

Accredited Under Review:  
An Inside-Out Account of High-Stakes Education Reform

Mark Dressman  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
311 Education, MC 708  
1310 s sixth  
Champaign, IL 61820  
(217) 244-8286  
mdressma@staff.uiuc.edu

Kip Téllez  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
1156 High St.  
Education Department  
Santa Cruz, CA 95064  
831.459.2208  
ktellez@ucsc.edu

Abstract:

Teacher education programs in many states increasingly face the same high stakes accountability schemes often used to measure progress in K-12 schools. In particular, the state of Texas now accredits its teacher education institutions based on paper-and-pencil test scores taken by preservice teachers. A comparison of the K-12 accountability system in Texas to the newly developed teacher education plan provides a first-hand interpretive account of the state's early efforts at a systematic accountability scheme for teacher education and its attempts to identify and bring into remediation those institutions not meeting the "standards." Using a theoretical frame guided by Bourdieu's principle of *habitus*, the authors note the peculiar ecology of accountability and specific manner in which the practice of testing can replicate itself in a various educational domains.

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Introduction

In educational circles, the turn from twentieth to twenty-first century is likely to be remembered for the intense attention paid to accountability. A transfer of the bottom-line logic whereby corporate management holds itself accountable to the management of public organizations has generated an entirely new set of conditions for the ways schools succeed or fail. In support of our thesis, we point to the transformation carefully noted in Jameson's (1991) work, whereby what was once in public conversations held to be beyond economic value—namely personality, identity, belief, and the insights, knowledge, and practices that constitute the nation's culture—have, in the late industrial age, become its dearest and often priciest commodities. This transformation has now been extended, in our view, to affect both the personality, identity, and beliefs of educators and the nation's shared understanding of the insights, knowledge, and practices that constitute education.

In other words, what was once conceived as marvelously, complexly human has come to be reconceived in utterly concrete terms, as the equivalent of a test score; much as the value of a corporation—of an assemblage of human beings' skills and talents, successes and failures—is reduced to its exchange value at the moment of acquisition by, for example, the manager of one's favorite mutual fund. Our task in this paper, then, will be to suggest how, once embedded into an educational system's social

ecology, similar practices of accountability can replicate themselves with surprising ease. Our interpretive pursuit will be to describe our experience of this cultural logic, or rather, what we believe are the multiple and coincident cultural *logics* that fuel this transformation within educational policy and practice. The primary source of evidence for our paper is our own involvement in the new preservice teacher preparation accountability system in the state of Texas and its origins in the k-12 accountability system which, we argue, was in turn borne from a reaction to reforms in school funding and the redistribution of property taxes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition, we examine how the zeal for “high standards” results harms the marginalized students and preservice teachers it has claimed to assist.

We agree in principle with other analysts of current educational reform such as Linn (2000), who point out that accountability and tests have been a key part of educational reform throughout the past century, and who imply therefore that the move to hold schools and educators accountable by their performance on standardized assessments is really nothing new. But we part from this argument on the issue of whether recent events are fully explainable as the logical and rational—in the sense of carefully reasoned (see Habermas, 1987)—outcome of an historical progression of ideas *that is specifically educational in origin*. Rather, we argue that what fuels the current movement for reform à la high-stakes accountability in Texas is a coincident combination of economic, political, and historically grounded cultural circumstances, each with their own seemingly separate set of rationalizations, or “logic,” that originated external to, but that have now co-opted—and twisted—arguments originally made within educational circles. In the midst of this era of school reform, political, economic, and

cultural forces are acting on schools and using accountability in ways that seem to be difficult, if not at times impossible, to counter or resist, at least in fully rational and public ways. While our own current experiences at major universities in California and Illinois have made it clear to us that such reforms did not begin and arguably do not all emanate from the State of Texas, the "Texas miracle" touted by former Texas Governor George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential election and subsequent passage by the U.S. congress of No Child Left Behind (2002), an educational reform bill calling for systems of educational accountability that echo the logic and the practices of Texas's high-stakes movement clearly extend the significance of our account and its analysis, we believe, well beyond that of a local tale told ex post facto by two alarmed educators.

To make this argument, we offer an interpretive account of our experiences as teacher educators (formerly) at the major public university in Texas, throughout the 1990s. (Author) taught at the (University) from 1991-2000. He was one of the principal designers of that university's current teacher education program and routinely taught a masters-level course in instructional evaluation to practicing local teachers. (Author) earned his doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at The University of Texas at Austin from 1990-1994, and was a witness to the court battles and public debates that surrounded school financing in Texas during that time. In 1997 he joined the teacher education faculty at (University) and served until 1999 as the coordinator of elementary reading instruction in its site-based teacher education program. Together, our combination of lived experience and professional interests and expertise placed us in both emic and etic relation to policy shifts and their both apparent and hidden consequences for Texas's educators and students.

During this period we participated in scores of meetings with colleagues and taught “site-based” undergraduate teacher education classes in local schools, as well as multiple masters-level courses to local teachers in which the implications of the teacher education and k-12 high-stakes accountability systems for teaching, learning, and professional survival were the often the central topic of discussion. Additionally, in 1998, our interest in the accountability movement led us to volunteer for training as oversight team leaders by the newly created certifying agency in Texas, the State Board of Educator Certification (SBEC, pronounced "ES-beck"), to investigate the financial and curricular practices of teacher education programs around the state that didn't "measure up."

In the course of our experiences as teacher educators in Texas we grew increasingly alarmed by what we were witnessing in local schools, listening to in faculty meetings, and, toward the end of our tenure there, being told we must adjust to in our own course development and classroom instruction. This interpretive account is the result of our struggle to resist the pressures of high stakes accountability in our lives as professional teacher educators in the state of Texas. Throughout our tenure in one major public university in Texas we took notes, collected documents, and frequently checked our own perceptions of events with ourselves and with colleagues at our own university and across the state. During this period we also observed in several classrooms and conducted interviews with the principal and several teachers at one urban elementary school with a predominantly Mexican American, bilingual student body that was struggling to meet the rate of passing on the TAAS, or Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, set by the state. We did not systematically begin to

collect and analyze the full evidence of our experience until nearly the end of our tenure in Texas, however, and thus what we report here and the sense we make of it may be construed as merely anecdotal. Yet we would also argue that much of the underlying logic of what appears on the surface to be a very rational and straightforward process of accountability only becomes apparent through sustained interaction within the system and reflection upon its effects, and so the best and perhaps only access to understanding what motivates Texas's accountability system is the interpretation of the collected experiences of related events over time such as ours. Moreover, since our time in Texas we will point to multiple similar and related accounts published in the *New York Times* (Schemo, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Yardley, 2000a) and broadcast on the CBS News program, *60 Minutes* (Rather, 2004; Stahl, 2000), as well as reports in Texas newspapers (e.g., Blackwell, 2003; Martinez & Rodriguez, 2003) that corroborate the interpretation of our experience of what came to be known during the 2000 presidential election as the "Texas Miracle" in educational reform. These journalistic reports, we will argue, lend credence to our claim that our "personal" experience of Texas's educational system and the sense we make of it is not isolated or entirely idiosyncratic.

To make theoretical sense of our experiences we have turned to the "reflexive sociology" of Pierre Bourdieu (1990), and to his analysis of the relation between rational, theoretical expressions of how societies behave—the principles that both social scientists and their subjects use to explain their behavior—and the actual, practical ways in which people adapt to forces beyond their control. In particular, Bourdieu's complementary concepts of *field* and *habitus* have guided our analysis. Bourdieu (1993) has defined a field as "a separate social universe having its own laws" (p. 162)—that is,

as an “arena,” or space that is relatively self-contained with its own dynamics and that may be examined as an entity in its own right. In Bourdieu’s theoretical system, social and cultural activity are characterized as taking place within a construction of fields—of art, economy, politics, education, and so on—whose practices and logic are overlapping, or as Bourdieu would say, “homologous.” Within intact societies, it is the overlapping logic of each field that provides its members with a sense of continuity, complementarity, and obviousness about the way things are and why they are that way—a sense that produces and over time reproduces social and cultural stability, even in the face of practices that routinely lead to the grossly inequitable distribution of resources among a society’s members.

*Habitus*, in Bourdieu’s theory, is the “structuring structure” of predispositions that individuals within a society begin to acquire as they move about and reflexively respond to a particular field, such as the home, neighborhood, school, and workplace. In his introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993), editor Randal Johnson describes the habitus as

a ‘feel for the game,’ a ‘practical sense’ (*sens pratique*) that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules. Rather, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions. The habitus is the result of a long process of inculcation, beginning in early childhood, which becomes a ‘second sense’ or a second nature. According to Bourdieu’s definition, the dispositions represented by the habitus are ‘durable’ in that they last throughout an

agent's lifetime. They are 'transposable' in that they may generate practices in multiple and diverse fields of activity, and they are 'structured structures' in that they inevitably incorporate the objective social conditions of their inculcation. (p. 5)

In the body of this paper, then, we present a history and analysis of the two fields of accountability that currently produce reform-minded policies in Texas, the accountability system for k-12 schools, and the accountability system for teacher certification programs. The evidence for this part of the paper comes substantially from a combination of state documents and journalistic reports of high-stakes testing and its consequences in Texas, supplemented by the data of our own experiences as teacher educators and oversight team members within the state. But our account and its analysis does not end there, for what interests us most as witnesses of these reforms is not *how* but *why* they have taken place with such thoroughness and apparent enthusiasm across the state. In the paper's conclusion we present an analysis of the habitus that structures the practices of what we will argue are the majority of educators in the state, in an attempt to explain why, from our observations, there has appeared to be so little outcry or resistance, either public or private, to changes that we believe only the most extremist members of an already very conservative educational community would find ethically tenable and educationally sound.

Accounting for Policy and Practice: The Case of Texas, 1988-2001

#### Reform in Texas, 1988-1998

Operating under state legislation, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), along with state departments of education across the US, had, since the early 1980s, attempted to

implement a series of policies designed to regulate the quality of textbooks, administrators, and teacher preparation programs throughout the state. The results of early efforts, however, were mixed and often embarrassing for TEA (e.g., Copelin & Graves, 1992; Elliott, 1992; Stutz, 1986), and had borne few direct consequences for teachers and educational administrators in the state, who had argued that differences in school achievement were linked to differences in (a) school populations' preparedness for school; and (b) inadequate school funding for under-performing schools, which led to lower teacher salaries, lower quality (less well-prepared) teachers, and sub-par facilities.

Issues of funding inequity came center stage in 1991, when the courts determined that Texas' school funding plan was unconstitutional and ordered wealthy districts to share a portion of their local property taxes with poorer ones (Paulken, 1993). While the funding plan certainly did not "equalize" school funding, to many lawmakers it suggested the notion of equity could be applied to the academic realm as well as the financial. The new funding plan, known as "Robin Hood," did not create equal dollars across districts, but in our view and that of many pundits in the state it demonstrated that a bureaucratic river had been crossed in the drive for control of the state's educational policies and practices. The specter of real change in the funding status quo, when met by the rhetoric of equal opportunity through "equal" accountability measures "equally" enforced throughout the state as a way of demonstrating concern for the quality education throughout all the state's schools, had produced a substantial shift in political sentiment across the state with regard to test-driven reforms.

One outcome that can be traced to this political shift was the imposition of high-stakes testing programs on schools (the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS, pronounced *tahss*) and teacher licensing entities such as colleges of education, regional educational service centers, and some major school districts (the Exam for Certification of Educators in Texas, or ExCET)—programs with consequences for those schools, teacher preparation programs, and students if they failed to "measure up." Schools whose students did not pass reading and mathematics tests at a rate of 80% or better risked being closed and having their principals fired and teachers reassigned (Garcia, 1994; Jayson, 1996).

In order to demonstrate the linkage between student and teacher accountability, we must first explore the student accountability systems in Texas, known as the Academic Excellence Information System (AEIS). The AEIS is based largely on a single standardized test, the Texas Assessment Academic Skills, or TAAS. The TAAS is developed by the state with considerable assistance from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Testing and other major U.S. testing firms. It is a criterion-referenced test, designed to measure minimal grade level skills in reading and mathematics. The test is given in grades three through eight and in high school.

Each grade level test contains both reading and math sections. A writing portion, which includes both an essay and select-response items based on writing mechanics, is also required at grades four, eight, and ten. Students must answer approximately 70% of the items correctly (the exact passing score is based on year-to-year passing rates on equated forms) to pass any of the select-response portions (reading, mathematics, writing mechanics). The essay portion is scored holistically on a scale from 0-4; a score

of 2 is passing. The tenth-grade test is an exit test, and may be repeated until passed. The exit test is mandatory for a high school diploma in each of the over 1,000 school districts in the state (See

[http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/resources/grad/grad\\_reqs.pdf](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/resources/grad/grad_reqs.pdf).)

The Texas legislature has also included in AEIS a ranking system whereby elementary, middle, and high schools are given ratings based primarily on their TAAS results. Attendance and drop-out rates are also included as variables in the AEIS, but for the elementary schools in particular—in which attendance generally reaches approximately 95% for nearly all schools, thus providing no variability because drop-outs are not a factor—the TAAS emerges as the only accountability measure (See <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2003/glossary.html> for an explanation of the accountability system for elementary and secondary schools in Texas).

The Academic Excellence Information System (AEIS) confers exemplary status on those schools in which over 90% of the students pass all sections of the TAAS, including all students in each student subgroup (African American, Hispanic, White, and Economically Disadvantaged) are rated as *Exemplary*. Schools which reach 80% passing (again, this means that both 80% of the total school population and 80% of the students in each subgroup) are given the *Recognized* ranking. The table below outlines the remainder of the school accountability ratings.

\*\*Insert Table 1 about here\*\*\*\*

Schools in the low-performing category are threatened with the prospect of state receivership. In that event, the TEA would take control of the school, remove all existing staff, and implement an instructional plan to raise scores. To date, however, TEA has

not taken this action, in spite of the approximately one hundred schools statewide that are routinely labeled as low-performing; rather, in our observations and as recent articles in the *New York Times* (Schemo, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c) and segments of *60 Minutes* report (Rather, 2004), principals typically are replaced, teachers are pressured to spend more time teaching for the test, and in some cases students' names are clerically reshuffled to remove them from school enrollments or eligibility for testing.

Based on our work with teachers and preservice teachers in elementary schools and our conversations with the teachers in our university courses, it would seem that implementation of the AEIS also brought about several unintended curriculum developments. Colleagues in our department who taught preservice science and social studies methods courses on-site routinely complained that those content areas, which were not tested by the TAAS, had nearly disappeared from some school programs, particularly in lower performing schools with sizable low-income and minority populations where scores tend to be lower. These subject areas had pilot tests for several years at select grades, but the results of these tests were not included in AEIS during our tenure, and therefore did not affect a school's ranking.

Secondary schools have become strategic about whom they promote to the tenth grade, the grade at which students are given their first chance to pass (or fail) the TAAS. Table 2 shows the enrollment figures for all eighth, ninth, and tenth grade students in Texas public schools from 1996-2003. The most noticeable pattern is that ninth graders outnumber eighth and tenth graders at every year and for each ethnic group. We believe this odd "bulging" of ninth graders is owing to school districts' strategy: holding ninth graders back until school officials are confident they will pass the

TAAS test. Table 2 also shows that a much larger percentage of African-America and Hispanic students are held in ninth grade. These students also show the largest decrease in number from the eighth to tenth grade, indicating a drop out rate of between 5-10%. For schools those serving low-income students, the drop-out rate from ninth to tenth grade is even greater.

\*\*\*Insert Table 2 about here\*\*\*

Finally, in an effort to raise TAAS scores, schools have been teaching directly to the test (Blackwell, 2003; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000; Stahl, 2000; Yardley, 2000b) In fact, prior to this work, we have reports from many teachers who have suggested that in some schools the entire school year is devoted to taking released tests, teaching sample items, and the development of strategies for increasing “test wise-ness.” In such schools, the standard curriculum is forsaken in favor of test-like materials. In other schools, as we have already noted, art, music, and physical education teachers are being told not to teach their subject but instead focus on TAAS reading and math skills. As administrators and curriculum specialists put pressure on teachers to raise scores, Texas schoolchildren have faced a dizzying variety of strategies designed to improve their TAAS scores. Such a reaction to high stakes testing is not surprising. The detrimental consequences of the TAAS have recently been documented by McNeil (2000) and by a report from the RAND Corporation in 2000, which showed that gains in the TAAS in reading and mathematics were not matched by equivalent gains on other standardized tests of the same subjects—a finding that strongly suggests that the rise in TAAS scores was due not to increased learning in these subjects but instead to increased preparation for the TAAS

(Klein, et al., 2000)As Mehrens and Kaminski (1989) put it, “When tests are used for important decisions, teachers will teach to the test” (p. 15)Again, based on our own direct experience and the reports of colleagues who spent several days a week in dozens of public elementary classrooms as well as several journalistic reports, it appears that many teachers and schools are now tacitly encouraged to "teach to the test" by focusing principally on test-taking strategies, rather than on the broader curricular areas that have been targeted ("TAAS: Are we just teaching for the test? [1994, August 21]; Young, 1997, Young, 1998).

### The Teacher Education Parallel.

Since the mid-1990s, processes of professional educational certification in Texas have also become subject to high-stakes accountability programs. Prior to 1996, teacher certification was a responsibility of the Texas Education Agency, which had historically been responsible for all certification and had overseen the development of the 1987 standards—a wide ranging set of reforms designed to make it easier for those with bachelors degrees in fields other than education to obtain teacher certification (Nevins, 1990). These standards eliminated “education” as a major in institutions of higher education across the state and mandated that student teaching could count for only six hours of coursework. They also led to the development of alternative certification programs (i.e, programs outside colleges and universities), particularly throughout the state's network of regional service centers as well as many of the state's largest school districts. Finally, these reforms introduced a set of certification examinations specific to preservice teachers in Texas, developed and scored by the

Massachusetts-based National Evaluation Systems. NES developed a customized testing scheme rather than relying on one developed nationally such as the Educational Testing Service's Praxis series (see <http://www.sbec.state.tx.us/SBECOnline/standtest/testfram.asp>). Customization of this test allowed for state control of the *content* of the test as well as the process of its administration, and so indirectly for control of the content of virtually every teacher education program within the state.

Known collectively as the Examination for the Certification of Educators in Texas (ExCET), these exams test content area knowledge in each of the 30 or so secondary teaching fields in addition to a "Professional Development" (PD) examination, which assesses knowledge of pedagogy and other educational themes. We will focus our attention in this paper on the ExCET PD tests because, since greater numbers of students take them, SBEC data show that the PD tests that often cause teacher preparation programs to be identified as "under review" by the state.

Built on 15 objectives or competencies developed by educators from around the state, the ExCET Professional Development test is composed of 80-100 items and presents students with scenarios or cases to be read and understood. Teacher candidates then must answer questions relating to the scenario. Passing standards were set by the State Board of Education at 60% of the items correct. Since that time, the passing scores have been raised slightly.

During our tenure, under this system each certificate candidate was required to pass the Professional Development examination (at either the elementary or secondary level). Secondary candidates were also required to pass a second and sometimes third

exam designed to measure knowledge in their content areas or teaching fields.

Elementary candidates were required pass a “comprehensive” examination, designed to measure general content and pedagogy knowledge appropriate for grades 1-6.

Students who failed any one of the mandatory tests could not receive a teaching certificate, and would need to wait until the next testing date to retake the test.

Teacher education students who passed each and every course for certification and who had done well in student teaching could not receive a teaching certificate without passing the ExCET test. Teachers who were certified in other states would also be required to pass the appropriate ExCET, regardless of their previous teaching experience or academic training. But until 1997, failing the ExCET was of consequence for individual students only. This was to change as the legislature embarked on a strategy to make teacher education institutions accountable for their students’ ExCET pass rates.

In 1995, certification responsibilities were moved out of the TEA and given to the newly created state agency, SBEC, the office now responsible only for teacher certification. One of SBEC’s first tasks was to devise an accountability system for certification programs, i.e., a set of pass rates and consequences for teacher preparation programs whose graduates did not pass at the set rate. The structure and logic of this accountability system was clearly taken from the one used for holding k-12 schools responsible for their students’ performance on the TAAS. This arrangement, it was argued, would work to improve teacher preparation as it was claimed to do for K-12 schools (Brooks, 1996). Moreover, the features of the ExCET and the new Assessment System for Educator Preparation (ASEP) would therefore also be quite familiar to

teacher educators in Texas who had become accustomed to the logic of the accountability system that had previously been developed for K-12 schools.

Within our own university's teacher education program as well as the programs of colleagues' across the state with whom we spoke, the shared feature of both accountability systems that quickly came to be of the greatest concern was way that programs would be held accountable for the pass rates of ethnic (i.e., racial) minorities. As we outlined earlier, The K-12 AEIS system mandated that a school composed of more than 10% minority students, but primarily white, could not rely on the white students' TAAS scores for a strong AEIS ranking. TEA had argued that a school interested solely in its ranking could neglect a segment of their population and still be considered an exemplary school or district. In other words, a school composed of 85% white students and 15% African-American students could receive a ranking of *Recognized* even if none of the African-American students passed a single section of the TAAS. To prevent schools from taking such a strategy, AEIS required that for schools in which at least 10% of the student population were part of an ethnic (racial) minority, each group must meet the passing standards for the ranking. For instance, if a school's white students all passed the TAAS, but if only 60% of its Hispanic population passed, the school would be given the AEIS ranking commensurate with a 60% pass rate (in this case, the ranking would be "low-performing"; see Table 1).

Similarly, in developing an accountability system for teacher education programs, the newly formed State Board of Educator Certification used the same ethnic (racial) categories as the K-12 system but did not include Economically Disadvantaged as a subcategory for accreditation purposes. It ruled that at least 70% of the first-time test

takers in each of three categories—African-American, Hispanic, and Other—had to pass all ExCET teacher certification tests. The cumulative pass rate (the total pass rate over multiple trials within a year) was set at 80% in each category. The first consequence of a teacher education program's failure to achieve these pass rates, SBEC ruled, would be to designate that program "Accredited—Warned"—that is, the program would be placed "under review," pending a formal investigation of the program and its supervisory entities (its sponsoring regional service center or college of education) by an "oversight team" that would have the power to make specific recommendations for the program's remediation.

The result of this policy, as indicated in Table 3, was that in the initial year of ASEP, nearly all of the historically black colleges and universities, both public (e.g. Prairie View A&M) and private (Jarvis Christian College), as well as many other institutions with smaller numbers of minority teacher candidates were also placed on the list as a consequence of their passing rates when disaggregated by ethnicity (Suhler, 1998).

\*\*Insert Table 3 here\*\*

For example, we later visited one of the universities on the list as oversight team members. This university's college of education has recently received NCATE-accredited institution, and was now placed Under Review because 6 of 20 African-American students in its program had failed the ExCET PD test.

### Oversight

The SBEC accountability system had identified, based on the accountability legislation, as "low-performing" the institutions whose preservice student teachers would

soon be serving as the teachers at low-performing schools. The K-12 accountability system (AEIS) and the teacher preparation program accountability system (ASEP) were nothing if not consistent. Each was identifying some of the most poorly funded educational institutions in the state.

On the teacher education side, SBEC developed a process to "remediate" those teacher licensing institutions (universities, school districts and regional state office that license teachers) whose accreditation was suddenly placed on notice, and in early 1999, directors or deans of all certification institutions who had been identified by the ASEP process as "Accredited" were invited to send teacher educators to undergo three days of training in Austin to become Oversight Team Leaders or Members. As members of a certifying entity that had been fully "Accredited" by the ASEP process, we participated in the training and were subsequently assigned to two different teams sent for fact-finding visits to two universities on the "Accredited—Warned" list.

\_\_\_\_\_ The universities we visited as members of the ASEP seemed well prepared for our visit, showing us a well-documented account of their program's performance. Based on the two universities that we visited, the interviews that we conducted with faculty, administrators, and students, and the budgets for teacher education that we reviewed over those three-day visits, it seemed evident that it was not incompetence or a lack of motivation that resulted in their poor performance but a combination of factors often beyond local control. These included inadequate funding of faculty positions and teacher education programs, "non-entity" students who signed up for the ExCET but who did not attend the institution, loopholes in the rules and procedures of ASEP, and situations that were the inadvertent byproduct of the state's teacher shortage.

For example, at one university, a look at the salary scale for the college of education in the spring of 1999 showed that one full professor earned \$35,000 per year—which we believed partially explained why faculty turnover at the institution was so high. Although that university's teacher education program had recently become site-based, increased remuneration from the state to offset increases in costs and faculty workload were being used to cover other, equally pressing, expenses. Moreover, the teaching load for tenure-line faculty at this institution, which also required scholarly publication as part of its tenure and promotion process, was four courses per semester, several of which were taught in the field and required significant travel and supervisory activities. Administrators also pointed to their struggle to gain control of the bar code process that would identify a preservice teacher taking the ExCET as a graduate of their program. Officials showed us the list of students who had taken the ExCET as enrollees in their programs. Faculty identified multiple individuals on the list who had only taken one or two courses there and had often pieced together courses taken at other universities. Yet that university was given responsibility for the student's poor performance on the test.

Finally, African American students who were still officially enrolled in the program and had taken and failed the certification test explained during interviews that they had been recruited by local school districts to work as "long term subs" (a euphemism in Texas for uncertified teachers who hold down full-time positions as teachers) *after only three years of college*. These students, who came to rely on the income teaching provided, were working full time as teachers during the day and still taking several college courses a week during the evening. Under pressure from their districts to take

and pass the ExCET (to meet state guidelines for the hiring of such individuals), they had had no time (and less energy) to prepare for the test on their own or to attend the study sessions offered by university faculty, who had volunteered to take on this task in addition to a four-course teaching load per semester. To the one of us who was a member of this oversight team, there seemed to be important and legitimate reasons for this university's failure to meet the SBEC pass rate for the ExCET. But, in spite of his arguments, the team leader and author of the report attributed the university's problems to fiscal mismanagement, poor "curriculum alignment" with the ExCET, and its failure to control access to the ExCET.

In another case, one of us visited a university whose teacher preparation program was warned not because of its overall pass rate, which was around 96%, but because the pass rate in the subcategory African-American was below 70% passing for first time test-takers and below 80% cumulatively. A closer look at the figures revealed that the warned status was the result of six African-American students who failed the ExCET Professional Development test. While on the site visit to this preparation program, which had just recently been NCATE accredited with several commendations, both university administrators and the oversight team caught themselves agonizing over strategies to get off the warned list while maintaining their college commitment to educating teachers of color. Both parties noted that they could easily meet the pass rates set for all ethnic categories by ASEP simply by screening out applicants to the program who were members of "high-risk" categories through some "objective" criteria. Based on conversations with members of several other oversight teams who reported having similar discussions with officials of the programs they visited, it was our

impression that the general response to the accredited but warned ranking would, in fact, inevitably become a more careful screening of candidates prior to their admission, a strategy that, from later reports (Rather, 2003; Schemo, 2003a, 2003b; see also Table 2) would seem to mirror the score-raising strategy of the secondary schools who raised passing scores on the tenth-grade TAAS by not promoting large numbers of “at risk” ninth graders.

### High-Stakes Accountability in Texas and the US since 1998

In 1999, the year after we (as part of the original Oversight Teams) had made our visits, the list of warned programs was reduced from 16 to eight. Save for one addition, the warned programs remaining on the list were the same as the previous year. In the year 2000, the total number of “accredited—warned” institutions decreased to six, but one program, Wiley College, a historically black, private college in East Texas, has remained on the list for four years straight. In addition, Texas Southern University, another historically black university (public) was off the list in 1999 but back on in 2001, when the total warned programs increased to 11. Other schools appearing on the current warned list are the University of Texas at El Paso and Texas A&M International University (formerly Laredo State University), both universities with a high proportion of Mexican-American students.

As for AEIS, the K-12 accountability system, it remains much the same, continuing to demonstrate the time-honored finding that children of low-income families have the most trouble with standardized tests. And in spite of some outcry of support for alternative accountability systems, for example from Texas State Representative Rick

Noriega (Schemo, 200c), it appears to be a permanent part of the educational landscape in Texas.

Nationally, President Bush and Congress have just completed work on the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) legislation. This landmark bill, which was Bush’s main priority before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, mandates that “states, school districts, and schools must be accountable for ensuring that all students, including disadvantaged students, meet high academic standards. States must develop a system of sanctions and rewards to hold districts and schools accountable for improving academic achievement” (No Child Left Behind, 2002). In spite of the new national attention to the testing of K-12 students, we have seen no federal initiatives for implementing a preservice teacher preparation program accountability system, although the Title II legislation has shown signs that the administration favors content (not pedagogy) tests that demonstrate a “high-quality” teacher.

### Conclusion: Accounting for Accountability in Texas

Our participation in oversight visits to two entities in Texas that were "under review" during the 1999-2000 school year has demonstrated to us just how graphically disproportionate the distribution of resources to higher education continues to be in Texas, and just how significant the effects of that disproportionate funding are.

But perhaps the most striking observation we can make is that in spite of the accountability system put in place by SBEC, we have not been able to detect many acts of either overt or covert resistance to high-stakes testing in Texas by students, teachers, administrators, or university faculty. We have looked carefully for signs of reflexive

resistance to the TAAS and ExCET exams, but, save for our own concerns, we could find few instances in which many teachers or principals or even our own university colleagues seemed to be resisting the logic of high-stakes testing as a curricular practice, either directly or indirectly. Instead, the general tone of our contacts seemed to be one of resignation, and in some cases enthusiasm, toward the narrowing of what constitutes "good teaching" and "success" within schools and teacher preparation programs. For example, during a presentation to a group of faculty at our own institution, one of our colleagues expressed contempt for the TAAS even as she approved of its extension into science and social studies areas, on the grounds that this would "reintroduce and revitalize the teaching of these subjects in local schools." In another example, one of the leading colleges of education in the state has chosen to forego National Council on the Accreditation Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation and now uses, in its teacher education brochures, its "high" ExCET passing rates as evidence of the superior quality of preparation offered preservice teachers. It seems to us, sadly, that one of the state's leading universities promotes ExCET scores over thorough program review, not only is NCATE's certification threatened, but the accountability stranglehold on the state is tightened.

During the statewide training session of the officials from certifying entities, we found no protest or discussion about ASEP's ethnic (racial) categories rule on the part of entity officials to the state bureaucracy or by the teacher educators from successful entities who were participating in the training. Invariably, those individuals who were vocal during these sessions were those faculty from other universities with high minority populations who were eager to share the "secrets" of their high pass rates with their

training group. These strategies included total curricular alignment of courses with ExCET test objectives and routine "warm-up" exercises in all education courses that began with practice ExCET questions. Finally, during our subsequent oversight team visits to certifying entities that were under review, nearly all the faculty and administrators at the universities we spoke with were careful to explain that their program's pass rate on the ExCET was not their fault; yet few faulted the system itself or challenged its logic in any direct way.

We will not argue here that there has been no criticism of or resistance to high-stakes accountability in Texas by individuals within k-12 schools or teacher education programs. When reporters from *60 Minutes* visited Texas in 2000, they were able to find not only teachers willing to complain and school children willing to cry on camera about the effects of TAAS on their morale. We also know of many teacher educators within the state who were as concerned about the effects of ExCET on their curriculum and the future of teaching in the state as we were. In an article published in *The Reading Teacher* (Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001), prominent Texas reading educator James V. Hoffman and colleagues reported the results of a survey of 200 reading supervisors, specialists, and teachers within Texas. Many of these individuals were very outspoken about the negative effects of high-stakes testing on the emotional health and long term educational success of their students, as well as on their own job satisfaction.

But as Hoffman and his colleagues also note, the generalizability of their findings as an indication of how most teachers in Texas viewed high-stakes testing was compromised by the fact that the group surveyed were all members of the Texas State Reading Association (TSRA) who had responded voluntarily to a mailed questionnaire.

These respondents tended to have more years of experience and to have a higher degree of education and professional specialization than most teachers in Texas. Moreover, as members of TSRA these educators would have tended to share a more “progressivist” and “holistic” view of education in general and literacy in particular than their colleagues.

In our experience, the views expressed on national television programs like *60 Minutes* and in Hoffman et al.’s survey are the exception in Texas rather than the rule. A far more typical response to high-stakes testing in elementary schools, we believe, would be that expressed by the principal at the school where we briefly conducted some observations and interviews in the spring of 1999. This administrator bragged about the dedication of his faculty to the goal of achieving the ranking of “Recognized” on the TAAS at all grade levels tested, and who talked at length about his admiration for the students who came to Saturday TAAS practice classes and on the day of the test “wouldn’t give up”—working on the untimed portions of the test from 8 am until 5 pm or later. One of us taught a site-based literacy course at this school and got to know many of the teachers at the school very well. In two years, he never once heard a teacher complain about the TAAS or its effects on their teaching. Although in interviews several of these teachers said they spent little time “teaching for the test,” it was not uncommon during observations of their teaching to see whole afternoons devoted to going over practice worksheets that mimicked the item format of the TAAS. One very talented teacher who was in line for promotion to assistant principal was observed on multiple days to teach writing as a series of strategizing sessions in which students read sample TAAS essays that had been rated on a scale of 1-4 and tried to deduce from them the

qualities that gave each its particular rating. A more personal but we believe important finding of our work is that our project provides an important model of how university researchers and teacher educators caught in situations beyond their control can begin to examine the material conditions of their professional lives. For us, the experience of collecting documents and keeping notes, of engaging in serious and focused conversation about what we were seeing and what events might mean in larger contexts, and of organizing our thoughts in this paper, has had a powerful cathartic effect. We also believe that the product of our observations and their analysis provides a bottom-up view of how policy implementation impacts schools and teacher education programs that is all too rare in the media and in public policy forums.

But as former teacher educators in Texas, we must at the same time acknowledge that for all the awareness and sense of intellectual control over the high stakes testing this project has brought, we, too, often found ourselves unable to harness much energy or creativity to resist the state's finely wrought accountability mechanisms. Based on our experiences, it seems that the accountability movement clearly derives from a logic that is difficult to counter. Because the tests themselves are assumed by the general public to be a fair assessment of student achievement, any attempt to alter the standards appears as though one is against higher standards.

We believe these observations raise important theoretical questions about the relationship between culture and educational policy making. For instance, how is it that high-stakes educational reform, which from our point of view has so many apparent negative consequences for the expansion and development of curriculum and for the

lives of teachers, students, and administrators, has taken such total hold of the life of public schools in Texas with such little resistance?

One possible explanation is that the situation could be considered a classic case of hegemony, á la Gramsci, (1971), in which oppressed groups come to align themselves with their oppressors' best interests rather than their own. This may be true, we believe, for administrators, whose salaries and careers in many circumstances are now pegged to the test performance of students in their care, and for the public at large who have come to believe, after innumerable reports in the media, that U.S. public schools are dismal failures, and that the high-stakes solutions of legislators are the only way to make teachers teach. But can this explain the lack of organized resistance on the part of teacher educators in colleges of education, of teachers' unions (not as applicable to Texas, which is an open-shop state), of individual teachers, or by parents whose children suffer the emotional consequences of test-driven curriculums? And can it explain the almost total permeation of the logic of high-stakes accountability into nearly every corner of educational practice within the state?

It is not the work of Gramsci but that of reflexive sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) that may provide the greatest insight into the logic of high stakes accountability and its cultural and political hold within Texas. Our reasoning stems from observations made in both classrooms and meeting rooms in schools, in certifying entities, and in state offices, that what increases and sustains the practices of high-stakes accountability is not only false consciousness expressed in speech acts and processes of intellectual rationalization, but fully embodied and ritually engrained cultural *practices*.

As evidence, we point not to the yearly tallies that show TAAS scores steadily increasing around the state or to the rhetoric of politicians, but to the enormous industry of TAAS worksheet production and inservice provision that feeds upon the test—industries that produce practices that provide *activity* and a sense of direction to underpaid and deskilled teachers, and that give school administrators the sense, however false, that they are *doing something* about their students' underachievement and so their schools' underproductivity. We point as well to the students we encounter in teacher education programs at the (University) who, as products of public schools in Texas, are well practiced themselves in the rituals of the TAAS, and who may question the "fairness" of the ExCET, but not the practice of certifying teachers by means of a paper and pencil test. In our experience these are teachers and preservice teachers who routinely express their opposition to the amount of time that is spent in classrooms on test preparation, but who also express surprise and disbelief and who argue back when we tell them in our courses that testing doesn't teach (subject matter); it only measures what has already been learned. The "cunning" logic of pedagogical practices like these, Bourdieu notes, "lies precisely in the fact that (they manage to) extort what is essential while seeming to demand the insignificant" (1990, p. 69).

Practice, in this view, is a far more powerful and controlling influence on social and individual behavior than is an intellectualized, theoretical "stance," because practices find their source and their justification not in abstraction, but through their *incorporation*—that is, their physical/mental enactment—within the fabric of social and cultural life, which makes them seem not contrived or alien to a situation, but its "common sense" response:

Practical sense, social necessity turned into nature, converted into motor schemes and body automatisms, is what causes practices, in and through what makes them obscure to the eyes of their producers, to be sensible, that is, informed by a common sense. It is because agents never know completely what they are doing has more sense than they know (1990, p. 69).

As a single example of how such practical sense operates within Texas public schools, we'll offer the case of a librarian whom one of us (Author, 1997a) once worked with in a school with a largely Mexican-American population and low TAAS scores. This librarian frequently expressed serious concern that because of the emphasis on testing, teachers in her school had turned reading into "something awful" for children. This was tragic, she noted, because if students avoided reading for pleasure, they would not acquire, as she had once she learned to love reading, the deep cultural knowledge that would lead to academic and life advancement. Her practical response, therefore, was to make Readers of all the students in the school through motivational reading programs that stressed the need to "exercise your brain" by consuming mass quantities of children's fiction, and then certifying that a book had been read by passing a ten-question test written specifically for that book by the librarian or one of her helpers (this was before Accelerated Reader™, a popular computer program that performs the same tasks electronically). While she emphasized the practice of reading in physical terms throughout the school year, this metaphor was most dramatically enacted each spring during Reading Rally Day, when classes were suspended so that students could attend special rallies in the school auditorium, led by cheerleaders who mimicked the act of

reading; visits to a "reading robot" (a cardboard figure with a tape recording of students reading inside); "Read-Out Work-Out" physical education sessions, in which students were led through exercise routines that parodied the physical acts of reading, i.e., scanning and turning pages; and a parade at the end of the day, in which students dressed as books marched around the block so that, as the librarian explained, "the community will see what we're doing" (Author, 1997b)

This librarian intuitively grasped that reform of her students' reading practices would not come through intellectual conversion alone, but must involve, at its "heart," reformation at the corporal, physical level. We will note the obvious logical contradictions within her own practices, particularly in her complaints about the abuses of testing at her school, to which she responded by writing questions for virtually every fictional book in her library (about 5000 sets, duplicated and compiled in five large ringed binders); yet she herself did not see any contradiction there, except to acknowledge that her practices were not in alignment with what was considered "best practice" in school libraries theoretically.

In the case of this librarian and more generally, practical sense is usually highly resistant to critique and reform through purely rational, "logical" argumentation, because, according to Bourdieu, "Practice has a logic which is not that of the logician" (p. 86). Rather, it is a logic that is "fuzzy," in that it "presupposes a sacrifice of rigour for the sake of simplicity and generality" (p.86), that is, a logic that is "logical" not because all its parts hold together, but because "it works" (seems to get results). Moreover, it is a logic supporting practices that respond directly to material (historical, economic, and political) exigencies, as they are ordered and perceived through the *habitus*—"systems

of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (1990, p. 53)—that are shared by members of a society, and that organize and give structure to its adaptive responses to changing environmental circumstances.

In the case of Texas, we believe, that changed circumstance occurred when a sizable and rapidly growing minority group of (Mexican-American) Hispanics was able to force a (temporary) change in the ways education was financed by the state, which in turn forced the practical, "logical" response of high-stakes accountability as one way to *certify* that (a) the state "cared" about low achieving (high minority population) schools; that (b) it was taking steps to ensure that "all Texans" received a high-quality education (as certified by TAAS standards); and that (c) this could be done without the sort of radical redistribution of funds that was originally called for. Moreover, our experiences suggest, corroborated by Bourdieu's concepts of *field, habitus, and practice* that if high-stakes accountability has been both a political and cultural success in the state, it is because the logic that produced the fields and generated the practices of high stakes accountability through criterion-referenced "objective" testing (but not, strangely, the content of what is tested, which remains strangely and contradictingly "constructivist" in what it advocates as "best practice") is "homologous," to use Bourdieu's term, with the habitus—the structuring predispositions and habits of reasoning—of, if not the majority, then the politically dominant and dominating within the state.

Yet we must also note in closing that however deterministic this analysis would seem, from our reading of Bourdieu and in our own imaginations we cannot preclude the possibility for change within the fields of accountability and subsequent educational

practices they have produced and continue to produce in Texas, and now, through federal legislation, the United States. While in our reading Bourdieu has never directly described precise circumstances or dynamics by which social and cultural change takes place, his own insistence that his theory is not “structuralist,” i.e., overdetermining (1989), the agency that his description of the habitus (1993) allows, and his characterization of fields (1993) and practices (1990) as improvisational responses to material (e.g., social, political, demographic, economic, and physical) conditions, suggest possible conditions under which Bourdieu would argue that change would be likely and unlikely to occur.

One way in which a shift in policies governing accountability in Texas is *unlikely* to occur is through rational, direct critique of the practice of high-stakes accountability or its underlying logic. Because in Bourdieu’s (1990) view beliefs *follow* and *justify* practices after the fact—that is, since beliefs do not motivate or guide social action, but rather rationalize what is already in place—an assault on beliefs such as the objectivity of tests, the lack of a relationship between test performance and performance in context, or the image on national television of crying children and stressed teachers is likely to be ignored or even to reinforce existing beliefs and patterns of behavior; thus, when one of us challenged the efficacy and ethics of teaching to the test with one state bureaucrat, he was told that teachers and university people would “just have to get over that.” Nor is it likely that any direct evidence of dire consequences resulting from high-stakes practices would produce any shift in policy, since the robustness of the logic that guides the habitus is likely to lead to further rationalization of accountability practices. Thus, in 1999 when formerly honest and dedicated administrators in Austin, TX, were

caught tampering with test scores, rather than question what would drive decent people to lie, the county attorney, motivated by public sentiment and political pressure, prosecuted the individuals involved to the full extent of the law, in order to deter future tampering across the state (Whitaker, 1999). In the fall of 2003, reports suggesting that nearly half the tenth graders across Texas had flunked the test that replaced TAAS, the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) and were in danger of not graduating led the *Austin American-Statesman* to run a story about the need for more test preparation and closer alignment of school curriculum to the test. And when an assistant principal in Houston blew the whistle on administrators who were miscoding dropouts as having left to take the GED exam or having transferred out of the district, the principal of that high school was charged with misconduct but in the fifteen (out of sixteen) schools in the district in which similar practices were discovered, the practice was characterized as resulting from “confusion” over coding protocols (Schemo, 2003c).

Still, one may argue from a Bourdieuean perspective that the accumulation of such gross contradictions between what is claimed and what can be empirically demonstrated should have an effect on public sentiment with regard to high-stakes accountability. Students who complete high school but do not receive a diploma eventually become voters who may be organized, as may their parents. The material effects of high-stakes accountability over time may produce a reflexive response on the part of those individuals who are most negatively impacted by such practices. Moreover, the internal logic of the habitus that empowers accountability as a general call for action may be picked up by critics and used to hold not only teachers, students, and a few administrators “accountable,” but politicians as well. It may be too soon to tell, in other

words, how the logic of accountability will play itself out within the field of education in Texas.

Finally, Bourdieu's concepts of fields and habitus as constructed by specific material and historical conditions helps to account for the less successful extension of Texas' accountability system nationally, for while educational accountability in general is a national issue, the provisions of NCLB, coupled with a lack of material support (funding) for its guidelines, have already generated responses far more potent than any seen in Texas. Resistance to the policies of NCLB may, in turn, generate a new and more forceful reaction from Texas educators. Now in solidarity with a much larger community, educators in Texas may be emboldened to act against the state accountability schemes. On the other hand, they may have become so habituated to high-stakes accountability that any organized response is impossible.

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Table 1. Accountability Ratings Standards, 1999

<u>Ranking</u>	<u>Exemplary*</u>	<u>Recognized*</u>	<u>Academically Acceptable</u>	<u>Academically Unacceptable/Low-Performing</u>
Spring '99 TAAS - Reading - Writing - Mathematics	at least 90.0% passing each subject area (all students & each student group*)	at least 80.0% passing each subject area (all students & each student group*)	At least 45.0% passing each subject area (all students and each student group*)	less than 45.0% passing any subject area (all students or any student group*)
1997-98 Dropout Rate	1.0% or less (all students and each student group*)	3.5% or less (all students and each student group*)	6.0% or less (all students and each student group*)*	above 6.0% (all students or any student group*)*
1997-98 Attendance Rate	at least 94.0% (grades 1-12)*	at least 94.0% (grades 1-12)*	at least 94.0% (grades 1-12)*	less than 94.0% (grades 1-12)*

Table 2. Statewide Enrollment in Texas by Grades Eight to Ten and Ethnicity, 1996-1997 to 2002-2003

School Year/Grade	Total	African American	Hispanic	White	Other
1996-1997					
Grade Eight	290,712	40,227	104,511	138,233	7,741
Grade Nine	343,923	51,088	132,717	151,629	8,489
Grade Ten	264,289	36,627	88,845	131,150	7,667
1997-1998					
Grade Eight	292,711	40,665	105,690	138,398	7,958
Grade Nine	348,093	51,582	135,437	152,102	8,972
Grade Ten	270,634	36,956	92,513	133,058	8,107
1998-1999					
Grade Eight	299,837	41,750	108,538	141,330	8,219
Grade Nine	350,864	52,167	136,974	152,476	9,247
Grade Ten	273,262	37,597	94,236	132,525	8,904
1999-2000					
Grade Eight	300,929	42,297	112,245	137,906	8,481
Grade Nine	359,492	53,861	142,130	153,926	9,575
Grade Ten	275,373	38,386	95,891	132,391	8,705
2000-2001					
Grade Eight	304,538	43,831	116,864	135,132	8,711
Grade Nine	360,857	54,241	145,608	151,156	9,852
Grade Ten	287,472	40,451	102,355	135,607	9,059
2001-2002					
Grade Eight	310,767	44,471	121,594	135,090	9,612
Grade Nine	366,899	55,993	151,511	149,170	10,225
Grade Ten	293,235	41,260	108,293	134,264	9,418
2002-2003					
Grade Eight	316,801	46,075	126,060	134,667	9,999
Grade Nine	375,136	56,751	157,680	149,641	11,064
Grade Ten	300,338	43,768	114,264	132,495	9,711

Source: Texas Education Agency Enrollment Reports [online: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us> ]



Table 3. Teacher preparation programs listed as "Accredited-Warning," 1998-1999

<u>Certifying Entity</u>	<u>Funding Source</u>	<u>Predominant Student Ethnic Groups</u>
Fort Worth Independent School District Alternative Certification Program	Public	White, Hispanic
Howard Payne University	Private	White
Huston-Tillotson College	Private	African-American
Jarvis Christian College	Private	African-American
Lamar University	Public	White, African-American
Paul Quinn College	Private	African-American
Prairie View A & M University	Public	African-American
Southwestern Adventist College	Private	White
Stephen F. Austin State University	Public	White, African-American
Sul Ross State University, Alpine	Public	White, Hispanic
Sul Ross State University, Uvalde	Public	Hispanic
Texas A & M University, Commerce	Public	White, African-American
Texas Southern University	Public	African-American
Texas Woman's University	Public	White
University of North Texas	Public	White, African-American
University of the Incarnate Word	Private	White, Hispanic

