Language & Leadership: Exploring the Relationship between Critical Theories and the Hegemonic Construction of Student Achievement

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM

*The spoken word belongs half to those who speak, and half to those who hear* (French proverb).

Introduction

Historically, schools have been managed using a rational approach to organizations. This has resulted in the misguided perception that there is one reality. Researchers who represent a critical theoretical perspective question the assumptions of this one reality (Apple 1990; English 1997; Foster 1986). According to English, “The idea that there is one reality out there waiting to be discovered through diligent pursuit of the truth is naïve” (p.14). Further, in questioning the presumption of this reality, researchers such as Fennimore (2000) and Fine and Weis (2000) state that it is in our investigation of language that we see how certain groups of people are systematically left out of the educational dialogue. Where educational discourse takes place, the powerful participants control and constrain the communication (Fairclough, 1989).

According to the National Association of Educational Progress (2001), a three to four year achievement gap exists between minority children and their white counterparts. Such statistics point to the fact that, despite the mandates instituted by the federal government and the best intentions of local leaders, minority students are not receiving an equal education. Federally mandated programs such as Head Start and Bilingual Education indicate a concern for the development of young children from a variety of home, community and language backgrounds. Yet, as this study asserts,
these programs of change have brought little success (Crawford 1999; Fennimore, 2000; Vinovskis, 2003). Most minority children remain in schools that are undoubtedly unequal. As a result, the educational opportunities presented to marginalized children are deficit, resulting in lower educational outcomes especially when measured against the national norm in standardized tests. With so many states performing below the national average there is a clear call for changes in the traditional structure, curricular guidelines and methods of assessment. For example, only seven states [Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Louisiana, and New Mexico, West Virginia and Tennessee] met the reading, math, and science requirement for the No Child Left Behind law in 2002 (Education Vital Signs, 2003).

Since the establishment of public education in the Nineteenth Century, there has been a general pattern of social stratification first with Irish, Italian, African American and Jewish immigrants, and currently with Hispanic, and Native Americans, being assessed as performing below the level of White Anglo Saxon children. Historically, education has been premised on the assumption that some classes of students come prepared to learn and succeed while others are at risk of failure, given their socio-cultural/economic background (Bruner, 1996).

The persistent achievement gap continues to be an item of importance on the national agenda (Bush, 2000-2001). Yet, the lack of success of the solutions proffered indicates that educational leaders must continue to search for more adequate solutions to these problems (Foster, 1986). Decades after the Brown versus Topeka Board of Education ruling 1954, the gap between White and minority student achievement remains a startling divide. Fuhrman (2003, p. 21) notes that while the NCLB Act has
heightened the emphasis on accountability, “states and districts have lacked the
capacity to mount serious interventions to improve the instruction, to turn around low
performing schools, and to close the achievement gap.”

Linda Darling Hammond (1995) asserts that the national educational agenda
supports a dysfunctional standardization and calls for pedagogy that “accommodates
different student experiences, interests and modes of performance” (p.19). Because
the existing curriculum is elitist and exclusive, it recreates the inequities that consistently
maintain the achievement gap. This is why the leaders of schools must actively
challenge these historical patterns of dis-empowerment and empowerment (Apple &
Beyer, 1998; Cummins 1996). Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Fennimore
2000) and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1999; Popkewitz 2001; Sleeter, 2000-2001)
provide the theoretical framework with which to interrogate age old assumptions about
the suitability of the curriculum and offer new and creative solutions.

This study establishes a framework to critique the traditional orthodox model of
leadership and recommends a mythological paradigm (Campbell, 1968; Whyte, 1994)
for educational leaders to examine the possibilities of pursuing more imaginative
approaches. Through the use of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989, 1995) and
critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1999), the mythological framework provides the kind of

Before proceeding, I will outline below the chief terms that congeal to form the
theoretical framework of this study. Following that, Figure One and Figure Two offer a
graphic presentation of this framework.
According to Owens (1991), “We understand much better than we did twenty years ago that schools, as organizations, are complex confusing places that are at their best filled with contradictions, ambivalence, ambiguity, and uncertainty” (p.19). In this study, I argued that the organizational and political structures of educational systems, as they currently exist, seem ill equipped to tackle this obvious complexity. Such complex issues in education include unimaginative discoursal practices, a hegemonic communication system that excludes some members of its constituencies (Apple & Beyer, 1998), and the achievement gap. These three problems are the motivation for undertaking this case study.

**Unitary model**

Many of the structures of educational organization come from the ideas, philosophy, and programmatic theories that have been borrowed from other disciplines and professions, primarily business and the military (Owen, 1991; Urban, 2000). Education continues to base its organizational leadership on the principles of scientific efficiency. It is this “traditional/orthodox” framework based on a unitary model that is ill-suited for the chaotic and pluralistic world of education. The system as it exists is based on maintaining a rational model of education (Woods, 1998). The characteristics tend to concentrate on data collection, curricular mandates, and technical issues, rather than on the social contexts and the needs of specific communities (Foster, 1986). This latter aspect is challenged by critical social theory advocates, such as William Foster (1986), Michael Apple (1979), and, Thomas Popkewitz (2001) who question the underlying assumptions of the structures of the educational system and the legitimacy of the
“traditional/orthodox” framework that has failed to address the multiple realities of the constituents within the educational system.

The bureaucratic arrangement of the educational system informs the method and thus the quality of the communication that takes place. It focuses on communication that is unimaginative and limits the creative potential of language to expand meaning and embrace the multiple perspectives of members of the community of practice. From the federal to state, to district levels of leadership this is the dominant mode of communication.

The federal government is a powerful political, economic and social group that exacts control in education through legislation and funding. From a political perspective, the key players in the system are the President, Secretary of Education, and state and local superintendents who have relied heavily on increased programs and extended site facilities to solve problems. Selecting knowledge, designing environments for learning and deciding which groups will participate is an act of political power (Apple & Beyer, 1998).

**Hegemonic communication**

This term refers to the stratified mode of communication that takes place between members of a constituency where one group dominates the other[s] in an hierarchical manner. The methods used in communicating between the group members are determined by those on the higher rungs of the hierarchy.

Control over others in discourse is a powerful mechanism for sustaining power (Fairclough, 1989). Federal language, as well as the language at the state level, is
privileged and often inaccessible to many at the school site due to a lack of understanding or fear of questioning authoritative figures (Foster, 1986). The language is formal and pervasive, setting up blocks of constraints in access to discourse (Fairclough, 1989). Such restraints serve to generate awe among those who are excluded and daunted by it. Over time, this power has become embedded in the discourse, setting up barriers at all levels in the hierarchical system.

Hegemonic language exists within the system in two dominant forms:

(a) the language of exclusion used by the dominant social groups, and (b) the silencing of the voices of those labeled as others such as children at risk, minority students, and students in high poverty communities.

**Eurocentric Curriculum**

The Eurocentric curriculum refers to the narrow conception of learning that is focused on the traditional model of the curriculum as a prescribed body of knowledge that is efficiently and objectively evaluated. At present, this curriculum centers on standardized testing as the preferred mode of evaluation and ignores what Posner (1998, p. 93) calls the curriculum conscience. This Eurocentric curriculum precludes critical pedagogy and is in direct congruence with the rational approach to leading. This ideology of a hierarchy of learners stratifies student performance outcome on a unitary model, based primarily on high stakes testing. This mass education for mass production model ignores the diversity of students, readily labeling those perceived to be different as failing, often, without attending to their needs or identifying underlying causes.

**The Achievement Gap**
The Achievement Gap refers to the disparity in academic achievement between diverse students and their White counterparts. This study contends that the achievement gap is perpetuated by the hegemonic use of language that is the hallmark of the educational system. This is the language used by educational leaders in making decisions about what is taught in schools and how this knowledge is evaluated.

**Marginalization**

Statistics highlighting the achievement gap, reveal that the children who lag behind, who are unlikely to enter college, and are at risk of dropping out are often those students labeled as *others* by the system: children whose language and cultural identity are not valued by the dominant social groups (Cummins, 1996). These children are pushed to the margins of the society when they do not possess the cultural capital to participate in the main stream.

**Imaginative Leadership**

Imaginative leadership centers on the craft of artistry in the daily exercise of organizational leadership of the education sector. This term refers to the mythological model of leadership proposed by this study. Operating within the critical paradigm, the leader brings to her journey an appreciation of current realities and past historical forces that are impacting the current context (Fairclough, 1995; Popkewitz, 2001). This discoursal practice has at its center a democratic agenda that opens up the communication to all members of the constituency. Specifically, imaginative discoursal practices include the use of imaginative language such as metaphors to expand meaning to give insights into the daily activities of a community of practice.


**Literacy**

Throughout this study, literacy is used interchangeably with the term curriculum. The two terms are taken to mean the process of acquiring knowledge which leads to transformation. This meaning of literacy/curriculum expands the narrow definition of curriculum as a prescribed body of knowledge. Literacy refers to a contextualized view of knowledge that brings into bearing past and current historical realities. It humanizes and personalizes knowledge and acknowledges the child’s role in her learning process. Such ways of knowing “increases our responsiveness to other forms of knowing “(Woods, 1998, p. 326). This form of learning proposes a more socially conscious form of evaluation to replace that which is offered by standardization. With its focus on critical pedagogy, this curriculum helps students to weld together their own inner experiences and the outer world (Posner, 1998).

**Critical pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy rests on the foundation of a curriculum that accommodates diverse learning styles, diverse material and diverse methods of assessment in the acknowledgment that there is no one reality (English, 1997). It is a curriculum that interrogates the traditional methods of teaching and establishes a paradigm that is based on creativity and contextuality, allowing students to have the best chances to perform at their maximum capabilities (Gay, 2000), to develop and internalize the drive to achieve their potential (Foster, 1986, p.166).

In contesting the narrow view of the curriculum as being a course of study, critical pedagogy embraces students who are not from the mainstream or dominant
culture. This democratization of the process of schooling involves as many voices of the school community as possible (Foster, 1986). This is pedagogy that “allows students to construct knowledge and respect themselves as learners because it reflects their achievement in their own terms” (Foster, 1986, p.166). The pedagogical implications of multicultural teaching (Banks, 1992; Banks & Banks, 1995) and culturally relevant curriculum (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994) converge in this interdisciplinary and transformational praxis. This is the transformational curriculum that Apple (1990), Popkewitz (2000) and Darling-Hammond (1995) argue for.

Figure 1 presents an overview of the current structure of organizational leadership of American public education that engages in discourse based on a rationalistic model of leadership. It demonstrates a hierarchical order of discourse where those with power control both the content and the method of communication. This hegemonic form of language needs to be altered to become more democratic and creative. These systematic constraints (Fairclough, 1989) need to be removed as “the social relations enacted through discourse can be expected to have long term effects on the knowledge and beliefs, social relationships, and social identities of an institution or society” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 74) such as the public school system.

Figure 2 represents the results of implementing imaginative discoursal practices which open up the possibilities of language use that accommodates multiple realities, leading to the closing of the achievement gap.
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Figure 1

Traditional Rational Model of Leadership

Unitary Model
Objective criterion of scientific management

Unimaginative discoursal practices

Hegemonic communication

Eurocentric/Traditional curriculum

The Achievement Gap = Curriculum Failure

The social structure of hegemonic relationships perpetuates academic failure for some groups of school children
Figure 2

Transformed Leadership based on mythological paradigm

- Imaginative Leadership
- Interrupting hegemonic communication
- Critical discourse
- Critical pedagogy

Student Achievement increased = Narrowing achievement gap
Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to critically analyze the language discourse of educational leaders and to identify the ways in which this language influences the implementation of pedagogy at school sites. Specifically, this study aims to determine the extent to which the language discourse contributes to the persistence of the achievement gap and the continuing marginalization of certain groups of children.

Through a critical analysis of the organizational leadership of education the weaknesses of the rational model will be identified with a specific focus on the extent to which unimaginative discoursal practices continue to contribute to vexing school problems such as the achievement gap. For as Foster (1986) states, educators who view a problem from multiple perspectives are the ones more likely to initiate steps towards transformation in a continuous search for more adequate solutions to our problems.

This study asserted critical discourse as a process of developing an educational organization populated by educational leaders who can “engage in continuing and unrepressed communication about existent school conditions and possibilities for change” (Foster, 1986, p. 167). It is important to examine the dominant features of the language discourse that takes place between the federal government, state, district, and school site. As a result of this research, educators should be able to identify language patterns and their relationship to pedagogy which may be related to the achievement gap and the marginalization of some groups of school children.
A Mythological Paradigm: A Conceptual Lens

The mythological concept of the hero as espoused by Joseph Campbell (1968) has been used as a philosophical approach in the discussion of educational leadership with an examination of how the leader makes theory meaningful at the level of practical action (Foster, 1986, p. 168). The mythological paradigm provides a conceptual lens through which one can view educational leadership as it readily offers a leadership paradigm which has imaginative discourse as its central feature. Such a practice rests on the tenets of political, symbolic, structural, and the human resources frames of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1999). Because mythology is a universal narrative form that inscribes Western society and culture (Hamilton, 1940), it is an accessible resource from which to establish this particular leadership perspective. As the following outline shows, the mythological paradigm bears the features of creative and imaginative leadership that is capable of embracing the multiple realities of the system.

Characteristics of the Mythological Paradigm

The mythological paradigm is framed by six concepts: philosophical, sociological, psychological, political, narrative and contextual.

Philosophical: The leader sees change efforts as transformative. She engages in critical inquiry to arrive at both questions and answers to transform the basic structures that have been established (Foster, 1986).

Sociological: The community of practice is central and constituents' voices are validated. The ultimate message of myth is unity and a common purpose. Such a community embarks on a sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise, social representations, language discourse, mental models, and shared experience and
beliefs (Wegner, 1998). This points further to the psychological development of self and identity and to the sociology of group formation and membership that critical educational pedagogy analyzes (Fine & Weis, 2000; Giroux, 1999; Popkewitz, 2001).

**Psychological:** The enduring archetype of the heroine presents a psychological typology for the educational leader (Hillman, 1988). The ‘heroine’ seeks knowledge, wise counsel and grows into self awareness and understanding of others. She understands that communal support is essential in tackling the vices on her journey (English, 1997). She validates the identity of the constituents, encouraging the formation of spaces (Popkewitz, 2000) and the multiple realities that exist.

**Political:** Leadership is democratically fostered and is based on consensus (Foster, 1986). The leader assesses the resources that are available to her and pursues a plan for equitable distribution. This political dimension of leadership has at its center the democratic participation of the members of the constituency and links education to broader issues of social concern.

**Narrative leadership:** Artistic communication is central. The story of the journey is shared communally with active participation by the members (Gardner, 1999). The leader understands the cultural construct of language and engages the community of practice in meaningful dialogue. Language is used as a dominant feature of leadership. The linguistic possibilities of symbols and metaphors are explored.

**Contextual:** The leader places her community in context. She situates the knowledge, the school, and herself as a leader within the reality of these social conditions (Apple, 1990) of the complex society. The heroine’s community is the parallel of education’s community of practice and she becomes an allegory of lived experiences.
When one examines the conditions under which education operates and the social effects of education, one readily identifies the timelessness of the mythological framework as an alternative paradigm. For it encompasses all humans, youth and adult, and sets as a framework, age old tales that teach life lessons that relate to all. Through an examination of mythology one might well be able to answer the question of how and why curriculum and teaching are organized and controlled.

Because of such pressing problems as violence, academic failure, and alienation, the leader must be able to offer hope within the community of practice (Estes, 1992). A mythological framework of leadership with its focus on narrative offers imaginative possibilities (see Figure Two, page 12). This leadership will interrupt hegemonic communication and implement a deliberative practice that is both critical of existing inequalities and powerful on envisioning possibilities (Apple & Beyer, 1998).
Research Questions

1. Do educational leaders at the district office use hegemonic communication strategies in responding to the federal and state demand for accountability?

2. What is the impact of the communication strategies used by district leaders on the constituents of principals, teachers, and students?

3. Does hegemonic communication control pedagogy at the school site?

4. What pedagogical assumptions do principals and teachers take to their practice of teaching and how do these impact pedagogy?

5. To what extent can critical pedagogy interrupt hegemonic communication practices within the school system and contribute to the narrowing of the achievement gap?

6. To what extent does hegemonic communication contribute to the marginalization of students at the school site?

Significance of the Study

This study points to the possibilities of pursuing a path that bridges the theoretical frames of critical discourse analysis with the contextual realities of school districts. Essentially, it provides the scope for moving theory into the realm of meaningful practice through the application of a creative paradigm identified as the mythological paradigm. Out of this research, one should be able to identify the language patterns of educational leaders and determine whether or not such patterns directly impact pedagogy and hence, the achievement gap.

In collecting and analyzing the data, I captured the multiple and dissenting voices that are fundamental to the system and offer a strategy for including these voices
through critical discourse. Through the collection and analysis of data, I provided a philosophical discussion of the possibilities offered by the mythological paradigm and how it may be used as an alternative method of leading. Very importantly, it has been determined that critical pedagogy can exist within an environment of hegemonic relationships. The research highlights the implications (see Chapter Five) that this finding holds for educational leadership and school achievement.

**Limitations**

This research was based on the compelling motivation to seek answers to critical questions. In the attempt to do so, it was difficult to sort through data, organize material, and arrive at findings that are free from personal bias and the impact of the researcher’s worldview. Apple (1996) cautions against the self-consciousness in placing oneself in the research setting. Under such circumstances, it was difficult to maintain objectivity in the conduct of the inquiry.

Every researcher takes into the research setting certain assumptions. In this study, the critical discourse method established a position that was critical of certain segments of the population under scrutiny. While it proved troublesome to find a balance between knowledge of the socio-cultural development of education and an objective analysis of the state and federal role in creating communities of practice, I successfully instituted strategies that safeguarded the integrity of the study (see Chapter Three). For example, awareness of the inequities that exist in the resourcing of schools was one important issue that posed a difficulty in maintaining consistency and objectivity in gathering and analyzing the data. The critical discourse analysis process demanded a constant critique of the researcher’s role. In undertaking this analysis, I
found that my assumptions about the role hegemonic communication plays in school leadership was continuously challenged and revised. Specifically, the interview narrative at both district and school site level presented evidence of critical discourse at each level. Through the process of reflexivity (Lather, 1986), I maintained the integrity of the analysis by reporting and analyzing all findings, both confirming and disconfirming. The researcher’s role is more fully discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

While on the surface, the small sample of one school district, one school principal, and five teachers as data subjects in this study might seem to pose a limitation to the scope of the study, the actual data sources were far more expansive. Data sources included a rich body of archival material and data synthesized from the review of literature. I reviewed pertinent correspondence from district office to the school site in order to critically interrogate the communication strategies used by that office in corresponding with the school. Archival records provided a rich source of data, independent of the researcher’s presence, interpretation, or preexisting theories. These sources provided different perspectives and cross checks for the other forms of data. (Drew, Hardman & Hart, 1996, p. 186)

Conclusion and Summary

There is the need to establish and maintain creative urgency in educational leadership (Whyte, 1994.) Given the multiple realities of the American public school system, the leader must embark on ventures to discover new possibilities (Greene, 1988). A creative and imaginative paradigm of leadership (Whyte, 1994) must be applied within the context of the community of practice (Wegner, 1998). In contextualizing the everyday experiences of schooling (Pisapia, 2000, unpublished
manuscript) the heroine will use a political and economic model (Foster, 1986) where she recognizes the community of practice as a political system that has real and symbolic resources. She knows the key players (Pisapia, 2000), recognizes the necessity to acquire access to the resources she needs, and strategically builds coalitions to do so. Through the stories she tells, she articulates that urban and minority youth are not culturally deficient, that despite the restrictions they have the agency for change. This effective leader has a storyteller’s sensibility.

This study offers findings and conclusions based on the assertion of the suitability of creative and imaginative discoursal practices such as critical pedagogy and a mythological paradigm of leadership. Chapter Two will present the conceptual framework for investigating the three problems of unimaginative discoursal practices, hegemonic communication and the achievement gap. The methodological design is described in Chapter Three. Data were collected from multiple sites at one district office and one school site and analyzed in Chapter Four. Chapter Five will present the conclusion and recommendations for future research. Chapter Six will present a discussion of the applicability of the mythological paradigm as a suitable construct in tackling the multiple realities of the public school system.

Before proceeding to Chapter Two, I have included a glossary of terms closely associated with the theories and methods that were used in this critical study.
Definitions of Terms

**Community of practice.** A community of people working towards the pursuit of the same goal, using a practice acceptable by the group (Wegner, 1998).

**Critical analysis.** Use of the anti-capitalist perspective in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of inquiry. This method moves beyond the traditional methodologies to include language and identity/subjectivity/space (Carlson & Apple, 1998; Fine & Weis, 2000; Popkewitz, 2001). It incorporates ideas from the social sciences to analyze and account for events and predict some of their consequences. It is based on criticism of the established perspective on knowledge (Apple, 1990; Foster, 1986; Fairclough, 1989).

**Discourse.** Any form of communication within a social relationship. This includes verbal and written forms of communication.

**Genre.** The uses of language associated with a particular socially stratified activity and includes the various forms of communication events such as speech, interviews, and press conferences. A text is produced as part of the on-going development of a genre-which includes both text features and social practices- and is read by a reader who is enculturated to understand texts in codified and conventional ways (Smagorinsky, 2001).

**Hegemony.** (Apple 1990, p. 4): How differential power is circulated and used in education and the larger society. It is the process in which dominant groups in society come together to form a bloc and sustain leadership over subordinate groups.
**Hero/ine.** The term is specifically borrowed from Greek mythology bearing the meaning of the individual who sets out on a quest, knowing of imminent danger, but courageous enough to prepare him/herself to tackle the dangers (Bolen, 1985). All hero/ines are contextually figured (English, 1997).

**Hidden curriculum.** Specific curriculum developed to meet the needs of a specific sector of the school environment, with insufficient or no attention paid to the needs of other students. This type of curriculum is perpetuated by conservative and bureaucratic schools that privilege some, while silencing others (Apple, 1979).

**Identity.** A way of talking about learning that changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities (Wegner, 1998, p. 5). Identity can be viewed as the actual experience of self in a particular social situation (Chen, Houston & Gonzalez, 2000).

**Ideology.** The assumptions that the “text producer uses to textualize the world in a particular way, and on the other hand, lead the interpreter to interpret the text in a particular way” (Fairclough 1989, p. 85).

**Meaning.** The ability to experience the world and our engagement in it (Wegner, 1998).

**Mythology.** Ancient tales (and contemporary tales) that teach lessons about life in the form of allegory and archetypes (Hamilton, 1940).

**Orders of discourse.** The structuring of a particular social space looked at from a specifically discoursal perspective. It is important to examine the conventions associated with a particular discourse type and observe the constraints or access that
this type of discourse may accommodate. These features imply particular linguistic forms.

**Power in the discourse.** The capacity to control orders of discourse, primarily through ideological domination. This includes the power to project one’s practices as universal and common sense. It is typically the prerogative of the powerful participant to determine which discourse type (s) may be drawn upon.

**Relations.** The social relations people enter in discourse

**Subjects.** Positions people occupy within the discourse.

**Text.** Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) defines text as any form of communicative interaction that bears possibility for analysis. Smagorinsky (2001) supports this definition stating that texts like the cultural-historical contexts in which they are produced and read, are codified and conventional.

**Texture.** The quality and form of the language conventions used.