of ELL students have specialized endorsements. However, both Denver and Boulder (the districts where teachers in the study work) require that teachers of ELL students have specialized preparation (either state or district endorsements). Therefore, teachers in this study are likely more knowledgeable and experienced than other teachers of ELL students in Colorado. Second, the vast majority of teachers in this study teach in the DPS district. DPS has the largest number of ELLs in the entire state, and 25% of the entire school district is composed of Spanish-speaking ELLs. The district is 58% Latino, is the only majority/minority district, and is the only urban district in the state. Teachers in the class who were not Denver teachers teach in Boulder—a neighboring school district also with a large number of ELL students. It is noteworthy that these teachers, in spite of their specialized training and firsthand experience with ELL students, seem to



**TABLE 1 Selected Denver Public Schools Demographic Data, 2001 to 2002**

<i>School</i>	<i>State Rating 2001 to 2002</i>	<i>Total School Population</i>	<i>Percent Latino</i>	<i>Percent ELL Spanish</i>	<i>Percent Poverty</i>
Barnum	Low	569	92	51	93
Beach Court	Low	454	91	37	84
Bryant Webster	Average	460	97	51	92
Cheltenham	Low	601	92	43	97
Cowell	Low	625	92	55	95
Eagleton	Low	556	94	50	90
Fairmont	Low	475	89	47	97
Gilpin	Low	440	63	33	85
Knapp	Low	661	91	55	91
Munroe	Low	608	93	54	95
Smedley	Unsatisfactory	545	95	52	96
Swansea	Unsatisfactory	702	94	58	97
Harrington	Low	526	78	47	96
Schenck	Low	513	89	50	90

SOURCE: Denver Public Schools (2003b).

NOTE: ELL = English-language learner.

espouse the same viewpoints as state policy makers and administrators with regard to Spanish-speaking students and rationales for a gap in achievement.

All of the teachers in the study are designated ELA teachers (bilingual and/or ESL), yet they seemingly agreed with the presumption that language and ethnicity is a problem and a significant factor in the creation of an achievement gap. Although many teachers expressed frustration with the high-stakes testing and accountability system in the state, most agreed that they had no choice but to comply with the movement to limit the amount of Spanish used in their classrooms and focus more on English as a way of trying to improve achievement and close the gap. Teacher responses indicated dissatisfaction with the state accountability system—some said they felt it was unfair to teachers and students at these “high needs” schools—but they accepted the testing outcomes and the explanation of the reasons for the low ratings without question.

Data collected to address this research question again suggest that teachers are tacitly accepting the language-as-a-problem orientation. Although all of the participants are teachers in bilingual or ESL programs, all seem to believe that low school ratings and underachievement on the CSAP assessment test could be attributed to the fact that they teach in schools with large numbers of Spanish-speaking ELLs and Latino

students. Furthermore, although they were not particularly enthusiastic about the proposed instructional solutions (e.g., less Spanish/more English), they seemed to be resigned to these reforms as mandatory and nonnegotiable.

### **Research Question 3**

To address Research Question 3, data on school ratings and achievement on CSAP tests in English and Spanish were obtained from 14 individual elementary schools in the DPS. All of these schools, except 1, were rated as low or unsatisfactory by the CDE in the 2001 to 2002 school year. All are schools where 80% or more of the student population is identified as ethnically Latino, all are high-poverty schools, all have large numbers of Spanish-speaking ELLs, and all are implementing the ELA short-term bilingual education program. Data were obtained from the DPS (2003b) Web site. Table 1 provides summary demographic data for each of the selected schools. Each school in the study had a school narrative on the DPS Web site. It is noteworthy that improved academic achievement and closing the gap were stated in the vast majority of school narratives as goals for the 2003 to 2004 school year.

Using the language-as-a-problem paradigm, data in Table 1 seem to provide an obvious and simple explanation as to why these schools have low and unsatisfactory ratings (with the

**TABLE 2 Third-Grade Spanish Reading Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) Performance Compared to English CSAP School and District Performance, Denver Public Schools, Spring 2003**

<i>School</i>	<i>Spanish<sup>a</sup> CSAP Reading Percent Proficient/Advanced</i>	<i>Schoolwide<sup>a</sup> English CSAP Percent Proficient/Advanced</i>	<i>Districtwide<sup>b</sup> English CSAP Percent Proficient/Advanced</i>
Barnum	35	27	51
Beach Court	79	35	51
Bryant Webster	91	67	51
Cheltenham	67	42	51
Cowell	82	44	51
Eagleton	70	27	51
Fairmont	76	45	51
Gilpin	75	33	51
Knapp	56	52	51
Munroe	67	39	51
Smedley	59	29	51
Swansea	56	46	51
Harrington	54	41	51
Schenck	— <sup>c</sup>	32	51

SOURCE: Colorado Department of Education (2003).

a. Scores are reported by the state and individual schools in terms of the percentages of students whose results earned them one of four labels (unsatisfactory, partially proficient, proficient, or advanced) and reflect percentages of students in Spanish and English who scored at proficient or advanced. These two categories are considered to be indications that students are performing at grade level.

b. For spring 2003, 51% of the third-grade students across Denver Public Schools who took English CSAP earned a rating of proficient or advanced.

c. Data not reported.

exception of Bryant Webster). Schools' ratings are partially a result of too many children who are Latino and speak Spanish as a first language. Officials from the CDE would further add in explanation for the gap that all these schools are implementing a type of bilingual education (ELA).

Data provided in Table 1, however, provide only a surface-level view of each of these schools. More detailed data are needed to assess the extent to which Spanish speakers and/or Latinos are contributing to the low ratings in these schools. Because Spanish-speaking students at all of these schools are learning to read and write in Spanish as well as English, and because the CSAP assessment is available in English and Spanish at the third- and fourth-grade levels, we did a comparison of third-grade student outcomes on Spanish CSAP and compared these data to outcomes of students in the same school on English CSAP and to districtwide DPS data. We used third-grade data only because very little data on Spanish CSAP outcomes are available at the fourth-grade level. We also used third-grade data because this grade level has the most clearly defined and appropriate comparison groups.

In Colorado, no student takes the CSAP in more than one language. Furthermore, Spanish-speaking ELLs who are learning to read and write in Spanish take the Spanish version of CSAP, and Spanish-speaking ELLs who are in English-medium programs are exempt from CSAP assessment altogether because of Colorado Senate Bill 04-186, An Act Concerning School Improvement (2000), which allows LEP students a 3-year exemption from English CSAP assessment. Therefore, the third-grade level is appropriate for this type of comparison because it does not mix groups and thereby confound the comparison. Latino ELLs either take Spanish CSAP or they do not take CSAP at all. It is unlikely that Latino ELLs are a part of the English CSAP database.

All schools in this analysis were selected because of the availability of both Spanish and English CSAP data in both the areas of reading and writing. Table 2 presents data related to reading outcomes on the CSAP, and Table 3 presents data for CSAP writing. Data were obtained from the CDE (2003) assessment Web site.

The CSAP assessment results are conveyed to schools and the public by reporting the number

**TABLE 3** Third-Grade Spanish Writing Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) Performance Compared to English CSAP School and District Performance, Denver Public Schools, Spring 2003

<i>School</i>	<i>Spanish<sup>a</sup> CSAP Writing Percent Proficient/Advanced</i>	<i>Schoolwide<sup>a</sup> English CSAP Percent Proficient/Advanced</i>	<i>Districtwide<sup>b</sup> English CSAP Percent Proficient/Advanced</i>
Barnum	10	9	35
Beach Court	74	42	35
Bryant Webster	96	60	35
Cheltenham	74	21	35
Cowell	72	27	35
Eagleton	79	19	35
Fairmont	71	15	35
Gilpin	63	16	35
Knapp	42	19	35
Munroe	63	42	35
Smedley	68	21	35
Swansea	48	22	35
Harrington	71	0	35
Schenck	54	27	35

SOURCE: Colorado Department of Education (2003).

a. Scores are reported by the state and individual schools in terms of the percentages of students whose results earned them one of four labels (unsatisfactory, partially proficient, proficient, or advanced) and reflect percentages of students in Spanish and English who scored at proficient or advanced. These two categories are considered to be indications that students are performing at grade level.

b. For spring 2003, 35% of the third-grade students across Denver Public Schools who took English CSAP earned a rating of proficient or advanced.

and percentage of students who fall within four categories: unsatisfactory, partially proficient, proficient, or advanced. Results presented below discuss outcomes with regard to the percentage of students who scored at proficient or advanced levels in the areas of reading and writing.

With regard to Spanish reading achievement, in the 14 schools represented in Table 1, Spanish achievement on the CSAP exceeded English achievement in all schools. No statistical tests were performed on these data because the state's database does not report test results via actual test scores. The state simply calculates and reports the number and percent of students at a school whose results placed them in one of the categories of proficiency (unsatisfactory, low, partially proficient, or advanced). The reader will note that the percent of children scoring proficient or advanced on the Spanish CSAP is much greater in all schools than the percent who scored proficient and advanced on the English CSAP. Furthermore, it should be noted that in 12 of the 14 schools, the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced in Spanish exceeded the districtwide average of students scoring proficient or advanced on the English CSAP. In addition, the percentage of students

statewide scoring at or above proficient in English was 74% for 2003. It is noteworthy that in 5 schools the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced exceeded statewide results. It is important to restate that Spanish-speaking ELLs who take Spanish CSAP do not take English CSAP, and Spanish-speaking students who are not learning to read and write in Spanish are exempted at the third-grade level from taking English CSAP. In these schools, Spanish-speaking ELL students in ELA (short-term bilingual programs) are outperforming students learning in English-only classrooms.

Table 3 presents similar findings for students who took the third-grade Spanish CSAP writing exam. In all 14 schools, the percentage of students taking CSAP in Spanish who scored as proficient or advanced on the CSAP writing exceeded the percentage of students at these same schools who scored at proficient or advanced in English CSAP writing. Again, because data are reported as percentages of students who achieve in the various categories from unsatisfactory to advanced, it was not possible to conduct tests for statistical significance. However, the differences in outcomes reported are great. Furthermore, as with reading, in 13 of the 14 schools, the percentage of students scor-

---

ing proficient or advanced in Spanish exceeded the districtwide percentage of students scoring at proficient or advanced in English. Finally, at a statewide level, 57% of the students who took English CSAP scored at or above proficient. It is noteworthy that in 10 of the 14 schools, Spanish CSAP writing outcomes exceeded statewide outcomes. Again, students taking CSAP in Spanish do not take the English CSAP. Furthermore, at the third-grade level, ELL students who are not learning to read and write in Spanish are exempted from taking the CSAP in English.

Comparisons between Spanish CSAP outcomes and English CSAP outcomes are important for several reasons. First, if the purpose of high-stakes assessment is to determine which students are becoming proficient in reading and writing and meeting state standards, it is clear that in these schools, students learning in Spanish are becoming literate. They are meeting state standards. Second, because students who are taking CSAP in Spanish are not taking CSAP in English, they cannot be the reason for a school's low rating and cannot be the source of an achievement gap. Furthermore, because these Spanish-speaking ELLs are in the classrooms labeled as ELA/bilingual, bilingual education programs cannot be contributing to any perceived or reported gap. Finally, CSAP results from Bryant Webster school are particularly interesting. This is the one school in the group that is rated average by the state and the one school where results for Spanish-speaking ELLs and Latinos were above the Denver average. Bryant Webster prides itself in being a school with the most comprehensive and sustained ELA/bilingual program in the district (P. Salazar, personal communication, October 10, 2003).

From the above, it could be argued that the reasons that these schools in the DPS district have low and average school rankings rather than unsatisfactory rankings is because of the high achievement of Spanish-speaking students in the ELA-S (bilingual) classrooms on the Spanish CSAP. The Spanish scores are not depressing school ratings; in fact, they are elevating them. It is ironic that in July 2003, when the

school ratings were released to the press and it was announced that achievement for minority students in the DPS district had significantly improved, the chief academic officer of the DPS attributed this improvement to the fact that "fewer students were testing in Spanish" and to the "district's aggressive English programs" (Olvera, 2003).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study proposed to examine whether educators and policy makers in Colorado have come to accept the proposition that Spanish-speaking ELL students, and particularly those in bilingual education programs, are the source of gaps in achievement. Findings indicate that the perception of a gap in achievement is pervasive and wide ranging in Colorado, extending from officials in the CDE to high-level school administrators and to public school teachers who are earning advanced degrees in bilingual and ESL education. All educators involved in the study expressed the view that having heavy concentrations of Spanish-speaking ELLs equates to having underachieving schools. The CDE further posits that bilingual education programs are a major "cause" of the gap. Through press releases and reports, educators and the public have been led to believe the gap is a reality. As the old adage says, "If something is repeated often enough, folks begin to believe it." Sadly, once a phenomenon is seen as reality, or fact, it becomes difficult to see alternate realities. The presumption of a gap has become the cultural lens through which educators judge Latino Spanish-speaking ELLs to the point that these same educators are unable to identify evidence that may counter this perceived reality. We conclude that the view that language is a problem in need of remediation is pervasive in Colorado.

In this study, we have documented, using extant data available to every educator in the state, that neither Spanish-speaking ELLs nor bilingual education programs can be plausible explanations for a gap in achievement. In fact, participation in bilingual programs seems to be a factor in helping Spanish-speaking children



learn to read and write in Spanish and, thus, meet state content standards. In the case of Spanish-speaking students who are learning and being tested in Spanish, their CSAP outcomes far exceed comparable students at their schools and in their school districts. Yet neither teachers in this study nor officials in the CDE made mention of the Spanish-literacy outcomes. Data collected and analyzed in this study suggest that teachers and policy makers hold the perception that language is a problem and a significant reason for a gap in achievement. However, there is nothing in the data presented here that would confirm these perceptions. Of greater concern, however, are the proposed solutions to closing this perceived gap. There is widespread agreement in the state that to close the achievement gap, students need less Spanish, more English, and quicker transitions. Witness the DPS official who credited minority students' improved test scores to "fewer students testing in Spanish, improved curricula, and aggressive English only programs" (Olvera, 2003). Witness also the CDE official who called for "innovations and more English" and "replacement of existing programs" (Lenhart, 2003).

We would argue that educators in Colorado have clearly bought into the idea that linguistic diversity is a problem and needs to be eliminated if achievement is to improve. We also point out that there are data that clearly challenge the perceived source or even existence of a gap. We would also argue that if a problem is incorrectly identified, then proposed "solutions" to the problem may not be effective. In fact, they may exacerbate the problem.

The data presented above have some important implications for educators who work in schools and teacher preparation programs. We have a responsibility to help in-service and preservice teachers learn to be more critical consumers and interpreters of testing data. We must push them to not simply accept the official and often erroneous interpretations of the outcomes of the tests, particularly in this era of high-stakes testing and accountability. We must challenge them to look beyond both simplistic

explanations of perceived gaps and test results as the sole means to judge whether schools and children are succeeding. This is particularly critical because most state and federal reform initiatives mandate and rely heavily on high-stakes tests to determine school effectiveness, teacher competence, and student achievement. Schools and teachers will get better only if they identify and address legitimate and real educational needs and problems. It is doubtful that schools for Spanish-speaking ELLs will improve as long as we continue to believe that their culture and language are problems and sources of educational underachievement. We must continue to challenge the notion of a gap and its causes and to challenge our teachers and schools to do the same.

## NOTES

1. The acronyms *ELL* (English-language learners) and *LEP* (limited English proficient) are frequently used interchangeably in the literature. Both refer to students whose first language is not English and who are in the process of learning English in school.
2. For a thorough discussion of Amendment 31 in Colorado, see Escamilla, Shannon, Carlos, and Garcia (2003b).
3. All schools in Colorado receive a school accountability report that ranks them as excellent, high, average, low, or unsatisfactory.

## REFERENCES

- Abedi, J. (2001, Summer). Assessments and accommodations for English language learners: Issues and recommendations. *National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing (CRESST) Policy Brief 4*. Los Angeles: CRESST. Retrieved July 2, 2004, from <http://www.cse.ucla.edu/CRESST/Newsletters/Polbrief4web.pdf>
- An Act Concerning School Improvement, Colorado Senate Bill 04-186 (2000).
- Barrera, R. (1992). The cultural gap in literature-based literacy instruction. *Education and Urban Society*, 24(2), 227-243.
- Black, B., & Valenzuela, A. (2004). Educational accountability for English language learners in Texas: A retreat from equity. In L. Skrla & J. Schurich (Eds.), *Educational equity and parity: Paradigms, policies, and politics* (pp. 215-234). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Colorado Department of Education. (2002). *Closing the achievement gap*. Retrieved July 30, 2003, from <http://www.cde.state.co.us>

- Colorado Department of Education. (2003). *Colorado Student Assessment Program*. Retrieved July 30, 2003, from <http://www.cde.state.co.us>
- Denver Public Schools. (2003a). *Closing the achievement gap: Meeting the needs of English language learners. Recommendations of the English language development (ELD) and transition work groups for elementary schools*. Denver, CO: Author.
- Denver Public Schools. (2003b). *Denver Public Schools data, achievement and information*. Retrieved August 28, 2003, from <http://dps.schools.net>
- Denver Public Schools. (2003c). *Denver Public Schools data, achievement and information*. Retrieved from <http://www.dpsk12.org>
- Escamilla, K., Aragon, L., Grassi, E., Riley-Bernal, H., Rutledge, D., & Walker, D. (2000). *Limited English proficient students and the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP): The state of the state*. Denver: Colorado Association for Bilingual Education.
- Escamilla, K., Chavez, L., Fitts, S., Mahon, E., & Vigil, P. (2003a). *Limited English proficient students and the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP): The state of the state, 2002-2003*. Denver: Colorado Association for Bilingual Education.
- Escamilla, K., Chavez, L., Mahon, E., & Riley-Bernal, H. (2002). *Limited English proficient students and the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP): The state of the state, 2001-2002*. Denver: Colorado Association for Bilingual Education.
- Escamilla, K., Mahon, E., Riley-Bernal, H., & Rutledge, D. (2001). *Limited English proficient students and the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP): The state of the state, 2000-2001*. Denver: Colorado Association for Bilingual Education.
- Escamilla, K., Shannon, S., Carlos, S., & García, J. (2003b). Breaking the code: Colorado's defeat of the anti-bilingual education initiative (Amendment 31). *Bilingual Research Journal*, 27(3), 357-382.
- Jones, M., Jones, B., & Hargrove, T. (2003). *The unintended consequences of high-stakes testing*. Lanham, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lenhart, F. (2003, February 18). *Dialogue on English language acquisition*. Denver: Colorado Department of Education.
- Lindholm-Leary, K. (2003). *Dual language education*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters LTD.
- Menken, K. (2000). *What are the critical issues in wide-scale assessment of English language learners?* Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.
- Mitchell, N. (2002, August 5). Bilingual education critics gather steam. *Rocky Mountain News*, p. 29A.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2002). Retrieved September 30, 2003, from <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA02/html>
- Olvera, J. E. (2003, July 31). Minority students improve; fewer taking test in Spanish. *The Denver Post*, p. 3B.
- Rivera, C., & Stansfield, C. (1998). Leveling the playing field for English language learners: Increasing participation in state and local assessments through accommodation. In R. Brandt (Ed.), *Assessing student learning: New rules, new realities* (pp. 160-189). Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.
- Ruiz, R. (1988). Orientations in language planning. In S. McKay & C. Wong (Eds.), *Language diversity: Problem or resource* (pp. 3-25). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2002). *Executive summary: No Child Left Behind*. Retrieved November 11, 2003, from <http://www.ed.gov/inits/nclb/part2.html>

*Kathy Escamilla is an associate professor in education at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research interests focus on Spanish language and literacy development and assessment of Spanish-speaking Latino children.*

*Loretta Chávez is a doctoral student in the area of bilingual/multicultural education at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research interests focus on school engagement of Latino students.*

*Peter Vigil is a doctoral student in the area of bilingual/multicultural education at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His research interests focus on teacher education for diverse populations.*