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Eric C. Sheffield
Western Illinois University

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*Our thanks to the cadre of scholars who serve as reviewers without whose services the journal could not exist.

Critical Questions in Education: Volume 15, Issue 1

January 15, 2024

Readers of *CQIE*,

Firstly, Happy, Happy 2024! And, welcome to *Volume 15, Issue 1* of *Critical Questions in Education*. As is typical, this issue contains some very thought-provoking manuscripts. Before getting to those, just a reminder that the Academy's next gathering will take place in New Orleans, March 4-6. The call for proposals for our spring conference (as well as other Academy endeavors) can be found at academyforeducationalstudies.org.

As I noted above, the five manuscripts in *Volume 15, Issue 1* are certainly thought provoking. Derek R. O'Connell starts this issue off with reporting on a case study using the theory of academic capitalism to explore a public university's evolution toward using market-oriented strategies to woo students and its potential impact on curriculum and enrollment profile. O'Connell's article is followed by Jennifer Ervin's autoethnographic exploration of her time teaching in a KIPP Charter School. The third manuscript, penned by Emma M. McMain and Brandon Edwards-Schuth, provides a caution lest we think we have made the "progressive turn" toward accepting the concept of social and emotional learning.

The first of our two closing manuscripts examines the complexities that come with being asked to implement new educational reforms/state mandates. Meghan A. Kessler provides much food-for-thought as to the impact such implementation can have on teacher decision making and positionality. We close this issue with a critical discourse analysis of newspaper coverage of exclusionary discipline—a discipline approach that drives inequity and marginalization of youth in our schools.

I hope you will curl up with this lates issue of CQIE and let your thoughts be provoked.

Stay warm and happy reading!

PAX,

Eric C. Sheffield, Editor
Critical Questions in Education

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Manuscripts

The Emergence of Academic Capitalism at a Teaching University

Derek R. O'Connell, Illinois State University

Abstract

This case study uses the theory of academic capitalism (TAC) to explore how a public university known primarily for undergraduate education is incorporating market-oriented practices and structures, and how those changes could impact its curriculum and enrollment profile. Through initiatives to establish an engineering college, expand graduate education, and expand international student recruitment, the university's initiatives bring it closer to its research-oriented sister institution, one with a much different curriculum and enrollment profile. The findings extend the scope of TAC beyond the limited set of institutional types and issues explored in most existing research. The findings also provide insight for policymakers and higher education administrators into how public institutions oriented toward undergraduate education may change in the face of declining state financing and increasing reliance on tuition revenue.

Keywords: *case study; higher education; academic capitalism; neoliberalism*

State funding of public higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States has been on a long decline. From 2000 to 2015, spending per full-time equivalent student decreased 31% nationwide (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2019, p. 5). HEIs have responded in a variety of ways, such as creating new academic programs, targeting new student populations, changing admissions policies, and taking on new functions and services. The theory of academic capitalism (TAC) provides an important framework for interpreting these changes. According to TAC, HEIs aren't passive subjects in a market system; they may proactively develop capitalist organizational principles, operational structures, and partnerships. Such developments illustrate how HEIs are actively reshaping themselves in market-oriented ways.

Most TAC research focuses on how HEIs integrate into existing markets and produce goods, such as intellectual property and branded products, for consumption. This focus centers larger, more prestigious, research-oriented universities that are better equipped to engage in such practices. Some recent scholarship has begun expanding into more varied institutional types and issues. The present study contributes to this expansion by looking at a public university known for undergraduate education, Western Mountain University (WMU), as it emulates aspects of University of the Coast (UC), a prestigious public research university and sister school to WMU. WMU's plans to develop an engineering college, expand graduate education, and expand international student recruitment suggest a significant departure from its historical mission and identity. Close examination of these initiatives reveals how WMU is adopting market-oriented priorities like those

of UC, while sometimes modifying them to fit a distinct market niche. The results show how TAC can be extended beyond research institutions and traditional market activities to explore areas such as curricular content and enrollment profile. They also offer a preview of how such institutions may adapt to a higher education environment increasingly defined by revenue pressure and market-style competition.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

TAC was originally developed by Slaughter and Leslie (1997). They argued that as states began reducing higher education funding in the 1970s and 1980s, HEIs responded by finding ways to reach into capitalist markets, such as expanding patenting practices and technology transfer. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argued that changes in political policies and available resources led institutions not only to connect with capitalist markets, but to incorporate capitalist structures internally and become active market agents. The result was "colleges and universities…as actors initiating academic capitalism, not just…players being 'corporatized'" (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p. 12). For instance, to boost revenues in a global market, many HEIs developed branding strategies, patent and trademark offices, public-private partnerships, and other revenue-generating methods. These developments required new infrastructure and administration, including whole offices and divisions devoted to market research and private sector cooperation. HEIs also adopted capitalist operating structures to reduce costs, such as increasing the proportion of cheaper contingent academic labor. In a recent literature review, Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) found five key concepts across current TAC research: new circuits of knowledge, such as research and development groups for new products; new funding streams, such as patents, royalties, and new forms of instruction; intermediating organizations, such as professional associations and forums to promote research and development; interstitial organizations, such as offices that manage distance education or public-private partnerships; and extended managerial capacity, such as enrollment managers and non-university support personnel. These systems develop goods and create organizational structures to promote and distribute those goods inside and outside of institutions.

The scope and function of TAC can be better understood by contrast with a more familiar theoretical approach to capitalism: neoliberalism. "Neoliberalism" is a widely used and rarely defined term. Shear and Hyatt (2015) note that neoliberalism appears both "heterogenous in its manifestations yet coherent as a project…, a sort of master signifier that gathers together a motley mix of social processes and deleterious conditions in the social field" (p. 4). They identify within it a core set of concepts including "marketisation, privatisation, responsibilising individuals, auditing and accountability, and entrepreneurialism," which are manifested in "the relationship between global-capital, international and state policies, and university transformations" (Shear & Hyatt, 2015, pp. 6-7). Studies of neoliberalism primarily focus on macro-level policy development and ideology; in these areas neoliberalism promotes market-based ideologies, nurtures and strengthens capitalist markets, and disenfranchises opponents of marketisation. Giroux (2014) argues that in a neoliberal education system "[p]rivatization, commodification, militarization, and deregulation are the new guiding categories through which schools, teachers, pedagogy, and students are defined" (p. 36). Rather than cultivating informed citizens or the examined life, education is organized to support capitalist systems. According to Lojdová (2016), in a neoliberal system "everyone in the university is transformed into an entrepreneur, customer, or client and every relationship is ultimately judged in cost-effective terms" (p. 614). These and other authors tend to use neoliberalism in an evaluative and mostly negative way, as when Giroux (2015) suggests that neoliberalism in

higher education is part of a "war on youth" reflecting authoritarian political shifts in the United States (p. 5), or when Shear and Hyatt (2015) say that "by calling attention to and revealing the workings of these agendas…we can become better equipped to understand and resist the conditions that we are in" (p. 4).

By contrast, TAC research (a) emphasizes institutional structures and specific actions over broad policy trends, (b) frames institutional motivations in terms of responses to economic and competitive pressures rather than overarching ideology, and (c) is descriptive rather than evaluative. For instance, a case study focused on neoliberalism might investigate the ideological orientation of administrators and the broader political environment; link these to institutional developments; and suggest forms of critique or resistance. A case study using TAC, on the other hand, may focus on institutional responses to specific pressures and policies in the economic or higher education environment, investigating how those responses integrate capitalist structures into the institution. As such, TAC offers a more fine-grained approach to institutional behavior that also has less risk of normative assumptions impacting the analysis.

TAC has its own limitations. One is that it largely leaves curriculum and students out of the discussion. Sigahi and Saltorato's (2020) literature review revealed few ways that curriculum and students factor into TAC. Most studies were directed toward areas such as research, professionalization, globalization, and corporate links. Focusing on these areas centers institutions with high visibility, well-funded research programs, and large numbers of graduate students—in short, prestigious research institutions. As a result, institutional types like liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and undergraduate-oriented "teaching" universities were rarely studied. As Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) remarked, those using TAC "often draw on the general—still narrow—idea of AC" (p. 96).

Recent work has started expanding TAC's reach. Pavlidis (2012), for instance, discussed academic capitalism's role in shaping curricula by shifting institutions away from much of the liberal arts and emphasizing disciplines' relationship to labor markets, "making universities primary sites of shaping the commodity of 'labour power'" (p. 12). Hill's (2019) study of new arts and humanities programs at three regional universities explored how liberal arts disciplines may respond to academic capitalist pressures, such as by emphasizing marketability and job preparation as justifications for new programs; mixed with conventional views of the liberal arts was a vision of students competing with graduates from other academic programs, using the liberal arts to develop superior employment skills. Perry (2018) found that increasing emphasis on enrollment and a transactional approach to students at one community college led to an institutional shift toward convenience and job preparation, a shift some administrators questioned or resisted. Ralston (2020) and Wheelahan and Moodie (2021, 2022) found that the rise of micro-credentials, such as non-degree certificates, reflected a push to "unbundle" university curricula, shifting emphasis from coherent disciplines to narrow vocational skills and goals.

The present case study uses TAC to explore how a public "teaching" university, defined here as a university focused primarily on educating undergraduate students in a broad range of academic disciplines, is undertaking curricular and enrollment changes that appear to mimic the priorities of its sister research university. The findings highlight familiar features of TAC at an institutional type rarely studied under the TAC framework, and approach aspects of higher education rarely discussed in TAC, particularly curriculum and enrollment profile. The results suggest areas for further exploration and raise questions about how similar institutions could change in the years to come.

Research Methods

This case study focuses on three initiatives at WMU related to curriculum and enrollment profile that are more suggestive of research institutions than teaching institutions. The research questions are: Do WMU's initiatives incorporate practices and concepts found in TAC? How might these initiatives, if successful, impact WMU's curriculum and student profile? Can TAC, as it exists, account for the full impact of the initiatives?

Case studies provide an important means for exploring complex institutional behaviors and testing the applicability of theories. Advantages of case studies include exploring data in greater depth than other methods allow (Zainal, 2007), bringing multiple data types to bear on a research question (Kohlbacher, 2006), and the ability to interpret data through its context (Yin, 1984; Kohlbacher, 2006). Kohlbacher (2006) suggests that "case studies seem to be the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p. 5), all of which apply in the present case. On the other hand, their narrower focus means that case studies provide less basis for generalization (Yin, 1984; Kohlbacher, 2006), and variation in cases and available data means that careful research design is important (Kohlbacher, 2006). Rules of data collection and analysis must be consistent, and limitations made clear, to reduce risk of bias and ensure results withstand scrutiny.

Case studies can employ a wide variety of data sources, such as interviews, official documents, news items, personal recollections, statistics, and more, with studies frequently using several at once. Each type has advantages and disadvantages; each is collected and analyzed in different ways; and many can be approached both quantitatively and qualitatively (Stemler, 2001; Kohlbacher, 2006). In this qualitative case study, documents are the primary data source. As Bowen (2009) argues, "document analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies—intensive studies producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organisation, or program" (p. 29), where analytical depth is critical. The core of qualitative document analysis is thematic analysis and interpretation of data (Bowen, 2009; Cardno, 2018). The researcher typically employs analytical categories or codes, either by generating them in an initial document review and refining them through further rounds of review, or using categories derived from a theoretical framework. TAC provides the theoretical foundation in this study, with the core concepts listed in Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) serving as analytical categories. At the same time, the second and third research questions suggest the possibility of new categories in TAC, and the analysis includes consideration of themes appropriate to academic capitalism but not found in existing TAC research. Qualitative document analysis allows for this—the theory can be simultaneously employed and critiqued based on the findings.

Unlike quantitative document analysis, which focuses on numerical frequencies of words in a document, qualitative document analysis accounts for context, implication, and other aspects affecting interpretation and communication of information (Kohlbacher, 2006; Cardno, 2018). The result is a "less rigid, more flexible" analysis that "allows for a more holistic study of content" (Cardno, 2018, p. 633). While lacking the numerical precision of quantitative analysis, this approach is useful when, for instance, the language in documents varies from that used in the theory, or when motivations are assumed or hidden rather than stated. For instance, it is unlikely that an institution pursuing "new circuits of knowledge," a TAC concept, will use such words; and "extending managerial capacity" does not sound as positive as "expanding student support," even if it's the result. Finally, qualitative document analysis is better equipped to reveal facets of academic

capitalism that don't fit existing theory. For instance, if existing TAC literature does not speak to curricular content, qualitative analysis allows for flexibility in identifying and categorizing such material when appropriate.

The primary weakness of qualitative document analysis is greater vulnerability to interpretive bias and weakly supported inferences between content and categories. This is countered through triangulation, the use of multiple data and information sources in conjunction to bolster individual data streams. "In qualitative research, validation takes the form of triangulation. Triangulation lends credibility to the findings by incorporating multiple sources of data, methods, investigators, or theories" (Stemler, 2001, p. 5). Data types used here include documented institutional history; statistical information about institutional size, enrollment, and finances; university planning documents including strategic plans, administrator presentations, and Board of Trustees records; news items and public interviews with university administrators; and promotional materials for the university (and, in a couple instances, a for-profit company). These were selected, first, because they convey the arc of development for what are ongoing projects, and second, to focus on the relationship between institutional context (such as history, enrollments, and finances), administrative motivations, and implementation. Institutional history was taken from an official written history of WMU. Enrollment and student data, and some financial data, were collected primarily from each institution's online data warehouses, with some collected from news releases. Official documents were collected from university repositories. News releases, interviews, and promotional materials were collected through online search engines, campus newspapers, and local community newspapers; search terms consisted of the institution name and terms identifying the three initiatives being studied (such as "WMU engineering college"), with a result harvested when the initiative was identified within it.

Institutional history and statistical data were used primarily for context and comparison. The main data sources were official documents and news items, which were analyzed through the process of "skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation" (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). First, documents were *skimmed* to locate terms that indicated the initiatives. Relevant sections were *read* in depth to better understand whether and how the initiatives were discussed; if other materials were indicated in the document as being important, these would be located and analyzed in turn. Relevant sections were then *interpreted* using TAC, first narrowly in terms of existing TAC concepts, then broadly to determine if content relevant to TAC but not captured in existing concepts was present. As an example of the former: articles about international students regularly discussed WMU's partnership with a private student recruitment company, falling under the TAC category "public-private partnerships." As an example of the latter, a more complex process: a news article about a summit attended by the WMU president mentioned the engineering college. Skimming revealed discussion of boosting enrollment and concern over an engineering shortage. Deeper reading showed that the president linked the engineering college to the shortage and, in discussing the shortage, emphasized the arrival of new industrial manufacturers in the community. The president thus directly connected curricular development to local capital. The relationship between curriculum and local capital divides HEIs, from "vocational schools" and workforce-oriented community colleges on one end, to liberal arts colleges on the other, with teaching-oriented institutions somewhere in between. Existing TAC concepts, which mostly ignore curriculum content, are inadequate for exploring such connections. Further evidence of such connections could suggest a new area of exploration within TAC.

The three initiatives studied—establishing an engineering college, expanding graduate education, and expanding international student recruitment—were chosen for several reasons. First,

they have received substantial attention and resources at WMU. Second, if successful they could substantially affect the institution's curriculum and enrollment profile, thus its educational identity. Third, they lead WMU in a direction typically associated with research institutions rather than teaching institutions. The final point is highlighted by comparing WMU with its sister institution, UC. UC has a prestigious engineering program, a large graduate student population, and a large international student population. Given the entwined history of these institutions and their relative positions in a typology of HEIs, comparison provides further context and insight into the case. The focus is on WMU; data from UC is primarily historical and statistical, used for context and comparison. Findings focus on how WMU's three initiatives fit into its history, organizational structure, and academic profile; how they are framed by administrators to internal and external audiences; and how they are to be implemented. The analysis discusses what TAC concepts can be identified in the initiatives and whether the findings suggest new areas of exploration for TAC.

The institutions are anonymized; "Western Mountain University" and "University of the Coast" are pseudonyms. Statistical and historical data is kept at a general level, precise enough to portray the institutions accurately but not enough to identify them. Public documents are typically paraphrased rather than quoted. When quotations that might identify the institutions are used, structure and word choice is altered to prevent identification while keeping the essential meaning and thrust of the quotation. Anonymization serves several aims. First, it allows findings to be more easily interpreted in terms of broader institutional types. While each institution has its unique circumstances, much in this case study speaks to general features of institutions like WMU and UC. Second, while TAC is only descriptive, one might be tempted to make evaluative judgments based on the data. The aim of this study is not critique, but exploration of changes at an institution; all the same, the findings and analysis could support evaluative claims in other contexts. For these reasons, individuals referenced in the study are also not named.

Findings

Background

Founded in the second half of the 19th century, Western Mountain University is a public comprehensive university known primarily for undergraduate education and some professional education; as a former teacher's college, it maintains a high reputation for K-12 teacher training. The nearby University of the Coast, founded around the same time, is among the most prestigious public research universities in the region and highly regarded nationally and internationally; it is known for STEM, especially engineering. The two institutions have a complex historical relationship. WMU was considered a top institution in its home state until the end of the 19th century, at which point state support of UC expanded rapidly while WMU's stagnated. A WMU historian notes that, if money talks, then this was when WMU lost its status as a premier public institution; it never returned to its former status, in terms of either reputation or state appropriations.

Present-day WMU and UC cut very different profiles. WMU's current student population hovers around 20,000 students. Of those, approximately 15% are graduate students and just under 3% are international students. By comparison, UC's enrollment is over 50,000, of whom over 35% are graduate students and nearly 25% are international. Recent ACT composite scores for WMU undergraduates were near 24 at the 50th percentile, while at UC they were close to 32. WMU was recently ranked around 200th place by *U.S. News and World Report* for national universities, while UC was close to 50th.

In a recent fiscal year, WMU's revenues totaled approximately $500 million. Of that, close to half came from tuition and slightly under 15% from state appropriations. The remainder includes bonds, some grants and government contracts, and other mixed sources. Yearly gifts average about 5% of revenues, and its endowment is $150-200 million. WMU's per-student state appropriation is less than half that of UC; despite this, only 8% of UC's budget comes from appropriations, as its yearly revenues surpass $3 billion. Approximately 30% of revenues come from tuition, 5% from gifts and endowment spending, and as a major research institution UC receives substantial revenue from grants and contracts. UC's total endowment is approximately $4 billion. Overall, UC has almost twice the per-student state appropriations of WMU, far more students paying thousands more in tuition, and an endowment over nineteen times higher. These gaps, and the history behind them, set the stage for three major WMU initiatives that by all appearances would make it much more like UC: establishing an engineering college, expanding graduate education, and expanding international student recruitment.

Establishing an Engineering College

The biggest recent initiative at WMU is the development of a new academic college of engineering. WMU currently has a few engineering majors and major concentrations scattered across different academic units, and the development process began with an internal committee studying the possibility of expanding these programs. The steering group commissioned two private consultancies: one to determine the feasibility and market demand for expansion, and another to begin developing structural plans. Preparatory research involved visiting engineering programs at other institutions and consultations with corporate stakeholders, such as local and regional industrial companies. As the plan unfolded, it grew from expanding existing programs, to creating new majors, to developing a full college.

In presentations to the WMU Board of Trustees and academic senate, administrators offered three main justifications for the college: meeting workforce needs, boosting student recruitment (with international students singled out), and becoming a more comprehensive institution. In more public-oriented forums, the justifications narrowed. In interviews and speeches to the media, for instance, labor needs were most often cited. In particular, the college was linked to the imminent arrival of major industrial employers in the community and a purported shortage of engineers in the state. In representative remarks, the university president suggested that WMU "can help overcome an engineering shortage that existed even before [two large manufacturers] arrived in the local community. One is expected to hire at least 1,000 people at its local plant, including for several specific engineering roles." In its official authorization of the college, the Board cited projections of drastically increasing need for engineers in the state.

The other justification regularly cited by both administrators and the Board was student recruitment. In presentations, administrators frequently referenced declining high school graduate numbers, projected enrollment declines, and fear of a nationwide enrollment crash. Top on the list of ways to "beat the crash" was the new engineering program. (Two other strategies, expanding graduate education and recruiting more international students, are discussed later in this study.) The Board's authorization referenced anticipated enrollment declines and interest in engineering from WMU admits who chose other institutions; like the administration presentation, it drew specific attention to international recruitment. The third type of justification, expanding WMU's comprehensiveness, was noticeably absent in most presentations, public news items, and the Board's authorization.

Tying new program development to workforce needs is not unusual, particularly for institutions such as community colleges, which often have close ties to local employers, and research universities, which frequently train students for high-status technical professions. What is unusual is the scale and process of development at an institution like WMU. Local manufacturers, both present and incoming, were regularly consulted in the development process and cited in justifications, something more typical of community colleges than larger comprehensive universities like WMU. Further, the scale of the initiative likely entails substantial curricular impacts outside the new college. The proposed engineering curricula involve several other academic colleges providing prerequisite courses, while for the new majors themselves electives are contracted as much as possible, with required major and prerequisite courses taking up three quarters of total credit hours. The administrators themselves also noted that a new college creates a "new academic culture and identity," without elaboration.

Beyond the close relationship with local capital and implications for curriculum, student recruitment was an important justification, with international students given repeated mention. Again, what stands out is not the idea of developing programs to attract new students, but the scale of development and its place at an institution like WMU, a university historically more focused on education and service professions. Rather than merely mimicking UC's engineering program, however, WMU adopted a distinct angle. Presentations and other materials strongly emphasized that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) would be foundational to the college. On the one hand, this may represent an increasing emphasis in DEI across higher education generally. On the other, local factors—specifically, the presence of UC—suggest a more nuanced picture. In their argument to the Board, WMU administrators noted that UC's prestigious engineering programs reject over 10,000 students each year. Recall that at WMU, overall ACT scores are near 24 at the 50th percentile. UC's high ACT scores are even higher in their engineering college, nearing 35 at the 50th percentile. Replacing WMU's fragmented engineering programs with a high-visibility college could help draw students who aim for, but do not get into, UC. This provides one possible explanation for why UC's president wrote a letter of support for the new college—WMU is not directly competing with UC for students. By hosting a program that is physically near UC but possesses a distinct identity and selects at a different (but still high) achievement level, the college could both promote itself as DEI-forward and boost WMU's prestige by drawing students who rank above the institution's average.

Expanding Graduate Education

As a former teacher's college, WMU's sole purpose for over a century was to train primary and secondary school teachers. Graduate school was considered by most such institutions to be unnecessary. In the 1930s, a WMU president surveyed teachers' colleges across the country and found fewer than half a dozen offering graduate degrees. WMU's present graduate offerings are largely at the Master's level, with half of its limited doctoral programs being for education fields. UC, by contrast, has long been a renowned doctoral institution, with top-ranked programs in STEM fields and doctoral-level study in dozens of other disciplines.

In its most recent strategic plan, WMU's graduate school proposed ambitious goals that would make WMU a much more graduate-oriented institution. They included growing graduate enrollment to 3,500 students—a 40% increase from the number at the time—and ensuring that the graduate school be considered essential to the institution, especially to enrollment management.

These goals would be advanced primarily by developing new programs. They would not be prestigious doctoral programs, as one might expect if WMU were fully imitating UC. Rather, the graduate school and WMU administrators emphasized non-traditional credentials like accelerated Master's degree programs and certificates.

A major push has been made at WMU for creating accelerated Master's degrees. The aim of such programs is to take students from incoming Freshman to Master's degree holder in five years at a single institution. Doing so relies on courses being simultaneously counted for undergraduate and graduate credit. Since the proposed degrees involve double-counting credits in WMU undergraduate and graduate programs, a student must be a WMU undergraduate to participate, and to make the right course choices the student must begin this route early in their undergraduate career. WMU's administration argued that these programs benefit all parties: students would have a quicker route to a Master's degree, while WMU would retain "its most capable students for a further year of study." While students pay less for two degrees by double-counting courses, they pay WMU for more courses total, with both financial and prestige-related ("most capable students") impacts. Several accelerated degree programs were launched in the first years of the initiative, with more in development.

Beyond accelerated Master's degrees, the plan called for expanding other non-traditional credentials and degree pathways "to meet the needs of the workforce," including "professional Master's degrees, online programs, and sub-degree credentials like badges and certificates." Such options, typically tied to workforce preparation, have proliferated nationwide. Already there are many graduate certificates available at WMU, several of which can be completed entirely online. Some are tied to professional endorsements or licensure requirements, while others are promoted as supporting a career path without requiring a full degree; only two, in women's studies and gerontology, do not identify a career connection directly in their names or descriptions.

Not all programs and fields appear to be equal in the graduate school's vision. The graduate school's ten-year plan called for looking into new programs that satisfy job market needs while simultaneously reviewing "underperforming" programs. The plan's SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis included, among opportunities, attending to programs "in growth mode" as opposed to those declining. Threats included access to fewer tuition waivers, a history of accepting only students with tuition assistantships, and the "misperception" that the graduate school is a financial drain on WMU. Without naming programs, this language appears to implicitly contrast "growth" programs oriented toward the workforce with humanities and social sciences programs, which are less workforce-oriented, more often include institutionally funded assistantships with tuition waivers, and have in many cases been declining nationwide. Financial efficiency, both perceived and actual, is a persistent concern in the graduate school's plans. Jessop (2018) argues that one effect of emerging capitalist markets in higher education is "the rationalization of . . . production based on tight control on costs and their recovery" (p. 105). Short-term certificates and professional degrees unlikely to have tuition waivers allow WMU's graduate school to expand choices for prospective students while simultaneously reducing costs.

Expanding International Student Recruitment

It is commonly, and justifiably, said that international students contribute to higher education both inside and outside the classroom. It is also commonly said that they pay well: "International students, especially those at the undergraduate level, have been especially attractive as a

source of revenue…Although rationales for attracting more international students vary, the potential for economic gain is a common, although not universal, motivation" (Cantwell, 2015, p. 515). Like most institutions, WMU and UC charge non-residential students, including international students, far higher tuition rates than residential students. In a competitive and increasingly global higher education environment, international students provide multiple benefits, offering ways to bolster culture, prestige, and revenues simultaneously.

WMU has stated very ambitious goals for international recruitment. In 2016, WMU's president proposed increasing international student enrollment from less than 3% of total enrollment to 10%, an increase of over 1,000 students, within a decade. This goal was framed in comparative terms, with the president saying that it would bring WMU to the level of regional and national peers. To meet this goal, WMU partnered with a private company, Entryway, that boasts of "the widest-reaching…and best-organized international recruitment force out there, with contacts in almost 100 nations." Entryway acquired office space on WMU's campus staffed by its own employees, including many former WMU employees. It also employed teaching staff for the many Entryway recruits who lack functional English skills. Entryway offered three "tracks" for students at different levels: an intensive English preparation track for the least prepared, a track combining English preparation with for-credit courses at WMU, and direct admission to an academic program. An "Entryway WMU Center" was established to run recruitment, marketing, admissions, the tracks, the English prep courses, and "practical support for students, from airport pickup to campus community and academic success." In some ways, recruits appear to be Entryway students at least as much as WMU students.

The competitive market for international students requires heavy investment in recruitment and promotion, which can be challenging for institutions like WMU. In exchange for substantial control and a share of revenue, Entryway offers existing connections and an integrated promotion, recruitment, and onboarding process; its website promises "a global recruitment network, digital tools, and research that will strengthen an institution's presence in emerging markets." The goal for WMU is to create a cycle where recruits become WMU brand promoters back home; WMU's head of international recruitment suggested that international students "are our best spokespersons when they talk about their experiences here." A system where WMU students return home and build interest through word of mouth would benefit both WMU and Entryway.

Unlike WMU, UC is an international recruitment powerhouse. It has a global reputation and a huge international student population in absolute and proportional terms; UC has almost as many international students as WMU has total students. Further, half of UC's international students are undergraduates, an uncommon but financially beneficial situation. Since undergraduate international students lack the tuition-waiving options available to some graduate students, they are more likely to pay full cost of attendance. Cantwell (2015) found that "[e]nrolling additional international undergraduate students yielded additional revenue when holding constant the number of all national (in-state and out-of-state) students enrolled" (p. 520). This effect was modest and held only at doctoral and research institutions like UC, not institutions like WMU. Regardless, WMU is following UC closely in this regard. WMU administrators claimed to the Board that in the long term up to 50% of Entryway recruits would be undergraduates. That goal is still some distance away: according to the most recent Board report mentioning Entryway, only 20% were undergraduates. Notably, the last few years of Board reports do not mention Entryway, and its physical presence on WMU's campus has declined. It continues to provide recruitment services for WMU, however, and WMU continues to heavily invest in international recruitment.

Discussion and Analysis

Do WMU's Initiatives Incorporate Practices and Concepts Found in TAC?

WMU's initiatives illustrate several TAC concepts at an institutional type, undergraduate-oriented teaching institutions, rarely discussed in TAC.

Most evident is an emphasis on new funding streams, apparent in all three initiatives. In TAC this typically involves research and brand-related initiatives like licensing, royalties, and business incubators. However, it also includes new forms of education and new student markets—the aspects of TAC most closely connected to curriculum and enrollment profile—both of which are central in WMU's initiatives.

Consider, first, the graduate school's emphasis on "micro-credentials" like certificates. Ralston (2021) argued that a nationwide shift toward such credentials reflects an atmosphere where "education resembles a commodity, a product, or service marketed and sold like any other commodity" (p. 84). Micro-credentials allow institutions to unbundle and fragment curricula, creating smaller programs that can appeal to a broader range of students with less overhead expense. Wheelahan and Moodie (2022) argued that such fragmentation supports a "human capital" perspective, which shifts "the ends of education from the development of knowledge to the development of productive workers" (para. 33) through emphasis on job skills and employment. For WMU, micro-credentials can serve as both marketing strategy and efficient form of educational delivery. Since such credentials are shorter term and lack the accreditation requirements of full degree programs, WMU can be more flexible in response to changing interest and market needs. The graduate school's strategic plan went so far as to suggest creating entire degrees by stacking certificates and other sub-degree components—a full degree based on fragmented market-oriented credentials.

Second, all initiatives involve new student markets: engineering students above WMU's average academic level, post-baccalaureate students seeking quicker professional credentials, and international students. These all represent shifts from WMU's more traditional, regional, academically average student population. Jessop (2017) argued that increased economic engagement among HEIs results in "intensified global competition for talent—including undergraduates and masters' students, doctoral and post-doctoral researchers, [and] skilled knowledge workers" (p. 855) among others. Recall, for instance, that part of WMU's argument for the engineering college involved the number of engineering students turned away from UC. Such students represent a distinct, academically desirable student group for WMU. An engineering college not only provides links to private capital and claims to preparation for high-status careers; it allows WMU to reach for higher-status students, boosting metrics like incoming student grades and graduate incomes that affect institutional prestige.

Finally, the expansion of interstitial organizations, public-private partnerships in particular, is a major theme in the engineering college and international student recruitment initiatives. The engineering program is being developed in regular consultation with existing and incoming local capital—as the latter expand their local presence, WMU will presumably be sending out its new engineering graduates. For many new international students, much of the enrollment process would be managed by a for-profit company, such involvement potentially extending to curriculum and student life. This arrangement is like those of many Online Program Managers (OPMs), a rapidly expanding group of for-profit companies that offer services including recruitment, enrollment, curriculum development, and even full instruction for online programs. While the scholarship on OPMs is still small, such programs have come under scrutiny for opaqueness, such as

masking their degree of control over some programs; predatory recruitment activities, such as aggressive advertising to marginalized students; and questionable revenue arrangements, such as contracts that give OPMs most of the revenue generated and are difficult to terminate (Hall, 2022; Hamilton, 2022). OPMs represent an assertive expansion of the for-profit sector into non-profit institutions (Hall, 2022; United States Government Accountability Office, 2022), and they share several analogies to Entryway.

Each of these topics could be explored at great length. Suffice to say that academic capitalism is present at WMU in several ways. How might these developments affect WMU's historical identity? Addressing this involves turning to curriculum and enrollment profile.

How might these Initiatives, if Successful, Impact WMU's Curriculum and Student Profile?

When it comes to students, the effects of these initiatives will likely reinforce each other. For instance, international students tend to be overrepresented in graduate programs and vocationally oriented programs such as engineering and business. At both WMU and UC, liberal arts colleges enroll the highest percentage of undergraduates. This is also true for graduate students at WMU, while at UC the engineering college rises to the top. The business colleges rise at both. These initiatives also dovetail with smaller developments at WMU, such as new cybersecurity and video game design majors, which draw from similarly oriented populations. The students gained through these cumulative efforts will likely be less local, more vocationally oriented, and more interested in high-paying technology and engineering careers than service-oriented careers such as teaching.

WMU's relationship to UC provides important context here. Even after becoming a full university, WMU focused primarily on broad education and preparing undergraduates for middle-class service professions; its motto references the joy of teaching. UC started as an agricultural university and grew into a STEM-oriented research juggernaut; labor is central in its motto. UC is a prestigious public institution with elite programs, researchers, and students from around the world. In many ways WMU's chosen road follows UC, but not fully. The engineering college is not designed to rival UC—a daunting task—but to draw students ranked between the two institutions, allowing WMU to increase prestige without direct competition. WMU does not aim to create top doctoral programs like those at UC, but smaller, flexible programs and credentials with less overhead. Rather than try to become UC, WMU is carving out a distinct niche by adapting elements of UC to its own purposes, targeting students who are positioned, in academic and cultural terms, between WMU at present and UC.

What would these initiatives mean for WMU's curriculum? TAC says little about such a question, but the broader recent TAC research suggests some possibilities. Pavlidis' (2012) discussion of curricular impacts of academic capitalism included shifting away from the humanities, social sciences, and theoretical natural sciences, which are less market-oriented, and toward "tradeable skills and qualifications, preparing [students] for the struggle for survival in an ever-changing labour market" (p. 143). The present study, especially in the engineering and graduate initiatives, shows a consistent emphasis at WMU on market-readiness in new curricula. On the one hand, there are no direct attacks on, or cuts to, non-vocationally oriented programs; at most, there is an ambiguous reference to eliminating underperforming graduate programs. On the other, there is no clear investment in growing such programs, either. If they stay the same while vocationally oriented programs grow, and if graduate and international students tend toward the latter as they usually do, the result would be a decline in the relative size and status of the former. This would

match UC—while it has large humanities and social science programs, they are dwarfed by those on the vocational side.

Hill's (2019) study of new arts and humanities programs explored one way such programs might respond. In Hill's (2019) three cases—an Artistic Media Technologies major, a digital humanities minor, and a writing major—career readiness and employment skills were offered as justifications for creating the programs. WMU's liberal arts college promotes something similar at a smaller level: "career readiness sequences," sets of courses across liberal arts departments leading to certificates in areas such as "Administrative Communication" and "Human Resources." These sequences, which combine vocationally oriented curriculum organization with micro-credentials, suggest that liberal arts programs at WMU have at least partially accommodated a vocational orientation. In an alternative scenario, faculty and administrators might ignore or resist such framings instead of accommodating them. Perry (2018) found a range of reactions by community college administrators to the growing emphasis on enrollment and the "customerization" (p. 35) of students at their institution. Many accepted career readiness as important while refusing to give it a sole or primary institutional role, citing other purposes that they thought were central to higher education. Perry's (2018) research was at a community college with vocational preparation as a substantial part of its mission. At a former teacher's college that became a comprehensive university, by contrast, one might assume greater ambivalence and perhaps even hostility among faculty and administrators as WMU pursues initiatives in tension with its historical identity. If such reactions are kept private, the result could be an outwardly pro-market orientation that masks deeper internal disagreement.

Can TAC, as it Exists, Account for the Full Impact of the Initiatives?

While existing TAC concepts have been valuable for this case, they are not exhaustive—in particular, the educational side of institutions is underrepresented in existing TAC research, and prestige, a frequent point of interest in the findings, is underemphasized. The findings point to ways these might be brought under an expanded form of TAC. While findings from one case may not be sufficient to develop fully articulated new categories, they are enough to suggest areas for further exploration and emphasis.

Curriculum as Promotional Tool, Source of Prestige, and Public-Private Intersection Point

TAC research shows how curriculum may be reorganized to reduce costs and reach into new student markets. Curriculum itself is underexplored, both in terms of proactive development to take advantage of market dynamics and reactive response to market pressures. With the engineering college, for instance, curriculum serves multiple market-oriented purposes: reaching new student markets; raising institutional prestige by drawing stronger students; promoting the institution as a place for high-level vocational preparation; and building connections to local capital. Entryway offers its own enrollment system and some privately run courses in ways that mirror OPMs. These developments, in turn, create pressure on the rest of the curriculum. As WMU's administrators noted, most WMU colleges would have to adjust course offerings and curriculum to accommodate the new engineering students, something no less true for large numbers of new graduate and international students. Can the humanities find a place in market-oriented institutions? How might administrators work with, or against, those opposed to a market orientation? How far might private companies penetrate public institution curricula? Curriculum is core to any

HEI. It is also a means to recruit, signal, and build external connections—in short, it can be a powerful market tool. TAC research should explore these dynamics.

Enrollment Profile as Status Signal, Promotional Resource, and Competitive Space

TAC research recognizes students as sources of tuition revenue and consumers of products through their university affiliations. Less recognized are students themselves as tools of market competition and activity. The status significance of enrollment profile at elite institutions is well-known. In such schools, great effort is spent creating class compositions specified along lines of racial diversity, academic status, athletic ability, and other categories in ways positive and negative (Karabel, 2005; Stevens, 2007; Tough, 2019). Even a small change in acceptance rates, average test scores, or diversity can damage an institution's image and ranking. The shift from admissions offices to "enrollment management" speaks to the complexities of balancing status, revenue, student financial need, and other factors (Tough, 2019). Such issues are largely absent from TAC research. This omission becomes stranger as tuition increasingly becomes the main source of revenue at public institutions like WMU. Nation-wide competition for international students simultaneously reflects attempts to increase diversity—a major prestige marker—and grow revenue; higher academic profiles from new engineering admits could raise institutional rank; faster job-ready graduate credentials could boost application counts at low cost. At the same time, changing the student body means changing the student experience. Can WMU build the infrastructure to support an influx of international students? How would hundreds of incoming graduate, international, and engineering students change campus culture? Without students there is no institution, and a theory of HEIs that does not attend to their experiences is incomplete.

The above areas reflect two broad gaps in most TAC research. First and most significant, TAC focuses on non-educational aspects of higher education, those most easily connected to existing capitalist structures, at the expense of studying the educational experience itself. Recognizing these non-educational aspects represents an important insight into the expanding roles of HEIs in recent decades. However, it is no less important to see how the educational core shifts in response to the same pressures and the resulting institutional responses. Second, the findings in this study show the importance of status, even below the elite level. Whether in terms of student academic profile, student diversity, provision of career-ready credentials, or other criteria, greater prestige is a broad and consistent concern in a competitive higher education marketplace. TAC does not ignore prestige altogether, but its importance for WMU and its intersection with other aspects of TAC—one cannot, for instance, separate the value of institutional branding from status—suggest it deserves much greater attention.

Implications and Future Research

This case study reveals limitations of TAC in terms of institutional types studied and conceptual range. WMU's engineering college, for instance, represents not just interest in a new market but a broader shift in institutional identity. Different students are likely to apply, and curriculum beyond engineering will change to accommodate them. Expanding graduate and international student populations affects more than revenue—international students have needs that may require adjusting curriculum and student services; graduate teaching assistants may become more common, impacting teaching at WMU; and so on. Even if such initiatives originate as responses to market pressures, consequences may surpass intentions. WMU and UC represent not just market

positions but visions of education—a regional university providing a wide range of students access to middle-class careers, and a national university with Nobel laurates preparing elite students for six-figure futures. Finding a middle point, as WMU appears to be attempting, means more than updating the brochure.

A more comprehensive version of TAC is needed, one that accounts for the educational side of HEIs and the importance of status. Such a theory would be better situated to connect with relevant research, such as the work on neoliberalism discussed in the literature review. On one side, TAC's analytical tools could sharpen analyses of institutions under neoliberalism. On the other, investigations of neoliberalism could help situate results from TAC in larger political and ideological forces, and provide avenues for shifting to evaluation and critique when appropriate.

In line with TAC research generally, this study is narrowly focused and descriptive; it leaves many questions unanswered, some of which were raised in the findings and analysis. For instance: What do WMU faculty and students think of these initiatives? How are individual administrative bodies, academic departments, and other units responding? What is the experience of students who enter WMU through Entryway? Are there other, less visible initiatives at WMU that follow similar directions? A comprehensive study of WMU would address these, but also greatly expand the scope of this study at the cost of focus. Many of the studies mentioned previously, such as Perry (2018), Hill (2019), and Ralston (2020), suggest possible answers to some of these questions, but as is so often the case, further research is needed.

This case study has several further limitations. First, like all individual case studies it sacrifices breadth for depth. While the benefits of depth are clear, a wider range of cases would strengthen generalizability of the findings and analysis. Second, the emphasis on documents limits available data and thus the findings. Triangulating documents with other data sources and discussing relevant existing research strengthen the findings and analysis, but the data still leaves gaps. Perhaps the most significant gap is the private and personal views of WMU administrators, faculty, and staff. Promotional materials and strategic plans rarely highlight internal subversion or resistance, for instance; personal interviews would be much more informative. Research such as Hill's (2019) provides a start, but further studies focusing on internal responses to academic capitalism's impacts, and studies employing other data types, are needed. Third, the absence of the student voice also deserves note. Are new international students integrating into WMU successfully? Are prospective students interested in the new engineering college? What of current students? Knowing their perspective is important to understanding whether WMU's initiatives are likely to succeed, and whether students are likely to support or resist academic capitalism more generally. This study's focus is on how and why upper administration developed these initiatives, but that represents only the beginning of the story. The next step may be asking how these initiatives will be received by those who teach and learn at WMU.

Limitations aside, this study suggests what may happen as public institutions face declining state support and increasing pressure to raise revenue. Over the last two decades, WMU went from 35% of its operating budget covered by state appropriations to less than 15%; over the same period, tuition jumped from just over 20% of revenue to almost 50%. WMU's three initiatives developed in this context. As public institutions nationwide face similar pressures, one can expect similar responses: recruitment strategies targeting groups, such as graduate and international students, who pay more; curricular changes emphasizing flexible credentials and career readiness; increasing partnership with private capital, whether in reshaping curricula for the workforce or providing support services to the institution; and greater attention to status. Policymakers should be alert to these possibilities, and the implications for students, when considering policies affecting higher

education. HEI administrators should be sensitive to how responses to present fiscal and policy developments may lead to unintended consequences down the road. Academic capitalism is more than grant proposals and brand campaigns; it can shift an institution's identity.

Conclusion

This case study uses TAC and data in context to understand how a teaching university is incorporating market strategies and structures, and how that may affect the institution's curriculum and enrollment profile. Besides identifying areas for future exploration within TAC, it raises questions about what these changes mean for the educational mission of institutions like WMU. If, in its push for revenue and prestige, WMU becomes more international, more graduate-oriented, and more defined by high-salary career preparation, further changes will almost certainly occur. What will these changes mean for its general education program, student experience, campus culture, internal politics, and institutional identity?

As one possibility, consider a cautionary tale from Sperber (2000), who argued that prestige in higher education is typically equated to research and graduate education. Being more prestigious means being more like a research university, and the late 20th century saw many institutions striving for prestige. This striving came at a cost: given finite revenues, greater support for research and graduate education typically meant less support for undergraduate education. Sperber (2000) pointed to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a public flagship which, despite "very tight budgets throughout the 1980s and 1990s, continued to pour millions into its graduate programs and to neglect its undergraduate ones"; a student at the university wrote that "U of I is really a research park that allows undergraduates to hang around as long as they don't get in the way" (p. 74). Sperber (2000) compared U of I with Rutgers, a public university "on the make" (p. 75) that didn't succeed in reaching the elite, but did, based on his reading of Moffatt's (1989) ethnographic work, succeed in weakening undergraduate education. WMU isn't guaranteed to follow either of these examples. But if it does achieve its goals, it could find its identity as an institution considerably changed.

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Derek R. O'Connell, Ph.D., is Assistant to the Department Chair and Undergraduate Advisor in the Department of Philosophy at Illinois State University. His research uses both philosophical and empirical methods to examine higher education cultures, student development, and student meaning-making.

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

Jennifer Ervin, University of Georgia

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 impossibility of reaching every student in every possible way with the work we do? Love is a part of engaging 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,

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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Jennifer Ervin is a doctoral candidate in the Mary Frances Early College of Education at the University of Georgia. Prior to pursuing her PhD, she worked in education for 11 years, teaching secondary language arts, reading, and ESOL. Her research explores justice-oriented pedagogies in English language arts classrooms, and on how educational policies influence ELA teachers' curricula and pedagogy.

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Let's Talk Before We Celebrate a "Progressive Turn": Critical Dialogue on Social and Emotional Learning[1]

Emma M. McMain, Washington State University
Brandon Edwards-Schuth, University of Oulu (Finland)

Abstract

As social and emotional learning (SEL) picks up pace in the twenty-first century, it is often presented as a universally progressive and even apolitical phenomenon. At the same time, a growing number of politically conservative groups are attacking SEL as a form of "liberal indoctrination." Amidst these layered contexts, there is an urgent need for deep, critical, and culturally humble conversations that recognize SEL as an inevitably political and power-laden phenomenon that must be consciously partnered with a commitment to social justice. In this article, we provide highlights and commentary from an interview podcast with two critical scholars, Clio Stearns and Kathleen Hulton, who shed important light on the sociocultural underpinnings of SEL. These scholars question how far the field of SEL can go in merely improving or reforming current practices, arguing for more radical transformations to the ways in which social and emotional humanity is conceptualized.

Keywords: *social and emotional learning; critical education; equity; podcasting*

Introduction: A Need for Critical Conversations Around SEL

Education in the United States has long sought to address aspects of the "whole child" (Boler, 1999; Osher et al., 2016), but how that endeavor has manifested, what it has been called, and how it has been received by the general public have varied across time and context. In the 2020s, as public schools face increasing budget cuts to art, humanities, and social studies education, as well as diminished time for recess and play (McMullan, 2021; Timon, 2021), a mounting base of empirical research touts the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL). Formally defined as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2022), at the heart of most SEL lies the assumption that social and emotional aspects of being can be conceptualized as a range of skills or competencies and taught in a codified, formalized manner (Emery, 2016; Hoffman, 2009).

Together, an assemblage of researchers, software and curriculum development companies, investors, international organizations, school administrators, and localized communities uphold the sentiment that SEL is a progressive and evidence-based way to promote positive youth development, maximize academic achievement, and minimize "problem behaviors" (Humphrey, 2013;

1. Acknowledgement: We extend our gratitude to Marc Koch for producing the podcast that inspired this article.

Williamson, 2021). The emergence of SEL learning standards and curricula in the US have rapidly picked up pace in the twenty-first century, and all fifty states have learning goals for SEL at the early childhood level (Philibert, 2016). Simultaneously, SEL has become a target for attacks—usually delivered by those on the political right—describing it as "fluff," "pseudoscience," and "liberal indoctrination." Many of these attacks associate SEL with a range of anti-racist practices collapsed beneath the label of Critical Race Theory (CRT), claiming SEL is a "Trojan Horse for Critical Race Theory" (Alexander, 2021) or a "new variant of the CRT virus" (Harris, 2022). Amidst this layered sociopolitical moment, in which SEL is presented as an apolitical, universally progressive phenomenon by a powerful network of psycho-economic expertise *and* a leftist attempt at radical indoctrination by a smaller but notable group of conservative voices, it is crucial to pose a range of deep and critical questions toward SEL.

The term "SEL" refers to such a wide range of tools and practices that it is difficult to discern what exactly is meant by it. In this article, we use the term primarily in reference to activities that have been brought into formal learning standards and curricular programs, including RULER, PATHS, Second Step, or Responsive Classroom. Common SEL materials within these programs include "feelings dictionaries" and thesauruses, flashcards, games, role-playing, and videos and photographs of people using different strategies to solve conflicts or calm down (Hulton, 2021). A recurrent message throughout these programs is that all emotions are ok to feel, *as long as* the feeler can prolong the time between registering an emotion and acting on it in designated "appropriate" ways (Hulton, 2021). When thinking critically about SEL, the question emerges of whether SEL simply needs to expand on what counts as "appropriate" ways of being, or whether a more radical reconfiguration of "SEL" itself is necessary.

A considerable amount of work focuses on ways to improve SEL; for instance, by developing renditions that are more culturally-responsive, community-led, and implemented with fidelity (Garner et al., 2014; Osher et al. 2016; Slaten et al., 2015). Some advocate for SEL that is explicitly oriented toward social justice (Simmons, 2019), using descriptors such as Transformative SEL (Jagers et al., 2019), SEL+ (El Sabbagh, 2021), or Social-Emotional Learning for Social-Emotional Justice (Higheagle Strong & McMain, 2020). Seldom, however, do researchers go so far as to depart from the labeled phenomenon of SEL itself or suggest dismantling its hegemony entirely (see Camangian & Cariaga, 2019; Hulton, 2021; and Stearns, 2019, for exceptions). There remains a pressing need for research and conversations that recognize SEL as a power-laden and always-political attempt not only to support student wellbeing or improve the productivity in a classroom (and nation) but also to foster a particular definition of personhood.

When educators are tasked with teaching students how to become self-aware, behave appropriately in groups, make responsible decisions, or regulate their inner experiences, what social norms and assumptions are at play? Simmons (2017, 2019) and Kaler-Jones (2020) draw awareness to how SEL can perpetuate deficit narratives of students of color when it is presented as a remediation to "correct" their social and emotional identities. Who gets to say what is defined—and emotionally experienced—as good, appropriate, right, or desirable at a social and emotional level of being? Does all learning necessarily come from explicit teaching? How do power dynamics across race, gender, class, ability, and other facets of identity operate with and through SEL? In this conceptual paper (stemming from a 50-minute podcast), we relay highlights from an interview conversation with two researcher-educators, Dr. Clio Stearns and Dr. Kathleen Hulton, whose work in SEL explores questions such as these.

The two of us received our graduate degrees from the same college of education: while Emma's research interests include SEL and teacher education, Brandon pursues arts-based methodologies and podcasting as public pedagogy. We blended these interests by co-hosting a podcast interview with Dr. Stearns and Dr. Hulton, working against the grain of academia that privileges linear, succinct, written knowledge over that which is spoken, cyclical, messy, and even tangential (Honan et al., 2018; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018). As two white scholars interviewing two other white scholars about SEL and its relationship to social (in)justice, we recognize that many elements of our discussion are not novel. In our critique of saviorist discourses around SEL, we also work against a meta kind of saviorism that seeks to save the field of SEL from being saviorist. Our aim is to interject questions that are not always asked in scholarly conversations, but to do so in a way that invites learning from the lived experiences of students and educators—particularly those of color—who have long grappled with such issues outside the awareness of higher education.

"Methodology"

The decision to include the heading of Methodology in an academic article carries the immediate assumption that the given article is a research study. This paper, which provides highlights and discussion from an oral interview, faces a bit of an identity crisis. Is this project conceptual? Is it empirical? Who is a co-author, who is a researcher, who is a participant? The term "research" unleashes with it a flood of ethical quandaries and expectations of rigor…why might other forms of knowledge production be exempt from the same kinds of rules or assumptions? Hegemony is easier to identify when it is breached than when it is followed, and the usual procedures of research may not come into question until a situation becomes ambiguous and genre-defying.

As we draft this article, selecting quotes to include from the interview transcription and storying them into a written narrative, how different is this process than qualitative analysis for formal studies? If I (Emma) am interviewing a second-grade teacher for a research project, I must take care to anonymize the participant and adhere to the protocols established by my university's institutional review board. If I am interviewing two established scholars in the fields of sociology and education, however, I may *broadcast* their identities and establish "consent" through relational cues and email decorum, no IRB approval required. In the results section of a qualitative research article, I typically interweave direct quotations from participants with theoretical and empirical evidence from other sources, remembering never to assume that an in-vivo quote will speak for itself. In a paper like this, which aims to share two scholars' voices and knowledge with a broader community, we do not intend to "analyze" their quotes so much as present them (although we are, of course, implicitly and unquestionably analyzing, synthesizing, and emotionally reacting to their words as we read, cut, paste, and type).

Our point in providing transparency about this article's playfully named identity crisis is to shine a light on the precarious, subjective, and power-laden line that separates "research" from "other forms of knowledge," a "formal" study from an "informal" one, and a "recruited participant" from an "invited guest." We choose to use the term Methodology in this section to invite the question of whether an informal conversation may or may not want to gain access to the level of legitimacy afforded by research, or perhaps to emphasize that while ethical and political relativism can become undeniably and inexcusably dangerous (e.g., treating white supremacist dialogue as acceptable, grounded in positivistic truth, or exempt from judgment), there is also a danger in drawing heavily guarded boundaries around what is conceived of as authentic or "scientific"

knowledge in and beyond educational communities. While further contemplation of these dynamics spans beyond the scope of this paper, they are worth the mention—if nothing else, as food for thought in the spirit of the free-flowing conversation-as-knowledge for which our podcasting advocates.[2]

Podcasting as Dialogic Production of Knowledge and Relationship

We utilize podcasting as a "part academic part creative assemblage" (Honan et al., 2018, p. 3) and as an interdisciplinary bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), drawing from the field of Education Sounds Studies (Gershon, 2017) in recognizing the world as something that is created—not merely reflected—by spoken words. Such an idea is not new but is rather a recognition of many Indigenous ways of learning since time immemorial (Archibald, 2008; Cajete, 1994). We draw direct inspiration from the Indigenous research method, The Dialogic Spiral (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017), which describes the intimate spiral moving between speakers/listeners (*between space*), moving upwards and outwards to symbolize a co-generation of knowledge and relationships, "expanding prior understandings of listening and speaking" (San Pedro, 2013, pp. 117-118). Critical Podcast Methodology (Edwards-Schuth, 2023) connects spoken-word, the medium of podcasts, and the method of Dialogic Spirals to "nurture a dialogical approach amongst co-hosts engaged in the co-creation of knowledge and narrative, through non-hierarchical inquiry and sometimes debate" (p. 94). Recognizing that conflict and disagreement are also inherent in dialogue, we embrace the reality of dissensus where speakers may agree on the *conditions of possibility* for a conversation yet still leave room for unclear answers, nuance, and differences of opinion (Rose-Redwood et al., 2018).

We strategically chose podcasts as our medium because of their wide popularity and deep-seated commitment to public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000; Jaramillo, 2010), making critical research and dialogue more publicly accessible instead of behind traditional academic paywalls. Podcasts are a way in which we can leverage our academic positions and privileges, and/also we aim to model scholar-activism for *democratization* (Amin, 2001), i.e., practicing and pushing ever-changing democratic practices into all domains of life. When it comes to SEL, a phenomenon that contains so many layers of hegemony alongside potential transformation, podcasting offers a venue for organic, collaborative, multi-sensory dialogue. Even within the genre and set-up of an interview (with pre-prepared questions and a process of turn-taking with providing answers), bringing multiple voices together in real-time can foster a sense of intimacy and responsiveness that may not otherwise be possible. For example, while a tangential stream of thought can be deleted or rearranged in the draft of a written article, its presence in the middle of a spoken conversation is tangible and irremovable, perhaps being "off topic" but opening space for an example, story, or connection to affectively impress upon those who bear witness.

An Interview with Clio Stearns and Kathleen. Hulton

I (Emma) initially discovered Clio Stearns during a literature search on SEL for the early stages of my dissertation. In her article, "Let Them Get Mad: Using the Psychoanalytic Frame to Rethink SEL and Trauma Informed Practice" (2020), Stearns presents vignettes from her ethnographic work in a third-grade classroom that did *not* currently include a codified version of SEL.

2. The Podcast can be accessed here:

I was struck by Stearns' unique angle of analysis, questioning what we may read as good or bad in a classroom and noticing where moments of connection, agency, and validation can emerge even (and perhaps especially) in the midst of "unregulated" emotional experience. In my dissertation (2022), I created a book club-esque discourse community of six elementary educators and myself, and we read from a variety of materials on SEL including Stearns' 2019 publication, *Critiquing Social and Emotional Learning: Psychodynamic and Cultural Perspectives.*

In the summer of 2022, while I analyzed qualitative artifacts from the discourse community and completed a full written draft of my dissertation, I also partook in a virtual workshop series focused on the intersections of art, ecology, and health. In this space of social and emotional learning that felt no need to assume such a label, I connected with a climate justice educator and we shared about our respective research interests. Upon hearing about my critical work on SEL, my new friend eagerly directed me toward the work of *her* good friend, Dr. Kathleen Hulton. Subsequently, I downloaded Dr. Hulton's (2021) dissertation, "Creating the Emotionally Competent Child: The Education of Feelings in American Public Schools," and was immediately taken in by the depth and honesty of Hulton's historical and current analysis of SEL. Dr. Hulton points to SEL's reliance on presenting itself as a response to social crisis, with a model of "cure" focused on the level of the individual. SEL promotes a self-discipline that is not just about calmness and rule-following but about fostering a responsible, self-knowing, emotionally "skilled" kind of personhood.

"I wish Hulton and Stearns could have a conversation," I mused while I read. And then, shortly thereafter, "why *couldn't* they?" It was then that I extended my invitation for them to partake in an informal conversation, followed by the podcast co-hosted with Brandon. In the subsequent sections of this paper, we provide directly-quoted highlights and commentary from five central questions posed to Dr. Stearns and Dr. Hulton in the podcast, ending with a brief discussion to summarize important takeaways and introduce possible implications for future conversation. Although the ordering of the interview questions is the same in the podcast conversation and the written sections below, the presentation of the speakers' answers does not necessarily follow the original chronology in which they occurred. Importantly, we do not consider this written article and the audio-recorded podcast to be substitutes for one another—we suggest that interested readers/listeners engage with both, recognizing each modality for what it uniquely offers. We began the conversation quite broadly, asking our guests to describe how they first became interested in researching SEL.

What Led You to Research SEL?

Dr. Hulton (Kathleen) shared that her intrigue in SEL was the result of a "combining of two worlds." First, Kathleen had "always been really interested sociologically in emotion," specifically referencing Arlie Hochschild's (1983) work on emotion rules and the capitalistic practice of "controlling people's emotions for the service of profit." Second, Kathleen's sociological interest in emotion intensified as she watched her own children begin to learn about their feelings in school: "I saw this sort of change, I didn't even know it was called social and emotional learning at the time." She became curious about the disconnect in sociology, wherein sociologists may say, "'Oh, it's a *bad* thing that workplaces want to control people's emotions, but then we see SEL as this sort of unequivocally good thing, and not having that critical lens there at all."

Dr. Stearns (Clio) then described her own path to SEL, which emerged through her experiences teaching fourth and fifth grade in New York City. "I got sent to a training," she said, "a

Responsive Classroom training…I just remember sitting there through a week of training over the summer and listening to some of the scripted recommendations that they were making. I felt really offended as a teacher, and affronted by the ways my interactions with children were…the scripts that were being suggested." Although Clio now describes Responsive Classroom as a "relatively low-key" form of SEL intervention, she said that training drove her back to graduate school with a new alertness toward "what was happening, SEL-wise."

Why is SEL So Appealing to So Many People?

Because Clio and Kathleen have both written in depth about the eclectic origins of SEL, we were interested in their take on why SEL has taken off in popularity since its inception in the 1990s. "What do you think has contributed to this massive surge of SEL in the twenty-first century? What is it that makes SEL so appealing to so many people?" Clio answered first this time:

> I actually don't think there's been a surge in SEL so much as a surge in *calling it* SEL. Education in the United States for a long time has done other things besides what we call academics…to me, this SEL phase is just one more stage in the evolution of that strand of thinking.

Kathleen indicated her agreement with this declaration, while complicating it a bit:

> I also agree with the idea that SEL has grown out of and shares a lot with earlier twentieth century interventions into the "whole child" in different ways. People have been interested in other parts of children and developing children since public education was invented in this country. So there is that. Although I do think it's that *and* the interest has become more intense…I think SEL has been there, but there also *has* been a surge. I think it's both.

Clio went on to say that "a big part of [SEL's popularity] is an ongoing and increasing concern with children's behavior, which partly has to do with an uptick in academic standardization."

> When we ask more of kids, we're stressing them out. And we're asking a lot more of them academically a lot younger. Often, children have no recourse but to communicate via their behavior, and then that in turn stresses teachers out, and teachers start looking for ways to manage behavior. But it's not very kosher to say, "We just want to get kids to behave." So instead, we dupe ourselves, and we—I mean, I'm guilty of this as well. We dupe ourselves into thinking we're helping them emotionally, when what we're really doing is—I think SEL is just really a way of teaching compliance without calling it that.

Again, Kathleen both echoed and added to this statement, discussing how the larger context behind "student compliance" has shifted along with what is recognized as appropriate or inappropriate means of discipline:

> As the kinds of tools that are available to adults for managing children's behaviors have changed, we need something at the end of the day to make children conform to these larger

> things that we're asking of them. I don't agree [certain forms of discipline] *should* be allowed, but I think it's a combination of those things plus one more thing. Our ideas of what children are and what they should be capable of have also changed.

In their written works, Clio and Kathleen expand on the argument that SEL is a way to teach compliance. For instance, Kathleen (2021) provides the example of a Second Step end-of-the-year assessment that asks Kindergarteners to pretend they are frustrated with a difficult puzzle and need to calm down. Their multiple-choice options are: a) Hit something, b) Belly breathe, and c) Yell, with photographs of each choice. The answer key shows that b) Belly breathe, is the only acceptable answer (Committee for Children, 2011, p. 91). Without suggesting that yelling and hitting are perfectly fine in any context, what assumptions about personhood are made in this multiple-choice question? How much of the goal is to engage with one's social and emotional self, and how much is the goal to foster compliance within institutional structures?

Although neither Clio nor Kathleen chose to discuss the surface-level appeal of SEL and its feel-good connotations in public discourse (e.g., SEL as a long-awaited embrace of the emotions that have allegedly been denied in public schooling), they do discuss this idea in their respective works, including how SEL's public popularity has depended on liaisons (e.g., Daniel Goleman, 1995) between the "scientific" research community and public-facing "pop psychology." Stearns and Hulton unpack not only how SEL is seen as a palatable way to promote student compliance with increasing academic demands but also a response to broader social crises.

Where Do You Situate Your Own Critique?

Amidst the many conversations currently unfolding around SEL (from calling it a Trojan Horse for Critical Race Theory to presenting it as an apolitical move of progress), a knee-jerk reaction is often to ask people which "side they are on," as if the issue can be divided into a debate of pro-SEL or anti-SEL. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of layers—not sides—to dialogue around SEL, we asked Clio and Kathleen, "Where do you situate yourselves in that constellation of critique?" Kathleen answered that "this question, on one hand, is very hard for me to answer. But on the other hand, the sort of simple answer is that I think it's a very comfortable and usual position for me to find myself outside of some kind of debate. No matter what the debate is about, I think I'm really used to finding myself not on either side but just not well captured by the sides." She went on:

> In terms of the right's critique of it as indoctrination…like a sneaky vehicle for whatever the boogie man of the time may be, and right now it's Critical Race Theory, so SEL must be some kind of way to kind of hide that in some way…I don't think that is true, and yet there are elements of truth in the critique, I think. "SEL is just this basically neutral, apolitical, basic way of being a good person we can all agree on," I don't agree with that either. …Is SEL just some sort of innocent, progressive thing to be celebrated? No, I don't believe it is. Is it some kind of sinister way to hide over some hidden agenda that the left agrees on? No, it isn't…I don't find either of those ways of thinking about SEL particularly true or helpful. Neither of them well capture either the promises and pleasures of SEL or the dangers of it.

"I agree," said Clio. "Kathleen, I definitely understand what you're saying and agree with what you've said."

> Anything that we do in schools is going to be inherently political because schools are a political phenomenon. They've never not been. And if anything, the push, the drive to see them as anything other than that is one of the most frightening re-writings of American educational history that I've ever seen. I think the word "indoctrination" is a really complicated word, because nobody can fully define the difference between indoctrination and education in a generally agreed upon way. So I do sometimes think that there are ways of doing SEL that can be frightening and destructive in a way that *does* feel very much like a problematic iteration of indoctrination to me…If we're going to celebrate SEL as a progressive turn in education, then we have to look *really* closely at what it is. And I mean, I've spent a lot of time studying a range of the most popular SEL curricula, seeing what happens in schools where those curricula are used, and I've just never seen it do anything that I would call progressive at all. I've never seen it do anything other than teach kids that their ways of being in the world inherently are a little bit flawed. And so I can't really see that as a progressive turn.

As Clio spoke these last sentences through our Zoom meeting, I (Author 1) sat at my computer and pictured all the students I have witnessed during my years volunteering in elementary schools being reminded to take deep belly breaths, reconfigure their sprawling bodies into a tidy "criss-cross applesauce," or use an "I statement" instead of angrily accusing a classmate of hurting their feelings at recess. Often, *I* have been the one to deliver these "reminders." SEL is often but not always the vehicle for such practices, as some SEL materials simply ask students to reflect on, not change, how they are feeling or what they are doing. Even asking students to get better at noticing their emotions, however, can suggest that SEL is something they will "learn" and become better at as they develop. Vassallo (2017) critiques the neoliberal assumption embedded in much of developmental psychology—and SEL—that linear betterment is the most sought-after mode of change. How might educators value the social and emotional ways of being that children already come into the world with, disrupting the constant discourse of "working on oneself" (Vassallo, 2017)? What metaphors of change and health might exist beyond the limited choices of upward progress, downward decline, or unchanging stagnation?

While neither I, Clio, nor Kathleen are a proponent of throwing up our hands to say "anything goes!" in a classroom, there remains such a powerful discourse of "correction" in so many SEL curricula and everyday practices. "I've never seen it do anything other than teach kids that their ways of being in the world inherently are a little bit flawed"... The simple candor of these words struck me with a wave of sadness that left me swaying with validation, my body releasing a breath I didn't know I had been holding.

What Are Your Primary Concerns with SEL?

Clio's and Kathleen's concerns with SEL intertwined throughout all the interview questions, but we asked the following question to ensure we touched on it explicitly: "What do you wish people would know more about, think more about, or even feel more about in particular [regarding SEL]?" For the sake of providing a more easily-identifiable list of takeaways, we present their responses beneath a few major themes.

What Are We Not Doing When We Do SEL?

At several points in our conversation, Clio spoke to the reality that time for one thing means time away from another.

> I'm in probably a dozen elementary schools a week, and none of them has social studies in the curriculum at all. Science a little bit. But basically the days are math, reading, and SEL. …By and large—and this is less true in middle and high school—but by and large, early childhood and elementary school settings have certainly prioritized SEL, for example, over history education. I think that's like an indisputable comment. Or over any sort of political or democratic education or involvement…Kids are in school for six and a half hours, and if we're spending half an hour of that, every single day, with these kinds of skills and techniques, that's half an hour that we're really not doing something else. And as we've seen more programmatic interventions in education across the board, we've seen the decrease not only in science and social studies but in playtime over the course of the school day.

What sorts of social and emotional learning may happen outside of codified curricula, distinct content areas, and conscious recognition? Colonized education systems often assume a natural link between "teaching" and "learning," with the latter contingent on the former, but *does* all learning come from explicit teaching (Biesta, 2014)? As so many Indigenous understandings of education would remind us (Bang & Medin, 2010; Cajete, 1994), the answer is often "no."

What Does SEL Present as the Problem, and Who is Expected to Solve It?

Both Clio and Kathleen emphasized that SEL remains rooted in white, middle-class, ableist norms and assumptions that may recognize social issues but place the onus of control onto the shoulders of the individual. "Probably my biggest [concern about SEL]," said Clio, "is that I think by and large, it puts the locus of control over reactions to circumstance in the hands and minds of individual children, rather than addressing underlying social injustices, in a way that's really flawed and destructive." She went on to share a heartrending story from her ethnographic work, when a first-grade student raised his hand during an SEL lesson to respond to the prompt about a "time he had been sad." The boy shared that he was sad the previous night because he was shivering and cold, but his blanket had holes in it and his home had no heating. The teacher responded by circling back to the learning objectives of the lesson, which included taking deep belly breaths when we get sad. Clio reflected on this story, explaining that she saw a great deal of empathy in this particular teacher but also a great deal of pressure to adhere to the scripted curriculum:

> There is something extreme about that example. But I saw stories like that again and again, where these programs are telling kids that things we can think of as radical, *painful* social injustices that we're committing against children in this country all the time…Now, not only do they have to live within that, but *they're* the one—it's *their* fault that they're not feeling great about it.

Camangian and Cariaga (2021) echo this concern, writing that "any framework that focuses more on changing people's maladaptive social and emotional orientation to oppression —rather than

aiming towards transforming oppressive social conditions itself —is hegemonic because it anesthetizes the political will of a people" (p. 3). Where, in the increasing absence of social studies and history education, is that political will being nurtured? "I absolutely agree with what Clio was saying," said Kathleen.

> There [is just] this huge disconnect for many children, in terms of what their actual emotional reality is and then the somewhat canned responses [from teachers and curricula]. What is actually safe and okay to talk about at school? I also have spent a lot of time with these curricula. And so many of the examples are so, like, the examples of middle-class white kids.

Again, Camangian and Cariaga speak to this issue, arguing that SEL often prevents students of color "from fully sharing their experience of social alienation and systemic harm or even their culturally informed ideas of happiness and wellness" (p. 16). Kathleen's comment also prompted me (Emma) to recall an example from my own dissertation study: one of the teachers was discussing how many children in her district have incarcerated family members, which also speaks to the systemic racism and classism entangled with the criminal injustice system of the United States. "I haven't seen that come up in a Second Step [SEL curriculum] lesson," said another teacher with a tone of dark humor. She was right. Stolen pencils, spilled milk, jealousy between friends at recess…without taking away from the emotional legitimacy of such moments, what kinds of scenarios are *not* being discussed in the context of children's social and emotional experiences?

How Does SEL Expect Children (and Teachers) to Solve, Learn, and Be?

Lastly, Kathleen shared her concern about how simplistic many SEL curricula can be, presenting teacher and students with a universal set of "tools" through which to achieve social and emotional competence:

> It assumes a sort of sameness. Human interaction is one of the most complicated things in the world! It has so much shaping by cultural difference, and age, and things are also changing so rapidly. I think about…how we teach math, and historically how the teaching of math has changed. I know enough to know that math instruction no longer assumes that there's one rote way of doing math. So even in math, we acknowledge that there's this diversity, and we give kids different tools and are like, "What kinds of tools work best with your brain to figure out this problem?" And it's just like there's this assumption that even *math* is messy in terms of how people do it. I feel like social and emotional learning of today is like a math of forty years ago, where it's just like, "We're gonna teach everybody the same way of how to deal with your feelings, how to deal with other people, and here's this script. Go ahead, go off with your script and you'll be fine." Whereas we know that social life is a lot messier than that.

It is important to acknowledge that many SEL scholars, educators, and practitioners have increasingly expressed a need for SEL that is more culturally-sustaining, community-driven, and geared toward social justice (El-Sabbagh, 2021; Jagers et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2016). Proponents of

SEL may read the concerns voiced by Clio and Kathleen and agree with many premises but conclude that what we need is *better* SEL, not *no* SEL. We closed the podcast interview with the (anything-but) straightforward question of "Do you think SEL is a practice worth embracing?"

Do You Think SEL is a Practice Worth Embracing?

"Thinking of SEL's dangers and its potential for harm or just not being helpful, or its potential for being good and helpful," we asked Kathleen and Clio, "how do we weigh those? Can we even classify SEL as good or bad? What should we be doing with SEL? *Should* we be doing it? Should we completely shut it down? Should we advocate for it contextually?" In Kathleen's closing comments, she explained that while she is extremely concerned with SEL's current manifestations and underlying assumptions, she still sees it as an important illumination of people's desire to recognize the relational and emotional pieces of ourselves—and to address the ongoing trauma and crisis experienced by so many in a world ravaged by ecological destruction, pandemic illness, and social atrocities.

> I have a lot of empathy for people who really love SEL. I want to critique these darker sides of it, but at the same time I don't necessarily think it needs to be trashed…I want to know more about why people want it so badly, the people who want it so badly, and I want to use it as a sort of lens into the things that we're missing or that we need. I think it's not a great answer to those things that are missing, but it still shines a light on what a lot of people are missing about childhood, about schools right now. What people seem to be saying they want is more connection and more time to relate to children and for children to relate to one another, and they want ways to deal with the huge feelings that are coming into classrooms.

Kathleen went on to share a story about her own child and the heavy weight that so many youth are carrying. Just as it is important not to present children as one-dimensionally traumatized, unwell, or in crisis, it is *also* important not to romanticize them as happy-go-lucky or endlessly resilient:

> Clio, when you were telling the story about the boy who had no heat, I actually just thought of this interaction I had with my own kid this weekend. She was getting ready to go to Homecoming, she's fifteen. We were downtown and she had just gotten a manicure, and she was just delighting in her manicure and thinking about the homecoming dance, and it was this perfect fall day, she was just like, out of nowhere, "Mama, isn't it so sad the world is gonna end soon?" You know, children are grappling with these huge realities. Even children who are relatively privileged and getting ready for Homecoming—I think they have so much weighing on them, and I think teachers and parents and—we need some tools to help them hold together a lot of really complex feelings…I don't believe that this desire for SEL should be squashed or thrown in the trash. At the same time, so many of the things we've talked about as its limitations: I think there's a level of dehumanization, there's a level of it being more simplistic than human interaction actually is, there's a level of kind of lying to kids and telling them we're giving them a tool that is maybe more universal and powerful than it actually is. I don't know. I like a lot of the tools, but I wish they could be

> presented with more context, with more real talk about inequality and some of the things that might make those tools more or less useful to different people at different times.

"I'm sympathetic to what you're saying, Kathleen, and also I feel generally more negative about SEL as a practice," replied Clio:

> I *definitely* would never say schools and teachers shouldn't reckon with the emotional lives of children or teachers. I just really think SEL is a misguided way of doing it, and I'd rather see it go away. But I don't think that's gonna happen, you know, because it's really trendy and has gained even more attraction as such since the beginning of the pandemic. So I guess I do feel like we need to find ways to work within it. But I find that it basically drives a bigger wedge between children and teachers. It's like one more curriculum to get through. I think it's true that this sort of desperation for relationality and emotional integrity in the classroom is very much there, and yet…there's a whole host of problems around that. For example, in teacher licensing, the drive is increasingly towards content knowledge and increasingly less towards anything around child development or emotional life…so there's this hegemony of content. And then SEL gets fit in as one of the content areas. I guess I think it's primarily destructive. I mean, I think there are a lot of other ways that schools could be spending that twenty-five minutes.

Clio went on to consider what would happen if "SEL time" were replaced with asking teachers to "do a little bit more internal work in thinking about how *they* want to talk about feelings—their own feelings and kids' feelings."

> To me, that's almost definitely going to be better than having something predetermined, a predetermined set of language and skills. I mean, I personally am very disinclined to think of anything around social and emotional life in terms of "skills." I find it problematic that—I mean, it's language from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, it's language from neuroscience to a certain extent, it's language from the way that learning sciences in general have kind of colonized education. I do think it's dehumanizing. I think it's dehumanizing to teachers as well as to children.

Clio then shared another example from her classroom observations: In this story, a boy was sent away from the group because he was being disruptive, and he sat alone at a desk angrily stomping his feet. A girl in the class quietly and stealthily scooted over to the floor beneath his chair and gifted him a tiny piece of paper, folded up many times. Together, they unfolded the paper and counted the squares (in ones and twos), then refolded and unfolded, co-regulating their bodies outside of the teacher's recognition. "And there's just no space for the teacher to even look at that and notice," said Clio.

> The teacher doesn't even have a minute to *think* about that, because she is just reading from the playbook, so I guess it's all just a long-winded way of saying I would rather see it go away entirely, and to kind of go back to the drawing board and think about what are we doing with feelings when they come into schools? But I don't actually see that happening. So I think we do have to figure out ways to work within it.

In my (Emma's) critical work on SEL, I come up against this tension time and time again: as Kathleen discussed, there is a *reason* people are so readily incorporating SEL into the zeitgeist, and yet that reason may be simultaneously bound to a desire for social and emotional wholeness *and* a capitalistic urge to marketize, measure, and manage the ways in which human beings experience their social and emotional worlds (Apple, 2004; Williamson, 2021). What happens when social and emotional awareness is brought into a neoliberal understanding of education as the acquisition of "tools" and "skills" that can be classified and compared for competitive aims that ultimately serve a white, colonial, oligarchical, and heteropatriarchal status quo? As I (Emma) said in my own closing comments, "I think just sitting with these questions and grappling with the reality of it, and the imaginaries of what [social and emotional learning] *could* be and what *else* could be happening, all of that is something I hope we can all be considering at this moment."

Conclusion

Recently, I (Emma) presented a conference paper in a session entitled, "Parents' and Teachers' Loving Critiques of SEL." As I said at the end of my presentation, I am not sure how well my work fits into that title. Like many scholars, I examine SEL through a critical lens, and I *would* say my critique comes from a place of love. That love is for children, for teachers, for families and communities. I have a fierce love for the relational and emotional parts of ourselves that cannot be neatly or formulaically wrangled into predetermined lessons and learning objectives. I also have a certain kind of love for pragmatism in the sense of valuing and building from that which feels right, authentic, or even fleetingly beneficial, and I believe many people (teachers and children alike) *have* experienced those kinds of feelings from particular renditions of SEL—including those that address social injustices and are not confined into pre-scripted lesson blocks. All that love, however, is not synonymous with love for SEL itself. By saying we critique something "lovingly," we maintain the premise that the thing itself is untouchable, no matter how rigorous the debate may be beneath it. If SEL "works," for what and for whom does it work…what does that work *do?* I often return to this quote from Noam Chomsky (1998):

> The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum—even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate. (p. 43)

Where are the limits to the range of the debate around SEL? How might we simultaneously recognize the reality of those limits and imagine beyond them (e.g., a reality in which the paradigm of SEL transitions into localized community-building, increased playtime, revamped social studies education, and an overarching commitment to dismantle capitalistic and colonial empires), while also recognizing how we might "work within" a phenomenon that is unlikely to soon disappear? Audré Lorde (1984) states that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." SEL is in some ways a tool of the master, through its entanglements with colonial models of personhood (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021), white-supremacist manifestations (Simmons, 2019), and political conglomerates seeking to utilize social and emotional data for economic ends (Williamson, 2021). A question we cannot help but ask, however, is whether SEL could simultaneously become a repurposed strategy of disruption, a transformative phenomenon that *could* be taken up in radical

ways within the classroom, an assemblage of practices with undeniable momentum behind them that could be redirected in new/revitalized ways.

Kathleen Hulton and Clio Stearns both illuminate and probe these sometimes-invisible limits on the debate around SEL, and their voices remind us not to lose sight of macro-level concerns amidst trendy, glossy representations of the micro (e.g., SEL tools and programs). At the same time, they remind us not to lose sight of the *micro,* whether it is a moment of unscripted solidarity between children or an excitedly critical lesson still labeled as "SEL," that continue to materialize beneath all the problems of the macro. Talking is not enough, but it is something…through collective conversation, both orally and in written form, perhaps we might move closer to the kinds of re-thinking, re-storying, and re-materializing that are necessary for social and emotional humanity at this moment.

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Dr. Emma McMain (she/her) is a postdoctoral teaching associate in Educational Psychology at Washington State University. Her teaching and scholarship, including professional development with K-12 teachers, are deeply rooted in relational, discursive, and affect-driven frameworks and methodologies. She brings a critical and qualitative lens to explore how curricula, media, educational practices, and teachers' and students' lived experiences are shaped by gender, race, anthropocentrism, and neoliberal notions of personhood. Emma currently teaches courses in classroom

assessment and qualitative research methods for pre-service and in-service educators. ORCId: 0000-0002-2267-9590. Emma.mcmain@wsu.edu

Dr. Brandon Edwards-Schuth (he/they) is a postdoctoral researcher for the University of Oulu's *CitiRats* citizen science and multispecies justice youth education project funded by the Academy of Finland. Brandon received their PhD in Cultural Studies and Social Thought in Education from Washington State University and their MA and BA in Philosophy from San Diego State University. Brandon's research is situated at the intersections of Eco-Democratic education, social activist movements, Social Studies, Critical Game Studies, and Critical Podcast Research Methodologies. ORCId: 0000-0002-2010-8604. b.edwards-schuth@wsu.edu

Middle School Teacher Enactment of State Curricular Mandates

Meghan A. Kessler, Illinois State University

Abstract

This article presents the findings from a yearlong narrative inquiry of teacher enactment of state mandated curricular reform in middle level social studies. Four brief narratives and cross-narrative themes are presented to provide examples of the complexities of teacher decision making and positionality when implementing new reforms. Analysis found teachers engaged in dynamic processes of interpreting, negotiating, and responding when enacting the SS reforms. Further, this enactment manifested in three themes. These found teachers engaging in ethical determinations, grappling with competing expectations, and feeling fatigued resistance. This article provides a nuanced, narrative perspective on teacher enactment of SS curricular reforms, finding teacher perceptions an important, but not all-encompassing element of teacher decision making.

Keywords: *teacher's lives; social studies education; curriculum reform; state policy*

It is well known that many policy initiatives can be a burden for teachers; teachers' voices and perspectives are often marginalized, and initiatives can be overly technocratic or reductive. Yet, as some educational reforms have moved to broaden representation and justice in the social studies, there may also be elements of reform that teachers find appealing. This article shares the results of a narrative inquiry of the enactment (Ball, et al., 2012) of state-mandated social studies curricular reform (SSSR) by four social studies teachers. Using a narrative inquiry approach, four *teachers' reform stories* (Craig, 2007; 2020) are shared, illuminating unique enactments of policy. To broaden the lessons provided by these teachers, I provide the results of a cross-narrative thematic analysis to provide new insights about teacher practice and reform and the multidimensional nature of teachers' work and experiences while enacting reform.

Literature Review and Interpretive Frame

This review has been kept brief to provide more space to the teachers' reform stories. However, two specific practices were named in the state mandates associated with this study: controversial issues-based instruction and informed action. As the teachers in this study were asked to discuss their pedagogical choices associated with these two concepts, I provide a brief review of this literature alongside a review of literature on teacher enactment of reform.

Teacher Enactment of Reform

Steven Ball and colleagues' (2012) theory of enactment illuminates the agentic, nonlinear nature of teachers' enactment of school reforms/policies. From this conceptual frame, enactment of reforms is constituted by "jumbled, messy, contested, creative, and [even] mundane interactions" that link policy to practice" (Ball, et al., 2012, p. 2). Educators will inevitably have political and emotional responses to reform and policy, which inform their selection, uptake, rejection, and even subversion. When teachers interpret, translate, and enact policies or reforms, they often do so reflective of their institutional context and schools' relationships with local communities (Sannino, 2010b).

Educators engage with both centralized and decentralized systems of change in their profession. However, when it comes to making choices about reform, teachers make specific choices based on what they know to be effective within their teaching strengths, student needs, and institutional settings. This may often follow an "adoption-adaptation-evolution" trajectory, depending on how reforms are initially introduced to teachers and within school structures (Hung, et al., 2016, p. 150). It is crucial that researchers, school leaders, and policy makers acknowledge that teacher agency is a critical component of education reform. Relatedly, teacher identity should be considered the "centerpiece" when understanding uptake and implementation of innovations or reform (Chee, et al., 2015). Teachers make agentic choices in implementation, and perhaps more importantly, these agentic choices are mediated by teachers' understandings of and commitments to their professional identities (Tao & Gao, 2017). This may be why, in some cases, teachers' responses to policies and reforms are characterized by resistance or even subversion. This is particularly true when policies or reform initiatives are at odds with teachers' values.

Critical policy researchers have recently engaged with concepts of enactment, performativity, and context to unpack the complexities of the tensions that can arise between mandates and practices (Singh, 2014). This framework is useful for analysis on a global scale (Singh, 2018). For example, Ball (2003) argues that the potential inauthenticity required for enactment pushes teachers to engage in "fabrications" of their work to align or comply. This evolves from teachers being posited as subjects whose work often is boiled down to narrow interpretations of teaching, with policing of conformity emerging as hallmarks of compliance (Vick & Martinez, 2011). In one comprehensive analysis of teachers' enactment of and potential resistance to accountability-oriented curricular reforms, Sloan (2006) found that teachers take an active role in reading and responding to mandates. This is an agentic process that finds identity as a central and meaningful component. Further, teachers' agentic enactments of such reforms are more complex than simple resistance. As Sloan states, "the overall quality and equity effects of accountability policies depend[s] on a variety of complex and interrelated factors. However,…site-specific factors are some of the most robust" (p. 146). This should inspire researchers to move beyond good/bad or implemented/resisted binaries and instead focus on unpacking the multi-layered and dynamic nature of teacher enactment of reform.

Sannino (2010a) describes the positive aspects of resistance, showing that resistance can often be a signifier of agency; that teacher may be caught between teaching values and the ideological emphasis of a given reform or policy. These tensions may be particularly pronounced in the United States, where social problems are often "educationalized" rather than being dealt with substantively in other ways (Labaree, 2008). Indeed, teacher identity is inextricably intertwined

with school policy, politics, and policy enactment. As Zembylas and Chubbuck note, teacher identities are socially situated; "politicized, discontinuous, and shifting" (2018, n.p.). This calls for a more nuanced and individually situated approach to analyses of teacher enactment of reform.

Teacher identity is particularly important when understanding the specific role of resistance or subversion in enactment of reform. For some time, researchers have discussed teacher uptake versus resistance to school reform while not appreciating that teachers are often acting in "good sense" when resisting, taking into consideration time, power structures, and potential "fundamental" shifts in their work (Gitlin & Margolis, 1995). Further, most policy and education reformers fail to consider teachers' emotions and the potential impact of reforms on their sense of wellbeing in their work (Zembylas, 2010).

Controversial Issues

Historically, the field of social studies education has been contested ground. Despite generations of debate and policy about how to prepare future U.S. citizens, consensus remains elusive and rhetoric ever-changing, which has been argued to be a failure to reach potential (Evans, 2004). Indeed, some scholars have noted a tension between the social studies' responsibility for cultural transmission and critical thinking (Ross, 2006). More recently, the imperative to foreground diversity and equity in systems and practices has increased. As our national political, social, and cultural tides continue to shift, leaders in the field have identified that at last seven categorical social issues should be addressed (Levy, et al., 2023). Social studies (SS) educators have a particular role to play in this area—both in the content of their lessons as well as the foundational principles of their work. One element of justice-oriented SS teaching is the infusion of "controversial" issues, which were mandated in the policy enactments explored in this study. Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess have led research in this area. They argue that schools are the perfect setting for students to engage in meaningful, intentional, democratic discussions of controversial political and social issues (Hess, 2009), providing potential for nonpartisan political education, deliberations, and safe settings for attending to the polarization and inequities that characterize our societies (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). However, teachers need professional learning and structural support to enact these practices, especially when justice and diversity are the goal. Since the publication of these groundwork pieces, others have engaged in study of these pedagogical approaches, finding that teachers most often emphasize discussion and deliberation; others emphasize trust and relationships to balance the power dynamics and emotional responses that often accompany such discussions (Ho, et al., 2017). Further, teachers may also choose to utilize controversial images in justice-oriented lessons, although this is an emerging area of study (Hawley, et al., 2016). The integration of controversies is an imperative for the health and sustainability of democratic citizenship education and democracy in general (Misco & Shiveley, 2016).

Informed Action

Analyses of state standards have found that informed action and critical thinking are features of several state standards, even for the youngest students (Odebiyi, 2021). This can take many forms, but can include the integration of participatory technologies (Holmes & Manfra, 2022) and other modalities. In social studies and civic education, informed action is designed to help students take civic action or participate in civic experiences inside and outside of the classroom (Croddy & Levine, 2014; Levinson & Levine, 2013; Parker, 2003). Like controversial issues, the integration

of informed action is intended to provide students with opportunities to engage in real-world practice of democratic processes. This involves supporting students to act in their communities inspired by what they've learned in SS lessons. It can also include engagement with external stakeholders or peers. Such practices are proposed by the National Council for the Social Studies' College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework as the culminating practice at the end of a unit.

SS Teacher Practice in Context

Researchers have argued that SS teachers are powerful actors and advocates in the pursuit of a more just society (Agarwal, 2011; Bender-Slack & Rupach, 2008; King & Kasun, 2013; Sibbett & Au, 2017; Stevens & Martell, 2021), yet policymakers can be allies or foils to justice-oriented SS teaching and learning (Stout & Wilburn, 2021). In particular, the rising tide of divisive, misleading narratives about "controversial" or cultural/identity issues plus populist politics have motivated many scholars to call for greater attention to SS as an area of practical and scholarly inquiry (Breakstone, et al., 2018; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; McGrew, et al., 2018). This is in part, to counter the potentially damaging rhetoric prevalent in today's media (Anderson & Zyhowski, 2018; Huang & Cornell, 2019; Journell, 2017; & van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). To this end, support and professional learning for SS education is more consequential than ever. Further, teachers' voices should be an essential element to aid understanding of the enactment of such initiatives. With that in mind, the following theoretical frames have guided my analysis of SS teacher enactment of state mandates.

Narrative Inquiry and Enactment

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) assert, "methods for the study of personal experience [i.e., narrative inquiries] are simultaneously focused in four directions: inward and outward, backward and forward" (p. 417). Each of these are interrelated and vital components of a narrative analysis. However, this paper will narrow its focus to the internal-facing elements of teacher/reform stories; that is, the *inward* and the *backward*. Here, *inward* refers to "the interactional conditions of feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions, and so on" (p. 417) of teacher stories, while *backward* refers to the temporal, historical, or past. By examining elements of teacher/reform stories focusing inward and backward, I hope to highlight elements of each teachers' story to highlight the potential and limitations of social studies reform.

Analysis of teachers' stories and teachers' reform stories (Craig, 2007; 2020) can illuminate the multidimensional aspects of teachers' lives. These stories can reveal joys and successes but can also reveal the "chasms that can open between personal and professional knowledge landscapes, between imagined and lived stories, between who each is as a person and who each is as a teacher" (Schaefer, et al., 2019, p. 24).

To analyze the impact of policy (in this case state-mandated changes in SS curriculum) on the lives and work of teachers, I utilize Ball, et al.'s (2012) concept of policy *enactment*. This concept attends to the agentic process of layered policy interpretations. Enactment of policy inevitably becomes intertwined with teachers' understandings of self; teacher identity and agency are in constant, dynamic interaction with their situational realities (Buchanan, 2015; Hall & McGinty, 2015; Zembylas, 2005), which is perhaps best understood through the structure of story (Clandinin

& Connelly, 1998). "Stories such as these, lived and told, educate the self and others, including…those, such as researchers, who are new to their communities" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415).

In sum, the constant churn of education reform during the last several decades has left many teachers feeling burned out, demoralized, or fatigued (e.g., Ball, et al., 2012; Dilkes, et al., 2014, Dworkin, 2008; Orlando, 2014; Santoro, 2018), calling into question the appetite for and efficacy of what may otherwise be well-intentioned—even popular—justice-oriented SS education policies or reforms. Research in this area has often explored the impact of testing and standardization. However, less attention has been paid to reform of disciplines traditionally under less testing scrutiny, such as the social studies (SS). In this political and reform context, my research intends to investigate the experiences and perceptions of SS teachers.

This following will present findings from a year-long, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that examined four middle level social studies (MLSS) teachers' *enactment* (Ball, et al., 2012) of curricular reform during the discursive realities and storied landscapes described above.

Methodology

With this interpretive frame in mind, the research question guiding this study was: How do teachers' personal-professional stories interact with and shape their enactment of state-mandated curricular reform? To unpack the dynamic complexity of teacher experience in this context, and maintain relational researcher positionality, I utilized narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As both phenomenon and method, narrative involves "listening to individuals tell their stories and living alongside participants as they live their stories" (p. 543).

School and Policy Context

This study was undertaken during the implementation of new SSSR (state-mandated social studies curricular reform) requiring teachers to integrate "controversial issues" and "informed action" into their teaching. Specifically, the state legislature passed a law requiring every public school in the state to include one semester of civics instruction in the middle school years (SGA, 2015; 2020). This instruction could be embedded across social studies curriculum (i.e., districts could determine how to integrate the new mandates into their curricula in a manner most appropriate for the structure of the social sciences and teaching assignments at a given school). Further social studies educators were now required to revise their curriculum to include service learning, discussion of contemporary and societal (re: controversial) issues, simulation of democratic processes, and general instruction in government institutions. Educators across the social sciences were also required to integrate social science inquiry within their disciplinary categories. Teachers in the state were provided professional learning supports for the integration of these mandates by their local districts and/or a large professional development agency that was well known and worked primarily on civics education. At the time when these new mandates went into law, they were not controversial within the political climate of the state. Further, because they were allowed to be integrated in a somewhat bespoke manner, districts and teachers had a relative amount of agency (compared with other more accountability-driven mandates). No high stakes testing or revisions to state standards accompanied these SSSR, however a complete overhaul of the state's social studies standards was underway for implementation in several years. More details about

how this context relates to each *teacher's reform stories* (Craig, 2007; 2020) is provided in the findings below.

Participants

Four middle-level social studies (MLSS) teachers were recruited through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2014). I sought participants who self-identified as integrating the SSSR. These teachers also agreed to allow me access to their planning and curriculum documents, host me for frequent participant observations, and sit for several interviews over the course of the school year.

Data Collection and Analysis

I visited each participant two to four times a month September 2019 through March 2020. The field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) I collected transcriptions from interviews, notes from observations, and documents from the teachers' classrooms. Data collection was intended to continue through the end of the 2019-2020 school year but was cut short due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Craig (2007) suggests, the process or method of narrative inquiry in analysis of reform stories is a multi-step process. Citing Connelly and Clandinin (1990), this process begins with *broadening* the teacher/reform story to understand how the influences and complexities of teachers' professional knowledge landscapes become revealed (Craig, 2007, p. 179). Then, researchers engage in *burrowing* to reconstruct "events from the point of view of the central participants" (179), and finally, restorying to unpack and understand the choices of individuals in context, which "makes the turbulence, tensions, and epistemological dilemmas that invariably appear in teachers' lives visible" (p. 180).

Results: Policy and Teacher/Reform Stories

Amid increasing student activism, political polarization, media misinformation, and recognition of underrepresented historical perspectives, the state in which this study took place began implementing a series of reforms to its SS curricular mandates (Anonymized SGA, 2016, 2020). These required MLSS teachers to engage students in units of instruction dealing with "controversial" social issues and "informed action". The following teacher/reform stories are presented in an abbreviated "story serial" format (Craig, 2020) to honor the unique "teacher and reform stories" (Craig, 2007) of each and stay within word count. All names, including those of schools, are pseudonyms.

Liz

Liz identified as a white woman and was approaching her fifteenth year of teaching when we met. She was born and raised in the community in which she taught and cared deeply about serving her students and their families in a locally relevant yet globally minded manner. She was a well-regarded and successful MLSS teacher, recognized by administrators and colleagues. One of the many reasons Liz had gained this reputation was through her appetite for professional development and leadership. In addition to her master's degree, Liz had traveled, volunteered, and earned certificates from national teaching organizations.

Liz's classroom was cozy, organized, colorful, and meticulously decorated with flexible seating, designated workstations, a variety of lamps, and numerous posters and photographs of cultures from around the world. It was a comfortable and unique setting in which to teach and learn. Students were seated in teams of four or five, often working collaboratively.

Many of the elements of the SSSR were already features of Liz's teaching. She helped lead her district's MLSS initiative to redesign the sequence of courses around conceptual themes like power, interdependence, and cultural diversity. Her curriculum featured multiculturalism, student inquiry, and informed action. Despite structural challenges to these efforts, Liz was resilient.

What supported Liz's enactment of the SSSR was overall alignment with her teaching. Further, these emphases supported Liz's identification as a public school teacher. She was particularly aware of the implications of her identity as a white teacher serving children of color: "We work with the public. We're exposed to many different things that impact our students—the good and the bad—so it's important that we support our students as whole individuals, expand their worldviews, validate their identities." Liz loved her students and felt supported by colleagues and administrators to engage in critical and ambitious social studies teaching. This manifested as a revised student activism unit, a key example of her enactment of SSSR.

After researching examples of adolescent activists from around the world and social causes, students constructed books. "They literally write chapter books about teen activism! They get into causes, effects, and conclude with a call to action, like what should people do now? How can we be inspired by these teen activists?"

As her teen activism unit revealed, Liz's teacher story and reform story were in sync. Revising her sixth grade SS curriculum, the enactment of SSSR was primarily about seizing the moment to forge ahead with topics relevant to her students. She was already engaging in most of what the state was mandating, so she used SSSR to dig a bit deeper:

> I've added, "What's *your* responsibility as a *citizen*? How can *you* be a teen activist *today*? It can be a lot of work and kind of intimidating to try these new types of projects, but you just try it and then suddenly, you're like, "Oh my gosh! How did you all write entire chapter books?" It's exciting to see what they come up with. And then, in April the sixth-grade class will pick one topic to focus on. They'll be in groups, creating an action plan for teen activism here in [our city]. And then we'll have them do it. Anything they want. We're going to give them some ideas to start, but mostly we're here to guide them.

Liz was already leading her students through the two main requirements of SSSR. They were engaging in conversations about social issues and were beginning work on projects that would be shared with a larger audience.

Unfortunately, the pandemic derailed informed action. However, Liz's teacher/reform story provides one example of how a teacher can leverage student interest towards policy enactment that is aligned with one's teaching values—especially when a teacher has support.

Yet despite her generally supportive environment and extensive qualifications, Liz felt teachers' work was under-respected:

> Sometimes, we are like public enemy number one. We're the fixers but "P.S., you've done everything wrong and why aren't you fixing it?" It's like, "No, we're doing a good job and we have wonderful kids in this community." We're doing great things with limited resources.

This extended to parent perceptions of the students' activism inquiry topics, which interrupted her curriculum, and therefore, enactment of SSSR. Here, tension wasn't with the reforms, but with the public's reticence towards certain topics.

> Sometimes we get pushback and parents call the district office. It's just crazy. I'll give you an example. Bullying can be focused on specific groups. Maybe students who are transgender or gay, you know? Our principal didn't like that. Which is problematic because we have not only children in our school who are gay, but also teaching staff. We've had transgender students. So, it's kind of like admin saying, "Well I'm worried about what other people are going to say." But I feel like, no, these topics are real. These are real students, real staff members we must support. This is their life and we're a public school. The public means everyone. School is supposed to be a safe place.

Towards the end of the school year, Liz began to resist; deciding to follow the students' inquiries and negotiate with parents later rather than open her curriculum up for questioning by the district before it had even begun: "I've learned to not necessarily run everything by admin. These are the topics the district has approved. This is what the students are interested in. Let's support them." Liz's story is one of synchronicity between teacher and reform stories, yet contextual factors complicated her enactments.

Jerry

Jerry identified as an early middle aged white man. He was a second-career teacher with a warm presence and sincere concern for his students' civic and social-emotional development. He was raised in the region where he taught and was committed to leveraging his teaching to contribute to an informed and empowered citizenry—particularly in the historically marginalized Black communities where he taught. Jerry's classroom was tidy, with the teacher's desk at the front of the room near a digital whiteboard and desks in clusters of four. The walls were decorated with posters of prominent Black Americans and social-emotional learning themes.

Jerry was passionate about his role as an educator in *public* schools: "An informed citizenry…is the only way to maintain a republic. The founding fathers wrote on this." He wanted his students not only to benefit from the mission of public schooling, but to care for themselves, their classmates, and their communities. As Jerry put it:

> My job is to care for them as whole people. It can take a while. There are students that are just now coming around, but you've got to have patience. They are under so much pressure that you and I wouldn't have had at that age.

When asked about his integration SSSR, Jerry said, "This is something I have done for a long time." He did his best to thread together several initiatives while maintaining what he knew how to do well—utilizing primary sources to make modern-day connections while emphasizing relationships. These connections ranged from current events such as the Black Lives Matter movement to wealth distribution. Rather than stating "controversial" social issues as focal points of a lesson or unit, Jerry prompted connections.

Jerry's students experienced high rates of adversity, which further reinforced his commitment to building supportive relationships above all else:

> We're also a school that's 98% poverty. When your water has been turned off, and you didn't get to wash your face, or when someone in the neighborhood is causing conflict with you or your family, or you've just come from a class where you felt disrespected by a student, a teacher, or whoever, you cannot learn in that fight or flight mode.

This related to Jerry's vision of teaching itself as activism:

> If I reach them socially and emotionally, they're going to trust me. Then when we move on to the bigger things, they'll be more likely to engage. They see me listening, being concerned. That is my form of activism. Caring about your students, your fellow human beings.

This manifested through classroom discussions connecting history content to structural issues such as racial and social justice. He felt that history class was "where it all should happen"—where students contextualize modern-day issues through historical foundations. He held an optimistic view of U.S. history, emphasizing moral and humanistic trends, calling it the "journey of humankind," in which Americans struggled to "search for justice." Systemic inequities and injustices "didn't just pop up overnight; some of these hatreds had been going on for thousands of years."

Jerry often utilized analogies to connect historic events to modern-day and/or humanistic themes. For example, he asked students to consider forced assimilation, removal, and genocide of Native American populations. Students read excerpts and secondary sources on Jefferson and Jackson, before engaging in discussion. Jerry asked his students to think about what other contemporary events seemed, to them, similar in tone, intention, or function. One student compared it to a college prep program that was recently implemented in her school. She focused her comparison on the program's emphasis on organization and college-ready character traits, making loose connections to colonization. In reflecting on this student's connections, Jerry was impressed, saying, "I see the similarities. It changes the way you're living your life. A new paradigm comes in and changes everything."

These teaching moves both aligned and diverged from SSSR. Jerry agreed with the intention and emphases of SSSSR. However, he was also beholden to numerous other initiatives, including social-emotional curriculum, a college preparatory program, new management practices, and curriculum redesign. These local reforms and Jerry's own teaching values took precedence over SSSR in his enactments.

Emma

Emma identified as a white woman in her early twenties. Emma had been teaching in her affluent suburban district for about three years when I visited. She endeavored to provide her MLSS students with a multicultural, critical, and justice-oriented perspective, and engaged in professional learning opportunities and her local teachers' union to build her own strengths.

Emma's classroom was bright, organized, and decorated with student art and encouraging quotes. She posted the learning targets, homework, and three things she was grateful for. Students were seated in groups and collaborated frequently. Each period, students filed into the room, grabbed the day's handouts and some tape. They settled in at their desks, opened their notebooks, and taped the handouts on a fresh page. These served as structures for the day: outlines for notes,

record of learning objectives and homework, and pace to write appreciations. This structured, procedural organization was characteristic of Emma's teaching. When it came to SSSR, she said, "I'm thinking of this as civics-oriented teaching. Particularly as modern-day social issues and key current issues." This was partially informed by student interest:

> My students are very split politically. I would guess ten percent are super liberal and ten percent are super conservative, and those are the ones who latch on to current events and speak up. I have one student who is really interested in economics. I can think of one student who is interested in gun legislation. But most of the other students don't particularly know what's going on or aren't super interested yet.

Because she had grown up in the community in which she now taught and had come to appreciate her own social/cultural positionality, Emma was passionate about developing her students into citizens who could understand their racial and economic privileges and see the U.S. through a more critical lens. While not every single student in her class enjoyed such privileges, the vast majority did, and so Emma made it a point to draw historical and contemporary connections when contextualizing inequities and injustices in U.S. society. "We ask, 'Has life truly improved for these five groups that we're studying?' Such as immigrants, women, Black Americans. I'm hoping this year we can make more explicit connections to today, as opposed to just analyzing the past." Economic issues—or viewing social issues and inequities through an economic lens—were particularly engaging for Emma's students, and she leaned into that interest. She pushed them to reconsider the infallibility of meritocracy by characterizing historical systems established in the late nineteenth century as "greedy," asking students to consider how these structural inequities had been maintained over time.

Emma also relied on metaphor. For example, she posited wealth distribution as "pieces of pie." However, she informed students that only about ten percent of Americans held almost 90 percent of the country's pie pieces (wealth). When discussing this idea with her students, she said, "We have this idea that the harder you work, the more pieces of pie you should get…[But] some people make money by manipulating politicians and taking advantage of marginalized workforces."

Yet, Emma felt pressure from her administrator to keep things relatively "neutral" in the classroom.

> Unfortunately, I only really feel comfortable engaging with controversial topics in certain ways…Some of our teachers are Trump supporters, and some [students] think he's funny because Trump's the loudest person in the room, but I have other students who push back and want to be able to argue ideas. I try to keep it civil and safe, but I don't engage head-on with all of it because I don't necessarily want to alienate them.

Interestingly, Emma's administrator and her students' parents seemed to feel that it was possible to keep her curriculum apolitical or "neutral" by keeping the focus on historical events. As she put it, "My administration encouraged me to not be super current events-y." Because of this, Emma chose to continually ground conversations about social issues within historical examples.

> One instance was when I wanted to include a Trump tweet in a nativism lesson and my principal said, "No, don't rock the boat on this one." And then the next year, I wanted to show a video about Emmett Till, but my principal was like, "No, you can't show the really

> graphic parts." And I'm like, "I fundamentally disagree with this, but okay." He likes to tread carefully.

Emma still felt that she was falling short on her enactment of the state mandates and her own goals to develop her students' critical, justice-oriented lenses. For example, she characterized her attempts at integrating informed action as "bad" despite the relevance and rigor of the assignment.

> [For one unit] they were asked to write a letter to our state senators… I told them that I'd send them, but they made comments like, "You're not really going to send 170 letters." It felt very inauthentic to them, and their final work was not their best.

It seemed that there were just too many competing demands at play. Emma felt pressure from her administrator to be neutral and please her students' parents/guardians, she was working hard on her own professional learning to stay up to date on the newest practices and reforms, all while doing her best to integrate her students' interests and push them to reconsider the world through more diverse perspectives. It was clear that this was difficult:

> Something that just frustrates me endlessly about education reform is that there's so many smart people having so many smart ideas. But I can't navigate them on my own, like which is the best idea? Or which is an idea that's going to fit well with my class and my teaching style?

Faye

Faye identified as an Asian American woman in her early twenties. She was in her fourth year of teaching at a large middle school in a mid-sized city. This city had a great deal of racial, linguistic, cultural, and economic diversity.

> As a social studies teacher, we can help our students to have conversations with the past. History acts as our consultant and it's kind of maybe a base line or standard for students to evaluate social issues as they become decision makers. Like, "Ah, my decisions will shape the future." The more conversations they have with people who are different, the better. I want them to be able to be strong critical thinkers.

Although she was just beginning her fourth year of teaching, Faye possessed the poise and perspective of a much more experienced educator. "It's so much harder to be a teacher these days," she reflected during our first conversation. What was "harder" was the numerous initiatives, policies, reforms, and demands (formal and informal) on Faye and her colleagues.

Faye was a highly motivated early career teacher with a strong desire to learn as much as she could to further her enactment of culturally sustaining and justice-oriented teaching. She was particularly passionate about supporting her students who were learning English for the first time.

> One thing on my mind a lot is the ELL/ESL students. I think that comes just from hearing stories in my family. For instance, my dad, who came to the States when he was young, and it was just such a struggle to get through school. He was handed *Dante's Inferno* as a teenager when he could hardly speak English. Or, in student teaching I had a student who

> was learning English. It was tough for him in government class, learning all those terms. I didn't want that excitement to be lost just from language.

Although she was taking a lot of initiative to grow her teaching knowledge and, there seemed to be a disconnect between what how she wanted to respond to students' cultural, developmental, and political positionalities and the numerous other initiatives at play. While Faye agreed with her district and state's numerous initiatives, she was overwhelmed by the long list of "must dos."

When it came to the SSSR, Faye wanted to let her students take the lead. She felt they knew what was most important to them as learners and citizens.

> I think within the social studies curriculum students seem to want to engage in discussion about what seems right or wrong. Often, they feel like, "How did they decide that? That's not right." Their feelings can be my guide. I love pitching big idea questions about decisions that have been made throughout history.

One controversial social issue relevant to Faye and her students was immigration and restrictions on who would be allowed to remain in the U.S. during the Trump administration.

> That was a little rawer. Students were sad, because we were hearing about families in our community who were fearful of being deported. Some students were jokingly more flippant about it. I don't know if they meant it, but it was just part of the political jargon. They would hear things on the TV or whatever and suddenly they're saying to classmates, "Oh yeah, you're going to get sent back to your country." But we had some students who were genuinely afraid. We have students who feel they are mistreated on the scale of the school—socially, politically. These students need to be advocated for. It's not okay that they are afraid. My relationships, my classroom, my curriculum needs to be a place where we can engage with these things.

However, tension existed between the rapidly evolving political landscape and other obligations. The SSSR, district initiatives, student interests and needs, curricular requirements competed. She summed it up this way:

> With the state and admin, integrating students' backgrounds, testing, good feedback, social emotional needs. It's so much. While they're [state mandates] awesome, it also makes it so difficult to be a teacher. Just the amount of responsibility. I just need time.

Results: Looking Across Stories to Learn About Enactment

I've followed Craig's (2007) lead in looking *across* stories to find common themes that elucidate the similarities and distinctions that are revealed by these stories of policy enactment. As the literature on the integration of controversial topics has found, teachers must attend to the complexity of their teaching contexts—including students social, emotional, and cultural needs—when engaging in these practices (Ho, et al., 2017). The teachers in this study represented a broad range of enactment, exposing the potentialities and limitations of state-mandated reform as a lever for transformative SS. All four MLSS teachers in this study felt their personal teaching commitments and values aligned with the interpreted intent of the SS curricular mandates. Further, all felt motivated by the moral, ethical, and civic import of their work with students, and saw these themes

represented in the heart of the state mandates. They felt it particularly important to support students' engagement with "controversial" social issues and learn how to engage in action in their communities during the current political climate.

However, the teacher/reform stories shared here also reveal each teacher's policy enactment (Ball, et al., 2012) work was characterized by a unique blend of personal, socio-political factors and the teachers' perceptions of their professional contexts. It was their interpretation of the latter that most frequently influenced their enactment of the reforms. In short, a clean line could not always be drawn from policy mandate to practice, regardless of each teacher's positive feelings about the focus of the reforms. This was an interactive and dynamic processes.

Who they saw themselves as teachers implicated the ways in which they organized their curriculum, how they leveraged current events (often called "teachable moments") in instruction towards efficacious enactment of the state mandates, and their perceptions of the new reform efforts contextualized within other reforms or policies to which they were held accountable. While teacher identity and professional goals did influence classroom practice, this influence was also in interaction with their understanding of their students and perceived expectations of state and institutional mandates.

As a result of this process, three themes emerged that characterize the nature of teacher enactment of state-mandated SS curricular reform. These are (1) teacher engagement with ethical determinations, (2) grappling with competing expectations, and (3) feeling fatigued resistance. I discuss these below.

Ethical Determinations

This dimension of policy enactment was one of the most impactful. The teachers in this study cared deeply about their students but needed lots of structural and administrative support to carry out reforms of their teaching. As other scholars have found (Wessel-Powell, et al., 2019), teachers in this study prioritized their time and teaching to enact what they saw as most important for their students and their teaching values. Teachers who felt administrative, parental/familial, and cultural support experienced less tension. Take the following quote from Liz as one example of this:

> Our principal will step in and say, "This doesn't work for us here." We also have curriculum heads at the district who let us take charge. They listen to us and say, "What do you want to do about these mandates?" Now I'm trying things I've wanted to do since I started teaching.

The process of making ethical determinations also meant that teachers would emphasize or prioritize things that they felt were most important or best aligned with their ethical commitments as teachers. This was most often related to teachers' perceptions of students' strengths, needs, and interests, but also the teachers' strengths or successes from their years of experience (such as the reliance on "teachable moments" or current events vs. pre-planned inquiries). Teachers also made determinations based on the prominence of external expectations or accountability, such as parental/family concerns, administrative directives or boundaries, local reform/curricular initiatives, and the teachers' interpretations of the intent of the state mandates.

Competing Expectations

The two teachers in this study who were earliest in their careers (Faye and Emma), placed pressure on themselves to implement the new mandates with fidelity. They were particularly excited about the potential to leverage the mandates for more justice-oriented themes in their teaching yet found this difficult amid so many other competing expectations. This tension illuminates the complicated reform stories of policy enactment that can arise among numerous, layered expectations.

This early evidence of competing—even overwhelming—expectations helps contextualize (in part) why all of the teachers in this story chose to enact reforms in a manner that was best matched to what their students' interests or perceived needs were *and* what these teachers knew they would be successful integrating. For example, for Emma, teaching with controversial social issues was not a binary or an all-or-nothing proposition. It was more about where she chose to draw the line and why. This line was negotiated by her individual teacher identity and motivations in concert with other contextual factors. In the example of Emma's teaching, lines were often drawn at the intersection of her curricular goals with parental concerns (as voiced by her administrator). It was permissible to discuss redlining, for example, but not to engage head-on with the concept of systemic racial privileges that were still realized by her and her students. Parent expectations about what was developmentally, culturally, and politically appropriate competed with Emma's interpretation of the state mandates and her own teaching goals.

In other cases, the persistence of competing expectations led more experienced teachers to simply rely on what they knew best how to do. Liz and Jerry were likewise experiencing competing expectations but felt more confident in their voice to fold in or highlight pre-existing elements of their teaching that were aligned with the state mandates.

Fatigued Resistance

Reform and policy fatigue are present factors for teachers, even in the best of circumstances. Looking across stories, fatigued resistance was especially present for teachers whose personal and contextual realities were misaligned with the ways in which the mandates were presented. Resistance was most teachers who felt a lack of agency and were fatigued by the constant churn of reform. This feeling persisted despite recent years' relative inattention to the SS as a target of reform in the state (compared with math and literacy).

Fatigued resistance emerged even when the teachers expressed support for the reforms. For example, Faye, who was just beginning her fourth year of teaching, was already concerned about burnout. Even though she found the ideas of the state mandates and other district-level reforms to be "awesome" it was simply too much to focus on at once. She felt frustrated at the lack of voice teachers were afforded in the process of developing and implementing state policy and wished there was more emphasis in her district on allowing teachers to do what they knew how to do best. Likewise, Emma was growing weary of the lack of time and support she was provided to design, assess, and redesign her curriculum. And Liz and Jerry, although positive about the reforms in general, were focusing on developing or continuing with things that they had done in past years of teaching. Liz was particularly frustrated in the lack of political and community support for teachers, saying she sometimes felt like "public enemy number one." She also said the following, which alludes to a sense of fatigue:

> I just feel like I commit so much time to my profession. Obviously, I know I'm getting a paycheck, but there's just so much more that we are expected to do now that it's almost a full-time job outside of the school day.

This provides evidence that even when teachers agree with reform or policy initiatives, there is still too heavy an overall burden. This is created by the constant cycle and numerous demands, a felt lack of respect for teachers' professional knowledge, and a lack of time to learn, experiment, and evaluate new ideas.

Discussion & Conclusion

While others have investigated teachers' resistance to reforms divergent from teaching values (e.g., Dyches, et al., 2020; Hall & McGinty, 2015), this paper provides a storied perspective on the impact of policy/reform mandates with which teachers agree. It is my hope that this brings attention to the diverse and wide-ranging factors that inform how social studies educators engage with and enact state mandated curriculum reforms. More specifically, the narratives shared in this study draw attention to the ways which each teacher's unique professional contexts can act as resources to support enactment of critical, justice-oriented social studies. Every participant in this study held passionate beliefs in the importance of SS curriculum as a tool for social and civic ends. However, as this study implies, only when teacher agency and supportive teaching contexts are present will teachers have the emotional and logistical bandwidth to sustain integrations.

While the text of state mandates did not explicitly mention social justice or equity as the end goal, the teacher/reform stories featured in this paper illuminate the potential fertility of these policies for such ends. Yet, reform fatigue, underwhelming support, and a history of revolving door mandates seemed to undercut this potential, creating tension and stress in the realities of the outstanding teachers who were working so hard as it was. This study illuminates the potentialities and limitations of (potentially) justice-oriented, state-mandated reform. Yet, without attention to teacher agency, reform fatigue and a history of revolving door mandates may undercut this potential.

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Meghan A. Kessler is an Assistant Professor of Middle Level Education at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. Her research investigates teacher education policy and practice, particularly teacher enactment of school- and state-level policies. She is also interested in teacher identity and emotion, middle level justice-oriented social studies instruction, and whole-child pedagogies. Prior to pursuing her Ph.D., Meghan taught middle and high school social studies in multiple districts across Illinois.

Constructing Youth Identities: Newspaper Coverage of Exclusionary Discipline

Brandon D. Mitchell, University of Louisville
Carl D. Greer, University of Wisconsin—Madison

Abstract

The school reliance on exclusionary discipline drives behavioral inequities and sustains the marginalization of youth in schools. The narratives of punishment often extend beyond the walls of the school system and may be reinforced by news media discourse. Nevertheless, the relationship between news media discourse and the school disciplinary structure is an understudied area of research. Using critical discourse techniques—with a theoretical framework of critical race and news framing theories—we analyze news coverage of exclusionary discipline across (N = 64) newspaper articles. Our findings underscore news discourse with a hyper-focus on youth deficits, stigmatizing portrayals of violence and blame, and teacher resistance to discipline alternatives and reform. Discursive absence included a lack of youth and family voices and perspectives, and a disconnection from the systemic mechanisms that shape the disciplinary structure. We conclude with implications for educators, policymakers, and scholars—as we advocate for a re-invigorated focus toward the equitable support and inclusion of youth.

Keywords: *exclusionary discipline; suspensions; media; newspaper articles; critical discourse analysis*

If we focus on defiant or destructive behavior,
the young person becomes the problem.
Brendtro et al., 2019, pp. 35

The disproportionate reliance on exclusionary discipline continues to lead to the exclusion of youth from educational opportunities. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) revealed that students were excluded from school for a total of 11,205,797 days due to out-of-school suspensions during the 2017-2018 school year. Disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline are LGBTQ youth, youth with disabilities, and racially minoritized youth—Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Latinx—with higher rates and more severe punishment (see U.S. DOE, 2021). Exclusionary discipline can be understood as an umbrella term entailing suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and referrals to law enforcement (Wymer et al., 2020). Since 2017, some exclusionary practices have risen, including school-based arrests (+5%) and referrals to law enforcement (+12%; U.S. DOE, 2021). Furthermore, evidence suggests that exclusionary discipline does not positively impact student behavior nor improve school climate (Amemiya et al., 2020; Deakin & Kupchik, 2018; Okonofua et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2016).

Systemic factors such as media representations of discipline may influence the dominant discourses of youth identities and reform structures in schools (Annamma et al., 2019; Sugrue, 2019). For example, news coverage of youth behavior is often represented in a way that normalizes racism, justifying inequities, reifies stereotypes, and attributes blame onto students (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009). Rather than identifying systemic inequities as a potential root cause of educational deficits, the behavior of individual students is ascribed as the dominant factor driving exclusionary discipline (Bornstein, 2015; Collins, 2009; Harwood, 2006; Valencia, 2010). In conjunction, oppressive school structures and media representations may intertwine in pernicious patterns, ultimately sustaining and perpetuating educational inequities (Giroux, 2009).

Due to the growing awareness surrounding the limitations of exclusionary discipline practices and the inequitable outcomes for students, the U.S. Department of Education in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Justice (2014) offered guidance for schools to help reduce exclusionary discipline practices and policies. After only four short years, the Trump administration withdrew federal guidance for schools (U.S. DOE, 2018). In this paper, we take a step toward understanding mainstream news coverage of exclusionary discipline during one year of active federal guidance. We unpack how youth identities are constructed in the context of enduring educational inequities. Herein, exclusionary discipline practices, prevalence, and the media effects on educational inequity are reviewed.

Review of Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Public Schools

The use of exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and referrals to law enforcement) may contribute to a cohesively punitive school structure. Nearly three million students are excluded from educational opportunities each year with disparities by gender identity, sexual orientation, dis/ability, and race (U.S. DOE, 2021). First—by way of gender—boys face the brunt of exclusion, accounting for 70% of suspensions (U.S. DOE, 2021). Second—student gender identity—has been linked to exclusion, with LGBTQ youth experiencing disproportionate removal (Snapp et al., 2015; Snapp & Russell, 2016). Third—students with disabilities—face exclusionary disparities, with the ramifications more severe at the intersection of race and ability (e.g., Black youth with disabilities; Annamma, 2017). Fourth—by way of race—an array of disparities negatively affects minoritized youth, particularly Black youth, but also Latinx and Indigenous youth face disproportionate rates of exclusion. Even more troubling, Black boys are overrepresented in *all* categories of exclusion, with rates of suspensions over 3.5 times their total enrollment (U.S. DOE, 2021). Black girls also experience disproportionate rates of discipline – excluded at two times their total enrollment (Morris, 2016; U.S. DOE, 2021). Finally, as identities converge and overlap, disparities are notably more severe (e.g., Black students with disabilities; Black and LGBTQ); Annamma et al., 2017; Snapp & Russell, 2016).

School reliance on exclusionary discipline begins in pre-school where disproportionality is higher than at any other grade level and continues through graduation (Wymer et al., 2020). In urban schools, 40% of Black boys experience exclusion from the classroom by age nine (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Black children have been arrested on school grounds and taken to the police station as early as *six-years-old* (Morris, 2016). Scholars have illuminated an array of contributors to exclusionary discipline, including oppressive school structures, educator biases, limited behavioral management training, lack of cultural sensitivity and inclusion, subjective-based interpretations of misbehavior, and adverse child experiences and trauma (Hirschfield, 2018; Jo-

seph et al., 2020; Kirkpatrick et al., 2020; Milner IV et al., 2018; Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Furthermore, zero-tolerance policies have radically altered the school environment, while solidifying the school reliance on discipline and safety measures that coalesce oppressive domains of capitalism and racism (Casella, 2018; Welch & Payne, 2018).

Zero-tolerance policies mandated disciplinary action for student possession of a weapon. These policies spread across the country in 1990s, then policies expanded to accommodate disciplinary action for drugs and alcohol, meanwhile administrator discretion emerged (Black, 2016; Hirschfield, 2018). Alongside the growing trends in exclusionary discipline, mechanisms of school surveillance have skyrocketed, leading to increases in metal detectors, security cameras, police officers, and oppressive surveillance tactics in classrooms (Fisher & Hennessy, 2017; Hope, 2018; Taylor, 2018). Collectively, surveillance tactics disproportionately target minoritized youth and are increasingly relied upon in urban schools, likely adding to the oppressive and alienating experiences that youth endure (Kupchik, 2016; Welch & Payne, 2018).

The ramifications of exclusionary disciplinary have been shown to stymie academic achievement due to increases grade retention, drop-out, juvenile justice involvement, and incarceration rates—more aptly depicted as the school-to-prison nexus (Fabelo et al., 2011; Mallett, 2016; Nocella et al., 2017; Noltemeyer et al., 2017; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Further, disciplinary tactics have not been shown to be effective in curtailing behavioral infractions (Okonofua et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2016). Conversely, these punitive strategies have been shown to *increase* student behavioral obstructions—contrary to the intended effects of discipline (Amemiya et al., 2020). Discipline is predominately administered for trivial offenses, including absenteeism, truancy, minor behavioral offenses, and subjective-based infractions—driven by biases and stereotypes—such as clothing and hairstyle variations (Anderson et al., 2019; Allen, 2017; Annamma et al., 2019; Neal-Jackson 2018; Neal-Jackson, 2020). These trends lead to the pathologization of students and may detach educators from a compassionate understanding of the developmental needs of students (Annamma, 2017). Collectively, these points underscore the need for relationship promotion to reduce biases and stereotypes, while strengthening teacher-student relationships to help curtail misbehavior (Okonofua et al., 2016).

In the classroom, the working conditions of teachers may confound equitable reform efforts and perpetuate the reliance on discipline. For example, the high-stakes test-based culture may demand unobtainable behavioral parameters of youth—which may be punitively reinforced by teachers due to their efforts to adhere to the rigid academic culture (Au, 2010; Giroux, 2009). Preservice teacher education programs often lack crucial aspects of racial socialization, knowledge of racial stress, and behavioral management strategies (Matias, 2016; Milner IV, 2015; Stevenson, 2014). Additionally, teachers often experience difficult working conditions shaped by a rigid academic culture, high caseloads and overcrowded classrooms, low salaries, limited resources, and high-stress environments—evidenced by the recent working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mitchell, 2021). Clearly, teachers may benefit from elevated supports to help structurally re-align toward holistic mechanisms and relationship-rich classrooms (Mitchell & Greer, 2022). Finally, our understanding of youth behavior and disciplinary processes may be confounded by media narratives.

Media Influence on Education

Longitudinally, the media has brought a sustained impact on school systems. First, the constructions of youth violence in the media helped to fuel the creation of zero-tolerance policies

in schools (Curran, 2019; Heitzeg, 2009; Jenson & Howard, 1998; Snyder & Sickmund, 1996; Stahl, 2009). This was achieved, in part, through the sensationalized media depictions of school shootings (Hong et al., 2011). Widespread societal fear—as facilitated by the media—reinforced stereotypes and biases, operationalizing the current structure of schools enmeshed in safety and surveillance-based tactics such as police (Casella, 2018; Kupchik, 2016; Welch & Payne, 2018). Even with the notable influence of the media on schools, there has been a dearth of literature that examines the relationship between news coverage and exclusionary discipline. Fields (2006) studied discipline as represented in the news, uncovering widespread bias related to selection, omission, headlines, names, photos, and word choices.

The portrayal of an "academic achievement gap" in the media serves to normalize academic inequities, positioning White students as superior, while circumventing structural explanations of inequities (Annamma et al., 2013; Eate et al., 2017; Gregory & Mosley, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The "suspension gap" conforms to a similar narrative that portrays White students as well-behaved, obedient, and a stature to aspire to (Borman et al., 2022). These deficit-based narratives have ties to racist ideologies that may be divorced from the structural context that drives these statistically inferred differences in "behavior." Further, any notion of a gap reifies the idea that equity can be achieved if only these gaps were to close. As these deficit-based narratives dominant school systems and the research literature, they are then recapitulated by the mainstream news media (Giroux, 2022). As the achievement gap narrative ensues, a false and racist notion depicts minoritized youth as unable to keep up academically, often without consideration to the systemic realities of widespread oppression and racism (Gordon, 2016; Horsford & Grosland, 2013). These pathologizing and stigmatizing representations of youth may perpetuate biased narratives that, in turn, influence educators, tarnish relationships, and sustain the reliance on punitive disciplinary tactics (Annamma, 2017). Meanwhile, the corporate control of the media maintains a network of influence to reinforce these deficit-based narratives and sustain stereotypes (Saltman, 2016).

The ongoing racist, biased, and stereotypical depictions in film, news, television, and books seep into the school environment in pervasive and invisible patterns (Arntson, 2020; Bryant, 2020; Kendall, 2020; Kendi, 2019). For instance, White savior educational films (e.g., Freedom Writers) reinforce themes of violence, and narratives of impoverished and delinquent youth, while positioning proximity to whiteness as the only avenue for reform and intervention (Dixson & Linz, 2000; Yosso & Garcia, 2010). Media portrayals may drive stereotypical narratives of youth, potentially damaging relationships, fueling discipline inequities, and upending reform interventions (Gordon, 2016). That said, the relationship between media discourse and school practices is an underexplored area of research. As previous scholarship explores these distinct topics separately, we move towards an intersecting interrogation of media influence and punitive educational practices and structures.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze mainstream newspaper coverage of exclusionary discipline. Specifically, we examine the year following the U.S. DOE (2014) guidance for schools to reduce discipline and improve practices and policies. This point of time offers an important point of inquiry and analysis for several reasons. First, this was the first and only time period when the federal government offered support to schools in addressing and reforming punitive exclusionary climates in attempts to reduce disciplinary disparities. Second, little is known about how the

media may play a supporting or confounding role amid disciplinary reform interventions. We explore how media narratives are constructed amid federally supported reform efforts. Much can be learned from this time-period, to inform future and ongoing efforts to improve climate, reduce the reliance on discipline, while supporting young people and schools more holistically. Three research questions operationalize this study:

1. How are students of varied identities and experiences constructed in newspaper articles (e.g., race, culture, language, age, ability, sex, and gender)?
2. How are themes of discipline represented in newspaper coverage?
3. In what ways may the elements of race, power and privilege in these articles reinforce the punitive school environment associated with discipline (e.g., what voices, ideologies, and norms are represented)?

Theoretical Framework

To support and guide our analysis, we leverage Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013) and News Framing Theory (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). This intersecting theoretical framework helps us attend to preexisting educational structures and inequities, how news media discourse is framed, and the intersections and relations between these domains of inquiry.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used to frame the scope of this study, contextualize findings, and develop implications within the necessary context of ongoing educational inequities facing minoritized youth. Several tenets guide this approach. The first CRT tenet used to situate our analysis is the *permanence of racism*, which observes the endemic nature of racism in schools and society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Racism is evident in both covert and overt forms, including biases and normative structures (Gillborn, 2008; Gillborn, 2010). The second tenet of CRT we operationalize in this study is *social construction*, which frames race as a product of societal construction, thought, and relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Social construction is useful to assessing media constructions and the orientation of discourse, including color-evasive techniques, and strategic efforts to reinforce power and control. The third tenet of CRT deployed in our study is *interest convergence*, which illustrates that progress to alleviate racism may be stymied unless interests converge toward mutually beneficial goals (Bell, 1980). We consider how the media facilitates, disrupts, or discourages the attainment of mutually beneficial goals and action. The fourth tenet of CRT guiding our analysis is *intersectionality*, which situates the layers of experiences, intersecting identities, and overlapping systems of oppression that merge macro level structures and micro level practices to underscore variations in youth experiences and educator practices (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Intersectionality can help to illuminate the intertwined power structures and the variations in youth and educator perceptions—and how these aspects may be dictated by oppressive structures (Collins, 2019). The fifth CRT tenet we utilize is the *counter-narrative*, which aims to amplify underrepresented voices, often marginalized and silenced (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Counter-narratives can help to frame the extent of inclusion in news articles and the variation in narrative perspectives. Collectively, these tenets frame the importance of gathering and exploring youth and family perspectives.

News Framing Theory

To optimize the theoretical lens of CRT, News Framing Theory is utilized. Frames shape meaning-making and interpretation, and as such are a useful analytical tool for understanding discursive representations (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Specific frames are used to construct news representations—a process subjected by a range of influencers and dominant ideologies (Fairclough, 1995). Variations in frames may be engendered by power structures as well as degrees of journalistic agency. Lecheler & de Vreese (2019) outline three levels affecting journalist agency, individual, organizational, and macro. These factors (e.g., where the news comes from) shape the autonomy and opinions of journalists to varying degrees, however the news coverage often follows predictable patterns and norms that may lead to homogenized reporting and institutional production (Cook, 1998). Power structures, dominant ideologies, and political factors may dictate frames in significant ways (Cook, 1998; van Dijk, 2008). For instance, the media often receives their bylines or topic ideas in discursive form—whereby the intended reporting outcomes may be predetermined – confounded by varied journalistic autonomy (Cook, 1998; van Dijk, 1998). The combination of CRT and News Framing Theory is used to support the analysis of exclusionary discipline as represented in the media.

Methodology

Our methodological framework entails critical discourse techniques with support from the theoretical lenses of critical race and news framing theories. This methodological framework guides our analytical inquiry of disciplinary themes represented in newspaper articles and helps to contextualize findings. Critical discourse techniques are used to examine the construction of disciplinary themes in mainstream newspapers. Discourse represents the structure of language and how meaning is conveyed to the reader (Gee, 2011). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is grounded in poststructuralism and explicates meaning by situating discourse within broader social, political, and contextual factors (Gee, 2011). There is a growing utility for CDA to assess how language-in-use may upend or facilitate social justice endeavors, by unearthing discursive impact across micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Jen et al., 2021; Willey-Sthapit et al., 2020). Tools to unpack this relationship and examine elements of power and privilege are embedded within CDA techniques through seven analytical angles to assess discourse amid historical, social, political, and cultural contexts.

Data and Sample

To analyze newspaper representations of exclusionary discipline we obtained (n = 64) newspaper articles (see Supplemental Table 1).[1] Typically, suspensions are the most relied upon disciplinary approach in schools, and as such, we oriented our newspaper database search toward suspensions to capture their prevalence in newspaper articles. Using the NexiUni database, we gathered articles between January 1, 2015, and January 1, 2016, using search phrases that encapsulated "suspensions," "exclusionary discipline," and "schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The inclusion time period accounted for one year of time to transgress, allowing schools adequate time to adapt and implement changes based upon federal guidance. Our inclusion criteria

1. Supplemental Tables 1 & 2 can be found in the Appendix.

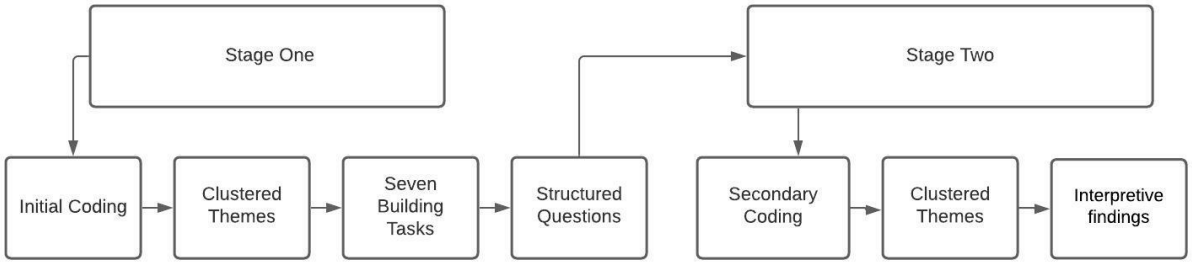
focused on data and geographical saturation to maximize substantive content with respect to the available articles.

The sample was guided by the predominance of newspaper coverage and NexiUni database offerings of newspapers in the United States. Our initial search garnered 294 articles; however, articles were clustered around several newspapers. Florida and Pennsylvania had 114 articles between the two states, representing nearly half of the articles in the database. Considering the predominance of articles in these two states, we selected two newspapers outlets to represent both liberal (L) and conservative (C) leaning newspapers from each state (Florida and Pennsylvania). A total of 215 articles were screened and excluded due to lack of substantive content or relevance to our research questions. Seventy-nine articles were downloaded from NexiUni and then uploaded to Dedoose Analytic Software. An additional 18 articles were later excluded due to lack of substantiative disciplinary content. Finally, an expanded search aimed to increase geographic diversity in our sample, through a targeted search of newspaper coverage in the western region of the U.S, leading to the inclusion of four more articles. Our sample of newspapers leaned liberal, however, both conservative and moderate news outlets were selected leading to (N = 64) articles across eleven newspaper outlets: *Tampa Tribune* (16%; C), *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (16%; L), *The New York Times* (16%; L), *Daily Oklahoman* (12%; C), *Tampa Bay Times* (16%; L), *Chicago Herald* (9%; L), *Pittsburgh Tribune* (9%; C), *Salt Lake Tribune* (2%; L), *Deseret Morning News* (2%; R), *The Bakersfield Californian* (1%; M), *and Spokesman Review* (1%; M).

Analysis

All articles were uploaded onto Dedoose Analytic Software version 8.3.43. Data analysis process entailed two stages and seven sequential steps presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: ***Critical Discourse Process***



First, each article was reviewed and inductively coded beginning with initial coding techniques (Saldaña, 2021). Initial stages of coding invoke the iterative process of gathering and denoting concepts and patterns within the text (Saldaña, 2021). This technique is useful to collecting and analyzing linguistical sequences to familiarize researchers with the text. Examples of initial codes include student behavioral problems; disobedience; teacher lack of control; discipline reform; and boys falling behind. In step two, initial coding techniques led to clustered coding to encapsulate substantive themes (Saldaña, 2021). Clustered coding techniques entail the process of moving from initial coding to overall categories of data (Saldaña, 2021). Third, Gee's seven build-

ing tasks are examined alongside developing themes and research questions (see Gee, 2004). Specifically, language-in-use is explored across factors of significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge (Gee, 2004). This stage is used to inform and develop structured questions—useful to move from substantive themes to dominant discursive trends (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009; see Supplemental Table 1). Once structured questions are designed, member checking and peer debriefing sessions established consistency through several stages of revisions to the structured questions (Supplemental Table 1). Subsequently, stage two of the coding process began. During the second stage of analysis – evaluating structured questions—themes of discursive absence were also noted. Specifically, any details of relevance that appear to be omitted from articles, including voices, perspectives, ideologies, and language (Gee, 2004; Richardson, 2006). This led the final step, putting all elements together, and interpretating the findings in the context of our research questions and guided theory.

Reflexivity

The primary author is a White, male, doctoral candidate in social work. My scholarly interests were shaped by my ongoing disciplinary experiences in elementary and high school. In recognition that my "misbehavior" was often ostracized, subsequently leading to an array of mental health diagnoses—in effect, the school's attempt to explain my behavior. Never questioned was the school climate, teaching pedagogy, relationships, trauma, or developmental needs. These experiences have fueled my desire to engage in research aimed at reducing the school's reliance on discipline by promoting relationships amid equitable and inclusive schools.

The second author is a Black, male, doctoral candidate in education. His interest in this topic stems from his youth worker background within school and community-based education spaces. Working with young people from various backgrounds constructs the author's perspective on analyzing the racial underpinnings prevalent across school discipline practices. Additionally, relating identity to minoritized youth primarily impacted by the school discipline provides some insight in understanding the experiences portrayed in the media. Awareness of these dynamics is critical when limiting researcher bias and moving forward in analysis. The researcher's passion for uplifting student voices assists in continuously pushing for a reimagining of the education system we want to see.

Findings

The findings from our critical discourse analysis of exclusionary discipline represented in newspaper articles are presented below. We utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT) for interpreting and contextualizing findings around the tenets of permanence of racism, social construction, interest convergence, intersectionality, and counter-narratives.

Permanence of Racism

The CRT tenet, permanence of racism helped to illuminate themes of racism within newspaper coverage, including explicit and implicit forms in the articles analyzed. For example, Article 51 quoted a student saying: "Were stereotyped because of our skin color and where we come

from". Meanwhile, Article 64 noted a more explicit form of racism: "A second-grade Native American student from St. George, Utah, was sent to the principal's office for violating the school's dress code standards. The boy was sporting a mohawk as part of his family's Native American culture."

The presence of racist sentiment was noted in reference to practice and policy, across public and charter schools [Articles 11; 17; 33; 45; 51; 63; 64]. Article 17 noted police violence: "Videos of a White sheriff's deputy throwing a Black high school girl to the floor of a classroom." Article 63 conveyed a traumatizing experience for a Black student:

> Louisiana eighth grader who was arrested and booked for six days because he had thrown some skittles on the bus the day before. A school resource officer handcuffed him, dragged him out of class and offered to beat the snot out of him. The boy was charged with interference with an educational facility, and assault. The kid spent six days in a juvenile detention center before finally seeing a judge.

This article appears to note the severity of this incident; however, the discourse is still framed in a way that downplays the incident and responsibility of the officer. Additional reports note how the student was removed during a social studies test, and that the officer "threatened to beat the fuck out of him or have his son, who is the same age, do it for him" (King, 2015).

Article 45 captured the intersection of behavior, mental health, and discipline:

> …said her son, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, was suspended 19 times last year, in first grade, and missed 26 days. Success [Academy] said her son was intellectually gifted but struggled with behavior, often hitting, kicking, biting, and spitting at other children and adults.

Rather than providing the mental health support needed, her son was continually excluded from education at a disturbing rate. While this article offers only anecdotal evidence of disparate treatment, scholars have alluded to problems facing minoritized youth with disabilities, and the lack of support alongside disproportionate exclusion (Annamma, 2017; Annamma et al., 2013; Annamma et al., 2019). Meanwhile, trends of academic "pushout" have also been previously articulated in the literature (Morris, 2016). These trends were also detected in newspaper coverage, and especially noteworthy in the exclusionary practices within charter schools [Articles 11; 33; 45]. For example, Article 44 quoted an administrator: "If you violate our code of conduct, you will be suspended." As exclusionary pushout continues within schools, barriers that excluded youth from getting into schools were also noted. Article 33 noted this pattern of disparate exclusion in access to charter schools: "There are parents that want their kids to get a quality education, and they are applying and not being able to get into these schools."

Social Construction: Deficit-Based Portrayals of Youth Behavior

The CRT tenet, social construction helped to identify the discursive framing of youth identities. Articles privileged deficit-based constructions of racial identities, often through depictions of violent, disobedient, and out of control students. Statistics were consistently used to reinforce the notion of misbehaving students in a decontextualized frame, ultimately serving to justify the reliance on exclusionary practices and disparate treatment. Article 18 offers an exemplar: "The number of suspensions in Pittsburgh Public Schools dropped by 15 percent over the prior year, but

still more than 9,900 suspensions were issued, nearly three-fourths of them to black students." Importantly, the quote above alludes to a positive trend—not elaborated upon—and seemingly used to reinforce stigmatizing and fear-based depictions of Black youth. Meanwhile, the decontextualized constructions of discipline often rely on statistical representations, serving to individualize the problem to behavioral variations and dismiss any structural or alternative explanations. In other words, the hyper-focus on data may reify the notion that the cause of discipline is due to misbehaving students. This narrative overlooks alternative explanations, including structural or institutional, ultimately stigmatizing schools and youth. This statistical framing justifies punishment and reinforces notions of misbehaving youth.

Article frames often relied upon the use of slander, blame, and an array of deficit-based constructions to depict youth. For instance, "chronic behavioral problems," "rampant behavioral problems," "not cooperating," and "class disruption" were all used and often portrayed in a decontextualized fashion [Articles 14; 26; 31; 37; 50; 61]. Article 26 offers an exemplary of this newspaper framing strategy: "…St. Petersburg's poorest, predominantly black elementary schools struggled in often violent classrooms as teachers received little training and even less help in keeping order." The need to maintain classroom "order" is often privileged—consistent with previous research (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). In this context, violence is framed as any youth deviance from the normative (i.e., obedient) classroom structure.

Importantly, these frames and quotes were often decontextualized from the enduring educational inequities affecting minoritized youth in schools. Further, there is zero attempt to understand the behavior of youth, nor the perspective of those insinuating the misbehavior of students. That is, even if youth are, in fact, misbehaving, there is an opportunity to understand the behavior and to offer resources and support for youth and educators. The overly simplistic and reductionist framing is disconnected from the lived realities of both teachers and students, and justifies the continued reliance on exclusionary discipline, framed as a necessary response to student problems. Vavrus and Cole (2002) note the consistent oppositional framing between students and teachers – this pattern was consistently identified in newspaper articles analyzed. Meanwhile, teachers were depicted as having zero control, with autonomy dwindling in the context of discipline reform initiatives: "When students know they can do anything they want and not be suspended, they're going to do it" [Article 57].

Interest Convergence: *Portrayals of Violent Classrooms*

The CRT tenet, interest convergence helped to recognize the facilitators of educational inequity, reliance on discipline, and barriers to discipline reform efforts. Articles often privileged top-down expert narratives and bottom-up teacher perspectives to convey systemic violence in the school system (see Supplemental Table 2). First, top-down constructions were utilized—referring to dominant ideology and privileged elites—to frame a troubled, violent environment within schools. Framing strategies began with sensationalized article titles, including: "Put Cameras in School Classrooms" and "Protect Order in the Classroom" [Articles 13; 20]. Article 13 pushed back against a student bill of rights and discipline reform efforts, blaming school board members for siphoning control from schools.

Second, bottom-up framing was utilized—referring to teacher perspectives, control, and resistance to reform—with discursive tactics that privilege the maintenance of a punitive disciplinary structure in schools. Although the range of actors quoted in articles was limited (e.g., limited

student voice), articles revealed teacher strategies used to maintain disciplinary control in the classroom. Meanwhile, diminishing teacher agency and control was noted in articles due to a confluence of factors (see Supplemental Table 2). First, the aforementioned social constructions of students provided imagery to justify a need for discipline, while painting teachers as the victims of chaotic classrooms. Second, discipline reform in schools, including student bill of rights, efforts to reduce the school reliance on discipline in the classroom may further diminish perceived teacher agency. As teachers lose agency (real or perceived), resistance to disciplinary reform may be a natural by-product. Thus, increasing teacher resistance to discipline reform efforts may occur – a factor often underscored in articles [Articles 2; 11; 20; 26; 31; 61; 66]. As the school's hierarchy of power exudes, teachers may subconsciously strive for dominance and power, whereby disciplinary control will be sought. Although only one article mentioned schools as "sites of control," our findings conform to the idea of institutionalized power and dominance (van Dijk, 1993; Foucault, 1975). Supplemental Table 2 provides exemplar quotes of the cognitive threats on teacher control and agency, alongside harmful student portrayals.

Intersectionality

The CRT tenet, intersectionality helped to assess the range of student experiences, and the extent to which articles allude to the wide range of influencers on behavior, teacher perspectives, and discipline. Articles briefly alluded to the intersectional influence on discipline, including the role of trauma, mental health, and explanations of misbehavior. Regardless of these trends, articles paid minimal attention to the nexus of student identities. Additionally, experiences of discipline were often individualized and disconnected from systems of oppression and domination in schools. On a positive note, Article 32 noted the need for crisis prevention and training to reduce suspensions and expulsions. A few articles referenced the need for diversity and cultural sensitivity training [Articles 40; 44; 53]. Some articles discussed the need for alternatives to discipline [Articles 9; 19; 36]. Primarily, articles alluded to intersectionality regarding discipline disparities, although descriptions were rather cursory:

> Twenty-four percent of high school students with a disability and 27 percent of the lowest-performing high school students received out-of-school suspensions in 2013-14…It is not unusual for minority students and students with disabilities to receive a disproportionate share of expulsions, detentions and visits to the principal's office compared to their white peers and peers without disabilities. [Article 64]

Article 11 noted the lack of attention to intersectionality and the implications on policy:

> At three dozen schools, there were no special rules covering the suspension or expulsion of children with disabilities, which the group said violated federal law. And in 25 instances, charter schools could suspend students for long periods without a hearing, which the group said violated the United States and New York State Constitutions, as well as state law.

While articles alluded to intersectional influences on discipline—most often at the intersection of race and ability—the discursive narratives were matter of fact and pushed back ever so slightly against problematizing the discipline rates of youth with disabilities. Overall, any alternative ex-

planations regarding the causes of exclusionary discipline were minimal. One article cited the intersection of race and poverty but reified the notion of youth misbehavior: "Boys tend to have more discipline problems than girls overall. But the difference is much bigger for Black and Latino children—and more than half of the difference is because of poverty and related problems*"* [Article 5]. Even as poverty is simplistically articulated as causal to rates of discipline, the narrative is still largely driven through a deficit-based lens, noting "discipline problems" and "related problems" although it is unclear exactly what this entails. Importantly, any connection to the systems of power and oppression that shape disparate intersectional influence was absent across articles.

Counter-narratives

The CRT tenet, counter-narratives helped to examine where student voices or contrary perspectives were represented or omitted in newspaper coverage. Overall, the consideration of student perspectives, and coverage representing youth and family perspectives were rarely used. Article 25 considered the youth perspective from the deficit-based teacher narrative:

> He [the student] wants to be suspended so he can go home, because the classwork is too difficult for him. Another said he would be ashamed to face a group of his peers to explain and justify the actions that got him suspended from school.

In this case, not only was the cause of discipline associated to the individual student, but it is conveyed as utterly intentional, in addition to the notion that the coursework is "too difficult" for him. The student perspective is non-existent. In other words, youth are only referenced to justify the continued reliance on discipline. The deficiency narratives are used to convey a pervasive theme of behavioral problems and student mediocrity. Collectively, newspaper coverage privileged administrators and educators, with students and families grossly underrepresented across articles. In addition, hearing more from teachers would also be beneficial to understanding the school environment, including both punitive and reform-based strategies. One administrator tries to clarify family challenges associated with discipline: "It's actually a crisis if you're a (working) parent of a young student and your child gets suspended from school" [Article 10]. The empathetic and in-depth consideration of youth perspectives was continually overlooked and downplayed amid portrayals of deviance.

Discussion

From 2014-2018, the U.S. Department of Education provided guidance and resources for schools to reduce racial disparities in exclusionary discipline and improve school climate. The Trump administration rescinded federal guidance; however, this initiative has received limited scholarly inquiry (U.S. DOE, 2018). In this study, we explore the discourse of exclusionary discipline as represented in mainstream newspaper articles during the second year of the federal initiative, 2015-2016. Critical discourse analysis revealed persistent challenges in the school environment, including problematic constructions of youth identities, dominant concerns from teacher and administrators, and barriers to disciplinary reform alternatives. Summative findings highlight themes, including explicit and implicit forms of racism, deficit-based constructions of youth identities, and wanning teacher autonomy and control. Meanwhile, alternative explanations of disci-

pline and behavior were underdiscussed. Specifically, references to structural inequities, intersectional influence, and youth and family voices were mostly absent across news coverage. Collectively, news framing tactics led to a conglomerate representation or intertextual discourse (Dunn & Neumann, 2016) that portrays youth—particularly racially minoritized youth—as disobedient and violent, with no choice for teachers but to maintain punitive practices. Furthermore, the discourse related to federal support often reinforced the deficit-based narratives of youth and depicted schools grappling with strategies to "handle unruly students" [Article 57].

Newspaper discourse often maintained ahistorical and de-contextualized representations, minimizing the understanding of youth behavior, and overshadowing potential alternatives to the punitive discipline structure. Students were framed as deviant or reckless and teachers were constructed within a state of constant fear while challenged to maintain order in in chaotic classrooms (Harwood, 2006; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). In addition, alternative understandings of youth behavior, teacher disciplinary reform strategies, and the educating institution were often absent from discussion. Articles' absence of structural considerations serves to reify the framing of youth disobedience (Joseph et al., 2021). For example, researchers have illuminated the role of educator bias in disciplinary practices, however as newspaper articles consistently constructed youth as "dangerous" and "out of control," the focus on educator bias or relationship promotion – among other important structural influencers was circumvented (Allen, 2017; Annamma et al., 2019; Morris, 2016; Neal-Jackson, 2020; Raible & Irizarry, 2010).

Consistent with previous research, newspaper article representations of the classroom environment often constructed teachers and their classroom management strategies in ways that shape, sustain, and perpetuate punishment (Milner IV et al. 2018). For example, some teachers voiced *resistance* to discipline reform interventions and alternatives to discipline. Articles revealed that teacher resistance is largely due to fears of diminishing classroom control and teacher agency. Additionally, the way in which reform and interventions are implemented—often top-down without teacher consent and input—may exacerbate teacher feelings of dwindling control and agency. Further, there may be a link between teacher agency and behavioral management strategies; underscoring a need for culturally responsive management strategies aimed to facilitate engagement through positive framing and critical reflexivity (Milner IV, 2015). Kirkpatrick and colleagues (2020) note as little as one class or module in a behavioral management course may be all that is required for pre-service educators. Articles consistently circumvented any focus on classroom engagement, behavior management strategies, and competencies of teachers. Previous research has found that classroom engagement strategies may be effective in reducing "misbehavior" (Gregory et al., 2015). Yet, articles maintained a hyper-focus on youth deviance and deficiency-based narratives as both the causal explanation of high rates of punishment and the appropriate target of reform.

Implications

The deficit-based constructions of youth identities in mainstream newspaper coverage may affect both the future development of youth in schools and the treatment they receive. Stereotypes and biases are perpetuated by the persistence of fear-based depictions of groups, therefore as the narratives of disruptive and violent students ensue, stereotypes and bias may be reinforced (Annamma et al., 2019). In the articles analyzed, we noted consistent depictions of disruptive students, meanwhile this discourse intersected with racialized portrayals of youth, such as the over-reliance on quantitative statistics. Further, youth and family voices and perspectives were absent across

articles. The lack of youth voice has been noted during disciplinary processes in schools, ultimately serving to align with teacher perspectives and administrative control (Neal-Jackson, 2020). The conglomerate of deficit-based constructions, minimal structural or institutional emphasis on inequities, and teacher resistance to move beyond the punitive structure may sustain and perpetuate the disparate and exclusionary treatment of youth. The impact may be most detrimental for minoritized youth. Meanwhile, the intertextual nature of exclusionary discipline discourse may justify the continued school reliance on punitive measures. As youth continue to be depicted from a deficit-based lens, exclusionary practices are justified, and disciplinary alternatives are negated from discussion (Love & Beneke, 2021). The only alternatives to the disciplinary structure were posed with reference to reforming students, teaching them appropriate behavior, and operationalizing their obedience in classrooms. That is, youth were framed as the problem and strategically positioned as the target for reform.

Articles noted ongoing teacher resistance to discipline interventions and reform alternatives, which offers several implications for school disciplinary research and reform. First, more research is needed to better understand teacher perspectives on discipline, regarding punitive strategies, reform, and alternatives to discipline. For instance, what are the components of teacher resistance to disciplinary alternatives? The teacher perspective is necessary to understand and value because they play a crucial role in both operationalizing discipline and implementing reform or alternative measures. Thus, successful reform can either be supported by or hampered by teachers. Furthermore, if discipline reform interventions proceed in the face of teachers and without their input and perspective, then barriers are likely to occur.

The teacher perspective is vital to uplift because they are often forced to manage classroom behavior, facilitate interventions and reform endeavors, often from a top-down (i.e., researcher or administrator imposed) purview. Furthermore, the equitable treatment of youth in classrooms begins with equitable treatment of teachers through valuing their autonomy and persistent dedication to education. Thus, we must be cautious not to reify the oppositional stance between teachers and students that is often commonplace in schools (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Moving forward, interests must converge to reduce the reliance on discipline, and design reform interventions of mutually beneficial nature. That is, how are youth and teachers playing a role in the construction of reform interventions, and how can both groups benefit from such endeavors. If interests are aligned and co-constructed, then relationship barriers can be abolished.

Recommendations

In light of our findings and in alignment with previous research that outlines the negative ramifications of exclusionary discipline on positive youth development, three recommendations are offered: (a) enhanced support for teachers and youth, (b) examining and understanding the school environment, and (c) cultural shift toward inclusion. We propose these strategies to help engender cultural shifts rather than impose additional control-based reform that siphons teacher and youth autonomy in an effort to re-align with holistic mechanisms of support that move beyond punitive, pathologizing, and reactionary responses to youth behavior. This shift must be supported through narrative and perspective shifts regarding youth behavior. Finally, our recommendations are aimed at schools rather than media outlets—as the media tends to replicate dominant perspectives and practices (Cook, 1998).

Enhanced Support

Enhancing support for teachers and youth must be within our continued mission in schools and classrooms. This recommendation is not novel; however, the mechanisms and strategies of support can be reinvigorated. For example, the difficult working conditions that teachers endure coupled with the limitations of pre-service education (Matias, 2016) underscores the need for additional support-based professionals in classrooms, such as school social workers. We suggest school social workers given their ecological, trauma-informed, and justice orientations in training, practice, and utility for procuring support-based classrooms (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020; Crutchfield et al., 2020; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). Neither youth nor teachers should face blame regarding the punitive reliance on discipline, however both parties could be supported in environments that promote relationship-rich curriculums and positive youth development (Brendtro et al., 2019). Additional support in classrooms could aid teachers in building and incorporating youth voice (Bell, 2010), youth participatory action paradigms (Radina & Schwartz, 2019), trauma-informed student focus (Joseph et al., 2021), and relationships and cultural responsiveness (Milner et al., 2019; Okonofua et al., 2019). School mental health professionals (e.g., school social worker) may offer a critical role in this capacity, potentially supporting teachers in the classroom, and better understanding behavior at a time of disciplinary action (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Griffith & Tyner, 2019). Collectively, as youth are increasingly heard and respect takes precedence over punishment – empathy, patience and understanding can occur to build relationships and sustain inclusivity. However, enhanced support must be supported and sustained by a re-examination of the school environment.

Examining and Understanding the School Environment

Mechanisms of enhanced support in classrooms for youth and teachers must be coupled with a deepened examination and understanding of the school environment. Meeting and addressing the needs of youth begins with understanding their behavior through non-judgmental and inclusive frameworks (Brendtro et. al, 2019). For example, the continued reliance on high-stakes testing sustains an alienating, oppressive, and exclusionary culture, while also diminishing teacher agency and autonomy (Au, 2010; Giroux, 2022). Understanding the school environment means a deepened attention to dominated norms, cultures, values, beliefs that perpetuate a reliance on punitive, pathologizing, negative, and deficit-based tendencies—much of which we saw recapitulated in news media discourse (Annamma et al., 2019; Love & Beneke, 2021). In this study, we analyzed media representations of discipline, however even amid the abundance of deficit-based and discriminatory narratives of discipline, it is important not to blame journalists or the media. This snapshot in time is important to understand and inform future reform efforts because even considering the federal government's stated mission to help schools realign toward more equitable and inclusive practices, the pushback, resistance, and enduring deficit-based trends endured. Clearly, one of the most important areas of reform that should align with federal frameworks aimed at equity and disciplinary reduction efforts are the shifts in discourse. Discursive shifts begin by shifting our thinking of youth and moving beyond antiquated frameworks rooted in deficit, pathology, and criminality.

Cultural Shift Toward Inclusion

In light of the previous two points, changes in discourse, practices, perspectives, and treatment of youth may benefit from a more holistic and all-encompassing shift. Thus, future efforts in disciplinary reform may consider the influence of language, prevailing ideological perspectives, culture, and discursive trends. This means, we cannot abolish punitive practices without examining the beliefs, values, and perspectives that underlie these efforts. A narrative that frames young people as needing to be fixed or controlled must be uprooted and replaced with a narrative of empathy, understanding, and opportunity for growth. Behavior offers a window into the needs of youth, and the more we punish and exclude behavior that fails to adhere with the dominant culture of obedience, the more we will alienate and oppress the development of youth (Mate & Mate, 2022).

One recommendation to fulfill a cultural shift toward inclusion is to move beyond the deficit-based narratives of youth and toward asset-based appraisals (Love & Beneke, 2021; Mitchell & Greer, 2022; Valencia, 2010). As we begin to develop a recognition for student strengths, skill sets, and move away from judgement and fear-based descriptions, student-teacher relationships and classroom climate will likely improve (Sterrett, 2012). An asset-based focus may also be useful in discipline reform interventions, rather than continuing to rely on "fixing" student deficits and curtailing their "problem behaviors." Further, teachers should not be expected to bear the brunt of reform interventions, and as noted earlier, should be supported in the promotion of positive and relationship-rich classrooms. We must support an enhanced perspective on exclusionary discipline from a well-rounded perspective that supports culturally informed and youth-centered classroom strategies to build compassion, engagement, and understanding (Milner IV et al., 2018). To do this, the focus on structural inequities should be strengthened, including a deepened understanding of normative behaviors that deviate from typical patterns of obedience – to become more accepting and tolerant of neurodiversity, cultural differences, and commonplace youth behavior (Brendtro et. al, 2019; Mate & Mate, 2022). Shifting the narrative means strengthening our understanding, and re-defining how we talk, act, and think about the discourse that we create.

Limitations

This study should be understood in the context of a few limitations. First, the low sample may not offer representativeness and limits generalizability. However, this unique sample does allow for a localized view on disciplinary discourse, including mechanisms of reform and school-based challenges. Second, the data gathered is several years old and may not represent the most current trends in schools. Our aim was to review data after the Department of Education's (2014) guidance to address discipline inequity. Furthermore, more research is needed to understand changes in schools to address discipline since the federal guidance was offered in 2014. The sample obtained was impacted by database limitations, which led to a disproportionately urban sample, and although, political newspaper variation was sought, articles were more than 50% liberal. Nevertheless, even with the majority slightly skewed newspaper sample, the coverage was disproportionately negative, which is a disappointing finding given the predominance of liberal news sources. Fourth, the influence of a global pandemic is likely to change the infrastructure of schools, impacting student behavior and themes of discipline for the foreseeable future. COVID-19 may confound the relevance of this data; however, it also frames a continued need to better understand students, behavior, and student experiences in pre and post pandemic schools (Mitchell, 2021).

Our findings should be interpreted within the context of these limitations; however, we encourage more research in this area.

Conclusion

Schools are still deeply enmeshed with deficit-based systems that negatively construct youth identities and target them in need of reform. These trends may stimulate teacher resistance to disciplinary alternatives and further justify the continued reliance on a punitive disciplinary structure. While the barriers to education equity may be substantial, there is hope in sight through an informed awareness and assessment of the educational landscape. As we continue to shift the paradigm away from student deficits and toward student assets, we can re-align schools toward equity. At the height of these endeavors toward equity include harnessing the voice of students, families, educators, in order to cohesively unite our efforts toward compassion, well-being, and inclusive support throughout the school system.

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Brandon D. Mitchell is a doctoral candidate in the Kent School of Social Work and Family Science at the University of Louisville, and an Adjunct Professor in the College of Social Work at the University of Tennessee. His research is operationalized by two pathways to examine and understand: (a) the impact of policies and media discourse on education, youth development and school-based support mechanisms, and (b) research to improve the role and practice of school social workers toward healing-centered frameworks and justice-oriented action.

Carl D. Greer is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Leveraging critical qualitative approaches, Greer's research explores two areas: (1) the relationship between community-based educational spaces and PreK-12 schooling institutions and (2) how youth display leadership and activism in and outside the classroom.

Appendix: Supplemental Tables

Table 1: ***Discourse of Exclusionary Discipline: Structured Questions***

- How are school suspensions and discipline constructed? (significance; practices)
- What identities, voices, and discourse are being privileged to uphold the status quo? (identities; politics)
- What factors are implicated as contributors to school suspensions and discipline? (practices; connections
- What changes in the school system are being considered? (signs systems and knowledge)
- How are student voices being constructed in these texts? (identities; relationships)
- How are schools represented and portrayed in these texts? (relationships; connections; politics; identities)
- What role does school leadership play in shaping reform discourse? (connections; relationships; politics)
- How is the perfect student idealized or constructed in these articles? (significance; identities)

Table 2: ***Findings of Critical Discourse Analysis: Sustaining the Punitive Disciplinary Structure***

Sub-Themes	**Exemplar Quote**	**Article**
Teacher control	"Order in the classroom shouldn't be scarified."	20
Teacher control	I hear from fellow teachers that students are taking liberties with smaller infractions like wearing hats or having their cellphones out, and they feel more empowered by our inability to write them up for smaller infractions, which can lead to bigger infractions	2
Teacher control	Some teachers say they feel pressured to ignore some disciplinary infractions as they work under policies that are meant to cut down on the number of suspensions.	20
Teacher control	New policy is sought to scrap the district's existing code of conduct in favor of a new disciplinary policy that would reduce the number of offenses for which a student can be suspended and the length of those suspensions. Last week, a group of teachers from Roosevelt Middle School in the Oklahoma City district told The Oklahoman that student misconduct went largely unchecked over several months of the just-concluded school year at the direction of district official	66
Teacher control	He doesn't think teachers will get the support they need to carry out student interventions	4
Teacher control	It's worth a try, even if it puts more burden on over-stressed teachers and administrators to solve problems they didn't create.	14
Teacher control; Student portrayal	Meanwhile, more than half of teachers who took the union survey said they are required to tolerate offending behavior	31
Teacher control	"Teachers already have enough to do."	31

Teacher control; student portrayal	Teachers filed complaints about a lack of support when they reported being bitten, scratched and kicked by students	50
Teacher control; student portrayal	Teacher was "seriously injured" during a recent fight at the high school and another school employee was threatened by a student	44
Teacher control; student portrayal	Many describe chaotic classroom settings and said they feel like babysitters who spend more time trying to control defiant students than planning and teaching."	31
Teacher control; student portrayal	Greater focus on keeping students in school has led to disruptive and unchecked student behaviors.	61
Teacher control; student portrayal	We're told that referrals would not require suspension unless there was blood," a teacher reported. "Students who are referred and do not seem to worry about consequences are seldom taken out of class, even for a talk with an administrator.	31
Student portrayal	Kelly Elementary School in Wilkinsburg reported 43 incidents to the state last year, including complaints of assault, disorderly conduct, fighting and rioting. Bellevue Elementary School in the Northgate School District reported 10, including one bomb threat and two threats to a student or school staff member. Penn Hills Elementary School reported 52 incidents, including vandalism, arson, theft, and possession of a knife.	50