ARTICLE SUMMARY OF "CHANGING THE DISCOURSE IN SCHOOLS"
(EUBANKS, PARISH, AND SMITH)

All content for this research summary is derived from:

Eugene Eubanks, Ralph Parish and Dianne Smith. "Changing the Discourse in Schools." In Race, Ethnicity, and Multiculturalism: Policy and Practice, ed. Peter Hall. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Hegemony. *noun*

1. the dominance of one social group or class over another, often supported by legitimating norms and ideas[1]

2. the social, cultural, ideological or economic influence exerted by a dominant group[2]

Introduction: A Need for a New Type of Discourse Accompanying Change Efforts

American schooling reliably reproduces long-term unequal social arrangements. Children tend to replace their parents, socially and economically, in society. The current purported goal of education reform is to break this cycle—to educate everyone well, so that race, class, and gender do not correlate so closely with a student's outcomes. However, the prevailing discourse in schools that governs the way people think, talk, behave and carry out reform is **hegemonic** discourse—discourse that it is framed by the dominant culture and leadership of the White majority (Discourse I). Thus, Discourse I maintains existing practices and results. If schools are ever to be transformed, to stop replicating inequitable outcomes, they must first change the discourse accompanying change efforts. A more substantive and critical discourse (Discourse II) is necessary to bring about the cultural shifts in schools that must precede substantive change.

Hegemonic Cultural Ways Prevent Substantive Change and Undermine Effective Processes

By adhering to a dominant set of values, norms and beliefs, schools continue to support the privileged minority and undermine the success of everyone else. They undermine success while *appearing* to offer opportunities to all. Hegemonic cultural ways not only prevent schools from improving social and economic order from one generation to the next, but they work in hidden, pervasive ways to maintain themselves. Hegemony persists through informal consent, incentives, the use of force and often through "taken-for-granted, accepted social conventions or practices that define and constitute what is 'natural', 'normal', and 'the way things are' or 'should be'."

In the presence of hegemony, even well-known and effective solutions coupled with solid change processes fail to produce significant and lasting change. Why is this the case? The authors suggest two possible reasons: 1) There was/is an assumption that following *processes* of change would promote change. And 2) Substantive issues are seldom identified and centered as the purpose of change, (as Discourse II would require).

Discourse II Requires Us to Center Substantive Issues, i.e., the Hegemony, as the Purpose for Change

For Discourse II, the substance—the purpose or reason for attempting change—cannot be superficial. Furthermore, it must exist to *change something significant* , rather than merely to improve what already exists.

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1   Rosamond, B. (2016, May 17). Hegemony. Retrieved from https://www.britannica.com/topic/hegemony

2   Hegemony. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hegemony

For example, workshops and training often exist for the purpose of *improved practice;* this is a general and superficial goal, characteristic of Discourse I. Teacher education and on-the-job training tend to equip educators to better understand and implement technical aspects and processes: techniques, methods, and content (also Discourse I). Whereas a substantive and critical focus would center instead on implications and consequences. Discourse II guides schools to examine learning and the effect of classroom relationships and conditions.

Discourse I Allows the More Powerful Group to Blame Others for their Own Oppression and "Failings"

Even when schools attempt to identify and discuss substantive issues (Discourse II), their existing cultural beliefs and practices subvert this goal when left unchecked. For example, despite efforts to identify and treat a problem's causes, schools often end up treating symptoms instead, due to the assumptions and accepted values from which they are defining the problem. To illustrate: students fail to turn in homework. Schools see the homework problem as something inherently attributable to the students (and/or families). Defining the problem in this way, teachers develop new homework and grading policies to reward or punish the student (where the problem lies). The new policies fail to get results. That's because not completing homework is a *symptom* of a problem; it is not the problem itself. Discourse I tends to blame the victims in its framing of challenges. Discourse II, on the other hand, would examine school and classroom relationships and conditions of learning as critical factors for why students aren't turning in homework.

Because educators and administrators are doing their daily work in ways that are acceptable within the hegemonic culture, the issues center on the students and their circumstances rather than on the schools themselves. When dominant culture discourse allows the more powerful group to blame others for their own oppression and "failings", the real problems are concealed; the mindsets and actions that contradict the goal of educating all students well remain undisturbed.

Discourse II Deconstructs and Demystifies Hegemonic Cultural Ways to Drive Change

Getting at the substance of systemic or cultural change requires deconstructing and demystifying the hegemonic influences that drive an existing school culture. Eubanks, Parish and Smith assert: "Systemic change must be understood in relation to what is troubling us, i.e., the hegemony." Our dominant culture values lead us to identify symptomatic issues (rather than causes) as what is troubling: attendance, dropouts, discipline, low test scores. As such, we follow "the change process" and end up implementing something adapted to the old cultural ways (how we do things here), merely replacing one policy or practice with another one that still produces outcomes by race, class, and gender. The authors describe: "If we followed the process and nothing changed, then the explanation must be in the thing being implemented. It did not work. This cultural way is a major factor in allowing schools to have the appearance of responding to change without having to change anything substantive."

Consider:

▶ When adults in your school site are faced with change efforts, how do they decide what is happening and how they must respond?

▶ How do we change so that the work and convenience of adults, i.e., Discourse I, takes second place to learning for everyone?

▶ How do we help those in schools cut through cultural myths without making them feel defensive, guilty, or at fault?

Discourse II Demystifies Systemic Issues Through Uncomfortable Conversations

"The effect a change will have depends on the discourse that sustains and accompanies a change effort." It is critical to identify and reflect on Discourse I and reframe it into Discourse II. Discourse II prepares the cultural ground for transformation. So, what other principles guide DII?

"Discourse II conversations tend to be about uncomfortable, unequal, ineffective, prejudicial conditions and relationships in a school. Discourse II processes create demystified schooling eventually."

▶ Is the discourse about conventional and traditional teaching and organizing (DI) or does it relate to creating a transformed school that is about learning, not only for students but for everyone there (DII)?

▶ Is the result that outcomes no longer correlate with social class, race or gender (DII)? This can be answered by asking, do outcomes continue to favor certain people and groups?

Discourse II schools continually change and develop because members of the organization are continually learning. "In a Discourse II school, ambiguity and change are part of a purposeful structure. The direction for change is clear. It is intended to produce schools where every student develops intellectually to high levels and the performance gap related to race, class and gender narrows until school effects are no longer correlated with those factors."

Pay Attention to DI Code Words that Often Support Racist Policies in the Name of Some Acceptable Value

To avoid Discourse I and live in Discourse II, we must pay attention to code words that express racism, classism and anger but on the surface avoid "undiscussable" topics. For example, in the name of an acceptable social value, such as "preserving standards", a school or district may develop policies that continue to sort students by race, class, and gender, but still allow for plausible denial of intentionally racist, classist or sexist policies. However, those policies are practiced daily and informally, visible in who they hire, who they promote, who gets suspended, who gets educated well or less well, and who gets resources. Some common race-based code words include: "We're a school in transition. Things have changed, students just aren't what they used to be. You just can't teach as much as you used to. We have so many single parent families...." Code words "not only reflect class, gender and racial hegemony in schooling but also the helplessness many urban educators feel about their abilities to do anything about the conditions in which they find themselves."

Discourse II Creates Paths, Not Answers

The most critical question facing school reform is *how* to shift school cultures from Discourse I to Discourse II. The authors suggest, "There may only be paths to discover, not answers." In itself, this is part of the shift. A reliance upon answers, i.e., "Just tell us what to do" is a status quo value (DI). It contrasts with true knowledge creation (DII) that is meaningful and lasting.

Part of the work of Discourse II is to transform the Discourse I picture of reality. In doing so, we deconstruct and make visible the way our schools sort kids, so that educators will no longer tolerate the current system of American schooling. The authors "are convinced that once educators understand they are part of maintaining the hegemonic culture, they will reject such behavior. [They] believe it violates the basic reasons most of the became teachers and principals." Discourse II asks different questions and questions everything we do in schools from a perspective of effects and consequences. It examines intent versus impact. It focuses on how to create learning conditions that *do not sort* and *do not* blame the victims, as well as conditions that *do* provide high levels of intellectual development for every student.

Discourse II prepares the cultural ground for transformational changes to happen, with all of us moving together. Yet the paths are full of "land mines and ambushes. It takes courage, intelligence, guile, determination, sensitivity, patience, caring and time." While Discourse I would have us focus on our own limited time and ability, Discourse II requires a willingness to start anyway, anywhere. If we lack sufficient time to question, reflect and reframe, then what prevails is the way we do things currently.

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