

Abstract

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Keywords: Dialogic pedagogy; Standardized testing; Classroom discourse; Linguistic ethnography

Dialogic teaching to the high stakes standardized test?

Abstract

Within current educational discourse, *dialogic pedagogy* is diametrically opposed to *teaching to the test*, especially the high stakes standardized test. While dialogic pedagogy is about critical thinking, authenticity and freedom, test preparation evokes all that is narrow, instrumental and cynical in education. In this paper we argue that such positioning of dialogic pedagogy as antithetical to testing is detrimental to attempts both to foster dialogue in classrooms and to constructively manage the high stakes standardized tests that are compulsory in so many schools. Drawing on an extended case study of dialogic teaching in one London primary school, we argue that while standardized testing is indeed an impediment to dialogic pedagogy, it does not follow that dialogue is impossible or undesirable within the testing context. By adopting an ironic stance towards the test, teachers can fulfil test preparation mandates while maintaining dialogic ideals and practices.

The title of our paper may strike a discordant note to many readers' ears. Within current educational discourse, *dialogic pedagogy* is diametrically opposed to *teaching to the test*, especially the high stakes standardized test. While dialogic pedagogy is about critical thinking, authenticity and freedom, test preparation evokes all that is narrow, instrumental and cynical in education, and high stakes standardized testing all that is authoritarian, coercive and alienating. But, as we argue below, positioning dialogic pedagogy as antithetical to testing is detrimental to

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attempts both to foster dialogue in classrooms and to constructively manage the high stakes standardized tests that are compulsory for so many teachers and pupils.

Drawing on data from an extended case study (Burawoy, 1998) of dialogic teaching in one London primary school, this article discusses how teachers negotiated the tensions between their desire to enact dialogic teaching and the urgent need to raise their pupils' test scores. We draw in particular on close analyses of two episodes of classroom interaction from one Year 6 classroom to argue that, while standardized testing is indeed an impediment to dialogic pedagogy, it does not follow that dialogic pedagogy is impossible or undesirable within the testing context.

Dialogic pedagogy, in testing times

We use “dialogic pedagogy” as an umbrella term to describe a wide variety of ideas and practices, ranging from Bakhtin-inspired radical openness (e.g. Matusov, 2009) to purposive teaching that “exploits the power of talk to engage and shape children’s thinking and learning” (Alexander, 2008, p. 92), Socratic discussions (e.g. Haroutunian-Gordon, 2009) and processes of joint exploration and knowledge construction (e.g. Wells, 1999). While fundamental differences divide these and other approaches to dialogic pedagogy¹, for the purposes of our discussion it should be sufficient to note some key themes common to most if not all dialogic educational approaches: a commitment to relatively reciprocal power relations, or at least some element of pupil empowerment; space for pupil voice and agency, to express independent thoughts, to respond critically to official knowledge, and even in some cases to shape the curriculum; and learning through processes of collaborative talk, joint inquiry and co-construction.

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Standardized testing is anathema to each of these commitments. With regard to power relations, the test is highly restrictive of pupil agency, and, crucially, is imposed upon teachers as well. The topics covered by the test are given priority in shaping the curriculum, and high stakes tests typically define the limits of the curriculum (Au, 2007). Finally, with regard to epistemology, standardized tests, in order to be reliable, must by design differentiate clearly between correct and incorrect answers, which are defined *a priori* by the test-maker, and not open to negotiation amongst test-takers.

Though most scholars of dialogic pedagogy have not written directly about the issue of standardized testing, when the topic does arise, testing is cast as dialogue's antithesis or impediment. Burbules (1993), for example, includes "a test-driven conception of educational aims... directly antagonistic to the possibilities of dialogue in the classroom" in his list of "anti-dialogical instructional practices" (p. 153). Nystrand and colleagues (1997) use the term "test question" to describe the epistemologically closed questions posed by teachers in monologic classroom discourse, and which they differentiate from authentic questions, which open up dialogic possibilities. For Matusov, helping pupils succeed on a standardized test is an inherently non-dialogic activity because it is instrumental: it uses dialogue as a means of attaining "preset curricular endpoints, at which students have to arrive. Preset endpoints contradict the open-ended spirit of dialogue, in which all participants — teachers and students — are genuinely interested in the topics, issues, and inquiries they discuss" (Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014, p. 2).

While standardized testing and dialogic pedagogy are in many ways at odds, one need not abandon one in favor of the other. We argue both that (a) the tests should be abolished so that dialogic pedagogy can flourish and, at the same time, (b) until then we should adapt our dialogic

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ideals to the high stakes testing situation in which so many teachers and pupils find themselves. While a purist dialogic pedagogy, which rejects any and all extrinsic authority and ends, may be satisfying as an academic stance, it provides no comfort or assistance to teachers struggling to meet institutional demands without abandoning their dialogic educational values.

Standardized test preparation: implications for learning

Standardized testing has long been a staple of State education, with the United States and the UK leading a trend towards high stakes testing that has taken hold in areas of Latin America, Western Europe, and Australia. These tests are a key component of standards-based reforms, which are designed “to identify a set of clear, measurable, and ambitious performance standards for students across a number of core subject areas, to align curriculum to these standards, and to expect students to meet these high standards” (Loeb & Figlio, 2011, p. 386). The accountability measures associated with these reforms may directly reward or sanction individual teachers and schools, or their impact may be felt indirectly through market forces reacting to publicly released test scores. As the stakes have risen, so has the pressure upon teachers to produce competitive scores. From work in the 1970’s which aimed to demonstrate and ensure the validity of test results (Ayllon & Kelly 1972; Rudman 1977) to defenses of the practice in recent decades (Phelps 2005), standardized tests have been touted as an objective means of comparison and a key policy lever for raising teacher expectations and pupil attainment. They have been used for everything from school district budgeting to OECD rankings. In a policy environment in which such tests carry grave consequences for teachers and schools, it is no surprise that most teachers set aside their uneasiness with standardized testing and prepare their pupils for the tests, often intensively. Any such preparation entails guiding pupils to conform to official expectations.

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The scholarly literature on standardized testing has been devoted primarily to debating its advantages, disadvantages and unintended consequences (Koretz, 2008; Stobart, 2008). Almost all oppose directly teaching to the test, in the face of a plethora of materials designed to help teachers do precisely that (e.g. Jasmine, 2004; Tileston & Darling, 2008). Some oppose test preparation as interfering with good education (e.g. Higgins, Miller & Wegmann 2006; Hollingworth 2007), by narrowing the curriculum at the expense of relevance (Hill 2014), thinking skills (Hollingworth 2007), meaningful writing (Higgins, Miller & Wegmann 2006), or non-tested core subjects (West 2007). Others lament that test preparation threatens the validity of the test results (e.g. Haladyna, Nolen & Haas 1991; Madaus 1988). Gulek (2003) articulates a common position, according to which teachers should expose students “to all curriculum objectives to be mastered at their grade level. When this is done, test scores will most likely take care of themselves (p. 43).”

The sense that “test scores will most likely take care of themselves” drives many of the recommendations for appropriate test preparation. The prevailing wisdom is that the less impact the test has on the curriculum, the better. Haladyna, Nolen and Haas (1991, p. 4) categorize “[d]eveloping a curriculum based on the content of the test” as “unethical,” advising teachers and schools against modifying either the subject matter included in the curriculum or its associated teaching objectives in light of the test, while Hollingworth (2007) recommends that teachers conduct alignment studies assessing gaps between their curricula and official standards, making only the most minor adjustments necessary. From this perspective, the teaching of test-taking skills (or: test-wiseness), reducing test-associated anxiety, and increasing pupil motivation are legitimate test-focused activities, but targeting curricular materials towards the test is not.

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However, in practice it appears that so-called inappropriate practices are common-place in settings with high-stakes testing. Au (2007), in his metasyntesis of 49 qualitative studies of test-driven curricular change, found a high incidence of curricular narrowing, fragmentation of knowledge, and teacher-centered pedagogies. Baldly put, engaging in test preparation may involve what the teacher committed to dialogic ideals would otherwise consider bad teaching.

From purism to pragmatism

Standardized testing is expanding rather than decreasing, posing enduring dilemmas for teachers. We have reviewed the educational and ethical entanglements engendered by directly preparing for the tests, and have found that the main recommendation emerging from the research literature is basically, don't prepare or actively resist (see McNeil, 2000). But this advice, which is found in scholarship on both dialogic pedagogy and test preparation (as outlined above), is not very helpful for educators who are being judged on the basis of their pupils' achievement. Rather than insist on strategies that do not help teachers meet institutional expectations, we advocate a different approach, one that grounds our ideals in the actual conditions in which teachers and pupils find themselves.

One promising approach is to find ways of letting pupils in on the 'rules of the game', problematizing the test and its associated skills even while training the pupils to perform well. Kontovourki and Campis (2010) describe a third grade classroom in which a two-pronged approach was adopted. On the one hand, pupils were offered avenues to relevance and motivation in the test preparation activities. On the other hand, teachers acted as "mediators of the discourse (i.e., system of knowledge) of testing that oftentimes contradicted what was regularly valued during reading instruction" (p. 242), finding ways to induct pupils into practices

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such as giving one right answer and using officially sanctioned language without endorsing those practices per se. Likewise, Dysthe (2011) shows how one teacher “created ‘opportunity spaces’ for dialogic discourse in a school setting where the main curriculum goal was directed towards doing well on the final exam” (p. 83). For instance, the pupils in her Advanced Placement literature class alternated between group discussion and personal writing, discussing literary themes but also reflecting upon their own identities and home lives. In yet another setting, “institutional bounds themselves became deliberately and overtly dialogized” (Aukerman 2013, p. A23), as discussion turned from pupils’ rationales for their differing responses to a standardized multiple choice test item to interrogation and critique of the test question itself.

These approaches offer pupils the opportunity to learn how to succeed on the test without buying in to the test’s epistemic underpinnings. We suggest that such an ironic stance may foster precisely the critical thinking skills, multi-vocal meaning-making, and dialogicity that standardized tests neglect and even hinder, in the service of preparing for those self-same tests.

Research context and methods

This paper discusses data from the (removed for anonymization) study. This study involved a professional development program intended to facilitate dialogic teaching of literacy in one primary school, and linguistic ethnographic study of processes of continuity and change in the wake of that intervention. Data collection included observation and video-recording of 73 literacy lessons in seven classrooms; 18 collaborative meetings in which teachers planned lessons or reflected on video-recorded lesson excerpts; 15 teacher interviews; and participant observation in school life. Thirty lessons were coded by discourse move (cf. Smith and

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Hardman 2003). Select episodes were subjected to detailed linguistic ethnographic micro, multi-modal and transcontextual analyses (Rampton et al. 2015).

This study's method, site and key findings are discussed in detail elsewhere (references removed for anonymization); here we focus on the particular issue of how teachers coped with the tensions between dialogic teaching and the high stakes standardized SATs test administered at the end of Year 6. The research site, Abbeyford Primary School, had been among the higher achieving schools in the Local Authority, as reflected in standardized test scores, but its position slipped 21 places in the two years prior to the research. School management and teachers were under considerable pressure to reverse this downward trend, and success in the standardized assessments task (SAT) tests and the upcoming governmental inspection were a major concern for all, particularly the Year 6 teachers, whose pupils were tested in May 2009.

In February 2009, the Year 6 classes began an intense period of revision for the SATs tests, and the literacy lessons we observed in the ensuing three months were devoted entirely to revising for the English component of these tests. This involved reviewing different genres of writing (e.g. narrative, interviews, formal/informal letters, persuasive writing), and working through test questions from previous years.

The shift toward test preparation was apparent in our quantitative measures of classroom discourse data. Figure 1 shows the type of teacher questions asked in the lessons pre-, during, and post-SATs revision in discourse in Ms. James' class, the one Year 6 classroom we subjected to systematic coding and quantitative analysis. SATs revision is clearly marked by a high incidence of closed questions, while in the post SATs revision period, Ms James uses fewer closed questions and instead opts for more open questions and probes. This preference for closed questions can be seen as preparation for the type of questions pupils will encounter in the tests.

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Moreover, both open questions, which give pupils the opportunity to go “off script”, and probe questions, which extend individual pupil responses, may slow down the pace of the lesson in terms of the breadth of topics that can be covered in the limited revision time available (cf. Dadds 2001 on the ‘hurry along curriculum’).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Time pressure was something that teachers frequently commented on in relation to the SATs. For example, Ms. Alexander, whose lesson we discuss in detail below, expressed her frustration in one of the workshops: “And it’s a time limit restriction as well. You know, you try to rush through these questions [in SATs test booklets]. You know, you try and discuss it, but rush at the same time”. (30th March 2009). Likewise, in her end-of-the-year interview she returned to this theme:

“I think another set-back [to implementing dialogic pedagogy] is being in Year 6. I think it’s the SATS, that’s a huge, huge, huge set-back. You can’t do things the way you want to do them. You can’t dedicate as much time as you want to. You know, there’s been times with dialogic teaching, I’ve wanted to do more of it, but I haven’t been able to because it’s just been impossible [...] You want to get their levels up, and you want to spend as much time as you can revising. It all gets in the way. And I think that’s a massive, massive obstacle”. (30th June 2009)

In planning the revision units the Year 6 teachers brainstormed with us² about how best to prepare their pupils for the test without completely abandoning their dialogic aspirations. In

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particular, they tried to identify topics or genres that lent themselves to rich, oral activities. So, for example, they designed a debate as precursor to writing discussion texts (reference removed). However, as they approached the SATs they focused on practicing tests from previous years and discussing together the answers. We have selected for close analysis two episodes from one of Ms. Alexander's lessons. Both these episodes capture the tensions between the culture of dialogic inquiry to which pupils and teacher were accustomed, and the epistemology and urgent requirements of the test.

Dialogic teaching to the high stakes test

Below we analyse two episodes from one lesson in Ms. Alexander's Year 6 class. This lesson was the first of six SATs revision lessons we observed in this classroom. We have chosen to focus on it here as it brings into sharp relief the tensions between standardized test preparation and dialogic pedagogy, and offers a glimpse of an ironic approach that we argue can potentially help to balance the conflicting demands.

At the start of the lesson, Ms Alexander gives each of the pupils a SATs reading comprehension booklet, which includes several short texts around the topic of flight, and some related test questions. The pupils are given five minutes to read the texts and are then instructed to work in pairs in order to answer the practice SATs questions. After completing each section, the teacher leads a plenary discussion, in which the answers are revealed, before the pair work continues with the next set of questions. In the first iteration of this process, Ms Alexander reminds the pupils that they must always look in the texts to find the answers:

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“Always check it in the book [i.e. the SATs reading comprehension booklet], because sometimes we think we know the answer, but then we could be- we could have some information in our head that’s not quite right or maybe we have misread something. So always just check the answer ... and find where it says it”.

The pupils demonstrate, however, that this is not necessarily a straightforward process, as in Episodes 1 and 2.

Episode 1 occurs 20 minutes into the lesson and just a few minutes after Ms Alexander has explicitly told pupils to get their answers from the relevant pages of the SATs booklet. The pupils have worked on a set of reading comprehension questions regarding a text about human flight, and the class are reviewing their answers together. The teacher turns to question number four:

Planes, gliders and birds all fly in a similar way using:

- a) flapping to get them into the sky
- b) specially shaped wings
- c) pockets of rising air
- d) light materials

Episode 1: Hollow Bones

1 Ms Alexander: Right
2 number four then
3 is a really easy one that everyone should get this right
4 Katy
5 Katy: it’s er-
6 it’s a planes gliders and birds all fly in a similar way
7 (.)
8 u:si:ng
9 specially shaped wings

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10 Ms Alexander: okay how do we know that
11 [where did you find that
12 Aaron: [what about materials
13 Katy: I know that because (.)
14 under the: subtitle how a plane flies
15 it says
16 like- like birds
17 planes use sp- specially:: shaped wing- wings
18 to move through the air
19 Ms Alexander: Excellent
20 Adin: miss it could be light materials
21 because
22 Aaron: I said that
23 Adin: birds- birds bones are light
24 and that's-
25 and so-
26 and they make planes
27 and they make planes with light materials
28 Ms Alexander: light materials
29 but- but would you say that a birds wing-
30 or a birds bones
31 are light materials
32 Aaron: yeah because they're hollow
33 they're hollow
34 Ms Alexander: right where does it say that in the-
35 in the book then
36 Adin: it doesn't say that in the book but I've read it
37 Ms Alexander: ah ha so you're just-
38 you're just getting your own (.)
39 ideas
40 but not directly from the book then
41 Aaron: no because in one page it does say that-
42 that aeroplanes and birds are very light
43 Ms Alexander: Right
44 the answer i:s
45 specially shaped wings
46 okay
47 and it-
48 because it gives you the answer here as well doesn't it
49 (1)
50 Alright
51 Aaron: it says on pages four (xxxx)
52 Ms Alexander: be careful where you get your information from
53 make sure that it has told you that
54 right just because you think (.) something
55 doesn't make it right
56 Adin: I don't think it I've heard it
57 Ms Alexander: you heard it

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58 Adin: I read it in a book
59 Ms Alexander: you read it
66 Adin: I've read it
61 Ms Alexander: Where
62 Adin: in a book
63 Ms Alexander: which book
64 Adin: I (got it)-
65 I don't know (xxx)
66 Ms Alexander: this book
67 Adin: no not this book
68 Ms Alexander: Right
69 well I don't care what you've read in other books
70 it's what i- what is in this pack that matters
71 okay
72 right can we move on then

Question four is characterized as “a really easy one that everyone should get this right” (line 3). The nominated pupil, Katy, obliges by quickly providing the correct answer (“specially shaped wings”). Ms Alexander delays positive evaluation, however, until Katy has demonstrated how she arrived at this answer: “okay how do you know that / where did you find that” (lines 10-11). The point of the revision lessons is to develop the skills necessary to do well in the SATs tests, which for the “reading comprehension” component means being able to locate the answers in the texts provided. Katy gives a model response (lines 13-18) by formulating a complete sentence, beginning “I know that because”, indicating the place in the text where the answer is found (“under the subtitle how a plane flies”), and citing the words from the text that provide the desired information (lines 15 to 18). If “it says” in the text that specially shaped wings are to be credited with the flight capabilities of both planes and birds, then this must be so, and the response is ratified by the teacher as “excellent” (line 19).

In the meantime, Aaron has attempted to gain the floor with a different explanation: “what about materials” (line 12). Adin picks up this bid and addresses it directly to the teacher (line 20), though Aaron claims ownership of the idea (line 22). Adin explains in a clear and

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concise fashion that “it could be light materials / because / birds bones are light” and “they make planes with light materials”. Adin thus offers “light materials” as a competing explanation to “specially shaped wings.” Both explanations share the premise that a feature common to planes and birds must be the reason that both fly, and thus both explanations seem equally plausible. Ms. Alexander probes Adin’s line of reasoning by questioning whether birds’ bones are in fact light materials (lines 29-31). Aaron responds, jointly constructing the knowledge with his classmate by elaborating the explanation: birds’ bones are light “because they’re hollow” (lines 32, 33).

This exchange is remarkable, and not just because of the inquiry and sense-making in which pupils are involved as they pursue evidenced-based lines of reasoning using out-of-classroom knowledge. These features are compounded if we note that the exchange, including the engagement of the teacher, takes place after the official answer to what was termed “a really easy one” (line 3) has been proffered and ratified. The class is undeterred by the fact that the point of the exercise is to indicate which line in the text feeds them the correct answer, as the pupils engage in more substantive dialogic inquiry. It seems they are not willing to let the test get in the way of their learning, or to pass up an opportunity to challenge authority.

Now that the hollowness of avian bones has been offered as support for the light materials explanation, Ms. Alexander probes this warrant further. However, she does so not for its veracity – are birds’ bones indeed hollow – but for its source: “right where does it say that in the- / in the book then” (lines 34-35). The teacher identifies “the book” – that is, the SATs booklet – as the only acceptable source of knowledge. Adin counters (line 36) by appealing to an alternate source, a text he has read elsewhere. Ms. Alexander rejects this as “just getting your own / ideas” (lines 38-39) and not “directly from the book” (line 40). Adin and Aaron have

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offered their own idea, namely that birds' hollow bones make them light, and that light materials are a feature common to birds and to aeroplanes. These boys are of course right that birds do have some bones that are hollow. But if information and ideas are not found in "the book", and "directly" at that, with no inferences necessary, then they are not valid in the context of the one-mark question in the reading comprehension unit. Aaron challenges Ms Alexander on lines 41-42: "no because in one page it does say that- / that aeroplanes and birds are very light ("it does say" marks this as a challenge and not merely a citation, as per the more neutral "it says"). Aaron claims that there is evidence on "one page" of the booklet, supporting the asserted fact "that aeroplanes and birds are very light." However, this fact is not "directly" connected with flying prowess in the relevant text, whereas the wing shape is, and thus it is not an appropriate answer. Ms Alexander does not acknowledge Aaron's challenge, but continues with a declaration that "the answer is: / specially shaped wings" (lines 44-45), the single, authoritative answer that had been offered and ratified twenty-five lines earlier. With the SATs book as the absolute authority for the specific question-answer correspondence ("because it gives you the answer here as well doesn't it", line 48), even Aaron's further attempt to point to evidence at a specific place in the book (line 51) is not deemed relevant. Rather, Ms. Alexander informs him (lines 52-55) that he should "be careful" because "just because you think (.) something / doesn't make it right". The only route to the "right" answer in this context is to consult the relevant place in the relevant text: "make sure it has told you that" (line 53).

The rules for knowledge warrants expressed in this exchange are anathema to the norms of Ms. Alexander's class, in which an inquiry-based stance and multiple sources of knowledge are typically embraced and encouraged. The epistemic switch that the teacher encourages in the context of the SATs reading comprehension unit is further marked in the somewhat

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uncharacteristic continuation of the exchange in lines 56 to 72. This series of questions and responses takes place at a rapid-fire, staccato pace until Adin eventually concedes that his information is not from the sanctioned source (line 67). Ms Alexander explicitly sums up the rules: “well I don’t care what you’ve read in other books / it’s what i- what is in this pack that matters” (lines 69-70). Given what we know about Ms Alexander, from this as well as other lessons, she certainly does care what they have read in other books. She emphasizes here, however, that for the purposes of the current exercise, it is only “this pack that matters”.

Episode 2 similarly illustrates ways in which the inquiry-based ethos of the classroom finds expression during SATs revision. It takes place just over ten minutes after Episode 1, and thus ten minutes after it has been made abundantly clear to the pupils they must get their information from the SATs texts rather than from outside sources. The class are now discussing a text about Alcock and Brown, British aviators who made the first non-stop transatlantic flight. The pupils have been asked to evaluate whether a series of statements about Alcock and Brown are “fact or opinion”. As the episode begins they are discussing the statement “Alcock and Brown were national heroes” (line 1).

Episode 1: National Heroes

1 Ms Alexander: Alcock and Brown were national heroes
2 Elsa: oo no: hang on (xxxxxxxx)
3 Ms Alexander fact or opinion
4 put your hand up for fact please
5 they were national heroes
6 put your hand up for fact
7 ((show of hands))
8 put your hand up for opinion
9 ((show of hands))
10 Elsa: I’m half (half)
11 Ms Alexander and (a half half)
12 Rick: I’m not sure really
13 Laura: oh yeah because you [could be
14 Elsa: [miss
15 Laura: [(xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)

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16 Ms Alexander: [what are we think then
17 Simon: miss it says they got ten [thousand pounds
18 Adin: [they could be think-
19 they could be thinking that they're national heroes
20 Aaron: no but THE MAJORITY-
21 the majority think
22 (which is the national xxxxxx that they're heroes)
23 Adin: no I-
24 I think the fact but-
25 I think it's fact (but I'm not sure)
26 Ms Alexander: Charlotte
27 Charlotte: er I think it could be (.) a like-
28 some people could think
29 oh yeah they're just ordinary people
30 but like others could think
31 oh wow th- they did this so that means that they're-
32 so that means that they could be really national heroes
33 Ms Alexander: uh hm
34 Charlotte: but then it could be a fact
35 because i-
36 because they got ten thousand pounds
37 so they could be (xxxxx)
38 Aaron: that's an opinion [innit
39 Ms Alexander: [okay
40 we-
41 well we're going to talk about it
42 okay then
43 e:rm
44 what does it mean to be a national hero then
45 what do you think it means
46 i- in actual fact
47 to be a her- a national hero
48 (1)
49 Daren
50 Daren (and like kind of xxxxx)
51 Ms Alexander: Yeah
52 Daren: Erm
53 just say that England went out to the world cup
54 and Rooney scored the winning goal
55 because he's gone and represent- represent-
56 Ms Alexander: Represented
57 Daren: represented
58 erm
59 i-
60 erm
61 (1)
62 Aaron: England
63 Daren: England

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64 erm the e:r (.)
65 English people
66 are going to-
67 they're going to
68 think he's going to be a hero
69 because he's done something for his whole country
70 Ms Alexander: Yeah
71 so he's done it f-
72 it's basically
73 for the whole country isn't it
74 national
75 yeah
76 national would mea:n
77 for the whole country
78 okay so a national hero:
79 can anyone find where it had that in there as well
80 where it's-
81 where it's got that part
82 Mary:
83 Mary: when the two men arrived in London
84 they were national heroes
85 Ms Alexander: Okay
86 fact or opinion
87 Dylan: Fact
88 Ms Alexander: what do you think now
89 Pupils Fact
90 Ms Alexander: Yeah
91 fact
92 they were national heroes
93 okay
94 Laurie: miss (can you put down fact)
95 Ms Alexander: Erm
96 even if there were a certain few people
97 that didn't believe in it
98 alright
99 they actually were national heroes
100 when they went back
101 they were treated as
102 heroes
103 okay
104 it seems like it could be opinion
105 but in actually fact it is- it is a fact
106 okay
107 it's something that did happen
108 at the time
109 and it's not someone saying that
110 I think they were national heroes
111 I believe they were national heroes
112 yeah

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113 they were national heroes when they went back
114 okay good
115 e:rm
116

The SATs questions in this section offer a binary choice: the statement is either “fact” or “opinion.” Ms. Alexander asks pupils to signal, by a show of hands, which of these two options they think is correct, based on their reading of the text (lines 3 to 9). Two pupils indicate to the teacher, however, that they are not able to make a simple choice between fact and opinion. These responses – “half half” (line 10) and “not really sure” (line 12) – suggest that the pupils have considered the options but have not (yet) found one to be more compelling than the other. The possibility that the answer may be neither straightforwardly fact *nor* opinion ignites a spark of recognition in Laura (“Oh yeah, because it could be-”), followed by Simon, Adin and Aaron, who begin the debate in earnest. Simon draws upon the fact that the aviators “got ten thousand pounds” (line 17) as evidence. In doing so, he uses the text (as instructed earlier in the lesson by Ms Alexander) but also applies his own criteria for what might constitute a national hero (i.e. recognition and reward). The discussion develops a dialogic orientation at this point, with pupils responding to each other’s ideas. Contrary to the “fact” presented by Simon, Adin seems to suggest that the statement is “opinion” because “they could be *thinking* that they’re national heroes” (lines 18-19). The stress on “thinking” suggests opinion rather than fact, and the ambiguous referent for “they” opens up the issue of who is doing the thinking (e.g. Alcock and Brown themselves or members of the public?). Aaron refutes Adin’s position clearly with “no”, and states that “the majority” think that Alcock and Brown are national heroes (lines 20-22). Implicit in his response is the idea that being a national hero depends on public opinion, and thus, if the “majority” (which is said with emphasis in line 20) within the nation think that the

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figures are heroes, they are indeed heroes. Adin leans towards “fact” in lines 23-25, but the hesitation in his response indicates that he is still not yet fully convinced either way.

It is easy to see why Adin is undecided. This brief exchange has opened up not just the interesting question of what constitutes a national hero, but also the issue of how to differentiate between “fact” and “opinion”, particularly in this case. If the status of “national hero” depends on public attitudes towards and recognition of a particular person, then collective public “opinion” qualifies as “fact”, and clearly distinguishing between fact and opinion in this case is impossible. This debate continues when Ms Alexander brings Charlotte into the discussion on line 26. Charlotte seems to suggest that, on the one hand, it could be opinion (with some people believing that Alcock and Brown are just “ordinary people” and others thinking that they’re heroes), while on the other hand it could be fact, because they were given ten thousand pounds (building on the point made by Simon in line 17). Aaron contests this: “that’s an opinion, innit?” (line 38).

Up until this point in the episode there has been a remarkable amount of pupil-pupil talk, only lightly punctuated by brief teacher turns, but this changes in line 39, as Ms Alexander reframes the discussion (signalled by the boundary marker “okay”). Ms Alexander explicitly asks the question that several of the pupils have been implicitly addressing: What does it mean to be a national hero? Her utterance on lines 44 to 47 serves at least three functions. First, it gives official voice to the pupils’ ideas while also reclaiming the teacher’s role. Second, it opens the floor for additional pupils to participate, by making the topic not only official but also explicit. Third, the teacher uses the language of the assigned task, with two instances of “national hero” (lines 44 and 47, with the latter self-corrected from “hero” alone) and one of “fact” (line 46), but

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moves from “what does it mean” (line 44) to “what do you think it means” (line 45), suggesting that the task itself is subject to dialogic construction and meaning-making.

Daren takes on the task of defining what constitutes a national hero, arguing that such a person should “represent” (line 55) the people, and the people, in turn, will “think he’s going to be a hero” (line 68); this person is a national hero by virtue of the fact that “he’s done something for his whole country” (line 69). In this manner, he uses the ideas that have already been raised – if the majority think he’s a hero, then he’s a hero – but adds through the example of a World Cup footballer the idea that a national hero in some way represents the people of the nation.

This relatively dialogic segment, characterised by pupil-pupil talk, the interanimation of ideas, and argumentation grounded in various types of evidence, reasoning, and example, takes place of course in the context of the SATs preparation unit on reading comprehension. Ms Alexander therefore refocuses the discussion in order to direct pupils to the “correct” answer for this SATs question. She asks: “can anyone find where it had that [national hero] in there [the text] as well” (line 79). Here the quest is not for ideas, for reasoning, for deduction, as in the case of the ten thousand pounds. Rather, the text has “got that part” (line 81); that is, there is a specific piece of the text that provides a definitive answer to the question (and importantly, this will always be the case for one-mark SATs questions). Mary obliges by reciting directly from the text: “when the two men arrived in London / they were national heroes” (lines 83-84). This is the relevant sentence according to the test-makers, and its introduction allows the fact-or-opinion lesson to proceed apace (lines 85-93). Here the discourse structure changes dramatically from what we saw earlier in the episode. The teacher speaks at every second turn, drills the pupils on monosyllabic answers, and advances a single, authoritative truth. Having arrived at and ratified that truth (“Yeah / fact / they were national heroes,” lines 90-92), the discussion ends. Laurie’s

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question underscores the shift in focus and structure: “miss (can you put down fact)”. This question is addressed exclusively to the teacher as the official source of knowledge, and relates not to nuanced questions about the nature and definition of national heroism or of fact, but to the single correct answer to the question. Ms. Alexander replies with an extended turn. In the first part, she summarizes and embraces the vibrant pupil discussion, drawing upon ideas about the few as opposed to the majority (line 96) and the way the heroes were treated (lines 101-2, referencing Simon’s “ten thousand pounds”). The second half of her utterance addresses the issue of opinion versus fact, but without accounting for or referencing the nuance from the pupil discussion – that if enough people think someone is a hero, then he is. Here, there is no room for what someone may “think” (line 110) or “believe” (line 111), because what matters is not what constitutes a hero, but what is meant by “fact” in a particular kind of text when it comes to SATs reading comprehension. The segment ends when it is once again established, through direct citation of the text, that “they were national heroes” (line 113).

Episodes 1 and 2 offer several insights into this classroom regarding points of contact between dialogic pedagogy and test preparation. First, the pupils are capable of engaging in substantive, pupil-driven discussion, and are inclined to do so. This is clear in both episodes, but particularly in Episode 2, where we see pupils pursue knowledge outside of the SATs test booklet despite Ms Alexander’s insistence in Episode 1 that it’s only “what is in this pack that matters”. It is also reflected throughout our observations of Ms. Alexander’s class (reference removed). Second, test preparation ultimately suppresses dialogic impulse, or at least its manifestation. As soon as the correct line from the text is cited, the discussion ends, and Ms. Alexander and her pupils move to more traditional recitation (Nystrand et al., 1997) mode, in which the aim is not to talk, think and develop ideas together, but to arrive at the answer desired

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by the test-makers (“it’s what i- what is in this pack that matters”, Episode 1, line 70), and in which pupil inquiry is limited to “Miss, can you put down fact” (Episode 2, line 166). Third, the SATs questions are far less demanding of the pupils than the mode in which they naturally engage, leading us to wonder whether the pupils are just smarter than the test. We posed this question in our discussions with two of the four Year 6 teachers during a reflection meeting in which we viewed Episodes 1 and 2:

You know, I mean, the ideas of hollow bones and things, that’s good. But it’s not in the text. You’ve got to be so careful that you’re not putting them down because they are thinking like that, because that’s what you want to encourage.

(Mrs Anderton, Year 6 teacher and Deputy Head)

So, you’re trying to ascertain the right answer, but then you want to say, “oh yeah, you know, it’s really good that you’re thinking outside the box, and, you know, you’re bringing in outside ideas, but not for this, you don’t do it”. And I feel bad for doing that, when I’m going through this kind of thing. You do feel like you’re restricting them, you do feel you’re- you know, like you said, they’re too smart. They are like – you know, certain kids in my class that-, even Aaron, you know, so- you know, he can be difficult [...] I mean, he can be outspoken, he can be a pain, but he is very smart. He’s got the knowledge. He reads a lot. You know, Adin, as well, you know, got really good ideas. But, then, for this, it’s not –

(Ms Alexander, Year 6 teacher)

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In these quotes we see some of the ways in which teachers experience the tensions between dialogic teaching and high stakes testing. The teachers want to encourage their pupils to think for themselves and draw upon extra-curricular knowledge, and they are careful not to “put them down”, but at the same time, they need the children to get to “the right answer” as embodied in “the text”. This tension manifests in feelings of guilt or regret: “I feel bad for doing that”. So how might teachers deal with the tension between the pupils’ dialogic impulse and the school’s need for them to do well in the SATs tests? We think that Episode 1 offers a glimpse of a promising way of addressing this problem, which we have termed an ironic stance.

In lines 57-72 of Episode 1, Ms Alexander presents a rather uncharacteristically absolutist stance that runs counter to the established epistemic underpinnings and discourse norms of the class. One way of interpreting her response is that she is constructing an ironic stance towards the test. Ms Alexander lets the pupils in on the rules of the game through the rapid-fire exchange with Adin, and by forcefully saying that there is, for the purpose of the test, only one source of knowledge. The pupils know full well that knowledge can be found in many different sources, in addition to being constructed through their own talk and reasoning. But Ms Alexander instructs them to put all of that on hold for the sake of the test. Her extreme position – “I don’t care what you’ve read in other books” – can be seen as a means of introducing the pupils to the test marker’s standpoint, which by necessity must be limited to the test pack and the one right answer it contains. We detect a hint of irony in her exaggerated display of impatience and unreasonable position, and in the marked difference between that stance and her normal classroom manner. In effect, she is implicitly teaching the pupils to participate in the discourses necessary to succeed on the test while also acknowledging the different shared discourses that typically prevail in the classroom.

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Dialogic Teaching to the High Stakes Standardized Test

In the post-industrial economy, where innovation and creativity are highly prized, children need “to develop skills and knowledge of an entirely flexible kind” (Kress 2000: 13); yet high stakes testing discourages independent and critical thinking, and directs children along narrow lines of inquiry. One response is to campaign for an end to the testing regime so that dialogic teaching and learning can flourish, as the teachers at Abbeyford Primary have done. During our fieldwork, they signed a joint petition from the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) calling on the UK Government to end SATs, and they backed the NUT’s move to boycott SATs in 2010. But standardised testing continues in England (and elsewhere), and thus teachers need to find practical ways of teaching for the tests without compromising their dialogic values.

The two focal episodes from Ms. Alexander’s Year 6 class illustrate some ways in which the dichotomy of dialogic pedagogy vs. standardized test preparation breaks down in real world classroom practice, and bring into relief the challenges that teachers face when trying to accomplish both of these seemingly incompatible aims.

The second episode, “National Heroes,” tests the limits of dialogic pedagogy in a test preparation context. On the one hand, there is an inquiry-driven discussion in which pupils introduce their own ideas and build upon those of their classmates. On the other hand, the space for this is limited by the test preparation mode, and the more dialogic sequence is shut down as soon as the officially correct answer is reached. The first episode, “Hollow Bones,” finds pupils similarly introducing ideas of their own and working together to support and advance them. In this instance, however, the discussion is overshadowed and ultimately closed down by the test-

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writers' epistemology, as Ms. Alexander constructs what we have characterized as an ironic stance towards the test.

In each of these cases, we find oscillation between dialogic and test preparation sequences. Within the curricular slot devoted to test preparation, dialogic opportunity spaces (Dysthe, 2011) are taken up, expanded, or alternatively, vacated, to varying degrees. The teacher can make space for dialogue, shut it down to accomplish other pressing matters, and even guide the pupils in the art of epistemic switching (Gottlieb & Wineburg 2012) by ironically marking her movement between the testing regime and dialogic inquiry. In the lesson analysed here that stance was implicit and momentary; teachers choosing to adopt an ironic stance would be advised to make their position more explicit and sustained. We have argued that the purists in neither the dialogic pedagogy community nor those involved in test preparation at the levels of scholarship and policy have found ways to help teachers navigate this particular set of competing demands. Rather than focusing primarily on the incompatibility of dialogic pedagogy with standardized testing, or advocating testing without specialised preparation or curricular modification of any kind, we adopt a pragmatic approach grounded in actual classroom conditions. We conclude: (1) Standardized testing is a fact of life, and a stressful one at that, for teachers. Since preparation for these exams is the norm, telling teachers not to modify their curricular offerings is naïve at best; and (2) Pupils accustomed to dialogue and inquiry in both discourse patterns and enacted epistemologies are not likely to check these at the door during test preparation time. An ironic stance towards the test is a way to invite pupils to play – and win at – the testing game, without threatening dialogic ideals and practices.

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¹See (references removed) for reviews of this multiple and diverse field, and an introduction to our own approach.

² We use the first person plural to discuss fieldwork, though not all three authors were involved. The second and third author conducted the original (reference removed) study, including facilitating the planning meetings and observing and recording the lessons.

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Figure 1. Type as a percentage of total questions in one Year 6 class

