

Exploring Fifth Grade Bilingual Students' Understanding of Character  
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Initially the aim of this qualitative study was to examine how one reading specialist taught character development using series books with ten bilingual students. However, some very surprising issues evolved during this project. First, I discovered that the teacher used very few series books in her reading instruction than previously self-reported. Instead, she mainly relied on testing materials to help her students pass the state mandated test. This shift was caused by a change in the schools' mid-year test scores, lowering the school's rank from a top level of achievement to the lowest level of achievement. Because of this change, this study was expanded to look at how one teacher responded to the testing pressures so deeply engrained in Texas schools. As a participant observer, I spent over 192 hours over 4 months conducting ethnographic research in the teacher's school, collecting field notes and artifacts (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), as well as conducting informal and formal interviews with the teacher, her colleagues, and her students. The teacher was purposefully selected (Patton, 1990/2001) because she was experienced (taught for more than 30 years) considered exemplary by their peers and administrators, and described using series books and teacher-led discussion groups with her students as her main reading instruction. Using grounded theory methodology (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), I examined the teacher's talk and the students' discussions during their reading instruction. I found that the teacher in this study responded to testing pressures by surviving, struggling, and resisting the effects of high-stakes testing and that her responses had much to do with contextual factors of teaching in a low-income urban school. She survived by finding ways to help her students get through the tests without losing their enthusiasm for reading. She struggled with ways to integrate skills-based instruction while reading quality literature. She resisted by creating opportunities to give students free books, have authentic book discussions, and encourage students to become "real readers" instead of "test takers." Implications for this study are that high-stakes testing pressures forced this teacher to change her reading instruction. Instead of focusing on the individual literacy needs of her Bilingual students, she scaled down her instruction to basic skills and testing strategies in order to pass the test and raise the school's rank causing her to question her knowledge and experience as an expert reading teacher.

Publications:

Assaf, L. & Base, M. (2005) *One teacher's response to the testing pressures: Are urban schools losing the battle?* Manuscript submitted *The Reading Teacher* for publication.

Assaf, L. (2005). *Using series books with your students: Tricks to get you started.* Manuscript submitted to *Elementary School Journal* for publication.

Dooley, C. & Assaf, L. (2005). *"I can't ask them to curl up to a passage": Two teachers' responses to high-stakes reading tests*. Manuscript submitted to *Educational Leadership* for publication.

Presentations:

Dooley, C. & Assaf, L. (2005, May). *"I can't ask them to curl up to a passage": Two teachers' responses to high-stakes reading tests*. Poster session presented at the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual International Reading Association Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Dooley, C. & Assaf, L. (2005, December). *"I can't ask them to curl up to a passage": Two teachers' responses to high-stakes reading tests*. Submitted for presentation to the National Reading Conference, Miami, FL

Assaf, L. (2005). *Using series books with your students: Tricks to get you started*. Submitted for presentation to the 51<sup>st</sup> Annual International Reading Association Conference in Chicago, IL.