Work Hard for Whom? A Critical Autoethnography on the Policies and Practices of a KIPP Charter School

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Abstract

In this critical autoethnography, I reflect on my experience teaching in a KIPP charter school in an urban, racially diverse city in the southwestern U.S. Over the past few decades KIPP has gained both prestige and resentment as a major character in the charter school movement. Their focus on supporting students from underrepresented racial backgrounds in achieving academic success has gained them ample support in many communities. However, in this article I draw attention to the KIPP policies and practices that work directly against the organization's aims and instead support a process of acculturation. I engage with storytelling to bring the reader into my classroom experiences so that we might collectively trouble these disconnections and (re)consider how policies may impact students of Color in similar institutions.

Keywords: autoethnography; charter schools; critical whiteness studies; education policy; Latinx students

I was unprepared for this.

It was not my first job interview—not by a long shot. And still, the question caught me off guard. In all my interviews for teaching positions (and I will admit, there have been many) no one had ever asked me this question: "Is it necessary for you to love your students, if you're going to teach them?"

You can remember a moment, I'm sure, when you sat with a question in an interview. Looking for the right response, wondering what the people in front of you wanted to hear. In this case, I had no idea. This particular interview was at a KIPP charter school, and I understood KIPP to be well known for their demanding school policies, their academic rigor, their routines and procedures. Did these educators want to know that I would love my students, unconditionally? That without that love, I wouldn't be here in this interview?

*I knew my answer, but I didn't know whether it
matched what they wanted to hear.
"Of course I love my students, it's why I show up
for them. And if love is missing from my classroom,
I can't expect them to show up for me."*

*Without a love for our students, I wondered, what
would keep us coming back to the classroom, day
after day, year after year, despite the frustrations,
the demands, the resistance? Despite the impossi-
bility of reaching every student in every possible
way with the work we do? Love is a part of engag-
ing with students through empathy and care, even
as we are challenged in that work. Love is in the
roots of our work.*

*After I nervously explained my answer, it was clear
that was the answer she was looking for. The look
the educator across the table gave me was not an
indication that the position would surely be mine,
but it was an indication that we were on the same
page, in this regard at the very least.*

Introduction

I did end up hired after that interview. And in that KIPP school, I found was constantly faced with experiences similar to the one from that interview—a feeling of doubt as to whether my beliefs about being an educator would align with what the larger system expected from me. Many times, I was affirmed—yes, we all want what's best for our students. Yes, we love them. Yes, we're here to work hard for them.

And yet, many other times during my tenure, my understandings about how to enact those core beliefs conflicted with the policies and procedures in place at our school that were meant to ensure an efficient and effective path for our students into higher education. I have since left that school, for reasons I will delve into in this article, and am now working to reflect on my past teaching practices. This process of reflecting is allowing me to understand how I sometimes did harm as a teacher, when I wanted to help. How I created barriers, when I was trying to create access. How I tried to force impossible solutions, instead of seeing ones that already existed. This critical process involves me constantly asking, "What could I have done better?" This question is particularly important in my current work as a teacher educator, as I work to prepare others for their own classrooms, as it is a process of uncovering what I wish I had known or considered before beginning my career.

In this critical autoethnography, I specifically reflect on my experience teaching in a KIPP charter school over the course of five years. I limit my reflection to this specific context because it is where I found such uneasy combinations of joy, love, frustration, and resistance, that I have worked for years to piece apart and analyze my practices from that time. I will use my experience

with KIPP's structures, which are highly standardized across their schools, to question the role that charter networks play in the ongoing acculturation of racially marginalized and recently immigrated student populations. By analyzing my experiences through the lens of critical Whiteness studies and social reproduction theory, I aim to highlight the ways in which White cultural norms, educational practices, and ways of knowing and interacting were emphasized, prioritized, and explicitly taught to students from predominately Latinx, first-generation backgrounds.

Knowledge is Power: The KIPP Charter School System

With over 255 schools nationwide, KIPP is the foremost charter school network in the U.S. It has gained both prestige and resentment as a major character in the charter school movement. Their focus on college access for all students, regardless of background, is put forth as an explicit strategy toward equity and educational justice. However, those opposing KIPP schools argue that the public funding allocated to these schools takes necessary resources away from local district public schools. Strict disciplinary practices, a narrow focus on college entrance, and high student and teacher attrition have also led to criticisms of the KIPP school model (Horsford et al., 2018; Lack, 2009; Robelen, 2007).

KIPP schools, the first of which opened in 1994, have an explicit goal to send more students from marginalized communities to college. Students enrolled in KIPP schools nationwide are from predominately Black (55%) and Latinx (40%) racial backgrounds (KIPP: Public Schools, 2019). Professional training I attended with KIPP often referenced the low rate of college enrollment by students of Color, and the income disparities between students with and without a college degree. As I worked for the district, their goal evolved from simply encouraging students to attend college, to supporting them in graduating from college. They set up a complex network of counselors and alumni to accomplish this goal. In 2019, 40% of KIPP alumni had earned college degrees (KIPP: Public Schools, 2019).

Debates over public charter schools often focus on their impact on the wider framework of education in our country. However, the impact on the individuals they enroll, and their families, deserves attention. Given that students enrolled in KIPP are predominately from Black and Latinx racial backgrounds, it is essential that we consider these charters' impact on students as individuals who will need to confront and defend their identities among the predominately White social norms privileged in American society. KIPP has a responsibility to educate these students of Color not only for college success, but for informed and empowered participation in this society more broadly.

Theoretical Framework

Social Reproduction Theory

Social reproduction theory helps to frame the way that cultural norms and expectations operate in KIPP's practices and routines. This theory, used to analyze schooling contexts by scholars such as Althusser (1971) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), brings attention to the process of perpetuating social systems and hierarchies over time. It is a way to analyze how our school system and practices reproduce particular social roles for particular classes of people. For example, Haberman (1991) argues that the pedagogical practices teachers typically engage with when teaching students from lower socioeconomic classes serve to reproduce a working class, ready to follow

directions and complete given tasks, but not prepared to critically examine and produce knowledge themselves. Bourdieu and Passeron use the concept of cultural capital to explain how school systems inequitably reinforce cultural practices favored by the dominant group. Those who speak, act, and socialize according to norms that are accepted by the dominant cultural group will be more successful than those who do not adhere to those norms, or who are less successful at adapting to them. The lens of critical Whiteness studies combined with these understandings of cultural capital have allowed me to reflectively question which practices, policies, and routines in KIPP's structure reproduced White, Eurocentric, middle-class norms as a form of capital to be delivered to students.

While I argue in this paper that this transmission of cultural capital works to effectively devalue students' home cultures in a process of acculturation, Bourdieu's theorization of cultural capital demonstrates that this process is not necessarily a "cynical manipulation" (Toshalis, 2015, p. 29), because these practices are taken for granted as normal expectations for successful behavior in society. Bourdieu's perspective is that cultural capital is arbitrary and socially constructed. Therefore, actively reproducing dominant cultural expectations as valued can result in symbolic violence against students from marginalized cultures. Horsford et al. (2018) point out that while this has led many schools to emphasize students' ability to shift registers depending on the context as a skill that may benefit them, if this is not done with respect for the students' own habitus, it "can have disastrous effects on a student's sense of self" (p. 173). The authors go on to explain that KIPP in particular is a program aimed at "giving poor children of color a 'cultural makeover,' as if a test-driven education and learning middle-class cultural capital alone will lift them into the middle class" (p. 174). The invisibility of this operation of power, in taking the cultural capital of Whiteness and imposing it as a social expectation through schooling, is at work in the way that KIPP schools replicate routines and practices in contexts throughout the country, without regard for the cultural norms in individual locations.

Critical Whiteness Studies

In this paper I also think with Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Dyer 1997; Lipsitz, 1995; Morrison, 1992; Roediger, 1991) to recognize and analyze the ways in which White cultural norms were operating in the structures, culture, and curricula at KIPP. Recognizing the construction and maintenance of Whiteness is the starting point for CWS, but it is not an ending point (Applebaum, 2016). White people should acknowledge their roles in perpetuating systemic oppression of people of Color, not just by recognizing their privilege but by owning up to their complicity in the racial hierarchy (Leonardo, 2004). As a White person, this has necessarily involved a process of self-interrogation and criticism to notice places where Whiteness was operating as an invisible norm to me, but was likely evident and even harmful to my students of Color. Recognizing the ways that our school norms and rules promoted White normativity through middle-class, Eurocentric cultural ideals and values requires me to first distinguish what those norms are. CWS provides a lens for my experiences that acknowledges how White normativity was operating in our school's curriculum and practices.

The normalization of White culture, which members of marginalized groups are measured against (Lipsitz, 1995; Yosso, 2005), is one of the most harmful aspects of white supremacist culture, because it is difficult for members of the dominant group to see and to name (Harro, 2010). CWS is a field of scholarship that can be used to analyze the operation of race and Whiteness in institutions such as education, as a way to "see" Whiteness and how the cultural capital associated

with this socially constructed race has worked to marginalize people of Color (Yosso, 2005). Applebaum (2016) explains that CWS "makes the invisible norm of whiteness visible" (p. 2), and Lipsitz argues that an awareness of the "destructive consequences of 'white' identity" are necessary (p. 370), because while Whiteness may not be visible to those who are White, it is often a "painfully ubiquitous" identity for people of Color (Applebaum, 2016, p. 2). Nayak (2007) calls Whiteness a "taken-for-granted category, something so ordinary it can pass without remark" (p. 2), and posits CWS as a way to "subvert the idea of whiteness as a universal norm" (p. 3).

The "critical" aspect of Whiteness studies is a key tenet of CWS scholarship. Nayak (2007) argues that the critical dimension of the work is necessary in analyzing the hegemony created by race in our society. He and Applebaum (2016) point out that a key purpose of CWS is to disrupt systemic racism, "for the betterment of humanity" (Nayak, p. 3). Schieble (2012) claims that analyzing Whiteness in curricula can empower students as they identify systems of oppression related to identity markers including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. CWS as a framework can help educators to support students in seeing the operation of Whiteness in curricula more clearly (Berchini, 2019; Schieble, 2012). It can support educators in disrupting racist policies or practices that may be seen as "commonsense" in schools (Baeder, 2021; Kumashiro, 2004). As Kumashiro explains, "we do not often question certain practices and perspectives because they are masked or couched in concepts to which we often feel social pressure to conform" (p. xxxv). Conforming to a racial hegemony in our society is something that White people often participate in unknowingly, and analyzing educational practices and curricula with a CWS lens can help bring that participation to light.

Methodology

This autoethnography looks back on five years of teaching 6th and 8th grade English language arts (ELA) classes in a KIPP middle school. In this process of reflection, I rely on memories of my experience to build an argument that KIPP policies and practices are working toward a process of acculturation with diverse student populations. Using autoethnography as a method to explore my research questions has allowed me to "write about (my) own choices, decisions, and experiences" (Brooms & Brice, 2017, p. 148). In this way, I hope to share how I participated in policies and practices that were potentially harmful to the students I was trying to help. This is an effort not to take the status quo for granted, but instead to ask critical questions (Mills,1997). I also hope to bring attention to practices that are in place in multiple KIPP schools so that we might (re)consider how these schools are impacting the students of Color they serve. Johnson (2018) explains that autoethnographies invite us to view "personal experience as a larger cultural experience" (p. 112)—bringing attention, through our own stories and accounts, to social experiences that may be impacting and influencing others.

Jones (2016) explains that by combining critical inquiry with storytelling, critical autoethnography can be a way for authors to engage with language that "unsettles the ordinary while spinning a good story" (p. 229). In this approach, theory and story work together in a "reciprocal, interanimating relationship" (p. 229). She illustrates, through storytelling, the three commitments of critical autoethnography: the collaborative engagement of theory and story; bridging analysis, action, and aesthetics in a material and ethical praxis; and allowing our theories and stories together to engage us in a process of change and of becoming. In this process we can embrace the "change we seek in ourselves and our lives—even if that change is not quite here" (p. 235). I embed stories from my classroom experiences in my analysis of KIPP's policies and practices to help the reader

understand how these practices impacted my work as an educator and may have impacted my students in ways that were not intended.

It is important to note that other research in the field of critical policy studies has brought attention to school choice policies that work to exacerbate inequities. The work of Golann (2021), for example, uses ethnography to give readers an intimate look at the day-to-day operations of a "no excuses" charter school, reporting on the detailed scripting and control of both teacher and student behaviors that ultimately serve to exacerbate educational inequities for students. Scott (2005, 2011) and Buras (2014) write on similar issues critical to understanding the impact of charter schools. Their work demonstrates that school choice policies expanding charter school options are related to student segregation and educational inequities for racially marginalized students. Fabricant and Fine (2015) take a broader approach, providing readers with a critical understanding of the charter school movement and how it has impacted the entire domain of public education. This article adds to this important research base by providing an individual teacher's perspective, using storytelling as a method of inquiry and understanding experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), in a way that might bring the reader into the school, and into my work with students, so that we can imagine how these policies play out in the lives of KIPP students.

Researcher Positionality

I am a White cisgender woman from a middle-class background, educated through public schools. My own challenging experience as an adolescent in a large traditional school made me more open to teaching in an alternative schooling context with smaller student enrollment, and I began working in a charter school with little understanding of their form or function in the broader realm of public education. My eleven years of classroom experience in secondary schools have led me through teaching in three U.S. states and in Vietnam, in the subjects of English as an additional language, ELA, and reading intervention. I spent nine of those 11 years working in charter schools with predominately BIPOC student populations, but in this paper, I have zoomed in on the five years I taught at one particular KIPP school.

School Context

During the time I worked for KIPP, the students enrolled were between 93%-94% Latinx. Black students represented between 3%-5% of the population, and White students represented 1%-2%. Most students were first generation or 1.5 generation immigrants to the U.S., meaning their families had immigrated when they were very young or before they were born (Valenzuela, 1999). Most students lived in predominately Latinx neighborhoods and began attending KIPP in elementary school. Therefore, both their neighborhoods and their school community reflected predominately Latinx racial identities. Despite this insular community, teachers and administrators, including myself, were predominately White. This dynamic brings up important questions, such as what responsibilities educators have to learn about the culture and communities of our students. KIPP employees must also consider how they might be inscribing and indoctrinating students in the dominate norms and ideologies of Whiteness, either intentionally or unintentionally, through curricula, school structure, and behavioral expectations. In the following sections, I illustrate scenarios from my teaching that invite critical reflection, folded in with analysis of how these institutional routines worked toward the acculturation of Latinx students.

The Arcade

On the bus ride home, after a full-day field trip with 8th grade students at the local arcade, my student Matías[1] looked across the aisle at me, and with a completely calm expression told me something very important.

"Miss, you're lucky I didn't get into a fight there."
"What? What are you talking about?"
"With that kid, from the other school."
"Why? What happened?"

What happened was that Matías was called a racial slur by a White student from a neighboring school. I was upset by this revelation—angry that it had happened, disappointed that it occurred in a space I had intentionally brought my students into, and most of all frustrated that I was learning of it now, on our bus ride home. As Matías's teacher, someone who worked closely with him over the year as a developing reader, who knew his father, his friends, his favorite movies, my reaction was emotional. I wanted to tell the bus driver to stop, turn around, I needed to go back to find the person who had insulted Matías, to address this immense harm. But there was little I could do. I reached out to the other school, a mostly White school in the suburbs of our city. The teacher responsible on the field trip and I communicated, and she apologized, but she had no idea who had said it. It could have been anyone, she told me. Anyone.

In contrast to my emotional reaction, this experience did not seem surprising to Matías. He was calm and matter of fact as he explained what had happened, and he was not asking or expecting me to take any action on his behalf. Matías would doubtless hear that word again, and I could not stop that. Instead, I had to consider—with who I am and with the tools I have, what, if anything, can I do to aid my students in such a moment? As a teacher, do I have the responsibility, or even the capacity, to support my students in pushing against the racial inequities of our society?

That instance happened at the end of the school year. I understood, in grappling to gain some sense of control over an interaction I had no control over, that I'd missed many opportunities during the year to engage my students in conversations on race, on racism, and on how their interactions in our society would be imbued with racial dynamics. I had missed many chances, in my time working with Matías and with other Latinx students, to connect our classroom learning with their lived experiences. Instead, I had spent hours working with Matías on identifying plot structures, on analyzing text organization, on how to use context clues. I needed to reimagine my approach to teaching, I needed to reassess my priorities. In thinking back to my initial interview at this school, I asked myself, is my love for this student showing up in the choices I have made as his teacher?

Highlighting Disconnections in KIPP's Policies and Practices

KIPP's practices, structures, and curricula are highly standardized across districts. Teachers are explicitly trained in behavioral expectations that contribute to an intentional school culture,

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1. All names are pseudonyms.

and in implementing curricula created by the national KIPP foundation. In this section, I unpack my experiences at KIPP with a critical lens to analyze how my actions within the structure of our school community may have contributed to the acculturation and assimilation of Latinx students into White, Eurocentric, middle-class cultural norms. Within each aspect of my work, I question—what does this communicate to recently immigrated Latinx students about the cultures, knowledges, languages, and norms for social interaction that are valued in American society? How are students encouraged to build on their cultural funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Riojas-Cortez, 2001), and how are those funds devalued in KIPP classrooms? I hope that sharing my experience will bring necessary attention to ways in which KIPP policies reinscribe boundaries between White cultural insiders and a cultural and racial "other" by privileging White normativity among recently immigrated and first-generation students. This is particularly important to highlight, as for many of these students KIPP will be their one and only experience with public American schooling.

Focus on Higher Education

I walked into the loud and bustling auditorium and was immediately overcome by the smell of perfume, which students are usually not allowed to wear. It was thick in the air, and I tried my best not to offend students by sneezing. They were preparing for their 8th grade graduation ceremony, set to commence in an hour, and I was frantically trying to finish up the ceremony slideshow. These slides would display students' names next to the university they planned to attend after graduating high school, and what they hoped to study there.

I looked around through scattered groups of students bedecked in flowery, chiffon-layered dresses and starched slacks with oversized jackets. I finally found Emiliano, in the midst of a group of boys trying to tie their neckties with the help of YouTube videos.

"Emiliano," I called. "I need your university. You still haven't told me which university you want next to your name on the slideshow."

He huffed and rolled his eyes. "Miss, I told you, I don't know where I'll go to college yet!" I looked at this 8th grader sympathetically, thinking that his response, compared to my question, was completely reasonable.

"Let's make something up, then, Emiliano," I say to him, "is that okay? Can I just pick a random school?"

He turned away from me, back to the video. "Sure miss, whatever you think."

KIPP's strategy for encouraging the success of students of Color was to get them to and through college. Higher education is a form of cultural capital valued in our society, and often leads to financial capital. And yet, other ways of reaching success are devalued in this hierarchy. At KIPP, there is an intense focus on college as a standalone means of reaching success that is concerning as it leaves out other measures and methods of what it means to be financially secure and satisfied in your career choice.

Students at KIPP schools are often asked which university they plan to attend and what they hope to study there as early as elementary school. Staff work with students to help them compare universities, consider what their major might be, and set goals for a competitive GPA. When students told me that they honestly wanted to be a soccer player, or an influencer, or an auto

mechanic, I gently pushed them to think about *which university* they could attend while they pursued those other paths. There was only one message: being successful means going to college.

Proponents of KIPP's model would likely argue that a focus on higher education as a means of success is a benefit of these schools, and that the consistent attention on universities is an effort to keep that focus central in students' experiences. And while the goal of supporting students of Color in going to college is not in and of itself harmful, dismissing other ways of reaching "success" also dismissed the real measures of achievement these students saw in their families and communities that had not required a university degree. In sending students the message that college was the ideal goal to strive for, I may have also unintentionally devalued students' parents' careers, the work their older siblings were engaged with, the small business in their neighborhood—any successful venture in their community that did not require a degree. What were students learning, from a very young age, about the parameters of success in American society? By prescribing social success through a college degree, we were also communicating to students that the passions, hobbies, interests, and skills driving other types of achievement in their communities were secondary to that degree.

Ironically, despite this intense focus on college success, there were several structural impediments at KIPP that decreased students' competitive profiles for university applications. Most KIPP schools nationwide operate on an extended school day structure. The argument for this is that BIPOC students need more time in school to gain academic skills and content knowledge, which should in turn make them more academically competent and competitive with their White peers. In one way, this is an effort to address the so-called "achievement gap," referred to more recently as an "education debt" by Ladson-Billings (2006). However, an extended school day left many students unable to work or join extracurriculars after school. The schedule, which started at 7:00am and ended at 4:00pm, posed a hurdle for students planning to pursue volunteer opportunities, an important component of a strong college application.

The Uniform Approach to Teaching and Learning

My instructional coach and I were sitting together in a meeting about an observation she had conducted earlier. We looked at my lesson plan and student handouts while discussing how the lesson went.

"I think it went well, we talked about the conflict Marjane experienced during the protests in her city." I explained, looking over my students' responses to questions I had given them on the day's handout.

"I agree, the discussion was going well. But I noticed one thing on Daniel's paper." She handed me one of my students' packets. "Did you see this?"

I looked at the intricate drawings on Daniel's work packet. A muscular manga character destroys a building with his gigantic foot. Lightning and sweat fly from his body onto the tiny buildings below him. At the top of the page is a helicopter swirling around his head.

"He's certainly a talented artist," I said, laughing.

"Yes, but he was distracted. He should not be drawing on his work packet."

I frowned, confused. Daniel's work was complete. His answers reflected our class discussion and the text we read. While the drawing might demonstrate that he was bored, and yes, somewhat distracted during our lesson, he had done everything I had asked of him

that day. I did not understand why it was a problem, but conceded the point that the drawing showed Daniel was off task at one point in the lesson.

"Next time, give him a new packet to complete. We should not accept work that looks like this," my coach explained.

One of the ways that the KIPP network has proliferated so successfully is by standardizing learning structures, school culture, and curricula across their schools so carefully. This approach has led to nationwide curricula adopted by many KIPP schools for math and language arts, uniform approaches to managing student behavior through tracking systems, and common training procedures for teachers and administration. Though reproducing a successful system is an efficient approach, it leaves out the individual and humanizing approaches to education that make a place for culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2010; Paris, 2012). Bowles and Gintis's research, as reviewed in Toshalis (2015), argues that a highly regimented and controlled approach to schooling for low-income students prepares them to fit into a particular role in society. Students in highly structured environments such as KIPP's are then "prepared to be bossed rather than become bosses" (Toshalis, 2015, p. 30). Haberman (1991) stresses this point in his work on the pedagogy of poverty, arguing that students in economically advantaged schools are more often engaged in critical and collaborative learning tasks, while students in urban, economically disadvantaged schools are taught to passively receive rote information. While our KIPP school did provide opportunities for critical discussion and analysis through complex learning tasks, the expectations for students' responses and learning behaviors, such as when and how they could ask questions, work with peers, or express disagreement, were uniformly applied across the school. This discouraged an authentic level of engagement and flexible, collaborative learning styles. Furthermore, dictating methods of engagement with learning is an example of the prevalence of White normativity, and how it was enacted across school spaces under the guise of "appropriate" behavior.

Many of the standardized expectations in our school revolved around students' responses to learning. School leaders required students to adhere to their particular standard of professionalism by using neat handwriting, speaking and writing in complete sentences, and meeting a predetermined sentence requirement in written responses. While some guidelines, such as a legible response, may be necessary, school leaders required students to redo any subpar work again and again until it met the predetermined standards. This process became tedious for both me and my students, often resulting in frustration and a refusal to do any work at all. A similar expectation for students' responses was that they use specific discussion starters. Using complete sentences and common discussion stems (e.g., "I disagree with that because…") can be helpful in increasing students' communication and literacy skills. However, interrupting the flow of a quick and engaging class conversation to request that a student rephrase their answer in a complete sentence using a discussion starter was stifling to students—they often decided not to speak up again after these types of corrections. These phrasings also resulted in an emotionally detached form of conversation, which is privileged in predominately White professional settings but may not reflect the conversational styles in students' home communities. In asking students to rephrase their answers within the school's expectations, I was effectively trying to put our school's stamp on their ideas, reconstructing them. I understood why many students instead chose to stay silent.

These standardized expectations for student work functioned as a form of surveillance over their thinking, setting parameters around their engagement and curbing their autonomy as learners. This was a reminder to my students that they were always accountable to me, not only in their

general behavior but also for how their learning showed up. My students resisted this type of surveillance, and sometimes turned in papers that had been crumpled, ripped, and torn, or were bleeding with marker ink. They listed nicknames instead of their full names; they left incredibly colorful cartoons. I quickly stopped trying to correct this, but this decision and the others I made to not enforce certain school rules created tension between my personal pedagogical beliefs and the school's expectations for my performance.

Expectations for Student Behavior

Golann (2021) writes about the common habit in charter schools for "scripting" expectations for students and their behaviors. While my particular KIPP school was not as heavily scripted as the school Golann studied, we similarly set specific and consistent expectations for student behavior, and the intention was for all students to meet those expectations, all the time. Behavioral norms were presented as non-negotiable habits that would serve students in and beyond school. These norms were deeply embedded in Eurocentric cultural habits, despite being presented in a value-neutral way (Applebaum, 2016). When a student at our school did not meet an expectation set by the school rules or a particular teacher, they were asked to correct their mistake, trying as many times as was necessary to demonstrate a behavior in the required way. This type of specific and consistent repetition of behavior norms across the school resulted in frustration and resistance in many of our students. They often tried to find small but purposeful ways to go against the norms and rules, and in response, teachers spent an immense amount of time on behavior management. The argument for repeatedly requiring students to demonstrate specific behaviors is that, in the long run, teachers will experience less interruptions as students become fluid with behaving according to school norms. However, in my own classroom, I found that the resistance these types of expectations caused was harmful to my efforts to build trusting and positive relationships with students. Many teachers in the school Golann studied similarly struggled with building relationships with students, and she explains that "resistance became a way for students to express themselves in an institution where their identities were severely constrained" (p. 85).

Prescribed Curriculum

Another method of standardizing school practices was requiring a prescribed curriculum, which became increasingly detailed and scripted over my years working for KIPP. Eventually, our school adopted KIPP's nation-wide curriculum for math and literacy. In ELA, teachers were given a set of literature to teach and corresponding supplementary materials and scripted lesson plans. While we were allowed to make minor adaptations, we were not allowed to make changes to the pacing of the lessons or the texts themselves. If we did have a suggestion for changing or adding a text, we had to put it through the right channels—suggested first to our content area chair, then to a district leader, who may or may not choose to pass on the request. Changes to texts were rarely made, and if they were, they occurred over the summer. By the time they were implemented we had a classroom of entirely new students, with new needs and interests, inviting us to suggest even more changes.

Prescribed curricula stand in the way of student and teacher agency, student interest, and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Researchers have found that prescribed and scripted curricula cannot meet the needs, interests, and motivations of individual children (Milosovic, 2007; Powell,

1997). It is a barrier for teachers who want to engage with the unique students who show up differently in their classrooms each year, and center instruction around students' interests and understandings. Excellent teachers understand that while we can rely on past practices and materials as a place to begin building our curriculum, things will need to change as we adapt to new literacies and the diverse funds of knowledge students bring to our classrooms each year.

What was most troubling to me about this prescribed curriculum was that it was promoted as being a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) curriculum (KIPP: TRG, n.d.). And yet, the impossibility of building a relevant curriculum at a national level, for an individual school's students at a local level, was not addressed by our school leaders. How could the curriculum writers in KIPP's national office imagine what my students would want to read? How could they anticipate their curiosities, their funds of knowledge, their cultures and communities? Though we read some excellent literature in that curriculum, including many texts by Black authors, we did not read any literature by or about Latin Americans or their experiences. Curricular choices for my students were being made, not always by White Americans, but from a White Eurocentric lens on what it means to include racially diverse texts. CWS helps to illuminate how the White racial gaze posits Whiteness as the norm and any other race as "other" in a racial binary. This binary excludes intersectional identities and racial identities beyond Black and White, ignoring the perspectives of myriad racial and cultural groups. A "multicultural" or "diverse" approach to ELA curricula that collapses a kaleidoscope of minoritized racial and cultural groups through a myopic focus on Blackness (and Black trauma) is detrimental to a vision of a more pluralistic society and a schooling experience aimed at sustaining fluid and dynamic identities and expressions (Paris, 2012; Parker, 2022).

When analyzing our class texts, the scripted lessons provided some opportunities to discuss issues related to cultural and racial identities, but very few compared to the instructional focus on skills-based learning. For example, we analyzed lines of dialogue in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee to determine character traits but did not broach the way that a White savior mentality operates in that text (Johnson, 2018). In our lessons, students were asked to recognize various forms of conflict and support them with text evidence, but not to consider the current conflict of racism in society. Ohito (2020) calls moves such as this one an "enactment of Whiteness"—where White teachers only address racism in ways that feel comfortable to them, often by historicizing it. The irony of prescribing a "culturally relevant" curriculum that is not designed by the teacher and students themselves is clear—there is no way to prescribe something relevant to someone you have never met.

A Testing Culture

"Miss, I don't know about this question. I could be A, C, or D. I know it's not B, but all these other answers are true."

"I know, and that's usually the case. Often on an ELA test you have more than one strong answer."

"So, how do I know which one to pick?"

"You have to ask yourself which one has the most evidence in the text. Which one has the most support?"

"What if they all have evidence?"

"Put yourself in the shoes of the test author. It's not about what you want to be the correct answer. What do you think the test author wants you to choose?"

KIPP, like many college preparatory charter schools, maintains an intense focus on standardized test performance. Using test scores as a measure of success provides a way for charter schools to prove their worth. If the school's students have higher exam results than students from the local district school, it shows they have a place and a purpose in the community. However, this focus on testing, combined with research that has shown many standardized tests to be culturally biased toward White middle-class funds of knowledge (Au, 2007; FairTest, 2019; Lipman, 2008; Rosales & Walker, 2021; Strauss, 2017) is harmful in a school that predominately serves students of Color. These tests are presented to students, parents, and the school community as unbiased. The fact that the inherent bias of the exams goes unacknowledged by school leaders is likely the result of a White racial ignorance of the connection between students' prior knowledge and cultural norms. Race, culture, ethnicity, class—none of these identity markers is controlled for in students' results, leaving marginalized populations at a distinct disadvantage.

My students spent at least eight weeks on testing and test preparation, significantly limiting the instructional time available to teach novels or poetry, or to engage students with activities and ways of demonstrating their learning that would not translate to the format of a standardized exam. Many studies have shown that standardized assessments, though often providing valuable guidance to instructors, are not in line with teachers' understandings of best practices and lead to teacher-centered pedagogy (Abrams et al., 2003; Kempf, 2016; Neumann, 2016; Pedulla, 2003; Shelton & Brooks, 2019; Wright et al., 2018). Another harmful aspect of this focus on testing is that it was used for teacher evaluation. The majority of my annual evaluation was based on students' performance on standardized exams created by national and state organizations, not by me or my school district. This meant I was directly incentivized, through a merit-based pay system, to encourage students' performance on these exams. Using standardized testing as the primary metric for my evaluation left me with a "shrinking space" in my classroom in which I might make decisions in response to students' needs and interests (Crocco & Costigan, 2007, p. 520). Instead, most of my work was driven by test data.

School Values

I buzzed around the room, quickly tossing graded quizzes down on desks. I first passed back all the quizzes with names on the top, then worked my way through those that only had initials, and then the ones I had to match with handwriting. I rolled my eyes dramatically at Diego, who had never put his own actual name at the top of a paper. "And here's your paper, Mr. Boom Squash," I said, setting the quiz down on his desk.

I moved to the front of the room and stood behind the overhead projector, calling on students as I reviewed each question. "What's the answer and why? Be ready to explain," I told them.

When we got to question four, Victoria raised her hand. "It's B, because he needed to go back to the store, so he must have felt frustrated."

"That's a strong answer, but incorrect. There's a better one, what do you think it is?"

Victoria puzzled over the question, then cautiously offered, "A? Is it because he's still worried about his brother?"

"That's exactly right. Thank you for working through that incorrect answer. That's a point for grit."

Victoria smiled and proudly made a note on her paper.

The KIPP motto is "Word Hard Be Nice," and the organization focuses on teaching values such as community, grit, tenacity, integrity, and courage, among others. The concept of hard work and nice behavior leading to social and economic success is a common tale of meritocracy in our society, but it obscures the other forms of cultural and social capital necessary to gain economic and social power (McNamee & Miller, 2009). The message of the KIPP motto is "if you work hard, and are nice to people, you can be successful." This refrain fails to acknowledge the structural impediments to success for marginalized populations in our society. While hard work and nice behavior can and often does lead many students to academic success, it does not always lead to economic gains. The lens of social reproduction illuminates how instilling this mentality in students from lower socioeconomic classes is one way that an elite class can reinforce the existing social hierarchy and recreate members of a working class who believe that hard work is more important than advocating against unfair treatment (Haberman, 1991).

Our framing around the school values, particularly grit and tenacity, was problematic to say the least. These values existed within a presumption of White moral integrity (Kaufman, 2001). We often framed behaviors such as working through a particularly difficult problem as ways students could show grit. The idea that I, a White woman who grew up in a middle-class suburban home, would present such behaviors as ways to demonstrate grit to my Latinx students, who largely came from recently immigrated and lower socioeconomic class families, was dismissive of their lived experiences. I privileged an interpretation of these values that fit in with our school's structure and my own cultural frame, rather than making a space where students could instead teach me how they understood tenacity in their daily lives, or embraced grit as a way to cope with the systemic or personal oppression they might experience as members of a marginalized social group. These students demonstrated integrity, community, courage, and tenacity in many admirable ways that I witnessed throughout my time teaching them and interacting with their families and communities. And yet within our school structure, they were only awarded points in our behavioral tracking system for demonstrating very particular actions that school leaders had decided to align with each value. In this way, the staff and I were working to (re)shape students' understandings of these values to be in line with specific schoolwide expectations, rather than taking the time to understand how these values and others may have existed in students' communities outside of school. This resonates with Soja's (2010) concept of "cultural imperialism," in which "one group or culture is subordinated and made almost invisible by another, losing their distinctive differences in beliefs and behavior" (p. 79). By (re)defining these social and community values to align with the school's framework, we centered White normativity in a way that appeared value-neutral. We were paving over students' preexisting understandings of how these values might show up in their family and community lives. We were directly asking our students of Color to "modify their behavior so that they embody appropriateness" (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 176) according to White dominant cultural standards for behavior.

Discussion

KIPP's mission to serve students from minoritized racial backgrounds includes a focus on issues of racial equity and social justice. Making schools a supportive and nurturing place for

students with diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds was a clear focus in staff training. An emphasis on diverse racial representation is clear in curriculum designed by the KIPP network, which included texts by racially diverse authors. There was also intentional support in my KIPP school for teachers to incorporate social justice topics in our lessons.

However, in this critical take on my teaching experience, I draw attention to KIPP policies and practices on an institutional, structural level that may be working directly against the organization's aim to support students from underrepresented social groups. Moon & Flores (2000) remind us that we cannot become "so committed to our particular vision for change that we fail to see the possibility that every strategy for change can also become oppressive" (p. 111). KIPP's "good intentions" need to be considered from a perspective that questions how its policies and practices have played out in ways that subtract from students' cultural resources and reproduce social norms for White behavior (Valenzuela, 1999).

Valenzuela (1999), whose ethnographic study explored Mexican American student experiences at a public school in Texas, similarly found that a school working to help "disadvantaged" students did so by imposing ways of knowing and learning from a White cultural perspective. Valenzuela coined this process "subtractive schooling," in that students' cultural resources were subtracted through their acculturation into the norms of a traditional American school. I found that in my experience with KIPP, our school similarly devalued the funds of knowledge and cultural ways of being and learning our students brought with them, expecting them instead to adapt to KIPP's tightly standardized learning routines.

These stories from my classroom demonstrate a disconnect within the KIPP network, between their goals and the methods they employ to reach those goals. This disconnect is most noticeable in KIPP's testing culture, which dedicates a large percentage of instructional time to preparing students for exams that are largely biased toward middle-class White American understandings. It also shows up in the focus on higher education as a means to reach success, without acknowledging other successful paths students may choose. KIPP's approach to standardizing aspects of the schooling experience, especially their curriculum, detracts from their ability to provide a truly culturally responsive learning experience to students across the country. KIPP also minimizes student and teacher autonomy by setting specific expectations for performance and student responses, stifling the opportunity for students to engage with learning in authentic ways that may not align with school expectations but are still valuable. KIPP also works to (re)construct students' understandings of values including grit, integrity, tenacity, community, and courage by framing these as particular behaviors that align with the school's culture and rules, instead of making room for students to demonstrate these values in their own unique ways.

In reflecting on my experiences through the stories in this critical autoethnography, I am working to understand my participation in a process of acculturation, and to see more clearly the norms of schooling that can become invisible when they are ingrained in our daily routines and are part of our own cultural milieu. Work by social reproduction theorist Althusser (1971) suggests that internalizing norms makes an ideological apparatus difficult to see. Toshalis (2015) explains that "the ideology becomes our reality, and we stop questioning it" (p. 25). In this critical reflection, I bring questions and concerns about KIPP's routines forward through narrative, as a way to provide myself and other educators with anecdotes that illuminate the problematic impacts of these seemingly efficiency-oriented policies. I recognize that a critical autoethnographic approach limits the reader's ability to assess whether imagined harms are actualized. And yet, given the limited access to research from within KIPP's schools, I hope that these imaginings will encourage the reader to consider KIPP's educational approach through the lens of CWS and social reproduction.

This may help us to peel back the veneer of social justice and uncover an all-too-familiar schooling context that privileges White normative ways of being and knowing to the detriment of students of Color.

Conclusion

Educators can work from their positions within schools and reflect on their practices, to consider how we might better support all students in reaching not only academic success, but personal fulfillment. Toshalis (2015) reminds us that

> if social reproduction is the wind, educators are the crew. Without educators' critical analyses and careful interventions, social reproduction will likely push education toward the status quo or, worse, toward increased inequity. But just as sailors can actually steer sailboats *into* the wind, educators too can reverse the trends that social reproduction theories imply. (p. 34)

Educators must address and challenge systems of inequity within schools. They need to be critical of the policies and practices in place at their institutions and consider deeply how they are impacting and influencing students. Latinx students are often faced with pressure to learn the dominant language and cultural norms of White middle-class Americans, and if educators want to cultivate supportive classroom spaces, we must consider how we work actively within them to alleviate some of this pressure by accepting and affirming our students' diverse identities. This requires that we take a critical look not only at our schooling systems, but at ourselves, particularly for teachers who identify as White. Applebaum (2016) reminds White teachers that, even when they are "committed to diversity and multiculturalism, if they do not deconstruct their own investments in whiteness, they will not be able to understand how their good intentions might be detrimental to their students of color" (p. 6). With the social norm of racism boldly at work in our society, educators must consider how our work might help students advocate for themselves against both overt racism, and against the more covert systemic acculturation that they will face, within and outside of schools.

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