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GREGORY SHEA

Learning is light. So powerful is this metaphor that it permeates our everyday language surrounding learning, as one can see in words like "enlightenment," "illuminate," and being "bright." This powerful image is also conjured in the mottos of many of our country's oldest and most prestigious universities: Columbia's motto is "In Thy light shall we see light," while Yale's is "Light and truth," to name just two.

Ideally, the metaphor of learning as light fits well with the structure of Massachusetts's public schools. This system creates and conveys intellectual energy to its students. When students are empowered with this energy, the light of learning shines forth from them, pressing away the darkness of ignorance and intolerance, and preparing them to live, as is written in the Massachusetts State Constitution, "the principles of humanity" (General Court of Mass., ch. 5, sec. 2).

It is troubling that current educational discourse seems to have eschewed such lofty metaphors in favor of the more prosaic terms of testing and data; today's educational discourse favors "the language of measurement and quantification" (Salazar, 124). In this metaphor, learning is no longer an almost divine energy shining forth from the students themselves; instead, it is numbers on a page, leaving in the dark the students who took the test that created these numbers.

This analysis of metaphors may at first seem a purely semantic exercise, but it highlights a change in educational discourse that has some troubling implications. Specifically, I contend that the current discourse on testing and data, especially among educational administrators, often exhibits an ideology that dehumanizes public school children in order to legitimize institutional power. To prove this, I will first establish theoretical frameworks of dehumanization and discourse analysis, within which I will examine a small sampling of administrative statements to establish a pattern of dehumanization in their language. I focus particularly on Massachusetts both because it is where I work as an educator and because of its positioning as a national leader in education ("Education Rankings"). Ultimately, the aim of this work is to offer a new rhetorical path for those who oppose the current dominant discourse of testing and data in education.

Dehumanization, Discourse, and Language Games

While the idea of humanity can seem

amorphous at first, work has been done to establish a definition of the term. Nick Haslam contends that such a definition of "humanness," as he calls it, is necessary to create an "adequate concept of dehumanization" (Haslam, 252). One of these working definitions of humanity focuses on "human nature," or those traits that "correspond to our shared humanity" (256). These traits include "emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, agency, individuality, and depth" (257). Within this framework of humanity, dehumanization is any act that denies humans some or all of these traits, including acts that show others to be "inert and cold," with an appearance of "rigidity" and of being "interchangeable..and passive" (258). Maybe most importantly for this argument, such "mechanistic" dehumanization robs individuals of "depth" and characterizes them as "object- or automaton-like" (258).

One of the most important observations of discourse analysis is that all language betrays an implicit "ideology," defined as "particular…'common sense' assumptions which are implicit in the conventions according to which people interact linguistically" (Fairclough, 2). In this view, there is no such thing as common sense; instead, there are simply dominant discourses that have come to be naturalized to the point that they *appear* to be common sense. In the context of educational testing, for example, most discourse centers on an ideology that naturalizes the assumption that data generated by testing is the most valid way to judge the progress of both students and schools.

In her article analyzing the *Diagnostic and Sta-*

tistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), Eileen Gambrill creates a model for using discourse analysis to trace a pattern of dehumanization in a particular discourse. In her argument, she first reminds her audience that the language of science is not "common sense" (Fairclough, 2), but that "scientific language is used to give an illusion of being value-free" (18). However, scientific language in psychology and psychiatry "decontextualize[s]" humans by ignoring the complex network of social and environmental factors that create a person's psychological state, instead favoring only "impersonal" factors such as "brain diseases over which we have no control" (29). Doing so dehumanizes patients in two ways: it denies humans agency (29) and it threatens to "take over the individual, that is, to transform the qualitative into the quantitative" (17). This last observation, especially, has great significance for this analysis, as it perfectly describes the loss of individual humanity in a discourse primarily focused on data.

To further understand the ideology invested in the words of state and local administrators, I will apply the theory of "language games" described by Jean-Francois Lyotard (Lyotard, 9). When viewing language through this lens, "every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game" (Lyotard, 10), which reinforces the insight that, no matter how much testing and data discourse sounds like the neutral truth, the utterances made by administrators regarding these ideas are nothing more than rhetorical, ideologically-motivated moves (even if the administrators themselves are unaware of this). Similarly, the "common sense" notion that focusing primarily on testing and data is the best

way to improve our public schools is also debatable. For those who think there are more productive focuses for our educational discourse, the question becomes how to disrupt the current dominant discourse in education- in other words- what is the best move we can make to win the game?

At this point, it's important to identify the parameters of the language game of testing and data discourse in Massachusetts. Lyotard identifies three elements in any language game: a "sender," an "addressee," and a "referent" (Lyotard, 9). The primary sender in this game is educational administrators, especially top local administrators like superintendents and state officials like Mitchell Chester, the Commissioner of Education. In the sense that this language game is a struggle, these officials oppose any group who is critical of the dominant discourse of testing and data, and these groups can be seen as another sender in the game.

The addressee of a language game is the person or group to whom the sender addresses his language moves (Lyotard, 9). I contend the most important addressee of educational discourse surrounding testing is the public- particularly the parents of public school children- who ultimately decide educational policy through their voting habits. That the addressee in this game is parents is the primary reason I believe highlighting the dehumanizing discourse among testing and data is the most effective move anti-testing advocates can make in this language game; parents, who are of course deeply invested in the human aspects of their children, will be mobilized to action if they believe the educational dis-

course of testing and data dehumanizes their students. The referent- "what the statement [or discourse] deals with"- of this language game, however, is less clear. One of the key ways students are dehumanized in much of current administrative discourse is through a certain form of referent-switching: while many administrative utterances have public school students as their ostensible referent, further analysis shows that the actual referent is testing data. Fairclough establishes an idea similar to referent-switching with his concept of "hyponyms," defined as when the "meaning of one word is…included within the meaning of another" (Fairclough, 116). In this case, the meaning of "student" is subsumed within the meaning of "data" as it is described through various terms (achievement, performance, results, etc.…), but it is only through a trick of ideological common sense that the two are seen as hyponymous.

The Dehumanizing Language of Massachusetts Administrators

I will begin my analysis with Mitchell Chester's November 2014 report to the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, titled "Building on 20 Years of Massachusetts Education Reform." Although the stated referent of the report is the Massachusetts Board of Education, I contend this board sits in for the public, since it is chosen by the Governor to represent different sectors of the public (General Court of Mass., ch. 15, sec. 1E). This report is a logical starting point for this analysis because its scope extends all the way back to the genesis of the testing and data movement in Massachusetts (the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act), making it an unusually complete

overview of the ideological underpinnings of administrative discourse.

The first way in which this report dehumanizes Massachusetts public school children is through the type of referent-switching described above. The implicit goal of Chester's report is to connect Massachusetts' "strong public school system" to the educational reforms enacted in Massachusetts in 1993 (Chester, 1), whose implementation continues today in such forms as charter schools and the administration of the MCAS. One would assume that any discussion of the strength of a public school system would have as its referent the children of that system. However, it seems the referent of Chester's report is not those children, but the system itself. For example, Chester writes that no one could say "the reform effort embarked upon in 1993 has been anything less than an overwhelming success for the Commonwealth" (Chester, 1). This statement would not have lost any of its clarity if Chester had replaced "the Commonwealth" with "the public school students of the Commonwealth." Later in the report, Chester boasts that "the quality of our standards is often cited as an important element in the Reform Act's success and the state's high performance on national and international assessments" (Chester, 8). Is the state taking these tests? No. Chester's message would have been equally clear- and the focus squarely on the students- had he replaced "the state's high performance" with "Massachusetts students' high performance."

In both cases, these quotes focus more on the success of the state as an institution than they do on the success of the students themselves. By trapping the human children of our public schools as hyponyms within larger, institutional terms such as "the Commonwealth," "the Reform Act's success" and "high performance on...assessments (8), Chester characterizes them as "interchangeable..and passive" (258), cogs in the state machine. Taken together with Chester's brief admission that "the MCAS has been less useful in informing instruction for individual students" (11) because of both its summative nature and the fact that student scores are not reported until the following year, these quotes betray an ideological stance in the language game of testing and data that places state success ahead of student success. Whether or not Chester's position as a high-level state official technically excuses his focus on institutions over children, the parents of Massachusetts public school children- myself included- may well desire that the language of educational leaders focus more squarely on the success of their children, not the power of the state.

The conclusion of Chester's report includes a textbook example of the type of "mechanistic" dehumanization described by Haslam when Chester highlights the institutional importance of the public schools by saying "the future of our Commonwealth is linked to maintaining our competitive advantage in the education of our citizens: we are not a state that will derive vast wealth from natural resources" (Chester, 22). In writing this, Chester positions Massachusetts public school students as "inert" and "object-like" (Haslam, 258) by implying they are a natural resource like oil or a precious metal. In framing public school children as a nat-

ural resource, they are robbed of individuality, agency, and depth; they are little more than fuel for the state's economy. Again, this dehumanization takes places because the referent here seems not to be the students, but the institution: students are not the main focus of the public school system, the power of the state is. To win the language game of testing discourse, examples like these must be proffered to the public, showing that our state's current educational leader does not see the public schools' main goal as delivering the light of learning to students; instead, he seems to shine a light on his institution's accomplishments, leaving our children- linguistically at least- in the dark.

Chester's language in "Building on 20 Years of Massachusetts Education Reform" is not the only example of students being dehumanized in the dominant discourse. While a large-scale, systematic analysis of the corpus of administrative communications for at least the last twenty years would best serve the aim of this paper, I offer, for now, the statements of two district superintendents as further evidence of the reach of the dehumanizing discourse of testing and data.

Each fall, Massachusetts releases the previous school year's MCAS data. This causes a storm of news reporting on the results that often includes quotations from school district administrators, which provide further evidence of the way testing and data discourse dehumanizes students by robbing them of individuality, agency, and depth. Take, for example, an article from a local newspaper titled "Brockton MCAS Scores Headed in the Right Direction." The addressee for this article is clearly the readership of the paper- in other words- the public. The article's referent seems to be the children of the Brockton school system. The journalist writing the article mentions them seven times in two pages (remember that Chester directly mentioned children five times in eighteen pages) in contexts such as "Brockton students did especially well on the English Language Arts exam" (Burgess, 2), a linguistic formulation that positions students in the empowered position of the subject. However, we see fresh examples of referent-switching when focusing on the administrator quotations in the article. Superintendent Kathy Smith says "the test scores are good news," while Ethan Cancell, the Brockton executive director of assessment and accountability, says "the results look like they're moving in the right direction" (Burgess, 2). In both cases, a focus on students is replaced with a focus on test results, a rhetorical move designed to connote empiricism and validity, but, in reality, betrays an ideology of dehumanization. When students are results- when administrators "transform the qualitative into the quantitative" (Gambrill, 17)- they are stripped of their individuality, agency, and humanity.

Those who see words as ethereal, as something distinct and unrelated to concrete reality, may struggle to understand the importance of these subtle semantic differences. But Lyotard reminds us that "the observable social bond is composed of language 'moves'" (Lyotard, 11). It is the social bond that creates our concrete reality for institutions like government that dramatically impacts the life of every modern human. If the social bonds that control our concrete reality are

little more than an accumulation of language moves, we must be very careful about the moves we permit as a society.

A recent development in the Boston Public School system provides an excellent example of the real-world tension between the dehumanizing discourse of testing and data and a discourse that focuses on children as humans. In late October, Boston Superintendent Tommy Chang announced the district's plan to shutter the Mattahunt Elementary School, which serves students in Boston's Mattapan neighborhood (Vaznis, "Parents Criticize"). This move was met by the outcry of Mattahunt's parents- those who best understand the humanity of their children. So loud was the outcry that City Councilor Andrea Campbell, who originally supported Chang's plan, changed her mind after speaking with parents (Vaznis, "Boston School"). Chang's response to this outcry of parent concern is telling: "My decision did not come easily...Unfortunately student achievement has continued to lag. The school is still in the lowest 1 percent statewide" (Vaznis, "Boston School"). That Chang feels this is an appropriate response to the very human concern of this community's parents illustrates the level to which the ideology of dehumanization has structured his thoughts. Reacting to the outrage of parents- the addressee of the language game of this analysis- he still falls back on the same referent-switching I have documented throughout this paper: he speaks not of students, but of "student achievement" and in which percentile "the school" falls.

No words I can conjure could better explain what Chang's statement misses than do the words of one of those concerned Mattahunt parents, Aveann Bridgemohan. After calling the school her daughter's "second home," Bridgemohan says "as a parent, I don't know what 'Level 4' means or what 'turnaround status' means. All I know is my daughter is doing well" (Vaznis, "Parents Press"). It is significant that after analyzing many pages of administrative language, it took the statement of a parent to illustrate the idea of "interpersonal warmth," (Haslam, 258) as Ms. Bridgemohan does when she speaks of the school as her child's second home. This type of warmth, I contend, is not and cannot be expressed in the achievement data of the current testing regime, but that does not mean it is not part of concrete reality. In fact, Ms. Bridgemohan's statement bankrupts the dehumanizing ideology of testing and data; where administrators see data as the primary truth in education, this mother sees the administrative labels used to describe her daughter's school such as "Level 4" and "turnaround status"as meaningless. The personal well-being of her daughter is all that concerns her; the individuality and agency of her daughter is her only truth.

The Next Move

The next move in this language game- which, in reality, is much more than a game- is for educators and parents to protest the dehumanizing discourse of testing and data in an effort to create space for a discourse that is both old and new: the discourse of humanity in education. A school system following the roadmap of testing data can never be a system that will convey to our children the light of learning and teach them "the

principles of humanity"(General Court of Mass., ch. 5, sec. 2) as anything more than an afterthought. I know that some will object to this vision, saying that such principles are too vague to be included in the primary goals of public education, but the writers of the Massachusetts State Constitution thought them fitting, as did Paolo Freire, a pioneer in the field of humanistic education (Salazar, 125). Even more importantly, the education of our country's children is too important for us to simply "[reduce educational] outcomes to what is easiest to monitor, count, assess, and manage: attendance rates, graduation rates, test scores, and school finances" (Knoester and Parkison, 250).

As an eighth-grade English teacher, I am lucky enough to yearly see the principles of humanity exemplified in, among many things, the courageous gentleness of Anne Frank's soul, the unifying revelations of Ponyboy Curtis in *The Outsiders*, and the new-found selflessness of Squeaky from *Raymond's Run*. Many front-line educators, administrators, parents, and even students see the immense and lasting value of these insights, but, at the end of the day, they will never be a primary learning goal in a system structured around the dehumanizing discourse of testing and data. Only when our state's public education system values the "principles of humanity" will teachers be able to focus on them as anything more than an afterthought or extension. It is time we demand that our state's educational leaders use language that reflects these principles, so that we may start shifting the focus of our system from producing numbers to educating humans. Our public school children deserve nothing less.

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Gregory Shea is pursuing a Master of Arts in Teaching English at Bridgewater State University, and his paper was completed in the fall of 2016 under the mentorship of Dr. Kimberly Davis. He plans on completing his master's degree in the winter of 2017.