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Performing Parent Dialogues on High-Stakes Testing: Consent and Resistance to the Hegemony of Accountability

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Assessment-driven accountability has altered the way schools deliver their services to children, and their relations with parents. Listening to how parents talk about their experiences with testing fosters an understanding of the discursive power found in the state's accountability rhetoric about learning, achievement, and assessment and how this discourse is accepted or rejected by parents. Focus groups with parents were conducted as part of a naturalistic study examining state-mandated testing and teaching and learning in two New York State school districts: one suburban and one urban. In four dialogic acts, we bring to life the questions, concerns, and understandings parents have of the impact state testing has on their children's educational experience. These acts represent areas of struggle for parents as they make sense of the new accountability discourse. They can be thought of as a performed critique of this discourse and its exemplification.

Keywords: state-mandated testing; parent dialogue; discourse analysis; hegemony; performance text

Prologue

Current accountability strategies of school reform rely heavily on measuring outcomes, especially student achievement outcomes, and attaching positive or negative consequences to various levels of performance. In New York State this has involved developing learning standards in every subject area, increasing graduation requirements, publishing an annual report card on each school's test scores, and

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mandating the use of statewide tests. Fourth graders take an English Language Arts exam (ELA), a math, and a science test. Fifth graders take a social studies test. And eighth graders take all four of these tests plus an optional technology exam. Parents are interested in the tests their children take in school. They want to know what the tests are measuring and how teachers, schools and the state are using the results.

State mandated tests are presented to parents and the public at large as a solution to widespread educational problems (Airasian, 1988). They have also become the means by which states control and enforce particular educational changes (Mathison & Ross, 2002). Therefore, assessment-driven systems of accountability, like the “standards movement” upon which it rides, can be understood as exemplifying the construction of a new hegemony (Collins, 2003).

Hegemony is the process by which dominant practices and ideologies get taken up and accepted by people even when doing so may not be in their best interest. Theorists interested in hegemonic processes argue that discourse practices employed by dominant groups play a large role in “the creation and maintenance of the consent of dominated groups for their domination” (Louw, 2001, p. 22). Fairclough (1992) terms this process the “technologization of discourse.” He explains:

Technologization of discourse is a process of intervention in the sphere of discourse practices with the objective of constructing a new hegemony in the order of discourse of the institution or organization concerned, as part of a more general struggle to impose restructured hegemonies in institutional practices and culture. (p. 102)

He goes on to explain that people in their daily activities and conversations may react differently to this discursive process. “[People] may comply, they may tactically appear to comply, they may refuse to be budged, or they may arrive at all sorts of accommodations and compromises between existing practices and new techniques” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 106). These accommodations are sites of hegemonic struggle as group and individual interests and beliefs intersect in a variety of ways and are manifested in the ambivalence and contradictions expressed in people’s discursive attempts to make sense of the practices they engage in.

This performance brings to life the play of hegemony in the field of high-stakes testing through themes and concerns shared by 47 parents (see Appendix A for demographic descriptions of participants) from two school districts: Orchard Hill, a suburban district with higher-than-average test scores, and Park City, an urban one with lower-than-average test scores. Ten focus groups conducted between October 2001 and February 2003 were used to craft this piece. It is based on the idea that the way parents talk about testing provides insight into the way dominant ideologies such as state and national accountability discourses infiltrate the discourse and perceptions of community members. Subordination always involves a complex interplay of acceptance and resistance to dominant ideologies and practices (Gramsci, 1971). Our aim here is to explore the processes by which established ideas such as the belief in educational assessment or the belief in individual leaning styles serve to advance or constrain the establishment of a new hegemony of accountability.

The four dialogic acts represent “sites of struggle” revealing how the reality of the discourse of accountability conflicts and/or resonates with parents’ experiences. These acts enact these “struggles over meaning” by creating a fictitious dialogue (see Appendix B for an outline of the process of turning transcripts into dialogic acts) between the researcher and parents from the two districts. Because hegemonic processes ride on other power-bearing discourses, hegemony is never singular but is always dynamic and plural (LaClau & Mouffe, 1985). Our data reveal that although there are dominant discourses about assessment, teaching, and parenting that cross class, race, and gender categories, there are strong indications that class, race, gender, the educational level, or the social context (“urban-failing” or “suburban-succeeding”) within which the parents’ meanings are being shaped play a role in how parents respond to the imposition of New York State’s accountability system. We wanted to retain as much as possible the way in which the dialogues parents engage in actively construct these meanings and understandings. Representing their dialogues as “performed dialogues” helps to achieve that.

The Performance

Setting: Set in a school library, parents enter one or two at a time, some of them greeting each other in recognition, others grateful for the moderator’s welcome and guidance. Parents are introduced to each other and engage with the topic of state standardized tests in New York State.

Cast of Characters:

Researcher: Female, White, age 40 to 49 years, graduate degree (Stands between groups)

Narrator: No distinguishing characteristics. (Moves to the front to speak and offer commentary, then retires out of sight.)

Park City Parents (Their voices are in italics):

(Audience members reading these parts stand near the front of the room over to one side. They are given scripts with their parts highlighted.)

Janice: White, female, age 30 to 39 years, high school diploma

Norina: White, female, 40 to 49 years, some college

Judy: White, female, age 40 to 49 years, some college

Gloria: Hispanic, female, age 30 to 39 years, high school diploma

Tammy: White, female, age 20 to 29 years, no high school diploma

Venetia: African American female, age 30 to 39 years, some college

Dustin: White, male, age 50 to 59 years, college degree

Emily: White, female, age 40 to 49 years, college degree

Angela: Hispanic, female, age 40 to 49 years, some graduate

Rodney: Native American, male, age 40 to 49 years, graduate degree

Orchard Hill Parents (Their voices are in regular font):

(Audience members reading these parts stand near the front of the room over to the opposite side. They are given scripts with their parts highlighted.)

Tracy: White, female, age 30 to 39 years, high school diploma

Dale: White, male, age 40 to 49 years, college degree

Carl: White, male, age 30 to 39 years, some college

Gail: White, female, age 40 to 49 years, college degree

Janet: White, female, age 30 to 39 years, college degree

Marion: White, female, age 40 to 49 years, graduate degree

Kathleen: White, female, age 40 to 49 years, graduate degree

Act I: You Need to Gauge How Well Your Kids Are Doing

Researcher: “To start off, let me find out a bit about what you know. Can you tell us what you know about the standardized tests that your children take in school?”

Emily: *“I know that they use the tests to compare what children are learning across the state; to compare different things to different schools and what percentages of students have mastered different levels of things. I’ve noticed that there have become a lot more of them and they’ve become more frequent in the younger years. And they have some definite effects on our children.”*

Dustin: *“Yeah, they spend so much time preparing for this test they have very little free time like they used to have. And they’re so focused on the test. So, it’s a very challenging thing.”*

Tammy: *“It’s very hard, they need to pass, and my kids won’t be. And that really has me really worried and concerned.”*

Researcher: “Any other thoughts about the testing?”

Tracy: “I found that the testing that they get here in elementary helps out a lot with seeing where they’re progressing, seeing how they’re progressing. If there was no testing or not enough testing, I think a lot of kids would get pushed into a system that they weren’t ready for and be stressed more from that. Where at least with the testing it helps the teachers and the educators place the students where they need to be and not in the wrong situation.”

Norina: *“Yeah, I have a feeling that if you didn’t give all the kids the test, some kids would not get the attention they need. If they take the test and they get a really low score in one area, someone can help them with that. If you didn’t test them, how would you know?”*

Researcher: “So the need to assess how well kids are doing is important to you? How well do you think the state tests measure what the kids know?”

Janet: “I think the tests have reflected pretty accurately where I thought my kids were. But they’re pretty good students.”

Gail: “I guess it depends on the child. I mean I have one that freaks out every time she has to take a test. It doesn’t matter whether it is for her grades or for placement or ranking in the school.”

Judy: *“Yeah, my daughter gets very anxious. She may not score well but she’s not a bad student.”*

Janice: *“I don’t know if it’s a correct way to determine what these kids know. I don’t think it’s fair for the kids. I don’t think it’s fair for the teachers. Because even if these kids don’t do good on these tests, we know as parents what’s going on or what the kids are learning. I can see just by the way they are coming home and the new things that they are learning everyday. I see that. So that one test isn’t going to change my mind that they’re not learning. And I’m blown away at their age with what they’re learning.”*

Rodney: *“Part of the pressure is we grew up with how SAT scores track you into what college you can attend. And personally I look at fourth-grade standardized performance testing as, are they tracking my child into junior high?”*

Carl: “But you need some kind of testing that’s a form of comparing. As a parent you need to gauge how well your kids are doing. If my children scored poorly there would be implications as far as going to college and self-esteem. I’m sure that affects placement and what would be recommended for that student. But you have to have some way of knowing how your kid is doing compared to other kids. It’s beneficial score-wise if he does well—if he’s looking to go further after high school.”

Dale: “You need a measurement tool. The state tests are a measurement tool. It may not be the best one. I’m sure there’s a way to improve it. But you know, good people have done the best they can to put together these state tests and you can’t do without some method to measure performance. If you do that you run the risk of teachers going off on their own little tangents teaching and you have no way to realize what’s going on until the kid’s into the next year and he hasn’t learned what he needed to learn the year

before. So I don't have a faith in the tests, I'm just saying you need to have a measurement tool. Let's take state tests away for a minute. Now you don't have anything. You don't know. Now you have to have absolute faith in the individual teachers that you get. And I would rather have a state test as a measurement than no testing."

Narrator: "Assessment-driven accountability rides on the taken-for-granted belief that education involves assessing students' strengths and weaknesses. This is evident in that parents agree on the importance of knowing how their children are doing in school. Less clear is what parents believe should be done with that knowledge and what types of assessments are most constructive. For example, parents in Orchard Hill seem to favor objective, standardized forms of measurement like testing, while parents in Park City seem comfortable relying on everyday subjective forms of assessment such as what they see occurring or what they are told by teachers. The first promotes a structure of competition between students while the second promotes the nurturance of individual growth. Assessment functions in the service of a hegemony of accountability because it rides on assessment beliefs that already divide people. Although competing forms of assessments have usually existed side-by-side (with varying effects), high-stakes standardized testing operates by dictating one assessment format with one assessment purpose: to sort and to rank. This mandate, however, rubs up against other well-established beliefs, one of which is developed in Act II."

Act II: Every Child Has Different Learning Styles

Angela: *"What I fear is we're talking about finding our child's level of academic ability, and sometimes I think that there are kids that don't appear to have the academic ability based on certain testing. But I know kids who weren't in the top 20% and those kids went on to college and grad school and everything else and are doing fabulously."*

Emily: *"Yeah, they're testing how these kids can take a test not what they know. Every child has different learning styles. And if a child has a learning disability and that test isn't being given to them in a way that they can handle, they're not going to do well. So you have a standardized test but you don't really have standardized results. The results are going to be skewed."*

Tracy: "I was a teacher's aide in another school district and I've seen students not graduate because they couldn't pass the state tests. They passed their classes but couldn't pass the tests. Some of them went back in August and retook it and passed and got a diploma, but others just dropped out."

Dale: "Well the kids did go back and take the test and pass, and they learned for it."

Tracy: "But the way I see it, there are students that are A average, B average, C average and students that struggle to be that C average. And if the best they can do is that C average, yet this test is saying no, no, no, you have to be this A, B average, then you're gonna see kids saying, why should I? Why should I do this?"

Carl: "But then the question is, do we lower the standards to make sure a kid gets a diploma and make the diploma useless? For example, my son who has special needs is going to have a lot of challenges with the standardized testing. It is going to be a lot of work for my wife and I to help him along and help him pass. But in the end if we pull that off, he will have learned more because of it."

Tracy: "My main concern with these tests is how they are designed. I mean how can you have one set test to judge all students across the whole spectrum? I know we need tests, but there are also circumstances, poverty, one- or two-parent families."

Dale: "We obviously are very fortunate here. You have a nice school, nice neighborhood, and plenty of kids in the inner cities don't have anything near to this. But you don't want to try to make kids feel better by giving them better grades or helping them out superficially. You've got to fix the problem."

Judy: *“Some kids aren’t good test takers. And I would hope they’d find that out if they saw a discrepancy between their classroom grade and their test scores.”*

Rodney: *“I don’t think that is the purpose. The purpose of setting a benchmark for a test is not to provide resources to those who failed to reach it but to somehow either through embarrassment or pressure get them to do something else to reach it without any additional resources. And therefore it’s very easy for a spokesman to say all this school really needed to do is buckle down and work harder. And while that may be functionally true it doesn’t address the situation where there are serious links between resources and the numbers of people who haven’t reached basic reading skills.”*

Researcher: *“It is interesting that the state feels the need to resort to threats such as withholding a diploma or taking over a school to enforce their accountability system. What other thoughts do you have on the state tests as measurement tools?”*

Angela: *“The standardized tests do not test everybody equally. There’s a race thing with the standardized testing. An average minority student, same grades, will not do as well on the standardized tests as the majority student on the same test. So here now if you’re having the student evaluated on this test, this student is at a disadvantage right there.”*

Judy: *“I teach preschool. Everyone learns different. But there’s a few of them who learn so drastically different from the other children that the parents are concerned and want to put a kibosh on it. I’m really concerned that if you don’t learn the way they want you to learn, you are advised to see a child psychologist. And it all starts as soon as you enter kindergarten. Why can’t they learn differently? That’s how they learn. They learn best differently. And because a lot of this testing has become so important it really singles them out.”*

Angela: *“It pushes them out.”*

Dustin: *“And you don’t get no stinking diploma. And any other diploma you get isn’t worth it. And it’s the same thing with these standardized tests. It’s the only way you can be tested, the only thing that counts, and if you fall outside the norm you’re no good. And I think a lot of kids feel left by the wayside.”*

Narrator: *“For the most part parents believe in different and multiple learning styles and see diversity being threatened by a one-size-fits-all policy of accountability. Although most parents agree that this is the primary flaw of standardized testing, they are divided on whether this justifies adopting a nonstandardized approach. At the core of this conflict is uncertainty over whether believing in multiple learning styles results in endorsing less rigorous standards for those who have not traditionally been successful on standardized tests. The current rhetoric of higher standards for all has succeeded in confounding standards with standardization thus weakening the impact the belief in plurality might have on the accountability movement. Parents in above-average-scoring districts like Orchard Hill seem more likely to believe that one can judge the quality of learning through test scores. However, as seen in Act III, this belief isn’t solid.”*

Act III: The Test Limits the Teachers on What They Can Do

Researcher: *“What impact have you noticed, if any, good or bad, happening in your children’s school as a result of state testing?”*

Emily: *“If the level of stress in our kids is any indication of the level of stress in the teacher, I’d say they’re pretty stressed over it. There is cascading pressure coming down on the kids to be there: to do well, to be refreshed, make sure everything is right, get a good night’s sleep, eat breakfast. Things that the teachers never mention at any other point in time, at least to us. So if that’s an indication of what the teachers are feeling, I think that’s probably a lot of pressure put on them to perform.”*

Venetia: *“I understand that the night before that you get plenty of rest. You should have breakfast in the morning. But when they come in and say OK you got so many minutes*

to do this part of the test, go. You know they're little kids still and they're worrying, they're worrying about doing well. I think they could not present the test in such a way that it scares the kids."

Gail: "The tests have a tremendous effect on what is taught in the classroom. The teachers have to teach to the test and the kids practice the test. They're starting now so that when they come up in eighth grade they'll do well on those tests. So it kind of trickles down and gets them younger and younger."

Kathleen: "And it might be things our kids already know and they're being taught it over and over."

Marion: "The teachers justify what the students do this year in preparation for the test next year—they have to learn this method this way because that's how it's going to be tested. Can't do it any other way—cannot."

Kathleen: "And for my son, being forced to do a certain kind of math a certain kind of way rather than being able to take those intuitive leaps. I mean, yes, he has to know how to do it that way, but it shouldn't be the only way that he's allowed to do it."

Marion: "You get no credit if you don't show your work in their style."

Kathleen: "No one is going to convince me there's a value added there."

Emily: *"My boys are five years apart and when my older one was here in eighth grade, I noticed that that particular year they did a lot of teaching to the test, a lot of drilling. And you know there were some current event kinds of things happening and my husband and I would say to our sons, 'So did you talk about this in school?' And they're like 'No.' 'Well what did you talk about?' 'Well, we're getting ready for the test.' So, I thought that was kind of a negative thing that all this stuff is happening and we're teaching to the test. And it's nerve racking for the kids. And you try to minimize it and say to them it's just a test; one moment in time in your life. We've all not done well on any given day. But there's this build up, build up, build up, and then they take the test. And they always call it 'the test.'"*

Tammy: *"And under pressure they seem to crack. And then their scores will be blank and then failure. And it's hard and there's absolutely no help whatsoever."*

Gail: "I think that the test limits the teachers on what they can do. Maybe there would be other things that they'd want to do that might be more exciting or more fun and just as educational but they have these tests scores to worry about so they need to make sure all that is covered and there's not a whole lot of room left for other things."

Dustin: *"They have to take all this time to teach the kids to take the test so they can do well on the test so they get a good report card for the school. But that's not really learning. They're learning how to play the test game so that they can grade well on the test."*

Researcher: "So they've altered the curriculum in ways that you don't consider to be really about learning but is more about playing some sort of performance game. Do you have any other thoughts about the role teachers play preparing students for the state tests?"

Venetia: *"For me, if my child is freezing up it has to do with the teacher because he is not preparing him well enough where they can feel comfortable to do the test. I want my son to be comfortable taking tests. I don't want him to be freezing up on a test and end up doing poorly. Then he will act out. If they freeze up it got to do with the teacher because he should be the one or she should be the one preparing those students."*

Gloria: *"For the school's part trying to pressure the kid for one thing it's good, for another thing maybe it's not good. I know they're pushing hard, but it's going to get worse. It's going to get more and more up. Sometime I feel this is a lot of pressure, but for the future, for the kid they will need a better education; our kids are going to get a better job for the future. I'm not complaining about the school because I think it depends on who you are. My oldest son is doing great and my second one, it's hard for him. But it's going to help him, I know it. I want him to finish college. I don't care if he's a plumber. He's going to have a college degree to do that."*

Researcher: “So for many of you, school is the means to a better future. So if the requirements go up, you feel the teacher must do a better job preparing students for these new requirements. If you have a district where a lot of students are failing, does it mean that the teachers aren’t teaching as well as teachers in a district where students aren’t failing the state tests?”

Gail: “I don’t know that you can assess the teaching methods based on what the kids get on these tests. They might teach, be great teachers, but the kids if they’re not taking it in, they’re not studying it or maybe they don’t care, they’re not going to perform well on the tests.”

Tracy: “Yeah, it doesn’t mean that the teachers are bad. It could be discipline; kids disrupting the class, you know.”

Narrator: “An obvious threat to the success of hegemonic processes is when the lived experiences of people who are supposed to benefit from a reform effort reveal a contradictory reality. Most parents agree that the effect of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning has been negative. Doubts are raised as to the appropriateness of criticizing the negative effects when other discourses such as the belief in higher standards as the means to a better future intersect with the dominant discourse of accountability—in this case supporting that discourse. Wanting the best out of education and assisting teachers in that endeavor, however, do not always mean the same thing. Act IV considers this issue.”

Act IV: I Feel it’s my Job as a Parent to Help, but in a Way I Kind of Don’t.

Norina: *“I noticed the fact that this year I’ve been in more conferences with the teacher than I did all last year already, so I see the care that she wants to give. She wants to let us know how our kids are doing on the test. And I wouldn’t say that she’s trying to pressure me but she’s showing me all the options of how I can help.”*

Janice: *“But doesn’t that make you feel frustrated? It does me. Because I’m thinking to myself, oh yes I feel it is my job as a parent to help, but in a way, I kind of don’t. When I was in school my parents never had to sit down with me and say, ‘Well this is what has to be done.’ It was, ‘If you need help, ask your teacher.’ And now, like the teachers kind of make you do that.”*

Researcher: “So based on your experience, the demands on children and families have changed. Why do you suppose that you have to help now?”

Gloria: *“They kind of make the homework more harder.”*

Janice: *“You’re forced to do it somehow you’re forced to do it.”*

Norina: *“I don’t know if I want to say though that you’re forced to do it, I mean I want to help. I don’t mind doing it.”*

Researcher: “It seems difficult for you as parents to question your role and responsibility as ‘your child’s first teacher.’ Why do you think parental involvement is important?”

Janet: “Because it shows the child that the parent is interested in how they do in school. And my kids are bright, they do well on the tests, but if I don’t show support for the school, they won’t have the right attitude.”

Gail: “I know the teachers want it to be as open as possible—if you have a problem bring it up immediately. But I’ve always felt like my job is to reinforce whatever they learn in school.”

Researcher: “What do you think would happen if you didn’t do that?”

Janet: “Well, they won’t care or they won’t show the respect that they should for their teachers or the work that they have to do. I mean there are things that go on that I disagree with but I don’t share those with my kids. Because this is where they have

to be, this is their life and this is how it's gonna go. They have to be here, not a different place."

Researcher: "It seems important for you to promote an image of parent-teacher teamwork in support of educational goals even when you agree that some of these activities such as state standardized testing are having negative effects on your children's educational experience. This support has to come with a cost. Can any of you comment on that?"

Tammy: *"I'm lucky if I can get my sons to sit down after school and get their homework done. I'm lucky if I can get them to focus down enough to get their homework done. It's really hard because we do the reading thing. I read a page. One reads a page. The other reads a page. And it's like 'ok mom are we done now?' It's like 'no you guys got to do this.' And then it's like screaming because they're screaming at me because they're bored. They don't want to do it. And I can just imagine what's going to happen on the test because they're on medication, and I don't feel that I should have to keep on increasing the medicine because they're not up to par or because they can't stay focused. That's not the answer either to constantly medicate them. So what am I supposed to do?"*

Norina: *"And it's frustrating for parents when your child comes to you and they want you to help them with homework and you don't understand it yourself."*

Angela: *"Because we're the same as the kids are basically. We have our weaker points and our stronger points. And if our stronger points or our weaker points are the same weaker points that they have, then we can't really help them as much as we would like to help them."*

Gloria: *"For me it's like my English is not, I speak Spanish. I know it in Spanish. I know some words in first grade. But my second grader I cannot help him because I cannot understand. His father has to help him. His grandmother has to help. Even the grandma, she go to college, and for her it's hard too. We can't help the children because the standards are too high."*

Janet: "I don't mind that they use testing to assess the school. I wish they wouldn't compare different districts to each other. I don't think that's fair, because it's different demographics. I mean there's 75% to 80% PTA participation here, there are parents all over the place crawling. In Park City they don't have that. They're lucky to get three people to show up for a Back-to-School night. And then the teachers are working with a different student population. If the parents aren't sitting there at home with homework like we do, then you can't expect the kids to be sitting there and getting in the 90th percentile on the ELA. They should keep it within our district and not publish it."

Norina: *"It almost sounds as if you're saying that if you're not part of the PTA and if you're not part of this whole like 'go, go, go kids,' the kids won't be able to do that. I would like to be more part of the school but it just kind of works out that I can't. And I don't know just to say that you have to, it sounds as if to be a PTA mother is the only way for kids to be successful. And I disagree with that."*

Janice: *"Right. If some children are coming from high-class homes where they can afford a tutor for their child and their children are acing the test. And some people over here have children and they can't afford a tutor and they don't know how to help the child themselves. Those two sets of children aren't going to score the same thing on the test. And it doesn't mean that the parents don't care."*

Carl: "When you think about it, high-income neighborhoods, the schools generally look better and there's more money. But it's not fair to say let's take more tax money from the high-income areas and give it to the low-income areas. It's not so much—add more to their resources. It's the attitude. There's a predetermined perception of what the lives in low-income areas are going to be like and what they seek. So their perceived self-concept in themselves are lower in low-income areas than in affluent areas. So the only way to bridge the gap, to change that, is not so much the school. They haven't been able to do that. You need to change the parent."

Gail: “I don’t know if it’s just an attitude that we’re going to adjust to. Nobody complains about the graduation exams, and the teachers—all they do is teach for that test. You’re going to pass the test and that’s what the whole course is and everybody knows that. It’s been that way since I went to school. And maybe it’s going to take another 10 years before we accept it in the lower grade levels.”

Researcher: “And you feel that you have to accept that?”

Janet: “No, but I don’t know that I could change it.”

Gail: “I feel kind of powerless. I don’t know what you would do about it.”

Narrator: “Parents want to know what is going on in their children’s school, and they are interested and concerned about the role they are expected to take in their children’s education. Although the suburban parents seem to approach involvement by supporting the school in making demands on children and the urban parents seem to support their children in dealing with school demands, they all believe that parental involvement involves monitoring, supporting, and caring for one’s children. What seems clear is that these parents do not see themselves as having much say when it comes to policy or school reform decisions, and yet they believe strongly that they play a primary and fundamental role in the success of students.

Because parents live out the hegemonic discourse of involvement every day through requests to check their children’s homework or make sure they’ve eaten a good breakfast before a test, it is no surprise that the role and value of parents resurface throughout their conversations. It also seems evident that parents have difficulty questioning the importance of their role in their children’s education even when fulfilling that role is difficult, impossible, or even destructive. The overwhelming belief in parental involvement and its place in the dominant discourse of achievement suggest that it is a practice that plays a crucial role in supporting and/or resisting the new hegemony of accountability. Furthermore, it seems that even in its support or resistance, the emphasis on parental involvement diverts attention away from instructional and assessment practices and in doing so unwittingly supports the new hegemony.”

Epilogue

This performance evolved from a simple question: If hegemony circulates through discourse can we identify the way it manifests itself in everyday conversation? Louw (2001) explains that the strength of any hegemonic rule resides in its ability to close communication flow. This is done by attaching specific meanings to taken-for-granted practices and beliefs. The parents’ dialogues reveal the role discourse plays in the creation and fixation of meaning. For example, even while arguing that tests don’t always measure what they are expected to, discussion of student success or failure, being “bright” or “different” is most often centered on how well they did on particular tests. This is not surprising because tests and assessments have always played a central role in schooling. What is different in assessment-based accountability is how the test scores are used by the state through the media to create images of successful and failing schools and districts. This arrangement places the “objective” accountability system represented by test scores at the center of the relationship of parent, teacher, and school and reshapes it in critical ways.

LaClau and Mouffe (1985) argue that new discursive formations are often created by taking possession of an established set of practices and rearranging them in such a way “that their identity is modified” (p. 105). The four dialogic acts reveal the dynamic and complex ways existing educational discourses work to strengthen

new hegemonic discourse formations. For example, the accountability movement promises to raise the performance of all students by equating higher test scores and higher standards to providing a better education for all. Longstanding social injustices, such as in this case disparities in achievement between majority and minority students, are attributed to inequality of standards justifying a need for intervention that does not include increased social, spatial, or financial resources for struggling schools and communities. The success of this kind of image making can be seen in its ability to raise doubt in some parents' minds that flexibility and accommodation are equivalent to less rigorous standards. The presence of performance and ability levels is so ingrained in educational discourse that it leaves most parents unable to begin to articulate an alternative view of educational success.

These dialogues reveal that despite the strength of dominant discourses to control the public's understanding of what counts as successful teaching and learning, multiple alternative and counterhegemonic discourses do exist. These discourses arise when competing, but similarly strong beliefs such as the belief in individual learning styles, clash with other beliefs being imposed such as the idea that test scores provide valid and useful information about performance. Although alternative discourses arose in both groups, they were more evident and varied among Park City parents. This makes sense because the consequences of having their children educated in schools with failing test scores are more pronounced and uncertain. In Orchard Hill, the test scores serve to confirm the belief that their schools and children are successful, whereas in Park City parents struggle with contradictory information when test scores do not reflect the belief that their children or their children's teachers are successful. Furthermore, Park City parents become witness to the hostility of the state when need and poverty are ignored, and limited funds must now be used for testing materials and administration.

Hegemonies are most powerful when there is no available alternative discourse or where opportunities for community conversation are lacking. The parent dialogues reveal that in settings where dialogue is encouraged, such as in our focus groups, the opportunity to open up the dialogue flow and create counterhegemonic discourses is created. What these dialogues also show is the importance of conversations between different communities and groups of people. Although the discussions between parents from Orchard Hill and Park City are contrived, many of the parents' comments are the result of being asked during the focus group to read and reflect on comments made by parents from the other district. We found that when people were faced with real experiences shared by others, they were more likely to think about and question their own beliefs and consider more critically the meaning and impact of images such as those circulating about testing and achievement.

We envision that these dialogues could be used in a public forum as a way to provoke critical conversations about schooling and assessment. They could be read not so much as evidence for what is right or wrong with assessment-based accountability systems, but as evidence of the issues that make up the available educational discourse. Viewed in this way, each act becomes a question to begin discussion on educational accountability. From where does the practice of ranking student achievement or the belief in individual learning styles emanate? Who benefits from these practices? In what way does the belief in parental involvement divert conversations

away from other school practices? Creating opportunities for conversation is essential if parents and teachers are to play a role in developing the kind of school system that truly serves the educational needs of all children. The dominant view that high-stakes tests are the best (and only way) to achieve accountability is not a stable view, but it needs to be challenged for change to occur.

APPENDIX A

Table 1: Total Participant Demographics by District

	<i>Park City (34 total)</i>	<i>Orchard Hill (13 total)</i>
Age	20 to 29 years: 2.7% 30 to 39 years: 29.7% 40 to 49 years: 56.8% 50 to 59 years: 5.4% 60 to 69 years: 2.7%	20 to 29 years: 0% 30 to 39 years: 46% 40 to 49 years: 54%
Ethnicity	White: 87% African American: 8.1% Asian: 2.7% Hispanic: 13.5% Native American: 2.7%	White: 100%
Sex	Female: 65% Male: 35%	Female: 69% Male: 31%
Highest Education	< high school: 5.4% High school: 16.2% Some college: 40.5% College degree: 29.7% Graduate Degree: 8.1%	High School: 2.7% Some College: 2.7% College Degree: 86.4% Graduate Degree: 8.1%

Table 2: District Statistics Year 2000

	<i>Park City</i>	<i>Orchard Hill</i>
Population	62,288	17,765
Land area (square miles)	11.09	49.82
Per capita income	\$29,458	\$60,876
# Students	8,482	3,350
Instructional expenditure/student	\$11,031	\$11,040
% Free lunches	48%	4%
% Passing fourth-grade state math test	66%	93%
% Passing fourth-grade ELA	50%	87%
% Passing eighth-grade state math test	18%	69%
% Passing eighth-grade ELA	27%	62%
Dropout rate	6.8%	1.6%

NOTE: ELA = English Language Arts exam.

APPENDIX B

Analysis and Dialogic Act Construction

This constructed dialogue represents part of the collective story told across 10 focus groups with parents in two districts on the topic of state standardized testing. In addition to constant-comparative coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we analyzed the focus group transcripts by taking note of the logical sequences, natural turns, and thematic connections brought forth in the parents' conversations. We then selected passages that focused on testing and accountability and the ones that retained the conversational nature of the focus groups. It was to retain the constructive, dynamic nature of meaning making that we turned to a performative representational scheme.

Our purpose was not to include all of the themes discussed. Because our purpose was to identify and represent the interplay of multiple discourses and their effect on the creation and maintenance of a hegemonic discourse on accountability, we were particularly interested in the kinds of arguments parents brought forth to justify or critique what they knew about state standardized testing in New York State. This means that we do not present the full range of these parents' concerns such as individual stories regarding particular classes, children, or teachers but focus rather on core, reoccurring themes brought forth across all focus groups. In fact, one critique of these acts is that they are built on what parents actually said about testing and don't reveal the extent to which their stories point to a lack of knowledge about state testing.

Furthermore, because it is not possible to include all or even the majority of parental voices involved, we had to make some decisions about who would speak and how their voices would get incorporated into an integrated dialogue when the original conversations occurred in separate spaces and with only a selection of other parents. This process involved several steps. First, we extracted relevant sequences of dialogue around each core theme of interest. Within these sequences, we then identified the range of dimensions and perspectives on these themes within and across districts taking note of the level and range of variety and the demographic characteristics of the speakers. When these were identified, we selected parts to represent this variety. We then repositioned and integrated parts of conversations with others that may or may not have occurred together. An attempt was to maintain as much as possible the overall thematic flow noticed across focus groups. Although, we know that this process significantly reduces the authenticity of each speaker and of the group interaction, an aim was made to retain as much as possible the authenticity of the concerns raised by these two groups of parents.

Another step involved selecting speakers. Needing to reduce the amount of speakers to make the performance possible also meant taking some liberties with "blending" various voices from different focus groups into one character. Although many of the characters speak the words they actually spoke, some of them are also credited with speaking the words of parents from other focus groups within the same district. This provided a way to represent a variety of points of view while retaining a "voice" for their shared concerns and responses. This blending took into account the gender, ethnicity, and level of education of the participants as it would have been misleading to undermine the importance these social characteristics play in the concerns of the speakers. Furthermore, an attempt was made to maintain the demographic diversity of the participants from each district in regards to gender, ethnicity, and educational level.

It is important to note that the parents who participated in our focus groups may not be representative of parents in these two districts. In Park City, participation in focus groups ranged from 4 to 9 parents, an average of 5.7; while in Orchard Hill, turnout ranged from 2 to 6 parents with an average of 3.6. Participants were paid U.S. \$25 each for their participation, which could have played a role in motivating some parents. The overall level of concern or interest in state testing might be another motivating factor. And finally, although these acts represent the themes and concerns raised by these parents, the conversations did not occur in this manner across districts, in this way, with these parents. The four acts are a deliberate dialogic reenactment meant to create a juxtaposition of thematic dimensions across contexts and between participants who may not share similar cultural backgrounds and experiences. The overall constructed meaning, therefore, is our own.

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