The Impact of State-Mandated Testing on Urban and Suburban Fourth Graders[1]

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Abstract

The debate on the effects of state-mandated testing as a means to reduce the achievement gap has generally overlooked the experience of those most affected by accountability practices—students. This study examines the experiences of 4th grade urban and suburban students with high stakes tests in New York State. We found that students' experiences with testing are shaped by a complex interplay of interpersonal and organizational conditions, some of which are different for urban and suburban students, some of which are the same. This paper considers the way state-mandated testing and the school's organizational context, itself altered by testing, shape students' perceptions of teaching and learning. We conclude that a focus on outcomes may reinforce rather than transform school practices that contribute to inequalities between students from suburban, wealthy, white and urban, poor, minority school districts.

Outcome-based accountability exerts pressure on districts and schools to raise the performance level of all students to state determined levels. Students are under pressure to perform at a particular level, in particular ways, and at designated times regardless of their individual developmental or academic needs.

Educators agree testing has a significant impact on students' classroom experiences (McNeil, 2000; Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000). Students are the most affected by accountability measures and practices, while their perspectives are the least sought after and the

least considered in decision-making. This study adds to research on students' perspectives of high stakes testing (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Haney & Scott, 1987; Thorkildsen, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999; Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2000a, 2000b). More specifically, we consider the impact of state-mandated testing on teaching and learning through a close analysis of the experiences of urban and suburban 4th grade students. We take what Valenzuela calls the "inside-out" perspective (2002).

The Schools

While the focus of this paper is students' perspectives, the upstate New York schools they attend have been the focus of our research for several years. Hemlock Elementary is an urban school. A brick fortress, it is the only institutional structure in a working-class neighborhood of one-way streets and rows of one and two family particle homes. Like a fortress, it stands, a perfect square protecting a central courtyard that is, in reality, a playground under renovation. And like a fortress, there is little traffic in and out of the school. Visitors are greeted with a huge yellow sign on the front doors. It reads as follows.

> Parents and visitors please note:
>
> Unacceptable Behavior Will Not Be Tolerated in This Building. This includes yelling, screaming, cursing and threatening staff, students or any other person on this property. This behavior will cause immediate intervention and referral to appropriate legal and police departments.

Next to this sign are ones with more positive messages, including parent education flyers prepared by the Hemlock Family Room. This sign points to the reality of working within a low-income, transient, urban neighborhood. While most Hemlock families act and communicate appropriately with school personnel, some do not. The staff and teachers at Hemlock continuously work to balance safety and security with openness and family involvement, and

disagree vehemently about the presence and use of such a sign. Many teachers find it offensive and would like it removed, especially since it is directed at only a small percentage of parents. Others who have been physically or verbally assaulted, or have been threatened or intimidated feel strongly that such a message should be stated clearly and have succeeded in advocating for its presence.

A twenty minute drive away is Cherry Grove Elementary, a suburban school in an affluent all white neighborhood. The district is free of traffic congestion, has no economically depressed areas, and is an easy commute to the larger city. Working farms, orchards, suburban single-family homes and residential developments line the country roads leading to the school. With a brick exterior, square shape, and circular driveway, the school looks organized and inviting. An expansive playground and field outlined by trees surround the school. Once inside, a large glass window, usually left open, and a door to the principal's office greets visitors. Hallways, wide and bright lead the way left or right to different wings of the building. Students, led by teachers, can be seen quietly moving in single file on their way to the well-equipped computer room, music room, playground, or state-of-the-art library. Artwork adorns the many large bulletin boards hanging in every hallway and a center garden illuminates both the hallways and interior classrooms.

The school is in the most upscale part of a top-performing district. Teachers and administrators attribute the district's high performance on state assessments to students who are intelligent and willing to work hard, parents who value education and support their children to excel, teachers who are well qualified and continually work to improve the curriculum and instruction, and a community that demands outstanding schools.

Figure 1 further illustrates the differences in income, ethnicity and race at Hemlock and Cherry Grove schools.[2]

	Urban (PreK – 5) Hemlock Elementary	Suburban (K – 5) Cherry Grove Elementary
TOTAL STUDENTS	376	476
American Indian, Alaskan, Asian, or Pacific Islander	2.9%	0.2%
Black	34.6%	0.6%
Hispanic	18.4%	0.2%
White	44.1%	98.9%
Eligible Free Lunch	74.5%	2.4%
Eligible Reduced Lunch	6.7%	2%
Public Assistance	81-90%	1-10%
Total Teachers	33	28
Other Professional Staff	3	6

Figure 1. Descriptive information for Hemlock and Cherry Grove Elementary schools, 2003-04.

The Students

Eleven fourth graders from Hemlock Elementary, a school with below average passing rates on the state tests, and twelve fourth graders from Cherry Grove Elementary, a school with above average passing rates, participated in this study. (See Appendix A for on overview of the scope of state testing at the elementary and middle grades in NYS).

Students were recruited in person to take part in the study. In order to collect students' perspectives, three one-hour group meetings in each school were planned to discuss their experiences with the state mandated tests. Each student received two movie tickets for each discussion group in which they participated. All students who responded to this invitation were

included in the study. Figure 2 summarizes descriptive information about the students participating in the study.

Hemlock Elementary (urban)		Cherry Grove Elementary (suburban)	
Alexa **Amber** **Daphne** **Tracy**	White females	**Alyssa** **Amanda** **Jamie** **Julia** **Lynn**	
Faith **Maia**	Hispanic females – Spanish spoken at home	**Megan** **Morgan** **Olivia**	White females
Lena	Afghani American female – Afghani spoken at home	**Andrew**	
Savannah	African American female	**Corbin** **David**	
Jake	White male	**Kyle**	White males
Joseph	Hispanic male – Spanish spoken at home		
Vincent	Native/African American male		
Reported family income: 10 less than $25,500 1 between $25,500-$46,999		**Reported family income:** 7 between $47,000-$96,999 3 between $97,000-$146,999 2 did not report incomes	

Figure 2. Description of students in the study.

Modes of Inquiry

While this paper focuses specifically on student perspectives of state mandated testing, these data are embedded within ethnographic studies of these elementary schools. This aspect of the study used a variety of open-ended and interactive data collection techniques to construct a rich description of students' lived experiences. Responding to a diversity of personalities and comfort levels within the groups and/or in some cases facility with the English language, the groups involved opportunities to respond to the experience of testing through interactive games, drawing, and oral and written responses to specific questions. For example, we wrote sentence

stems for students to complete orally: such as, “Kids who do poorly on the math test will ...” or “One thing I liked about the English Language Arts test is ...” A student drew a sentence from a hat, he/she would end the sentence and then other students were given an opportunity to end that sentence before the hat was passed to the next student. Another approach was to write a question on the top of a blank lined page and have students write, in turn, their answers. These questions were of the sort, “What strategy are you glad you knew when taking the math test last week? Describe the strategy and why you needed it” and “What do you do when you feel nervous while you are taking a state test? How did you learn that?” (Students did very well with these two part questions and attributed this directly to their test preparation activities. For example, many students began their answers with words drawn from the question such as, “The strategy that I was glad I knew was ....”). Other activities included small groups drawing what test preparation looked like in their classrooms and drawing self-portraits of how they felt when taking the English Language Arts test.

These responses were analyzed and organized around common themes and perspectives using a constant comparative method typical of a grounded theory approach. A theory is considered “grounded” when it is derived from everyday experience (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Within this approach we ascribe to a social constructionist view (Charmaz, 2005), and used the constant comparative method to construct meaning from the meanings participants are themselves constructing in their day-to-day social encounters in and out of school, including taking part in our group meetings.

To understand how students made sense of and integrated the practice of state standardized testing into their overall educational experience, we systematically compared and contrasted their responses looking for similarities and differences across both groups, within

each group, and especially in regards to the differences that an urban-failing versus suburban-succeeding context might suggest. The data from each group meeting were analyzed and used to inform the nature and content of our questions and activities in subsequent interviews. Throughout this iterative process key features of the phenomenon described by the participants were identified and possible relationships between constructs theorized.

We approached analysis of the data with the assumption that all data, whether individual or group drawings, statements made in open-ended discussions, and spoken or written responses to prompts, are equally valid sources of information, and each provides only partial understanding of the experiences and interpretations of the students. The visual offers as complex an array of analytic insight (and dilemmas) as does the spoken, but the visual can open up equalizing opportunities for expression that the verbal may not (Rose, 2001). Additionally, drawings can depict a more personal and immediate response to the experience, as well as express local, social, and/or cultural norms and values thus providing other methods to elicit and describe students' experiences (Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Wilson & Wilson, 1977). While they are not the same, visual materials were often brought forth in the presence of or in conjunction with verbal materials, so our analysis of such a variety of mediums occurred simultaneously and in the context of each other.

It is difficult to do justice to the diversity of voices and experiences represented in the student responses. Clearly, performance on state tests is both an individually as well as socially, culturally and contextually mediated phenomenon. In the end, the modest amount of time we spent with each group of students raises many questions. However, these questions are based on specific patterns evidenced in the data. We have organized the students' experiences with testing under three conceptual headings: preparing for state tests (and associated messages about

schooling and learning), taking the tests (and the mixed responses and strategies for handling them); and consequences of passing and failing (and the perceived power these tests have in decisions about students).

In each section, we will provide a brief overview of the shared experiences across settings and discuss in more detail differences between urban and suburban 4th grade students' experiences. While we are cautious in presenting these differences in a conclusive way, we feel they are important in understanding how high stakes tests is affecting schooling for students. We suggest these experiences may be contributing to maintaining or even widening rather than closing the achievement gap.

Preparing for State Tests

Impact on teaching

Students, in both districts, perceived that testing has changed the kind of teaching that goes on in their classrooms. They easily identified test preparation activities because of the nature of that work and because of the explicit cues provided by teachers. When asked to finish the sentence, "I know a lesson is for test practice when ...," students' typical answers were:

Savannah (Hemlock)[3]: *"...teachers tell us to clear everything off our desk and put our booklet on our desk."*

Julia (Cherry Grove): *"We know because in writer's workshop we are doing ELA practice and usually in writer's workshop we write stories. And we know* [when] *we do one of these* [shows ELA test packet] *it's going to be an ELA practice."*

Students explained that test preparation focuses heavily on taking state tests given in previous years and working on test-like items. Alyssa (Cherry Grove) described what an ELA

practice looks like: *"It was a practice test and we had to read and like answer a question and then read and answer a question and then answer* [questions] *on both."*

While test preparation activities focus extensively on test taking strategies and seem generally similar across settings, the way students talked about the strategies paints a different picture. Both urban and suburban students talked about learning specific strategies for taking state tests. For example, reading the directions carefully and skipping the hard questions and returning to these only when all the others were completed. Some strategies, however, were emphasized by one group of students over the other. For example, the suburban 4th graders talked extensively about being taught to read the comprehension questions before reading the associated story or text, while urban students focused more on strategies such as reading the directions and what to do if they didn't know the answer to a question, as in this exchange among Hemlock students:

Savannah: *"Our teacher told us that when, if you don't know what the question is and that if you go back and you still don't know it will be D or C."*

Daphne: *"B or C."*

Savannah: *"B or C."*

Researcher: *"So if you really don't know the answer…"*

Savannah: *"You should pick one B or C."*

Faith: *"Then like put a little mark. Then when you are done with that, with the rest of the stuff ..."*

Daphne: *"...if you've got more time go back..."*

Savannah: *"...yea, go back through the story and try to look again and read."*

Different strategies may point to different areas of concern, such as maximizing the use of a limited amount of time or preparing students to deal with questions they will not know how to answer, or they may begin to highlight differences in the preparation of students based on teachers' expectations of students' success or failure. Test preparation activities and the strategies emphasized by teachers shape students perceptions of the tests as well as themselves as learners.

Impact on Learning

For the most part, the students in both settings acknowledged disliking test preparation activities because these are perceived as confusing, hard, boring and/or repetitive. However, they generally agreed test preparation is necessary if they are to do well on the state tests. In response to the sentence beginning, "One thing I really wanted to tell you about the state tests is...," Lynn (Cherry Grove) explained, *"...that your teachers get you ready really well. You'll do fine."*

Nevertheless, making the connection between test preparation activities to actual test readiness came mainly from the suburban 4th graders who believe the means justifies the ends. In their view, practicing and preparing were necessary if they were to do a good job on the state tests. In response to the sentence beginning, "Practicing for the ELA feels ...," typical Cherry Grove student answers were:

Olivia: *"... hard but I'll know if I practice I'll do a good job."*

Alyssa: *"...makes me feel good because then I know that the ELA won't be as hard as if I didn't practice."*

In contrast urban students did not elaborate on this question, perhaps viewing learning in this case, not as a means to some end, but more as something that adds (or should add) some sort

of value to their senses of selves, as these Hemlock student responses to the same sentence beginning suggest:

Tracy: *"...like I'm getting smarter and smarter."*

Joseph: *"...feels great."*

Jake: *"...makes me want to pass it."*

Test preparation activities contribute to students' senses of self as learner and student responses illustrate a distinction between urban and suburban students. This notion of self as learner includes the extent to which students perceive themselves to have the skills necessary to do well on the state tests and understand what those skills are. Practice tests, a key test preparation activity, also provide students with a place from which to assess their potential performance level. For example when asked to predict how well she thought she would do on the ELA, Jamie (Cherry Grove), as did most of the suburban students, based her prediction on past assessment levels: *"I think I'm going to get a 3 because usually I get 4s but sometimes since it's a lot harder you could get a lower grade on it."*

For the urban 4th graders, however, their thoughts on this relationship are harder to interpret. Only Daphne based her prediction on prior levels of performance. The other Hemlock students said they would pass the ELA because they planned to do what they were taught. Tracy explained: *"I think I am going to pass because I listen to all the teachers and I pay attention to whatever they say, every single word."* It is unclear, however, whether these feelings of preparedness correlate with actual performance (since, for example, while all the urban students expressed confidence that they would pass, the majority of them felt more pessimistic after taking the actual test, feeling that it was too hard). We do not have participants' individual results on the state tests, however, test scores for the year these students took the ELA and math tests

provide a picture of the test outcomes. Figure 3 gives the passing and failing rates on the ELA and math tests for the year that the students' in our study took the test.

	Urban (Hemlock)	Suburban (Cherry Grove)
4th grade ELA		
Does not meet standards	70%	18%
Meets standards	30%	82%
4th grade math		
Does not meet standards	46%	2%
Meets standards	54%	98%

Figure 3. Percentage of students not meeting and meeting standards on the ELA and math tests, 2003-04 in Hemlock and Cherry Grove Elementary Schools.

All of the students recognized that teachers have expectations for them. The message they got is that these tests are important and it is necessary to prepare for them. Furthermore, teachers can provide the tricks to do well, but it is up to students to apply them. In the next two sections, we will explain the ways in which this relationship is more complex. There is a difference in the way urban and suburban students talk about this relationship. For example, suburban students were more likely to talk about teachers providing the practice and the means for students to acquire the necessary skills, while urban students were more likely to talk about teachers guiding students successfully through the test item maze as long as those students pay attention. When asked how they thought their teachers felt about preparing students for the tests, urban students, such as Faith, often associated their teacher's feelings with their possible (if not inevitable) failure: *"I think* [the teacher] *feels like a little worried because maybe, like the listening, kids might fail or something, just by not listening and stuff,"* while suburban students, even while being aware of their teacher's stress or worry, were hopeful there was ample evidence to suggest most of them were going to do just fine. Morgan explained: *"Well I think it's because we've*

gone through so much practicing and a lot of time working on the test that [the teacher] *probably thinks that we know what to do."*

Taking the Tests

Researcher: *"How did the ELA go for other kids in your class, like did you notice other kids around you?"*

Alexa (Hemlock): *"Some people didn't really like it."*

Researcher: *"How did you notice that?"*

Alexa: *"Because they seemed worried and bored."*

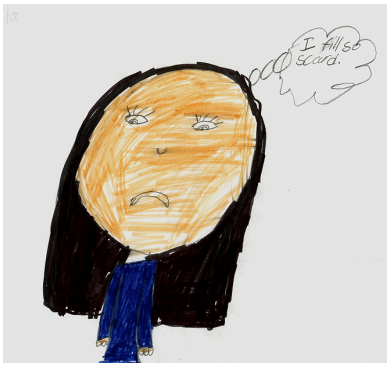
Joseph: *"Some schools might do good and some schools might be bad and I saw some people kind of looked like fat sweating."*

Jake: *"It was all quiet ... and nervous, because it was so quiet you could hear a cricket go click, click."*

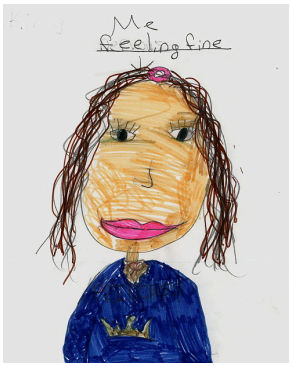
Mixed Experiences

Corbin (Cherry Grove): "*I drew me doing my test. And at that time I thought I was gonna do good because like on all the other pretests I got good grades and like on every one I got a B+ or higher. And I came to school and ate well and slept well and all that, and I really felt confident in myself."*

Jamie (Cherry Grove): "*I wrote I can do this. I can't get nervous. I wrote I can do this because mostly tests are short and I couldn't get nervous because I was thinking of me finishing."*



Lena (Hemlock): *"I feel so scared."*



Daphne (Hemlock): *"Good ...because I know I listen to the teacher when he explains the ELA. I know I learned all that he said."*

As other studies have shown (Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2000a), students' reported experiences of taking the tests show a varied and personal set of responses. Many students felt fear, stress, frustration, or some level of worry when taking the tests. Students also reported feeling confident, bored, confused, or neutral. However, most suburban students felt relief once they were faced with the test, finding it easier than expected and thinking they had done well, while the urban students felt relief because the test was confusing and much harder than expected. This sense of relief may point to ways in which suburban students are taught to expect and therefore prepare for the worst, and urban students, maybe for fear they will give up before even trying, are taught to try their best when confronted with a difficult task. The message urban students were getting is the inevitability that they will be confronted with a task that is out of their knowledge or ability repertoire.

When we asked students about strategies they used or found helpful during the tests, there were interesting differences between the preparation of urban and suburban students. Students' responses illustrate differences in the discursive and experiential educational context for these two groups of students. For example, when asked to complete the sentence, "State tests

questions can be tricky because ...," students answered in one of two ways. The first was simply to say that state tests can be tricky because they are difficult or confusing. Joseph (Hemlock) who was left alone with the tape recorder provided such an answer: *"The state test questions can be tricky because they are soooo, they are soooo hard. And sometimes they get confusing ..."*

Interpreting tricky as hard came mostly from the urban students. In fact many of the urban students were not sure what we meant by 'tricky' and even after we provided an explanation their responses pointed mainly to 'tricky' as being hard. Suburban students, on the other hand, were more likely to have ended the sentence by explaining how test questions can be worded in ways to purposefully fool or confuse you.

Morgan: *"State test questions can be tricky because they say something that you might think is easy and then you put down the wrong answer because you thought it would be easy, but you have to actually read the question a few times to understand what it says."*

Kyle: *"State test questions can be tricky because they try to put in words that mean something but seem like something else if you read it."*

Lynn: *"State test questions can be tricky because they put in answers like if it's very obvious, the people who make up the test they know 4th graders will make mistakes so they put non-obvious, obvious but it's not really obvious."*

Researcher: *"How do you know about this?"*

Lynn: *"Because our teacher told us."*

When students were asked if their teachers ever said anything to criticize the test questions or prepare them for tricky questions, suburban students were more likely to have heard specific warnings and to have received instruction for identifying tricky questions. Urban students had not.

A developing set of relationships between constructs here is a difference in the scope and nature of the strategies taught to each group of students and the way it interfaces with other constructs such as the ability to self-assess and confidence in self as a learner. For example, while all students expressed some level of worry prior to taking the ELA, there were clear differences in how they assessed their level of readiness after taking the test. In general, the suburban students felt confident that they had the skills to do well. For example in a written response asking the students if they needed help on the ELA, David (Cherry Grove) wrote: *"I don't think that there was anything that I didn't get. I knew all the words and what they meant."*

On the other hand, most, if not all, of the urban 4th graders, expressed wanting considerable help on the ELA:

Maia: *"Writing the essays. I didn't know what to do because the questions were too hard. I didn't understand."*

Savannah: *"I wanted help on the questions cause it was hard to read, but the teachers were like they couldn't help us read them."*

Furthermore when 4th graders were asked to complete the sentence, "I am glad the ELA is over....," their responses reveal a different orientation towards learning and testing. Here are some examples of how these students responded:

Lynn (Cherry Grove): *"I am glad the ELA is over because we don't have to study anymore and we don't have to come in and get our pencils sharpened and we don't have to sit down right away and get to work for an hour.... I don't like writing what people tell you to write, I like writing like what I feel like writing."*

Corbin (Cherry Grove): *"I am glad the ELA is over because ... like Lynn ... I don't like to write, like I don't like taking notes from a book or something and like it's kind of like if you're*

practicing for a play, if I'm in a play I don't like to do skits that like are there for me, I like to you know make up my own skits, but it's kind of like dirt biking freestyle, or monster truck freestyle. And it's also because ... I like the real test but I don't like the practice tests because the real test is actually what your grade is really getting graded on and because we only take three sessions of the real test and like we take like on each session we do like at least three pretests so it's like more than nine pretests."

Amber (Hemlock): *"I am glad the ELA is over because...it was hard."*

Lena (Hemlock): *"I am glad the ELA is over because I was nervous."*

The suburban students' answers focus on being glad that the practices are over so they can get on with what they see as more authentic tasks, while the urban students' answers focus on being glad the test itself is over. These answers may indicate that, for suburban students practicing for the tests were activities clearly oriented to taking state tests and are understood as different and not as valuable as their other day-to-day learning experiences. The responses of urban students suggest a lack of clarity as to the purpose and objectives of different educational tasks, which suggests a lack of explicit instruction about the relationship between activities (like test preparation and other activities unrelated to the state test) and a more explicit emphasis on product and consequences. This relationship is supported in other ways, such as the stress students experience around testing and their fear of retention.

Stress

Stress responses were different for the urban and suburban students. Students in both schools reported the presence of the state tests increased pressure on teachers and students to perform well. Most students recognized their teachers shared the stress they experienced. For example, in response to a picture of kids partying while a teacher is holding her head, Megan

(Cherry Grove) wrote: *"Kids are happy, teacher saw a bad test, they are having a party. I feel like that… Mrs. T was saying over and over and over don't be stressed, but I think she was a little stressed herself."*

While most students expressed feeling increased pressure when it comes to state tests and testing, their level of stress or fear seemed to be based on a personal history of testing experiences—students who felt they typically did well on tests expressed more confidence than students who have had past difficulties with testing. There were, however, definite differences between urban and suburban students' worries, their experiences with stress, and the way stress was acknowledged and dealt with by teachers.

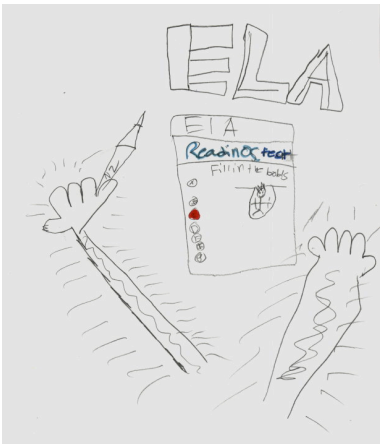
When asked to draw how they felt taking the ELA, many urban and suburban students expressed worry and fear.

Amanda (Cherry Grove): *"I chose to show myself thinking about what can go wrong and what can go right too. I wrote I'm so scared because I was scared if I can make a little mistake like forget a punctuation and it didn't make sense or I forgot to capitalize a letter. And I wrote I'm just gonna just get this over with because on all the pretests I did pretty well on the pretests, so I wasn't that scared anymore."*

Morgan (Cherry Grove): *"Well in my picture I was confused for what to write and I felt like I was alone in a room all by myself sitting and taking a test and it seemed to me like forever but I got through it all and when I got through it the last day, I was really happy."*

Joseph (Hemlock): "[I was] *worried cause if I don't, if I fail again cause I did third grade, cause in 3rd grade my teacher, I was in Manhattan and my teacher said 'some of you aren't going to pass into 4th grade,' and I didn't ... cause if I fail then I have to go to summer school and I don't want to go to summer school again."*

Vincent (Hemlock): *"Scary!"*



Jake (Hemlock): *"I was shaking. I was nervous. I'm like I'm not ready for it. I hope I pass."*

While suburban students worried they might forget or would not know how to apply something they had learned, their statements were filled with confidence that they had the required knowledge, and were usually followed by statements of relief that they should not have been nervous because they generally do well on tests. Most of the urban students, on the other hand, expressed real concern that they weren't ready for the tests and that it was too hard. This was followed by real fear about the consequences of failing the test and therefore 4th grade.

Students were also were prepared differently to handle this test-oriented stress. Since students experience stress in school for a variety of reasons, state tests, in and of themselves, may not produce more or less stress than other tests, quizzes or tasks such as homework.

However, the persistent presence of test preparation and stress reduction activities seem to magnify the importance of state tests. Many students shared personal strategies for handling this stress, such as taking a deep breath or counting to ten. The suburban Cherry Grove students, however, shared stress reduction strategies the whole class had participated in, strategies that were explicitly a part of the curriculum. These were brought up spontaneously when they were asked about test taking strategies in general.

David: *"Well somebody came in and we made a turtle thing and we wrote things that we can do if we like stress, like just put your pencil down and relax and think of happy places.... You can just pull out the turtle thingy."*

Olivia: *"There was a turtle on a piece of paper, a green turtle that you cut out and then we, you can fold their head or tail and their legs and then it's like protected. If it's in danger, we could* [look up] *a strategy we could use....* [Also] *before the ELA we all made these things we called warm fuzzies. We have little mailboxes on the sides of our desks... and everybody wrote down on little pieces of paper ... to everybody in the class something good about them. So, if you got like stressed out and ... you didn't know what to do cause you saw a question that was confusing you, you can ... reach in your mailbox and look at one of them ... and they would make you feel good and make you calm down..."*

And Amanda added to Olivia's statement: *"It was the day before... the ELA and I was reading my warm fuzzies and a lot of them said I was smart and I was good at math so that made me feel really good. It made me feel that like I could do the ELA. It made me feel really good and smart."*

On the other hand, when we prompted urban students to share examples of stress-related experiences, they indicated that stress-reduction strategies were not part of their teachers'

pedagogical repertoire. Instead, they considered their teachers' show of support to be a form of stress relief. Faith (Hemlock) explained: *"To help us with stress the teachers help us feel confident and sometimes help us feel better."*

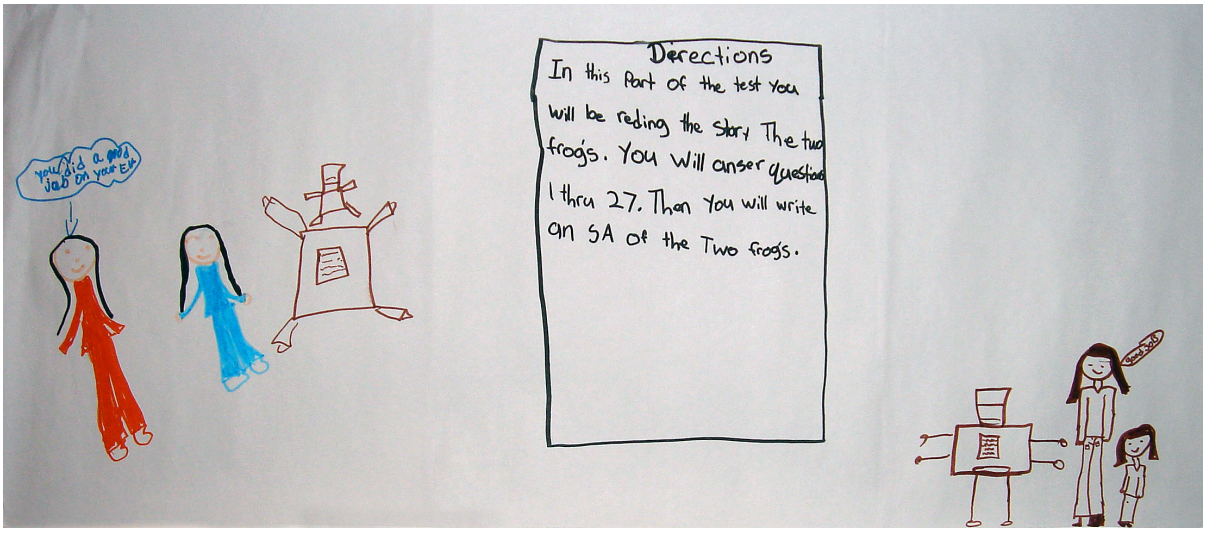
Researcher: *"And how do they do that?"*

Faith: *"By saying, 'you'll do a great job. Try your best. Don't rush on it.' Like that."*

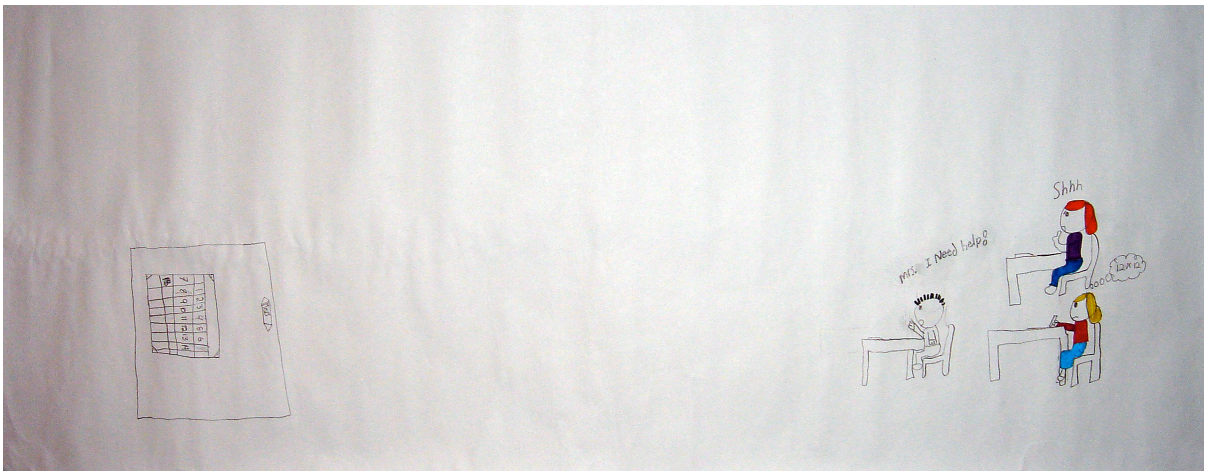
Lena concurred: *"I was nervous when I take the test. My teacher said that don't be nervous. Just try your best."*

The urban students not only mentioned that teachers often told them to 'do their best,' they themselves used that term to describe how they coped with having to take the test, as Maia (Hemlock) explained when asked what strategies she used on the ELA: *"I don't do anything. I just try my best."* Indeed, Hemlock teachers and parents place a high value on educational experiences that acknowledge the differences among children and that focus less on absolute outcomes and more on each student's individual progress. At Hemlock, as in many non-team sports, the emphasis was on one's "personal best."

It is unclear to what extent differences in the way teachers relate to students matter to how well students do on the test, or to what extent these differences exist. However, when 4th grade students were asked to draw pictures of their test preparation activities, the urban students all drew themselves with a teacher standing near them saying things like 'good job,' while the suburban students drew themselves sitting in desks facing a teacher's desk that was often quite distant from them, as these examples show:



Maia and Lena (Hemlock), Urban 4th grade girls



Olivia and Morgan(Cherry Grove), Suburban 4th grade girls

The suburban students believe their teachers know the system and perceive their role to be one of passing key insider knowledge or the tricks of the trade onto the next generation. Like coaches, teachers were seen as transmitting necessary and specialized knowledge to students that shapes students' perceptions of themselves as learners. The group drawing of test preparation may reveal the extent to which these students have internalized the roles and expectations of being a student. Student drawings often depict the social values embedded in that context along with personal expressions of the experience (Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Wilson & Wilson, 1977).

So the students' pictures may show the extent to which they understand and have internalized the expectations inherent to the situation. Furthermore, because the district has traditionally scored well on standardized tests, students have no reason to disbelieve teachers when they are told they will more than likely be successful. Students not only believe what they are told, but have internalized that sense of capability so that even if worried about how well they will do, there is a belief that they will do well enough to pass or succeed. The stress over the state tests and the emphasis on stress-reduction strategies may, however, be evidence that the teachers are not completely confident that students have mastered the knowledge on state tests.

On the other hand, urban students described their teacher's role as providing care, support, and guidance. These students rely more on the presence and direction of their teachers in assisting them with completing school requirements, rather than viewing the tasks to be completed as needing specific skills and information that can be applied in discrete settings. In this context, teachers are seen less as coaches and more as cheerleaders, cheering the students on wholeheartedly regardless of their potential to pass or fail. While the social values of interconnectedness may be reinforced in the students' homes and neighborhood, they backfire in the context of outcomes-based accountability. The individualized message to 'do your best' rings hollow in a system that chooses the one-size-fits-all criteria and standards by which every student is to be judged. Rather than providing teachers with the resources to give students the very special skills they need to take their best to the next level, standards-based testing takes many of these students 'best' and stamps it with a mark of failure. Both teachers and students know that failure is not only possible, but highly likely. The message is no longer one of individual support and progress, but a double verdict that doing one's best will not get you on the team. Valenzuela's (1999) study of a predominately Mexican-American urban school in Houston

provides evidence of the alienation students come to feel when students begin to realize the school does not have their best interest at heart. While the Hemlock 4th graders did not yet feel that teachers and the school did not care about them, what may occur over time is a loss of faith in teachers and in the school system to provide the necessary assistance and knowledge to compete in an outcomes-based accountability system.

Consequences and Rewards of Passing or Failing the State Tests

Students have bought into the achievement ideology and in a state-mandated testing context, "the achievement ideology refers to the view that hard work and individual effort determine one's test scores" (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 4). When asked, "Who is responsible for how well you do on the ELA?," all students in this study held the test taker ultimately responsible for his or her success or failure:

Julia (Cherry Grove): *"Why because it is how you do, not anybody else. I am responsible for the ELA test. Why, because [I] did the ELA not anybody else."*

Vincent (Hemlock): *"Me."*

Only two students mentioned the teachers' role:

Alexa (Hemlock): *"I think my teacher and I is responsible for my ELA test because me and my teacher is the ones who are taking the test and grading the test."*

Corbin (Cherry Grove): *"When I take the test I take my test and no other. It also depends on how I am taught."*

However, when asked to consider the consequences of passing and failing these tests, there is a difference in urban and suburban students' responses. When asked to complete the sentence "I want to do well on the ELA ..."

Olivia (Cherry Grove): *"I want to do well on the ELA because it will make you feel proud of yourself."*

Kyle (Cherry Grove): *"If I did good on the ELA I would like the entire world to know that I did good on the ELA and I would tell my parents every morning that I did good on the ELA and never forget it again forever."*

Savannah (Hemlock): *"I want to do well on the ELA because I want to pass the 4th grade."*

Daphne (Hemlock): *"I would feel excited just because I am passing the 4th grade and going to the 5th grade. Also I would feel very glad just because I did good on the ELA."*

Similar differences were noted in responses to the written question, "What would you worry about if you did really badly on the ELA?"

David (Cherry Grove): *"I would feel really sad and like I should be grounded. I would worry like everybody is going to laugh at me and not be my friend. I would feel like I shouldn't be alive."*

Jamie (Cherry Grove): *"I would feel like it would overtake my mind, and my parents would yell at me, and I would be grounded. But it wouldn't, because I think I did really well."*

Vincent (Hemlock): *"I will be very mad and I might stay in fourth."*

Maia (Hemlock): *"I wood feel very sad because I would get more than a fat, fat, fat, big zero."*

Furthermore, when asked to complete sentences such as, "Kids who fail the ELA ..." or "Kids who don't do well on the math test ..." an interesting difference emerged that adds to understanding the other differences already mentioned.

Alyssa (Cherry Grove): *"The kids who fail the ELA will feel like they should have practiced harder when they were practicing so then they probably could have made it, if they checked their work over."*

Morgan (Cherry Grove): *"Kids who don't do well on the math test think that they should do better the next time and try harder, maybe study a little more."*

Joseph (Hemlock): *"The kids who fail the ELA have to do summer school."*

Jake (Hemlock): *"The kids who fail the ELA have to repeat the grade."*

For suburban students, kids who fail the ELA will chide themselves for not having practiced or studied harder suggesting these students believe hard work leads to success and that the amount of effort put into work can alter the outcome. It also suggests that consequences such as repeating the 4th grade are not in the foreground of their concerns. Urban students in failing districts, on the other hand, have experienced and are reminded every day that there are real consequences to failure.

Our findings suggest that a complex interplay of interpersonal and organizational conditions play a role in shaping students' understandings of self and others. Faith in hard work for suburban 4th graders and concerns about repeating the grade for urban 4th graders are all developed within a discursive community. These beliefs circulate and create very different school contexts that effect all students, the capable ones as well as the struggling ones, and alter their perceptions and expectations of teaching and learning.

Discussion

These students come from very different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and attend elementary schools located at nearly separate ends of the needs index (NYS needs statistics for schools like Cherry Grove are in the lower range at 0.0 to 21.4, while needs

statistics for schools like Hemlock are in the higher range at 161.2 to 279). In this final section, we suggest that the concept of "organizational habitus" provides a way to investigate the structuring processes of organizational practices, and consider the way our findings suggest that this macro perspective is critical to understanding how outcomes based accountability holds little hope in narrowing the achievement gap.

Many studies have examined the role educational processes play in perpetuating or redressing inequalities in educational outcomes (Anyon, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Hallinan, 2001; MacLeod, 1995). More and more, researchers are considering how intra-organizational processes create structured and structuring practices that reproduce inequalities (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Roscigno, 1998). Our study contributes to this analysis by focusing on understanding individual accounts as meanings produced in the structuring practices of the school as an organization (Booker-Jennings, 2005; Diamond & Spillane, 2004).

The students, teachers, parents, and administrators in our study are thoughtful and reflective human beings, that is, they have self-understandings within a thinking mind that are created also through an active engagement with their social world. Bourdieu (1977) calls this embodied knowledge 'habitus.' "Habitus refers to a speaker's competence as a strategic player; their ability to put language resources to practical use but also to anticipate the reception of their words and to profit from this. However, at the same time, habitus is seen as an internalized disposition of objective structures." And more importantly, he continues: "It follows that agents continuously subjected to the sanctions of the linguistic market, functioning as a system of positive and negative reinforcements, acquire durable dispositions which are the basis of their perception and appreciation of the state of the linguistic market and consequently of their

strategies of expression" (p. 654). In other words, habitus is not only an "internalized disposition of objective structures," it also embodies an evaluative component. People learn to judge themselves based on current linguistic market and social values. For the students in our study, and the teachers who teach them, outcomes-based accountability is today's linguistic market.

While many studies have contributed to our understanding of the intersection of individual habitus and school practices, there has been less focus on the way an organization builds similar relational dispositions over time that structure the practices within it (Bourdieu, 1992). Organizational habitus is the dispositions and perceptions shaped by class, race and ethnicity to create a common organizational culture, one that builds on class-based practices, beliefs, and rules to provide meaning and structure social interaction (Diamond et al, 2004; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). For example, Diamond and Spillane (2004) argue that the identification of schools as succeeding and failing, an identification that coincided with students' race and social class, created different educational practices that may increase rather than decrease educational stratification.

Our study illustrates the details of the organizational habitus of an urban and suburban school and the practices they engage in everyday; practices that have been altered by state-mandated testing. There are two themes that seem especially relevant to understanding the intersection of organizational habitus and state mandated testing: the differently constructed notions of success and failure, and the teachers' role.

Constructed Notions of Success and Failure

When test scores go hand in hand with retention, tracking, or other grouping strategies, students most affected by these practices tend to achieve less well and put forth less effort (Wheelock, Bebell, and Haney, 2000b). "The overuse of standardized testing, grade retention,

and ability grouping are all inextricably intertwined in an approach to schooling that separates the "successes" from the "failures." Separately and together, these practices reinforce beliefs that some are inherently "smart" and some "not so smart." As a result, students caught up in this web of practices are vulnerable to developing beliefs that reinforce self-doubt and debilitate motivation to learn" (p. 8).

While we cannot speak confidently of individual student responses about success or failure, the urban and the suburban students responses suggest that individual student's senses of capabilities and beliefs about success are affected by the school's overall level of success. Cherry Grove teachers and students expect to build on a history of success. This school is a Garrison Keilor world where all the children are above average or at least capable of being above average. Even though students experience stress and worry about their performance on the state tests, there is the expectation that everyone will do well. And success is indicated by the attainment of high scores on the state tests.

Hemlock teachers and students, on the other hand, anticipate recreating a history of failure. To salvage something from the situation, but ultimately to insure the inevitable, teachers and students focus on "doing your best," rather than doing well. Success is redefined within the school context, but collides with the extra-organizational meaning of success as high test scores. Hemlock teachers' responsibility shifts away from student learning and toward providing a safe, caring environment where each student can feel they have learned something. This is evident by the common internalization of the message of "doing your best" that the 4th graders illustrated in their talk and drawings.

The attention of teachers at both schools is reinforced by parental expectations. Cherry Grove parents expect their children to perform extremely well on the state tests and expect the

school to insure they do. Hemlock parents want their children to develop positive self images and to be accepted individually for who they are, and in this social interplay teachers focus on each child's best, not high scores.

Teachers' Constructed Roles

The second important aspect of organizational habitus is the construction of teachers' roles, seen here through the students' eyes. Teachers often develop the kinds of differentiated instructional styles that the students in our study described (Anyon, 1980), and these styles are themselves shaped and reinforced within the larger cultural and social communities of the neighborhood. They are not adopted by teachers out of context, but develop over time through encounters with others.

At Hemlock, teachers focused on rote tasks reinforced by close interpersonal cheerleading. For example, test preparation looked like taking the test. The students understood the event of test practice and the test because they were framed in the same way—by asking students to clear off their desks, take out their pencils, and wait to begin when told to do so. Teachers offered test-taking tips (like doing the questions you know first) but students reported little instruction that could be seen as going beyond practicing the test. However, students felt a sense of comfort and support within the classroom. Their teacher was there to support them, encourage them, encourage them to do their best, as illustrated especially in the pictures students drew of their relationship with their teachers.

At Cherry Grove, teachers are knowledgeable, if distant, and provide the sort of meta-cognitive coaching that not only prepares students for taking the test, but has pedagogical value beyond the test. Teachers communicate clearly to students the relevance of practice testing for doing well on the test, and students come to see that as a particular kind of instructional activity.

Cherry Grove students were relieved when the testing was over so they did not have to participate in what they perceive as an inauthentic activity any longer. At the same time as the teachers prepare students for the test, they also teach meta-cognitive strategies like stress reduction or self-reflection that reach beyond the state testing episode. And students predict and anticipate how they will do using these meta-cognitive strategies. They anticipate they will do well on the test because they reflect on their personal histories of successful test taking.

The relational and pedagogical routines at Cherry Grove and Hemlock are shaped by the values inherent to the cultural contexts of each community. Hemlock's urban children depicted their teachers as close and supportive while Cherry Grove's suburban students portrayed their teachers as distant and knowledgeable.

Conclusion

No Child Left Behind emphasizes testing as a way to decrease the achievement gap between rich and poor, between English speakers and those with other first languages, between recent immigrants and others, between racial and ethnic groups. This study illustrates clear differences between the educational experiences of urban (poor, ethnically and racially diverse) and suburban (wealthy, white) 4th grade students, and these differences have been altered by the presence of high stakes testing. The organizational habitus of these schools is markedly different. Cherry Grove, a white suburban affluent school, reinvents itself daily based on its past success and its anticipated future success. Teachers pointedly focus their teaching and curriculum on the test, but also beyond. The test is like many of the assessment hurdles these children anticipate facing throughout their lives. Hemlock, a largely minority urban poor school, reinvents itself based on its past failures. The cultural expectation of focusing on individual bests creates a kind of hope, but one that will in the end be dashed. Doing one's best does not count on the state tests,

only doing well. While the Hemlock teachers construct a pedagogical role that seems caring and accepting of individual differences, in the end it will perpetuate the high rates of failure of the school and its students.

The problem, of course, does not lie fundamentally in the organizational habitus of either school. Neither expecting success nor encouraging students to do their best are inherently bad. It is the injection of the one-size-fits-all accountability system that discourages both schools from building in positive ways on its own community and cultural norms to increase the likelihood that students will be successful, happy, and well adjusted.

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Appendix A

Summary of New York State Tests Given in 4th, 5th and 8th Grades

4th	**English Language Arts** ➢ Session 1: Reading selections, 28 multiple choice questions ➢ Session 2: Listening selection, short and extended response questions, independent writing prompt ➢ Session 3: Reading selections, short and extended response questions **Math** ➢ Session 1: 30 Multiple choice questions ➢ Session 2: 9 Short and extended response questions ➢ Session 3: 9 Short and extended response questions **Science** ➢ Part 1: (Written) Multiple choice questions (35-40%), constructed response(15-20%), and extended response(15-20%) ➢ Part 2: (Performance) Open-ended questions (25%)
5th	**Social Studies** ➢ Book 1: 35 multiple choice, several short answer and constructed response ➢ Book 2: Document-based question
8th	**English Language Arts** ➢ Session 1, Part 1: Reading selections, 25 multiple choice questions ➢ Session 1, Part 2: Listening selection, short and extended written responses ➢ Session 2: Reading selections, short and extended written responses and an independent writing prompt **Math** ➢ Session 1, Part 1: 27 multiple choice questions ➢ Session 1, Part 2: 6 Short and extended response questions ➢ Session 2: 12 Extended response questions **Science** ➢ Part 1: (Written) Multiple choice questions, constructed response, and extended response ➢ Part 2: (Performance) Open-ended questions ➢ *(numbers of questions and percentages of weight not yet provided as this is a new test in 2004)* **Social Studies** ➢ Book 1: 45 multiple choice, several short answer and constructed response ➢ Book 2: Document-based questions

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[2] Complete case studies of Hemlock and Cherry Grove Elementary Schools can be accessed at http://www.crsep.org/HighStakesTesting.htm. These case studies of these schools are titled, "Hemlock's Stand" and "Doing the Best on the Tests," respectively.

[3] In order to help the reader compare urban and suburban student responses, student names (which are pseudonyms) are routinely followed by the name of their school (also pseudonyms) in parentheses.