

When Transparency Obscures: The Political Spectacle of Accountability

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Abstract

In the United States (US), an increase in standardization, quantification, competition, and large-scale comparison—cornerstones of neoliberal accountability—have been accompanied by devices of transparency, through which various forms of school data are made available to the public. Such public reporting, we are told by politicians and education officials, is essential for improving schools and reforming education. Using a framework of political spectacle, we reveal, however, that such transparency does more to legitimize the political action of those who promote transparency in education than it does to reform schooling. In fact, drawing on ethnographic data collected in New York City (NYC) between 2005 and 2011, we interrogate the ways in which politicians, state education officers, city officials, school district, educational leaders, and the media use the transparency of numbers and quantified accounts of academic achievement to draw attention away from the ways in which NCLB negatively impacts poor, Black, and Latino youth. We demonstrate that transparency selectively magnifies the ways in which NYC is making schools more accountable, and strategically hides the persistent racial and class achievement gaps. Finally, we discuss how, in the rush to provide evidence to the federal government, to states, and to the public, exuding confidence through transparency has emerged victorious over generating accurate data in order to attend to the disparities in American public schools.

Keywords: Policy, Transparency, Accountability, Politics, NCLB

The enthusiastic and pervasive use of “transparency” to convey openness in operations of government, economics, and business has taken hold in domains of education. In the United States (US), an increase in standardization, quantification, competition, and large-scale comparison—cornerstones of neoliberal accountability—have been accompanied by devices of transparency, through which various forms of school data are made available to the public.¹ Such public reporting, we are told by politicians and education officials, is essential for improving schools (i.e. raising standardized test scores). Yet, such transparency may do more to legitimize the political action of those who applaud transparency than it actually does to benefit schools (Ozga, 2009). Transparency, thus considered, is not only a strategy by which to inform the public, it is also an important political apparatus (Barry, 2010). In public education, transparency is part of what Hill (2006) refers to as “the current neoliberal project” in which “intensive testing...and accountability schemes are aimed at restoring schools” (p.1) to function effectively in reproducing social stratifications.

Transparency makes information public, or at least publicly accessible, and upon first glance, this seems to be for the civic good. Deeper consideration shows, however, that transparency does not reveal all; rather, it illuminates only selected procedures and the ways those particular procedures structure and organize social phenomena and relations (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2009[2001]). Certainly, transparency in reporting information is not neutral. It is part of the construction of a variety of actors, devices, and organizations capable of generating, monitoring, maintaining, and circulating the information. Labaree (2011) and Grosz (2005) suggest this impulse in contemporary policy to atomize, quantify and digitalize obfuscates the complex, idiosyncratic and contextually bound world and renders silent alternative epistemological criteria by which we may understand the fullness of the material world. Further, transparency represents not only the processes of monitoring and auditing, but also sets of practices, methods, and instruments aimed at producing particular kinds of information tailored for specific audiences (Barry, 2010). Transparency reconfigures relationships between information and those people and institutions who ready it for public consumption (Power, 1997). This calculable and rationalized map of educational settings undergirds and makes possible the power of policy actors to steer and direct narratives of reform. It also aims to

change the public's response to government and business—and now, educational processes that were once more securely in the domain of those working in schools.

In contemporary education policy, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), transparency is utilized as a “technology of accountability” that holds states, districts, schools, and individuals accountable to their practices by transforming what is emphasized and publicized—i.e. what is counted is what counts. It does not necessarily transform practices. Within the hegemonic script of transparency as a public service, situations of discrimination and marginalization that make necessary the need for educational reform are eclipsed by publicly-circulated reports of test-driven accountabilities. Those critical of NCLB's transparency and test-driven accountabilities (Apple, 2006; Hursh, 2007; Ball, 2010; Koyama, 2011; Lipman, 2011; Giroux, 2012, among others) question to whom should schools be held accountable. They insist that even if contemporary educational reforms bring greater transparency (and this is also questioned), the test-driven accountabilities simultaneously threaten equity and perhaps exacerbate inequalities.

NCLB aims to “close the achievement gap between high-and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers” (Section 1001.3). Under NCLB, states are required to report achievement gaps between demographic subgroups, including those delineating race, “to help schools, districts, and states decrease achievement gaps over time” (Berends and Penaloza, 2008, pp. 66-67). Paradoxically, the current accountability and reporting mandates of NCLB “have transformed racial achievement gaps into a real, tangible, and local issue in many school districts” (Magnuson and Waldfogel, 2008, p. 4), while disproportionately affecting low-achieving schools attended by low-income students of color, thus “reproduce[ing] and extend[ing] racialized and class disparities in schools” (Lipman, 2011, p. 129).²

Standardization, accountability, and transparency have done little to alleviate the racial achievement gap between White students and Black and Latino students (Hursh 2007), nor to improve the schooling experiences of Black and Latino student in public schools that have low achievement (Fry 2008).

Here, we examine the purposeful public enactment of transparency as a technology of accountability under NCLB in New York City (NYC). Drawing on ethnographic data collected between 2005 and 2011, we interrogate the ways in which politicians, state educational officers, city officials, school district, educational leaders, and the media use the transparency of numbers and quantified accounts of academic achievement to draw attention away from the ways in which NCLB negatively impacts poor, Black, and Latino youth. These youth, who disproportionately attend “failing” public schools (Public Policy and Education Fund of New York, 2011), and are often blamed for low achievement, high-dropout rates, and the overall ruin of public schooling (Leyva, 2009; Ny and Rury, 2006), become secondary to the primary display of increased overall quantification of schooling and publicized accountability.

Using a framework of political spectacle, we reveal a paradox in which the transparency and accountability measures implemented in schools and lauded by education officials and politicians depend on the work of a small group of experts in statistics and psychometrics, making most information opaque to the general population (Gorur and Koyama, 2013). So specialized is the expertise needed to understand the actual processes by which the data is produced, let alone the educational practices it comes to represent, that the transparency measures obscure more than they expose. And perhaps, this is intentional. As we illustrate, transparency and secrecy are conjoined; transparency selectively magnifies the ways in which NYC is making schools more accountable, and secrecy strategically hides how the data-driven accountability measures do not improve the schooling of poor Black and Latino youth.

Political Spectacle

Policy is political and this paper draws upon Edelman’s (1988) theory of political spectacle, as applied to educational policy by Smith, Miller-Kahn, Heinecke, and Jarvis (2004), Wright (2005), Koyama and Bartlett (2011), Koyama and Cofield (2013). Political spectacles are, according to these scholars, political constructions of reality that “resemble theater, complete with directors, stages, casts of actors, narrative plots, and (most importantly) a curtain that separates the action onstage—what the audience has access to—from the backstage, where ‘real allocation of values’ takes place” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 11). Yet, what goes on immediately

behind the curtains fails to capture the range of enactments, and here, we consider additional offstage settings, such as dressing and rehearsal rooms, where accounts of student achievement are essentially “dressed up” or “spun.” These variations between onstage, backstage, and off-stage conduct, originally elucidated by Goffman (1959), are purposefully concealed by the actors. Packaged and presented by the media and publically-elected officials as benefiting citizens, NCLB’s transparency and accountability serve to render unintelligible the ways in which the policy sustains inequalities and maintain power differentials. In this paper, inanimate props, such as test scores and like-school comparisons, become the main actors, pushing students, especially Black, Latino, and poor ones, away from purview.

Promoted as a tool for increasing academic achievement, NCLB, like other policy, disguises its political nature with vague statements, coded language and objective, logical, and neutral idioms (Shore and Wright, 1997). The political language of education policy so “bemuses, obfuscates, befogs, mystifies, lulls, [and] glosses” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 16) that few challenge it. Deception in the political spectacle of policy relies upon the use of symbolic language, which is ambiguous, metaphorical, and open to multiple interpretations. Yet, paradoxically words, figures, and numerical data used by political leaders to support policies are presented as precise and logical, rather than subjectively and selectively contextualized.

Smith et al. (2004) convincingly argue that “accountability is a concept that glosses political and institutional arrangements and exchanges” (p. 48). They contend that assessment mandates, which “epitomizes the political spectacle,” (p. 47) function to demonstrate accountability but have exceptional political usages. For instance, tests are used as levers for national reform or to enforce policy. Tests provide bureaucratic control, are publicly seen as reliable measures of accountability, and “are useful policy instruments because they are cheaper and quicker than alternative reforms...” (p. 50). Assessments and policies centered on accountability emerge from behind-the-scenes negotiations of power and position even though they are performed as desirable, if not necessary, to the populace.

The theatrics are for public consumption. As accountability and transparency are promoted across multiple stages, including parent meetings and political forums, actors and production

staff (politicians, state and district officials, and businesspersons) “negotiate for themselves material benefits using the informal language of barter, in contrast to the stylized, formal, abstract, ambiguous language characteristic of the performance onstage” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 32). Political hopefuls gain favor from particular constituents; businesspersons garner lucrative contracts with educational agencies; and government officials vie for popularity and ongoing support. In NYC, Mayor Bloomberg, both a politician and a wealthy businessman, built much of governing platform on ridding the city’s educational system of inefficiency and building transparent accountability measures. Often, as shown by Koyama and Bartlett (2011), those, like Bloomberg, who operate off stage and act onstage aim to extend their power and ability to govern or influence through accountability and assessment policies.

Here, we focus on the materiality of educational policy and its role in the spectacle. Informed by Callon and Muniesa (2005), Fenwick and Edwards (2011), and Law (2008), we see materiality as the processes through which policymaking materializes or animates knowledges, ideas, practices into observable and measurable things. Tracing what Law refers to as “matter-ings” reveals how inanimate things, such as particular knowledges, become infused with values, and made real and visible. Central to interrogating the spectacle are the documenting and tracing of materialized objects or onstage props, such as students’ test scores and graduation reports that indicated a closing gap between racial groups. They are strategically selected and deployed as symbolic objects imbued with meaning. We also consider actors who are cast, or cast themselves, to play certain policy roles, but focus on how these actors generate, utilize and circulate the material objects to garner personal gain and support. As do Koyama and Cofield (2013), we focus not on Smith et al.’s distinct casting of individual policy actors; but rather consider the deeply embedded and systemic ways in which multiple policy actors collude in obscuring the racial achievement gap and the schooling experiences of Black and Latino students with transparent accountability measures.

The Impact of NCLB's Accountability on Racial, Ethnic, and Linguistic Minority Youth

NCLB's heightened accountability, according to several scholars (Au 2009; Darling-Hammond 2007; Hursh 2007; Lipman 2011), is a result of a neoliberal movement that infiltrates public education with business-like, market-based reforms all in the name of maintaining the country's position in the global economic structure while ignoring the pernicious social inequities within the US that undergird the need for educational reform. Specifically, NCLB's high-stakes standardized testing is used by official policymakers and business leaders to garner political support and financial returns behind the scenes, while bolstering their erroneous public claims that close monitoring and improvement of academic attainment in the U.S. will strengthen the economy (Au 2009). Similarly Koyama (2010, 2011) and Burch (2006, 2009) demonstrate that NCLB legitimizes schools accountability to the federal government, the state, and a host of local educational support businesses and politicians. They reveal how urban districts depend on the private services—including test development and preparation, data analysis, and targeted remedial instruction—that keep schools in compliance with NCLB accountabilities and reliant on the intrusion of the private business, but that do little to reduce achievement gaps.

Evidence on the test-based accountabilities and measures of NCLB, themselves, suggest that these accountabilities are not likely to benefit most students, including ethnic, linguistic, and racial minority youth (Koertz 2008). Adequate yearly progress (AYP), the measure used to hold schools accountable under NCLB, has been shown to have several limitations (Brown and Clift 2010; Linn 2003, 2008). Also, schools with greater demographic diversity and lower initial academic achievement are more challenged to meet their AYP goals (Brown and Clift 2010). The test scores, especially gains in scores, do not generalize well to other measures, such as lower stakes measures, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), making broad claims about increased achievement risky (Fuller, Gesicki, Kang, and Wright 2006; Lee 2006).

NCLB narrows curriculum (Meier and Wood 2004; Gay 2007) and undermines authentic assessments and reforms for linguistic, ethnic, and racial minority youth (Loder 2006; McNeil

2000; Menken 2008). It pushes out and excludes low-scoring youth from mainstream classes, creating a disproportionate number of Black and Latino dropouts and special education placements (Darling-Hammond 2004; Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Valenzuela 2005). The policy's punishments for low-performing schools fall more severely on those schools serving racial and linguistic minority youth, employing ethnic and racial minority teachers, and located in poor Black and Latino communities (Hursh 2007; Lapayese 2007).

Educational literature is, as Leonardo (2007) summarizes "replete with powerful critiques of NCLB as it affects children of color, poor students or immigrants" (p. 262). Leyva (2009) concurs, noting that as NCLB does not address social inequities or school funding disparities, African American and Latino students attending urban public schools are disproportionately affected. Recent scholarship, in fact, insists that NCLB's high-stakes assessments and increased accountability have actually exacerbated racial, ethnic, and economic inequality (Darling-Hammond 2007; Hursh 2007). Brown and Clift (2010), for instance, find that where school failure under NCLB is linked to a racial, ethnic, or ability subgroup, a reinforcement of discrimination, rather than a closing of the achievement gap, results. Thus, NCLB not only fails to lesson racial and class achievement gaps, it also normalizes racism by disguising it within narratives of accountability and measures of transparency.

Drawing upon critical race theory (CRT), scholars (Gillborn 2005; Leonardo, 2007; Taylor 2006) argue that federal education policy reflects particular societal norms and values that perpetuate white privilege. This prompts Gillborn (2005) to refer to education policy as an "act of white supremacy" (p. 485), through which socially constructed and consistently reinforced whiteness becomes the norm, if not the supreme. Analyzing the production and performance of certain truths in education policy, such as NLCB, researchers have revealed how policy can advance color-blind discourses on education and global competition that serve to eclipse the racism experienced by people of color (Hollingworth 2009; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Specifically, Leonardo (2007) insists that NCLB is "an 'act of whiteness'" (p. 262); it, he states, "represents a node in nation creation that is intimate with the educational construction of a white polity" (p. 262). For him, NCLB formally assists in constructing the US as a nation by normalizing whiteness. From the policy's stated focus on *all* children through its standardized

assessments, NCLB reifies and furthers a colorblind narrative that reinvigorates whiteness as a “racial discourse” (Leonardo 2002, p. 31).

Methodology: Actors, Stages, and Performances

This paper draws on data collected, between 2005 and 2011, in New York City by the first author in an ethnographic study that aimed to answer the broad question: What happens when NCLB is localized in the country’s largest and most ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse school district? That larger ethnographic study concluded in 2008, but was extended with additional interviews, observations, and policy artifacts collected through November 2011. The additional information was gathered with a renewed emphasis on critical policy analysis amidst the educational politics of NYC, and in the US. Data for the entire study included interviews with principals, assistant principals, parent coordinators, and other school staff, as well as others associated with of the Department of Education’s regional superintendent offices, the Office of Strategic Partnerships, the 32 Community Education Councils, the Division of Contracts and Purchasing Vendors. Interviews with a variety of other boards and panels associated with NCLB and local reforms in New York City were also gathered. Nearly ninety interviews with school administrators—principals, assistant principals, and deans; more than half of the forty-five principals in the initial ethnographic study were interviewed more than once. Fifteen school and district administrators who had been interviewed between 2005 and 2008, when contacted later by email, agreed to be interviewed again during 2009, 2010, and 2011 about the annual progression of NCLB and state policy changes. In total, each of these fifteen educational administrations was interviewed at least five times between 2005 and 2011.

In addition to the interviews conducted with educational administrators, interviews with various for-profit educational support companies, as well as observation and participation in afterschool programs, governmental meetings, DOE hearings, school meetings, teacher-training workshops, community assemblies, and policy forums contributed to the data. Overall, including the previously mentioned interviews with administrators, eighty-seven informal interviews were conducted and more than one hundred fifty-five formal audiotaped interviews, including those

conducted with the school administrators were completed. By 2008, more than 550 SES and NCLB related documents were collected and reviewed, and greater than 250 pages of typed observational notes. Documents collection and analysis post-2008 have continued, resulting in greater than 800 pieces of saved non-interview or observation material. And more than 300 pages of typed observational. All data were initially broadly analyzed, using inductive coding with the qualitative data software NVivo 2.0 (and later version 8.0). As clear themes or categories emerged, the analysis moved from descriptive to analytical categories.

As larger quantities of NYC schooling data was made public in 2008, through web-based reports and widely circulated documents, study participants increasingly discussed the impact of quantification, data-driven accountability, and transparency—a trend that continued in interviews through 2011. The documents amassed between 2008 and 2011 also reflect this focus on accountability. By 2009, those interviewed had begun to criticize the effect of transparent accountability on youth, 71% of whom are Black and Latino, in schools in need of improvement (SINI). All of the fifteen principals who were interviewed during the initial study, and then annually between 2009 and 2011, stated that their main concerns were how NCLB harmed English language learners and how an emphasis on large-scale data hid the disparities for poor Black and Latino youth. The first author shared these emerging findings with the second author, whose research centers on the connections between “local” and “grassroots” school reform movements and broader political agendas and actors. This sparked multiple conversations about transparency and accountability between the two authors. Integrating the second author’s thoughts on neoliberalism and education, we discussed and analyzed the data, and here, critically examine what happens to issues of racial disparities when the NCLB test-driven accountability processes become public.

Findings and revelations

Widely distributed numeric accounts of student achievement are one result of standardizing, measuring, and categorizing, that have become important instruments of transparency in schools (Ball, 2001). Standardized test scores are compared and contrasted across subgroups of students within schools, and between schools, districts, and states. These accounts are presented to the

public as unbiased, logical, and apolitical accounts of policy-driven achievement. Data points from these accounts are casually used by popular media sources; complete school reports are made available online; like-school comparisons, in the form of leagues tables, can be accessed through district websites; and district rankings, based on NCLB accountability measures are widely circulated by various levels of government. Most of the data is available on openly accessible websites, and the public availability of this data is used as evidence for transparency in governance. Here, we discuss two situations—one focusing on the response to erroneous achievement data in New York City and the second centering on a series of New York State Education Department meetings—to demonstrate how such transparency acts gain legitimacy for policy decisions and actions that render the persistent racial and class achievement gaps less consequential.

Numbers Don't Lie

The test-driven accountability measures of NCLB have dramatically shaped New York City's public school system. A story in the New York Times succinctly summarizes the influence of the exams: "The test scores that the mayor and the chancellor chose to highlight were the state standardized tests, and they built their entire system around it, with schools' A-through-F grades, teachers' bonuses and now tenure decisions dependent on how well their students performed on the tests" (Otterman and Gebeloff 2010). According to one district official, "having the results of the tests go public, online and in the media, has changed the way we do business... It exposes us" (March 5, 2009). In fact, the results of the accountability measures, which are widely published and publicized, are used by the city administrators to justify the intrusion of free-market practices into schools, to guide the city's reforms, and to shape the discourse of schools in the service of the economy.

In 2009, the test scores became prominent political props of the mayor, who used them in his bid for an unprecedented third term. Michael Bloomberg, businessman turned NYC mayor, and then Schools Chancellor Klein, as well as several district administrators, touted increased state test scores in the city as evidence of the success of their administration's reforms. They performed them across multiple public stages. In Queens, a district administrator exclaimed: "We've done

it. We've figured out how to reduce the racial achievement gap that's been plaguing us for decades" (March 23, 2009). The city's progress in closing its racial achievement gap during this period was widely publicized and held up as a national model. Joel Klein, the city's school chancellor testified before Congress that the city had made progress in closing the gulf between White and minority students and President G.W. Bush even pointed to the city as proof that NCLB was working (Otterman and Gebeloff 2010). Mayor Bloomberg's campaign plugged the achievement gap reduction between White students, and Latino and Black students as evidence of his business-like approach to schooling. An administration aid bragged: "Look, we've got nothing to hide. We've made it all public, and well, it's all good....Numbers don't lie" (March 24, 2009). Such sentiments were echoed across the city by local officials, school administrators, business persons, and portions of the media that supported Bloomberg. In the current climate of public sector reform, including educational reform, increases in budgetary allocation are often tied to perceived levels of managerial efficiency as demonstrated by publically available data (Whyman, 2006).

However, by 2010, it was clear that the city had made no statistically significant progress in closing the racial achievement gap. An outside audit of New York's third through eighth grade reading and math tests mandated by NCLB requested by the governing body of the New York State Education Department (NYSED) revealed that New York had lowered its standards. To address the federal pressure to increase test scores to meet NCLB's one hundred percent proficiency goal by 2014, the NYSED lowered the bar by which "proficiency" was determined. In 2006, students in all grades needed to earn nearly sixty percent on the mathematics exam, but by 2009, they needed to earn less than fifty to reach proficiency (Ravitch 2009).

Bloomberg, who was re-elected, benefited from the perceived improvements and chose to ignore the multiple warning signs indicating that the higher scores had been manipulated by lowering the standards on the state examinations. For several years there had been a growing gap between students earning proficient scores on the state tests administered under the terms of NCLB and those earning proficient scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests. In a notable statewide example from 2008, "the percentage of eighth-graders reaching proficiency on the state's math test rose from 58.8percent in 2007 to a stunning 80.2 percent in

2008” (Stern 2010), even as NAEP math scores remained nearly unchanged for the same period. The Board of Regents and the state’s education commissioner at the time failed to investigate the incongruent state and national test scores and defended the state’s testing practices on the NYSED website, even as reports showing that it was possible to pass the state exams in some grades by guessing were also being circulated on the web (Kolodner 2009; Senechal 2010). All fifteen of the principals interviewed annually between 2009 and 2011 remarked that they had suspected something was “wrong” with the state tests. The comments of one principal are representative:

Tests don’t do that. They vary some. That’s why AYP is such a problem. So much at stake from year to year. But the kinds of increases we’ve been seeing are peculiar at best...Sure, many of us suspected a dumbing down of the tests, and I can’t say we didn’t talk about it. We hoped it was our targeting the test in instruction or our emphasis on, well, you know, teaching to the test. I can’t lie. We sure did and then we just sort of patted ourselves on the back for our increases and worried about the next year’s exams (November 27, 2010).

In 2011, more than year after test scores had been recalibrated to the new standards, one principal sent me a chart, showing the differences between what she called the “manufactured” and the “real” scores. During my 2011 interview with her, she pointed out that because parents and the public were able to access the achievement data online, and because the media “was having a field day with the miscalculations,” she and her colleagues were under fire to explain how, with such oversight and seeming transparency, such systemic “cheating” went unidentified for so long—and how the schools could be held accountable for the recalibrated scores.

After the state recalibrated the 2010 test scores, many fewer students met or exceeded the new mathematics and English proficiency standards in 2010 than in previous years; the greatest drop-off in proficiency levels were seen for Black and Latino students, as well as English language learners, as many of these students “had been just above the minimum proficiency rates under the old standards” (Medina 2010). Only 40% of Black students and 46% of Latino students met state math standards in 2010, compared with 75% of White students and 82% of Asian students; in English, 33% and 34% respectively of Black and Latino students demonstrated proficiency, compared with 64% among Whites and Asians (Otterman and Gebeloff 2010). Furthermore, Black and Latino students remain subject to disproportionate rates of school disciplinary sanctions, and drop out in numbers far exceeding their White peers. High school graduation rates

for Blacks and Latinos increased in 2010, but still remain 25 percentage points lower than their White and Asian counterparts. The graduation rate for English language learners is 40.3% as compared to 75.3% for English proficient students in NYC (New York State Education Department 2011).

Still, however, Bloomberg and Klein continued to claim that NYC students were making substantial academic progress (Zraick 2010). Rather than discussing the racial achievement gap that they had previously been so eager to forefront, they now focused on how test-driven accountabilities and transparency were still the best way to move the schools forward and clean out the corruption in the board of education, a governing body he had previously called “a rinky-dink candy store” in his 2002 State of the City Address. Implementing the accountability measures—and making their results transparent—trumped the actual results of the measures. Playing up to the moral imperative of disclosure, based on the public’s right to know, particularly when public money was being spent, Bloomberg and his administration signaled that they had nothing to hide, and were therefore deserving of public trust. A common script line was delivered by a district administrator during a borough meeting:

The issue is at the state level, not here and now we all need to pay better attention to what’s going on. All of us need to see what’s going on up there [in Albany]. We didn’t create this mess, but we’re going to take the heat for it...We need to be on the same page...Bottom line, tests are important. Accountability is good for everybody. The numbers don’t show that yet, but they will. We’ll close the achievement gap if we just stay the course and let ourselves be derailed by state errors. (October 28, 2010).

The administrator encouraged the public to give their support for greater transparency at the state level and help educators monitor the state’s implementation of NCLB accountability and reporting mandates.

Strategically crafting an explanation after the test scores were recalibrated highlights the illusion of rationality in the staging of any political show. First, there is the prudent manipulation of numbers offstage, followed by a display of the numbers and multiple scientific quantifications as concrete and rational, and in this example, a reorganization of the enumerating that challenges the earlier calculations and yet, becomes folded into the original illusion that stringent and

transparent accountability via testing is desirable. Closing the racial achievement disparities was held up as the highest form of rationality, until recalibrated test scores forced them to be recast and restaged. Once the test scores, which had become symbolic materiality for all of the onstage actions mandated by NCLB, were no longer useful in demonstrating how racial achievement disparities were being ameliorated (because they weren't), they come to represent how stringent accountability and public monitoring is necessary. The test scores took center stage in the spectacle, although the plot in which they starred was dramatically altered between 2009 and 2010.

Numbers shock

In February 2006, the New York State Education Commissioner Richard P. Mills sent a report to the State Board of Regents, the governing body of NY schools, in which he responded to the 64% four-year graduation rate as follows:

That is a shocking number. It is unacceptable. In our large cities, the proportion is even lower. As we will see this month, it is lower still for children with disabilities, for children of color, and for students learning English...Confronting the facts will convince most people that the gap is not some distant condition affecting others, but something right in our town. (<http://www.oms.nysed.gov/comm/2006/0206commrep.htm>)

In multiple meetings held by New York State Education Department (NYSED) offices, including, but not limited to the Office of Accountability and the Office of Assessment Policy, Development, and Administration, speakers tackled the concerns of Commissioner Mills, with discussions of assessment tools, algorithms, and various accountability measures aimed at further disaggregating and explaining the graduation data. Subcommittees—in the form of action groups, ad hoc committees, and informal task forces—spun out of the larger official meetings and were assigned specific responsibilities and focused assignments. Several were to look more closely at the achievement trends and graduation/drop out data for English Language Learners (ELLs) in efforts to condense (politically) nuanced data analysis into publicly-palatable data points.

On October 23, 2008, the NYSED meeting included the topic of ELL's achievement patterns in the five largest NY cities (NYC, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers). In the meeting, it was stated that ELLs meeting the ELA state standards had increased 7%, from 18% to 25% in 2008 and that ELLs scoring in the bottom quartile had decreased 11%, from 29% to 18% in the same period. Met with head nods from attendees, the NYSED official congratulated everyone at the meeting for the successes. The speaker, a NYSED official, exclaimed that the increase in ELL's test scores proved that the NCLB accountability measures were working. Comparable data was presented at several meetings in NYC throughout 2008, and it was followed with similar self-congratulations (Koyama and Menken, 2013).

In the smaller action group meeting convened later the same day, member of NY districts multilingual departments, school principals, bilingual educators, and NYSED staff met to draft a short summary of ELL accomplishments suitable for distribution to parents. The following excerpt reveals that ELL achievement presented in the earlier NYSED meeting were less clear than the official had stated:

NYSED Manager: So, our task today is about writing something to highlight the state's ELLs successes... We all agree on that, right?

NYC District Administrator: Listen, we know that NCLB's sanctions result in less resources for schools with African Americans and ELLs. This creates more inequity and we can talk all we want, but that's the issue... NCLB doesn't help minority kids, period.

Rochester Principal: Right, and the numbers they were throwing out in that meeting aren't even true. I personally know that ELLs lost ground between 2006 and 2007.

NYSED Manager: Come on. What are you getting at?

- Bilingual Education Activist: Okay [pulling out reports from a 2007 NYSED and pointing to a graph]. See, ELLs did worse from 2006 to 2007 in most grades.
- Rochester Principal: Oh oh. We've got a problem then.... [We are] writing a summary about how ELLs accomplishments fit into the bigger picture and the big picture's wrong?
- NYSED Manager: Come on....We've been over this before.... Let's focus on 2007-2008. That's what matters.
- NYC District Administrator: Is that really what you think is important? Because if it is, then we are at odds here and...
- Rochester Principal: Okay, let's...take a breath. We've all got our own work to do....Let's just write this thing. We can talk about ELLs and then talk about ELLs in comparison to other students.
- NYC Principal: I agree. Let's just draft something. Get it to the Committee and let them change whatever they want. That's what's going to happen no much, matter, how much time we spend on it....That's the way it is.
- NYSED Manager 2: Okay, everyone, I'm with [name of the Rochester Principal], let's just get something hammered out to circulate for parents and the public. Getting something out is the important thing. We owe it to the parents to let them know how their kids are doing.

After several minutes more of discussion, the group set about writing a one-page summary of the academic gains of ELLs between 2007and 2008. Like the NYSED official in the first meeting, they did not mention the 2006-2007 data, which revealed a wide achievement gap between ELLs

and non-Hispanic White students. Also, although it was brought up, they chose not to include a table, that upon close inspection, showed not only the 2007-2008 increases in test scores, but also illustrated how ELLs' academic achievement trended downward as they moved from third to eighth grade.

Nearly two months later, in an interview, the NYC Principal who helped draft the report explained why she hadn't pushed for the "complete picture" to be included:

It's not that I don't care. You know I do. Most of my kids here are ELLs. They've pretty much been our focus for the past, I don't know how many years, five or so....That group doesn't agree. We don't ever... The state reps always just do what they want so a few of us just let them. We've given up on the truth....There's lots of tension with all the accountability and we just feel like we need to get things written than show we've been doing our jobs. Absurd. What's new? Why spend so much time hashing out reports and summaries that never go anywhere? (December 12, 2008)

A much revised and reduced report was, in fact, posted on the NYSED website a few weeks after the interview. It nearly reiterated what had been stated at the original October 23rd NYSED meeting and none of the confounding information discussed in the action group made it into the report.

The materiality, the process through which knowledge about ELLs came to be embedded within the values associated with transparent accountability, resulted in the short report with strategically and politically selected data. What came to matter was not the actual achievement trajectories of the students designated as ELLs, but rather demonstrating to the parents and public that educational officials had gathered and established evidence that they were attending to achievement of ELLs. The report became a symbolic prop, referred to in several school meetings across NYC. It represented the state's transparent documentation of educational processes. With data points disguised as clear evidence, NYSED aimed to show that it was meeting the accountability responsibilities set forth in NCLB.

Closing remarks

Integral to transparency as a neoliberal accountability tool is the requirement to provide a public account of policy-directed actions. As shown in this piece, providing an account favorable toward their own actions became germane to the politicians', officials', and education administrators' roles as policy actors. Co-constructing a political spectacle through the creative development and strategic utilization of student data, these policy actors capitalized on the push for transparency in education to justify their actions, verify that they had done their jobs, and often solidify their positions or further their careers. They also manufactured "evidence" to show that they were meeting their NCLB accountabilities. As well-articulated by Luke (2003):

What has come to count as evidence-based educational policy in the US has set new benchmarks for a tight articulation of publishers, state authorities and a particular definition of 'science'. This is nothing short of a legislative codification of new definitions and interventions for what counts as success and risk. (p.95)

We argue that in the rush to provide evidence to the federal government, to states, and to the public, exuding confidence through transparency has emerged victorious over generating accurate data in order to attend to the pernicious racial and class achievement gaps in American public schools. "Governments have become ravenous for information and evidence" (Mulgan, 2003), p. 1) that can be manipulated into publicized data points, obscuring, as we've shown the situation for poor, Black, and Latino youth.

The complexities and messiness of measuring and analyzing achievement has thus become materialized into "certain" evidence. Such evidence or knowledge displaces not only important discussion about the methods through which the evidence came to be, but also obscures the larger issues, such as racial segregation and inequitable funding in districts, that, in part, result in the persistent racial and class achievement gaps. In the political performance, evidence-based educational policy such as NCLB, elevate transparency as a way of making selective evidence and technical accounts of achievement serve as "stand-in" for meaningful accountability.

Currently the technologies of transparency and accountability claim a central role within the reform narrative of Race to the Top, a competitive federal grant policy, and continue to re-define and re-contextualize social relationships within educational practices. Because Race to the Top, which is part of a larger public sector reform strategy, legitimizes transparency, data, private-public partnerships and innovation as key indicators of ‘reform’ and modernization, it indicates a new modality of the state—the competition state—whose power is more centralized and more diffuse (Ball, 2007). Reform narratives in the competition state are designed to foster flexibility, managerial efficiency, competition and performance attainments—as seen in the push for charter schools, teacher tenure reform, data-driven instruction, state-wide testing and merit pay— and therefore rely heavily on timely, accurate data and greater organizational transparency (Whyman, 2006). In fact, in many states the new Common Core State Standards and curriculum will work in conjunction with new state-wide longitudinal data systems which offer the public an objective and transparent indicator of student growth and teacher/principal effectiveness, thereby allowing no excuses for the failure to modernize. Much of the money needed to create value-added teacher evaluations and public league tables will be made possible by the competitive grants won through the Race to the Top competition as well as states that attract lucrative public-private partnerships and new policy entrepreneurs (namely the Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation and Harcourt-Mifflin). Underlying this reform narrative is the powerful idea that transparency, at all levels of educational practice, will nullify the pernicious effects of race and class and place “students first”.

However, transparency itself need not be a culprit. In fact, recent work (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barth 2001; Gorur and Koyama, 2013; Koyama and Varenne, 2012) suggests that as the public becomes informed and engages with the publicized educational data, they can bring new ideas and concerns into the policy area, unraveling the evidence and creating productive “spaces of uncertainty” (Callon et al., 2001). In such spaces, there are the potential for reconsiderations of the policy problem—in our concern here, the achievement gap. There, policy problems might be elaborated or changed; the methods by which the data was collected to account for the problem could be challenged; or the representation of the evidence as factual and unbiased could be demystified and deflated. Consensus often hides relations of domination and exclusion, and

even seemingly transparent measures can yield particular secrecy, but transparency might also make greater democratic participation possible. However, we have little evidence of this to date.

The questions surrounding transparency and data are not only epistemological but ontological as well. The limits of transparency as a policy technology is bound not just by how we come to know the world, but the very nature of the complex, heterogenous and often idiosyncratic contexts of educational practice and the social world in general. Because transparency and accountability claim to offer a measurable, calculable and neutral representation of the reality and the practices of schools, they have become part of a discourse of “common sense” policy solutions. However serious questions remain as to what exactly, within the educational world transparency actually measures. A radical critique of how it is that we come to know and understand the world and how the world renders itself visible to our understanding is necessary in order to develop “news forms of representation, new types of knowledge and epistemological criteria” (Grosz, 2005, 179). It is only through sustained investigations and critiques of the ways in which transparency has gained such currency in current neoliberal educational policy that we might recognize what goes on in the popularized political spectacle hides more than it reveals.

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Notes

¹ We refer to Lipman’s (2011) definition of neoliberalism: “Put simply, neoliberalism is an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourse and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere” (6).

² In this paper, academic achievement collectively includes standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college-readiness.