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The Journal of the
New York State
Foundations of
Education Association

Volume 6 (2026)

EDUCATIONAL ABUNDANCE

The Journal of the New York State Foundations of Education Association

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ISSN 2693-3314

The Beautiful Struggle of the New York State Foundations of Education Association: Presidential Notes on the 52nd Conference

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Abstract: As one of the few remaining regional Foundations of Education associations in the United States, NYSFEA places experienced scholars, early career researchers, practicing K-12 administrators, teachers, and students in a reciprocal space. The intellectual alchemy sparks a real community of inquiry, opening an authentic avenue to build a local, collective consciousness. A sense of intellectual solidarity sets the annual meeting of NYSFEA apart from others in the field. I discuss the past and present beautiful struggle of NYSFEA, present a short summary of the conference program, and end by offering two ways of seeing the conference.

I write these words with immense gratitude. I want to begin by thanking each member of the Association's Board: Shirley Sommers, Lori-Ann Newman, Leslee Grey, Timothy Glander, Greg Seals, Ana Juliana Borja, Amanda Kingston, and Tim Monreal. In a field of research that prioritizes what works and in a society that promotes surplus enjoyment (Žižek, 2023), the annual meeting of the New York Foundations of Education Association (NYSFEA) serves as an intellectual refuge. Stuffed in a single room, people interested in educational theory and practice — professors, administrators, teachers, parents, friends, graduate students, undergraduate students, and secondary students — dwell on issues that span theoretical disciplines and practical dilemmas. Vibrant conversations on ideas presented continue between sessions, bites of food, sips of drink, and across cyberspace. Since the association's reconvening in 2020, the annual meeting has grown from a regional conversation across the State of New York to an international exchange that blends remote and in-person presentations. Thanks to the reach of American Educational Studies Association's newsletter (shout out, Tim!) and the advent of blended conference rooms, the association has brought together topics that speak to both local and international issues in education. As one of the few remaining regional Foundations of Education associations in the United States, NYSFEA places experienced scholars, early career researchers, practicing K-12 administrators, teachers, and students in a reciprocal space. The intellectual alchemy sparks a real community of inquiry, opening an authentic avenue to build a local, collective consciousness. That feeling of intellectual solidarity is what sets the annual meeting of NYSFEA apart from others in the field. In what follows, I discuss the past and present beautiful struggle of NYSFEA. I present a short summary of the conference program. With help from curriculum theory, I end by offering two ways of seeing the conference.

The Past and Present Struggle of NYSFEA

In the first volume of *Educational Abundance*, Richard Ognibene, a founding member of NYSFEA, presents a history of the association. The founding collective, formalized in 1971 on the campus of SUNY Cortland, arose amid a struggle in teacher education. Namely, business-oriented reformers renewed the clarion call for performance-based teacher education (Cuban, 2023). Fitted within a back-to-basics rhetoric, the business-oriented reformers questioned the practical utility of pre-service teachers learning what social foundations of education courses offered. As Ognibene aptly notes: "One could not dare to build a new social order if one did not know it was needed or know that teachers should have an important role in helping to shape that new and more just society," (Ognibene & Seals, 2020, p. 1). Although formed as a way for

SUNY educational foundations professors to “discuss the place of Foundations” and “share methods for teaching courses,” (Ognibene & Seals, 2020, p. 1) NYSFEA played an active role in preserving educational foundations within the performance-based standards of teacher education, especially in the state of New York.

The early years of the association featured discussions on critical questions in the history and philosophy of education with a clear-eyed commitment to social justice. The dedicated service and published research of Jeff Harold, Richard Ognibene, William Griffen, John Marciano, Ron Butchart, Bill Doll, Jr., and William Pinar reflected activist-inspired, cutting-edge scholarship that not only showcased the value of social foundations but modeled another way to answer the call of teaching. The rhetoric of performance-based teaching, as Dewey wrote in 1904, is enticing: “Teachers, actual and intending, flock to those persons who give them clear-cut and definite instruction as to just how to teach this or that,” (1904, p. 16). Rather than “become submerged in the routine detail of their callings,” the founding collective of NYSFEA were “possessed by the spirit of an abiding student of education...” (Dewey, 1904, p. 16). Their collective spirit broke through and inspires the present struggle.

Fifty years later, the push for performance-based teacher education continues. Scholars in foundations of education, from its inception, occupy a peculiar place in departments of education — not practical enough for practice-based enthusiasts and not truncated enough for ROI-motivated policymakers. People who study the social foundations of education float in the liminal space of educational theory, practice, and policy. This shaky feeling of in-betweenness prompted the theme of this year’s annual meeting: “The Beautiful Struggle: Recommitting to Democracy (or something else) in Education.” The “struggle” signals a recognition that what came before inspires continued action today. The “beautiful” speaks to an aesthetic appreciation for the social movements and organizing pedagogies that have formed in response to the dramatic erosion of civil liberties (Strong, 2024). The potential “recommitment to democracy in education” highlights a duty to maintain access to counter-majoritarian forms of knowledge, which are under direct attack from the fascistic politics of erasure (Grey & Seals, 2024; Stanley, 2024). The “or something else” represents an unruliness that encapsulates the beautiful struggle for an education that leaves open the possibility of reconstruction or refusal.

The 52nd Annual Conference

Christopher M. Span, historian of education and dean of the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, kicked off the conference with heartfelt opening remarks, welcoming NYSFEA to the campus. The first session oriented us to the material reality, with special attention to gendered and racialized forms of social oppression, administrators and teachers face when they engage in leadership and care work. The second session built off the first by offering possible pathways for pre-service and in-service teachers to become democratic and just in their future and current roles. In between the second and third session, the room came together to reflect on the conference theme. After a short interval of silence, those in the room discussed how assumptions of others shape how we see each other and the world around us as well as what it means to enact a dignity-affirming educational practice. The third session featured two presentations that placed artificial intelligence and data-driven decision making in the realms of critical realism and humanizing educational practice. The fourth session featured a wide-ranging meditation on the educational consequences of technological addiction, the biopolitics of student-driven educational activism in Iran, and civic reform, and the pragmatic promise of developing pre-

service teachers as social change agents. The New Jersey State Teacher of the Year, Gillian Ober, delivered a talk on the importance of creating meaningful relationships with students and school community members in the face of ongoing political whirlwinds. The first day of presentations ended with Greg Seals, who delivered an excellent keynote lecture on a theory of educational energy development, using clips from *The Wire* to elucidate a formula to articulate a concrete way to enact a Deweyan-inspired democratic education.

The second day of in-person presentations started with two presentations. The first explained the theory and practice of teaching an anti-racist genetics unit in a high school biology course. The second highlighted best practices for nurturing community for migrant families promises and discussed challenges of sustaining a university partnership with a community school district. The second session connected the carceral logics of the university and the vital, but unrecognized role Black women play in higher education spaces, the audience then conducted a collective map-making activity to build a campuswide counternarrative to the politics of erasure. A deeply personal and wide-ranging talk on educational displacement followed, featuring the awesome work of Project Belonging and the Interfaith Lab. The third session presented gallery walks as a pedagogical tool to promote critical engagement in teacher education courses, audience members were encouraged to partake in the practice and reflect on its pedagogical value for maximal participation in classroom dialogue.

After lunch, the plenary session presented the conference with a rich engagement on the state of social foundations in education and what the beautiful struggle entails. A poignant commentary on the beauty of silos and their reinvention as community spaces in Buffalo, New York served as a wonderful metaphor for the conference's theme. The fourth session, then, featured middle school students — by far, NYSFEA's youngest presenters/participants ever — modeling the power of classroom debate to promote civic dialogue. A holistic education approach, combining experimental, project, and place-based methods, pointed to a different way of seeing the vocational ends of higher education. Using AsianCrit as the organizing principle, a more inclusive version of culturally relevant education was outlined and discussed. The final session began with a philosophical meditation on a morality-motivation paradox in Emerson's "The American Scholar." Moved to the history of community-controlled education at the Highlander Folk School which featured an oral history interview that illuminated how the struggle over childcare at the school spoke to underlying tensions in the movement. The session ended with discussion of how implementation of mindfulness-based instruction in kindergarten classrooms demonstrated serious gains in knowledge acquisition and decreased the amount of negative behavioral reports.

After two days of in-person gathering, the conference moved to cyberspace for two evenings. The feeling of intellectual solidarity carried over as we heard presentations and had discussions on a wide range of issues in educational theory, practice, and policy. The first day included: the politics of gender in elementary classrooms, disability justice on campus, social justice in public health education, philosophical analysis of neuromyths, international educational exchanges on Padlet, the inadequacy of teachers' workforce knowledge, and a critical analysis of higher education politics in Vietnam. The second day featured: meditation upon personal growth as necessary for democratic education, methods for teacher educators to engage their students in analysis of educational privatization, an in-school study of reality pedagogy, a critical engagement on the educational value of LLMs and AI companies, the cultivation of an online space for educators of color as a way to build racial equity, an

argumentative literature review of disaster studies and science education, and a critical appraisal of graduate assistant labor in US-based higher education. The combination of in-person and remote presentations, as one participant noted on our feedback form, is “both generous and helpful...” As the political whirlwinds continue to increase the precarity of academic labor, the combination of both mediums allow for maximal participation across the educational landscape, tenured and adjunct professors, graduate and undergraduate students, and interested members of the public are provided the opportunity to engage on important issues in educational research. The full experience of the fifty-second conference, by the end, felt like an enactment of the theme.

The 52nd Annual Meeting as an Academic Conference and a Third Space

Curriculum theorists have conceptualized multiple forms of curriculum. As Benjmain Justice has detailed, the overt curriculum contains “what is formally offered, officially sanctioned, and/or described in standards, curriculum guides, and lesson plans...” The implicit curriculum is the educational experience of learning the overt, which can include, for example, “sitting in bolted down desks in front of a lecturing teacher...” (Justice, 2017). In application to the fifty-second conference, the overt curriculum is the conference program, which includes the titles of the talks and names of the authors who present. The covert curriculum is the experience of the presentations and the discussions that take place between and after the talks are presented, including but not limited to how the desks were arranged in the Rutgers Graduate School’s lecture hall and the positioning of the speakers as they delivered their presentations, whether in person, remote, or hybrid.

One way of seeing the fifty second conference is, through a reading of the overt curriculum listed on the programs, as an academic conference. Issues that span across many areas of educational research were featured: how intersectional oppression shapes and reshapes teaching and learning, the critical relationship between technology and education, the promises of teaching methods that promote racial equity and justice-oriented action, and much more. As an academic conference, the fifty-second annual meeting includes fresh and diverse perspectives from various stakeholders across the field, driven by concerns for democracy, social justice, and emancipatory education.

Another way of seeing the fifty-second conference is, through the prism of the implicit curriculum, as a third space (Oldenburg, 1999). Academic conferences, whether regional, national, or international, almost always include separate rooms to hear concurrent sessions on the topics presented. This is not the case for a NYSFEA conference. The single room features the conference, where the presenter and audience members sustain an intimate relation, leading to a reciprocity that envelops the space. Upon arrival, for the fifty-second annual conference, attendees only had to sign in free of charge (with an option for a donation to the association) to attend the conference, either in the room or on Zoom. NYSFEA’s fifty-second annual meeting, then, felt more like an agora than a pressure-cooked academic conference. People flow in and out of the room as they please, continuing discussions on what was presented or preparing for the next presentation. While academic conferences function as an extension of work for educational scholars and researchers, the openness of NYSFEA conferences places scholars and researchers in community with persons beyond the research enterprise — practitioners, teachers, administrators, friends, and family are present and welcomed.

As we look toward to the next annual conference, the board intends to build and continue fostering the unique spirit of NYSFEA conferences as third spaces where all are welcome to think and speak on pressing issues in and around education.

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Reinterpreting Neuromyths as Epistemic Artifacts: Democracy, Knowledge, and Meaning Making in Education.

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Abstract: The philosophical stakes of neuromyths (learning styles, hemispheric dominance, etc.) extend far beyond the myths themselves. Neuromyths force us to confront foundational questions about how educators know, what that knowledge is for, and how meaning is constructed in the practice of teaching. Reinterpretation of neuromyths as edu-myths offers a response that honors the humanity of learners and the intellectual agency of teachers who create, refine, and implement conceptual tools that illuminate learning rather than distort it. This transforms debate over neuromyths into a broad philosophical project: The reconstruction of educational epistemology. Reinterpretation situates educational knowledge within communal narratives and institutional structures where teachers, via testing and reflection, forge conceptual tools for effective use in context.

Science is a powerful presence in today's educational landscape. School districts heavily advertise “research-based practices,” teacher preparation programs emphasize “evidence-based instruction,” and policymakers invoke “neuroscience” to justify curricular interventions. However, underneath this vague veneer of scientific certainty lies a much more complicated reality. Much of what circulates within schools under the “guise of neuroscience” reflects neither scientific consensus nor neuroscientific nuance. Teachers continuously rely on the language of learning styles, hemispheric dominance, and other simplified explanations of cognition. These claims are often repeated long after they have been empirically discredited. The persistence of these neuromyths is well documented; but the prevalent academic response remains weak. Most administrations aim to debunk myths and call for improved dissemination of accurate information. While this corrective impulse is understandable, the philosophical questions embedded within these myths demand deeper examination and broader consideration. For instance, Why does this misinformation continue to persist among well-trained educators? What epistemic needs do myths fulfill that empirical data alone cannot? How should educators understand the relationship between scientific knowledge and the lived, interpretive realities of teaching? And, as we shall see, understanding neuromyths as artifacts of hybrid epistemologies allows us to raise other, still deeper philosophical issues: What counts as legitimate (i.e., justified) knowledge in teaching? How do different epistemic domains — for example, neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and classroom experience — interact in teacher decision-making? These fundamental questions raised by neuromyths cannot be answered solely on the premise of neuroscience.

Although they are inadequate to teacher need, neuromyths should not be dismissed as merely false beliefs awaiting correction. Instead, study of them reveals fundamental tensions regarding what counts as “legitimate knowledge” in education. Neuromyths are an evolving epistemic artifact constructed and perpetuated by humans. Understanding of neuromyths sheds light on how scientific claims travel across cultural and institutional domains and how teachers construct meaning within their practice. Viewing neuromyths solely as errors ignores their epistemological, ethical, and symbolic functions. Teachers do not cling to myths because teachers are irrational or scientifically naive. Teachers rely on neuromyths because myths are able to provide metaphors and interpretive frameworks that help render complex phenomena intelligible. Myths arise not from ignorance, but from the inadequacy of available conceptual tools. Unfortunately, neuromyths themselves are defective insofar as they traffic in reductionistic

models and probabilistic findings that, as uncritically accepted generalities, often fail to speak to the contextual and intuitive work of teaching. Of course, this is not to say that neuroscience is entirely an ideology, unsupported by any data or entirely unrevised by teacher use and communal understanding. Yet these two existential worlds — scientific discourse and teaching practice — inevitably collide, creating distortions in epistemic spaces. Neuromyths materialize within this translational gap, where myth functions as a bridge allowing educators to cross from generalized knowledge to embodied experience. However, neuromyths fail to make a solid connection between ideas and implementation. The failure of neuromyths creates the need for construction of new myths, ones more adequately supportive of effective teaching.

I.

Firstly, claims that neuromyths are scientific explanations must be rejected. A philosophical account of neuromyths must begin by acknowledging the empirical basis for rejecting neuromyths as literal truths. Their empirical inadequacy is well established, and educators have a professional duty to avoid pseudoscientific interpretations that may harm students or undermine pedagogical effectiveness. The unsubstantiated idea that students innately possess some dominant learning modality or “style” (visual, aural, kinesthetic, etc.) continues to shape teacher practice. This occurs despite the lack of scientific support for the belief. Harold Pashler and his colleagues reviewed the evidence and ultimately found no support for the “meshing hypothesis,” the idea that matching instruction to a student's preferred modality improves learning.¹ Frank Coffield's systematic review of learning styles literature reaches an even stronger conclusion: Most learning styles lack both reliability and validity.² John Hattie's synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses confirms the claim that modality-based differentiation has a negligible impact on learning compared to practices such as explicit instruction or formative feedback.³ Sadly, however, surveys reveal that more than 90% of teachers endorse at least one neuromyth. This is even after completing professional development leading away from endorsement of neuromyths!⁴ The severity of this disconnect invites philosophical scrutiny: Why do empirically false beliefs persist even when teachers are exposed to corrective information?

Standard answers attribute the persistence of myths to communication failures, lack of properly trained teachers, or educator reliance on outdated ideas. However, these explanations are inadequate. Dekker et al. found that even teachers with substantial neuroscience training endorsed neuromyths at very high rates.⁵ The issue is not a deficit in communication, training, or professional development. There is something much deeper at stake. The persistence of neuromyths reveals an epistemic void in which teachers lack accessible metaphors for understanding complex ideas. Unable on their own to fill the empty epistemic space between research and instruction and faced with holes in teaching theory, teachers tend to draw on cultural idioms available to them to fill in the gaps. In doing so, educators are actively trying to reach for explanatory frameworks that help them respond to a large diversity of learners in ways empirical research alone is unable to provide. Seeing neuromyths as performing an

¹ Harold Pashler et al., “Learning Styles: Concepts and Evidence,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 9, no. 3 (2008): 105–119.

² Frank Coffield et al., *Learning Styles and Pedagogy in Post-16 Learning: A Systematic and Critical Review* (London: Learning and Skills Research Centre, 2004).

³ John Hattie, *Visible Learning* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁴ Sanne Dekker et al., “Neuromyths in Education: Prevalence and Predictors,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (2012).

⁵ Ibid.

epistemological function reshapes the problem presented by neuromyths. Rather than viewing neuromyths as isolated misconceptions in need of correction, we can understand them as artifacts of epistemology that are produced at the intersection of scientific authority, pedagogical intuition, and cultural imagination. Neuromyths arise because scientific knowledge is not readily applicable to the relational, context-dependent judgments teachers are required to make. Neuroscience may illuminate the mechanics of memory and perception, but it is unable to detail how to instruct an educator to interpret the uniqueness of a student and the meaning of that student's actions. When prevailing suppositions and theories fail to supply conceptual structures relevant to the lived reality of teaching, teachers must compensate by casting about for other, available ideas. But this procedure merely cobbles together an incomplete conceptual coherence; too readily accepted in a context where some such explanation is so urgently needed. Examining the reasons behind the persistence of neuromyths clarifies the epistemological tension between research and practice. The task is not to eliminate these structures but to examine their origins, functions, and limitations, to put them to use for pedagogical success. Among thinkers typically studied in Education programs, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nel Noddings, John Dewey, and Jane Addams provide conceptual tools for construction of myths more adequate than neuromyths as starting points for engaging teachers in philosophical investigation of the teaching profession.

Emerson offers an account of knowledge as fundamentally metaphorical. He emphasizes the human tendency to interpret the world through symbolic frameworks that go beyond empirical precision. Emerson explicitly states that every understanding is a "new circle" that endlessly expands as insight continues to grow.⁶ For Emerson, knowledge is always provisional, always metaphorical, never literal. Emerson helps us see that the problem neuromyths present for teaching lies not in the metaphors themselves, but in the stagnation of the metaphors. Things go wrong when interpretative approximations transform into dogmatic assertions. A metaphor, such as being "a visual learner," becomes harmful when it restricts available options for study of subject matters to the single mode presumably "preferred" by some student. Dewey's pragmatism offers a further layer of insight. Ideas are instruments. Not a mirror of reality.⁷ Dewey's notion of "warranted assertibility" insists that beliefs must earn legitimacy through the consequences they produce in practice. The value of conceptual tools lies not in their literal accuracy, but in their ability to guide intelligent action. Neuromyths are instrumentally unhelpful. They misdirect attention, constrain interpretation, and undermine inquiry. Myths that inhibit growth, distort perception, or create intellectual blind spots cannot be warranted. Teaching requires conceptual tools that mediate complexity, not inadequate ideas that deteriorate it.

Dewey's moral concerns about students' stunted growth in the face of stultified inquiry find full expression in Noddings' account of the ethical relationality of teaching. Teaching is not merely the transmission of content but is the cultivation of caring encounters.⁸ Teachers must understand students to be particularized individuals who are situated within their own unique histories and lives. Language such as "being an auditory learner" tends to act as shorthand for teacher attentiveness; but that description is flawed. The ethical danger lies not in the desire to differentiate instruction, but in the reduction of students to fixed categories that foreclose future

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 395–407.

⁷ John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1929).

⁸ Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007).

growth. Philosophical reinterpretation of neuromyths preserves the authenticity of the relational attentiveness Noddings demands by discarding deterministic narratives that actively distort learning. Addams extends Noddings' (inter)personal moral analysis into the cultural realm when she argues that individuals need symbolic frameworks that connect personal experience to broader social meaning.⁹ Communities fragment when they lack cohesive narratives. In accordance with Addams' thinking, neuromyths function as cultural narratives that seek to make sense of learning within American cultural commitments to uniqueness and self-expression. They offer a narrative of individuality and the appearance of being grounded in scientific authority. As Addams might suggest, neuromyths specific to the teaching profession become a resource that helps teachers make sense of their identity as professional educators. Neuromyths are presumed to be something all teachers know about. Nonetheless, although Addams' insight does help to clarify the resilience of neuromyths, it does not excuse their empirical inaccuracy. As Dewey might object, intractable commitment to scientific pretense subverts the cultural narrative constructed around neuromyths.

As harmonious as these philosophical frameworks may seem — Emerson's poetic approach to knowledge, Dewey's insistence on empirical adequacy to warrant knowledge claims, Noddings' ethic of care, and Addams' moral awareness of cultural relativity, — when taken together as a group they stage a philosophical conflict. They collide and conflict constantly. However, the conflict is not carried out just for the sake of discord; it creates needed conceptual heat to forge a more functional mythos for the teaching profession than the one neuromyths provide. Noddings questions Emerson's naïve assumption that metaphors are inherently good things by pointing out that some metaphors may cause harm, Emerson wishes to expand Dewey's understanding of knowledge to make room for claims that may not be susceptible to empirical confirmation. Addams challenges Dewey on the presumed universal sameness of inquiry and reminds Noddings that care is not a monolithic concept, either, but takes different shapes and forms in different cultures. And Dewey insists that Emerson, Noddings, and Addams all find warrant for any speculative metaphors, moral maxims, and cultural relativities they wish to assert. Tensions among these thinkers push the argument beyond resolution via summary of philosophical viewpoints. They create genuine philosophical stakes.

Synthesizing these four philosophical points of view forces us to confront a deep epistemological problem: Teaching is an activity that requires conceptual frameworks that neither science nor metaphor alone can adequately provide. If teacher knowledge requires metaphor, then myths hold conceptual value for teaching. If teaching demands empirical clarity, then myths at odds with science must be abandoned and myths more accommodating of science found. Teachers operate within hybrid epistemic conditions as their decisions must integrate empirical findings, ethical commitments, intuitive judgments, and cultural knowledge. It is vital that teachers interpret behavior that cannot be quantified and decipher internal states that cannot be directly observed. Affective, factual, social, and cognitive factors must be attended to simultaneously. The question is not whether neuromyths are true or false. The question is what sort of myths do educators need to think critically and wisely about teaching. Neuromyths show us how to assess the (in)adequacy of myths adopted in support of the teaching profession. Myths in education lose validity when they get in the way of good teaching rather than facilitate effective pedagogy. The overall challenge is to begin the quest for the conceptual tools educators

⁹ Jane Addams, "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements," in *The Jane Addams Reader*, ed. Jean Bethke Elshtain (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

deserve, that is, to develop alternative metaphors that convey meaning without distorting science. Eliminating neuromythologies without replacing their interpretive function leaves teachers epistemically stranded. Adequate reinterpretation of neuromyths into what may be called “edu-myths” honors the symbolic nature and allegorical manner of teaching whilst simultaneously grounding new conceptual tools in both ethical and empirical responsibility. Philosophical reconstruction of neuromyths into edu-myths must take a form that allows educators to retain the cultural meaning-making and structural stability gained via shared myths without allowing (or requiring) teachers to endorse false, that is, unwarranted, pseudoscientific claims.

II.

As a second step in the reconstruction of neuromyths, neuromyths must be interpreted rather than simply eliminated. Neuromyths are cultural artifacts that illuminate how educators attempt to integrate disparate forms of knowledge, especially what they study while in teacher education programs and what they learn during the lived experience of teaching. When approached as a philosophical puzzle, neuromyths reveal important insights regarding meaning-making, metaphor, and the interpretive nature of teaching. Under philosophical reinterpretation, neuromyths can be transformed into more encompassing metaphors that support rather than distort immensely thoughtful pedagogical practice. The task at hand is not to defend myths but to understand the epistemic functions they serve in order for educators to be able to supersede failed myths, such as neuromyths, by constructing conceptually stronger and epistemically more responsible frameworks. Much is revealed about the nature and purpose of educational knowledge itself by treating neuromyths as a lens through which to observe and resolve broader epistemological tensions such as educators' validation of evidence, how laboratory experiment gets negotiated into pedagogical context, and what counts as meaningful knowledge in teaching.

Treated as an intellectual endeavor, teaching is distinct, if not unique, in the manner in which it synthesizes two forms of knowledge — scientific and symbolic — that operate under fundamentally different assumptions. Scientific knowledge aims to predict, explain, and generalize. Allegorical knowledge seeks to interpret, evaluate, and respond meaningfully in specific contexts. The friction between these two epistemic aims becomes apparent when teachers attempt to put scientific knowledge to use in culturally imbued practice. Neuroscience may offer a precise account of how working memory is limited and how neural networks can reorganize with practice, etc.; but such findings are abstract. They are unable to translate directly into decisions about grouping students, structuring classroom discourse, or even interpreting a child's confusion. Any attempt to put scientific findings directly into place as classroom practice is a process inherently vulnerable to distortion. The precision of science is lost as it moves from experimental conditions to classroom environments. However, the authority of science remains. When this sense of authority attaches itself to cultural metaphors without any scientific credibility, like neuromyths, epistemic mirages that falsely appear scientific lead teachers away from effective pedagogy.

But pseudoscience need not be the inevitable result of science finding its way into classroom practice. The solution is not to remove science from education but to submit science to scientific scrutiny *in* education. To see teachers, metaphorically speaking, as the final test of the claims of education science is the best way to improve the quality of translation of science into practice. Dewey's emphasis upon inquiry offers a direct model for this. Translation of science into classroom context should be iterative, reflective, and provisional. Teachers must utilize scientific

findings as tools rather than made to treat what science tells them as dictates to be followed slavishly. Teachers must interrogate the complexities of research rather than be made to accept research at the bare minimum of simplistic narrative. Yes, such a reconceptualization of teachers at work would require epistemic training few teachers genuinely receive in the course of study comprising most teacher education programs. Teacher education often places emphasis on memorizing “scientifically endorsed” strategies over conceptual understanding of how to implement strategy across a wide diversity of students. Without solid philosophical grounding gained via teacher education courses, teachers lack the tools to be able to evaluate conceptual frameworks in a critical manner. This intellectual vulnerability Education students acquire as they study to become teachers gives bad ideas, like neuromyths, ample soil in which to seed and grow. “Teacher as independent researcher,” however, is a metaphor that replaces teacher vulnerability with teacher vitality. Teacher test of education research and theory is the best way for teachers themselves to discern the pseudo- from the genuinely scientific in education thinking. Finally, the edu-myth that “All teachers know how to test education science for contextual validity and reliability.” is an element of teacher mythos acceptable to both Dewey and Emerson on knowledge. Teacher as researcher is a teacher in search of warranted assertibility in context for scientific claims in education. “Teacher as researcher” supplies a metaphor guaranteed to keep expanding teachers’ circles of knowledge as they do their jobs.

The edu-myth of teacher as researcher also fits with Noddings' ethic of care. Noddings insists that teachers must avoid practices that undermine students' ability or restrict their perceived potential. Neuromyths can indeed undermine students' abilities and restrict their perceived potential. When a student is labeled as, say, a "kinesthetic learner," the label may feel affirming; however, it can quickly become limiting. Research on expectancy effects indicates that labels shape not only teachers' expectations, but also students' self-perceptions.¹⁰ A child who thinks they can't learn abstractly or verbally because "their brain isn't wired that way" is internalizing nonexistent limits. Neuromyths thus directly affect identity formation in harmful ways. This is true even more so for students whose identities have already been ill-affected in other ways by marginalization. Eliminating deterministic labels is an ethical necessity. However, teachers cannot abandon interpretation altogether. Care requires attentiveness to difference. Teachers must recognize that students vary in background, habits, motivation, and cultural experiences. These differences actually make up how students engage with tasks. Neuroscience does not deny heterogeneity. It pigeonholes it. By contrast, an edu-myth framework of teacher as researcher opens opportunity for understanding students as the individuals they are and the persons they are becoming. Personalization of teacher-student interaction preserves the ethical impulse to attend to particularity whilst also allowing for the rejection of false explanatory mechanisms that seek too easily and readily to categorize students into kinds. ‘Teacher as researcher’ allows teachers to respond to student differences without reducing students to categories.

The distinction between acknowledging difference and essentializing identity also clarifies a flaw in the social dimension of neuromyths. Addams reminds us that symbolic narratives become harmful when they promote inequality. Students from nondominant linguistic and cultural backgrounds risk being disproportionately labeled as “visual” or “kinesthetic” learners because of their newness to school language and culture. Mislabeling culturally inexperienced students

¹⁰ Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968).

with neuromyths reveals, first, the limited ability of learning styles language to correctly describe a large diversity of students; and, second, implicit biases about who is capable of abstract and verbal reasoning.¹¹ When these labels are treated as scientifically grounded, they absolve educators of their responsibility to directly dismantle structural inequalities. To Addams' delight, the metaphor of teacher as researcher invites educators to ask, "What am I perceiving?" and "What assumptions underlie my interpretation?" "How do cultural narratives shape the language I use to describe students?" "What assumptions underlie my interpretation?" "How do cultural narratives shape the language I utilize to describe students?" These reflecting questions are a necessity for educators set to take a leading role in construction of their professional identity.

Conscientiously constructed professional identity also protects teachers against the commercial ecosystem that perpetuates neuromyths. Brain-based training, differentiated instruction packages, and market-based learning-style assessments all capitalize on teachers' desire for tools. These products tend to present metaphors as scientific facts, thus reinforcing misconceptions. Dewey would argue that such practices impede necessary inquiry by presenting fixed categories as unquestionable truths. Emerson would warn that accepting such a framework violates intellectual self-reliance. Addams would broadly critique the social consequences of commodifying pseudoscientific narratives. And Noddings would add that care is not a commodity that can be purchased. Neuromyths, whether imposed from outside or voluntarily purchased online, fail to distinguish between teachers' assessment of canned curricula and the presumed scientific authority with which the curricula speak of themselves. Only the former can be philosophically justified. However much hyped as scientific, every new curriculum will have to be tested in context by classroom teachers just like any other suggestion for classroom success. Teacher as researcher suggests a companion edu-myth that says, "No curriculum teaches itself." Or, restated in positive terms, "All teachers know how to write lessons that tailor curriculum to student body."

The need for teachers to become well-versed in analysis of curricula for scientific merit becomes even more apparent when looking at priorly established principles based on neuromyths. Consider the common belief that students can only remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, etc. The result is the so-called "Learning Pyramid," a model that rests on no empirical basis whatsoever.¹² However, it is able to flourish in its falsehood due to its intuitively compelling narrative about active engagement. Teachers observe that students retain more when they are able to discuss, teach others, and directly apply their knowledge. The pyramid method merely offers a quasi-quantifiable narrative that aligns with this intuition. The scientific pretense, the claim that the numbers are neuroscientifically validated, is false. The pyramid doesn't tell us anything we don't already know. It just increases the likelihood that we will misuse what truth it may contain. Nevertheless, the underlying pedagogical impulse is reasonable. Active engagement matters greatly. Teacher capacity to evaluate this pedagogical insight in classroom context would preserve the general point about the importance to learning of engagement but could discard the pseudoscientific quantification. Without fictitious numbers influencing their thinking, teachers would be encouraged to explore with their students what sorts of active engagement enhances learning in their class; rather than rely on falsely produced percentages. In a similar manner, the myth of left-brained/right-brained learners persists because

¹¹ Django Paris, "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice," *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (2012): 93–97.

¹² Will Thalheimer, "The Learning Pyramid: The Myth, the Lie, and the Legend," *Work-Learning Research* (2015).

it resonates with cultural narratives about the opposition of creativity to logic. Teachers observe that some students gravitate towards artistic expression while others may thrive within analytical tasks. The neuromyth of hemispheric dominance offers a scientific-sounding explanation for this observation. However, scientific research shows that cognitive functions are integrated across both hemispheres.¹³ A good way to resolve this paradox is to put on hold the question of the truth or falsity of hemispheric dominance. Reinterpretation of neuromyths into edu-myths reclassifies hemispheric dominance as a hypothesis to be tested by teachers, not an article of teacher knowledge or faith. Students may differ in interest, background, and confidence, yet these differences are not solely rooted in (nor should they be restricted by false beliefs about) hemispheric dominance. Understanding neuromyths as hypotheses rather than axioms provides a distinction that works to prevent deterministic interpretations and helps to encourage teachers to cultivate cognitive capacities across domains.

Reinterpretation of neuromyths into edu-myths initiates a process of actively disentangling teacher observation from curricular explanation. That is, teachers' perceptions in class of variability, engagement, and preference among their students are sources of data for testing the scientific merit of research recommendations for classroom practice. Conversely, and even more importantly, teacher fidelity to research recommendation is decidedly *not* a criterion for effective teaching. What actually requires revision is the narrative that is used to interpret these perceptions. The two edu-myths discussed above — 1) Teacher as independent researcher and 2) No curriculum teaches itself. — present an approach that reformats all of the insights of Emerson, Dewey, Noddings, and Addams into a unified philosophical method for reconstructing educational knowledge. Emerson teaches us that metaphors need to evolve. Teachers evolve as researchers as they perfect their craft. Dewey teaches that ideas must be tested. Edu-myths insist that teachers find warrant for what and how they teach. Noddings states that interpretation carries ethical weight. Their search for warranted assertibility for their instructional decisions engages teachers in interpretation of students' individual learning strengths and learning needs. Addams shows us that narrative shapes communal meaning. Edu-myths provide communal meaning for teachers because they set standards for common knowledge among teachers. Edu-myths presume 1) All teachers know how to test education science for contextual validity and reliability. and 2) All teachers know how to write lessons that tailor curriculum to student body.

Some may say trying to save any part of neuromyths risks legitimizing pseudoscience. They contend that teachers need to rely solely on validated scientific findings, as well as discard metaphorical language entirely. However, this position rests on a misunderstanding. Even neuroscientists rely on metaphors, such as neural pathways, encoding, retrieval, etc.¹⁴ Metaphors are not only a sign of ignorance. Metaphors reach beyond what we don't know to provide at least a partial grasp of complexity we are attempting to understand. This turns the question away from whether or not to use metaphor and turns the question toward how to use metaphor in a responsible manner. Conversion of neuromyths into edu-myths suggests the safest way to use neuromyths is to treat them as a research project. In converting neuromyths into edu-myths, the general strategy has been to offer a logic broader than neuromyths that is able to transform the pseudoscience into an idea awaiting test among a group of (more promising) others. Let the better ideas emerge from the contest. Neuromyths no longer act as unquestioned axioms but remain open questions. Neuromyths become hypotheses not pronouncements. Neuromyths are as

¹³ Michael Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Brain* (New York: Dana Press, 2005).

¹⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

open to test as any other candidates for classroom use that theorists and researchers generate.

III.

The philosophical work of this project — analyzing the metaphorical bridge between research and practice in teaching — has involved reconstructing the conceptual tools that educators rely on. The next logical step is to ask how well reinterpretation of neuromyths into edu-myths can function within the lived realities of educational practice. Arguing that metaphors should be refined is insufficient because abstract. What matters is whether implementation of reinterpretation is able to reshape the way teachers think, act, respond, and collaborate. Edu-myths are only able to gain legitimacy as they are able to generate desired consequences from practices that teachers are able to enact within real institutional conditions.

A first practical implication concerns how teachers are able to identify and respond to learner variability. Neuromyths such as learning styles gained traction not merely because they sounded scientific but because they were able to offer teachers an intuitively appealing explanation for the differences among students that they observe each day. Students most evidently vary in how they approach tasks, engage with content, respond emotionally, and display confidence. These differences are easily observable, pedagogically meaningful, and very much ethically significant. What neuromyths offer (falsely) is a way to be able to interpret these differences. A re-interpretive framework shifts the attention from the imagined existence of innate modality-based learning styles to careful examination of complex dynamic factors that shape behavior and motivation, prior success, and cognitive load. Even a student who appears to be a visual learner may instead be a student who, more accurately speaking, benefits from reduced linguistic demands. Perhaps a student who needs to move while in class may not be “kinesthetic” at all; but struggling with anxiety and cognitive overload. Reinterpretation encourages teachers to examine these underlying conditions rather than unquestioningly accept superficial explanations.

The reinterpretative shift has significant pedagogical consequences. Neuromyths often distort instructional planning by encouraging formulaic approaches to student diversity. However, eliminating learning styles does not mean treating all students identically. Instead, freed from neuromyths, teachers are able to focus on well-supported principles such as multimodal representation, considered as a tool for deepening comprehension as opposed to a checklist accommodation of all the stated types on an arbitrarily constructed list of “learning styles.” Teachers are freed to explore techniques such as retrieval practice, elaborative interrogation, and scaffolding to meet diverse needs.¹⁵ Dual coding theory suggests that combining verbal and visual information strengthens memory.¹⁶ Elaborative encoding recommends that connecting new ideas to prior knowledge deepens understanding; spaced and interleaved practice, then, support retention.¹⁷ When neuromyths are reinterpreted as edu-myths, they become prompts for inquiries as opposed to labels. Teachers as researchers are encouraged to then ask themselves; “What is this student responding to?” “What meaning are they making?” “What supports this deepening understanding?” These questions align in a closer manner with

¹⁵ Yana Weinstein, Megan Sumeracki, and Oliver Caviglioli, *Understanding How We Learn: A Visual Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁶ Allan Paivio, *Mental Representations: A Dual Coding Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Henry Roediger and Mark McDaniel, *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

both empirical evidence and ethical commitments when compared to the rigid categories that neuromyths impose. Reinterpretation anchors teacher research within legitimate cognitive science and allows teachers to integrate science into practice flexibly and intelligently, rather than clumsily or in a simplified, mechanical manner.

A second implication concerns assessment. When teachers believe wholeheartedly in learning styles, assessments begin to function solely as criteria for categorization rather than opportunities for understanding. Students may end up completing unreliable learning style inventories that (mis)shape expectations about their abilities. Reinterpretation shifts assessment towards taking the form of a research project answered via reflective inquiry: What strategies helped this student to understand the concept? What obstacles emerged? What misunderstandings continue to persist? This approach aligns very well with Dewey's view of assessment as part of inquiry and resonates with Noddings' view of interpretation as an ethical act. Edu-myths position assessment as a means of understanding how students learn rather than as a mechanism for sorting learners into "styles" or students into "grades." A fourth implication concerns professional dialogue. Teachers frequently use learning style language as a shorthand in conversations with colleagues, families, etc. The language persists because it is intuitive and culturally embedded. Reinterpretation does not demand abandoning shared vocabulary altogether. Instead, it encourages educators to develop new terms to help better express what they are observing in their classrooms. Phrases such as "engagement pattern," "representation preference," or even "task-based response tendency" may initially feel less fluent than the pseudoscientific discourse teachers have grown used to. However, by actively resisting essentialization of students and wisely foregrounding context over identity, continued use of new language bridges into richer conversations about learning. Over time, these conceptual shifts will reshape professional culture.

Reinterpretation also has major implications for teacher preparation. Many teacher education programs operate under the assumption that providing more scientific information will eliminate neuromyths. Yet, as Dekker's findings show, this assumption is very flawed.¹⁸ Information transmission alone is unable to reshape conceptual frameworks. Teachers require extensive philosophical preparation and practice with conceptual tools for evaluating the assumptions that are embedded in educational narratives, for interrogating the metaphors they inherit, and for constructing their own metaphorical understanding of the limits of scientific knowledge. The more teacher education programs treat teachers and teachers-to-be as implementers rather than as thinkers, the more they deprive teachers of opportunity to construct cultural narratives that make learning intelligible and individualistic. If teachers are unable to recognize how neuromyths (mal)function both conceptually and culturally, they cannot adequately replace them with better and more appropriate frameworks. Therefore, philosophical inquiry is not peripheral to teacher training. Development of philosophical acumen is central to creation of teachers who are researchers and teachers who are capable of tailoring curriculum to students.

Reinterpretation of neuromyths into edu-myths, therefore, generates consequences at every organizational level: Individual practice, pedagogical design, professional culture, teacher preparation, etc. This suggests that use of edu-myths to understand teaching requires institutional reform. Neuromyths are not merely individual misconceptions. They are institutional artifacts shaped by policy, professional development, and cultural narratives. For reinterpretation to be

¹⁸ Dekker et al., "Neuromyths in Education: Prevalence and Predictors."

able to function fully, institutions must create structures that support teacher research and teacher reflection. Teachers need to know how to use research models that foreground inquiry rather than become adept at uncritical compliance. Without these intellectual support structures, teachers will continue to remain epistemically overburdened and susceptible to reductive frameworks. In a philosopher's ideal, Addams and Dewey would agree, democratic educational communities would support the intellectual growth of teachers just as they are able to support the growth of students. Reinterpretation requires institutions to reimagine the epistemic environment in which teachers work when the metaphor for 'teacher' becomes 'researcher'.

Taken all together, the practical implications of reinterpretation provide a vision of professional autonomy for teachers. Reinterpretation proposes a work culture in which teachers, using a critical methodology, are able to examine the merit for classroom use of recommended conceptual tools. Teachers are then able to comfortably integrate empirical knowledge into their practice in a responsible manner and, in turn, construct meaning collaboratively with other teacher-researchers and with students. This vision challenges entrenched structural forces such as top-down mandates, commercial pseudoscience, enforced time constraints, and the currently implemented educational epistemology of: "Hear and obey!" Neuromyths reveal not only misconceptions about the brain but also misconceptions about what educational knowledge is. Simplistic notions of evidence-based practice, which presume direct application of scientific facts to teaching, clearly suffer severe epistemic shortcomings. An edu-myth approach aligns with philosophical commitments to inquiry, autonomy, and ethical relationships. It also responds to empirical research and classroom realities. It neither clings to pseudoscience nor reduces teaching to simplified technique. It sees teachers as researchers adept at adapting educational science to learning environment.

IV.

Neuromyths should be obsolete. The question is what element of the conceptual landscape should replace them. This brings us to the final movement of the argument, what reinterpretation is able ultimately to offer as a philosophical framework for education. If reinterpretation is to serve as a philosophical framework for education, it needs to be able to provide teachers with alternative versions of metaphors. It must be able to articulate a vision of educational knowledge that honors the complexity of teaching while simultaneously maintaining fidelity to scientific evidence. It must adequately explain how educators are able to integrate empirical research, ethical standards, cultural narratives, and practical judgment without collapsing these domains onto each other. Reinterpretation of neuromyths into edu-myths ends up requiring a model of knowledge that has the ability to be cohesively dynamic, relational, and culturally grounded. In brief, edu-myths must do all the things neuromyths fail to do. Ultimately, reinterpretation must clarify what it means to "know" in education.

The epistemology implicit in neuromyths is fundamentally flawed because it treats scientific claims as isolated truths that can be directly applied to classrooms. It is assumed that the transmission model of knowledge works as follows: Neuroscientists first discover how the brain works, educators receive this information, they deploy it in their classrooms. Thus, pedagogy improves. This account of the formation of teacher knowledge ignores the interpretive work required to make knowledge meaningful within context. Dewey insists that knowledge becomes meaningful only through use, through the consequences that are generated within lived

experiences.¹⁹ Addams argues that knowledge gains force when it becomes socially situated, that is, connected to the narratives that communities use in order to make sense of experience.²⁰ Noddings stresses that understanding needs to be filtered through relational care. Emerson reminds us how conceptual tools are able to gain power through the flexibility of metaphor. Reinterpretation aligns with all of these views. Knowledge must be reconstructed by teachers, not just received by them.

Reconstruction requires teachers to reject the false dichotomy between science and metaphor. Science alone is unable to meet the epistemic demands of teaching, and metaphor alone is unable to provide reliable guidance for practice. The challenge is not choosing between science and metaphor; but integrating them responsibly. Reinterpretation allows teaching to operate at the intersection of these two epistemic forms, the scientific and the metaphoric. Reinterpretation of neuromyths into edu-myths preserves the imaginative richness of metaphor whilst grounding metaphor in empirical responsibility. The significance of this synthesis becomes clear once we consider the consequences of failing to achieve it. When metaphors are taken in a literal sense, they end up ossifying into dogma, distorting learning. When empirical findings are overextended, they become reductionist and dehumanizing. When teachers are deprived of or denied conceptual tools to evaluate the usefulness in context of scientific findings, pseudoscience fills the vacuum. Neuromyths have come to flourish because educators lack both the epistemological training and institutional support necessary to be able to carry out inquiry appropriately. Reinterpretation responds to this failure, not by shaming teachers or demanding conformity, but by empowering educators as thinkers, as interpreters, as researchers, as creators of knowledge.

‘Teacher as researcher’ is a metaphor that highlights how reinterpretation is able to illuminate the role of institutions in influencing educational epistemology. If schools end up rewarding compliance over inquiry, if professional development markets pseudoscience, if teachers lack time for reflection, then neuromyths will persist even in the face of evidence against them. Addams would advise that epistemological reform requires democratic communities of inquiry, whilst Dewey would insist that reflective practice must be institutionalized, not incidental in manner. Seeing teaching as a process of research demands systemic change. There need to be structures that support collaboration, opportunities for professional discourse grounded in inquiry, respect for teacher autonomy, and integration of philosophical reasoning into teacher preparation. Ultimately, reinterpretation is offering not simply an alternative to neuromyths; but a vision of educational knowledge grounded in humility, flexibility, and ethical relations. An approach to teaching informed by edu-myths rather than neuromyths rejects the notion that scientific authority alone is able to determine pedagogical truth and, instead, insists that truth in education emerges through teachers’ reflective engagement in classroom contexts with empirical evidence, ethical principles, and lived experience. Reinterpretation positions teachers not as passive recipients of knowledge *from* others but as active participants *with* others in construction of knowledge.

One could perhaps worry that reinterpretation concedes too much to myth itself. Yet this objection misses the point that myths are here to stay. Myths fill the vacuum left by insufficient conceptual tools. Eliminating myths without addressing the vacuum their disappearance creates invites construction of new myths, just as likely pseudoscientific as neuromyths. That’s why

¹⁹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court, 1925).

²⁰ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1902).

reinterpretation preserves the conceptual functions that give rise to myths while simultaneously rebuilding sturdier, more reliable frameworks for construction of myths. An edu-myth approach to teaching puts a stop to the cycle of pseudoscience by clarifying the epistemological and ethical standards that conceptual tools must meet for use in context. According to a second line of concern, some may worry that reinterpretation might be too time-consuming for teachers who are already overwhelmed by structural constraints. As odd as it may seem, this objection precisely reveals why support for the methodology of reinterpretation is necessary at the systemic level. Structural reform is not something separate from epistemic reform, but a prerequisite for it. Addams' emphasis on communal inquiry underscores that epistemology requires supportive social structures. Schools must create conditions that allow inquiry to flourish. The result will be time for collaboration, opportunities for professional dialogue, and respect for teachers' intellectual labor and hard work built right into the job descriptions of teachers.

The methodology of reinterpretation appears to be a philosophically coherent and pedagogically viable alternative to both myth preservation and science eradication. Edu-myths are able to acknowledge the complexity of teaching and provide a conceptual path for moving beyond the flawed binaries that tend to dominate discussion of neuromyths. The philosophical stakes of neuromyths extend far beyond the myths themselves. Neuromyths actively force us to confront foundational questions about how educators are to come to know, what their knowledge is for, and how meaningful knowledge gets constructed as part of the practice of teaching. Reinterpretation is able to offer a response that can honor the humanity of learners and the intellectual agency of teachers. It provides a path for being able to create, refine, and implement conceptual tools that illuminate learning rather than distort it. In doing so, this transforms the debate over neuromyths into a much broader philosophical project: The reconstruction of educational epistemology. Reinterpretation situates educational knowledge within communal narratives and institutional structures where educators, via testing and reflection, refurbish and rebuild conceptual tools for effective use in classroom context.

Dissenting to Transform: Iranian Female Students in a Prescriptive Educational System

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Abstract: In post-revolutionary Iran, female students confront systemic violence embedded within the educational system, from compulsory hijab mandates to ideological indoctrination. I examine how these realities perpetuate gender-based discrimination, restricting young women's rights and freedoms. The lens of Reproductive Justice theory reveals how authoritarian structures reinforce patriarchal norms through segregated classrooms, biased curricula, and direct repression. Though state institutions attempt to neutralize dissent, female students strategically leverage social media and underground solidarity networks to challenge institutionalized violence and advocate for social change. Iranian women's activism, seen in movements like *White Wednesdays*; *Women, Life, Freedom*; and *Lion & Sun Revolution*, reflects a broader pursuit of educational autonomy and bodily self-determination. Analyzing these campaigns using transnational feminist theory shows how Iranian female students transform educational spaces shaped by state violence into sites of resistance and empowerment.

The female-led revolution in Iran is fueled by over four decades of oppression, violence, and lack of accountability. Iranian men and women stand unwavering in the face of bullets and brutality because they recognize that a life without bodily autonomy, the right to self-expression, and economic and social stability is not worth living. Raising awareness is no longer adequate. Iranians unanimously demand systemic change through international organizations and governments: it is long past time for action.

— Armita, 18-year-old Iranian student — She's the First, Sixth Annual Summit, 2022

Iranian students have experienced years of harassment, threats, arrests, detention, and even being put on the Islamic Republic of Iran's list of potential targets for assassination. Beginning in early 1997, college students' politically dissident activism returned to Iran's political arena seventeen years after the Islamic Revolution. Effective student involvement in President Mohammad Khatami's campaign (from February to May 1997) was the first indication of the rebirth of a student movement (Mashayekhi, 2001). During Khatami's presidency (1997-2004), known as the reform period, political space was opened in post-revolutionary Iran. Iranian students became more involved in politics during the reform era by criticizing conservatives and advocating for more political freedom (Yaghmaian, 2012). From 1997 to 1999, Iranian students often advocated freedom of the press, freedom for political prisoners, better and more available housing, and better food in dormitories (Tohidi, 1999). In response to these protests and efforts at reform, the government of Iran turned to *securitization* to protect its state-sanctioned version of Islam. As Ahuja (2020, p. 194) explains, "securitization involves changes in a subject, system, or state to minimize potential risks or dangers that develop from particular social and political environmental contexts." Securitization involves safeguarding an object, in this case, the Islamic Republic's ideology, by adopting a future-focused approach that emphasizes short-term preventative actions to mitigate potential long-term risks. In this context, crackdowns on students and the press were an effort to secure Iran's regime from any future criticism, particularly with respect to its religious moralism.

On July 6, 1999, in an obvious act of securitization, the Islamic Republic's Parliament passed a stringent press law, giving authorities expanded powers to protect Islam from the perceived harms posed by dissenting journalists, some of whom were students. On July 7, 1999, the Special Court for Clergy ordered the shutdown of *Salam*, a widely read newspaper that

supported Khatami's reformist candidacy for the presidency. In response to the law and press crackdowns, Iranian students took to the streets in Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad, and Esfahan to protest. This student movement is referred to as *Fajeh Kuye Daneshgah*, or "the tragedy of the university dormitory," an event that has been characterized as Iran's version of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, since at least seventeen students were killed on their university campuses or at their university dorms. Ezzat Ebarhim-Nejad, a poet, was killed in a dormitory. As of this writing, Saeed Zeinali, one of the first victims of this protest, is still missing. In addition, many Iranian students published articles objecting to the law. However, the courts shut down demonstrations, interfered in the publication of written protests, and at least ten writers and others, including writers and publishers Faezah Hashemi, Latif Safari, and Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, were convicted of "insulting the sanctity and tenets of Islam" or "forgery and offending Islam" (CPJ, 2000). Security forces then launched brutal attacks on the University of Tehran and Tabriz University. The attacks ended with several students killed or imprisoned (Golkar, 2015), with some still missing as of this writing.

Thousands of Iranian students nevertheless continued to play a substantial role in the social movements that were mobilizing in this increasingly repressive era, including the 2009 *Green Movement*. Also known as the *Green Wave* and in the West as the *Persian Spring*, the *Green Movement* became prominent following the contested Iranian presidential election in June 2009, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner despite an election that was widely recognized as fraudulent (Golkar, 2011). Still, the *Green Movement* had its roots in long-standing discontent and unhappiness with the government that had ruled Iran for the previous thirty years. Even with the most recent rebellious movement in Iran, known as the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement, which began on September 16, 2022, after Jina "Mahsa" Amini's death (at the hands of the morality police for violating women's dress code), high school and university students were again, notably, the first protesters. The morality police in Iran, known as the Guidance Patrol, which enforces their interpretation of Sharia law (i.e. Islamic social and societal law), had detained Amini, a Kurdish 22-year-old recently admitted to university, on September 13, 2022, for *improperly* donning her headscarf. Her relatives and the local media reported that in detention, morality police brutally beat her, and while still in police custody, she lost brain function and passed away three days later (Rights, 2022). After news of the tragedy spread, protests broke out all over Iran. Protesters were led by women from all classes and demographics, such as students in high schools and universities, grandmothers, and working-class groups. They cut their hair, tore off their headscarves in protest of the compulsory hijab in schools and universities, and took up the chant "women, life, freedom." From high school to college, young Iranian women raised their voices to express outrage against the many years of oppression and denigration women have been suffering.

Role of Women in Iranian Protest

Throughout Iran's history, and especially since the 1979 revolution, women and female students have been a significant part of social uprisings (Gheytanchi, 2022). During the 2009-2010 *Green Movement*, young girls and women were introduced to a new form of activism and political protest through social media. Under the influence of new technology, the internet and political movements grew in tandem, giving Iranian citizens a platform in cyberspace to advocate in some cases for — but more often against — the Iranian government. Women gained the most from these social media sites, finally having a place to voice their own articulation of cyberfeminism (Malekpour, 2021). As a former student, teacher, and staff member in Iran's

educational system, I also experienced gender oppression, having to live under the heteropatriarchal moralistic norms imposed by society and government institutions. Back in my time, there was less awareness of the pervasiveness of harassment by the system and even less of the means to push back and speak up against gender injustice. These discriminations continue to be normalized in Iran's academic and social setting by means of limited access to education, especially to equitable higher education (compared to that available to men), and limited social resources for women educators.

Trends of the last 25 years have shown that whenever the education of Iranian women approaches equity with that of men, the government will take definitive action to ensure that fundamental inequalities remain. Iranian women first outnumbered men in university entrance exam applications in 1998, a turning point that led to a quiet but ongoing shift in policy. To curb female acceptance rates in higher education and acting on the belief that men should retain dominance in both academia and the job market authorities introduced gender-based quotas aimed at limiting the number of women admitted to universities (Iranian Republic, 2020). By 2004, these quotas were officially applied to fields like medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy, despite strong opposition from women's rights activists. In 2013, the policy became even more explicit, with universities such as Allameh Tabataba'i assigning certain programs to men and others to women (Mehr News, 2025). Although the government has never publicly acknowledged quotas, reports confirm the National Organization for Educational Testing and key ministries continue to implement them, capping admissions by sex in many fields (Khabar Online, 2023). Ahmad Tavakkoli, a senior member of Iran's hardline Principlist faction, defended the policy claiming it protects family stability and aligns with women's own preferences (Iranian Republic, 2020). During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013), officials cited concerns (limited dormitory space, female dominance in the job market, and social imbalance) as justification for maintaining gender-based restrictions (Radio Farda, 2007).

Iran's misogynist social and political context in which female students have been a critical part of contemporary-era Iranian social movements, echoing their historical role in past movements for justice. Iranian female students face systemic discrimination in education and limited opportunities for social and political participation due to state efforts to control their bodies through draconian morality policing. While the most recent uprisings in which women and female students play a central role do not explicitly foreground reproductive rights, they challenge entrenched economic and educational disparities that intersect with race, gender, and class and control women's daily lives, including bodily autonomy. Reproductive Justice theory, which examines how poverty, immigration laws, and state violence undermine reproductive autonomy, is critical to understanding the importance of Iranian resistance movements. Women protesting in Iran are addressing oppressions that ultimately infringe on their reproductive freedoms. Looking at Iranian protests through a Reproductive Justice feminist lens that refuses to disconnect fundamental rights from systemic oppression, I examine recent female student movements and the role of female students in Iran's ongoing social transformation, a topic overlooked in academic literature. I explore why female students take to the streets in their school uniforms, burn their school dress codes, and are sometimes killed for doing so, all in well-publicized activities, as was the case in the 2022 murders of Nika Shahkarami and Sarina Esmailzadeh, two female high school students murdered by the morality police during the *Women, Life, Freedom* protests. Sociological and cultural analysis of female-led student movements in Iran focuses on 1) the religious-political forces that shape the structure of education and schools in Iran and the resulting gendered social discrimination against girls and

women, and 2) the role of global cyberfeminism as an agent of reproductive justice in opening to female students paths and goals different from those of the state-run educational system in Iran.

Reproductive Justice Theory: A Demand for Women's Social Justice

The Reproductive Justice framework, developed by both Asian American and Black feminists in the 1990s, provides an intersectional lens for understanding how political, social, and economic structures, which, while not always understood in relation to reproductive health access, affect marginalized groups' reproductive autonomy and broader social experiences (Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, 2017; Ross, 2017). Loretta Ross, a prominent African American activist, constructed the Reproductive Justice framework to expand the pro-choice conversation, dominant for a long time in the US, to include broader social and economic factors, enacting the concept of "calling in" culture (disagreeing without punishing) as an alternative to "calling out" culture (punishing because of disagreement) (Nelson, 2010). By addressing systemic issues, such as racial inequality, poverty, and healthcare access, that undermine reproductive rights, the Reproductive Justice (RJ) theoretical framework critiques mainstream reproductive rights movements for remaining too narrowly focused on abortion and contraception, (Ross & Solinger, 2017). RJ recognizes three core rights — the right to have a child, the right not to have a child, and the right to parent in safe and supportive environments — that are often grouped in human rights discourse with social and economic rights such as the rights to education and an adequate standard of living.

Social/economic rights are frequently compromised by intersecting oppressions like racism, sexism/heterosexism, and classism, as well as broader, related systemic factors such as poverty, immigration laws, and state violence (Morison & Herbert, 2018). For women of color, reproductive freedom is inseparable from issues of economic justice, healthcare, and education (Price, 2022). Reproductive Justice emerged as a response to the limitations of the feminist reproductive rights movement, which primarily emphasized individual choice while neglecting the lived realities of women of color and other marginalized groups, which present obstacles and inequities that interfere with or even deprive women of rights to family, health, education, and political participation. Ross and Solinger (2017) argue that White-dominated feminist movements generalized experiences of middle-class White women, overlooking the intersectional challenges faced by others. RJ, by contrast, encompasses broader social justice concerns, including environmental racism and economic inequality, all of which shape reproductive outcomes and thus should not be disconnected from those outcomes in movements for social change (Morison & Herbert, 2018). Broader application of the idea of reproductive rights to include social rights provides a lens for analyzing how systemic power dynamics influence reproductive and non-reproductive decisions (Morison, 2021). RJ's adaptability makes its splicing of human and reproductive rights relevant to global contexts, including the activism of Iranian female students (Price, 2022). RJ theory, therefore, intersects with Social Justice Theory, which advocates dismantling systemic barriers to equality and access (Daniel, 2021).

Iranian women face systemic discrimination in education and limited opportunities for social and political participation, all reinforced by gynophobic state efforts to deny them bodily autonomy in terms of what they can display of their bodies and how, by means of hijab, their bodies must remain separate from, and thus not equal to, those of males in public. In the context of analyzing the contemporary movements of Iranian female students, RJ offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how political and religious structures limit women's autonomy in

reproductive decisions, in education, and political and social participation. Social Justice Theory aligns with the Combahee River Collective's (1983) analysis of race, gender, and class oppression as foundations of identity politics, a position often credited with laying the foundation for RJ. In addition to stating their own clear theoretical principles and practical plans for cultural change, Social Justice theory and Reproductive Justice theory critique neoliberal policies that characterize reproductive rights as merely individual choices, often ignoring systemic inequalities that hinder access to vital resources like healthcare, employment, and education (Morison & Herbert, 2018). Exclusion from socially just treatment is evident in the Iranian context, where female students face systemic marginalization, enforced by morality police and other systems of securitization, that limits their ability to participate fully in social movements like the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement and political life more broadly. Application of RJ as a way to study female-led Iranian protests allows for exploration of gender-based discrimination and broader socio-political factors shaping the lived experiences of Iranian female students.

Schools: A Source of Oppression

The Reproductive Justice (RJ) framework emphasizes identifying sources of oppression as particularly relevant in understanding where discrimination begins. For Iranian women oppression often begins in the schools. The organizational function of any schooling structure is formed and deployed in a country's particular and distinct social context (Oplatka, 2004). The educational system in Iran, a tool of the theocracy that rules Iran, plays a crucial role in shaping the social and political views of young Iranians, with schools deploying tools for overt ideological indoctrination. For some historical contextualization of the education system in Iran, in 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the revolution that ousted the shah, tasked the schooling system with enacting "a revolution in values" because he and his allies viewed the revolution as primarily a cultural and ideological revolution rather than a political revolution (Mehran, 2006). Khomeini believed fundamentalist Islamic religious education should be a required component of the new educational system's curriculum and structure: what is taught, how it is taught, and who teaches it. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian educational system has undergone significant transformations, with the government using schools to instill its political and religious values, especially in girls and young women. Revolutionary securitization against the perceived threat that women represent to the Islamic Republic is accomplished not only through teaching Shi'a religious beliefs but also through architecturally sex-segregated education and societal institutions. Where it is not possible to keep females and males apart, segregation is accomplished by insistence on the physical separation created by enforced hijab. Indoctrination begins early, with textbooks and teaching materials systematically rewritten to reflect fundamentalist Islamist and anti-democratic ideals, such as the obligation of women to cover parts of their bodies when in public. Golnar Mehran (1989) highlights that school textbooks serve as key agents of socialization, ensuring that Islamist values permeate every aspect of education, from history and sociology to literature and religious studies. Curriculum portrays the government as the defender of Shi'a Islam against all competing viewpoints from religious minorities such as Jews and ethnic groups such as Kurds (Mehran, 1989).

The educational system uses religious and political propaganda via textbooks and other pedagogical materials and practices to maintain control over students, presenting alternative perspectives as threats to Islam and the nation. The headscarf as a key component of the religious code of hijab is another critical tool of power imposed on female students as a symbol of their submission to Islamic values and heteropatriarchy (Shirazi, 2019). Following Abu-Lughod, who

has cautioned against Islamophobic oversimplification of the meaning of hijab, I point out that requiring women to wear hijab extends beyond mere religious observance (Abu-Lughod, 2002), functioning as a form of forced political compliance within schools. Since the beginning of the revolution, the government's central authority has determined significant policies regarding education in Iran, which has a highly centralized political and ideological framework (Hallinger, 2017) that violate women's fundamental human rights. These policies include making head coverings a *requirement* for girls only and segregating educational spaces based on sex (Paivandi, 2012). The government also established various religious customs, such as communal prayer, to reinforce the schools' political and religious propaganda events. Another notable change in 1979 was establishment of the Educational Affairs authority, Omour Tarbiyati, tasked with imparting Islamist culture to students and forming their thoughts (Mohammadi, 2004).

In 1987, the parliament passed a statute that is regarded as a critical piece of legislation for implementing significant, state- securitizing reforms in Iran's educational system in the contemporary era. The law strongly emphasized ideological frameworks primarily based on Shi'a principles, presented as the national religion and the embodiment of the sacred order on earth. The most *holy* objective of the school, according to the law, is to prepare young Muslims to become "virtuous believers, conscientious, and involved in the service of the Islamic society" (Paivandi, 2012, p. 7). One of the initial political and intellectual stages toward Islamization under the 1987 law involved removing teachers who opposed the revolution to ensure only those who supported the new political order remained in the classroom. The Ministry of Education quite quickly and extensively reformed college/university faculties of education with a stringent admissions process and a heavy dose of Islamic education and religious practice in programs to train future teachers. The Ministry offices require candidates from all fields to take religious knowledge examinations as part of the recruitment examination (Paivandi, 2006). Additionally, several extracurricular activities in each academic year are planned to strengthen teacher loyalty to the established patriarchal culture. The schools organize over one hundred political and religious gatherings, *the days of God*, each academic year, including political rallies, rituals honoring martyrs, and commemorations of religious luminaries' births and deaths (Mohammadi, 2004). State-enforced education practices, understood as tactics of morality policing and, thus securitization, have severely undermined educational quality in Iran. As Payman (1996, p. 23) critically observed, "the educational system has experienced the process of so-called 'cultural revolution', and it has paid a heavy price and declined in terms of human power, level of scientific education, and research quality." Educational degradation has led to a system plagued by low academic standards, inadequate facilities, and a chronic shortage of qualified educators (Tavassoli, 1997). Systemic control imposed on schools ultimately serves to uphold a theocratic structure that restricts and oppresses women, shaping young girls' lives to align with a rigid, state-prescribed version of female identity, thus stifling their voices and potential.

Saeed Paivandi (2012) notes schools have been viewed as essential in building an Islamist, i.e., fundamentalist state, aligning students with the principles of Shi'a Islam and ensuring their adherence to the political ideology of the Islamic Republic. Resistance to this alignment is punishable in the extreme. This may be why, in 2023, when young female students began to challenge the revolution and its core values with such activities as demonstrations in classrooms, online activism, and public burning of their scarves, the Islamic Republic began targeting schoolgirls with attacks at girls' schools across Iran. More specifically and horrifically, in February 2023, girls' schools across Iran faced a series of chemical attacks, where students reported exposure to chemical agents that caused severe symptoms like shortness of breath,

nausea, and even temporary paralysis. Despite clear evidence, and no such attacks on boys' schools, the regime denied responsibility and accused students and parents of exaggerating (Taheri, 2023). However, many believe the government orchestrated these attacks to terrorize young women who were striving for education, making it apparent that Iran's education system serves as an extension of state control over women's freedom and everyday lives.

State violence intensified further during the nationwide protests and strikes of January 2026, which were met with one of the deadliest crackdowns in the contemporary history of the Islamic Republic. According to human rights organizations, security forces killed tens of thousands of unarmed civilians across the country, including large numbers of students and schoolgirls participating in or affected by the demonstrations. More than 200 students were identified among the victims. The January Massacre illustrates the extent to which Iranian youth, and especially female students, have become central targets of state repression (IDC, 2026). For many families, classrooms became sites of mourning rather than learning, as countless children never returned home from school or back to their desks. Their absence remains part of the ongoing history of violence surrounding education, gender, and dissent in Iran. Such violent indoctrination was plainly an attempt to socialize female students into a marginalized, collective identity centered around Islamist revolutionary ideals, weakening individuality and ensuring conformity and securitization of the state (Razaghi et al., 2020). As Hayat Alvi (2022) explains, extremist groups often view women and even young girls as threats to religious and social order. Policies targeting women are tools of broader efforts to maintain male dominance and religious purity, because the typical role of women, in many societies, is one of engendering social norms and values in their socially reproductive roles in families. By embedding religious, political, and cultural values into every facet of education, the government shapes young girls' minds to align with its Islamist vision of a Shi'a Islamic state, marginalizing those who do not conform and thereby ensuring that the next generation of girls and women will align as well. Ultimately, the state can take even this limited education away, as government forces demonstrated by attacking college campuses in April 1980 (soon after the revolution) and driving them to close for three years (Mashayekhi, 2001). Forced closures continue in present times, and the threat is real and viscerally understood, a chilling tactic of state securitization. An Iranian female student highlighted the depth of enforced restrictions, reporting to VICE World News (2022) that "Women in Iran cannot choose their clothes, cannot choose the job they want, cannot get a divorce without their husband's permission, cannot marry without their father's permission, and cannot sing. During the *Women, Life, Freedom* protest, the Islamic Republic closed the doors of universities, arrested students, and shot them." Her testimony underscores how deeply embedded and oppressive gender-based restrictions are within Iran's educational framework, which openly penalizes women for expecting their rights and for seeking autonomy.

Cyberfeminism and the Education of Female Students

Schools in Iran function as spaces where girls and women are conditioned to accept a lack of fundamental human rights, fostering a broader social and political environment of systemic injustice. Educational institutions reflect the broader societal structure, preparing students for futures in which they will work in occupations deemed *acceptable* for women while establishing households, marrying, and raising children according to heteropatriarchal mandates of Shi'a Islam. Schools act as agents of socialization, ensuring that the next generation of Iranian women internalizes their roles as *ideal women* who refrain from demanding equitable pay, access to higher education, fair treatment in marriage, or an equal quality of life comparable to their male

counterparts. However, even as schools in Iran have become key sites for ideological indoctrination in the contemporary period, perpetuating the Islamic Republic's political and religious dominance by obviating women's reproductive rights and normalizing reproductive discrimination, the longer history of democratic participation has endured (Kaivani, 2019). Indeed, more recent efforts at indoctrination have largely failed, as demonstrated by recurring anti-regime protests. Over the years many students have demonstrated and now many students continue to demonstrate the failure of the policies of the Islamic Republic's 46-year attempt to produce a new generation of devout and dogmatic Islamists.

Despite all the political, cultural, and behavioral norms the Islamic Republic has been teaching its youth through textbooks and architectural efforts to create physically separate educational institutions for females and males, students have usually been first in line to exit the classroom and go to the streets to protest the regime and its repressive, gendered policies. The question then is "Why?" Why have so many students not cooperated with their Islamic studies in schools, while working adults seem more inclined to cooperate? Why has the education students have received for years in school, an education intended to ensure their fidelity to Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran, had the opposite impact on their lives? Partial answer lies in the fact that other forces from outside Iran in different types of classrooms, forces that were not present at the beginning of the revolution, have helped students think and behave in ways opposite to their schooling. Social networking sites (SNSs) are foundational in increasing people's knowledge of international political issues (Shahwar & Student, 2025). Young people, especially college students, use social media for cyberfeminism, political activism, and social justice conversation (Alami, 2019) to feed the need and desire to seek equity for marginalized groups, including women. However, the Islamic Republic has repeatedly attempted to sever digital connections whenever youth-led movements threaten state authority, from the *Green Movement* (2009), to the 2017–2018 protests, to the 2019 fuel protests, to *Women, Life, Freedom* (2022), and most recently the 2025–2026 social media/internet blackouts.

Digital Repression and the Politics of Connectivity

The growing importance of digital spaces for political education and participation in Iran has been accompanied by increasingly sophisticated efforts by the Islamic Republic to regulate, surveil, and restrict online communication. As young people, particularly students and women, have turned to digital platforms to share information, organize collective action, and challenge dominant state narratives, cyberspace has emerged as a significant site of political contestation. Consequently, the Iranian state has increasingly viewed unrestricted internet access as a threat to its authority and has repeatedly employed internet disruptions, platform restrictions, surveillance technologies, and nationwide blackouts during periods of social unrest. The relationship between political dissent and internet control in Iran has developed over more than two decades. During the 2009 *Green Movement*, protesters used digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and text messaging to coordinate demonstrations and document state violence. In response, authorities blocked social media platforms, throttled internet speeds, and expanded digital surveillance. Similar strategies reappeared during the nationwide protests of 2017–2018 and the November 2019 demonstrations against fuel price increases, which prompted the government to implement one of the most extensive internet shutdowns in modern history, effectively disconnecting much of the country from the global internet for nearly a week (O'Neil, 2025). State disruptions limited communication among student protesters, reduced international visibility of state

repression, and demonstrated the government's growing capacity to isolate Iranian students and citizens from transnational information networks.

The *Women, Life, Freedom* movement further intensified state efforts to control digital communication. Following the morality police murder of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, social media platforms became critical spaces through which Iranian women and students documented demonstrations, circulated images/videos of state violence, and connected local struggles to global audiences. Digital platforms enabled forms of activism that transcended geographic boundaries, allowing participants to challenge state narratives and generate international solidarity. The movement demonstrated digital spaces could function not only as communication tools but as alternative educational sites where participants exchanged political knowledge, feminist critiques, and strategies of resistance. The significance of digital spaces for resistance and protest helps explain why the Islamic Republic has invested heavily in systems of digital control. Iran's National Information Network (NIN), often presented by state officials as a project promoting cybersecurity and digital sovereignty, functions as a centralized infrastructure that enables extensive monitoring, filtering, and restriction of online activity (O'Neil, 2025). Systemic attempts to control media access exemplify broader patterns of digital authoritarianism in which governments employ advanced technologies to strengthen political and educational control, monitor dissent, and enhance regime resilience (Conduit, 2025). Rather than rely solely on physical repression, contemporary authoritarian regimes increasingly utilize technological infrastructures that allow surveillance and control to operate continuously and often invisibly.

Recent internet disruptions demonstrate the evolution of digital securitization strategies. During the June 2025 nationwide shutdown, Iranian authorities implemented a sophisticated service-level blackout that dramatically reduced access to the global internet while maintaining the appearance of normal network operations through stable routing infrastructure (Aryapour, 2025; Cui et al., 2026). Researchers documented extensive filtering, deep packet inspection, protocol restrictions, and selective blocking mechanisms that effectively isolated users while preserving state control over domestic communication networks (Aceto et al., 2026; Aryapour, 2025). VPN (Virtual Private Network) demand reportedly increased by more than 700 percent during the shutdown, highlighting citizens' continued efforts to circumvent censorship and remain connected to global information networks (Aryapour, 2025). Similarly, the January 2026 internet shutdown occurred amid widespread political unrest and demonstrated the state's continued reliance on digital repression as a mechanism of social and educational control. Analysis of the shutdown reveals extensive restrictions on communication infrastructure, further illustrating the central role that internet governance now plays in managing dissent, limiting collective mobilization, and inflicting huge damage on the education of Iranian students (Aceto et al., 2026). Repeated use of communications disruptions suggest that the state increasingly perceives digitally connected citizens, particularly politically active youth, as a significant challenge to its authority.

From a cyberfeminist perspective, efforts to restrict connectivity reveal the transformative potential of digital spaces. The state's recurring attempts to control internet access underscore the extent to which online platforms have become important sites for feminist knowledge production, community formation, and political resistance. For many Iranian women and students, cyberspace functions as an alternative educational sphere that exists beyond the direct control of state institutions. Through digital networks, participants exchange experiences, challenge dominant narratives, archive acts of resistance, and imagine alternative futures. The

state's investment in censorship and surveillance reflects not merely concerns about technology itself, but fears regarding the emancipatory possibilities that digitally connected communities can create. In this sense, cyberfeminism in Iran represents more than online activism; It constitutes an ongoing struggle over knowledge, visibility, agency, and the right to participate in shaping social, educational and political life. By disrupting access to digital communities, online learning spaces, activist networks, and transnational feminist discourse, internet blackouts attempt to limit not only political mobilization but also alternative forms of learning through which Iranian female students develop critical consciousness and collective agency. The internet and social media have been very powerful tools in educating Iranian students in ways that depart from Islamist indoctrination and have served as a crucial space for women to become social activists or to become involved in social movements, such as the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement.

In this era of rapid technological change, a new generation is emerging that is *location-aware* and that uses a *technology language*. Frequently, they are called *Generation Z*, or the *TikTok generation*, an age cohort that possesses more technical proficiency than previous generations (Cilliers, 2017). Social media usage has ingrained itself into the lives of the majority of individuals globally. Recent digital platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter (now X), and TikTok, are simple to use and highly engaging. Smartphones have made it easier to access social media applications, which make up a significant portion of teenage screen time overall (Shah, Das, Muthiah, & Milanaik, 2019). Nowadays, like their counterparts in other locations, most teenagers in Iran use social media and the internet. Most teenagers (80–90%) have access to smartphones that allow them to utilize social media and the Internet in their homes, schools, and communities (Ghorashi, 2020). Today's classroom is portable, open 24/7, and accessible through many anonymous features (VPNs and screen names). Social media can significantly aid adolescents' collaborative and self-directed learning (JinMao, 2014). Iranians now utilize the Internet and social media much more frequently as components of a networked society (Abolfathi, 2022). Therefore, students have far-reaching spaces to expand their learning beyond the confines of their classrooms. They can easily access vast information beyond their limited school textbooks and the spatialized and physical geographies of Shi'a state-imposed education. As a former Iranian student, based on my own lived experience with emerging educational and political technologies, I remember that, in technology courses in Iran, students often had to correct their teachers' mistakes during lessons.

Iran's restrictive educational system has not been able to compete with the mass media that students can access, especially media that is digital and available on the Internet. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 happened many years before the birth of Generation Z. Iran's Generation Z grew up differently than their parents did. Gen Z has access to social media, albeit somewhat regulated, and other ways to learn about events taking place abroad. Interacting with this more global virtual space, they are intolerant of isolation and of subjection to sanctions in Iran (Bahari, 2022). As a result, authorities can no longer force schoolgirls to wear compulsory hijab or stop them from singing and dancing in public, in part because young girls can watch girls in Hollywood and other international movies and series openly doing what Iranian girls are forbidden to do in public. Unsurprisingly, students have concluded they will not abide by gender segregation in Iran's schools, while other students around the globe post TikTok videos with their opposite-sex and gender variant/fluid classmates. As Iran's educational system has failed in its attempt to condition girls and women into accepting second-class citizenship, Iranian girls and women have risen to reclaim rights they once had before the Islamic Republic came to power. Virtual platforms have provided Iranian students, especially women, with vast amounts of

information unavailable in the country's schools and an open space for them to develop their specific form of cyberfeminism, though I caution *cyberfeminism* is not typically a term used by Iranian activists to describe their politics.¹ Generation Z has insight into alternative lives; how women and girls across the world live more freely, contrasting starkly with the heteropatriarchal society they experience in Iran. In repressive regimes, like the Islamic Republic, political and civil spheres are not permitted to exist. Individual actors use virtual locations, not necessarily or initially intended for this purpose, to convey the mood of the group (Golkar, 2015).

Strong Iranian Women Courageously Taking It to the Street

An important example of Iranian women's online activism emerged after and in part as a result of the *Green Movement*. Since 2009, the Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad has been living in self-imposed exile, from where she started the 2016 *White Wednesdays* and *My Stealthy Freedom* social media campaigns. The slogan on the *mystealthyfreedom* website is "The right for individual Iranian women to choose whether they want the hijab" (Alinejad, 2017). *My Stealthy*

¹ Worldwide, cyberfeminism arose in the 1990s as a response to the increasing convergence of gender, technology, and virtual communication. To avoid the animosity of male-dominated online spaces and to cooperatively create a discourse focused on respect, shared experience, and feminist values, many women established women-only forums like the SAPPHO list (Hall, 1996). Cyberfeminism includes both utopian and separatist feminist viewpoints. Liberal cyberfeminists, who draw inspiration from postmodern gender theory and Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto, see cyberspace as a possible utopia where physical symbols of race, gender, and sexuality can be removed to allow for fluid identities and sexual liberation (Hall, 1996). More recently, liberal cyberfeminism has focused on user-generated and interactive knowledge production, as with Mel Chen (2010), who uses case studies of what they refer to as "everywhere archives." Radical cyberfeminists, on the other hand, contest a romanticized view by emphasizing how online environments frequently mirror offline instances of gender-based discrimination and harassment. Expanding beyond early cyberfeminist optimism or later overriding pessimism, scholars like Ayu Saraswati highlight ongoing tensions in cyberfeminism and examine how digital spaces can both reinforce and disrupt systems of power, especially those that depend upon racism, misogyny, and neoliberal capitalism.

Saraswati (2021) explores the "neoliberal self(ie)" as a digital phenomenon in which feminist activism on platforms like Instagram is constrained by consumerism, visibility, and personal branding. Saraswati demonstrates how pain, which is frequently racialized, gendered, and generational, is turned into a valuable commodity on social media by using the example of Indian-Canadian "instapoet" Rupi Kaur. Kaur's poetry of phantasmagoria, or the aestheticization of suffering as a consumable digital spectacle, becomes entangled with feminist protest. In some ways, this digital activism is empowering, but it is also limited by the platforms it aims to instrumentalize, a limitation that turns feminist affect into commodified content rather than ongoing or enduring political resistance. In a related but distinct context, Chen (2010) uses the case studies of Asian FTM (female-to-male) trans YouTubers, specifically videos produced by Zach and Thomas Beatie. By emphasizing racialized spectacles and the politics of who is seen, remembered, or erased online, Chen's analysis challenges some cyberfeminist presumptions to remain a bit more hopeful. In addition to affirming complex visibility for marginalized trans masculine global existence, these digital spaces support counter-archival practices and community-building, which challenge prevailing narratives that are frequently cisnormative and racially charged. The temporary and personal archives of social media users provide a decentralized method of creating knowledge and identity, in contrast to the physically located state archives. Together, Saraswati (2021) and Chen (2010) highlight the conflicts between structural limitations and digital empowerment, prompting us to think about how racialized and gendered bodies are commodified, archived, and circulated in the digital era for multiple and often competing purposes.

Nonetheless, strictly cyberfeminist or not, school-aged girls and adults in Iran are using social media to educate themselves and raise their awareness on issues like women's liberation and reproductive justice. Despite commercial limitations, Internet access has created a new virtual platform for political opposition and new tools for resistance to effectively defy attempts by authoritarian governments to suppress protest by controlling and monitoring speech and other securitizing or policing activities (Rahimi, 2003). Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet, have aided dissident political movements to weaken the authoritarian regime in Iran, as evidenced by several instances in the recent history of the fight for democracy (Lamer, 1995).

Freedom urged Iranian women and young girls to upload pictures without their headscarves. Several schoolgirls actively participated (Figure 1) and in *White Wednesdays*, too (Figure 2).

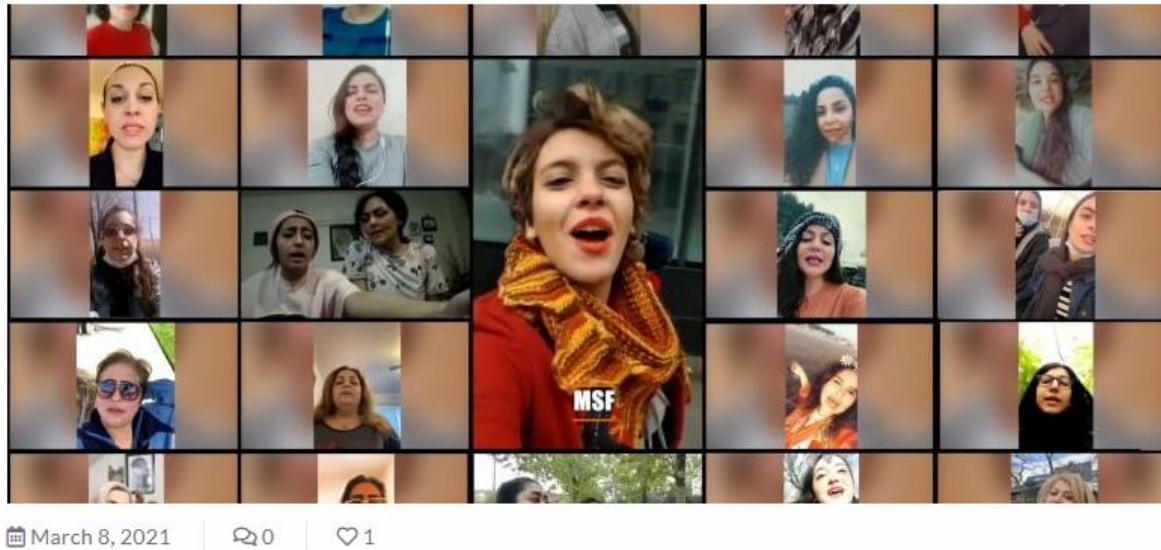


Figure 1. Collage of Iranian Women Singing in Solidarity on International Women’s Day, *My Stealthy Freedom*, Instagram video, March 8, 2021. <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/a-message-from-prison-for-international-womensday/>



Figure 2. Iranian Woman Raises White Scarf on a Stick, symbolizing defiance of mandatory hijab laws. Masih Alinejad, “Woman Holding a White Scarf,” *White Wednesdays Campaign*, 2019. <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/shaparak-shajarizadeh/>

The *My Stealthy Freedom* campaign acquired new momentum in 2017 as a result of the *White Wednesdays* action, which featured Iranian women posting photos and videos of themselves hanging white headscarves on a stick each Wednesday as a nonviolent protest against the hijab

law that requires women to completely cover their hair, leaving only the *circle of the face*. As per these government parameters for the hijab, all other clothes need to cover women completely and in no way cling to them or outline any *sexually suggestive* parts of their bodies (e.g., breasts). In solidarity with Iranian women's protests, men and women worldwide sent images and videos of themselves wearing loose white headscarves or waving the white scarves in the air. Fearless of the repercussions doled out by the morality police, which tracks the way women dress and detains and arrests women in violation of state-regulated dress codes. Many other Iranian women indicated support for these campaigns by driving around Tehran without the mandatory hijab, claiming that their cars were private spaces that allowed them to wear whatever they desired (Yaghoobi 2021). *White Wednesdays* persisted for longer than one year. Thus, it came as no surprise when, two years after *White Wednesdays* ended, female students and others again flocked to the streets (Figure 3) after the tragic 2022 death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the morality police (Wright, 2022).



Figure 3. An Iranian Female Student Taking Her Mandatory Hijab Off and participating in the 2022 *Women, Life, Freedom* street protests. Medium Website, “The breadth of misogyny in Iran,” October 18, 2022. <https://medium.com/@iranvoice/the-breadth-of-misogyny-in-iran-77bd2dad67a3>

As has been understood by activists for generations and across geopolitical contexts, *street* in its physical manifestation is a hub for debating the issues at hand, a forum for expressing dissatisfaction, and a place where scattered efforts eventually coalesce, without prior organization or planning, into coordinated efforts to address specific problems (Bayat, 1997). Today, social media and the Internet allow users to create virtual groups that function as a *virtual political street* (Wolff, 2011). The internet poses a clear democratic threat to autocratic governments, such as the current regime in Iran, because it is a potent medium for contact that defies attempts at stringent regulation. The controlled educational system in Iran intentionally excludes accurate narratives of both Iranian and global history. Distortion of history serves to protect the authority of the Islamic Republic and its ideological goals. Historical teachings are curated to align with the regime's narrative, avoiding any acknowledgment of a time when

Iranian women could serve as judges, sing and dance freely, or live without the constant surveillance of the morality police. Despite the controlling efforts of the Islamic Republic, platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok are becoming "archives of immediacy," revolutionizing how activism unfolds in real-time (Matter, 2021). Social media platforms not only document the ongoing struggles of Iranian women and students but also invite global audiences to actively engage with their stories. Generation Z's approach to digital archiving challenges traditional ideas of history by focusing on the raw, everyday experiences of resistance rather than the polished, controlled narratives customarily produced by authoritarian regimes. Rhetorical shift reflects feminist archival practices that value inclusivity and aim to disrupt dominant power structures (Matter, 2021).

Because an Iranian archive of immediacy exists, Iran's TikTok generation is far from unaware of alternative social structures. Through videos, pictures, and stories passed down by parents, grandparents, and other relatives, young people have access to truths schools try to obscure. To challenge the authority of the Iranian state, students have used online spaces to establish a new political space. Despite the Iranian government's restrictions on internet use, political dissidents have found innovative ways to contest governmental power, thanks to the internet's rapid expansion and constant change (Rahimi, 2003). Social media has given Iranian girls the opportunity to compare their current reality to footage and images from the era of the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), allowing them to compare the rights and freedoms women enjoyed during that time (See Figure 4 on the next page.), freedoms as fundamental as being able to decide what to wear, to access birth control freely, to work unfettered with men as colleagues, to serve as judges, and to be the petitioner in a divorce, (Ustiasvili, 2025). Historical insights have sparked a more profound understanding among female and male youth of how rights and justice have been taken from them and how many invisible fences restrict their life options. Awareness fuels resistance and shapes determination to fight for a freer and more equitable future.

Echoing strategies of movements in support of marginalized communities in a variety of contexts, such as the women who spearheaded *Black Lives Matter* in the US and the women who developed the Reproductive Justice framework, Iranian girls challenge the official narratives by creating *archives of resistance*. Through digital activism, Iranian girls of Generation Z are reshaping the very definition of archives, focusing on immediacy and accessibility. These young activists show how digital archives are not static collections but powerful, evolving tools for advocacy and solidarity as well as for building collective identities and driving action (Chen, 2010). Archives, including colonial archives that function as sites of struggles between the colonizing forces that create the archives and those among the colonized who use them, become more than just records of the past; they are deeply tied to the power dynamics of the present (Arondekar, 2005). Using social media to create and share archives with content that defies state censorship, Iranian girls assert their voices and humanity by co-creating living, dynamic archives where they share and preserve stories that the state-controlled education system and media often try to silence. But students are using cyberspace to decolonize the archives by reclaiming control over their narratives and asserting their human rights as well as their reproductive and familial choices. By amplifying voices that are otherwise marginalized, virtual archives challenge the erasures and distortions imposed by the Islamic Republic, creating a record of alternative histories focused on women's rights, activism, and capable service to the state..



Figure 4: Two of the 200 Iranian women who were pilots in Iran's Pahlavi Era. The photo is the cover page for *Zane Rooz* (Today's Woman) magazine of the time. Pinterest, "Beautiful Iran before Dark Islamic Revolution 1979." Shared by Sarah Irani S. May 28, 2025. <https://fr.pinterest.com/pin/104497653841830010/>

Repression, Dissent, Transformation

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 resulted in the fall of a secular government, giving rise to *modern* or, at least and more accurately, contemporary Iran. Forty-seven years later, young Iranians in the Islamic Republic reject what they experience as oppressive laws, isolation from the rest of the world, and harsh Western sanctions on their nation (Saber, 2022). Under the

current regime, problems extend beyond censorship: Students in Iran suffer from poverty and are subjected to bullying at school by the state. The morality police humiliate students publicly. The world devalues their nation and homeland because of its regressive and repressive government. Gen Z is also the first to have grown up surrounded by social media and the Internet, and so they understand there is a different world beyond Iran's borders. Unsurprisingly, young people, and in particular young women, seek change (Bahari, 2022). The Islamic Republic needs to bring meaningful changes to the educational system, changes that address the new generation's needs. The government is unlikely to effectuate these changes on its own. However, without these changes, the youth, and particularly young female students, will not stay silent. Social media has become a vital outlet for these students, offering a space to share their stories and rally support for their causes. Campaigns like *My Stealthy Freedom* and *White Wednesdays* illustrate how effectively students have leveraged these platforms to advocate for societal change and challenge systemic oppression. The present movements; *Women, Life, Freedom*, and *Lion & Sun Revolution 2026*, show that a more significant movement for democracy and civil society is developing, the student movement possibly being its most active subgroup. A major source of discontent for the women in this movement is the mandatory inclusion of religious teachings in school curriculum, which many view as a tool for ideological control rather than education. Within the scope of the current social movement, Iranian female students actively resist the gender norms imposed by the educational system, challenging with determination and creativity the barriers they face. They use social media to amplify their voices and push back against societal expectations, often expressing frustration with the strict gender roles and expectations enforced in schools. Their resistance takes various forms, such as defying dress codes or organizing protests.

The Iranian student movement has several structural advantages that could result in substantial political and cultural breakthroughs despite the crackdowns and oppression by the powers that be. Iran's 1.3 million students, spread among hundreds of schools, colleges, and universities, are the political influencers that make up the student movement. From a sociological perspective, it is possible to consider students in general as politically engaged and as a subgroup of the social category *intellectuals*. Students' shared ties to thought, science, and specific cultural goods serve to define them. Shared bonds are essential for young student activists who oppose the *status quo* (Farsoun & Mashayekhi, 2005). Intellectuals in general and students in particular are the carriers of what Alvin Gouldner (1985, p. 30-33) refers to as "the culture of critical discourse," a subculture of reason and critical judgment that makes it easier to challenge the *status quo* and traditional knowledge. The student movement in Iran is still experiencing metamorphosis. Leadership and the student body are becoming more mature and democratic in everyday interactions. The most valuable achievement of the recent student movement is its intimate relationship with the pro-civil rights movement in Iran's society. The resilience of Iranian female students in confronting and challenging oppressive systems is truly remarkable, given that they frequently face resistance, imprisonment, torture, and, in some cases, death. Continued efforts aimed at regime change highlight the critical role digital platforms play as tools for resistance and empowerment in sociopolitical movements. By pushing back against gender norms and using social media as a powerful tool, Iranians actively challenge the systemic inequalities upheld by the educational system. There is still much to explore to understand the intersection of education, gender, and activism in authoritarian regimes. As we look ahead, future studies of Iranian resistance could generatively delve into the lasting effects of digital activism and the potential for student movements to drive meaningful systemic change.

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Afterlives of the Plantation: Black Women's Narratives and the Geographies of Academic Violence

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Abstract: I theorize the contemporary university as a plantation landscape — a haunted geography in which the afterlives of slavery materialize through practices of surveillance, spatial enclosure, epistemic extraction, and the systematic exploitation of Black women's labor. Drawing on Black Feminist Hauntology and Plantation Logics, I examine how racialized and gendered violence is reproduced across academic spaces, from the physical design of campuses to the invisible labor expected of Black women students, staff, and faculty. Grounded in a synthesis of critical geography, Black studies, and Black Feminist Thought, I argue universities perpetuate plantation-derived structures of domination and disposability. Awareness of mistreatment also illuminates the long genealogy of Black women's resistance within and against these institutions. Structural transformation — not symbolic representation — is the precondition for Black women's flourishing in higher education.

American colleges and universities have never been passive beneficiaries of slavery. According to Craig Steven Wilder's (2013) *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, colleges were active architects of slavery. Alongside the church and the state, the academy stood as what Wilder calls a third pillar of a civilization built on bondage; entangled from its origins in the exploitation of enslaved African labor and the violent dispossession of Indigenous lands. Faculty enslaved people. Trustees profited from slave-trading networks. Campus buildings rose on stolen ground. Wilder's account makes clear that the university's relationship to racial violence is not incidental or historical in the sense of being a thing of the past — it is foundational, structural, and ongoing. Wilder's argument permits extension of his point into the present by asking what it means for the institution that Wilder historicizes to remain, in its spatial logic, its labor expectations, and its treatment of Black women, a plantation landscape in the present tense. In 2011, Katherine McKittrick wrote that “the plantation is a viable blueprint for the modern city and Black diasporic claims to space” (p. 953). Where Wilder grounds us in the historical record, McKittrick's insight pushes that record into the present — insisting that the plantation is not merely a historical artifact but an ongoing spatial and epistemic formation that continues to structure who belongs, who labors, and who is expendable. The university, like the city McKittrick theorizes, inherits and reproduces the plantation's logics of domination, surveillance, and racialized labor. For Black women in particular, the academy is not simply a site of intellectual production; it is a haunted geography in which the violences of slavery and colonialism persist in embodied, institutional, and spatial forms.

A Tripartite Theoretical Framework

Argument that universities act as plantations emerges from a presentation I delivered at the New York State Foundations of Education Association (NYSFEA) Annual Meeting in March 2026. In the presentation I mapped the spatial, epistemic, and affective connections between the antebellum plantation and the contemporary university campus. I am now able to ground my analogy more firmly in three interlocking theoretical frameworks: Black Feminist Hauntology, Black Feminist Thought (BFT), and Plantation Logics. Together, these frameworks illuminate how academic institutions reproduce plantation-derived structures of surveillance, discipline,

spatial organization, and labor management — structures that disproportionately target Black women. Black women in academia today are continuously living in what Hartman (1997) calls the afterlives of slavery and what Sharpe (2016) describes as “the wake.” The premature deaths of Black women administrators such as Antoinette “Bonnie” Candia-Bailey, Lincoln University’s Vice President of Student Affairs who committed suicide at the age of 49 in response to cruelty inflicted upon her at work. Or, Orinthia T. Montague, president of Vol State Community College, and JoAnne A. Epps, president of Temple University, who both died of apparent stress-related causes at 56 and 72 years of age, respectively (Hudson-Ward, 2023). The public targeting of Claudine Gay, when president of Harvard University, is another case in point (Deliso, 2024). Mistreatments of Black women administrators are not aberrations — they are symptoms of structural conditions I name and theorize as afterlives of the plantation. But there is more at stake here than theory. By situating these contemporary realities within plantation afterlives, I offer both a vocabulary and an analytic framework for understanding and transforming what I call the geographies of academic violence. As a Black woman navigating a predominantly white institution, my lived experiences, values, and identity profoundly shape my research. My scholarly approach is rooted in personal and community testimonials and collective memory, guided by a desire to center the voices and experiences of those marginalized or silenced in academic spaces. I am both the researcher and the researched — a position that Black feminist scholars have long recognized as a source of epistemological strength rather than a methodological liability (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1989). I write from within the institution I critique, and that location is not incidental to the argument. It is the argument.

Black Feminist Hauntology: Black feminist hauntologies theorize how the unfinished violences of slavery, colonialism, and racial capitalism persist in the present through gendered and embodied forms of haunting. Building on Derridean hauntology (Derrida, 1994) and Black feminist theory (Collins, 2009; Hartman, 1997; hooks, 1989; Sharpe, 2016; Spillers, 1987), Black feminist hauntology insists that Black women’s lives are marked by a spectral simultaneity of presence and absence: hypervisibility as laboring bodies and invisibility as intellectual and affective subjects (Hsiao, 2022; Lovelace, 2021; Nzinga-Johnson, 2013; Saleh-Hanna, 2015). Black feminist hauntology examines how the intertwined legacies of slavery, colonialism, patriarchy, and systemic racism continue to haunt the experiences of Black women within academic institutions (Nzinga-Johnson, 2020; Saleh-Hanna, 2015; Squire et al., 2021; Bozalek, et al., 2021). Crucially, however, this framework does not reduce Black women to victims of haunting — it also centers their practices of memory, refusal, and world-making, showing how spectrality can generate modes of resistance that unsettle dominant narratives of gender, race, and temporality. As Amponsah (2023, p. 30) observes, the United States’ relationship with its colonial past has symptomatically involved “silence, repression, suppression, collective amnesia, active forgetting, and colonial memory loss.” Black feminist hauntology insists on remembering.

Black Feminist Thought: Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is a critical framework that centers experiences, knowledge, and agency of Black women to understand and challenge intersecting systems of oppression within academic institutions (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1989; Lans, 2024). BFT emphasizes both the everyday knowledge Black women generate through lived experience and the specialized knowledge produced by Black women scholars across disciplines. BFT highlights how Black women navigate and resist overlapping structures of racism, patriarchy, and institutional hierarchy, while reimagining the academic spaces they inhabit. Central to this framework is the question of what it means to trust Black women. Cottom (2017) argues that trusting Black women requires distinguishing between trust in individual

Black women and trust in the structural analyses that Black feminist thought produces. This distinction matters because representation within hierarchical whiteness does not guarantee emancipatory outcomes. A Black woman placed at the helm of a white institution may be constrained, co-opted, or ultimately abandoned by the very structures she was meant to reform — as the case of Claudine Gay makes plain. BFT thus insists that structural transformation, not symbolic inclusion, is the precondition for Black women’s flourishing in academic spaces.

Plantation Logics: Plantation Logics is a theoretical framework that examines how the cultural, social, and epistemic structures of the plantation system continue to shape contemporary institutions, notably higher education (Eldar & Jansson, 2023; Gilmore, 2007; Marquez, 2024; McKittrick, 2011, 2013). Rooted in the afterlives of slavery, Plantation Logics reveals how racial hierarchies, expectations of Black labor, and the invisibilization of Black knowledge are normalized across academic spaces. Scholars, including McKittrick (2013), Sharpe (2016), and Spillers (1987), employ Plantation Logics to examine how white supremacy shapes institutional policies, classroom dynamics, and professional expectations; and to show how Black women navigate and resist the enduring legacies of the plantation. Two related concepts extend Plantation Logics into specific institutional domains. Plantation Politics refers to the systemic policies, hierarchies, and power structures within universities that reproduce racialized control, surveillance, and labor expectations for Black women and other marginalized employees (Edwards & Dancy, 2023; Squire et al., 2021; Woods, 2017; Wynter, 1971). As Squire et al. (2018, p. 1) argue, these structures “parallel organizational and cultural norms between contemporary higher education institutions and slave plantations.” Plantation Pedagogy describes the mechanism “through which slavery as an educational project was enacted materially through the spatial formation of the plantation” (Marquez, 2024, p. 12). Together, Plantation Politics and Plantation Pedagogy reveal how the academy disciplines and contains Black life in the service of racial capitalism.

Plantation Spatial Design and the University Campus

The physical layout of a slave plantation was a spatial configuration designed to maintain discipline, optimize economic productivity, enforce surveillance, and reinforce the subordinate status of enslaved individuals (Bates, 2015; Delle et al., 2011; Marshall, 2022; Singleton, 2001). The plantation’s spatial landscape subjected enslaved people’s labor to constant surveillance through arrangements reminiscent of the panopticon: The overseer’s residence functioned as a strategic vantage point for observing enslaved individuals, creating a constant sense of potential observation that compelled the enslaved to self-monitor even when overseers were not actively watching (Foucault, 1975; Hartman, 2022; Singleton, 2001). Plantation housing structures — sometimes referred to as *barracones* (barracks) — were deliberately uniform and monolithic, stripping enslaved people of individuality and imposing spatial conditions of containment and control. The spatial logic of control did not disappear with emancipation. The 1959 fire at the Negro Boys Industrial School in Wrightsville, Arkansas, in which twenty-one Black boys perished, illustrates how plantation spatial logics were reproduced in carceral and institutional settings well into the twentieth century (Momodu, 2025). Conditions at the Industrial School — confinement, surveillance, and indifference to Black life — are continuous with the plantation architectures described above. The overseer becomes the officer; the quarters become the dormitory; the surveillance becomes institutionalized through what Foucault (1975) calls disciplinary space, a space architecturally designed to make people useful and obedient.

The university campus participates in the plantation's spatial inheritance. Cornell University, as one of the largest beneficiaries of the 1862 Morrill Land-Grant Act, contributed \$25,000 from its grant-derived funds toward the founding of Syracuse University in 1865 — funds derived from the sale of nearly 11 million acres of land seized from Indigenous nations, including the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Dakota peoples (Burnam, 2024). In 1883, Syracuse Chancellor Charles Sims attempted to acquire additional land through a fraudulent treaty with the Onondaga Nation, which the Onondaga chiefs unanimously rejected (Burnam, 2024; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The university's reliance on dispossessed land mirrors the plantation as a spatial order in which property functions as a technology of domination — determining who can inhabit, who can be expelled, and whose bodies are rendered permeable to extraction (Bhandar, 2018; Gilmore, 2019; Russell, 2001). Reframing the university campus as a plantation landscape requires recognizing how deeply the spatial organization of plantations was rooted in the dehumanization of Black people (Berry, 2017; Singleton, 2001; Vlach, 1993). The logic of panoptic surveillance persists in campus public safety structures, the monitoring of Black student protests, and the racialized regulation of space and belonging. As Camp (2004, p. 16) theorizes, “geographies of containment.” describe not only the plantation's physical boundaries but the ongoing spatial regulation of Black mobility within and beyond institutional grounds.

The Exploitation of Black Women's Labor in Academia

The afterlives of slavery signal not merely the temporal residue of slavery but its ongoing structuring force in the present. Within higher education, Black women disproportionately shoulder the “invisible” labor of mentorship, diversity initiatives, and affective care, even as they face systemic barriers that hinder their advancement (García-Louis & Reyes-Barrientos, 2022; Nzinga-Johnson, 2013). Asymmetrical extraction of labor mirrors the plantation economy, where Black women's labor was indispensable yet unrecognized, reinscribing a condition of social death in which their contributions are both demanded and disregarded (Dillon, 2012; Dumas, 2016; Love, 2016). The university reproduces these conditions not only materially but epistemically. As Hartman (2008) demonstrates, archives render Black women as non-persons — distorted, dismembered, and dehumanized. The academy similarly disciplines knowledge production in ways that obscure Black women's intellectual contributions through what Hartman (2008, p. 10) calls “the protocols of intellectual disciplines.” McKittrick (2006) extends this analysis by theorizing Black women's geographies as lived, possible, and imaginable terrains that push beyond the academy's narrow frameworks, bringing into focus the spaces where Black women persist and create. But even when Black women are acknowledged within higher education, it is often through logics of containment and commodification (Contreras et al., 2023; Mahtani, 2004; Matias, 2014; Nzinga-Johnson, 2020). The enslaved woman, once compelled to sing and dance, is refigured as the Black woman student, staff member, or faculty member cast as the “happy symbol of diversity” (Baldwin, 2022; Contreras et al., 2023). Identified by Kupenda (2012), the three ghost archetypes affecting Black women in academe — “I want my mammy ghosts,” “just be our negro ghosts,” and “flying with the white female ghosts and their disappearing acts” — capture the specific forms of haunting Black women academics face within the ivory tower. Symbolic visibility belies deeper exclusions: Black women's cultural and communal practices are sidelined when institutional programming privileges white norms and white comfort (Andrews et al., 2019; Marquez, 2024; Matias, 2014; McKittrick, 2011). Within academic institutions, Black women often assume the role of othermothers, providing emotional support, guidance, and advocacy for students and colleagues from marginalized backgrounds

(Bernard et al., 2000; Burley et al., 2022; Collins, 2009; Nzinga-Johnson, 2013). While this work is vital for fostering inclusivity, it places additional labor demands on Black women and compounds the challenges of navigating racialized academic spaces.

The “Black Pink Tax” (BPT), a concept attributed to Sharnell Myles, names “the unique financial, racial, and social burdens that Black women often face due to intersectional discrimination” (McGee, 2025, p. 707). A manifestation of this burden is Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF), which produces psychological, physiological, and behavioral health consequences, especially for Black people working in predominantly white institutions (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014; Hartlep & Ball, 2019; Yosso et al., 2006). Without healthy support systems and counterbalancing spaces, Black women navigating these institutions are more likely to develop the health consequences associated with RBF — consequences that, at their most extreme, become life-threatening. Layer upon layer of exploitation and exhaustion do not simply create professional challenges. They have life-and-death consequences. The emotional, intellectual, and physiological toll of Black women’s labor in the academy contributes to what scholars describe as Black premature death (Dillon, 2012; Gilmore, 2007; McKittrick, 2015; Smith et al., 2007; Yosso et al., 2006). Academic lynching is defined as “attempting to kill the personality, soul, and spirit of people of color... centered on eliminating any threat to white social order” (Hayes, 2014, p. 71). Closely related is the concept of spirit murder, which reveals how systemic racism and discrimination damage not only the individual psyche but the collective well-being of marginalized communities (Love, 2016; Revilla, 2021). The very real and literal death of Antoinette “Bonnie” Candia-Bailey in January 2024 exemplifies these dynamics. Following months of harassment, bullying, and racial discrimination at Lincoln University, Candia-Bailey died by suicide. Her death illuminates the life-and-death stakes of systemic racism in academia, where Black women disproportionately endure “premature and preventable death” as a result of intersecting racial and gendered oppression (Collins, 2009; Hartman, 2006; McKittrick, 2006, 2015). Orinthia T. Montague and JoAnne A. Epps both passed away prematurely due to preventable causes (Williams, 2023). The institutional targeting and abandonment of Claudine Gay extends this analysis to the domain of senior academic leadership. Gay’s case demonstrates that even positions of formal authority offer little insulation from plantation logics of fungibility, disposability, and racial spectacle. As Cottom (2017) argues, trusting Black women cannot mean assuming that placing individual Black women in positions of institutional power automatically produces emancipatory outcomes. Rather, it requires trusting the structural analysis that Black feminist thought provides — an analysis that reveals how the plantation politics of disposability operate across rank and institution. The plantation’s logics of fungibility, discipline, and extraction persist through racial battle fatigue, othermothering expectations, academic lynching, and the mammification of Black women’s emotional and intellectual labor (Edwards & Dancy, 2023; Marquez, 2024; McKittrick, 2013).

The Genealogy of Black Women’s Protest from Representation to Transformation

College protests by Black women serve as both immediate acts of resistance and profound rituals of collective memory and reclamation (Hall et al., 2020; Hanna, 2024; Jeffers & Dixon, 2024; Saleh-Hanna, 2015; Squire et al., 2021). These protests summon the specters of Black women’s historical resilience against intersectional oppressions and continue a long genealogy of revolt and revolution. Bazner and Button (2021) connect slave rebellions to college student activism, arguing that systems of language and power must be established to suppress potential

uprisings — a dynamic traceable through anti-Black sites, including both plantations and colonial colleges. The 2020 #NotAgainSU student occupation at Syracuse University offers a contemporaneous illustration of these dynamics (Kalnitz, 2020). Protestors — disproportionately Black — were subjected to institutional violence, deprivation, and disposability. The administration's response demonstrated how spatial confinement, managerial force, and punishment for dissent reflect the continuity of plantation pedagogy on the modern campus. Even under conditions of extreme violence, enslaved people resisted, prompting oppressors to codify restrictions through slave codes — later transformed into Black codes — that can be paralleled with modern universities' codes of conduct. As Holden (2021, p. 6) observes, “enslaved men rebel while enslaved women resist,” yet Black women's everyday acts of resistance and survival were central to the very rebellions often (unfairly) attributed only to men. Following the antebellum period, Black people's legacy of resistance carried into educational spaces, where Black women were positioned as agents of “race uplift. At the same time, their leadership was constrained by the gendered politics of respectability (Perkins, 2024). Squire et al. (2021p. 230) argue that neoliberalism has birthed “cultural codes and attacks on downwardly redistributive social movements,” universities have been repeatedly criticized for their attempts to contain the protest speech and organizing strategies of Black student activists (Giroux, 2007; Squire et al., 2018, 2021).

For Black women in higher education, living and working in an atmosphere haunted by the afterlives of the plantation means navigating institutions that simultaneously demand their labor and render them disposable, that both acknowledge Black women's presence as symbols of diversity and suppress their intellectual and political contributions; that reproduce the plantation's logics of surveillance, confinement, and racial hierarchy. The theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Hauntology, Black Feminist Thought, and Plantation Logics together provide analytic tools necessary to name and theorize these conditions. They also illuminate the long genealogy of Black women's resistance — from enslaved women's everyday acts of refusal to contemporary campus protests — reminding us that the plantation was never only a site of domination. It was also always a site of resistance and world-making. Candia-Bailey, Gay, Montague, and Epps demand more than acknowledgment. They demand a reckoning with the structural mechanisms that produce Black women's overwork, underrecognition, and disposability in academic spaces. This reckoning requires moving beyond representation — beyond the symbolic placement of Black women within hierarchical whiteness — toward the structural transformation of academe that Black feminist thought has long insisted upon: Construction of work environments in which the professional courtesies of collegiality, presumed competence, and recognition of accomplishment are, as a matter of course, enjoyed by Black women, too. Educational institutions cannot claim commitments to equity while relying on the very logics that historically commodified and controlled Black women's bodies, labor, and lives. The university must reckon with what it is before it can become what it claims to be. The plantation's legacy does not merely shape the contemporary university — *the contemporary university is a plantation*, a haunted geography in which the afterlives of slavery materialize in spatial, epistemic, and affective forms. I ask the reader to consider whether the university can be otherwise. If the university continues to reproduce the spatial, social, and racial logics of the plantation, then perhaps the task is not to reform the plantation, nor to make it more hospitable, but to ask whether an institution organized through plantation logics can ever become otherwise without fundamentally disrupting the conditions that sustain it. Can we imagine a university beyond the plantation? And what would it mean for Black women to flourish within that

possibility — not as evidence that they have learned to survive the institution, but as evidence that the institution no longer requires their survival?

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**“It’s like they don’t care at all”:
Latine Teachers, COVID, and the Need for Just, Collective, and Relational Care for
Democratic (Re)Imaginations**

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Abstract: Interviews with 5 Latina public-school teachers who worked in South Carolina during the COVID pandemic provided ideas for rethinking connections between democracy as a way of life and care as a communal activity. We coded teacher comments about their COVID experiences using four different frameworks of care: aesthetic/authentic, responsibility, revolutionary, and relational. Vulnerability emerged as a key relation between the interview data and the four frameworks. Reconsidering care in terms of beneficial response to vulnerability describes a standard for community strengthening democratic action.

Stella, one of five Latina K-12 teachers working in South Carolina who participated in our interview study about teaching during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, recounted that while she waited for a prescription at a local CVS pharmacy during the early days of the pandemic, a complete stranger noticed her school ID card and unkindly shared their thoughts about teachers: *“I don’t understand why you teachers don’t want to work. I’ve been working since this whole thing [COVID] began... why are you not doing what we’re telling you to do, I pay your salary, you need to take my kid....”* This interaction led Stella to henceforth remove, or at least hide her school ID when she was out in public. Stella concluded the recollection with the words, *“This [treatment of teachers] isn’t going away.”* Unfortunately, Stella’s summation was prescient. Nearly six years removed from that day at CVS, (mainly right-wing) activists and politicians using patently false claims of indoctrination, intolerance, and incompetence continue to attack and undermine public trust in the work of public-school teachers (Futernick, 2025; Jones et al., 2025; Pollock et al., 2022). Yet, despite incessant efforts to paint public school teachers otherwise, the data we share here shows that teachers genuinely *care* about students and actively engage in *care work* for their students and the greater good. Moreover, analysis of our participants’ interviews revealed that the Latina teachers consistently referenced an implicit call toward a more democratic care praxis — collective and relational care — even as colleagues and community members invoked the rhetoric of (individual) rights and personal well-being. In order to better understand the role of care, caring, and care work among our participants we coded their interviews through four general care frameworks ranging across political, moral, academic, and community dimensions of care (Valenzuela 1999, Tronto 2001, Sosa-Provencio 2019, Vázquez 2012, and Finch 2022). Our multi-lensed process led us to offer three questions for critical educators, teacher educators, and foundations of education scholars:

Does democracy (or something else) require a radically different pedagogy, praxis, and/or curriculum of care?

Does democracy (or something else) require a shared sense and appreciation of vulnerability?

Can/do we need to teach a politics of interconnected care, specifically how we are differently vulnerable to each other?

Our questions inspired the general reflection we have published here about connections between care work and democracy (or something else) in education.

Lack of Care in South Carolina's Schools

Like most schools and states in the U.S., South Carolina public schools first closed, and then provided rudimentary online education and remote learning during spring and summer of 2020 (Baker, 2022). In the fall of 2020, most South Carolina districts started a hybrid model of learning with certain COVID precautions to be practiced while in school, including social distancing, masking protocols, increased use of personal protective equipment, and limited interaction among large groups of students (South Carolina Department of Education, n.d.; Wilkerson, 2020). Though many teachers were still concerned, especially since the COVID vaccine was not yet available, there was some comfort that there would be precautions in place. However, almost immediately, schools started bypassing many of the precautions and districts rapidly changed protocols; in turn, teachers faced uncertainty about, among other things, quarantine requirements, testing procedures, student expectations, and working conditions. Many worked under the extra pressure of teaching virtually and in-person at the same time. Unsurprisingly, researchers measured rising levels of teacher stress, anxiety, and confusion during the pandemic (Buttimer et al., 2022; Pressley, 2021). To add even more confusion, near the end of the 2020-2021 school year, South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster stated that masks would be optional for students. The South Carolina legislature followed by passing a law that schools could not require masks. Such policies caused myriad student, teacher, and parent responses, but generally were put into practice to appease an increasingly vocal anti-mask political base. Gesturing toward conservative, so-called parent rights groups, Gov. McMaster (2021) stated at a news conference: "It is ridiculous for school districts to tell parents whether or not their child should wear a mask in the classroom, that is up to the parent. Every teacher has had the opportunity to get vaccinated and are safe from the virus. It's time to unmask our children."

Soon, South Carolina teachers who pushed for what they assumed were commonsense safety measures — masks, spacing, quarantines, and virtual teaching options — were being vilified by many local communities (Ma, 2021). Hence, after initial praise, many teachers, both in South Carolina and around the United States felt unsupported by their districts, administrations, and local policymakers even as teachers expressed concern about the cascading effects of the pandemic on mental health, student engagement/motivation, widening inequities, and the removal of vital emergency supports (Anand & Bachman, 2021; Rodriguez, 2023). Teachers responded by emphasizing flexibility and working hard to differentiate instruction, center student interests, and communicate with families in new ways. As just one small example, Wexler et al. (2024, p. 278) shared how a teacher constantly sent her students "emails of encouragement, reminders of assignments, and modifications to assignments to help them." Yet, even as teachers worked to find creative ways *to care* about students and families of students, in some cases working to (re)organize social events and maintain mutual aid networks for families, teachers also voiced concerns about heightened surveillance of their work coupled with lessened respect and diminished professional autonomy (Anand & Bachmann, 2012; Marcolina, 2025; Rodriguez, 2023). Teachers experienced a sense of professional loss, feelings of isolation, and the constant

specter of burnout (Buttimer et al., 2022, Esquivel, 2020; Pressley, 2021). Thus, previous research largely mirrors the reflections of the five participants in our study: The teachers felt immediate urgency and oversized expectation *to care* for students and communities, but this work was largely unsupported by the larger institutions that demanded it.

A final intersectionality pertinent to the context of our study is that all the teachers interviewed identified as Latina. Research has shown that Latine teachers in the U.S. South *prior* to the COVID pandemic shouldered unsustainable responsibilities given the *ad hoc* and insufficient ways schools and districts have responded to a growing Latine population across the region (Colomer, 2019; Hamann et al., 2015; Monreal, 2020, 2022a; Stacy et al., 2015; Vega, 2024). Even as the extra work becomes an expectation of Latine teachers, it is rarely recognized, let alone compensated. Latine teachers instead are typically employed in culturally subtractive contexts with “experiences of racism from colleagues and parents at schools due to immigration assumptions, stereotypes about Latinx, and questions about the need and value of Spanish (classes)” (Monreal, 2022a, p. 53). Moreover, Latinx in the region continue to live with increasingly restrictive (and explicit) anti-Latine (immigration) policy. State policies and local ordinances interacting with inaccurate, inflammatory rhetoric, and racialized action materially limit the lives of Latinx in regard to housing, local travel, law enforcement, education, and access to resources (Cuadros, 2025; Hatch, 2025; Lacy & Odem, 2009; Monreal, 2025). One such example in South Carolina is HB. 4400, legislation which bars undocumented students from public higher education and receipt of state-based merit scholarships and financial aid (McCorkle, 2025; Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017). It is unsurprising then that our participants invoked (lack of) care repeatedly in our interviews.

A Multiform Theoretical Framework for Fathoming Care

Given the prevalence of talk about care in our participants’ interviews, the myriad ways it was invoked, defined, and repeated by all five participants, it became clear to us that we needed to build an analytic framework to make sense of and ask valid questions with/about our data. Thinking and asking questions about care with the intent to theorize about teacher care work and its democratic implications is an example of using theory to think with data (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Kuby & Christ, 2019; Varga & Monreal, 2021). Four of us (Tim, Chelsea, Vi, and Ziqi) used four care frameworks — Aesthetic vs. Authentic Caring (Valenzuela, 1999), Responsibilities of Caring (Tronto 2001, 2015), Revolutionary Care (Sosa-Provencio, 2019), and Deliberate (Listening) Care (*Buen Vivir*) (Vázquez, 2012; Finch, 2022) — to deductively code the data (Monreal, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Together the four conceptualizations of care comprise an overarching definition of care and/or care work; at least in the sense that the more kinds of relational care schools can provide, the more caring schools will become and the more caring schools will be perceived to be. We agree with Robert et al. that “teachers’ care work is crucial... so that schools are care-*full* institutions” and that we must collectively “deepen our understanding of that care work” (2025, p. 215, emphasis original). We operationalized the four care frameworks to use them for deductive coding:

Aesthetic and Authentic Caring: Valenzuela (1999) suggests that there is a tension between what matters to students and to schools, particularly schools that serve Latine students and communities. Schools often focus on delivering content in a way that neglects the emotional needs of the student and fails to build necessary rapport. Students often perceive this as a *lack* of caring, noting that if teachers “really cared,” they would not be “boring” and would instead show

that students' lives are worth their time. Furthermore, there is a constant struggle between institutional structures and the time needed to develop authentic relationships. Valenzuela outlined two definitions of caring that characterized two different types of student-teacher relations: aesthetic care and authentic care. Definitions of aesthetic and authentic care provided the first two subcategories of care that guided our coding of the data.

Aesthetic Care: Students show/demonstrate/perform caring *about* school. Since teachers believed schooling was for students' benefit already students were to reciprocate care (i.e., be grateful) via "proper" dress, talk, and behaviors. Aesthetic caring values form over content.

Authentic Care: Students wish teachers to care *for* them, "to be recognized and addressed as whole human beings" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 108), and for teachers to be deeply concerned for students' academic welfare, cultural sustenance, and political contexts.

Responsibilities of Caring: Tronto (2001, 2015) outlines an ethics of care with five distinct phases of caring: "caring about," "caring for," "caregiving," "care receiving," and, finally "caring with." Tronto argues that moral understanding of care must center questions about how to help people live well, especially when the ability to live well is experienced unequally through power injustices. Responsibility in relation to care means that collectively we must recognize, if not embrace the idea that "humans are interconnected in relationships of receiving and giving [care] over a lifetime" (2001, p. 61). Tronto finds an obstacle to reciprocity of care in the concept of "privileged irresponsibility." The tendency of care-receiving groups to excuse themselves from the material and emotional consequences borne by their caregivers. Care-receiving people and groups refuse the political responsibilities of care because they dismiss their vulnerability to and dependence on others' care (Zembylas et al., 2014). Moreover, believing themselves to have deferential rights to care, they become angry and indignant when confronted with their own vulnerability. Tronto's ideas 'responsible care' and 'privileged irresponsibility' provided us, respectively, with a general description of care and another subcategory of care by which we coded our data:

Ethics and Responsibility of Care: The degree of understanding of the collective responsibilities to care for each other, demonstrated by perceived political significance of our interdependence and vulnerability to each other.

Privileged Irresponsibility: The degree to which "some groups of people are obliged to pay a lot of attention to their caring responsibilities, while others can afford to ignore these responsibilities, at the same time as taking it for granted that their needs will be serviced" (Zembylas et al., 2014, p. 9)

Revolutionary Care: Sosa-Provencio's (2019) *revolucionista* care framework describes care as a potent form of resistance, a tool to dismantle historical and ongoing structural oppression. Care is part of a social justice ethic that is rooted in a deep understanding of long-suffering endurance of hardships associated with individual discrimination and structural marginalization. Knowing about social justice translates into tangible, even if sometimes subterranean, action where care can be viewed in both a literal and a symbolical sense as "fighting and feeding." Educators show care by breaking cycles of poverty and hunger by nourishing students, uplifting their identities, and planting the seeds for continued resilience, resistance, and activism. Revolutionary care also highlights the importance of education, ensures access, expects high academic achievements, and

encourages student-led advocacy against institutional inequities. *Revolucionista* led us to code, as kinds of care, acute, urgent, and tactical political praxes for social justice (Marcucci et al., 2024).

Revolutionary Care: Critical knowledge of structural inequality and oppression translates into tangible action where care is advocacy, that is, “fighting for” and “feeding” academic achievements of students.

Deliberate (Listening) Care (Buen Vivir): Vázquez (2012) outlines a concept of care — *buen vivir* — rooted in Indigenous cosmologies. *Buen vivir*, translated as “living well” or “living in plentitude,” rejects capitalists’ notions of “the good life” that are measured by accumulation and consumption. Instead, *buen vivir* is about living well in plentitude, that is, living in active relationality to the whole, the plentitude. Similarly, Finch (2022, p. 4) explains *buen vivir* through the lens of Black feminist praxis to imagine living well as a “different kind of relationality that is enacted through alternative forms of community and accountability to the natural world.” Finch and Vasquez both root care, then, in attunement, in deliberate listening to the needs of people and watchful attention to creation of collective well-being. Collective care has also been recently taken up by Diera (2025, p. 1311) who shows Latina educators “nourish the knowledges, life pathways, full personhoods, and collective wellness of multiply marginalized students and communities.” Care as listening in, with, and for relationality prompts questions such as how to listen to/for conviviality, and “how to listen to the voices, traditions, philosophies of the communities that present alternatives” to uncaring worlds (Vázquez, 2012, p. 6).

Deliberate (Listening) Care (Buen Vivir): Care is about living well in plentitude, that is, living in active relationality to the whole. Care consists in attunement, in deliberate listening to the needs of people and watchful attention to creation of collective well-being.

Participant Examples of Care to Think With, From, and About

All five participants articulated their views on care work in terms of all four care frameworks that guided our coding of the data. More than merely findings, however, teacher comment and discussion should be read as an ongoing conversation between care workers and theorists of care that may prove insightful to general reflection about (re)theorizing democracy (or something else) in education in light of encounter with the wisdom of working teachers.

Aesthetic vs. Authentic Caring Orlanda, a high school Spanish teacher, contrasted the care that was offered to her versus the care she offered her students. She was plain in speaking about the ephemeral ideas of care her school administration offered: “They [administrators] go to my classroom, they see that things are happening in the ways they are supposed to be, and they [admin] say: ‘Bye. We have no problem with you.’ But when it comes to caring for me as an individual, you know they just don’t care. [For example], there’s one time where my son had COVID symptoms, he didn’t have the COVID, but he was coughing, he had a fever... I told my admin, and I’ve never received any response from my administrators.” Orlanda believed that administrators saw care in terms of behaviors, they only cared that you were doing what you were “supposed to be.” Aesthetic caring ignores human relationships and neglects the importance of being “recognized and addressed as whole human beings” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 108). Orlanda evidenced the hole in the heart of aesthetic caring with her words, “when it comes

to caring *for me* as an individual, they just *don't care*" (emphasis ours). For Orlanda, the failure of the aesthetic idea of care extended beyond dismissal of her son's symptoms to the lack of seriousness with which her administrators took the possible spread of COVID: "If we, if we look at it in contact tracing we're not doing anything in contact tracing. We look at it... we're not following up, and you [admin] are just not caring about the teachers, you're just caring about "let's check the boxes."

"Checking the boxes" valued the appearance and bureaucratic performance of care, rather than sustaining reciprocal relationships of support and safety. To Orlanda, the *show* of care ("let's check the boxes") endangered students, teachers, and communities as COVID's spread jeopardized everyone's health. Moreover, the decision not to care (about contact tracing) was made "by one group for another," (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 22) without the mutual respect and social responsibility necessary to live with each other (in a democratic society?). On the other hand, Orlanda described the authentic caring she exhibited for students during COVID: "Oh yeah. there's no support whatsoever [for Latine students]. Oh yeah, she [one student] has been helpless until the computer lab teacher asked me to help and now I'm trying to catch her up but she's been behind for almost an entire year... you're just *esta tratando contra la corriente*. Students want to work, but the teachers don't help you... They [school] don't help you. There's no way to move forward, so they drop out, yeah." Orlanda discussed how her efforts to show care in more authentic ways were blunted by other teachers who "don't help you." Even as Orlanda worked with a student for whom she was not the regular teacher to "catch her up," she compared such efforts to "*esta tratando contra la corriente*," "swimming upstream."

Responsibilities of Caring: If, according to Tronto (2001, p.65), a responsibility of care is to address fundamental questions of "how people are better able to live in the world," then people in (a democratic) society must be attentive to both their own care needs and the demands of those care needs, while also recognizing that and acting as if others' care needs matter in comparably equal ways. Our participants communicated that reciprocal responsibilities to and of care were inherent in a collective sense of living well during COVID. Stella, the special education teacher you've already heard from in our opening paragraph, explained:

You know, [and] you do what you need to do... You need to keep everybody safe and so we've had to learn... [for example] there were two colleagues who were teaching for the last two weeks with just each other, in each other's bubble because they will be leading CPI [Crisis Prevention Institute] training and they're going to have to be close [to everyone] so they had to think about it, you know, way out. They got tested [for COVID] and made sure they were both negative, and they've been quarantining and only being, you know, in contact with each other at school so that they can lead the training at school.

"You know, [and] you do what you need to do" is a frank description of the responsibility to be attuned to the myriad care relationships among self, other, and society. Stella communicated how in order to live well together during this time, two colleagues acted to limit spread of COVID by "teaching for the last two weeks with just each other." In a somewhat similar manner, middle school art teacher Serena shared how understanding the wholistic needs of her students prompted her to change instructional approaches: "I feel like I am behind with my lessons... but I need to really, like, create lessons where kids can be engaged, [where] they can have fun, but also, like, relieve stress and learn... So I try to create that experience for them, because I know that they've been through a lot, and last year was hard and this year, you know it's harder."

Serena believed that the need to care for her students by offering engaging and fun lessons (because “they’ve been through a lot”) was worth being “behind with lessons.” Serena’s ability to recognize the need to change the organization of her class to meet the needs of her students highlights how care is “other directed;” how care calls for suspending “one’s own goals, ambitions, plans of life, and concerns in the world” (Tronto, 2015, p. 128) to support living and learning *well* together. In suspending her own desire and/or obligation to be in the “right place” with her lessons, Serena showed a different responsibility to care than say Orlanda’s building administration who monitored teachers vis-à-vis aesthetic care, “the ways they are supposed to be.”

Privileged Irresponsibility: During COVID, a widening societal circle was forced to recognize that their ability to live well in the world was dependent on the (often invisible) care work of groups like women, immigrants, people of color, who “are seldom recognised for their contributions to society.” Certainly, direct receivers of care may acknowledge, even appreciate care as it is received. Yet, when care in an organization is expected to be merely aesthetic, people in and outside of schools distance themselves from recognizing, let alone resolving, “the hidden costs for people that carried the burden of care” (both quotes: Zembylas et al., 2014, p. 6). In fact, while teachers and other frontline workers were at first lauded for their sacrifice and resilience; conflict, even anger emerged as different care-receivers (parents, administrators, etc.) were forced to continually recognize a certain need for, vulnerability to, and dependence on care workers, like teachers — a complex (power) relationship often dismissed or ignored when not disrupted as by COVID (Tronto, 2001, 2015). Stella’s story about being verbally accosted by a total stranger in a local pharmacy is an example of a general societal trend for teachers as the pandemic wore on. In Stella’s words: “We went from like in the spring, being “Oh my gosh! Teachers are working so hard to try to finish out the school year.” and then, when September came now we’re just “bad people.” Another participant, Regina, a high school math teacher, expressed a similar sentiment: “I’ve heard comments like You know, that’s what we pay you for... you get some months off and you guys are just whining and... we’re not paying you if you are not teaching our students in school.” No matter how convinced we were that we did and could care for ourselves and our significant others, COVID shattered our ignorance and fractured our presumptions of privileged irresponsibility. As Tronto (2001, p. 67) observed, “in a society in which vulnerability is viewed as a weakness, those who need more care, regardless of actual situation, are in a more vulnerable situation.” Rather than recognize and reorganize a democratic praxis based on our interdependent, if unequal, care needs, we have largely doubled down on the undemocratic norm that some, mainly rich, white men, have deferent rights to (unrecognized) care.

Revolutionary Caring: Our five participants showed a deep understanding of how different groups unequally experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences; and generally believed that COVID accentuated pre-existing academic inequities. Yet, while they displayed an urgency to care for students, often emphasizing a direct need to improve the academic achievement among their students of color, participants were less likely to explicitly tie care to social justice. One participant, Regina, did discuss how she had grown more active in the statewide #RedforED group called SCforED (Estes & Monreal, 2019; Monreal & McCorkle, 2022): “I’ve taken a more vocal role with SCforED... in a thread [on Facebook] I just said straight out like ‘Nothing will change unless teachers, one: start voting and two: they start voting in their and their students’ best interest.’ I said, ‘they need to get over the one, the one issue, voting, because that’s not going to get us [teachers and education] anywhere,’ and I was so

surprised how many people were like yes, yes, yes, yes, and I was like oh okay we'll see if that happens."

Regina thus used social media to critique her fellow educators and demonstrate how they were upholding a *status quo* of inequity. She also was sharing her knowledge and wisdom of how structural injustices continue (e.g. not voting or voting against students' best interest). Perhaps Regina is "preparing the earth... and planting the seeds" (Sosa-Provencio, 2019, p. 1130) for her continued resilience, resistance, and activism on behalf of her students. We also saw a certain urgency and reluctance in Regina's closing statement, "we'll see if that happens." which seems to point to a belief that while folks said they cared for and about (their) students, their actions — their votes and politics — repeatedly came up short. At other times, Regina seemed to grasp that direct words and statements on social media would not be strategic: "There were posts [on Facebook] when white women were just like... flabbergasted watching these people [White parents] use their privilege to get their agenda [anti-masking]... I was like 'Oh, my goodness, this is the first time they've watched white privilege from the outside, and it's not in their favor.' It's like white people versus white people, like privileged people versus privileged people... and I'm going to sit back and stay out of that." In some cases, tactical silence and more subterranean or hidden plays are worthwhile for longer term *revolucionista* care work in the form of advocacy for teachers and students. Regina also pointed, albeit implicitly, to how critical notions of care were needed to challenge the marshalling of (parental) privilege "to get their agenda" of anti-masking. In line with her use of "we'll see if that happens," Regina grasped a long tradition of "White feminist care as silent regarding power, privilege, and the heavy educational histories and Eurocentric pedagogies children of color face" (Sosa-Provencio, 2019, p. 1130). Revolutionary care seeks to correct errors and instabilities of *status quo* aesthetic care.

Deliberate (Listening) Caring (Buen Vivir): Care as an act of deliberate listening that leads toward living well in plentitude (*buen vivir*) was evidenced when participants spoke of interdependence and mutual support. Participants contrasted collective and purposeful care to the aesthetic care of colleagues and community members who invoked the rhetoric of *individual* rights and personal well-being. Stella, who is a special education teacher, spoke to this: "I just wish we would see this [COVID] more as a collective thing we're navigating and that everybody's going through. Just when I see or hear 'the kids need to be in school because it's what's best for them,' and in some cases, especially for our little friends, it's just not, because everybody is stressed." Stella stated that while administrators and policymakers minimized voices that spoke to the complexity of the situation and promoted discussion of multiple possibilities of action, school leaders remained attentive to concerns of certain groups, especially those that wanted kids in school. Stella wished we would be more imaginative, that we would frame decisions about school protocols, openings, and closings as opportunities to listen to the many voices, each of which needed to be heard. Instead, as a society we reverted to dichotomous thinking — open/closed, good/bad (Vázquez, 2012) — in which some people (but not "our little friends") decided what was "best for" all people in their communities. We squandered the democratic imperative to listen to and be in attunement with "the voices, traditions, [and] philosophies of communities that present alternatives" (Vázquez, 2012, p. 6).

Danny, a high school Spanish teacher, heeded advice she got from a colleague who envisioned care as rooted in what Finch (2022, p. 4) describes as a "different kind of relationality that is enacted through alternative forms of community and accountability." Danny suggested masking might be viewed as living in active relationality to the whole, the plentitude: "Like a

colleague [another Latina teacher] told me about enforcing masks and safety protocols... She was like ‘I’m not only advocating for me, I’m advocating for my students because if they get contaminated they take it [COVID] home, and you know it’s just there’s a lot of scenarios.’” *Buen vivir*, then, is thinking beyond our individual right to mask (or not), and toward a (democratically inclusive) praxis of paying attention — of rooting action in and through appreciation for the care needs of others, for the care needs of our collective well-being. Care understood as listening in, with, and for relational well-being prompts questions such as *how to* listen to/for conviviality, how to appreciate the many scenarios reciprocal care work demands.

Concluding Questions of Care, Education, and Democracy

In *Democracy and Education* (1916/1997, p. 87) John Dewey wrote, “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.” Noting how Dewey’s definition of democracy is built on listening to and acting with others, Nel Noddings (2017) centered the development of care on the development of democracy (or something else):

Just as Dewey argued that democracy is more than a form of government... *caring* is more than the set of acts performed by a “carer.” *Caring* describes a *relation*, an interaction, between a carer and a cared-for. The carer must be attentive, must listen to the expressed needs of the cared-for, feel something as a result, and respond; the cared-for, in turn, must somehow acknowledge the efforts of the carer as caring... Care theorists contribute to the effort at improvement [of Dewey’s idea of democracy] by recommending that we seek to develop relations of care and trust in all of our social interactions (pp. 315-316, emphasis original).

Similarly, in analyzing our participants’ interviews with and through different care frameworks, we came to see that COVID brought to light how expectations and enactments of care are fundamentally linked to, if not inseparable from how we (ought to) live (well) with each other. Questions and debates about care are issues of democracy; just as questions and debates about democracy are issues of care. This is not a ground-breaking assertion (as evidenced by Dewey, Noddings, and many, many others), yet there is worth in saying so explicitly. Centering questions of unequal relationships on care (work) demands we question the underlying inequalities of our democracy (or something else). The Latina teachers we interviewed provided ways of reorganizing and (re)recognizing our relationships to each other that necessitate an understanding of democracy based on collective well-being and relational care in lieu of, or at least in conversation with, the supremacy of (individual) rights endorsed by aesthetic care.

Deeper understandings of care (Robert et al., 2025) also provide insight into rising levels of rage and indignation we increasingly confront in our classrooms, communities, and country/ies. As Tronto (2001) points out, people who had, previous to COVID, dismissed their vulnerability to and dependence on others’ care were confronted with the stark realities of shared, if unequal, interdependence between care-givers and care-receivers. The fact that during COVID many care-receivers, privileged because of their gender, race, class, etc., lacked ability, knowledge, or resources to provide care for themselves, as in our case, educating and caring for children and students. Loss of care prompted an anger among care-receivers that was based on perceived weakness in themselves, their own vulnerability laid plain. Moreover, people who found themselves in the rare position to simply acknowledge this (power) relationship of care, felt, instead and however erroneously, that their vulnerability was being abused by, in the case of

schooling, teachers who were “whining” or “not wanting to work.” It is here where we finally confront our lede. Stella’s story about being ill-treated by a stranger in a community space is a story apt of a society stuck in aesthetic care. Stella’s story would be much, much more an anomaly in a society where care involved sustaining conviviality by learning to live well with one another.

During our engagement and analysis with different care frameworks as we coded our data, we were struck by the need to center vulnerability in conversations about care and democracy. Vulnerability presents as many things; among others, it is a valid emotion, a skill to be developed, an outcome of in/justice, and a problem to be solved. Yet curricula of care tend to undertheorize (inter)connections among vulnerability, care, and democratic action, both political and interpersonal. Therefore, we reprise our three starting questions for critical educators, teacher educators, and foundations of education scholars to begin re-envisioning democracy and care through the lens of vulnerability:

Does democracy (or something else) require a radically different pedagogy, praxis, and/or curriculum of care?

Does democracy (or something else) require a shared sense and appreciation of vulnerability?

Can/do we need to teach a politics of interconnected care, specifically how we are differently vulnerable to each other?

We pose our questions and, inspired by our participants, answer them in the affirmative in the hope of fostering intellectual dialogue (including critique), further theorization, and/or practical action. In many ways these questions are a modeling of care; attempting adequate answers to them requires listening to others, recognizing others as fellow human beings, challenging privilege on their behalf, and thinking collectively about *our* well-being. We need to return to serious consideration of how thinking about ‘care’ in terms of ‘taking care of vulnerabilities’ is a necessary component of democratic schools and societies. We offer our questions and our (tentative) answers in vulnerability, but with a genuine dream that we might live better together.

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Thriving Against the Democratic Backdrop: Black Women's Leadership, Racial Justice, and the Reimagining of PK-12 Schooling

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Abstract: Black women educational leaders occupy a paradoxical position in PK-12 schooling. Frequently called upon to lead during periods of complexity, equity initiatives, and organizational transformation, Black women often do so while navigating racialized and gendered norms that undermine their authority, intensify their emotional labor, and constrain their professional advancement. Drawing on a phenomenological study of Black women lower school principals working in independent schools, I construct a research method that positions Black women's leadership as a critical lens through which to assess democratic failures and democratic possibilities of schooling.

Research grounded in Black feminist theory, misogynoir theory, constructive-developmental theory, democratic education, affective neuroscience, and decolonial thought reveals how Black women who are school leaders resist anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and gendered racism while cultivating liberatory, community-centered approaches to leadership (Dai, 2025). Their experiences demonstrate how schools often reproduce anti-democratic patterns such as exclusion, gatekeeping, inequitable access to power, and devaluation of culturally rooted ways of knowing. At the same time, leadership practices of Black women illuminate alternative futures for education grounded in relationality, justice, and transformative possibility. Seeing Black women in leadership roles in this clarifying light repositions scholarly understanding of Black women as leaders. Black women are not exceptional figures who survive hostile systems, but visionary architects of more humane, democratic, and liberatory educational environments. Black women educational leaders in PK-12 schools, particularly in early childhood and elementary settings, enact justice-oriented leadership while navigating institutional environments shaped by misogynoir and structural inequity. Black women's leadership experiences expose both the fractures and the unrealized possibilities of democracy in education. Black women leaders often encounter diminished authority, isolation, tokenism, and heightened scrutiny. Yet they also cultivate forms of leadership embedded in cultural knowledge, relational trust, communal care, spiritual grounding, and liberatory imagination. Their experiences therefore reveal not only what educational institutions fail to provide, but also what schools might become when leadership is rooted in equity, dignity, and collective flourishing.

Black Women's Leadership: A Conceptual Framework

To study the complex lives of Black women school administrators adequately, I've constructed an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that integrates Black feminist theory, misogynoir theory, constructive-developmental theory, democratic education, decolonial thought, and affective neuroscience. Together, these perspectives provide a robust analytic lens for understanding the lived experiences of Black women educational leaders in PK-12 settings, particularly in independent schools. At the center of this framework is the understanding that Black women's leadership experiences cannot be adequately interpreted through race-only or gender-only analyses. Rather, Black women navigate educational leadership through the confluence of race, gender, power, culture, and institutional hierarchy. Their experiences reveal the ways schools reproduce inequitable systems while also illuminating possibilities for more

democratic, humane, and liberatory educational futures (Dai, 2025). A synthesis of theoretical orientations is required to begin to understand adequately the complicated professional lives of Black women who are school leaders. The theories I discuss in this section combine to give us insight into the general social context in which Black women school leaders work (Black Feminist Theory, Misogynoir Theory), the opportunities for growth at work (Constructive-Developmental Theory), and the aims of growth for the institutions they lead and the profession of educational leadership (Democratic Education and Decolonial Thought, Affective Neuroscience and Human Development).

Black Feminist Theory: Although aware and respectful of the imbricate nature of the many chauvinisms faced by Black women in educational leadership positions, Black feminist theory serves as the central interpretive lens of my study's conceptual framework. The framework positions Black women's lived experiences as legitimate and necessary sources of knowledge (Collins, 2000; Cooper, 1892/1988; Crenshaw, 1989; Smith, 1983). Black feminist theory argues that Black women occupy a distinctive social location shaped by intersecting forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of marginalization (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). These intersecting systems influence how Black women are perceived, treated, and positioned within institutions. In educational leadership, these dynamics often manifest through diminished authority, hypervisibility *and* invisibility, tokenism, isolation, and the expectation that Black women perform extensive emotional and relational labor without adequate support. At the same time, Black feminist theory emphasizes that Black women are not solely defined by oppression. Their leadership reflects resistance, creativity, relationality, spirituality, and communal care. Black women leaders often cultivate culturally grounded approaches that center dignity, trust, and collective flourishing. Their experiences therefore offer critical insight into how schools can be transformed into more equitable and life-giving spaces.

Misogynoir Theory: 'Misogynoir theory' deepens Black feminist analysis by naming the specific form of anti-Black, gendered oppression directed toward Black women. Coined by Moya Bailey (2013, 2021), misogynoir describes the intersection of misogyny and anti-Black racism that uniquely shapes Black women's experiences. Within educational leadership, misogynoir may appear through tone policing, racialized assumptions about competence, excessive scrutiny, invisibilization of expertise, exclusion from informal networks, and persistent questioning of Black women's legitimacy as leaders. Black women leaders are often expected to be strong but not "too strong," caring but not "too emotional," assertive but not "too aggressive." These ambiguous, if not downright contradictory expectations create impossible standards and intensify the emotional burden of leadership. Importantly, misogynoir is not limited to individual interactions. It is embedded within institutional norms, hiring practices, leadership pipelines, mentorship structures, and definitions of professionalism that privilege whiteness and masculinity. Misogynoir theory helps illuminate how schools can systematically marginalize Black women while still professing commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Constructive-Developmental Theory (CDT): Constructive-developmental theory, particularly the work of Robert Kegan (1994, 2000) and Eleanor Drago-Severson (2009, 2012), provides a framework for understanding how leaders make meaning of complex experiences. Adults continue to grow and evolve throughout their lives, developing increasingly sophisticated ways of understanding themselves, others, and the systems in which they work. CDT also offers an important counter-narrative to assumptions about adult development: Adults can continue to develop more expansive, justice-oriented ways of knowing as they grow older. A concept central

to CDT is the idea of “holding environments,” or relational and organizational structures that support adults as they navigate challenge, complexity, and growth (Drago-Severson, 2012; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018). Effective holding environments provide a balance of support and stretch, allowing leaders to engage difficult realities while remaining connected to a sense of purpose and possibility. Schools can intentionally cultivate holding environment leadership structures that support growth in leadership capacity, especially for those whose identities and experiences have historically been marginalized. But the organizational reality in schools for Black women leaders is a far cry from a holding environment. For Black women leaders, the absence of holding environments can be especially harmful. Participants in a study of Black women school leaders working in independent schools frequently described leading during episodes of racialized conflict, institutional resistance, and organizational instability without access to meaningful mentorship, developmental/emotional support/scaffolding, or affirming leadership structures (Dai, 2025). Constructive-developmental theory therefore helps explain not only the external barriers Black women face, but also the internal work required to sustain themselves within inequitable systems.

Democratic Education and Decolonial Thought: Democratic education and decolonial thought further situate Black women school leaders within broader questions about the purpose of schooling and the meaning of educational leadership. Democratic education suggests that schools should serve as spaces where all people are treated with dignity, where multiple ways of knowing are valued, and where communities participate meaningfully in decision-making (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970). Yet schools frequently reproduce anti-democratic practices through exclusion, gatekeeping, surveillance, and biased access to power. Decolonial scholars, such as Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti (2016), challenge educational institutions to interrogate the assumptions, hierarchies, and desires that shape dominant models of leadership and schooling. Andreotti's work is particularly useful for understanding how educational systems often privilege rigid, white-centered definitions of professionalism, authority, and success while marginalizing relational, communal, and culturally grounded forms of leadership. Together, democratic and decolonial perspectives help frame Black women's leadership not as a deviation from dominant norms, but as a genuinely generative alternative to the way things currently are. Black women leaders frequently enact leadership practices rooted in care, relational trust, collective responsibility, and cultural responsiveness. These practices model democratic and liberatory possibilities for schools.

Affective Neuroscience and Human Development: Recent scholarship in affective neuroscience and human development further strengthens this conceptual framework by emphasizing that learning, growth, and leadership are deeply relational, intensely emotional, and personally embodied processes. Scholars such as Mary Helen Immordino-Yang (2015; Immordino-Yang et al., 2024) argue that people do not learn or lead through cognition alone. Human development is shaped by belonging, emotional safety, cultural context, identity, and the quality of relationships. Schools that ignore these realities often undermine the very outcomes they seek to produce. For Black women leaders, this insight is especially important. Chronic exposure to racial stress, tokenism, isolation, and emotional labor can have significant developmental and physiological consequences. At the same time, environments characterized by trust, affirmation, care, and meaningful support can foster resilience, agency, and transformational growth.

A Prism through which to See the Light

Constructive-Development Theory shows us that adults continue to grow even as they age. Thus, what we see emerge from study of Black women school leaders is patterns of growth in difficult circumstances. Chief among those difficulties are anti-Black racism and misogynoir considered as social structures. What we can most importantly learn from Black women school leaders' positive growth in hostile circumstances is how to create working conditions that foster even more profoundly positive growth. Educational institutions must move beyond deficit-oriented approaches and instead cultivate conditions in which Black women leaders can thrive. Participants in an interview study of Black women school administrators emphasized the importance of mentorship, inclusive hiring practices, affirming leadership pipelines, and holding environments that recognize the complexity of Black women's leadership experiences (Dai, 2025). Taken together, — Affective Neuroscience and Human Development, Black Feminist Theory, Constructive-Developmental Theory, Misogynoir Theory, and Democratic Education and Decolonial Thought — these frameworks create a conceptual foundation for understanding Black women's leadership as both a site of struggle and a site, possibly, of victory. Black women leaders expose the contradictions within educational institutions that, for instance, claim to value equity; but, that, all the while, maintain structures that marginalize Black women. At the same time, Black women in positions of authority also model new ways of leading that are relational, liberatory, developmentally grounded, and deeply democratic. Rather than positioning Black women as exceptional individuals who survive hostile systems, the conceptual framework constructed here recognizes Black women as visionary leaders whose experiences can help reimagine the future of schooling. The Black Women's Leadership Conceptual Framework is a multi-faceted prism through which to discern the refracted components of lived experience that Black women school leaders conjoin into a guiding light.

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Negotiating Gender in Childhood: Insights from Third Graders' Classroom Experiences

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines how masculinity is constructed and negotiated in a third-grade classroom. Grounded in a post-structural perspective on gender and informed by critical literacy, I describe two students who represent contrasting performances of masculinity: One aligning with dominant norms of competitiveness and athleticism and another demonstrating a more relational and flexible identity. Classroom literacy activities, including discussions of *William's Doll*, created opportunities for students to question rigid gender expectations. Findings show that dominant masculinity is reinforced through peer recognition and status, while alternative expressions of masculinity are negotiated within social constraints. Elementary classrooms are spaces where gender norms are both reproduced and disrupted. Critical literacy supports more inclusive understandings of masculinity.

Gender in elementary classrooms often operates as an invisible organizing force — shaping how children interact, how they are recognized, and what forms of behavior are considered acceptable. These norms are rarely taught explicitly. Instead, they are produced through everyday classroom practices, including peer interactions, teacher responses, and participation in academic and social activities. Gender norms often function as part of the hidden curriculum of schooling (Jackson, 2012; Francis et al., 2017). From a post-structural perspective, gender is not a fixed trait but a repeated performance shaped by social expectations and power relations (Butler, 1990). Classrooms, therefore, function as key sites where these performances are both enacted and regulated. Children learn not only how to “be” boys or girls, but also which performances are rewarded, ignored, or marginalized. Recent research has increasingly emphasized that young children are active participants in constructing and negotiating gender norms rather than passive recipients of preset rules about acceptable gendered behavior (Blaise, 2014; Paechter, 2018; Davies, 2012). At the same time, dominant constructions of masculinity — often associated with athleticism, competitiveness, and emotional restraint — continue to be privileged within school settings (Renold, 2017; Francis et al., 2017; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2015). Critical literacy offers one possible avenue for disrupting these norms. By encouraging students to question taken-for-granted assumptions about gender “traits” in texts and social practices, critical literacy creates opportunities for examining how identities — including gender identities — are constructed and maintained (Vasquez, 2014; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). Even elementary-aged students can engage in meaningful conversations about identity, difference, and fairness when supported appropriately. This study builds on these perspectives by examining how gender is performed, recognized, and negotiated within a third-grade classroom. In particular, I focus on how two students — one aligning with dominant masculine norms and one adopting a more flexible stance towards masculinity — navigate and respond to these expectations. Additionally, I explore how classroom literacy practices can open space for questioning and reimagining gender norms.

Gender as Social Practice

Contemporary research conceptualizes gender as a social practice that is continuously produced through interaction rather than a stable individual attribute (Paechter, 2018). Within

classroom contexts, children actively construct gendered identities by drawing on available discourses and negotiating their positions among peers (Blaise, 2014). These constructions are not neutral. Certain forms of masculinity — particularly those associated with physical competence, dominance, and peer recognition — are often privileged, while alternative expressions of masculinity may be marginalized (Renold, 2017; Francis et al., 2017). Schools remain key sites where normative gender expectations are reinforced, even within environments that aim to promote equity and inclusion. At the same time, children demonstrate agency in how they take up, resist, or rework these norms. Gender in classrooms should be understood not as fixed categories, but as dynamic processes shaped by both structure and interaction.

Research on boys' peer cultures highlights the importance of recognition in shaping gendered identities. Boys who embody dominant forms of masculinity — often through athletic ability, competitiveness, or social dominance — are more likely to achieve popularity and status (Adler et al., 1992; Renold, 2017; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2015). However, this recognition is relational and context-dependent. Boys who do not align with dominant norms may be positioned as less competent, less mature, or socially marginal (Francis et al., 2017). At the same time, alternative masculinities — such as those emphasizing care, creativity, or collaboration — can emerge, though they often require negotiation within existing power structures (Paechter, 2018; Anderson, 2011). These dynamics highlight how masculinity is not simply expressed but interpreted and valued, making recognition, both institutional recognition *and* interpersonal recognition, a key mechanism through which gender norms are maintained and reproduced.

Critical literacy provides a framework for examining how texts and social practices reproduce dominant ideologies, including those related to gender (Vasquez, 2014). Stories like Charlotte Zolotow's *William's Doll* (1972), a text we read and discussed in class, are important because they *recognize*, that is, they *give recognition to* alternative ways of being. Through critical discussions, students can begin to question assumptions about what is considered "normal" or "appropriate," opening space for alternative perspectives. Recent work has shown that elementary students are capable of engaging in these conversations in meaningful ways, particularly when instruction is grounded in their lived experiences (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Rowsell & Pahl, 2015). These discussions can support what some scholars describe as "gender literacy," or the ability to recognize and critique gender norms and inequalities (Stromquist, 2014). However, introducing critical perspectives does not automatically transform students' beliefs. Instead, it often produces moments of tension, negotiation, and partial change. Understanding these moments is essential for examining how classroom practices can both challenge and reproduce dominant discourses.

Setting up and Carrying out the Study

This study employs a qualitative, classroom-based approach informed by ethnographic sensibilities. The purpose is not to generalize across contexts, but to develop a nuanced understanding of how gender is performed, recognized, and negotiated within the everyday life of one elementary classroom. Rather than treating gender as a fixed variable, I approach it as a social practice that emerges through interaction. Accordingly, attention is given to the ways students position themselves and others, how those positions are taken up or resisted, and how meaning is constructed through language and participation in classroom activities.

Context and Participants: The study was conducted in a third-grade classroom in a public elementary school in the United States. The classroom consisted of a diverse group of students

with varying academic abilities and social backgrounds. Within this setting, two focal students — referred to by pseudonyms as John and Chris — emerged as particularly illustrative cases. These students were not selected in advance; rather, they became focal through ongoing observation due to the ways their behaviors, interactions, and peer positioning made visible different constructions of masculinity. John was widely recognized by peers as athletic, competitive, and socially dominant, while Chris was described as kind, cooperative, and creative. Their contrasting ways of participating in classroom and peer activities provided a lens through which to examine how gender norms operate and are negotiated.

Data Generation: Rather than separating data collection from teaching, data generation was embedded within everyday classroom practice, with fieldnotes used to document significant interactions, recurring patterns, and moments of tension or negotiation. To enhance the credibility of the study, multiple data sources were used to capture different aspects of classroom life. Observations were supported by student dialogue and artifacts (written work and shared stories), allowing for triangulation of emerging patterns. In addition, attention was given to maintaining detailed descriptions of classroom interactions to support transparency in interpretation. Rather than seeking definitive conclusions, the goal was to present a rich, contextually grounded account that allows readers to consider the transferability of findings to similar settings. Classroom observations focusing on peer interactions, class participation patterns, informal social dynamics; student talk from whole-class discussions, small-group interactions, and informal conversations composed the bulk of the data. Instructional moments, particularly during literacy activities such as reads-aloud and writing workshop, were important sources of data. One key instructional context was the read-aloud and discussion of *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972), which served as a catalyst for explicit conversations about gender norms and provided insight into how students articulated, defended, or questioned dominant ideas about masculinity.

Data Analysis: Analysis was ongoing and iterative, occurring alongside data generation. Rather than applying predetermined categories, patterns were identified through repeated engagement with the data. The analysis focused on how students constructed and performed gender in interaction, how certain behaviors were recognized and valued by peers and the teacher, and how dominant gender norms were reinforced, negotiated, or resisted. Particular attention was given to micro-level interactions — brief but meaningful moments such as comments, responses, and peer reactions — that revealed underlying assumptions about gender. Through this process, John and Chris emerged as contrasting cases, highlighting both the stability of dominant masculinity and the possibilities for alternative expressions.¹

Constructing Masculinity: Recognition, Power, Performance, and Possibility

Taken together, and presented in tabular format to facilitate comparison and contrast, John and Chris illustrate that masculinity in the classroom is not singular or monothematic but exists along a spectrum shaped by recognition, power, and social context.

¹ Note on Researcher Positionality: As a researcher and educator, I was actively involved in the classroom context in which the study took place. This dual role provided close access to students' everyday interactions, while also requiring ongoing reflection on how my presence and interpretations shaped the research process. My interest in gender and critical literacy informed both the focus of the study and the design of instructional activities. At the same time, I remained attentive to students' perspectives, allowing their voices and interactions to guide the direction of the analysis.

John: Performing Dominant Masculinity	Chris: Expanding Masculinity through Care, Creativity, and Flexibility
John emerged as a highly visible and influential figure in the classroom, embodying what might be described as a socially valued form of masculinity. Although he did not initially present as physically dominant — being one of the shorter boys in the class — he actively constructed his identity through other recognizable markers of masculinity, particularly athletic competence and competitive behavior.	Chris represented a less dominant but equally meaningful way of performing masculinity. Described by peers as “nice” and widely accepted across social groups, Chris occupied a position that did not rely on athletic dominance or overt competitiveness; but rather on ease and enjoyment of association.
Peers consistently positioned John as a “sports expert,” and his participation in recess and physical education reinforced this identity. His performances — boasting about physical abilities, dominating games, and displaying competitive intensity — aligned with what prior research has identified as key pathways through which boys achieve peer recognition and status (Adler et al., 1992; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).	Chris constructed his identity through qualities often undervalued in dominant masculine discourse, including kindness, empathy, and cooperation. He demonstrated a willingness to work with all peers, regardless of gender, and consistently resisted the binary logic that framed boys and girls as oppositional groups.
John’s identity work extended beyond physical spaces into academic contexts. His repeated production of sports-centered narratives illustrates how literacy practices can function as sites for identity construction. His stories, structured around competition, professional sports, and victory, consistently centered male characters and excluded female presence. These texts did more than reflect interest; they reproduced a particular version of masculinity that was both exclusive and hierarchical.	Chris gained recognition through creativity and literacy. His writing — particularly <i>The Clam Trilogy</i>, stories about a caring clam family including parents and a baby clam featuring themes of affection and protection in everyday interaction — combined humor, narrative coherence, and imaginative detail, challenging commonly reported gendered patterns in boys’ writing. Rather than privileging action over structure, Chris integrated both, producing texts that were widely appreciated by peers.
At the same time, John complicated traditional dichotomies between “athletic” and “academic” boys. He was both physically competitive and academically competent, positioning himself as a leader within the classroom. His election to student council further reinforced this status, suggesting that dominant masculinity, when paired with academic success, can become especially powerful.	Chris’ engagement in literacy highlights how writing can serve as a space for negotiating identity. As Lensmire (1994) suggests, fiction provides distance, allowing students to explore aspects of themselves without direct exposure. Chris used this space to construct an identity that was playful, creative, and agentic — distinct from the quieter persona he displayed in classroom interactions.

John's construction of masculinity relied heavily on boundary-making — defining what boys are <i>not</i>. His comments frequently reinforced a rigid binary between boys and girls, positioning masculinity in opposition to femininity. For example, he rejected working with girls, framed their work as less competent, and consistently described gendered differences in essentialized ways.	Perhaps most significantly, Chris demonstrated a more flexible understanding of gender. He repeatedly emphasized that “everyone is different,” explicitly rejecting the idea that behaviors should be determined by gender. In discussions about boys engaging in traditionally feminine activities, he acknowledged social risks while still expressing acceptance: “Some boys think boys doing girls’ stuff is weird, but I don’t think so...if girls can do boys’ stuff, then it will be okay for boys to do girls’ stuff.”
This boundary-making became especially visible during the reading of <i>William’s Doll</i> (Zolotow, 1972). John openly resisted any attempt to disrupt traditional gender norms, stating that boys playing with dolls was “weird” and associating nonconforming boys with negative labels such as “losers.” His responses demonstrate Butler’s (1990) description of gender as a repeated performance that produces the illusion of stability.	Chris’ comment about boys and girls doing each other’s gendered “stuff” suggests a post-structuralist awareness of contradictions within dominant gender discourse. While he resisted rigid binaries, he also recognized the social consequences of challenging them. His suggestion that nonconforming behaviors might be kept “a secret” illustrates the tension between personal beliefs and social pressures. This tension aligns with Butler’s (1990) notion of gender as a regulatory practice. Chris did not fully reject dominant norms, but rather negotiated within them — maintaining social belonging while subtly expanding what masculinity could include.
Importantly, John’s resistance to blurring gender lines should not be understood simply as individual bias, but as participation in a broader social discourse that rewards certain performances of masculinity. His strong rejection of alternative masculinities reflects both the pleasure and power associated with occupying a dominant position. As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue, boys are not merely resisting change; they are protecting identities that offer them recognition and status.	Chris constructed his gender identity through qualities often undervalued in dominant masculine discourse: acceptance of difference, flexibility regarding self-expression, and development of a personal sense of creative agency. These forms of masculinity, sometimes described as more inclusive or caring masculinities, have been increasingly recognized as important yet underrepresented in school settings (Anderson, 2011; Francis et al., 2017).
As the school year progressed, John’s stories composed during literacy instruction remained consistent with broader patterns in which dominant masculinities are constructed through competition and exclusion (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2015).	For Chris, engagement in literacy highlights how writing can serve as a space for negotiating identity. Literacy practices provide opportunities for students to explore and reimagine identities beyond dominant norms (Rowse & Pahl, 2015; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

John's masculinity was highly visible, rewarded, and reinforced through both peer and teacher interactions. His dominance was not simply a product of his behavior, but of how that behavior was interpreted and valued. In contrast, Chris expressed a quieter and less dominant masculinity, yet still a socially accepted one. His example suggests that alternative masculinities are possible, but they often operate within constraints. What is particularly important is that both boys were navigating the same classroom environment, yet arrived at different ways of enacting masculinity. This highlights the role of agency within structure — students are not passive recipients of gender norms, but active participants in negotiating them (Corsaro, 2015; Blaise, 2014). At the same time, the classroom itself played a significant role in shaping these possibilities. Through everyday interactions, peer dynamics, and instructional practices, certain forms of masculinity were normalized while others were subtly marginalized. Disrupting rigid gender norms in elementary classrooms requires more than simply introducing diverse texts. While critical literacy practices can create openings for reflection, these efforts must be accompanied by careful attention to everyday classroom interactions. Educators should consider how recognition is distributed among students, how language reinforces or challenges gender expectations, and how peer dynamics shape what is socially acceptable. Supporting students like Chris — who demonstrate openness to alternative gender expressions — may be particularly important, as they occupy positions that can bridge dominant and non-dominant discourses. Similarly, working with students like John requires thoughtful consideration. Rather than positioning dominant masculinity as something to be dismantled outright, educators might focus on expanding its boundaries, creating space for multiple ways of being masculine without diminishing the sense of competence and identity students derive from their current positions.

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Critical Consciousness in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract: Although there are positive ways to use Large Language Model format, LLM has been shown to provide disservice to its users, particularly people who are young and/or have limited formal education. Through a Freirean lens, LLMs have become a “Banking Machine,” synthesizing information from every corner of the internet, but lacking human experience and nuance that is invaluable and irreplaceable in meaningful and transformative education. As the “cognitive offload” caused by AI assistance becomes more normalized the field of education will change dramatically. To ensure young people use AI responsibly to construct and claim a critical education students must be educated on the risks and/or reliable uses of AI, and educators must achieve critical understanding of how AI works.

Today’s educators play a crucial role in developing the next generation of students. The terms of teachers’ responsibility shift from one generation to the next and in the 21st century teachers are required to keep up with technology that rapidly evolves. With the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into daily life, challenges are likely to arise no educator can foresee.¹ Educators must be more proactive than ever in ensuring students’ critical thinking skill and media literacy are preserved long after students leave the classroom. Use of AI affects how students perceive their education and its place in society. Evidence points towards cognitive offload, that is, reduced mental effort put into academic work, with increased use of AI, especially in the form of Large Language Models (LLMs). A major concern of ours is that 21st-century students are unknowingly sacrificing social emancipation and criticality when they opt to use AI rather than work through, to personally take advantage of, the educational opportunities available to them. Using information from all corners of the internet, LLMs employ predictive statistics analysis of internet sources to create human-like responses. The most common LLMs are ChatGPT and Google Gemini, but others, like Claude and Grok, are growing in popularity and sophistication. Triangulating research on frequency of AI use among different age and racial groups, studies of how people interact with AI based on education levels, and ideas of educational philosophers like Paulo Freire, we urge educators and administrators to develop more concrete stances on AI use for young, vulnerable student populations not yet aware of the importance of an education that prioritizes critical thinking. To substantiate our advice, we review the rise of Artificial Intelligence in society in general, as well as in K-12 education specifically. Next, we explore Freire’s concept of Critical Consciousness to compare and contrast his philosophy and models of education to current trends in educational use of LLMs. Lastly, we critically assess the trajectory along which we believe technology-driven education seems to be going. While our conclusion encourages educators to be adaptable and learn about AI to ensure it does not operate without accountability within classrooms, we also urge hesitancy in uncritical, full-scale acceptance and application.

The Rise of Artificial Intelligence

AI-driven technology has garnered a reputation over the last several years as the direction the world is moving, an inevitable part of life for those living in the 21st century. With the

¹ We keep with common usage in speaking of ‘artificial intelligence’; but this should in no way imply we take AI to actually be intelligent. For this point see Noam Chomsky, “The False Promise of AI,” *New York Times* Opinion Pa, 8 March 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/08/opinion/noam-chomsky-chatgpt-ai.html>

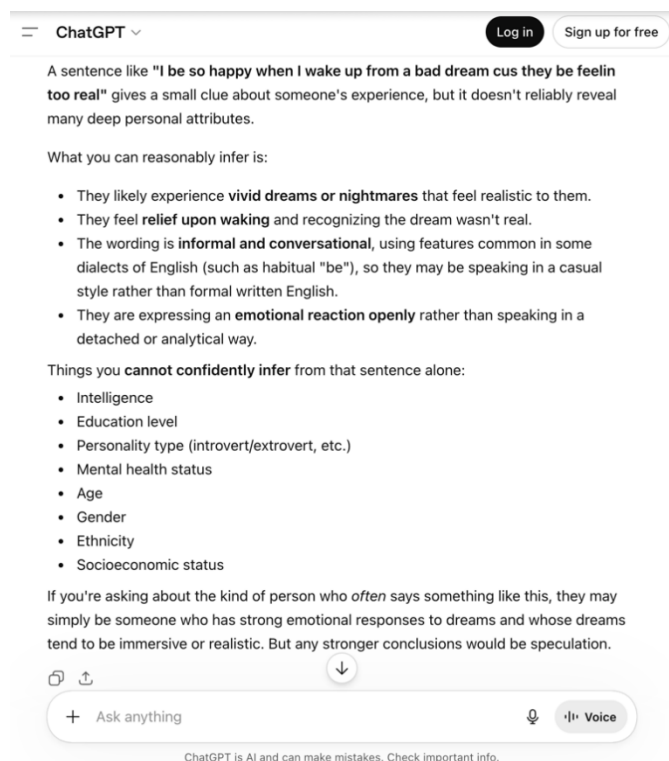
mentality of “sink or swim,” people are essentially being forced to learn about and live in an increasingly technological world. LLMs and other AI models have tremendous benefits available to those who use them wisely, such as teachers creating ideas for adaptable lesson plans, scientific laboratory research, computer scientists efficiently finding errors in code, and beyond. However, LLMs may be used for less meritorious purposes in day-to-day life, and have given rise to a concerning pattern of students steering away from mentally stimulating research and critical questioning of curriculum. In February of 2026, CNBC released an article detailing the concerns held by executives of OpenAI, the parent company of ChatGPT. Authors Ashley Capoot and Kate Rooney explained that OpenAI declared a “code red” in the face of growing competition from other LLM producers. Even though ChatGPT has reported up to 900 million monthly users within the past year, this is not enough for the company. In the wake of the growing popularity of Google Gemini and Anthropic’s Claude, AI will likely continue this push for more regular users. AI companies have created new marketing goals and initiatives for their chatbots, with TV commercials and social media ads becoming more common. Competition between AI parent companies will draw in more users who have little to no knowledge of how AI is programmed and how it works.

The likelihood of an adult individual using AI is highest for those aged 18-29, according to a 2025 study from Pew Research Center (Kennedy et. al.). One-third of participants in this age group reported using AI at least several times a day. Rates of AI use were reported to increase in relation to higher education levels: 46% of participants with post-graduate education reported using AI several times a day, whereas only 20% of those with a high school education or less reported using it to the same extent. The “high school education or less” group had one of the lowest rates of reporting AI use, with 51% stating they use it “less than several times per week”. Another Pew Research Center study investigated rates of AI use among different racial groups of high school students, including Black, Hispanic, and White students. The study focused on teens aged 13-17 and asked them how often they use chatbots for different tasks. Rates of reported use were highest among Black and Hispanic teens in every single category compared to White students. McClain et. al., (2026) also reported that over half of all students stated they regularly use chatbots to search for information, and just about half use it for help with schoolwork. McClain et al., attributed differences among racial groups to several different factors such as lack of access to newer textbooks/materials, language barriers in the classroom or at home, or stigmas that come from reaching out for extra support. Beyond trends in LLM use, however, our most pressing concerns revolve around *how* AI is used by different (particularly marginalized) groups, what drawbacks can come from AI use, and how this may or may not affect educational attainment and aspirations that could in turn impact the course of a student’s life.

Hegemonic Bias in AI

LLMs can inadvertently mirror and perpetuate societal prejudice, which can make it difficult for educators to foster and sustain students’ critical thinking. Researchers have found concerning patterns of bias and stereotyping in AI models. Members of the University of Chicago Linguistics Department (Lee, 2024) investigated how LLMs perceived hypothetical statements from people speaking in different dialects. Researchers input sentences into the LLM and the LLM was asked to output words, jobs, and traits connected to the “speakers.” The inspiration for the experiment came from a past series of studies known as the “Princeton Trilogy,” where a similar line of questioning was presented to U.S. citizens alongside the racial identities of the speakers. The LLMs were *not* told any specifications about who the speaker was, but were

statistically *significantly* more likely to attribute traits like “dirty”, “lazy”, and “stupid” to sentences rooted in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). On the other hand, sentences in Standard American English had a higher correlation to words like “intelligent” or “brilliant,” even when making a remark very similar to statements made in AAVE. The LLMs also related speakers of certain sentences to different jobs, often placing those using AAVE in jobs that were lower paying, less prestigious, or did not require college degrees. When results from the 2024 study were reviewed and compared to the Princeton studies, the responses from the LLMs seemed to be equivalent to or *worse than* responses from white Americans living in the southern U.S. throughout the Jim Crow era (Lee, 2024). Since the publication of Lee’s study, OpenAI seems to have made progress in its training of ChatGPT to avoid issues like this. Below is a screenshot from ChatGPT taken in early June of 2026, prompting a much more programmed response to a sentence written in AAVE originally used in the University of Chicago study. The software makes it clear there is no way to infer factors like intelligence, education level, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status from one simple sentence.



ChatGPT Screenshot from June 02, 2026. (OpenAI, 2026.)

But shrewd programming cannot adequately address the bias built into LLMs, who accept at face value everything they read. A public-school librarian named Jean Darnell, a Black woman from Texas, wrote a piece published by PBS about her experience asking ChatGPT to write a paper about Black history. Darnell went in-depth on each part of AI’s response, highlighting the crucial points that she believed were left out including: “...the denial of the right to read ...the rich history of Black Reconstruction ...the first Black President ...the history of lynching and the KKK ...*who Black people were before enslavement*” (Darnell, 2023). Another query specifically asking about people of color in U.S. politics would have (hopefully) brought up former President

Obama, or asking about a history of targeted violence in Black history could have led ChatGPT to mention the KKK. However, the fact remains that there are people (specifically young students) who have no way of knowing about some of these historically significant figures before asking AI about them. AI is deceptive of them. Darnell knew what was missing from the paper due to her own lived experience, personal connections to the subject, and her advanced education. When an individual uses AI to learn about historical events or other subjects that they have no prior knowledge of, there is no way for them to get a holistic picture. Human emotions, perspectives, and nuance slip through the cracks because all LLMs can do is combine statements others have written into a response tailored for a specific prompt from a specific user. If AI continues to be used by young students as a first line of research *without* clear understanding of how to formulate questions that compensate for AI's tendency towards social bias, we run the risk of allowing learners to miss out on crucial, evaluative aspects of their studies. As Darnell states, "AI is such a powerful invention of ingenuity that it deserves, if not warrants, tough criticism."

Unfortunately, criticism is exactly what LLMs downplay. Nataliya Kos'myna (2025) conducted a comparative analysis of three different groups of people working on a writing task. Group One was asked to write for a short time using only their brains/prior knowledge. Group Two was permitted to use a search engine. Group Three was allowed to use ChatGPT. After the writing was complete, participants were asked to briefly explain their answers as well as how they felt about the writing process. Researchers discovered that the third group, who used ChatGPT, had less physical activation in their brains during the writing task (as recorded by EEG, electroencephalogram, during the writing), lower-quality papers as judged by human teachers and AI-powered assistants, impaired ownership over/lack of connection to their own writing, and a lowered ability to recall the information they had written just minutes earlier. This was not a one-time result. Kos'myna acknowledged that "The use of LLM had a measurable impact on our participants... demonstrated over the course of 4 sessions, which took place over 4 months, the LLM group's participants performed worse than their counterparts in the Brain-only group at all levels: neural, linguistic, scoring." Deleterious cognitive effects can show up in classrooms, too, particularly among students who are already struggling and learning to rely on AI for academic support. It seems as though with more and more use this "tool" will only be doing its users a greater and greater disservice. With unpredictable rates of bias, inconsistencies in information presented as a result of differences in queries, and a lowered likelihood of LLM users really digesting the content shown to them, we, as a society, must be more diligent than ever in fact-checking information that gains traction on the internet. Although there are resources available in 2026 urging people to review any photos, videos, or outlandish information they see online, AI-generated sites have already had a period of popularization (NewsGuard, 2023). If students remain unaware of the existence and the error-proneness of AI-generated websites, severe misinformation is a likely result. The potential scale of misinformation spread can be reduced with restrictions on AI such as regulations requiring disclosure of AI-generated statements/photos; but teaching students to be on the lookout for AI-generated content and how to identify and interrogate that content will help, as well.

AI in Relation to Critical Consciousness

About 60% of students participating in a Pew Research Center study reported that they or other students in their school use AI to cheat "at least sometimes" (McClain et al., 2026). For many users, including students in McClain et al.'s study, AI is not a last-resort option to solve a

problem — in many cases it replaces Google searches, collaborative group work, and the general desire to exercise one’s problem-solving skill. Michael Gerlich (2025) investigated how people with different levels of education chose to interact with LLMs. Results pointed to a lower rate of independent verification of information presented among people with lower reported levels of education. One participant interviewed by Gerlich, P309, who had a master’s degree, stated, “I always cross-check AI recommendations because I know it’s not always accurate.” This was not the only participant who attributed their research skill and awareness of AI to their advanced education. A different participant, who had a doctoral degree, P601, shared a similar sentiment: “My education has taught me the importance of not accepting things at face value, especially when it comes to AI, which can sometimes offer biased or incomplete information”. However, there is a stark difference between these statements and those of others in the study with less formal education. As admitted by P7, a high school graduate, “I rarely reflect on the biases behind the AI recommendations; I tend to trust them outright.” P229, another high school graduate, shared, “I don’t have the time or skills to verify what AI says; I just trust it.” Not only does this individual with a secondary school education believe it is *unnecessary* to verify responses formulated by AI, but they also do not believe that they are *capable* of critiquing LLM output. Certainly, cognitive submission fits portrayal of AI’s by its parent companies as the peak of information technology; but the more educators know about the potential shortcomings of LLM use, the more they may be able to warn students away from blind trust in AI. Education cannot wait any longer to find ways to counteract the cognitive offload and extreme trust that Gerlich highlights as consequences of uncritical AI use.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher of education, is widely recognized for his foundational contributions to critical pedagogy — most notably his contrasting conceptions of problem posing and banking models of education. The problem posing model positions learning as a two-way dialogic process between educators and students, one that is fueled by curiosity and mutual inquiry. In contrast, the banking model situates students as passive empty vessels to be filled with knowledge by an authoritative educator — positioning learning as a one-way process that often strips students of agency and voice. On the banking model, the responsibility of a teacher is to bestow knowledge on students for them to later regurgitate, ideally without students questioning or critiquing what teacher has told them. Freire (1970, pg. 72) asserts: “Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry.” A Freirean perspective illuminates the importance of developing students’ *conscientização* or critical consciousness, providing students consciousness-raising opportunities to develop sociopolitical awareness about injustice and engage in transformative change and liberation in their communities. While Freirean education has yet to find wide acceptance in schooling, when AI brings a banking ideology to education, grave concerns arise about how much — or how little — students are activating their minds to learn. In a school system that rewards banking and discourages questioning, students fail to recognize they have the capability to transform the world. AI reliance can help power the type of educational system in which efficiency and accuracy are valued more than experience-based learning. When teachers accept regular use of AI in the classroom, we risk a massive resurgence of the banking model and a deterioration of *conscientização*. The existence, prevalence, and normalization of AI in day-to-day life risks reverting the field of education back to a banking model. Rather than encouraging students to go through the brain-building work of drafting research questions or outlines for papers, LLMs relieve students of putting forth research effort. McClain et. al. (2025) found 37% of teens 13-17 routinely asked AI to summarize articles for

them, potentially depriving them of developing skill in strategic and metacognitive thinking learned through interpreting and critiquing research studies. Cognitive challenges students face in schooling help them grow and, moving forward, learn how to face more difficult tasks. Skillfulness at critical thinking, problem solving, meaning making, and reflection decline the more students rely on LLMs to think and write for them.

Educators and administrators need strong ethical footing grounded in understanding of AI technology to bolster their stances on LLMs' place in schooling. For example, given the understanding that LLMs are prone to bias, misinformation, and incomplete answers; educators could teach students how to engage in critical AI literacy, to interrogate AI through a problem-posing approach. Getting students to compare different answers from LLMs based on the way a prompt is phrased, could, in, say, a U.S. History class, be as simple as comparing LLM responses to the prompts, "Tell me why prohibition started." and "Tell me why prohibition ended." Learning how to create an unbiased, thorough question like, "Tell me about the foundations of U.S. prohibition and the pros and cons of it." would give students a more complete understanding of the subject and a stronger sense of what it takes to get a reliable answer from a chatbot. Any prompts brought to an LLM like ChatGPT are subject to the same principle of problem-posing education. Because responses that come from LLMs are intended to satisfy the input of the user regardless of the topic being discussed, it's important for people to understand how bias and misinformation can bleed through. Educators and administrators must grapple with key questions, like the three below, about the ways in which AI *can and will* make an impact in classrooms:

What does it mean to teach in a classroom in a Freirean way in the age of AI?

Given the existence and normalization of AI, how can we work to prevent a society-wide relapse into the "banking model" of education?

How do we ensure students develop critical consciousness, with or without constant assistance from chatbots?

Questions like these are not meant to frighten or shame education professionals who don't yet have a thorough understanding of AI and its rapid rate of change. Rather, bringing these questions up in conversation, meetings, or in the classroom itself is better begun sooner than later. Finding ways to detour students from using AI and instead exercising their own ability to learn may be some of the most impactful work today's educators can do. Create new lessons, assignments, and rubrics aimed at student-directed education; serially scaffolded writing assignments rather than one large paper or project to show a clear development of thought in the record of the writing process. Connecting class topics to students' real lives provides an experiential base from which to critique AI observations on what students study. Having opportunities to bounce ideas off each other or even listen to a topic explained by a peer rather than a teacher can allow a student to find new resources or techniques that are AI-free. Educators themselves know their own students best and have ample opportunity to figure out alternatives to AI, or assignments that will turn students away from abusing AI and entice them to critique AI.

Legal scholar and civil rights activist, Derrick Bell (1989, p. 22) declared in *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*, "It appears that my worst fears have been realized: we have made progress in everything yet nothing has changed." So it is with AI. Uncritical use

of LLMs disrupts traditional canons of education by challenging our thinking about teaching, learning, and knowledge. But, overreliance on LLMs can inhibit students' critical consciousness, reasoning, and two-way dialogic learning. AI promises to change processes of schooling; but threatens return to reliance on banking education. By contrast, Freire's critical pedagogy is anchored in interrogating accepted answers to whose knowledge, whose perspective, and whose lived experiences matter most. Freire argues that education is never politically neutral because education functions as a social institution. Similarly, AI, because woven into society's tapestry, is never neutral either. The question is no longer whether students will use AI. The more refined question is if students will critically think when using LLMs. AI becomes another avenue to perpetuate hegemonic practices that afford dominant culture inclusion while excluding those from historically or systemically disenfranchised communities. Misinformation in the form of bias and prejudice perpetuated through LLM use cannot be ignored. Educators and students should decide together about how they want to use LLMs in the classroom to promote *conscientização*, whether it's evaluating the credibility of LLM information, the intentions behind use of LLMs to complete academic work, or the negative cognitive side effects that can come from uncritical use of AI. As a sociology professor (Christina) and a prospective history teacher (Lola-Dillon), both of us often deeply consider the perspectives people have on the world and the reasons people have behind their beliefs. Most often people take on the political, societal, religious, etc., beliefs of their parents or social networks (i.e., peers, teachers, mentors, etc.). But beliefs based for the most part on unthinking acceptance of local norms have the potential to shift. As people explore different regions, cultures, or perspectives they experience the otherwise and the elsewhere (Garcia & Baca, 2019); and become positioned to critique different traditions to reach their own conclusions about what to believe. LLMs are at their worst when treated as just another source for belief formation based only on some anonymous authority's say-so. Education in the age of AI urges teachers to help students know how to question and to get in the habit of questioning what chatbots tell them.

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Democratic and Authoritarian Technologies: A Framework for Evaluating Artificial Intelligence in Education

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Abstract: I challenge prevailing enthusiasm for “artificial intelligence” (AI) in education by examining AI’s authoritarian entailments. The main aim is development of a framework for evaluating AI in education, focusing on three interconnected domains: ideology, cognitive and emotional socialization, and political power. Technologies must be understood as inseparable from the social dynamics and institutional forms from which they emerge. Educators are being compelled to use a technical system (“AI”) that erodes capacities required to govern it. This poses significant challenges for prospects of democratic education. “AI” in education will erase wisdom found in professional judgment, encourage cognitive and emotional dependency, and diminish capacity for independent thought and political action by concentrating decision making power over education in the hands of those who control the technology. “AI” must be judged not by efficiency or innovation alone, but by whether it advances human flourishing and democratic self-governance. I present a rubric for evaluating AI in education, focused on autonomy, dignity, intellectual development, cultural diversity, and the organization of power.

What I wish to do is to persuade those who are concerned with maintaining democratic institutions to see that their constructive efforts must include technology itself. There, too, we must return to the human center. We must challenge this authoritarian system that has given to an underdimensioned ideology and technology the authority that belongs to the human personality.

– Lewis Mumford (1964, 7)

It would be hard to overstate the zeal with which technologies branded artificial intelligence (AI) are being promoted. While “AI” boosterism remains the dominant narrative, a growing number of researchers and educators have raised concerns about “AI” in education and the rise of authoritarianism (Guest et al. 2025; McQuillan, Jarke, and Pargman 2024; Heffernan 2025; Garrison 2025; Luciano 2024).¹ I synthesize and build upon the insights of technology studies,

¹ There is a great deal of confusion regarding what constitutes artificial intelligence, hence the scare quotes. A separate treatment of both the concepts of *artificial* and *intelligence* is warranted, as is an analysis of the specific technical apparatuses that may rightly be considered artificially intelligent. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues, although it should be noted that some of my earlier work attempted to deal with them, albeit incompletely and insufficiently (Garrison (2025, 2022, 2009). Promising efforts may be found in Larson (2023). Possibly more in the spirit of my argument, I’ll quote from an interview of Microsoft researcher and architect of virtual reality, Jaron Lanier (Lanier 2026), who, when asked, what if “AI becomes recursively self-improving,” said:

... the moment you think that way, you’re lost. You’ve already given in, and your mind is owned by the idiots [...] If you think of AI as a form of collaboration, it’s absolutely reasonable to think that, yes, we ought to be able to use this not just for a single step change, but rather for an ever-improving cycle, and that’s great. But it’s our collaboration. It’s us. AI does nothing. AI is a pile of shit without us. It is nothing. There’s only people. Interviewer: So, is a better question to ask what can we do with AI? Is that a better question? Jaron: No, because AI is not a noun. It’s not a thing. The only question is what can we do together with better tools for collaboration? That’s a question. [...] the term AI as it’s used doesn’t refer to a specific thing [technical apparatus], but rather an ideology, and so therefore all kinds of very different [computer] programs can be lumped together because they can be understood within that ideology, even if they don’t have much to do with one another. So, it’s a sort of anti-scientific term.”

Larson’s view is akin to Pasquinelli’s (2023), who argues that AI is not modeling biological intelligence but extracting the intelligence of labor and social relations.

recent critical AI literature, and calls to action to develop a framework for evaluating any of the data-intensive, algorithmic educational tools commonly placed under the “AI” banner. The AI evaluative framework I propose is one designed to foster discussion. While I obviously have a critical view, we need to encourage educators to go through the process of evaluating “AI,” individually and collectively. To promote educator evaluation of AI I have tried to frame things (mostly) as a series of questions, with explanations as to why those questions (and not others) are valuable. The focus is on implications of contemporary AI for democratic arrangements, with the starting point being that democratic arrangements are preferred to authoritarian ones. The ability of educators to contend with the present AI situation depends in part on their/our collective ability to evaluate what is going on with all things branded “AI.” A democracy-focused evaluative framework will help develop the collective knowledge and confidence needed to confront authoritarianism in and out of the classroom. To get educator assessment of AI off on the right foot, I explore how we should think about technology and the relationship between technology and democracy, how these insights might inform an evaluation of technologies deemed artificially intelligent, and finally, how such a framework can be applied to evaluate “AI” in education:

1: How Should We Think about Technology and Democratic Arrangements?

At NYSFEA 2025, we considered authoritarian and democratic social forms in relationship to education. The most important place to begin is to argue that technology *is part of* institutions — that is, technology is a material and structural expression of human culture, an inseparable part of what we call society. If we are going to think about democratic forms, building democratic ways of living, and maintaining democratic institutions, technology must be included in our thinking and action. Technology is part and parcel of the life of institutions and social relations more generally, not a separate and independent force. While perhaps a welcome starting point for many, it is not one generally accepted or easily maintained, even for those who are sympathetic to AI. In writing this and other missives about technology, I confess to struggling to produce narrative that does not, despite my efforts, reinforce misconceptions regarding technology, including “AI”. It is thus worthwhile to “begin again,” articulating the problems inherent to evaluations of technology and possible solutions to those problems. An important starting point for this work is to understand that debates about technology and democratic institutions are in fact quite old. I opened this paper with a quote from Lewis Mumford, in an essay arguing that technologies have democratic or authoritarian characteristics. The article appeared in 1964. Anyone who is familiar with the history of critical theory in the United States knows there was an argument following World War II about mass communication and associated technologies, the authoritarian personality (from Adorno), etc. Critiques of “instrumental reason” are in important ways critiques of technological rationalities; for Marx, technology discloses features of social relations and how we understand those relations. Of course, there are important writings on technology before Mumford, before Marx, before Aristotle and *technē*. Non-European thinking on technology, if not by name, is substantial (e.g., Wang, Qin, and Xu 2019)). It is thus important to recognize this is not a new problem. Thus, while the recent AI-boom most certainly presents new challenges in terms of evaluating technology, the more general problems of how we conceive of and speak about technology remain the same. The way we think about technology must be addressed if educators are to effectively evaluate and contend with “AI.” One contention I offer here is that many of the weaknesses or limitations of present “AI” discourse emerge from common myths about technology.

1a: *What myths about technology render evaluation difficult?* Hype is common in technology discourse and generally serves to foster an uncritical stance. *Hype* is defined as unsubstantiated claims regarding the capacities (e.g., AI is conscious) and efficacy (e.g., AI can teach) of a technology (Barrow 2024). Hyperbolic claims are typically designed by boosters to hasten adoption of technologies so as to expand boosters' profits, power and influence (Bender and Hanna 2025, 11–20). Anyone who has worked in education for more than a decade has been exposed to the promised but never realized educational benefits of various technologies. Knowledge of the harms of highly touted technology have been suppressed (e.g., Horvath 2025). Related is the association of various technologies with utopian or dystopian scenarios (with “AI”, both scenarios are often promoted by the same people and organizations), what Bender and colleagues (2025, 213–215) have termed *enchanted determinism*.²

Behind hype and mysticism stand two, mutually reinforcing, but seemingly contradictory, ideological myths: *technological somnambulism* and *technological determinism* (Frischmann and Selinger 2018, 45–59; Lawson 2018, 62–98; Pfaffenberger 1988). Technological somnambulism is the view that a given technology is morally, ethically, and politically neutral. Somnambulism encourages us, as the name suggests, to sleepwalk through technological matters, insisting that the nature of a technology is socially irrelevant.³ A sleepwalking view is evident in the all-too common (idealist) refrain, “It all depends on how you use it.” “Guns don’t kill; people do.” While this is in one sense true, somnambulist sloganeering about firearms masks the more compelling truth that guns, unlike butter, are designed to kill. Yes, one could drown their enemy in butter, but those with the guns will win the war. And yes, weapons can be used for purposes deemed “good” or “evil,” but consider that weapons of mass destruction are differentiated in international law from other weapons on account of their being designed to target civilian infrastructure and populations as opposed to effectively targeting only military combatants. Technological determinism is the opposite myth. While sleepwalking encourages us to ignore the nature of a technology or deny that it “leans” a certain way, determinism insists we yield to technology as an autonomous agent, a god, who alone dictates our future (Heffernan 2025; Becker 2025). The myth of technological determinism presents human beings as passive, and historically irrelevant — the only option is adaptation, not change of course. While the claim to technological neutrality gives up a certain agency to human beings (the character of a technology depends on its use), technological determinism boldly denies it, demanding acquiescence to “technological change.” Technological determinism precedes neoliberalism’s desperate incantation, “*There is no Alternative.*”

Importantly, these myths are unified and mutually reinforced by way of the *fetishizing mechanism* — that is, *rendering invisible the social relations from which a technology emerges and by which a technology is sustained*. In the somnambulist view, the social network required to construct the technology is hidden from the user; in the determinist view, the technology itself is seen as an “independent variable” outside the social network from which it in fact emerged (Pfaffenberger 1988, 20–53; Garrison 2022). The confluence of somnambulist and deterministic myths about technology is actively promoted in efforts to push faculty and students to rapidly adopt “AI” in education (Guest et al. 2025; Guersenzvaig and Monett 2026). Unchallenged, technological myths block us from a careful, all-sided evaluation of “AI” for

² Compare Garrison 2025. For a positive experimental view of utopia, see Means 2026.

³ This view is flawed in a similar manner to how environmental determinism is flawed, as evidenced in, e.g., radical behaviorism, see Garrison (2018).

educational and research purposes. Simply put, if the dominant approach to understanding technology directs us away from considering the nature of a technology (sleepwalking) while simultaneously insisting the technology is inevitable, that we have no choice but to adopt it (determinism), *we are being blocked from evaluating the technology*. We are not to examine if, how, when and under what conditions the technology contributes to our efforts as educators and researchers.⁴ Blocking evaluation is anti-science, anti-intellectual, and anti-democratic. The atmosphere being promoted is that “AI” presents some type of emergency, which means “we” cannot “waste” time considering what is at stake. It should be noted that an urgency-oriented approach to AI may also contribute to missed research opportunities for the revision and refined use of a new technology, such as machine learning.

1b: *How **should** we understand technology?* As Otto Mayr intones, technology is an “indispensable part of all human culture and is not, as one often hears, an alien, inhuman force unleashed upon mankind by some external agent” (1986, xv). Technology is, as Pfaffenberger (1988) argues, a “total social phenomenon” — simultaneously material, social, and symbolic; technology is *humanized nature*. As Frischmann and Selinger point out, we both make and are made by our technologies (2018). Understood as a social phenomenon, technology is an expression of *and* means for reproducing socio-cultural order. Machines never emerge or act without humans “in the loop” (Guest 2025). Technology is *more than just a tool*: it is a form of *institutionalization*, “interlocking systems of extraction, production, distribution and consumption,” such that these “systems gain their own momentum and dynamic” (Guest 2025, 6), which is not to argue technological systems are beyond the control of human beings. We might say that specific technical artifacts are instantiations of a technology. Technology is as “neutral” as any culture is neutral and it is as “determined” as much as any culture is determined. Once neutrality and determinism are questioned, we are able, following Doctorow (2026), to ask the important questions: *Who* the technology does something for, and *what* it does to the person using the technology. Put differently, evaluation must consider the degree to which a technology serves the people using it (empowerment or productivity) and the degree to which technology use serves those who own and control the technology. For instance, when workers determine the nature and character of automation, they aim to make the product better for the worker *and* consumer, while capital driven automation focuses on profit and tends to increase intensity of work at the expense of worker well-being *and* product quality. It is important to keep in mind how hype, magical thinking, and the myths of neutrality and determinism tend to mask the social relations and attending ideologies instantiated through a technology.

1b1: *Technological adoption is an ideological process*: Historical analysis suggests that socio-cultural formations are decisive in determining what technologies are widely adopted. In this sense, technological adoption is intensely ideological (Lanier and Glen 2020). After his extensive examination of automation in early modern Europe — with clocks reflecting monarchical power and feedback systems reflecting liberal political economy — Mayr (1986, 175) puts forward the following thesis: “[If] a technological innovation displays in structure and function an unmistakable analogy to the structure that a society prefers to give its various practical and theoretical systems, if it reflects the various mentalities and attitudes that shape public life, in short, if it matches and reinforces the prevailing conception of order, it will be received more warmly, regardless of its technological merits, than other inventions.” We might consider Mayr’s

⁴ Recently, senior administrators at my institution indicated that faculty were now *required* to “embrace” “AI” — we were *not* asked to discuss, test, or evaluate.

hypothesis the *social-anthropomorphic thesis* of technological adoption. If a society “sees itself” in the technology, it will more plausibly be developed and widely adopted. We might also postulate that in complex social systems with extreme inequality of political power and economic wealth, where public life has been undermined, the preferred technological adoption of elites may proceed without broad public consensus, especially during unstable periods in which no single conception of order prevails. Forms of technology not favored by elites may also be designated dangerous.⁵ A corollary of the social-anthropomorphic thesis applied to “AI” is that technology companies design chatbots, for example, to encourage users to anthropomorphize the tool *as a means to facilitate more widescale adoption than would occur on the merits of these apparatuses alone* (Monteith et al. 2026; Janson 2023; Guest et al. 2025; Barrow 2024). While it may be natural and of some evolutionary benefit for humans to anthropomorphize, technology companies use this built-in human tendency to *their* advantage (Gregg 2025).

1b2: *Technologies are socializing agents that extend or degrade human capacities*: While the prevailing ideology and social system may have a strong influence over whether a technology is widely adopted, it is also the case that social context of development influences the nature of a technology, its ontology (as building chatbots to encourage anthropomorphism reveals). Technical design, argues Lawson (2008, 54), is influenced by “the values, desires, intentions, etc., of those designers and all the groups that have had some say in the nature of the design.” These values and intentions become “concretized in the very structure of the technical object,” and thus can be “understood to be exerting a continuing influence over technical activity” by way of both “enablements and constraints” of human behavior and “codes of operation built into and mediating their use.”⁶ Finally, technical objects do not simply constrain or enable particular human behavior, or promote certain values, norms, or goals, they also may foster or disable “subjectification,” that is, the degree to which one is the subject of one’s own life, “rather than the object of what others — whether individuals, groups, or more abstract forces such as capitalist social media — may want them to be and do” (Biesta 2024, 4).

1b3: *Is it possible to have democratic or authoritarian technologies?* Challenging the myths of technological neutrality and technological determinism and establishing that technologies take on social characteristics of developers while socializing and enabling or disabling users, were all necessary to establish that technologies have political entailments. Thus, the idea is to think about how some technologies are constitutive of democratic arrangements, while other technologies are constitutive of authoritarian arrangements. One way to tackle this problem, well-suited to the field of education, is to consider how Mumford (1964) highlights *personality*, that is, the relation between technology and the development of persons, when expressing concerns about loss of the “human center” as a possible social effect of technological adoption. Again, we should ask: for whom does the technology do what, and what does this do to the person? What is valorized, and how does this relate to political arrangements? When we think about personality, especially in the United States, we think of it in purely psychological terms—shy individuals, the big five personality traits, or narcissism, etc. But we can also think of personality in institutional and political terms. Drawing on ‘personality’s’ archaic definition, we can think of *person-ality* as the quality of being a unique human *person*, as distinct from a *thing*.

⁵ This thesis is inspired in part by the anti-AI sentiment expressed by students during this years’ series of graduation speeches (Watters 2026).

⁶ This tendency is also evident with *standards*, where, for example, standardized tests reflect the values, interest and outlook of those who designed them, and pushed for their adoption (Garrison 2009).

We can also think of democratic education as developing unique powers and characteristics of persons, emerging from and in service of a common good.

The right to have a personality (to speak in one's own name) is a relatively modern idea (in the West at least): "...personality, once the exclusive attribute of kings, belongs on democratic theory to every [person]. Life itself in its fullness and wholeness cannot be *delegated*" (Mumford 1964, 2, emphasis added). My reading of Mumford suggests that a defining feature of democracy is the flourishing of the human person, the conditions of which are *final authority belonging to the whole body politic*. We might call this *democratic personality*. The idea is to think about technologies and their implications for personality, both individual and social (e.g., as in a *national* personality characteristic). Put differently, certain personalities are cultivated by specific institutional forms and cultural practices, which include specific technologies. Recent scientific and popular interest in anxiety, addiction, depression, narcissism, and other "personality disorders" have been linked to technological apparatuses, including "AI", but the *political* ramifications of such dysfunctional digital socialization are typically not considered. *Institutions and thus technologies are socializing agents*; a main function of education as an institution is socialization (Biesta 2024). As such, the technologies embedded in educational systems matter for the democratic, or common, personality. Thus, in evaluating "AI" in education, consideration should be given to this flourishing of the human person, which, the thesis holds, rests in part on the capacity to self-govern.

Of course, much has been said about education and democracy, but this robust *corpus* seems to have been erased by "AI" advocates, who (when not predicting our immanent doom) only promise improved efficiency and convenience. Put differently, technologies can be evaluated as democratic or authoritarian based on whether they support the flourishing of the human person, understood as part of democratic living and the common good. For whom (individually and collectively) does the technology facilitate decision making power, both as a capacity (an ability to *think things through*, or what is commonly called "critical thinking") and as a role (as a decision "maker")? The development or degradation of cognitive and emotional capacities *required for the democratic personality* are key for evaluating the character of an educational technology. A second way in which technology can be said to foster democratic or authoritarian arrangements is with respect to the degree of institutional centralization or decentralization associated with adoption of the technology. For example, nuclear power tends to give rise to centralized forms of control, as compared to, say, solar or geothermal power. The degree of centralization is often associated with the degree to which people have a meaningful say over the direction and character of something. Certainly, the vast computing power required for large language models associated with so-called generative AI stems from highly concentrated economic and political power and technical infrastructures such as data centers (Wheeler 2025).

2: Evaluating Technologies Deemed Artificially Intelligent

Evaluation of "AI" should include three domains, understood as distinct yet dynamically related: an ideological domain (What are attending aims, values, outlook, etc., of "AI?"), a cognitive/socialization domain (How does use of AI shape human capacities and personality?), and a political domain (What political formations are constituted, how is power shifted?).

2a: *Artificial intelligence as an ideology*: Because the phrase 'artificial intelligence' fails to point to a specific technical object or system, it can be, first and foremost, understood as ideology (Nayak and Walton 2026; Guest et al. 2025; Lanier and Glen 2020; Cugurullo 2025; Anderson

2024; Wheeler 2025). AI, as currently conceptualized, emerges with the anti-democratic political theory of Hobbes and the anthropomorphic construct, “person of state” (Garrison 2022); Descartes has been described as a “cybernetic” theorist (Bates 2025); but for our purposes, it is enough to establish that “AI” is emerging out of a highly unequal social system, at the behest of misanthropic corporate elites/billionaires who admittedly despise democracy, who have worked to deskilling and “dumb down” the populace, who seek to increase exploitation, policing, and imperialist war by way of automation/extensive surveillance (Crawford 2021; Pasquinelli 2023; Becker 2025; Horvath 2025; Eubanks 2018; Bender and Hanna 2025; Heffernan 2025; Dyer-Witthof, Kjosen, and Steinhoff 2019). Means (2026, 1), in *Teaching Against the Machine*, describes the situation well: “Figures like Silicon Valley edgelords, Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, and Elon Musk embrace this image of a calculated, programmable world. They hope to see the present order dissolve into neo-monarchical corporate fiefdoms and libertarian city-states powered by an advanced AI that banishes democracy, and where the only right afforded to citizens would be the right to choose which viceroy they will serve.” Even Pope Leo’s recent encyclical letter, “*Magnifica Humanitas*,” reads like a review of recent critical “AI” scholarship.⁷ None of this is to argue it is impossible to design something that might generally be considered artificially intelligent but not anti-democratic or otherwise socially regressive or fascist (van Rooij et al. 2024). Part of the motivation here is, without a doubt, to change course.

2b: *Artificial intelligence as cognitive and emotional outsourcing*: Guest (2025, 3-5) offers a framework for evaluating sociotechnical relationships. To facilitate her analysis, she redefines AI as “any techno-social relationship that outsources to machines or algorithms some part, however small, of human cognitive labor.” Any sociotechnical relationship, Guest argues, “could be AI if it links an artefact to human cognition such that the artefact can be seen as performing some aspect of a cognitive capacity. (Following Siegel (2020), I add emotional labor.) Guest’s redefinition not only emphasizes a much broader historical vantage point from which to study “AI,” it emphasizes technology as a relationship, encouraging the question “What does the [tool] do as a function of interacting with humans.”⁸ Once it can be determined that some degree of cognitive or emotional labor has been offloaded to a tool, Guest posits three, non-mutually exclusive, possible outcomes: displacement (which is harmful), enhancement (which is beneficial), or replacement (which is neutral). As examples, Guest evaluates various technical objects such as the abacus, the calculator, the alarm clock, the camera, and of course, the computer. Her evaluation framework considers, in particular, the effect on cognition (reskilling, deskilling, or where cognition is unaffected); labor obfuscation (the degree to which the role of human beings is hidden); human equivalence (whether the outcome is “worse or the same,” “different or better,” or “quantity, not quality”); human in the loop (none, worker, user); human input; and desired output. Table 1 (next page) summarizes Guest’s assessment framework for AI. As data-intensive automated digital technologies have been both recommended to promote mental health and linked to degraded well-being, the effect of use of a tool on emotional regulation has been, as noted, added to Guest’s framework. Given the significance of emotions for both teaching and learning, their inclusion in any framework evaluating “AI” in education seems prudent (Vadeboncoeur and Collie 2013; Siegel 2020; also see Garrison 2019).

It is useful to contrast Guest’s evaluation of the calculator (often favorably referenced in promotions of AI in education) and the camera, with her evaluation of large language model

⁷ See: <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html>.

⁸ Lawson (2018) discusses extension theories of technology and de-skilling of humans.

(LLM) use. Assuming a math literate adult, Guest notes while the calculator replaces some human cognition, the effect is neutral, with cognitive capacity unaffected. While Guest

Criteria	Characterize relationship		
Form	replace	enhance	displace
Valence	neutral	beneficial	harmful
Effect on cognition	unaffected	reskilling	deskilling
Effect on emotion	unaffected	integration	dysregulation
Labor obfuscation	minimal	possible	maximal
Human equivalence	worse or same	different or better	quantity, not quality
Human-in-the-loop	rare	possible	common
Human input	transparent	transparent	opaque
Desired output	specified	formal	unspecified

Table 1: How does the artifact relate to cognitive and emotional labor?

acknowledges some techniques such as long division may atrophy, general mathematical reasoning does not decline with calculator use. Likewise, use of a camera does not degrade vision, and is considered beneficial. When comparing LLMs to essay writing, negative evaluations are given for all criteria. Table 2 presents Guest's evaluation of the calculator, camera and LLM.

Criteria	Calculator vs Mental Arithmetic	Camera vs Human Vision	LLM vs Essay Writing
Form	replacement	enhance	displace
Valence	neutral	beneficial	harmful
Effect on cognition	unaffected	unaffected	deskilling
Effect on emotion	unaffected	integrated	dysregulation
Labor obfuscation	moderate	moderate	maximal
Human equivalence	better	different or better	worse
Human-in-the-loop	none	user	data, programmers, sweatshop workers
Human input	function, numbers	framing, memory or film, energy source	so-called prompt
Desired output	result of calculation	persistent image or video	essay matching prompt

Table 2: Evaluation of Three AI Tools⁹

Unlike the calculator or camera (what Guest calls enhancement AI), use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT to produce text for an essay facilitates the degradation and devaluation of

⁹ Adopted from Guest (2025). The added component of emotional integration and dysregulation draws on the work of Siegel (2020). My evaluation of the emotional effect of the calculator and camera is admittedly conjecture; the dysregulating effect of chatbot use is generally substantiated (Guest 2025; Garrison 2024).

human cognitive ability. Cognitive/emotional atrophy is not limited to skill; as in the case of legal and medical professionals use of AI tools, reasoning ability is also degraded. Callaway (2026) summarizes a wide range of research regarding the effects of cognitive offloading. Cognitive atrophy is associated with the use of GPS while learning and memory are degraded by the “Google effect,” that is, where the assumption that retrieved information remains easily accessible causes one to learn and remember less. There is growing evidence that secondary students learn less and reason less well when using ChatGPT-like tools in school. Use of generative AI tools degrades the reasoning and diagnostic capacity of legal and medical professionals; “automation bias” reduces efficacy of risk-management professionals.¹⁰ Given this degradation, admonitions to fact-check text from a chatbot ring hollow, as use of generative AI tends to erode the very capacities required to evaluate output of the technology (and those promoting it). It is valuable to quote Calloway (2026, 18-19) at length:

When the printing press reduced reliance on oral memory, it did not simultaneously reduce the reader’s capacity to evaluate the quality of what was printed. When calculators displaced arithmetic, they did not reduce the user’s ability to assess whether a calculation was needed or whether the result was plausible. The cognitive function offloaded was distinct from the cognitive function required to oversee the offloading.

AI collapses this distinction. The reasoning capacity it displaces is the same reasoning capacity required to evaluate its outputs. A professional whose capacity for independent analysis has been degraded through chronic AI dependence is less capable of performing the analysis independently, yes — but she is also less capable of determining whether the AI’s analysis is correct, relevant, complete, or appropriate to the situation at hand.... What distinguishes AI is that it generalizes this problem across the full range of professional cognition and operates in the very medium — language — through which reasoning is conducted. No amount of reference to calculators and printing presses can make that distinction go away.

We can conclude with Guest (2025, 12) that the subject (user of “AI”), now deskilled and displaced, disappears. She asks: “What voice does the human, now reduced to only a user, have if their essays ... are just the copy-pasted output of a device that performs patchwork plagiarism? What human connection do they have when their friends and romantic partners have been replaced with inanimate objects?” It is worth highlighting that positive human connection, for which there is no mechanical substitute, is the foundation upon which a healthy mind develops, (Siegel 2020).

2c: *What kind of political power does “AI” adoption constitute?* Calloway (2026) proposes contemporary AI be understood as a *new hegemonic* force used by elites to manufacture consent and secure dominance. Drawing on Gramsci, Calloway understands hegemony as the process by which cultural and institutional arrangements (especially unequal or undemocratic arrangements) come to appear as natural to those subject to them. Calloway predicts contemporary “AI” systems will erode the current (albeit already in decline) assemblage of liberal-democratic institutions, associated rights and freedoms, and especially the professions generally understood as needed to sustain these arrangements, such as law, medicine and education (Hartzog and

¹⁰ For additional evidence and related commentary, see the following: Goldenberg and Wiens 2026; Ramaswamy et al. 2026; Chirayath, Premamalini, and Joseph 2025; Guest et al. 2025; Shaw and Nave 2026; Orland 2026; Abdulhai et al. 2026; Ewen 2026; DeRewal 2025; Horvath 2025; León-Domínguez 2024; Bastani et al. 2024.

Silbey 2026). In a sense, his argument, and I am borrowing again from Mumford (1964), is that contemporary AI dynamics work against the development of democratic personality (he organizes his analysis around the precept of *cognitive sovereignty*). Unlike past hegemonies, such as slave law in the United States, Calloway argues that AI hegemony is mainly established by way of a *cognitive architecture rather than ideological struggle*. “Convenience and speed,” he writes, “make independent reasoning feel unnecessary, shifting the felt locus of authority from the human to the system” (3). Calloway argues that most people do not experience the decline in their ability to interpedently reason, which, in turn, makes evaluation of this trend especially challenging (Horvath 2025, 107–21).

Recognizing AI’s potential for hegemonic power, the political significance of Guest’s analysis becomes more apparent: The specific forms of cognitive offloading accompanying contemporary tools such as chatbots, image generators, and agentic AI, may not simply deskill. Degrading *independent reasoning* as both an ability and expectation not only militates against self-governance, but also diminishes capacity and imagination for individual and collective resistance to injustice and for development of alternative paths. Independent judgment, whether of the professional or the citizen, is to be “replaced by passive acceptance of algorithmically generated outputs.” Whether the outputs are correct is, in this analysis, beside the point. “Accepting them without independent engagement is itself the mechanism of cognitive capture” (Callaway 2026, 6). And, I would add, a form of socialization constitutive of a non-self-governed subjectivity, or political surrender: disabling individual and collective ability to fight for common interests and human rights. Calloway (2026, 3) outlines what he sees as modes of cognitive capture (scope expansion, language drift, logic mutation), and a “three-class hegemonic operation” where AI tools target in specific ways professionals, governed populations, and legitimizing institutions. The result is “a recursive consent loop in which we are building instruments that erode the faculties required to govern them.” The type of power being instituted, if the analysis of AI as hegemonic is correct, is that of *total unaccountability* (cf. Davies 2025).

3: How Should We Evaluate “AI” in Education?

“AI” in education may be examined in the same way we have critiqued the technology in general by focusing on the ideology of education-specific presentations of AI (How the purpose of education and role of teacher are presented.) the degree and character of cognitive and emotional offloading accompanying educator use of various AI tools (What exactly is being offloaded, does this help teachers and students, and how does it strengthen or weaken the profession?), and finally, the political implications of educational use of AI tools (Is the political or social power or agency of educators or students enhanced or diminished by use of AI tools?).

3a: *The ideology of educational AI*: The ideology of AI is dumbed down when applied to education. Recent books promoting the use of generative AI to “transform” teaching evidence a vapid blandness and lack of imagination that makes one almost yearn for a good dystopian and fascist missive from Palantir (n.d.). The carnival giddiness that often accompanies “AIED” presentations is, frankly, embarrassing: “Look mom! It spins!” (e.g., Gaspar 2025). Closely examined, there is absolutely nothing “transformative” being “recommended” in these often-glib manifestos. Sure, there are plenty of companies hawking educationally tailored AIs that optimize this or that (budgets, HR processes, student engagement, monitoring of vaping in bathrooms) and these *might* be useful; a few faculty are probably trying to do interesting things with LLMs. But

other than saving time, and peddling confused and contradictory ideas regarding personalization, the rallying cries are by comparison to claims about, say, the use of AI in medicine, palpably anemic (e.g., “AI” will eliminate disease and significantly extend human life). From what promoters say, the most educators can hope for is reduced time spent grading and being relieved of the intellectual responsibility to craft syllabi, curriculum, and conduct research. In terms of outputs (but not quality), various generative AI platforms can now craft syllabi, curriculum, and conduct research with relatively minimal human intervention. Advocates seem to suggest that educators use their new AI-generated free-time bounty to repair the relationships severely damaged by the various automated systems that liberated people from having to directly interact with each other. In fact, I always feel professionally satisfied when colleagues brainstorm with ChatGPT instead of seeking to form intellectual community amongst themselves.¹¹ Here, the ideological message is clear: The role of faculty is to step aside. “AI” — not your colleague, not your professional association — is your new “partner.” Obviously, partnering with AI as if it were a fellow educator transfers much control over course design, curriculum and research to the corporate entities who own and control the technology.

Students are told they equally benefit in an AI-oriented vision of education. They are promised more quick entry into the highly liberating and not-at-all precarious job market. No longer will students be blocked from an exciting occupational journey by being held to an academic standard — students already admittedly use generative AI in ways they believe will harm learning, but because the entire system is output-only focused, little will be done to counter the trend (Kapoor 2026). I predict students will be especially grateful for not being challenged to broadly study their world, and how it came to be, or debate, using the collective wisdom of humanity, what kind of world *they* might want to build. What a grand waste of time *that* would be! The fact is that most students really do see how being in the current workforce contributes to their parents’ happiness and fulfillment. Youth will thank us for not hampering them with, say, philosophy, history, or ideology — or learning one of the few remaining languages other than English. If we keep up the constant threats of job loss and promises of “lifelong learning,” offering a few Bible verses along the way (Yu 2026), educators will have prepared youth well to accept *even lower wages, even worse working conditions*, with no benefits. This is, after all, *what proponents of “AI” say the future is*, the future educators are to prepare youth for. Oh, and maybe we will see better test scores, too!

Admit it: It is hard to think of a less exciting formulation of why one might go to school.

The charge to educators, the ideological orientation, thus remains essentially neoliberal, *in full force before ChatGPT*: Quickly produce workers and replace public-serving schools and universities with privatized platforms to foster consumerism, obedience to elites, and wealth transfer (upward, of course).¹² We are all encouraged to celebrate and chase literal “moon shots” by spending billions trying to send human beings to Mars (Leinfelder 2026), but education for democracy and well-being (here on planet Earth) is, it seems, unrealistic. AI’s anemic ideological framing is very significant. No more is there talk of the “American Dream,” or education as the great equalizer; opportunity discourse is very muted now. What we do hear from advocates is that those using “AI” will take your job (“so get on board, or else”). Anemic,

¹¹ Recent research indicates that people are speaking less to each other than they did a decade ago (Jargon 2026).

¹² While it is commonly argued AI’s idea of education is most often reserved for use with working-class and minority youth, I would venture that such enshittification of education has been increasingly extended into once protected suburban and urban educational spaces.

neoliberal ideological framing of AI lends support to Calloway’s claim that the hegemonic function of AI mainly operates via *cognitive architecture* — the software platforms and apps that increasingly mediate cognitive work — *and not ideological content*.¹³ Bloodless AI schooling also highlights the significance of Calloway’s claim that many if not most “AI” users do not directly or immediately experience cognitive atrophy. Even the ideological content used to sell AI to educators has been *enshitified*. Musk gets to go to Mars. Teachers get dashboards indicating little Bobby is not focused, because he’s not sufficiently clicking (or whatever). Of course, I acknowledge the decaying working conditions, especially of K12 educators, that make it understandable why some teachers might try any offering to lighten their load. But it is also worth emphasizing, when it comes to education, “AI” is, at least in its present forms, at best crumbs from the corporate table, for which, I should add, public schools must pay debilitating social surcharges. Unless workers introduce and control automation, it leads to intensification of work and degradation of the work product.

The most “developed” vision of education that comes with “AI”, the model or worldview for how to go about teaching and organizing schools, is “personalized learning” and closely associated ideas such as competency-based education, along with admonitions regarding variations of the four-letter acronym to which everyone wants to add their discipline’s letter (“STEM”), and a “laser” focus on all manner of advanced skill, such as typing a few carefully crafted sentences into a text window. “AI” has added *nothing* new here. The kind of “personalized learning” advocated for is not a new idea, but rather rooted in behaviorist psychology from a century ago; its application has not and does not consistently “work” by the standards of most proponents (i.e., test scores) and it is *inherently* anti-democratic (Roberts-Mahoney and Garrison 2015; Watters 2021; Tlili et al. 2024). It is, however, hard to overstate the ideological significance of “AI” conceptions of *learning*: For almost all forms of AI that might be used by educators, learning is imagined as behaviorists have imagined learning for more than a century — as an ensemble of stimulus-response mechanisms (e.g., operant-conditioning). “Reinforcement learning,” relied on in training LLMs, robots, self-driving cars; is said to occur when one or more parameter of a model changes (“learning”) as a consequence of prior model action. We might say that many AI tools are “learning machines” and thus bring with their use a conception of learning rooted in behaviorist ideology. Consider how often the word “feedback” is used to frame how a teacher might respond to what a student has produced. “Feedback,” and “closing the loop,” are in fact both concepts from cybernetics, the less often heralded but significant foundation of “AI” and closely aligned with psychological behaviorism (Garrison, 2018, 2025). The behaviorist world view is opposed to considerations of history, consciousness, purpose, etc., and in that sense, behaviorist conceptions of learning are against education (Garrison 2018). B. F. Skinner believed that we need to move beyond dignity, that freedom is an illusion; to solve social problems we need a “technology of behavior” (Skinner 1971). As Horvath suggests (2026), the most salient danger of the “AI” worldview is an apparent aim to train people to think like machines. For machine ontology, meaning, truth, understanding, knowledge, empathy, purpose, conscious experience, desire, love, imagined futures are all irrelevant to or impossible for a machine (Hicks, Humphries, and Slater 2024). Thinking like a machine would, in fact, entail *not thinking*. The only thing that matters for a machine is *behavior*; the knower vanishes, only action remains (Seals and Garrison 2024). It might bring the

¹³ In fact, this is what Palantir calls for, that is, “hard power, and hard power in this century will be built on software” (“Palantir (@PalantirTech) on X” n.d.).

point home to note that the words “behavior” and even “stress” were rarely used outside natural science or engineering contexts before the 1920s, e.g., the behavior of molecules; stress capacity of steel (Davies 2015).

3b: *Cognitive and emotional offloading, socialization and agency*: Much of the problem, from the point of view of learning, can be attributed to “educational technology,” with “AI” being the most recent offering. It is thus important to understand that there is robust scientific evidence that digital tools *impair* rather than enhance learning (Horvath 2025). When Guest’s (2025) framework is applied to “AI” in education, the conclusion is that “AI” in education is, as currently deployed, harmful. Table 3 summarizes Guest’s case that offloading is evaluated as harmful to human cognitive well-being, displacing and deskilling educator expertise, while contributing to depersonalization.

Criteria	AI Graded Essay vs Teacher	AI Developed Course vs Teacher	AI Communication vs Teacher
Form	displacement	displacement	displacement
Valence	harmful	harmful	harmful
Effect on cognition	deskilling	deskilling	deskilling
Effect on emotion	depersonalization	depersonalization	depersonalization
Labor obfuscation	maximal	maximal	maximal
Human Equivalence	worse	worse	worse
Human-in-the-loop	data, programmers, sweatshop workers	data, programmers, sweatshop workers	data, programmers, sweatshop workers
Human input	so-called prompt	so-called prompt	so-called prompt
Desired output	rubric matching/timely response	standard course	timely response; friendly and informative

Table 3: Evaluation of Recommended Educational Uses of “AI” Tools¹⁴

Educators have long faced efforts to deskill their profession, and the recent push for AI can be viewed as an extension of this long-standing trend. Contemporary deskilling efforts have taken the form of mandated scripted curriculum, and date back to the mid-1800s development of standardized tests designed to limit educator professional judgment and autonomy (Garrison 2009). Deskilling efforts are themselves partly responsible for documented shortcomings of educators and education preparation programs. Suffice it to say that offloading assessment,

¹⁴ Adopted from Guest (2025); the claim that generative AI is associated with depersonalization is supported by Henriksen et al. (2025). Note, here the target is the professional educator, not student. It should also be noted that while the quality of assessment of essays, course development, and communication is believed to be lower with the use of generative AI (assuming an experienced educator), AI generated exams appear to be equal or better than educator developed forced response exams, if using standard psychometric criteria (Isley et al. 2025). For recent research on the limited quality of automated essay grading, see Talmi et al. (2026).

course design, and communication responsibilities to machines will further hamper the development of educators' professional expertise including expertise in forming relationships with students and their families. Especially in the classroom, student-family-teacher relationships are key, not as auxiliary niceties, but rather as foundations for accurately and quickly judging student development. The educational value of a technology whose use degrades a teacher's ability to assess student work, design courses, and communicate with students and families should be seriously questioned. While there is little doubt the average workload and class size of many educators is overwhelming, selling automated technologies as a solution forecloses discussion of other methods of improving both the quality of education and supporting educator well-being (namely, fair workloads with proper supports and compensation). Those selling educator deskilling technologies are also often the architects or associates of social planners seeking to limit public school funding for academic personnel.

3c: Epistemicide and professional knowledge: A main concern up to this point has been that of cognitive offloading and, drawing on Calloway, AI hegemony via the architecture of “cognitive capture.” Cognitive capture refers to the expanding scope of AI systems that replace human cognitive labor, institutionalizing philosophical emptiness, mythical and ideological flatness, and epistemological indifference. But Calloway suggests there is “a deeper phenomenon” that should concern us: “the destruction of the knowledge traditions themselves.” Drawing on postcolonial scholarship regarding the displacement of diverse ways of knowing, Calloway argues that when “AI capture” spans an entire domain of practice, such as education, *epistemicide* results. To understand the significance of the death of a way of knowing, consider when a language “dies” — the thinking enabled by that language also dies. Displaced traditions do not fade away with the new monoculture, “they become unthinkable.” Calloway argues that AI systems perform a structurally analogous operation in the professional domain by replacing “diverse professional reasoning traditions — the way a seasoned trial lawyer reads a courtroom, the way an experienced diagnostician synthesizes contradictory symptoms, the way a compliance officer detects a transaction that is technically clean but substantively wrong — with a single algorithmic monoculture.” Importantly, “professional reasoning traditions” are often not written down. “They live in practitioners.” Calloway emphasizes that traditions of reasoning, “transfer through mentorship, apprenticeship, and practice. They are exactly the kind of embodied, context-dependent, practice-built knowledge that cognitive offloading degrades and that no training dataset can replicate” (Calloway, 2026, 12). Being decontextualized and text-based, LLMs cannot model via prediction on “practical reason” (Sayer 2011).

The question is: How will “AI” adoption in education effect knowledge traditions of professional educators, their “embodied, context-dependent, practice-built knowledge”? As is the case with the professions mentioned by Calloway, educators and university researchers have professional reasoning traditions that are neither formalized nor solely discursive. Calloway (2026, 12) emphasizes that a community of professionals that loses their professional reasoning traditions cannot reconstruct them “from the archive because the archive never contained it. The knowledge lived in practice, and when the practice dies, the knowledge dies with it.” Thus, a key question to ask is: What specific forms of practical reason are possibly displaced by AIED? AI educational initiatives such as Alpha School offer a glimpse into the educational future AI boosters imagine, and how the role of teachers and meaning of school is radically altered. In the Alpha School model, there are in fact no teachers, there are only “guides.” Guides are given the role of, essentially, an emotional support animal. Thus, AI advocates envision a central role for automated technologies in education, or rather, “learning.” In fact, Biesta’s insistence that

education be distinguished from learning, and that *learnification* be interrogated, gains central importance in the context of evaluating “AI” in education. “Put briefly,” Biesta (2024, 3) explains, *learnification* “is the tendency to assume or claim that education is ‘all about learning,’ and that the best way to grasp what education is and what it is about is by using the language of (learners and their) learning, rather than to understand education in terms of, say, teaching or curriculum....”

Biesta offers evidence of the trend towards *learnification* by pointing to the increasing influence of the learning sciences in how educators are to think about their work (such as cognitive psychology and neuroscience, which are implicated in AI development and deployment). Contrasting education and teaching with learning reveals what might be a key component of AI boosters’ imagination: the elimination of education (and thus teaching), and a move toward what might be called, *total learnification* (which is essentially radical behaviorism via AI-branded edtech). Put differently, the concern might be not so much that robots will replace teachers, but that schools (as educational institutions) will be eliminated altogether (i.e., “education” embodies different “professional reasoning traditions” and so education becomes “unthinkable”). Core functions once performed by teachers (grading, course design, communication) are also practices embodying professional reasoning. Once the functions are transferred to the machines (and those who own the machines) practical knowledge shared by educators dies. Demise of practical reasoning in the field of education will require “educators” be socialized to accept and perform their new role as “emotional guides” for students and “partners” with machines while value in the form of data is extracted from students (Saltman 2026). As the role of educators shrinks under AI hegemony, more power is shifted to those controlling the machines and the data that powers them.

From Democratic to Authoritarian: A Technology Rubric

To evaluate “AI” in education, specific conceptual challenges need to be overcome, including mythical and apolitical presentations of technology *as such*. For evaluation of any educational technology (such as “AI”), ideological considerations are thus very important. Evaluation also includes adopting a broad definition of “AI” as technology transferring any cognitive labor to machines as part of systemic evaluation of what such transfer entails (e.g., enhanced vision as with the camera, or skill atrophy and loss of professional judgment with widespread use of chatbots to construct courses and grade essays). Thus, consideration must be given to how technologies often bring with them specific ways of thinking about and doing teaching and learning. What is not central to the evaluation proposed here is also worth noting: nowhere is it suggested that benchmarks comparing humans to an AI model’s performance on, say, law exams, are all that significant or helpful (Guess 2025). While some of the claims made here are empirical and thus could be tested (e.g., the degree of skill atrophy among specific types of students or teachers using a chatbot, or the degree to which a teacher’s workload remains reduced once widescale adoption has occurred) my critique of AI aims for a more holistic understanding. That is, even if in a particular instance no atrophy is observed during a specific period, that alone would not be sufficient to evaluate “AI” as harmless in education. Rather, we are interested in trends and patterns. In that sociologically oriented spirit, it may be useful to conclude with a list of seven key questions to ask. An “authoritarian technology rubric,” if you will.

Does the technology reduce the autonomy and dignity of persons?

Does the technology *tend to* increase the amount and intensity of work for those who do not control the technology?

Does transfer of cognitive or emotional labor negatively affect ability or outcome?

More generally, does the technology injure, devalue, deskill, cheapen, or inhibit the general intellect of humanity?

Does the technology homogenize and debase cultural forms and productions?

Does the technology mediate relations among persons for the narrow social, political, and economic benefit of those controlling the technology?

Does use of the technology tend to contribute to anxious, dependent, dogmatic, manipulative and servile personalities?

As affirmative answers to the questions composing the rubric pile up, technologies take on a stronger and stronger authoritarian cast. However, as negative answers accumulate or, better, as answers may be given that indicate the technology achieves the opposite effect, that is, the technology promotes the flourishing of humans who use it, then the technology becomes more and more democratic and of personal and social value to its users. AI fails the rubric miserably. Thus, we must look for alternative technologies that earn strong democratic scores on the rubric, if we wish to enhance human existence.

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The American Scholar's Paradox: Motivation, Manipulation, and the Ethics of Pedagogical Influence

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Abstract: Motivation in education remains an underexamined ethical domain. Commonly treated as a neutral or benevolent pedagogical tool, motivation is rarely scrutinized for forms of influence it entails. Motivation cannot be ethically justified by good intentions or positive outcomes alone; rather, the manner in which motivation is exercised is itself morally significant. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The American Scholar*, a lecture delivered in 1837, offers a case in point. Emerson paradoxically uses *prescriptive* rhetoric, *hierarchical* speech, and *outcome-oriented* promises to awaken intellectual *independence*. Maxine Greene's conception of imaginative freedom and Nel Noddings' ethics of care resolve Emerson's paradox. Together, these frameworks reimagine ethical motivation as a relational, dialogical, democratic practice grounded in shared imagination, mutual recognition, and co-constructed purposes. Motivation becomes ethical when it sustains learners' authorship of their own becoming. Motivation is an ethical responsibility, one that honors autonomy without abandoning care and supports engagement without resorting to manipulation.

Autonomy is a widely invoked ideal in educational studies. It is celebrated as a value to be respected and carefully protected, and teachers are often urged to remain mindful of student autonomy as a defining feature of an ideal classroom. Yet, in practice, autonomy too often appears in an unexpected form: Students very *autonomously* choose not to engage, not to study, not to care! This tension raises a set of urgent questions for educators and theorists alike: How can one motivate students while maintaining their autonomous decisions? Educators may rely on persuasion, encouragement, or appeals to students' best interests, all of which are commonly assumed to be benign or even necessary. However, persuasion, even when well-intentioned, operates by steering another's desires or judgments toward a preferred outcome, and in doing so risks overriding the very autonomy it claims to honor. To persuade students into action may easily slip into coercion. Consideration of motivation as a moral phenomenon leads to a deeper ethical concern: How can one motivate without manipulating? To motivate without manipulating requires first understanding what manipulation is. Philosophers of ethics have long noted that manipulation is distinct from both coercion and rational persuasion. Manipulation operates, as Noggle (1996) argues, by leading another astray without their rational agency, steering emotions, beliefs, or desires toward outcomes the manipulator has already decided are appropriate. The line between encouragement and coercion, moreover, is rarely clear-cut. What begins as guidance can quietly become pressure, especially within asymmetrical relationships like those where teachers hold institutional authority over students. Acting for the student's own good — deciding what will benefit them, what they ought to value, or how they ought to grow — can easily slide into paternalism. Even when outcomes are genuinely beneficial, the process by which they are secured matters ethically. If students are moved into compliance without meaningful participation in deciding why or whether an action is worth pursuing, motivation risks becoming a subtle form of control rather than an invitation to agency.

The use of rewards further complicates this picture. When rewards are offered not as recognition but as leverage, they may cultivate dependence on external prompts, which is what Self-Determination Theory identifies as 'controlled motivation,' a condition shown to diminish intrinsic engagement over time (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While rewards are not inherently unethical,

their strategic deployment as incentives can function manipulatively when they are used to secure behavior in the short term without engaging the learner's understanding or desire. In such cases, motivation becomes less about supporting autonomy and more about engineering outcomes, a violation of learners' freedom. Even efforts grounded in care, encouragement, or benefit can exert influence in ways that compromise freedom and reveal a persistent ethical tension at the heart of motivation itself, raising a pressing philosophical question: What does it mean to motivate ethically? The idea of moral motivation makes a contribution to a broader conversation in philosophy of education about the ethics of pedagogical influence, a conversation that has, until now, attended more carefully to what is taught and to whom than to how influence itself is ethically exercised in the act of motivating students. Critical pedagogues, most prominently Freire (1970/1993), have exposed how hierarchical transmission models disguise authority as benevolence; yet this critique, powerful as it is, has largely focused on the structure of knowledge delivery rather than on the motivational rhetoric that surrounds and sustains it. Ethicists have examined manipulation as a form of influence *sui generis*, establishing the conceptual tools needed to diagnose it (Noggle, 1996, 2018). Still, these frameworks have rarely been brought to bear on everyday pedagogical practice, where motivation is still largely treated as an unexamined good. What remains underexplored, then, is the specific ethical dimensions of motivation as a practice: not merely its outcomes, but its manner, its medium, and the asymmetries of power it often inhabits.

Before proceeding, it is worth pausing on the key terms, motivation and manipulation, that animate this discussion, to examine how they operate in ordinary language. Autonomy, motivation, authority, inspiration, and influence are concepts that carry significant philosophical weight, yet, precisely at the level of common usage, ethical blind spots tend to form around these ideas. Attending to how these terms are commonly understood, therefore, is not a preliminary exercise but a diagnostic one. Etymologically, both motivation and manipulation derive from the Latin root *movere*: to move. Motivation, in its root sense, means to prompt action or set something in motion (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). Manipulation involves moving or controlling something, or someone (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The shared root of motivation and manipulation reveals what educational discourse habitually conceals behind uncritical acceptance of motivation as a good thing: 1) to motivate *and* to manipulate is always, at some level, to move another, and 2) the line between moving and controlling is less clear than generally supposed. The blurry line between moving and controlling transcends semantics to disclose a conceptual entanglement. Autonomy, for instance, is defined as the state of being independent, free, and self-directing; yet authority — autonomy's apparent opposite — is defined as the power to influence or command thought and behavior, and in some contexts as a freedom or right to act (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Freedom paradoxically plays a role in the definitions of both autonomy and authority. Likewise, inspiration is defined as a motivating agent or influence, while influence is the power or capacity to cause an effect indirectly (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), placing it uncomfortably close to what manipulation does.

Precisely because terms so closely related are also so easily conflated, development of a consciously ethical understanding of motivation becomes essential in educational discourse. Positing motivation as our moral responsibility as educators positions us to resolve a foundational ethical problem in pedagogy: Motivation risks becoming manipulation when freedom is prescribed rather than co-created. If we are to investigate the boundaries between influence and autonomy in education, the ways in which motivational power is exercised, and explore whether motivation can ever be entirely free from coercion or asymmetries of power,

then motivation must be understood as an ethical practice rather than a neutral pedagogical technique. Motivation, I argue, serves moral life best when exercised through consciously relational dialogue and co-construction of imaginative freedom. To explicate this claim, I examine what I call “*The American Scholar's Paradox*,” using Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1837 lecture, *The American Scholar*, as a case study of the ethical tension at the heart of motivational discourse.

The American Scholar's Paradox

The American Scholar is a lecture delivered by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1837. In this address, Emerson speaks to Harvard students about “self-reliance” and the importance of “trusting thyself”. His tone is unmistakably rousing, and the lecture carries an inspiring force. Yet, although I experience this essay as motivational, it is not straightforward to claim that Emerson himself was explicitly concerned with motivation. The term motivation, used to describe a psychological drive, does not appear until the late nineteenth century, with its earliest recorded usage *circa* 1870 (Merriam-Webster; Oxford English Dictionary). Since *The American Scholar* was delivered in 1837, Emerson may never have conceived of himself as giving a *motivational* talk. Nevertheless, regardless of Emerson's intentions or historical vocabulary, the lecture functions as a powerful motivational address insofar as it seeks to awaken intellectual independence, shape dispositions toward self-reliance, and move its audience toward a particular vision of scholarly life. Emerson repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of trusting oneself and achieving a distinct American culture to awaken intellectual independence in his audience. At the same time, he describes how such freedom ought to be achieved. It is here my concern arises: In attempting to inspire independence, Emerson begins to dictate his own terms of freedom, thereby paradoxically undermining the very autonomy he celebrates. By articulating not only the value of self-reliance but also the proper path toward it, Emerson shifts from calling for autonomy to prescribing its form. His prescriptive movement introduces an asymmetry between speaker and audience that risks transforming inspiration into direction. Emerson's slip makes *The American Scholar* a case study in which to explore the fine line between motivation and manipulation.

A most significant problem with *The American Scholar* lies in the fact that it was originally delivered as a speech. Speech, as a pedagogical medium, carries inherent risks for student autonomy. Like the lecture format, it is teacher-centered; relies heavily on authority and sustained teacher talk; and privileges rhetoric. Emerson's rhetoric in *The American Scholar* gives rise to one of the deepest contradictions in his account. Emerson's entire argument is predicated on the idea that the scholar must find his “own orbit” and not be “made a satellite instead of a system” (2003, p. 46). Yet, in the lecture format, he himself occupies the center, while students are positioned around him as recipients of his vision. Even as he urges them to construct their own intellectual systems, his rhetoric performs the orbital metaphor he explicitly warns his audience against. The very medium of his work becomes part of the problem: Emerson enacts the very hierarchy Emerson seeks to overcome. He was preoccupied with autonomy and self-reliance to such an extent, so focused on the end goal of his admonition that he failed to recognize the potentially manipulative power of his own prescriptive delivery and thereby produced *The American Scholar's Paradox*.

My concern is not to evaluate Emerson's ideas for strength or legitimacy. I happily concede that Emerson's thinking aligns with my own. I find the rhetoric in *The American Scholar* deeply charismatic and undeniably influential. However, the manner of Emerson's influence is what I

find ethically questionable. For example, Emerson initially addresses the students as “gentlemen,” only to immediately redefine their status to passive failure, referring to them as “meek young men,” forgetting, perhaps deliberately, that these students were once just young men themselves who “grew up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views” of others. Emerson reinforces this critique by noting that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were themselves once young men in libraries when they produced the texts that Harvard students now follow instinctively. Emerson’s concern lies with the bad judgement of blind acceptance. Cicero, Locke, and Bacon are grouped together not as thinkers to be rejected, but as examples of authorities whose ideas risk being absorbed uncritically. In such cases, Emerson insists, what begins as a guide can become “a tyrant.” Emerson is careful to warn that one must accept others’ views only after rigorous judgment. He openly cherishes the works of Goethe, Emanuel Swedenborg, Plato, and Shakespeare, citing them as historical authorities whose “authentic utterances” the discerning reader should seek (2003, p. 45). What he critiques instead is the wasting of “genius” in “other men’s transcripts of their readings.” As Emerson puts it, “genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence” (2003, p. 46). Even the most admirable thinkers can discourage or restrict new creation when followed too closely. In this sense Emerson likens students to “parrots of other men’s thinking” (p. 43), not as an outright condemnation of learning from others, but as a warning against the loss of “creative reading” which he proposes alongside “creative writing”.

Even if we grant Emerson’s intentions are ultimately constructive: to push students further, to awaken creativity, and to strengthen their intellectual self-esteem, the rhetorical labels he employs function in a counterproductive and ethically troubling way. By naming his audience as meek, passive, or unoriginal, Emerson undercuts their confidence, which in turn increases their openness to his message. Once addressed in terms of their incapacities, the students hearing the lecture are placed in a moment of disorientation. They are made acutely aware of a lack, a failure, or a deficiency that demands correction. In this state, the audience is primed to seek resolution, to escape the discomfort produced by these labels, and to recover a sense of worth or agency. Emerson’s rhetoric, by diminishing confidence heightens receptivity and operates perfectly as a subtle form of manipulation. Furthermore, Emerson presents the promise that once self-reliance is achieved, “the huge world will come round” (2003, p. 59), implying that success is a reward for adherence to his philosophy. He argues that the world’s coming round is not a goal to be pursued, but rather an inevitable consequence of self-reliance. The force with which this consequence is articulated, contradicts Emerson’s aim to dismantle intellectual dependence. Emerson’s focus shifts away from self-trust *per se* toward its anticipated outcome, framing autonomy as a goal-oriented attribute rather than an intrinsic drive. Emerson provides a powerful motivation that can easily be interpreted as extrinsic. The promise that the “huge world will come round” may cultivate reliance on outcomes, approval, success, dominance, rather than on intrinsic fulfillment of the “active soul”.

Emerson finds no help at all in the fact that the reward is framed as natural or inevitable. Describing intellectual independence in terms of “success” or “dominion” risks transforming an internal journey into a kind of transaction, where self-reliance becomes valuable not for its own sake, but for what it yields. Emerson’s ultimate aim was to cultivate an active soul and develop in his listeners the persona of “Man Thinking.” Emerson’s choice of the phrase “Man Thinking” is deliberate and philosophically loaded. Man Thinking is not a container of received ideas but a subject actively creating meaning. He does not seek rewards; he flourishes in the process itself. The more common phrase, “thinking man,” describes someone who habitually reasons before

taking action. Man Thinking, by contrast, names a human being in the act of thinking, continuously engaged in inquiry rather than defined by credentials, roles, or accumulated knowledge. The emphasis on thinking as something one does, not something one is, reinforces Emerson's broader call for intellectual independence and creative engagement. But it is precisely at Emerson's rhetorical highpoint that ethical tension intensifies. While Emerson celebrates thinking as process rather than outcome, his rhetoric gestures toward promised rewards and punishments. The language of success, inevitability, and recognition, however unintentionally, introduces a prescriptive logic that may orient the listener toward results rather than intellectually independent becoming. Emerson's rhetoric risks motivating through promise rather than participation, through projection rather than dialogue. Although his aim is to awaken self-reliance, the means by which he seeks to do so rely on hierarchical speech, evaluative judgment, and outcome-oriented assurance. Thereby, *The American Scholar* falls into the trap of pedagogical manipulation.

Man Imagining

The American Scholar's Paradox illustrates how easily motivation can turn into direction, and how a call to freedom risks becoming a new form of authority. In conversation with a professor of mine, we contemplated whether Emerson's manipulative pitfall would disappear if the same insights were expressed as a diary entry. Emerson himself writes about "the poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them" (2003, p. 52). A diary would reflect the same solitude of unpressured recording of truth rather than a public performance of persuasion.... Yet, even this version would remain paradoxical — a solitary record of thoughts about interdependence: The American Solitude. Likewise, a diary entry would not serve Emerson's ideal of the "One Man," the universal mind achieved not through solitude nor conformity, but realization of one's potential as part of the whole. He uses a foundational myth of how "Man divided into men ... just as the hand was divided into fingers." (p. 42) to emphasize that society exists because individuals were meant to be interdependent parts of a larger whole. Therefore, the scholar's ultimate duty is to connect with others through genuine self-expression by illuminating truth amid confusion, standing alongside others in shared struggle, and conversing honestly to one's *brother*. Maxine Greene's conception of freedom unfolds as a natural continuation of Emerson's vision. Greene's *Dialectic of Freedom* (1988) notes that freedom is pursued in reciprocity with others, not in privacy, but in public spaces. Where Emerson imagines the scholar becoming part of a larger whole through meaningful expression and shared striving, Greene articulates freedom as an imaginative and fundamentally communal pursuit. For Greene, freedom is neither solitary nor completely achieved in solitude; autonomy emerges through participation with others in the ongoing work of interpreting and reshaping a shared world.

Greene understands imagination as the capacity to perceive alternatives to what is given, enabling individuals and communities to resist closure and envision new possibilities. Central to imagination is what she calls *naming*, the critical act of identifying and articulating constraints that shape lived experience. For Greene, naming is conceptually necessary for intellectual independence. By naming obstacles and imagining alternative ways of being, Greene argues, individuals are empowered to overcome their constraints through action. Imagination disrupts the taken-for-granted and calls individuals toward awakening to newly perceived possibilities. Imaginative engagement requires a deliberate rejection of what Greene describes as the "cotton wool of habit, mere routine, and automatism" in order to "seek alternative ways of being and

look for openings” (1988, p. 2), precisely the forms of intellectual stagnation Emerson himself resists. For Greene, however, movement from constraint to possibility is fundamentally a pedagogical process, and the teacher plays a vital role within it. The teacher’s commitment to their own freedom is the key mechanism for awakening freedom in students: A “teacher in search of his or her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own” (p. 14). In resisting routinized practices and fixed expectations, teachers engage in a dialectical process of identifying limits while simultaneously seeking alternative ways of being within the given world. The teacher thus becomes a catalyst who models freedom as an ongoing, unfinished pursuit and invites students into that shared struggle as freedom unfolds through dialogue. Greene emphasizes from the outset, in the introduction of her book, that freedom must be sought “in dialogue with others for the sake of personal fulfillment and the emergence of a democracy dedicated to life and decency” (p. xii). Dialogue aims to create opportunities for the articulation of multiple perspectives in multiple idioms. Thus, dialogue is not merely conversational but political as it redistributes authority by creating space for multiple voices to be heard. Rather than positioning the teacher as the sole arbiter of meaning, Greene envisions education as a democratic practice in which authority is exercised responsively rather than hierarchically. Greene suggests, “we may be able to empower the young to create and re-create a common world — and, in cherishing it, in renewing it, discover what it signifies to be free” (p. 23). Pursuit of freedom draws both teachers and students into a shared struggle to recognize possibility, resist closure, and imagine alternatives together.

Turning to Greene and her imaginative pursuit of freedom allows ethical motivation to emerge as a fundamentally democratic and relational process. When Greene’s conceptual framework is deliberately and carefully integrated into pedagogy, particularly through the practices of *naming* constraints and *imagining otherwise*, teachers nourish students’ autonomy. Rather than being prescribed or directed, autonomy is exercised through participation in meaning-making. Greene herself insists that when students are “provoked to reach beyond themselves, to wonder, to imagine, to pose their own questions,” they are “most likely to learn to learn” (p. 14). Collaborative inquiry into possibility functions as the engine of ethical motivation. Learning to learn is not merely a cognitive achievement; it is an existential one. Through imaginative engagement, students encounter alternative ways of seeing and being in the world, discover that the given is not fixed, and realize their own agency matters in reshaping it in more rigorously democratic forms. Motivation does not arise from external pressure or promised rewards, but from the intrinsic pull of possibility itself. When students experience themselves as capable of imagining, questioning, and creating meaning alongside others, engagement ceases to be demanded, coerced, or manipulated, it becomes freely chosen. Students may autonomously choose to engage in classrooms, not because they are persuaded to do so, but because they recognize learning as a site of freedom rather than a circumstance of compliance.

Caring Our Way toward Motivation

To illustrate Greene’s pedagogy of freedom in more detail and to further conceptualize what ethical motivation might look like in educational practice I turn to Nel Noddings’ ethics of care. Noddings’ *Philosophy of Education* (2016) underscores that care ethics begins from the assumption that education is fundamentally relational and that learning takes place within webs of human connection rather than in isolation. Dialogue becomes the space in which ethical attentiveness can occur, allowing educators and students to encounter one another not as roles or functions, but as persons situated within a shared educational relationship. Noddings’ relational

understanding of care extends beyond the individual teacher-student interaction and unfurls into a broader sense of community in which authority is not eliminated but transformed, exercised through responsiveness rather than command. Specifically within this relational and communal context care ethics becomes indispensable to discussions of motivation. Motivation, approached “carelessly,” that is, without concern for care, can easily slip into persuasion, coercion, or subtle forms of control. Care ethics offers a necessary ethical counterweight by insisting that educators remain attentive to how they exercise their influence and how their words shape students’ sense of self and agency. Noddings writes that “we seek to enhance the other’s growth, but we do not threaten the other’s Otherness, and we do not define for another exactly what he or she must do or be” (p. 237). Her point clearly asserts that genuine motivation is grounded in care rather than control. From a care-ethical perspective, forcing students into actions we believe to be in their best interest is not an expression of care, but a violation of it. Consequently, motivation ought to be reconceptualized as ethical practice that resists the impulse to direct others’ becoming.

Likewise, Noddings (2016) explicitly cautions against confusing coercion with care, noting that many students come to believe that a caring teacher must necessarily be demanding or directive. Such assumptions, she warns, risk cultivating dependency, as “critical theorists and care theorists worry that such thinking may induce a permanent dependency on a strong boss or leader” (p. 230). Noddings’ insight casts Emerson’s rhetorical strategy in a new light. Even if his intentions were contributive to his audience’s own benefit, insofar as his tone remains persuasive and demanding, his approach would fail to motivate ethically within a care framework. Even if *The American Scholar* were reformulated as a series of conversations, where engagement occurs through dialogue; without careful attention to language and relational stance, Emerson would remain positioned as an authority who directs rather than a caregiver who accompanies. Noddings’ concept of engrossment becomes especially significant at this point. Engrossment refers to a form of nonselective receptivity, a way of attending to the other that suspends preconceptions and opens space for meaning to be mutually constructed through dialogue. Ethical motivation requires an engrossed relational stance in which standards, goals, and directions for growth are not imposed but co-constructed. Co-construction in classrooms, for example, minimizes the risk of dictation by positioning the educator not as an authority who directs, but as a companion who participates in the learner’s becoming.

Care ethics proposes that dialogue is the key to establishing caring relations, not merely as a technique, but as an ethical medium. Noddings notes that “genuine education must engage the purposes and energies of those being educated. To secure such engagement, teachers must build relationships of care and trust, and within such relationships, students and teachers construct educational objectives cooperatively” (2016, p. 237). To ensure that the motivation is authentic and not manipulative, the end goal must be mutually constructed by the students and the teachers. Purposeful engagement repositions the student as a subject rather than an object of education. Care ethics aligns closely with Greene’s insistence on agency and imagination. Greene reminds us that freedom emerges when individuals refuse predetermined paths and make their own choices as autonomous agents, forming “life-plans or projects for themselves in the light of readings of their lived worlds” (Greene, 1988, p. 6). Imagination, she argues, enables a “conscious adjustment of the new and the old”, allowing individuals to act meaningfully within complex and shifting conditions. With this understanding, motivation no longer operates through external pressure, reward, or compliance, but emerges from within the learner as an expression of agency. When students are positioned as subjects who actively interpret their lived worlds, motivation becomes intrinsic rather than imposed. Autonomy is not the absence of guidance but

the presence of meaningful choice, choice grounded in dialogue, imagination, and relational trust. Morally justified motivation is sustained not by authority that commands, but by relationships and conversations that invite. When educators attend carefully, adopting a position of engrossment, they cultivate conditions in which learners experience themselves as capable authors of their own projects. Autonomy is neither abandoned nor romanticized nor *manipulated*; but activated through imagination and nurtured through care. Ethical motivation takes shape as a relational practice that honors freedom not by withdrawing influence, but by handling it responsibly, creating spaces where students may come to act, choose, and engage on their own autonomous terms.

Motivation can manifest in many ways, but the morality of motivation cannot be reduced to good intentions or achieved outcomes. Good intentions do not absolve ethical responsibility. What ultimately matters is how motivation unfolds in practice. Any consequentialist account that focuses on ends achieved as the sole criterion of moral success tells only a small part of the whole story. John Dewey (1903) observes that a complete consequentialist analysis of an action requires answering three questions about it: 1) How well does the action achieve its intended end? 2) What sorts of attitudes and dispositions are required to engage in the action? and 3) How does the action play out as a system of social interaction? Sociological and psychological effects count as important consequences of action. If consequentialism turns a blind eye to extended effects of actions when assessing their moral worth, then consequentialism offers an inadequate analysis. However, when consequentialism includes in its analysis of moral value broader concerns about personal and interpersonal effects of an action, then even consequentialism must take into account the morality of the processes by which the action achieved its desired end. Moral assessment of motivation exemplifies theoretical adequacy in ethical analysis. Motivation is a process that shapes not only what students achieve, but how they come to understand themselves as learners, as agents, and as participants in a shared world. Ethical reflection cannot stop at satisfaction alone; it must also attend to how freedom, voice, and authorship are preserved, or diminished, along the way. Manipulation cannot be justified simply because it “works,” since the methods employed actively misshape habits, dispositions, and modes of participation. Motivation becomes ethically precarious precisely at the moment it is assumed to be self-evidently good, neutral, or benevolent. Explorations into the morality of motivation are necessary to unsettle the assumption that motivation is an unproblematic educational good and to move educators to more careful reflection on their own practices of influence. Just as counseling and therapy rely on explicit ethical frameworks to guide intervention, the conscious and subconscious practices of pedagogical motivation should not remain theoretically underexamined.

As educators, we cannot abandon the task of motivation altogether. To motivate without imposing remains both our greatest challenge and our ethical responsibility. That is why Greene's and Noddings' works hold utmost theoretical significance for examining the morality of motivation. Greene's and Noddings' works hold utmost theoretical significance for examining the morality of motivation. Greene allows us to imagine what ethical motivation might look like when oriented toward freedom rather than compliance. Greene insists that freedom is not a private possession, nor a final achievement, but an ongoing pursuit enacted in engagement with others. Building on this foundation, Noddings' ethics of care offers a crucial pedagogical principle that emphasizes dialogue. Care ethics reminds us that education is relational and that ethical responsibility arises within relationships, not outside of them. To care, in Noddings' sense, is not to decide for another what they should become, but to remain attentively responsive

to whom they are becoming. Through imagination, naming, and shared inquiry, teachers and students together learn to perceive and converse about alternatives to the given. Freedom is not bestowed or demanded; it is practiced through dialogue in communities. Greene's vision makes clear that motivation becomes ethical when it invites participation in collective work, imagining and reimagining what is possible. Motivation becomes ethical when it functions as a shared pursuit of freedom, grounded in dialogue, sustained through imagination, and enacted as praxis. Motivation calls for a theoretical and practical interrogation that treats influence, especially pedagogical influence, as an ethical responsibility. Treated as an ethical responsibility rather than a neutral technique, motivation demands a moral framework capable of supporting growth without manipulation and of honoring autonomy without abandoning care.

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Listening to Prevent Educational Displacement: A Case Study

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Abstract: Analysis of a case of radicalization and its subsequent deradicalization makes clear three lessons: 1) a connection-first approach to preventing Educational Displacement preserves the bond between a radicalizing person and their non-radical community of origin; 2) through its thoughtful practice, listening — a protective and preventive practice both within and outside K-12 schools — builds, sustains, and preserves interpersonal connections; and 3) listening, as a practice that supports cultivation of our common humanity, builds collective resilience to radicalization, extremist ideologies, and the narratives of hate that seek to divide us. Listening is a unifying practice that strengthens resilience against radicalization through connection, not correction.

In *Wickedness*, Mary Midgley (1984/2003) spotlights a persistent concern regarding the “very existence of wickedness” (p. 16) as she recognizes that many thinkers treat the question of studying wickedness, hatred, resentment, and cruelty as attending to complex states in human nature that are imagined, not real. But she cautions against neglecting the study of such states since “disowning them can conceal their presence in us” (p. 134). As a method to study a concept like wickedness, Midgley asserts that one ought to find cases that illustrate the complex state under scrutiny and “concentrate” on them (p. 47). Researchers who study radicalization are aligned with Midgley’s methodological insight because the use of case studies of a radicalized individual enables the field to refine the application and understanding of learning theory to processes of radicalization. (Wilner & Dubouluz, 2011). One facet of Midgley’s theory of wickedness, namely, negligence — a fundamental failure to attend to oneself — focuses almost entirely on examination of individual expressions of human nature and personal motives behind wickedness. However, Midgley herself recognizes that insufficient attention is paid to social causes of wickedness (Joshi, 2025c). Following Midgley’s lead, we develop a case study of radicalization to discern both individual and social factors contributing to the process. Giving equi-importance to three facets of radicalization: 1) the individual on the path of radicalization, 2) the environment in which this process occurs, and 3) environmental influences that may accelerate radicalization, we share with you the story of Lauren Manning as an opportunity to determine social causes of and interpersonal protective factors against radicalization.

A compelling feature of Lauren Manning’s story is her choice to have it told from two, different points of view. Structured as a series of fragments told from the viewpoints of both Lauren and her mother, Jeanette, *Walking Away from Hate: Our Journey through Extremism* (Manning & Manning, 2021) presents a narrative of radicalization from the perspective of the person who radicalized (Lauren) and the perspective of the recently widowed, single parent witnessing her daughter’s gradual radicalization (Jeanette). One of the fundamental drivers of Lauren’s radicalization was that she did not feel listened to by anyone in her life. The absence of a listening ear engendered isolation, alienation, and ultimately the search for an alternative space of belonging outside of the home, the school, and the neighborhood in which Lauren grew up (Sabic-El-Rayess, Joshi & Hruschka, 2023c). Lauren and Jeanette’s co-authored book is sub-textually an account of mother and daughter learning again how to listen to one another. It was Jeanette’s commitment to maintaining a connection to her daughter that eventually brought Lauren home. Therefore, Lauren’s story necessitates recognition of the preventive power of listening as developed in Megan Laverty’s (2011) conception of ‘listening education’ where it is

through “the act of listening that humans fulfill, or fail to fulfill, the imperative that we seek to understand others” (p. 155).

Lauren and Jeanette Manning: From Invisibility to Radicalization

During her mid- to late teens, Lauren radicalized into the Neo-Nazi movement in Canada following experiences of Educational Displacement (i.e., a sense of invisibility) in school and at home. As Lauren recounts, her descent into a radicalized, Neo-Nazi community included adoption of a narrative of hate. But that was not how things had always been with Lauren. As we learn at the beginning of the story, Lauren was an ordinary kid who was, in fact, in early elementary school a supportive presence for a bullied peer in her class, Aaron. The awkward, sensitive, and slightly goofy boy — as described by Lauren — was the victim of frequent bullying and found it very difficult to build friendships. When Aaron’s mother and Jeanette began scheduling playdates for Lauren and Aaron, the two children grew closer. At this point in the story, Lauren reflects that “it felt good to have his friendship, to know I could give him a sense of belonging” (Manning & Manning, 2021, p. 20). By befriending Aaron, Lauren, exemplified a meaningful protective factor against radicalization in schools and universities — peer acceptance. Unfortunately, Aaron transferred out of the school, and Lauren’s life journey took a turn for the worse.

Lauren’s mother shared that Lauren’s positive relationship with school began to sour after an incident in the 2nd grade (Joshi, 2022). Whenever Lauren attempted to offer a response during class discussion, the classroom teacher neglected to call on her. But, at a moment when Lauren was finally called upon, she was not only ridiculed in class for what she said but also felt that the teacher did not listen (Sabic-El-Rayess, Joshi & Li, 2026). Jeanette sees this incident as the onset of Lauren’s Educational Displacement. Educational Displacement is a sense of invisibility experienced by a person in a learning environment such as a K-12 or university classroom. Lauren being ignored by her teacher could charitably be interpreted as difficulties in distributing speaking time in the classroom. This was frustrating, but it did not immediately push Lauren away from school. It was, as Jeanette explained, the sense of displacement from the class felt when the teacher called upon Lauren only, it would seem, intentionally to disregard, demean, and distort what Lauren said (Manning & Manning, 2021).

Minor weight gain in her early teens prompted Lauren to feel “ugly and fat and I just wanted to hide,” (Manning & Manning, 2021, p. 22). At the same time, the rapid deterioration of her academic performance in school deepened Lauren’s Educational Displacement. Nor did homelife offer support for Lauren. Jeanette shared that Lauren’s maternal grandfather, Poppa, shamed Lauren for “carrying a bit more weight” and criticized her for being unable to get a boyfriend. Further, Lauren observed that Poppa “disliked all visible minorities, Jews and gays” which made her keep secretly to herself that she was confused about her own sexuality (p. 29). Corroborating these observations, Jeanette acknowledged Lauren’s grandfather “peppered us with his opinions and prejudices ...intense dislike for Blacks, “Pakis,” and immigrants... I had learned at an early age to keep my opinions to myself...I didn’t challenge him out of respect” (p. 29). So, just as Lauren was experiencing Educational Displacement at the hands of teachers and classmates, we learn her home life mirrored the neglect and ridicule she felt at school. In a categorical statement

that defined her adolescence, Lauren writes: “I had no voice” (p. 24).³⁸ The pattern of displacement that spread throughout her life was what initiated Lauren’s search for an alternative space of belonging. In this way, she took her first steps upon the pathway to radicalization.

Her search for an alternative space of belonging (aside from school and home) led Lauren to discover the punk rock and heavy metal scene. While the intensity and aggression that typify such music is no cause for alarm in and of itself, Lauren began searching for bands online and found the genre of NSBM — National Socialist Black Metal. While the lyrics were less important to her when she began listening to songs, she noticed that several songs “spoke of taking back the land that is rightfully ours” (Manning & Manning, 2021, p. 22). As she continued to listen to NSBM, Lauren began adopting fashion choices that signaled a growing engagement with the “lifestyle” of the punk community. To wit: She bought combat boots. While this may seem an unimportant or even amusing detail, sociologist Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2018), describes the process of normalization of extremist narratives through commercialization of radicalized clothing. Extremist-approved clothing creates an “aesthetic” that signifies a person’s degree of commitment to a radicalized community. For example, Miller-Idriss describes the apparel aesthetic of the racist skinhead in the United Kingdom in the 1980s as the “uniform” of a bomber jacket, combat boots, and — as the name suggests — a shaved head that exposed the skin on the scalp. In Germany, multiple sub-cultures have evolved beyond use of non-descript clothing items (e.g., a particular style of jacket or boot) to use of specific brands or labels that “code” hate-fueled messages on the products themselves. The average consumer, for instance, likely has no concerns about t-shirts with the word “Wustenfuchs” printed or written on them. However, Miller-Idriss explains how “Wustenfuchs” works as Neo-Nazi code by connecting “Wustenfuchs” to Nazi Germany. “Wustenfuchs” in English is “Desert Fox.” “Desert Fox” is the nickname given by Adolf Hitler to Erwin Rommel upon Rommel’s promotion to Field Marshall after Rommel lead Nazi troops to early, but ultimately unsustainable, victories against the Allies in North Africa’s Sahara Desert. Thus, “Wustenfuchs” becomes a private secret, publicly shared among radicalized community members. Commercialization of extremist aesthetic messaging has also seen the rise of brands like “Thor Steinar,” adopted by German Neo-Nazis as a brand expressive of loyalty to Hitler’s Germany. This brand has opened several flagship stores across Europe with wooden flooring and glass entryways to create a veneer of commercial legitimacy. The façade deflects questions about Steinar’s propagation of Neo-Nazi messaging via brand logos resembling Nazi military insignia.

Lauren’s initial foray into the punk scene resulted in her adoption of the aesthetic of the Neo-Nazi movement without any ideological conversion to Neo-Nazism. However, her interest in the aesthetic caught the eye of Donny, a recruiter for the radicalized community, who gave her “the pitch.” Lauren was reading about Nokturnal Mortum — a heavy metal band — when she stumbled into the radicalized community on Facebook. She received a message from someone named “Donny” that said: “I was wondering if you’re NS or just listening to NSBM (Manning & Manning, 2021, p. 7). Lauren thought that these were both genres of music and said “no.” After sharing lists of bands and songs, Donny noted that several of Lauren’s choices “leaned towards racism.” Donny then sent a message with the following speculation: “With all of this you must lean on the NS side of things.” Lauren reflected on that early exchange and explained: “Not

³⁸ The Educational Displacement Model of Radicalization considers the home environment (i.e., the environment in which a person grows up) to be a learning environment. Emphasis on K-12 schools and universities (Joshi & Sabic-El-Rayess, 2023) does not negate the educational significance of a person’s home environment.

wanting to sound stupid, I didn't ask what NS [National Socialist] meant. I just enjoyed having someone to talk to," So, their initial conversation then grew into messaging every day. Donny shared stories of his White friends being beaten up by Black people and complained that Black people "always get away with this shit" (p. 47). Lauren, who was simply trying to fit in and felt like Donny was listening to her thoughts and views, said that these must have just been preppy school kids who caused the violence. Donny, who by this point had learned that Lauren had unaddressed grievances owing to the behavior of her classroom teachers and peers at school, validated Lauren's thoughts. He suggested that they meet.

As the dialogues between Lauren and Donny continued, he projected the blame for her unaddressed grievances onto a range of marginalized communities including Jews. Lauren acknowledged that she had "never known anyone Jewish but reasoned that he [Donny] knew more about people than I did. After all, he was twenty-six and lived in the city" (Manning & Manning, 2021, p. 48). Soon enough, Donny began referring to the National Socialism movement and shared that he was part of this resistance against the minorities who were seeking to oppress white populations. Donny introduced Lauren to Stormfront, the white-supremacist, anti-Semitic, and Neo-Nazi digital hub, and she created an account. Lauren reflected on the "education" she received through this platform and the sense of empowerment she felt: "Donny referred to everyone outside the movement as 'sheep,' telling me it was good to be different, so this new knowledge made me feel better than they were. I kept reading so I could throw the movement's rhetoric at anyone who challenged me...I was learning to fear and resent anyone whose skin wasn't white...Whenever we talked, Donny would use whatever I said to lead the conversation into his own narrative about the victimization of the white race. I began thinking I was learning more from him than any of my teachers at school" (pp. 48-49).

It is noteworthy that even after several dialogues and in-person meetings with Donny, Lauren had not immediately adopted the prejudicial beliefs characterizing Neo-Nazi ideology. Reflecting on the reasons why she continued to speak with and meet Donny, Lauren said: "I like the way he spoke to me...He told me, 'You're smarter than everyone around you. There need to be more girls in the world like you.' He made me feel like I mattered" (Manning & Manning, p. 48). Lauren felt listened to, empowered, and valued by the recruiter who radicalized her. Following this, Lauren began skipping school and was introduced to Donny's crew of Neo-Nazis who called themselves "SD" — "from the German word *Sicherheitsdienst*, the intelligence and security division of the SS [*Schutzstaffel* — "Protection Squad"] and the Nazi party" (p. 50). After taking several trips to diverse neighborhoods across the city, Lauren began believing in the notion of white genocide. "We're being wiped out...What happened to you in the past is nothing compared to what a non-white will do with you," (p. 51) said Donny. This is a clear example of the scaling up of Lauren's personal grievances to the general grievances at the heart of Neo-Nazi ideology. Lauren, whose radicalization was deepening with each day spent in the company of her newfound friends, stopped interacting with non-white people and let her few friendships at school perish. Lauren's educators, peers, and school community didn't listen to her, and so she was recruited by a hate-fueled group that did listen to her. Lauren had radicalized. She labeled herself in interactions as a "white power skinhead" (p. 51), and began posting online that she had found the truth. Everyone else was misguided, but Lauren had found in the Neo-Nazi movement the answer to her search for belonging.

Preventing Educational Displacement through Listening

Lauren's story of radicalization makes three things clear: a) the process of radicalization involves learning; b) the learning occurs outside a formal learning environment; and c) the sense of empowerment felt by aggrieved, alienated youths enable the creation of a sense of belonging to the radicalized community not felt in other social contexts. This is how "thinking" becomes radicalized. Gemma Corradi Fiumara (2013) proposed the aim of a philosophy of listening is to "recover the neglected and perhaps deeper roots of what we call thinking" (p. 13). Western thought from the time of the ancient Greeks focused on *logos*. *Logos* can be translated as relating to 'word' and/or to 'reason'. If we think of the actions related to *logos* in these two semantic pathways, we have the act of speaking and the act of thinking. But, the tradition of *logos* has neglected the role, power, and importance of listening, especially as it relates to the experience of education. (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2003). We may extend this concern about neglecting to listen to include experiences in communities. Dewey's conception of democracy depends deeply on listening to others (Dewey, 1916/2011). However, the insight that mutually satisfying community life requires listening preceded Dewey by more than a century and a half, as detailed in Megan Lavery's (2011) work on the educational idea of listening in Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education*. (1762/1979).³⁹

Lavery (2011) begins by underscoring the importance of speaking and listening as a twinned activity that supports the cultivation of our common humanity. As Rousseau helps us understand, the relation asserted between two people by the activities of speaking and listening illustrates that connection precedes comprehension. While one can certainly maintain that the content of one's speech, upon listening, may change the nature of the implied relation between speaker and listener, the very fact that a relation was asserted creates an opportunity. Rousseau, Lavery points out, asserts that human wisdom can be understood through the development of "a sense of the true relations of man" (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 219). As persons who speak with and listen to others throughout the course of our everyday lives, Rousseau is attuning our sensibilities to the powerful realization that listening is connective. Rousseau recognized an insight about the act of listening: *Listening is characterized by attending to the speaker's sentiments* (Lavery, p. 160). Sentiments, which emerge from within, are shared by all human beings and enable the cultivation of our common humanity. As Lavery's rendering of Rousseau's conception of listening elucidates, humane communication is "premised on an inclusive outlook that sees all individuals, without exception, as participating in a condition that is shared or common" (p. 156). This is not, as Lavery helps us see, merely the absence of the experience of speaking but, more importantly, the absence of listening ears in the learning environment (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021). While this universal insight about the importance of

³⁹ In addition, the significance of digital spaces where young people are venturing into uncharted waters without the mediating influence of a trusted parent, adult, mentor, or educator accelerated Lauren's process of radicalization as Donny became the mentor she had been missing as she turned 17 years old. As Jonathan Haidt (2024) has argued, it is the "underprotection [of children] in the virtual world" (p. 14) that has allowed children to explore dangerous online spaces without sufficient guardrails or protections. The United States, through the enactment of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) in 1998, effectively set the standard for protecting children online. COPPA required children under 13 to obtain parental consent before they could sign a contract with a company to open an account, thereby accepting the release of their data and certain rights to use, for example on social media. On the negative side, however, COPPA seems to have arbitrarily "set the effective age of "internet adulthood" at 13, for reasons that had little to do with children's safety or mental health" (p. 4). As Lauren's story spotlights, the harms to children and even older adolescents in terms of the risk of radicalization were not adequately considered when legislating on the issue of youth engagement on the internet.

listening to the achievement of learning transcends the space of the classroom to include all learning environments, listening nonetheless suggests a connection-first approach in the classroom that helps prevent Educational Displacement caused by untoward experiences had by students in school.

Commonly, when educators enter the classroom, they hold the expectation that they will be the primary speaker. Just as typically from their perspective, students enter the classroom with the expectation that they will be listening for the majority of instructional time. The educator will be the principal speaker and students a collective of listeners. It is a puzzling instructional paradox to consider the extensive practice in listening that students engage in, while many educators forego a similarly extensive practice in a capacity that is crucial to the educational process. But paradox dissolves if we take a connection-first approach to pedagogy. Especially in light of preventing Educational Displacement, we ought to recognize that: “We regularly under-value and underestimate the power and significance of establishing our care prior to our credibility. Students are already led to believe that the teacher is an epistemic authority by virtue of their role in the life of the classroom. On the contrary, students are not always conditioned to presume that their educators care about them. So, a connection-first approach equips educators, practitioners, and well-minded citizens to practice a method wherein connection between an epistemic authority and a learner is prior to or at least parallel with the epistemic bond built between these two agents.” (Joshi, 2024b, p. 42)

With a connection-first classroom approach, listening plays an integral role in establishing care prior to establishing credibility.⁴⁰ When Vik, a co-author of this article, taught his first undergraduate course, he wished to emphasize instructional care for his students, and he stated intentions to care for each and every one of them during the educational experience. While he was met — as he had hoped — with some students who expressed appreciation for this disclosure, several other students did not simply accept spoken testimony at face-value. Vik remembers surveying the visages of students across the classroom. He saw looks of skepticism, curiosity, incredulity, and even amusement. Although it took time and practice to realize, moments of establishing care were strongly cemented when he was *not speaking*. Care occurred not only when he listened in the classroom, but — and to his great amazement — also when he read students’ writing and offered feedback, responded to emails with attentiveness and sensitivity, and during office hours with students who visited for dialogue.

When examining the importance of the concept of listening to Lauren Manning’s radicalization into the Neo-Nazi movement, it becomes clear that her experience of Educational Displacement in the classroom involved the repetitive failure of being listened to by educators, peers, and staff at school. By Lauren’s own admission, she had *no voice*. Even if it were the case that Lauren’s 2nd grade classroom teacher thought that the young child’s contribution to class discussion was deserving of correction, the response of ridicule and humiliation served to fundamentally harm Lauren’s *connective* possibilities *first* and her *epistemic* considerations *second*. Listening, considered as a practice in prevention of Educational Displacement, prioritizes a connection-first approach to pedagogy rather than a correction-first approach to training (Dillon et al., 2024). We would be remiss in failing to point out that radicalizing recruiters, like Donny, *listen* to educationally displaced youth, like Lauren. But Donny’s

⁴⁰ Nel Noddings’ (1984/2003) emphasis on grounding care work through epistemic and emotional responsiveness remains integral to understanding the educative power and significance of listening. For work that offers a framework for radical care in service of social justice education see Rivera-McCutchen (2021).

listening is merely a lure. It is instrumental only. It is listening devoid of a sense of reciprocity (Joshi, 2024a). In the radicalization process, the recruiter views recruits merely as means to an end, not as ends in and of themselves (Sabic-El-Rayess, Joshi & Hruschka, 2023a). Contrary to Donny's machinations, listening — in Rousseau's sense and within a connection-first approach to pedagogy — remains aware of the ends to which *both* speaker and listener are bound in this relation. Connection is at the heart of listening and it is this special feature of acts of listening that helps prevent Educational Displacement (Sabic-El-Rayess, Joshi & Hruschka, 2023b).

“Keep the Door Open”

We have seen that one social cause of Educational Displacement and, in turn, radicalization to commit hate-fueled violence — which Midgley (1984/2003) would undoubtedly confirm as an act of wickedness — is neglecting to listen (Hruschka, Sabic-El-Rayess & Joshi, 2025). Lauren's mother, Jeanette, herself noticed that her own negligence was part of Lauren's process of radicalization: “But when your last thought before going to sleep is “Will my daughter commit an act of violence against another human being?” you know you've missed something along the way” (Manning & Manning, 2021, p. 13). Reflecting today on her daughter's radicalization, Jeanette observed that co-authoring the story with her daughter afforded an important experience of listening to one another. The co-authoring process engendered the discovery for both Jeanette and Lauren about the experiences of Educational Displacement (i.e., the result of the absence of listening) that characterized Lauren's childhood (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2025). Growing up, Lauren was not met with a connection-first approach at home so the listening gap that characterized her her schooling interview prompted her search for an alternative site of belonging.

When speaking with Jeanette, we were able to ask: “What is one lesson that you can offer educators, parents, leaders, and community members about what supported Lauren's de-radicalization, her exit from the Neo-Nazi movement, and her return home?” (Joshi, 2022) Jeanette repeated a key insight that she includes in their co-authored story, “the most difficult lesson of all — how to keep the door open” (p. 15). She elaborated on the symbolic significance of “keeping the door open” as a metaphor for preserving a channel of communication between herself and her daughter. Her mother's extraordinary patience of waiting to listen, not to speak, is what brought Lauren home. Although Jeanette found abhorrent and worthy of severe moral reproach the views and beliefs that her own daughter began to espouse, she wisely and caringly prioritized connection over correction (Joshi, 2025b). Schools would be wise to employ a similar strategy. Silencing only ever estranges students. Listening always encourages students to learn.

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Everyone Is Community: A Community Schools Approach to Immigrant Families' Needs

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Abstract: Meeting the needs of all students regardless of immigration status is a challenge faced by many school districts. Utilizing participatory action research (PAR), we partnered with a local community school district to explore family engagement practices and organizational response to increasing numbers of immigrant families in the community. Using interview and site observation data, we explored connections between leadership values and ability to welcome newcomer families into the school district. Guiding principles expressing meaningful responsiveness, genuine connection, and care for all transcend moments of “crisis” (COVID-19/immigration legislation) to create structures continuously able to meet the needs of students and their families. Schools, educators, and administrators can learn from the equitable approach to serving a school community and be inspired by an organization actively meeting the needs of families it serves.

“I want to always be heard and seen, not just in a crisis, but I'll take it.”
— Ruth, Community Schools Leader, Hatlen School District

Given the heightened visibility of immigration in the United States, the diverse needs of immigrant families are central to important community work schools can accomplish and coordinate to positively affect students' education. The Hatlen School District (HSD) — pseudonyms utilized throughout for school district, town, and all participants — exemplifies successful public-school responsiveness to a multiform community. The district's student body is 18% Caucasian, 68% Hispanic, 8% Black, 3% multi-racial, and 3% nonreporting. District English Language Learner (ELL) enrollment has increased by almost 40% over the past five years. Currently, 20% of district students are English learners, 14% are students with disabilities, and 61% qualify for free or reduced-price school-provided meals. HSD has 77 families who lack a fixed, regular, nighttime residence, and so meet the McKinney-Vento criteria for homelessness (Cunningham, 2014). To address the needs of its diverse students HSD uses a K-12 community school model clustered into 6 schools that serve 5,000 students. Horizon, HSD's community schools organization, is led by Ruth, who, with her team of family engagement specialists, works to create structures for sharing community resources by building relationships with families, schools, and community partners. Horizon currently works with over 50 partners to provide adult English classes, food pantries, clothing drives, housing support, back-to-school resource fairs, and connections to community organizations like the local library, legal offices, and counseling. Schools are used as central locations where resources are housed, shared, or utilized. The community schools model puts in practice a simple concept, as stated by HSD's Director of Facilities and Operations: “a school can be a hub of a community, right? This whole idea is that the school can leverage the resources in the community, and that the community can resource the leverages of the schools.” Forged in the heat of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic when community needs expanded and meeting *those* needs became a test of determination and creativity, the central mission of Horizon is to meet community needs. Still committed to its original mission, Horizon is confronting new challenges. In meeting its new challenges Horizon has created a school district where families can receive resources they need so students can thrive in the classroom regardless of immigration status.

Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) to build a mutually beneficial research partnership with Horizon and HSD, a partnership centered on respect, trust, and knowledge-

sharing, the members of an Education course at Vassar College explored the challenges school districts face when experiencing a shifting demographic of immigrant families. With faithful commitment, Horizon's leadership created the infrastructure necessary for attaining a successful community school model even in the difficult political climate of 2025. Our research into Horizon's success began as a university-school district partnership that over the past three years has grown into a longitudinal study involving undergraduate students, their professor, and community schools partners. PAR is conducted *with* people, not on them. "*With*, not on" became a bedrock mantra guiding our partnership with Horizon. All research team members were not only data collectors and analysts but also, whenever possible, participants in the activities that they observed. At the same time, the PAR model empowers participants to actively engage in the research process as "equal partners," creating a less hierarchical research dynamic that centers community knowledge (Cohen et al., 2020; McIntyre, 2008). After many iterations in collaboration with our partners, we settled on the research question, "What are key elements of a community school district that affect newcomer families?" Utilizing grounded theory methods to identify likely themes of significance to Horizon's success in welcoming newcomer families, our focus fell on Horizon's leadership philosophy, its capacity to build networks of community partnerships, and its development of individual champions.

Study Framework: PAR, Community Cultural Wealth, and Critical Education Theory

Our theoretical framework centered on PAR (Participatory Action Research), which works both as a method of inquiry and as a paradigm guiding thought and action while researching (McIntyre, 2008). PAR's emphasis on power equality among researchers and participants helped us interrogate aspects of power throughout our study (Fine et al., 2021; Mackay, 2006). In every encounter with our community partners, we purposefully reminded ourselves of any asymmetrical power between the university and the community, while also reminding ourselves that asymmetry can be reversed based on different contexts and spaces we entered. PAR expands the sphere of who is counted as a researcher by extending that role beyond students and professors to include mothers, youth, teachers, librarians, volunteers, and organizers. Yosso's (2006) Community Cultural Wealth theory (CCW) gives specific content to critical education theory's concern with power relations (Giroux, 2023) by identifying areas in which power asymmetries are likely to form. Yosso (2006) distinguishes six types of community cultural capital: Aspirational, Familial, Linguistic, Navigational, Resistant, and Social. Aspirational capital is the ability to generate hopes and dreams and, despite challenges, persevere in pursuit and realization of them (p. 41). Familial capital is knowledge nurtured among kin that inculcates community history, memory, and cultural intuition (p. 48). Linguistic capital points to intellectual and social skills learned in communication experiences using language(s) (p. 43). Navigational capital consists in skills at maneuvering through social institutions (p. 44). Resistant capital expresses skill learned from challenging inequality, oppression, and systematic injustice (p. 49). Social capital concerns networks of community resources and peer support (p. 45). As our study progressed we noticed that familial, linguistic, and social capital surfaced most frequently in our interactions with participants. Linguistic capital was evident throughout our data collection and interaction with our community partners where interviews, observations, and casual conversations were in a language other than English, most often Spanish. Developing linguistic capital among researchers and participants enriched us, our community partners, and our data collection. A strong sense of family is fundamental to the Horizon team both internally and in interactions with families in the district. Newcomers shared values with the family

engagement specialist with whom they worked. Continuous creation of social capital is the aim of Horizon's community school leader who works tirelessly to expand and nurture the community partners and resources she brings into Horizon. By modeling the leveraging of social capital, her staff and even the families supported by Horizon were able to see how they could also extend their own social capital and create new networks of resources. Figure 1 provides a model of our theoretical framework describing how we approached our study of Horizon's creation of community wealth in the interest of improved power relations among newcomer families to Hatlen School District:

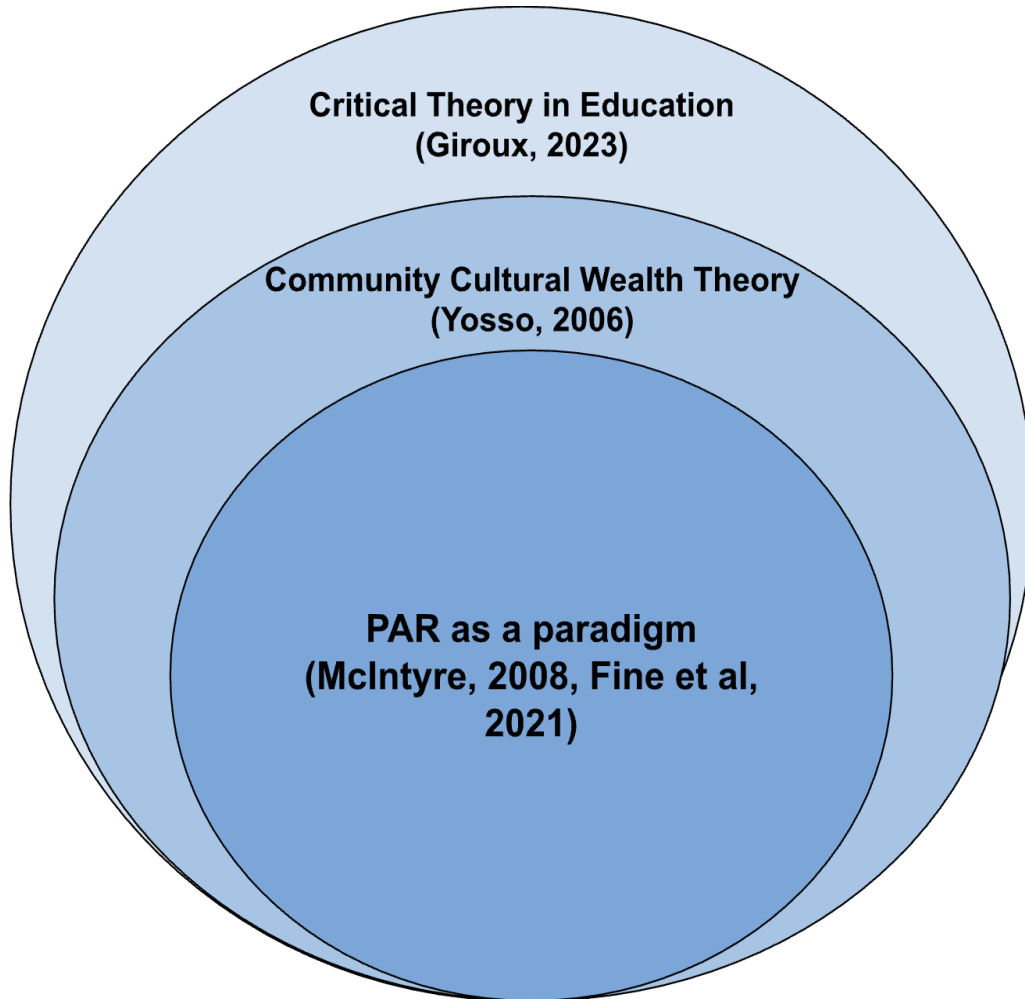


Figure 1: Critical Theory Focused through Community Wealth Theory to Understand Horizon's Success

Immigration Challenges, Community Schools, and School-College Partnerships

To understand the magnitude of its achievements with newcomer families to the Hatlen School District, Horizon's goals, influences, and structures must be contextualized in the politics of immigration, the community school district model, and the potential community schools create for school-college partnerships. According to Passel and Krogstad (2025), there are approximately 14 million undocumented immigrants in the US. Approximately 40% had some protection from removal. However, "these protections can be, and in some cases have been,

removed by the federal government, sometimes with little notification” (Passel & Krogstad, 2025, n.p.). Disappearing protections were evident in the summer of 2025, when U.S. immigration enforcement intensified across the country. Undocumented people were stopped, arrested, and taken away from their families and communities by masked Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents (Hesson et al., 2025). People were taken away and held in overcrowded immigration detention centers (Jarvie & Solis, 2025). Perception of the immigration issue as binary (legal vs. illegal) is too simplistic. Motomura (2014, p. 192) reminds us that there is a problem with this view because “...it disregards both US immigration history and the current state of immigration law and policy.” Every immigration case is different and every immigrant, even undocumented immigrants, have different, albeit, limited options available to them. Motomura (Ibid.) observes, “...the immigration law system is one of selective admissions, selective enforcement, and vast unpredictable and inconsistent discretion.” While simultaneously not wanting them to integrate into the society they helped build (Bosniak, 2008), selection of whom is allowed into the US is often tied to labor demands that cannot be met by documented citizens and residents (Garcia, 1980; Green, 2003). Lastly, ICE agents across the country, including at our research site in Hatlen, now have access to sensitive locations like schools, places of worship, and healthcare facilities, where they once did not (Crudo Blackburn & Callaghan, 2026). Oversurveillance, always prominent in communities where undocumented immigrants live, is now heightened and expanded to include institutions that work with newcomers to the country, such as community schools.

When discussing an issue as complex and large-scale as immigration in the United States, one must try to envision a better future to (re)shape the present. Sonny Villamor (2005) shares how transformational leadership utilizes vision, example, and challenges to inspire a community to take shared ownership in a joint creation of change. A transformational leader develops relationships of high expectations and high-levels of support that empower and motivate others to collaborate and innovate. When a community is faced with change, visionary-focused leadership can create positive motivation, partnership formation, and community empowerment (Pitler, 2024). Transformative leadership finds ways to continue radical care in disruptive times. Rebecca Lowenhaupt and colleagues assessed COVID-19 responses from high-immigrant population school districts. They discovered the importance of sustaining, adaptive, and innovative leadership practices for all, but most specifically for immigrant families. Lowenhaupt et. al. (2025, p. 523) found “...leadership practice was both shaped by and shaped immigrant contexts of reception through disruption.”

Community school models function optimally under transformative leadership. A community school model seeks to meet student needs to improve student academic achievement (Castrechini et al. 2012, Zehr 2011, Fehrer et al. 2016, Sanders et al. 2005). While assessing a community school response to unequal access to educational resources, Medina et al. (2020) performed a PAR study that found collaborative leadership, family engagement, culturally relevant practices, and family support all create an effective community school system. Fehrer et al. (2016) and Sanders et al. (2005) also found that leadership and intentional family engagement are the two most discussed capacities for establishing and maintaining an effective community school. Family engagement, in a community school context, means an intentional and reciprocal partnership between a school (or district) and the families that send their children to that school (or district). When students’ physical, social, and emotional needs are met, they can succeed in school (Diamond et al. 2016). But the community school model extends past student achievement to foster the development of a complex interconnected relationship between

schools, community organizations, community members, students, and families (Fehrer et al. 2016, Holme et al. 2022). Central to supporting family engagement to best enhance a child's educational well-being, a school (or district) keeps the parents of students informed about and involved in their child's education, regardless of the family's ability to provide resources for their child's educational journey (Ferrara, 2011). Considering the current family demographic of Hatlen, it is crucial to keep in mind that family engagement is affected by multiple factors, including language differences, immigration status, parent education level, family socioeconomic level, and differing family values (Peña, 2000). We acknowledge these important factors in studying the family engagement efforts of Horizon.

Combining research on community schools, school leadership, and immigrant communities, Lowenhaupt and Montgomery (2018) highlight the challenges faced by school districts with growing immigrant populations. They advocate for university-school partnerships, like ours, utilizing PAR to assess quality of school-family communication, looking especially for ways to bridge communication gaps stemming from cultural and linguistic differences. Similarly, Song (2022) used PAR within a university-school partnership to investigate how translanguaging pedagogy — intentionally using multiple languages in the classroom — can increase the engagement of parents in their bilingual children's education. Intentional use of multiple languages surfaced several times in our study and was especially noted in our findings. Our college-school research partnership highlights the power of PAR to enhance collaboration among teachers, students, and families; and was instructive for our own study of immigrant communities and how community schools address newcomer needs. Our study examines the interconnectedness of leadership and caring for immigrant families that has developed at Horizon. We provide the story behind Horizon's organizational structure with in-depth portrayals of two individuals who created the Hatlen community school district. Educators have much to learn from the philosophies, qualities, values, and practices of Horizon's leaders.

Enacting a College-School PAR

Our college research team worked to share the opportunity of decision-making with the members of Horizon as much as possible. Our PAR relationship allowed our team the ability to enter into the Hatlen community alongside trusted members who helped ground our research in the voices of community members to whom they were actively providing resources. The current iteration of the research partnership discussed here is a longitudinal study which builds off the research into Horizon carried out by two previous years' classes of undergraduate students, their professor, and community schools partners. Our team chose to use a mixed qualitative approach collecting data from fieldnotes during site observations and conducting semi-structured interviews with key informants. The research design is outlined in Figure 2 on the next page. We found it instructive how PAR can be used to create systemic family engagement strategies. PAR's emphasis on collaboration empowers families to contribute to shaping school practices and fostering stronger partnerships through the encouragement of parental engagement (Pushor, 2018). While university-school partnerships (USP) are effective in developing short and long-term solutions for family engagement in schools, there is mixed discourse about the efficacy of USPs as evaluative avenues (Booth et. al. 2003; Provinzano 2018; Yapa 2009). According to Provinzano (2018), USPs provide a new lens to evaluate programming and can make improvements that would be otherwise hard to identify. Specific obstacles to effective evaluative partnerships include creating diverse methods of engagement, effective implementation of methods, bridging the gap between policy and research, and ensuring a long-term viability of the partnership

(Booth et. al. 2003). Centering research on communication and shared values can help USPs using PAR avoid these common pitfalls.

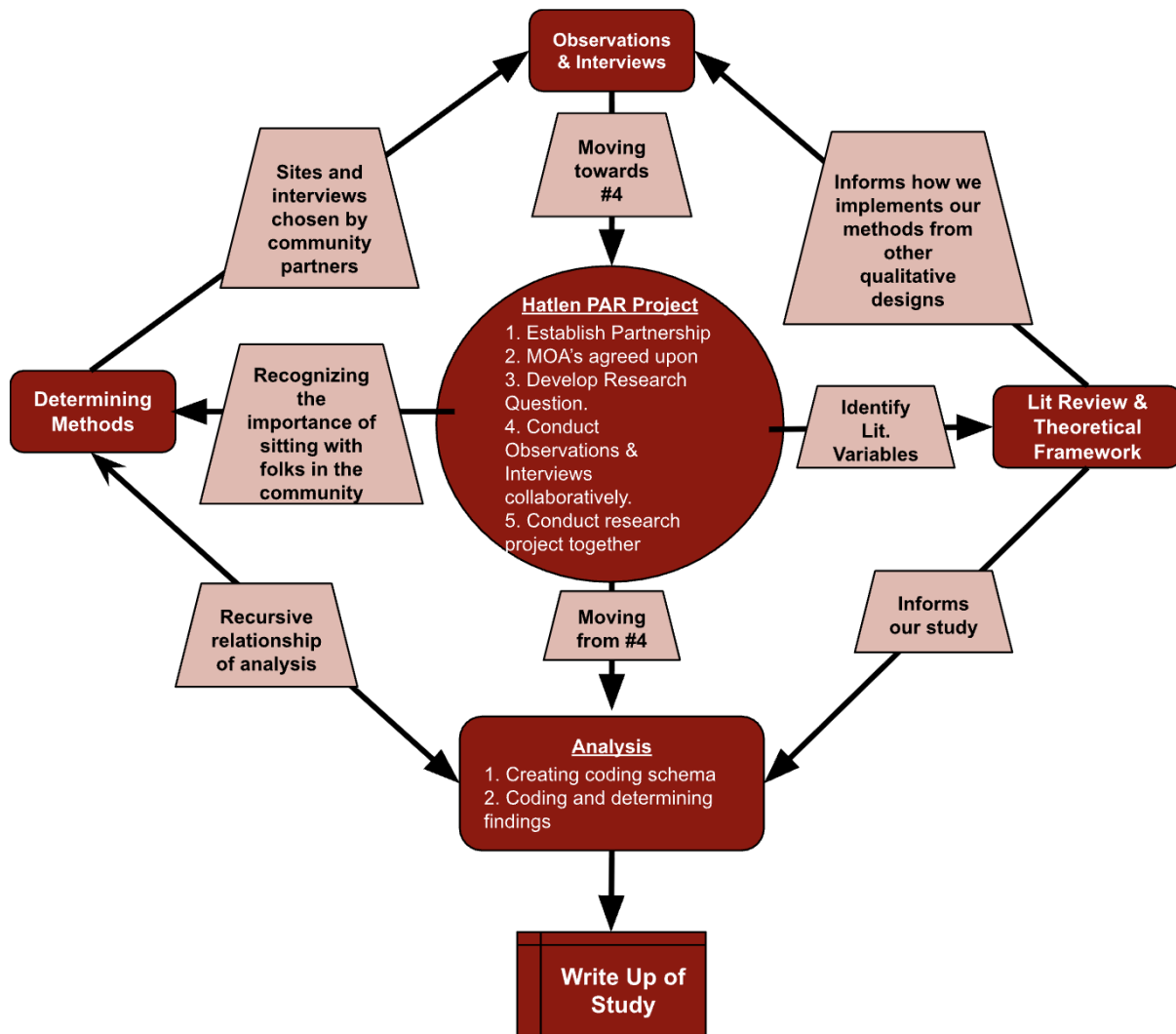


Figure 2: Horizon-Vassar Research Partnership

Data Sources: Our research team worked alongside participants (the community school director and the family engagement specialists of Horizon) to select 11 observation sites and 24 interviewees for data collection. Sites were chosen as hubs of community in terms of location, participants, and programming. Observations focused on sites that showcased Horizon directly involved in family engagement. The research team also emphasized sites observed in previous iterations of this research partnership. All twenty-five (25) interviews and twenty-six (26) observations were conducted from March 2024 to May 2024. Our team interviewed a range of school personnel including the current superintendent and a former superintendent, principals (3), school staff (3); community members including parents (8) and community organization partners (2); Horizon staff (5, including family engagement specialists); and the community schools leader (twice). Each semi-structured interview ran to no more than an hour in length. Bilingual members of the research team conducted some interviews in Spanish or a combination of Spanish and English. Table 1 (next page) describes the observation schedule.

Event	Event Duration	Location	Total Observations
Adult English Class	3 hours	Hatlen High School	3
Art Program	45 minutes	Hatlen Library	4
Digital Tech Class	2, 90-minute sessions	Immigrant Rights Organization	3
English Language Education	90 minutes	Immigrant Rights Organization	3
Family Yoga Storytime	45 minutes	Hatlen Library	2
Minecraft Day	1 hour	Hatlen Library	2
Mobile Food Pantry	2, 1 hour deliveries	Hatlen Elementary	2
Mother Goose Time	45 minutes	Hatlen Library	2
Parent-Child Class	2 hours	Immigrant Rights Organization	1
Reading with Pets	45 minutes	Hatlen Library	2
Story and Crafts	45 minutes	Hatlen Library	2

Table 1: Number and Description of Observations

Data Analysis: After transcribing the interviews, we analyzed the data through multiple levels of qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2021). As our research team shifted composition due to members of our team leaving after graduation or to pursue other commitments, we have continuously coded and re-coded our data to identify connections across entries and salient themes. In addition, multiple research team meetings spanning 2 years were crucial in thinking and rethinking our research project. At times, we moved back to move forward. For example, our two research foci of leadership and newcomers were fine-tuned through repeated conversations about what we could extract from our data. Reconsideration required us to start anew and revisit previously coded data and at times recode some data. In one instance, we went so far as to re-interview the community school leader and compare the second interview to the original to see what differences, if any, existed.

A Source of Horizon's Success: Leadership Philosophy Responsive to Constant Change

While there are many lessons to learn from Hatlen's district-wide community schools model, the most significant findings were the success of their leadership and the responsiveness of their methods for welcoming newcomer families. Exploring the values embedded in Horizon's leadership philosophy assists in understanding the organization's ability to welcome newcomer families on the families' own terms and to meet their needs. The scope of Horizon's community school model operating on a district-wide scale is impressive, but the success of the organization lies in the values that constitute Horizon's philosophy. The Horizon leaders have employed intentional leadership practices grounded in a core principle of building strong relationships. Focusing on strength of relationships with families and community partners allows Horizon to respond to the Hatlen community at all times, including times of crisis. To understand the connection between values and practice constantly forged and reforged at Horizon, one can look to Dave, the former superintendent who envisioned the movement of creating a community-school district at HSD, and Ruth, the current Horizon leader who has made the community-school district vision a reality.

Dave: Beginning as a teacher, Dave held many positions in the district before becoming superintendent of HSD. After hearing about the community schools model, Dave recognized shifting needs of the community as a reason to create a community school district: “The demographics had changed since I first started in the district to where I was. Significantly, poverty levels increased while enrollment was increasing... the community became predominantly Latino. So doing things the way we did in the past is not the way we were going to do things now.” Dave was assessing needs of those around him and, in order to respond to changes in the community, he understood the potential of pivoting to develop a new model. A core value of Horizon is understanding through relationships. Acting as a community organization, Horizon emphasizes building relationships with community members and organizations. Strong relationships help target services, but also keep Horizon in the know about who’s living in Hatlen and what’s going on in their lives. Horizon is embedded in the community because they recognize the necessity of knowing their population in order to serve their population. However, the goal of Horizon is not just to help people, but to re-imagine Hatlen as an inclusive community where people work together to meet their needs. Tasked with bringing his vision of a community school district into reality, Dave needed to find a leader who could make it happen. He took a chance on Ruth. Ruth worked as a special education teacher in HSD. After volunteering at the mobile food pantry, Ruth observed that serving direct needs (food) left families vulnerable to other unmet needs (lack of weather protection, lack of childcare, lack of time). Ruth shared possible solutions with her former principal, who passed the ideas on to Dave. Dave recognized Ruth’s ability to see the bigger picture while valuing the humanity of the individual. He approached her to partner with him in creating what is now known as Horizon.

The philosophy of “Maslow before Bloom,” which means, as Dave shares, “making sure that everyone is cared for, not only just academically, but socially, emotionally” is core to the construction and implementation of Horizon. The “Maslow before Bloom” approach requires seeing the person through the need, regardless of age, education, or immigration status. Subordinating Bloom’s Taxonomy to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs expresses how students must have their basic needs met before they can reasonably be expected to learn. This mantra is more than words: Dave and Ruth breathe this philosophy into every action and decision, and this commitment to enacting their beliefs inspires others to do so, too. To Horizon, everyone in Hatlen is part of the community. Horizon’s communitarian outlook is exemplified through Horizon’s Block Party, an annual event before the beginning of the school year for community organizations to gather with information, food, games, and resources. Dave shares: “...it brought families from everywhere to these hot streets of Hatlen... But it wasn’t just for these families and that families... it brought the whole entire community, you are a high SES or low SES, right? [It] brought together people as a community and brought administrators and teachers and staff. We were just there and we got to know each other.” Horizon is situated as a resource for every single person in the community as they understand that the wellness of each relies on the wellness of the whole. The network of partnerships Horizon has built in Hatlen reflects Dave and Ruth’s philosophy of helping the whole person. For example, family visits to the mobile food pantry have been created to emphasize dignity and ease as much as getting food into people’s hands. Adult English classes and library story times understand their attendees and cater instruction and material to the specific needs of the group. The alignment of values between Horizon, its partner organizations, and the community creates a joint ownership over Hatlen resources and partnerships that generates success in large- and small-scale engagement. These partnerships do not solely provide resources for the families, but actively build community.

Ruth: Ruth's ability to center humanity in her role as Horizon's leader has allowed her to create strong connections and inspire those around her to do the same. Expressing the drastic positive change stemming from working with Ruth, the principal of a school Horizon partners with said: "In the beginning there was nothing, we had nothing for families. If we needed school supplies, we bought them out of the school district budget. [Ruth] has brought partners to us... she brings these events, and through those events, we're able to then find out what more do you need as a family?" But the best showcase of Ruth's capacity for community leadership is the team of volunteers and Family Engagement Specialists — all bilingual, immigrant mothers with children attending school in the district — she has assembled and trained to become leaders in the work they do with families. The team who works to meet needs of families in the district employs Horizon's values of awareness, empathy, and diligence. Ruth shares a proud moment as a Community Schools Leader:

We had a family who was moved into a shelter, and there was a period where they were not coming to school because we couldn't figure out what was going on. And I'm so proud of my family engagement team, because this individual said to me, "I'm really upset. This family is now missing a week of school, and we're not set up for next week. Can you help me?" And so I did. I dropped everything. I got on the phone. And I was so proud of this moment that they advocated for this family, and that whole mission of we remove barriers. And that we will do whatever it takes for kids. That was a proud moment for me, that they came to me and that they know that that's what we do. So we collectively came together to figure it out. And I reached out to United Way and I said, "Can we use your Lyft services? I know that you have them, but they're individualized right now." And she said, "Yes, absolutely." And then our family couldn't figure out how to use Lyft. My staff member left work at five o'clock last Tuesday and drove down to the shelter to figure out how to make it happen. So that's I think a proud moment.

First, the staff member felt safe and confident enough to speak out when they noticed something was wrong. They then invoked the Maslow before Bloom philosophy because the student could not learn and grow if they couldn't get to school. Next, Horizon connected with one of its many local organizations to leverage resources. When roadblocks occurred, the leaders changed the system to meet their needs. And finally, staff patiently invested time well-spent to ensure they were connecting genuinely with families and meeting their exact needs.

Horizon is not special because it makes sure families can get to school. It is special because the leaders of Horizon have established clear values of relationships, dignity, and intentionality to drive the creation of thoughtful, genuine networks of hardworking, compassionate people. This network of nonprofit organizations, donations, mobile services, childcare opportunities, adult classes, and countless other groups and services was built with purpose and care by select leaders in the community. Dave and Ruth enacted a philosophy of forming genuine relationships with everyone in the community to not only assess individual needs, but also to gauge a community member's ability to contribute to other people's needs. Persistent, creative, diligent, and ambitious, Dave and Ruth form meaningful connections with those around them to leverage assets within the community. Horizon represents a complete community schools model in theory and in practice. The values of Horizon spread power to everyone, regardless of resources, ability, or identity, to engage in a collective vision of a shared community that meets the needs of all its residents. Horizon's value-based model allows for the community school district to be adaptable

to any need presented. Dave reiterates this promise stating: "...in Hatlen this is who we are and we're a welcoming environment, and whoever comes in here, you're going to get served and served well. But the other part of it is always with this mindset of we have to evolve, right? Because our families are changing and the influx of families might be different, but whatever happens, we're going to take care of you." Horizon cannot solve every problem and meet every need, but values put into practice by Horizon's leaders, partners, and community members lay foundation for creative, intentional, timely problem-solving to meet present and future challenges, especially those involving newcomer/immigrant families. By positioning humanity as its central virtue, Horizon continues to evolve in sync with the Hatlen community.

Meeting the Changing Needs of Newcomer/Immigrant Families

While Horizon seeks to meet the needs of all families in their district, newcomer families have specific needs such as adapting to a new country as well as school. Most immigrants in Hatlen come from Latin America, so, to continue the organization's standard of serving families well, Horizon directly needed staff who understand Spanish and understand the cultures from which families come. Equally important was a staff that honored knowing a language other than English as being an asset, not a deficit, imbuing interactions with the form of cultural wealth Yosso (2006) refers to as linguistic capital. Horizon's staff, with the exception of the Community School Leader, shares with the families they serve the experience of being bilingual, immigrant mothers with children in the district. Family engagement specialists relate to and communicate with newcomer/immigrant families to help them navigate a new place and new country. As one of the most senior staff members said:

Sobre todo con estos padres nuevos que recién llegan al país y obviamente la mayoría llegan de países latinoamericanos... Y se encuentran con un mundo que no conocen y para eso estamos nosotros

Especially with these new parents who have just arrived in the country, and obviously most of them come from Latin American countries... And they find themselves in a world they don't know, and that's why we're here.

The staff member's comment exemplifies how the Horizon staff see their purpose: To respond to families in need is "Why we're here." Horizon remains strong in its mission that every community member is a person first. Family engagement specialists approach every new family, immigrant or not, from an asset-based framework designed to invest in newcomer and needy families all the forms of capital Yosso (2006) identifies as community cultural wealth. When newcomer families become part of the Horizon "family" their familial capital increases exponentially. Family engagement specialists increase families' social capital by connecting newcomers to community resources and informing them of opportunities to seek peer support. Additional support with accessing available resources increases navigational capital. Family engagement specialists are well-versed in working within the system. Interaction with Horizon staff and at Horizon events enhances linguistic capital among newcomers by engaging them in bilingual conversation. Horizon fosters strong resistance capital by demonstrating time and again that systemic injustice need not remain unresolved. Invested with greater community cultural wealth across the board, families are able to improve their own aspirational capital as opportunities arise to imagine and to realize hopes and dreams. Relationships built between community members and staff are the reason the organization can meet so many needs. Every Horizon-related interaction creates new community cultural wealth.

As immigration continues to spin into a political conversation about scarcity of resources and limited availability of support, Horizon's philosophy remains a clear and simple beam of hope, offering intentional support and completing connections so more families' needs can be met. Though Horizon's leadership recognizes that there is a current rise in immigrants and immigration enforcement, they do not view it as a crisis. When responding to the notion of an "immigrant crisis," Dave, a former superintendent of the district, said: "I wouldn't say crisis. I think folks really started to say that because we started to see them, not just a few but a number of our families coming in, recent immigrants. And I think there was a real urgency to really think about how we address the needs of all our families. And more importantly, and I give credit to a lot of the staff, is really thinking carefully about the individual stories of those said by students and those said by families." When Horizon started to see numbers of immigrants rise, they did not see the newcomers as being the problem. Instead, the problem that needed to be solved was how they were to help these newcomers integrate into the district. Every time a new family moved into the district, Horizon did an intake interview to see what their needs were and quickly directed them to any existing resources. If these resources did not exist, then Ruth, the Horizon community school leader, added it to her list of things she needed to find and provide for her families and students. The problem was not, "There are too many people!" Rather, the challenge was, "How can we best serve all these new people?"

Horizon shines in its ability directly to confront and contain problems and situations. An example of this devotion to all families can be found in the vignette below that tragically but fully illustrates the types of cases Horizon helps out with when newcomer families first arrive.

Vignette - "When is Mommy arriving?"

Claudia, a Horizon family specialist, we interviewed in her native Spanish, provided an account of one of the children in Hatlen who had a short time in the district. We provide Claudia's actual response in Spanish and then offer our English translation. Claudia said,

El caso de una niña. Llamé para hacer una cita. Respondió su padre. Luego pregunté por su madre, y el padre me dijo que su madre había fallecido. Entonces vino y me dijo que había llegado hacía unos cinco años. Y ella [la madre] llegó después con los dos niños, y por alguna razón, la deportaron y dejaron pasar a los niños, ya que su padre estaba aquí. Bueno, [la madre] intentó cruzar de nuevo y murió. Y él me dijo que los niños acababan de llegar. O sea, no había estado con sus hijos en cinco años. Y me dijo que ni siquiera sabía cómo decirles que su madre nunca volvería a casa. Me preguntaban todos los días: "¿Y cuándo llega mami? ¿Cuándo llega mami? ¿Cuándo llega mami?". Y bueno, yo estoy ahí para contarles esa historia a los maestros de la niña, porque muchas veces, un maestro ve a un niño triste y muchas veces no se acerca, y no tiene la humanidad de preguntar: "Mi hijo,

A case of a little girl. I called to make an appointment. Then her father answers. Then I [ask for] her mother, and the father tells me that her mother died. So, he came and told me that he had come about five years before. And she [the mother] came later with the two children, and for some reason, they deported her and let the children cross since their father was here. Well, [the mother] tried to cross again and died. And he told me that the children had just arrived. I mean, he hadn't been with his children for five years. And he told me he didn't even know how to tell them that their mother wasn't ever coming home. They asked me every day, "And when is mommy arriving? When is mommy arriving? When is mommy arriving?" And well, I'm there to tell that story to the girl's teachers because many times, a teacher sees a sad child and many times they don't approach

¿qué le pasa?". Si no, simplemente no, ya no quiere estudiar. No, no está prestando atención, pero hay algo más. Así que recuerdo que se lo dije a su maestra, y todos ya lo sabían, sobre todo si llegaba el Día de la Madre, que la trataran con un poco más de cariño, porque su madre había desaparecido.

them, and you don't have the humanity to ask, "My child, what's wrong?" Just simply "No, she doesn't want to study anymore." No, she's not paying attention. There's something else going on. So, I remember having to tell this to her teacher. So now everyone was well aware, and especially when Mother's Day came around, they should treat her with a little more care, because her mother had gone missing.

The vignette expresses the degree of investment that the Horizon staff has with families in their district and also, how much newcomer families trust Horizon with sensitive information like the tragic death of a mother who was trying to reunite with her children but died while crossing the border. The vignette also describes how Horizon intercedes on behalf of the grief-stricken father to explain to his daughter's teachers what had befallen the girl's mother. As educators, we may see students who are withdrawn and may not know the enormous burdens they may carry with them to school. Claudia's vignette is an important reminder to all who work with students that withdrawal, even misbehaving, may not be malicious in intent but unsuccessful ways of coping with tragedy and/or trauma.

"Everyone Is Community:" Horizon's Unifying Theoretical-Practical Principle

The task of meeting basic and complex needs for thousands of families is monumental, but the Horizon leaders' ability to connect, combine, and empower has established a community that can accomplish the goal of meeting the many needs of a growing and diverse community. They do not ask, "Why are you here?" They ask, "How can we help?" While talking with Dave, Ruth, commenting on the scope of services provided, said: "We have a bigger thing going on here. We're not just at one school. We have all of this." The issues within the Hatlen community, the country, and the world are big, but so are the partnerships, services, and relationships created by Horizon. Supporting newcomer families is a difficult task that requires resources, staff, funding, empathy, and time, but it is possible. While many school districts in the United States are unable to provide adequate support for their newcomer families, HSD's Horizon demonstrates that, with the proper structure and leadership, meeting the needs of newcomer families is achievable. However, Horizon is notable not just for the scope of its district-wide community school efforts or for effective implementation, but also for the resilient community, the genuine relationships of care and support they have built. By centering the humanity of all people, Horizon fosters relationships of genuine care to build the trust necessary to meet people's needs — especially the complex needs of a newcomer family. Identifying the assets in everyone, including community members, school personnel, and community organizations, allows Horizon to leverage the community to share collective goods and services on a district-wide scale. Horizon empowers all members of the community, especially those with shared identities, stories, and language, to help create a community for newcomers. The leaders of Horizon have a strong vision of creating community for everyone in Hatlen and a philosophy of always meeting the need. Pairing this vision with tireless implementation creates partnerships, structures, and relationships that not only achieve the initial goal of meeting needs but also inspire others to join in the collective action working toward the Horizon vision for Hatlen's community.

With the current increased visibility of immigration in the United States, the ability to meet the needs of all families in diverse situations is deeply important for schools and school districts. Experience with an influx of immigrant families and increased needs to meet inside and outside of school are not unique to Hatlen School District and Horizon. But Horizon's success in Hatlen may very well be a one-of-a-kind response to greater numbers of immigrants moving to a community. Shining a spotlight on a school district working tirelessly to meet the needs of its community can provide information and ideas on how to replicate Horizon's success in other school districts and the communities those districts serve. The values employed by the community schools leader, the family engagement specialists, and all of their community partners were established at the inception of Horizon and, regardless of the people involved or the environment in need of improvement, those principles persist through every conversation and decision. Horizon does not need to reconstruct their approach to meeting community needs because their organization was created for perpetual reconstruction as it constantly adapts and readapts to changing community circumstances and emerging needs of community members. As we move further into this current era of ICE raids and widespread deportation fears, further studies of Horizon-like structures of hope, safety, and support become necessary. However, the members of Horizon are clear that their operations transcend headlines and crises. Schools play a pivotal role in the lives of many newcomer families, and the community school model expands avenues of support. Participatory Action Research partnerships between a college and a school district provide university-level researchers the opportunity to inquire into and experience creation of community cultural wealth by building mutually beneficial research partnerships centering respect, trust, and knowledge-sharing. Future studies exploring the impact of district-wide community school models on newcomer families can shed light on social processes that shift division into community, fear into hope, and powerlessness into potential.

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Transforming Urban Charter Schools Through Reality Pedagogy: A Case Study of Teachers' Confidence, Competence, and Connection

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Abstract: To evaluate the effectiveness of professional development in raising cultural sensitivity among teachers in an urban charter school, I used a mixed-method case study to investigate how teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse populations develop self-efficacy in enhancing students' engagement in study of curriculum. Findings show an increased understanding among teachers of students' cultural differences increased teacher confidence in managing culturally diverse classes. Findings also highlight professional development in reality pedagogy as a process that combines study and practice in cultural competence. Culturally appropriate methods help lead to enhanced learning conditions free from prejudice against students, especially those from vulnerable groups.

Delivery of education in the United States of America exhibits deep inequalities, with learners of color being among the most ill-affected by typical educational practice (Gee et al., 2023). Black, Latine, and Indigenous children face challenges, such as limited access to educational opportunities, relevant curriculum, and quality tutors and teaching resources, that negatively affect educational achievement (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022; Wirtz, 2021). Educational disparities are even more pronounced in urban areas where socio-economic factors — both relative and absolute poverty — further widen the achievement gap (Goudeau et al., 2021). Black and Hispanic students perform poorly on standardized tests and drop out of school at alarming rates compared to their White counterparts (Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023). Moreover, teacher populations comprise mainly White persons who tend to remain culturally distant from the students of color they serve. Cultural disconnect is a major contributor to educational disparities (Arar & Tlili, 2024; Alam & Mohanty, 2023). Cultural competence is imperative in addressing educational disparities because culturally competent teachers can create learning environments that enhance students' academic and socio-emotional development, particularly when students originate from culturally diverse backgrounds. (Van Pham, 2024; Pandey, 2024). Nevertheless, teacher education programs provide little preparation for educators to successfully instruct students of color, which results in ineffective teaching (Singun, 2025). Lack of culturally relevant practice prevents educators from promoting educationally sustaining relationships with children of color (Henshaw, 2022; Thomas & Larwin, 2023). I investigate the promise of reality pedagogy (Emdin, 2016), an approach to curriculum delivery that respects students' lived experiences, as a way of enhancing cultural competence among teachers and improving teacher self-efficacy in narrowing the achievement gap for students of color, especially in culturally diverse urban contexts. Because more students attend urban schools as part of the general trend of urbanization across the globe, teachers must be ready and able to address cultural differences that students bring into the classroom (Roshanaei et al., 2023).

The Role of Cultural Competence in Addressing Educational Disparities

Despite longterm recognition of the cultural/racial achievement gap, its sources and possible solutions are still subject to debate (Rochmes, 2024). What is needed for resolution of the debate is a conceptual framework rich enough to support exploration of existing difficulties and challenges surrounding instruction of culturally diverse students that moves us towards a theory

of school transformation. To explain enhancement of instruction in ways significant for diverse learners I combine Emdin's (2016) reality pedagogy, Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory (SCT), and Rogers' (1983) diffusion of innovation theory to provide a comprehensive perspective on the development of cultural competence among a group of urban teachers. The reality pedagogy proposed by Christopher Emdin examines traditional teacher-student relationships and casts students, particularly those from marginalized groups, as holders of cultural knowledge. Emdin helps teachers consider students as significant stakeholders in the learning process, and makes everyone in the classroom responsible for learning. Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory presupposes that factors such as cognition, behavior, and environment play significant roles in learning, and proposes that self-reflective observation improves educators' knowledge, skill, and self-efficacy as culture-sensitive teachers. SCT positions educators to assess the effectiveness of professional development in contributing to inclusion of diverse students when planning and carrying out instruction (Sümen & Öncel, 2021), a factor that leads to improvement in students' academic achievement and social development (Dignath et al., 2022). Everett Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory helps explain how innovative ideas such as reality pedagogy spread throughout educational organizations. Rogers describes five stages of adoption of innovation: pre-adoption, incipient adoption, adoption decision, adoption, and post-adoption (Oyelana et al., 2021). I use these three theorists — Emdin, Bandura, Rogers — to describe how teachers at Brilliant Charter School [a pseudonym] embraced and then integrated reality pedagogy into their teaching practice based on professional development that promoted cognitive and behavioral changes in instruction to match a reconstructed school environment instituting a policy of reality pedagogy. Perceived educational benefits and policy compatibility with changes in instructional environment facilitated diffusion of innovation.

Cultural competence is a recognized term in professional practice that refers to mastering cultural variability in carrying out job responsibilities. From the education perspective, cultural competence encompasses not only appreciation of ethnic origins of students but also addressivity of students' needs in classroom practice. Teachers adept at cultural competence are more effective for learners of color (Liu et al., 2021; Mgonja et al., 2021). According to Hosseini et al. (2025), educators who learn to appreciate cultural diversity among students tend to obtain better results from learners because they allow students to appreciate themselves and feel welcome in a culturally diverse classroom. A sense of belonging boosts student performance, self-esteem, and interest (Van Pham, 2024) Even though teachers may not be conscious of it, their prejudices and biases manifest within classrooms. Teachers who originate from privileged White backgrounds are not ready to address cultural and socioeconomic realities of students in urban schools (Gómez-Redondo et al., 2024). Brown et al. (2022) also notes that White teachers who practice in urban settings often unintentionally adopt a cultural model of education based on their own upbringing that is incompatible with their students' cultural norms and perspectives, resulting in a cultural modeling mismatch. Wirtz (2021) acknowledged that there was discrimination when Black students received more punishment for the same misconduct as White students. But bias exists not only in discipline but in other domains, as well, including academic behaviors and manners, and even in classroom social dynamics (Rimban, 2024). Educators may have stereotypical beliefs that could cause them to expect less from students of color and these assumptions decrease minoritized students' chances for academic achievement (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022). Kaufman and Killen (2022) show that even when teachers thought they were being fair with students, implicit prejudice still affected their behavior regarding support and discipline

of students.

Cultural competence is more than awareness of cultural facts; it also requires willingness and ability to question oneself, break down prejudices, and support students equitably in the classroom (Liu et al., 2021). Urban schools, populated with racially integrated students and students from prominent subgroups, pose several complexities that hinder efforts to mainstream versatile, culturally appropriate teaching practices (Franco et al., 2024). Schools in urban areas tend to serve underprivileged populations and are mostly overcrowded and poorly equipped, making it difficult for teachers to attend to cultural difference among students (Aijaz et al., 2024; Leithwood, 2021). Furthermore, teachers in urban settings experience stress and burnout from managing students' behavior and attending to students' needs, including poverty, trauma, and other forms of familylessness (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2023). Such challenges block teachers from practicing the reflective process required when cultivating cultural consciousness. In addition, curriculum studied in numerous urban schools remains focused on majority group standards and content while ignoring students' cultural backgrounds (Ramirez et al., 2021). As a result, students of color are further distanced from the curriculum since it does not do justice to the viewpoints and experiences of minoritized peoples (Thomas & Larwin, 2023). Deculturation of schooling is the result when students see no relevance to their own cultural reality in what is taught. Culturally responsive teaching, therefore, requires a shift in teacher and learner practices and enrichment of the content of curriculum to reflect the experience of cultures with which learners identify (Anugrah et al., 2024).

The Need for Transformative Teacher Professional Development

Continuation among educators of biased tendencies is directly related to absence of cultural sensitivity curriculum from teacher preparation courses (Yip & Ji, 2024). Despite the various benefits of cultural competence, most teacher preparation programs fail to adequately prepare educators to handle diversity (Yip & Chakma, 2024), a shortcoming most apparent in urban schools where large numbers of learners come from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds. Teachers do not always have the capacity to assess bias within themselves or to understand how their interactions might positively or negatively impact students from culturally diverse groups (Berson et al., 2025). Continual professional development is particularly important in addressing the cultural competence gap (Matschiner, 2023). However, many traditional professional development programs do not equip teachers with materials needed to address multicultural classrooms (Egara & Mosia, 2025), nor do they provide advice on how cultural sensitivity can be practically put into use (Al-Kamzari & Alias, 2025; Kouijzer et al., 2023). Thus, professional development does not lead to more effective teaching because it fails to change teachers' attitudes and beliefs about diversity. The importance of sustained, first-hand professional development in helping improve teachers' working practices cannot be overly emphasized (Romijn et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). Teachers who undertake extended professional development programs designed to promote cultural competence have better relations with learners in multicultural classrooms (Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2021). However, cultural competence programs cannot merely be named diversity training: Professional development has to provide a way for faculty to learn to teach in light of students' own culture and experiences to address structural factors that impact educational attainment (Marshall, 2024; Medvide, 2022).

That teacher professional development works best when based on understanding of students' lived reality is a core principle of Emdin's (2016) concept of reality pedagogy. Reality pedagogy

helps teachers change their mindset and see their students not as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge but as engaged participants in the knowledge construction process (Ling et al., 2025). Using students' culturally relevant identities and encouraging students to co-construct knowledge as they study curriculum, reality pedagogy denies traditional models of teaching and learning and creates a more fair and culturally sensitive classroom experience (Vespone, 2023). Reality pedagogy provides a perspective from which power relations may be levelled in a classroom (Bae et al., 2021). While scholars have documented the need for cultural competence in teacher preparation and personal development (Anugrah et al., 2024; Romijn et al., 2021), there remains a gap in the literature regarding the specific impact of reality pedagogy in fostering cultural competence in urban teachers (Soto et al., 2024). Most research on culturally responsive teaching focuses on negative teacher attitudes, the implementation of diversity training, or the design of culturally relevant curricula (Wojuade, 2025). However, there is limited empirical research on how specific teaching frameworks, such as reality pedagogy, influence teachers' practices and their ability to navigate complexities of teaching students of color in urban schools (Hosseini et al., 2025; Rowan et al., 2021). I address this gap by focusing on how an urban charter school used reality pedagogy as a framework for transforming its teaching practices and school climate.

A Case Study of Cultural Competence Development

Two research questions — one broad and quantitative, the other detailed and qualitative (Sopory et al., 2022; Taherdoost, 2022) — guided my mixed-methods case study of processes of change in an urban charter school seeking to enhance the cultural competency of its faculty:

1. To what extent did the professional development program based on reality pedagogy (Emdin, 2016) lead to measurable improvements in teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and cultural competence, as measured by pre-and post-training surveys?
2. How did teachers perceive the impact of reality pedagogy on their teaching practices, particularly in terms of building relationships with students and implementing culturally responsive strategies?

The qualitative question sought detailed insights into teachers' experiences with the intervention, while the quantitative question allowed for estimating effectiveness of the professional development program in terms of changes in teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy and cultural competence.

Context of the Study: The study was conducted in an urban charter school located in a multicultural area of a major city where the majority of students are Black and Latine. The school commenced its operations over a decade ago and has experienced many challenges in addressing academic and socio-emotional needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recently, the institution has been working to tackle educational disparities by incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy into its approach to instruction. At the time of the study, school leadership agreed to undertake a professional development program based on Emdin's reality pedagogy to sensitize teachers and other school staff to cultural competence in hopes of improving learning conditions for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Participants: The participants were 47 school employees including classroom teachers(22), out-of-classroom teachers and staff (18), administrators (4), and specialists (3). Forty-four of the participants were born in the U.S., while 3 had immigrated to the country. The study population included both male (8) and female (39) employees of the school, and included both experienced

teachers and those with little working experience in a school environment. Among participants, years in the profession of education ranged from 2-12 (Mean = 6.4 years with a Standard Deviation of 2.3 years) and years in current position ranged from 2-10 years (M = 6.2 years with SD = 3 years). Subjects were selected using purposive sampling to capture as many elements of the school's workforce as possible. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that selects participants based on specific characteristics or knowledge deemed relevant to the research study (Nikolopoulou, 2023). The sampling approach ensures that the results are generalizable to similar sets of participants due to the sample being representative of the target population. The response rate was 63% of the total staff, which is an adequately large and diverse sample size to generalize the findings to similar target populations. Table 1 gives further demographic details of the study participants.

Age	N	%	Race/Ethnicity	N	%
21-25	1	2.1	White/Caucasian/European American	18	38.2
26-30	11	23.4	Black/African	13	27.6
31-35	10	23.1	Hispanic/Latine	11	23.4
36-40	10	23.1	Ashkenazi Jew	1	2.1
41-45	6	12.8	Culturally Jewish	1	2.1
46-50	4	8.5	White/Hispanic	1	2.1
51-55	4	8.5	Other	2	4.2
56-60	0	0			
61-65	1	2.1			
Education Level			Household Income		
High School	1	2.1	\$20,000	1	2.1
Certificate Program	2	4.2	\$30,000	1	2.1
Associate's Degree	2	4.2	\$40,000	1	2.1
Bachelor's Degree	3	6.3	\$50,000	18	38.2
Master's Degree	39	82.9	\$100,000	24	51.0
			\$200,000	2	4.2

Table 1: Further Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population

Instrument: A pre/post-self-efficacy survey, Our School Survey (See Appendix.), was used to assess teachers' perceived competence and confidence in interacting with culturally diverse students before and after the reality pedagogy intervention. The instrument includes open-ended questions for the qualitative part of the study where teachers were asked to describe in their own words what they had gone through when undertaking the training, how their perception the school environment changed, and how the program influenced their teaching. In addition, survey results were complemented by analysis of training documents, such as workshop agendas, reading materials used, and reflective prompts.

Analysis: For the quantitative component of the study, paired t-tests were performed to assess changes in self-efficacy scores between the pre- and post-training periods. The t-tests enabled direct comparison of changes in teachers' self-ascriptions of competence and confidence about specific aspects of cultural competence, such as multicultural student interactions, dealing with diverse student behaviors, and teacher capacity to create a favorable learning environment.

Bonferroni correction was used to reduce the possibility of type I errors (false positives) and validate results (Francis & Thunell, 2021). Analysis yielded t-values and p-values for each item to establish statistically significant differences between the pre- and post-training. Responses to the open-ended questions were coded using Braun and Clarke's (2024) thematic analysis. The coding process involved two researchers who coded the data and extracted common themes regarding how effective the teachers considered the training to be, the problems they met along the way, and how the program affected interaction with students. Disagreements in coding were settled by researchers involved to ensure reliability of results. Codes were then grouped into categories and sorted into more general themes describing aspects of the teachers' experiences. Themes concerned alterations in instruction, social intermediation, and teacher-student relationships. Quantitative and qualitative results were triangulated to ensure validity and reliability. Triangulation was achieved by comparing the survey results with the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions to help get a systemic view of how reality pedagogy affected teachers' self-efficacy, classroom cultural competence, and instructional practice.

Results: Utilizing paired t-tests, the quantitative analysis of the pre- and post-training self-efficacy (confidence) and knowledge (cultural competence) surveys revealed significant improvements across behaviors targeted by the professional development program. Bonferroni adjustment applied to control for type I errors set the significance level at $p = 0.003$, indicating the effectiveness of the reality pedagogy professional development program. For instance, knowledge on "interactions with students from varied cultural backgrounds" demonstrated a mean score increase from 7.17 (SD = 1.880) pre-training to 8.28 (SD = 1.499) post-training, with a t-value of -7.389. The mean score for self-efficacy on "interactions with students from varied cultural backgrounds" improved from 7.1 (SD = 2.0) to 8.1 (SD = 1.5), with a t-value of -6.448. Mean score on "engagement with diverse students" rose from 7.17 (SD = 1.88) to 8.26 (SD = 1.44) with a t-value of -6.699. Self-efficacy on "engagement with diverse students" increased from 7.17 (SD = 1.85) to 8.19 (SD = 1.48). Similarly, mean score on "valuing cultural difference" rose from 7.79 (SD = 1.78) to 8.26 (SD = 1.44) with a t-value of -5.118. Self-efficacy on "valuing cultural difference" increased from 7.60 (SD = 1.84) to 8.49 (SD = 1.50). Also, when comparing scores for staff of color and White staff, staff of color demonstrated significantly higher post-training self-efficacy. The mean score for staff of color was 8.93 (SD = 1.254) versus 7.63 (SD = 1.023) for White staff.

Results from the quantitative aspect of my study showing improved scores on both self-efficacy and competence among teachers learning about reality pedagogy align with Holmqvist and Lelinge's (2021) findings that participation in professional development programs designed to promote cultural sensitivity among educators improves teacher-learner relations in multicultural classrooms. While lack of culturally sensitive curriculum identifies a deficiency in teacher training (Pandey, 2024; Singun, 2025), culturally sensitive teachers provide classroom conditions that lead to better academic performance (Liu et al., 2021). Most importantly, results of my study confirm the strength of organizational strategy combining reality pedagogy with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1983). Bandura posited that self-efficacy catalyzes the behavior change process. Increased self-efficacy in handling diverse students' needs in culturally sensitive ways enhanced use of culturally responsive pedagogy. Rogers helps explain why teachers from minority groups were more likely to incorporate reality pedagogy into their practice. Reality pedagogy relates to the experiences of minoritized teachers and their experiences are already similar to those of the students they teach (Egara & Mosia, 2025). That is to say, in terms of Rogers' five-stage sequence of diffusion of

innovation — pre-adoption, incipient adoption, adoption decision, adoption, and post-adoption — teachers of color at Brilliant Charter School, given their insider understanding of student culture in the school, were able to begin the process of adoption of reality pedagogy at Rogers' third stage, whereas White teachers, less familiar with student culture at the school than their minority colleagues, were more likely required to go through the first two stages of Rogers' process as they contemplated adoption of reality pedagogy.

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed five key themes offering insights into the personal and professional transformations teachers experienced as a result of the professional development program based on reality pedagogy.

- 1) A recurring theme across responses was the teachers' recognition of the value and importance of the training activities for considering new perspectives on working with urban students in ways that had significant emotional and instructional impact on pedagogical practice. One teacher noted, "I think the work has been important..." while another shared, "This was enlightening." Several teachers also reflected on the generative nature of the discussions, with one participant stating, "I feel like the discussions that I participated in were thought-provoking." Viewing training activities as valued emphasizes the positive attitude most teachers had toward the professional development, especially when they were involved with one another in critical analysis and meaningful topical conversations about working with urban youth of color. Consonant with Mgonja et al.'s (2021) argument that teachers appreciate professional development programs that promote metacognition via working through real-world issues, participants' perception of the value of reality pedagogy for their practice also supports Pandey's (2024) assertion that culturally relevant professional development helps teachers understand and plan for students' cultural differences. In addition, Emdin's reality pedagogy requires teachers to participate in self-reflective practice combined with co-constructed learning to bring more mindfulness to their practice.
- 2) A prominent theme was the impact of the professional development on pedagogical practice, specifically in relation to tailoring teaching to urban youth of color. Teachers reported the professional development sessions helped them critically examine and functionally adapt their teaching approaches to students' interests, needs, and abilities. One teacher shared, "I had already started shifting my practice to be more reflective about how I unconsciously centered White models of teaching and learning in my practice." Another teacher mentioned, "I appreciated all of the discussions because many people need to be aware of some of the things that affect urban children [and prevent them from] learning in schools." Teachers' growing awareness of their students' life worlds and deepening commitment to adapting pedagogy to students' lived experiences marked a critical change in faculty approach to urban education. Incorporation of student perspective into pedagogical practice concurs with Emdin's reality pedagogy which encourages teachers to recognize students as knowledgeable about themselves and their community. Teachers' use of reality pedagogy promotes culturally sustaining pedagogy that positively affects academic achievement among diversified learners (Liu et al., 2021). Teachers' readiness to implement strategies relying on knowledge of students' cultural characteristics demonstrates development of a student-centered teaching-learning process sensitive to learners' cultural profiles (Berson et al., 2025).
- 3) Teachers also highlighted the importance of bonding with colleagues during small group discussions in professional development sessions. One teacher shared, "I felt like the conversations where we broke into focus groups to discuss different aspects of the book were

really great. We met with the same group of people multiple times and developed some trust and comfort that way...." Another teacher expressed, "I appreciated the discussion groups that strategically paired White teachers in groups with teachers of color to hear our experiences in teaching." Small, focused group work provided teachers with opportunities to connect more deeply with one another, share experiences, and build collegiality, which facilitated more meaningful conversations about race and culture. Teachers valued continued discussion. They "looked forward to continuing the [group] work," which helped deepen their understanding of issues affecting students. Teachers also realized the themes of smaller group discussions and racial affinity groups are particularly useful for in-class instruction with students. Teachers described the benefit of having students interact with one another in small affinity groups, noting that meaningful and intimate discussions on race, culture, and identity could occur in such forums. Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory emphasizes the role of shared talk in diffusion of new practices. Teachers indicated they felt much more at ease in more intimate settings when addressing sensitive issues such as racial identification and prejudice. The value of intimate interactions can be explained by social cognitive theory, as well, which observes learning transpires through common experiences shared in group settings. Interaction in small groups supports appreciation of how culture affects knowledge acquisition and facilitates transfer of knowledge to new contexts (Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2021).

4) Teachers also emphasized the value of racial affinity groups that worked on issues of racial identity during the training. One teacher shared, "I thought the interest groups, particularly the sessions in racial affinity groups, brought up some powerful stories and gave teachers a space to talk them through." Another teacher stated, "I particularly enjoyed our discussions on racial identity...." These discussions were seen as opportunities for teachers to explore their own racial identities and gain deeper insights into how these identities impacted their interactions with students." Perceived value of racial affinity groups and the discussions of racial identity they facilitated proves teachers need to examine their own culturally related biases to build better teaching environments. Teachers discovered the relevance of self-reflection for understanding racial status, thus affirming Emdin's emphasis on awareness of racial identity as important to successful cultural responsiveness. Kaufman and Killen (2022) state that teachers need to come into conscious contact with their prejudices to be sensitive to students from backgrounds different from theirs. Exploring racial identity enhances educators' feelings of empathy for students from other cultural groups which, in turn, enhances teaching practice by creating empathetic school classroom climates (Van Pham, 2024).

5) The training fostered greater empathy for urban youth of color among White teachers. One teacher noted, "This has helped me view/relate/attempt to understand and empathize better with students." Teachers reported heightened awareness of challenges their students face and expressed stronger commitment to supporting students *in situ*. Cultivation of greater empathy for students underscores the emotional and cognitive shifts teachers experienced as a result of the professional development on reality pedagogy. Teachers began to see their students' cultural backgrounds as integral to academic success and social-emotional development. While considering the need for eradicating prejudice and promoting diversity led White teachers to develop greater empathy towards urban youth of color, it also improved the empathy of teachers of color towards students (Wirtz, 2021) at Brilliant Charter School. Most teachers stated they understood students of color and problems of youth living in cities better than before participating in the professional development about reality pedagogy. Emotional comprehension significantly boosts teachers' self-efficacy and promotes self-control in relation to student

classroom behavior by improving the cultural sustainability of the teaching-learning environment and the educative process (Bandura, 1997).

Despite the focus of my study on a short-term professional development for faculty of only a single charter school, results highlight the importance of integrating cultural competence training into teacher education. By utilizing texts like Christopher Emdin's *Reality Pedagogy* to emphasize the value of aligning instruction with students' lived experiences, teachers were able to develop deeper connections with diverse students. Professional development in reality pedagogy fostered culturally responsive teaching practices, making classrooms at Brilliant Charter School more culturally inclusive and student-affirming. My study underscores the need for sustained professional development integrating personal reflection and community engagement to promote long-term growth in cultural competence as a way of addressing systemic inequalities in power and privilege that negatively affect the quality of educational experiences in schools. My study demonstrates the significant potential of reality pedagogy for enhancing cultural competence among urban teachers, improving their self-efficacy as instructors and honing their ability to engage with diverse students. My findings indicate reality pedagogy offers a useful model for transforming urban schools into inclusive, culturally responsive environments that address the achievement gap for marginalized students (Goudeau et al., 2021; Henshaw, 2022). Future studies of effectiveness of reality pedagogy should include larger samples of participants across a variety of schools. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported data should be replaced in subsequent studies with external assessment of the effectiveness of reality pedagogy in the final stage of Rogers' (1983) theory of diffusion of innovation, namely, post-adoption of new practices. Therefore, future research should include longitudinal studies to ascertain long-term impact of cultural competence/reality pedagogy training. Considering how reality pedagogy may be integrated into teacher education programs would also add value to effectiveness of assessment by permitting study of pre-service teachers' use of Emdin's theory early in their teaching careers. Although more a pilot study than a definitive treatment, my research clearly indicates how essential it is to integrate cultural competence into teacher education and professional development, as it fosters equitable educational outcomes for students of color (Singun, 2025; Van Pham, 2024). By continuing to incorporate cultural competence into long-term professional development, schools create sustained changes in teaching that improve student success in diverse classrooms (Liu et al., 2021; Mgonja et al., 2021).

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Appendix

OUR SCHOOL SURVEY

This is a survey that asks you questions about you, and your reactions to some of the professional development and special trainings held at this school over the past two years.

You are NOT being asked any questions that can identify you, such as your name. Your answers will be kept confidential. The information will be used to evaluate some of the school's professional development and special trainings, including their value and impact on you and the school—given your confidential sharing of your personal views.

Please answer the following questions as honestly as you can. Thank you.

PART I. ABOUT YOU

- 1-I am: ☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Other (meaning _____)
- 2-My age is: _____
- 3-My race/ethnicity is as follows: (Please mark all that apply)
- ☐ White / Caucasian / European American
- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ Hispanic / Latino (including Puerto Rican, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Cuban, other Spanish)
- ☐ Asian (Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, or other Asian)
- ☐ American Indian / Alaska Native
- ☐ Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander
- ☐ Arab American / Middle Eastern
- ☐ Other group(s) (Please specify _____)
- 4-Were you born in the United States? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- If answered "No," Where was your place of birth or your country of origin? _____
- If you answered "No," for how many years have you lived in the US? _____
- 5-My yearly household income is:
- ☐ Less than \$10,000
- ☐ \$10,000 to \$19,000
- ☐ \$20,000 to \$39,000
- ☐ \$40,000 to \$49,000
- ☐ \$50,000 to \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 to \$199,999
- ☐ \$200,000 to \$299,000
- ☐ \$300,000 to \$399,000
- ☐ \$400,000 or More
- ☐ I do not know
- 6- My highest education level is:
- ☐ Grade School (please indicate your grade completed) _____
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Certificate Program
- ☐ Associate Degree
- ☐ Bachelors Degree
- ☐ Masters Degree
- ☐ Doctoral Degree
- ☐ Other Degree (Please explain _____)
- 7-My current position in this school is:
- ☐ Classroom staff
- ☐ Out of Classroom staff
- ☐ Specials teacher
- ☐ Administration staff
- ☐ Leadership
- 8-I have been working at the school for _____ years.
- 9-I have been in my profession/role (here or at other schools, places) for _____ years.

PART II. MORE ABOUT YOU

Read each item below and decide whether the statement is true or false as it pertains to you personally. Circle T for True or F for false.

1. It is sometimes hard for me to go on with my work if I am not encouraged.
___T___F
2. I sometimes feel resentful when I don't get my way. ___T___F
3. 3. On a few occasions, I have given up doing something because I thought too little of my ability. ___T___F
4. There have been times when I felt like rebelling against people in authority even though I knew they were right. ___T___F
5. No matter who I'm talking to, I'm always a good listener. ___T___F
6. There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone. ___T___F
7. I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake. ___T___F
8. I sometimes try to get even rather than forgive and forget. ___T___F
9. I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable ___T___F 10. I have never been irked when people expressed ideas very different from my own. ___T___F
11. There have been times when I was quite jealous of the good fortune of others. ___T___F
12. I am sometimes irritated by people who ask favors of me. ___T___F
13. I have never deliberately said something to hurt someone's feelings ___T___F

PART III. ABOUT THE SPECIAL SCHOOLS TRAININGS

Are you aware of the professional development/special training activities that went on at this school—going back about two and half years ago—with a focus on students' cultural (racial, ethnic, religious) backgrounds?

This included several activities:

- staff reading from the book by Christopher Emdin (2016) entitled *Reality Pedagogy: For White teachers who work in the hood...and the rest of y'all too*
- interest groups with a focus on varied issues, such as any incidents of bias one may have witnessed or experienced
- watching and sharing reactions to a video clip of Dr. Christopher Emdin giving a talk
- discussions with a focus on racial identity issues, etc.

1-Would you say you are aware of these professional development/special training activities?

___Yes___No___I'm not sure___Other (explain)_____

2-Did you participate in any of this special training?

___Yes___No___I'm not sure___Other (explain)_____

3-What was your level of participation in this special training?

___None at all___Low level___Moderate level___High level

___Very high level___Extremely high level

4-Did you personally read from the Emdin (2016) book?

___Yes___No___I'm not sure___Other (explain)_____

5-How much of the book did you personally read?

___none___less than 1 chapter___about 1 chapter___more than 1 chapter

___few chapters___most of the chapters___nearly all chapters___entire book

6-How would you rate the special training with a focus on the Emdin (2016) book?

___not valuable at all___somewhat valuable___not sure/unable to judge

____valuable ____very valuable ____extremely valuable

7-How would you rate the other activities and discussions (i.e., interest groups with a focus on varied issues, such as any incidents of bias one may have witnessed or experienced; watching and sharing reactions to a video clip of Dr. Christopher Emdin giving a talk; and, discussions with a focus on racial identity issues, etc.)?

____not valuable at all ____somewhat valuable ____not sure/unable to judge

____valuable ____very valuable ____extremely valuable

8-Please take your time and answer these 3 questions (A, B, C), below: (You can continue writing on the back of this paper)

A-What would you like to share about the special training with a focus on the Emdin (2016) book?

B- What would you like to share about the other activities and discussions (i.e., interest groups with a focus on varied issues, such as any incidents of bias one may have witnessed or experienced; watching and sharing reactions to a video clip of Dr. Christopher Emdin giving a talk; and, discussions with a focus on racial identity issues, etc.)?

C-What impact did it have on you or how you function in this school

ART IV. ABOUT ANY CHANGES SINCE THE SPECIAL TRAININGS

When it come to the following behaviors, I rate myself as follows:

1-FOR: My interactions with students reflecting consideration of the cultural background (i.e. race, ethnicity, religion) of my students...

BEFORE THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

AFTER THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

2-FOR: My interactions with students reflecting effective engagement of students from varied cultural backgrounds

BEFORE THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

AFTER THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

3-My interactions with students reflecting how all cultures (races, ethnicities, religions) are valued—with an appreciation of differences, while differences are not treated as deficits, dysfunctions, or disadvantages

BEFORE THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

AFTER THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

4- My interactions with students reflecting fairness and consistency in how diverse students are disciplined (corrected, or punished)—so there are no differences by cultural background (race, ethnicity, religion) in how students are disciplined

BEFORE THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

AFTER THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

5- My interactions with students reflecting my affirming (supporting) them, their culture, and the history of their cultural group

BEFORE THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

AFTER THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

6- My interactions with students reflecting a greater empathy and acceptance of students from diverse cultural backgrounds

BEFORE THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

AFTER THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

7- My interactions with students reflecting appreciation for what it means to live in an urban environment

BEFORE THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

AFTER THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

My level of confidence for doing this, given my skill/ability was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

8- My interactions with students reflecting my creating a safe space and trusting environment for students from diverse cultural backgrounds

BEFORE THE TRAINING

My level of knowledge for doing this was:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = Lowest level

10=Highest level

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
0 = Lowest level 10 = Highest level

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
0 = Lowest level 10 = Highest level

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
0 = Lowest level 10 = Highest level

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
0 = Lowest level 10 = Highest level

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
0 = Lowest level 10 = Highest level

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
0 = Lowest level 10 = Highest level

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
0 = Lowest level 10 = Highest level

1-For all school staff, what thoughts, feelings or final reflections might you share, given your taking this survey? And, specifically, for teachers, please also answer this question: Did you make any modifications to the curriculum that were inspired by the training? (Feel free to continue on the back of the page)

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THIS SURVEY!

Please place this completed survey in the envelope provided, seal it, and submit it by placing it in the SLIT IN THE BOX at the Office of the Director of Student Support.

Reimagining Culturally Relevant Education Informed by AsianCrit

Julianne Park
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Abstract: Culturally relevant education (CRE) is long-recognized as a fundamental framework for promoting equity-based teaching in K-12 schools. However, prevailing frameworks often overlook the unique racialized experiences of Asian American students. I fill CRE's critical gap by extending the scope of culturally relevant education via integration of two AsianCrit tenets — Asianization and Story-Theory-Praxis — to develop AsianCrit-CRE. Asian American students are racialized through narratives such as the model minority myth and perpetual foreigner stereotype, two experiences that shape their sense of belonging, identity, and educational opportunities in schools. AsianCrit-CRE argues for a more racially responsive approach that recognizes Asian American students' lived experiences, centers their counter-narratives, and challenges curricular and institutional invisibility. Implications for educational leadership include strengthening culturally responsive professional development, critically examining racialized assumptions embedded within school practices, and cultivating more inclusive educational environments that affirm the experiences of Asian American students as central to equity and social justice efforts.

Culturally relevant education (CRE) has long been acknowledged as a foundational framework to enhance equity-based teaching in K-12 education (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2023). Yet, its prevailing frameworks have primarily focused on Black and Latine students' experiences (Pang, 2006). Despite Asian American being one of the fastest growing student populations in U.S. schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023), frameworks of culturally relevant education systematically neglect Asian American students by overlooking their unique racialized experiences — shaped by racial stereotypes such as the model minority myth and portrayal as perpetual foreigner — which contributes to their ongoing cultural under-recognition and curricular invisibility (Goodwin, 2010). Exclusion and narrow focus create a critical problem: a limited vision of equity-oriented education. The absence of Asian American perspectives undermines efforts to build inclusive educational environments that affirm all students' identities and experiences. I address exclusion of Asian American students by critically examining the limitations of prevailing frameworks of culturally relevant education and reimagining CRE through the lens of AsianCrit — particularly the tenets of “Asianization” and “Story, Theory, and Praxis” — to promote more equitable learning engagement for Asian American students (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). I focus on these tenets because they directly disrupt the racialized stereotypes and narrative invisibility that shape Asian American students' experiences in school. In addition, Asianization and Story-Theory-Praxis highlight the racialized realities of Asian American students, integrate their counter-narratives into dominant educational discourses, and contribute to development of more inclusive and equity-driven approaches that inform both teaching and educational leadership. Intentional and meaningful incorporation of experiences of Asian American students enables teachers and administrators to practice a form of resilient, collaborative, and responsive schooling grounded in cultural knowledge, personal narrative, and social justice (Parkhouse et al., 2023; Sleeter, 2012).

Centers and Margins of Culturally Attentive Education

Culturally relevant education encompasses a set of interrelated pedagogical frameworks that seek to center teaching and learning on students' cultural backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences. Aronson and Laughter (2016) synthesize culturally relevant education as

comprising two major strands: Geneva Gay's (2018) culturally responsive teaching and Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995a, 1995b, 2023) culturally relevant pedagogy. Paris and Alim (2017) expand the idea of culturally relevant education to include culturally sustaining pedagogy. While these frameworks share a broad commitment to equity-oriented education, they differ meaningfully in their emphasis and scope. Ladson-Billings centers the student as a whole person, insisting academic achievement, cultural identity, and critical consciousness must be pursued together. Gay's framework shifts the lens toward instructional practice by focusing on how teachers draw on students' cultural knowledge as a vehicle for learning/academic achievement. Paris and Alim push further, arguing the purpose of education must be reimagined. Rather than using students' cultures as bridges toward dominant academic outcomes, schooling should actively sustain and revitalize cultural and linguistic practices of communities of color. These distinctions are essential because they determine not only what equitable teaching looks like in practice, but also which students' experiences are centered and which remain at the margins.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) developed culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as a framework grounded in the academic and cultural needs of Black students. Drawing from ethnographic research in elementary classrooms, Ladson-Billings identified three core criteria that define culturally relevant teaching: (1) academic achievement, which emphasizes that all students can and must experience intellectual success regardless of background; (2) cultural competence, which involves supporting students in maintaining and affirming their cultural identity while navigating the demands of schooling; and (3) critical consciousness, which challenges students to interrogate and critique social inequities and structural injustices that shape their lives. Ladson-Billings (2021) revisited her framework acknowledging that CRP is frequently misappropriated and reduced to prescriptive, surface-level approaches rather than treated as a transformative pedagogy. But as early as 2010, Ladson-Billings had already cautioned that true implementation of CRP is an ethical position and a way of "being" rather than a rigid checklist of "doing," calling on educators to look beyond standard routines to foster deep student learning and critical consciousness. While CRP remains a cornerstone of equity-based teaching, its primary historical grounding in African American student experiences has prompted subsequent pedagogical evolutions to address more explicitly the linguistic and cultural autonomy of a broader range of racially marginalized groups, among them, Asian Americans (An, 2016; Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Expanding from Ladson-Billings' CRP, Geneva Gay (2018) developed culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as a comprehensive pedagogical framework that emphasizes using students' cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and prior experiences as conduits for learning. Gay argues that effective teaching requires cultural competence — an essential ability teachers need to understand and honor the diverse cultural heritages students bring to school — and insists that this competence must be actively translated into instructional strategies, curriculum design, and classroom relationships. Gay's framework is broad in scope, intended to be applicable across diverse student populations. CRP delineates five key dimensions of culturally attentive teaching and learning: (1) developing a cultural diversity knowledge base; (2) designing culturally relevant curricula; (3) demonstrating cultural caring by building a learning community; (4) communicating with ethnically diverse students; and (5) responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction. Although Gay's framework was developed to address diverse student populations, its practical application in K-12 settings has often focused on Black and Latine student experiences, leaving Asian American students' distinct cultural and racial realities under-addressed (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Pang, 2006).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: Paris introduced culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) as a critical extension of culturally relevant and culturally responsive frameworks. Paris (2012) argues that frameworks organized around relevance and responsiveness risk being assimilationist in orientation. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, by contrast, centers the goal of sustaining and revitalizing cultural practices, languages, and ways of knowing that communities of color enact, particularly in the face of forces that seek to erase or devalue them. Paris and Alim further developed CSP by emphasizing dynamic, evolving understandings of culture that resist static or romantic representations. CSP calls on educators to engage students as full participants in cultural production, allowing classroom spaces to affirm both heritage practices and the contemporary, hybridized cultural expressions of youth communities (Paris & Alim, 2017). Despite these advances, CSP, like its predecessor frameworks, has engaged Asian American students unevenly. The framework's emphasis on sustaining community practices is highly relevant to Asian American youth whose linguistic and cultural identities are often erased in schools, but CSP has not yet been systematically extended to address the specific racialization processes that construct Asian Americans as model minorities and perpetual foreigners. Sleeter (2012) also critiques the broader trend of overgeneralizing student needs as a weakness of culturally relevant education, a weakness that has inadvertently resulted in Asian American students' erasure from equity-oriented frameworks.

AsianCrit: A Framework for Analyzing Asian American Experiences in Education

Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) was developed by Iftikar and Museus as a race-conscious framework firmly grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) but specifically tailored to the experiences, histories, and concerns of Asian Americans. Iftikar and Museus argue that while CRT has generated important insights about the role of white supremacy in education, it has disproportionately informed scholarship focused on Black and White populations and, so, has fallen short of generating complex and holistic understandings of Asian American racial realities. AsianCrit addresses this gap by offering a framework that begins from an evidence-based assumption that nativistic racism and racialization processes profoundly shape the lives of Asian Americans in ways that are simultaneously similar to and distinct from other racial communities. The AsianCrit framework consists of seven interrelated tenets that can be understood around three thematic functions: understanding how Asian Americans are racialized, centering Asian American knowledge and narrative, and enabling structural and political action toward justice. The first four tenets were developed by integrating CRT scholarship with knowledge of Asian American racial realities, while the final three are adapted from core CRT principles and reoriented to the specific conditions of Asian Americans (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). In concert, these tenets offer a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding how white supremacy shapes Asian American students' experiences in education and for guiding educators toward more equitable teaching and leadership practice. As such, it is crucial to examine how these tenets can help address specific needs of Asian American students arising from their racialized schooling experiences.

The first two tenets address the foundational question of how Asian Americans are racialized and why understanding those processes is essential for educators and school leaders. The tenet of Asianization posits that people within the United States become "Asian" through racialization processes driven by white supremacy and nativistic racism. Iftikar and Museus argue that these processes have historically constructed Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners and have also consistently functioned to dehumanize and exclude Asian Americans. Critically,

racial constructions serve as the vehicles through which white supremacy becomes embedded in laws, policies, programs, and institutional perspectives that structure the conditions of Asian American life. In educational contexts, Asianization generates a particular paradox for Asian American students: They are simultaneously marked as academically exceptional and rendered invisible in terms of their cultural identities, emotional needs, and racialized struggles. The model minority myth, a product of Asianization, leads educators and institutions to assume that Asian American students do not need support, thereby justifying their exclusion from equity initiatives and culturally affirming practices. The tenet of transnational contexts deepens this analysis by insisting that the racialization of Asian Americans cannot be fully understood without situating it within a broader network of global economic, political, and social relationships (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Many Asian American students' family histories are shaped by U.S. imperialism, colonialism, war, and forced displacement, often resulting in intergenerational experiences of migration, trauma, and cultural adaptation that continue to influence students' educational experiences today (Lowe, 1996). This tenet calls on educators and school leaders to expand their understanding of students' backgrounds beyond national borders, and to design educational environments capable of acknowledging, validating, and responding to the full complexity of Asian American students' lived histories.

The second cluster of tenets addresses whose histories and voices count in education — and what is lost when Asian American students are rendered invisible in curriculum, pedagogy, and educational discourse. The tenet of (re)constructive history is grounded in recognition that Asian Americans are typically absent and voiceless in dominant U.S. historical narratives. Rather than treating Asian American absence as an oversight, AsianCrit understands it as a structural feature of white supremacy that perpetuates the erasure of Asian American contributions, struggles, and resistance. In K-12 settings, curricular invisibility has direct consequences for Asian American students: When they do not see their communities' histories reflected in what is taught, the implicit message is that their experiences do not belong to or matter in the national story (An, 2016). Educators need to redesign curriculum to include Asian American histories of exclusion, resistance, and community-building, while school leaders must ensure that those curricular commitments are institutionally supported and sustained. The tenet of Story, Theory, and Praxis extends commitment to knowledge and narrative by centering the experiential histories of Asian Americans as a legitimate epistemological foundation for educational theory and practice. Drawing on CRT's tradition of counter-storytelling (Milner IV, 2007) and TribalCrit's emphasis on the connections between story, theory, and practice (Brayboy, 2005), this tenet holds that stories inform theory, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate new stories and apply theory for transformative ends (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). For Asian American students whose narratives have been systematically marginalized in both academic and educational discourse, Story-Praxis-Theory has profound implications. It calls on educators to create genuine opportunities for students to share and examine their own experiences, to treat those narratives as sources of knowledge, and to use them as a basis for developing more responsive and culturally affirming pedagogy (Han, Kang, & Kim, 2024). Together, (re)constructive history and Story, Theory, and Praxis reframe Asian American students from passive recipients of a curriculum that does not present them to active producers of knowledge in dialogs where their voices are central to teaching and learning.

The third cluster comprises the final three tenets of AsianCrit, adapted from core CRT principles and reoriented to address the specific structural and political realities of Asian Americans, speak to how Asian Americans can resist racialization and what educators and school

leaders must do at the structural level to create more just educational environments. Strategic (anti)essentialism acknowledges that while white supremacy racializes Asian Americans as a monolithic group, Asian Americans can actively intervene in this process. For instance, Asian American students and communities engage in pan-ethnic coalition-building to advance collective advocacy, while simultaneously pushing back against erasure of differences among ethnic subgroups. In schools, strategic (anti)essentialism challenges educators to resist both the flattening of Asian American diversity under a single stereotype and the (mis)aggregation of data that allows administrators to ignore intragroup disparities in achievement, mental health, and access to support. The intersectionality tenet recognizes that white supremacy does not operate alone but intersects with other systems of oppression — including imperialism, colonialism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and capitalism — to shape the conditions within which Asian Americans exist. For Asian American students, race alone is an insufficient lens for understanding their experiences. Applying intersectionality in schools requires educators and leaders to move beyond race as a singular dimension of analysis and to develop the capacity to recognize and respond to the overlapping forms of marginalization that individual students face. Finally, commitment to social justice makes explicit that AsianCrit is fundamentally oriented toward action to dismantle all other systemic forms of dehumanization and domination. In educational contexts, commitment to social justice calls on educators and school leaders not only to understand racial inequities but to actively work to disrupt them — treating equity as a moral and institutional imperative. Importantly, Iftikar and Museus (2018) emphasize that AsianCrit is not intended to replace CRT but rather to adapt and extend it in ways that center the specific racialized realities of Asian Americans, generating more nuanced and actionable insights for educational research and practice.

Asian American Schooling Experiences

Asian American students' schooling experiences are shaped by a complex and often contradictory set of racialized narratives and structural realities that existing frameworks of culturally relevant education have been ill-equipped to address. The model minority myth occupies a central place in shaping how Asian American students are perceived and treated in schools. The myth perpetually masks inequities within Asian American communities, fuels misconceptions that Asian American students are impervious to racial challenges, and justifies their exclusion from racial discourse and targeted support (Museus & Kiang, 2009). While often framed as a compliment, the model minority stereotype places enormous academic pressure on students, erases the diversity of experiences within Asian American communities, and produces a form of racial silencing in which students' struggles go unacknowledged (Goodwin, 2010; Lee, 2006). The perpetual foreigner stereotype compounds these challenges by positioning Asian American students as permanent outsiders regardless of how long they or their families have lived in the United States. This racialization manifests in schools through experiences of racial isolation, racial hostility, pressure to assimilate to dominant white norms, and racial silencing in curricular spaces (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Students may feel that their cultural and linguistic identities are neither recognized nor valued in school, contributing to diminished sense of belonging and cultural identity.

At the same time, Asian American students' academic achievement is frequently interpreted through narrow racialized assumptions that obscure the structural conditions shaping their educational experiences. Aggregated achievement data and model minority narratives often lead educators and policymakers to perceive Asian American students as uniformly successful,

minimizing attention to disparities among ethnic subgroups and reducing institutional urgency to provide culturally responsive support (Museus & Kiang, 2009). As a result, Asian American students are frequently excluded from conversations about educational inequity, diversity initiatives, and social-emotional support despite experiencing racial discrimination, cultural marginalization, and identity-based stressors in school settings (An, 2016). Conditional recognition positions Asian American students as academically valued yet socially peripheral, reinforcing the perception that they do not require the same forms of racial or institutional support afforded to other marginalized student populations. Ni et al. (2022) explains that Asian-origin youth face heightened mental health challenges, often shaped by the intersection of academic pressure, experiences of racial discrimination, and cultural marginalization: A daunting set of challenges intensified by racialized invisibility in schools and lack of institutional recognition of their unique cultural and racial experiences. Pang (2006) similarly highlights emotional and psychological costs of navigating a school environment that demands high academic performance while offering little recognition of the cultural knowledge and identities students bring. Goodwin (2010) extends Pang's analysis to the curriculum itself, arguing the broader pattern of curriculum exclusion positions Asian American students outside the scope of culturally relevant education and renders their histories, contributions, and experiences invisible in what is taught, valued, and discussed in schools. Structural and experiential realities of marginalization and erasure underscore a fundamental gap in the field of culturally relevant education: Existing frameworks of culturally relevant education have not yet developed the analytical tools or practical strategies necessary to meaningfully address the racialization of Asian American students. I offer a conceptual extension of existing frameworks — one that begins from an explicit acknowledgment of how Asian Americans are racialized and that centers their counter-narratives, histories, and lived experiences as foundational to equity-oriented teaching and leadership.

Toward AsianCrit-Informed Culturally Relevant Education

I propose a conceptual extension of existing frameworks of culturally relevant education through the intentional integration of two AsianCrit tenets: Asianization and Story, Theory, and Praxis. The goal is not to replace the foundational contributions of Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2023), and Paris and Alim (2017), but to redress limitations in responding to the specific racialized experiences of Asian American students. I select these tenets because they directly disrupt the dual challenges that most profoundly shape Asian American students' schooling experiences: the racial stereotypes that render their struggles invisible, and the narrative erasure that excludes their voices and histories from educational discourse. Together, the AsianCrit tenets of Asianization and Story-Theory-Praxis offer a conceptual foundation for AsianCrit-Integrated Culturally Relevant Education (AsianCrit-CRE).

Asianization as a Foundation for Equitable Teaching and Leadership: The tenet of Asianization addresses a gap that existing frameworks of culturally relevant education have not adequately filled: the need to name and disrupt the specific racialization processes that construct Asian American students in schools. Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2023), and Paris and Alim (2017) all call for educators to recognize and affirm students' cultural identities, but none of these frameworks explicitly provides the analytical tools to interrogate how the model minority myth and perpetual foreigner stereotype actively distort how Asian American students are perceived, supported, and positioned in educational settings. Asianization makes myth and stereotype visible and names them as structural features of Asian American students' schooling

experiences (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). For Asian American students, integrating Asianization into culturally relevant education means that their racialized struggles are finally recognized as real and worthy of institutional response. Students who are presumed academically self-sufficient, emotionally resilient, and culturally assimilated are in fact navigating significant pressures related to identity, belonging, and mental health that schools routinely overlook (Ni et al., 2022; Pang, 2006). An AsianCrit-integrated culturally relevant education framework affirms that racialized experiences are not personal failings but the consequences of racialization. AsianCrit creates educational environments in which Asian American students' full identities are seen, valued, and supported.

For educators, Asianization functions as a critical lens for pedagogical reflection. Rather than treating Asian American students as uniformly high-achieving and unproblematic, educators informed by the tenet of Asianization are called to examine how their own assumptions, shaped by dominant racial narratives, influence their instructional choices, relational practices, and interpretations of student behavior. Appropriate steps include actively working against stereotype-driven expectations, developing more complex and accurate representations of Asian American students in curriculum, and attending to the emotional and cultural dimensions of students' school experiences (I, Son, & Jung, 2024). Advocacy also means disrupting the curricular invisibility that An (2016) documents to ensure that Asian American students see their communities reflected not only in supportive relationships with teachers but also in the content of what is taught. For school leaders, Asianization has direct implications for how equity frameworks are designed and implemented. When Asian American students are excluded from equity initiatives on the assumption that their aggregate academic performance signals well-being, the model minority myth becomes institutionalized as policy. An AsianCrit-integrated culturally relevant education framework calls on leaders to critically examine these structural assumptions, to disaggregate data by ethnic subgroup, to explicitly name Asian American students' needs in institutional equity plans, and to allocate resources accordingly.

Story, Theory, and Praxis as a Framework for Counter-Narrative Integration: The tenet of Story, Theory, and Praxis addresses the second dimension of Asian American students' marginalization: the systematic exclusion of their voices, histories, and perspectives from educational knowledge. While Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2023) emphasize the importance of students' cultural backgrounds in teaching and learning, and Paris and Alim (2017) call for sustaining community cultural practices, none of these frameworks sufficiently engages with whose stories are centered as legitimate knowledge in schools or with the particular ways that Asian American narratives have been silenced in academic and educational discourse (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Story, Theory, and Praxis fills the curricular gap by treating Asian American students' experiential knowledge as an epistemological foundation for theory and practice.

Addressing Asian American Students' Schooling Experiences Through AsianCrit CRE: Taken together, the integration of Asianization and Story, Theory, and Praxis into culturally relevant education offers a more complete and racially specific response to the schooling experiences of Asian American students than existing frameworks have been able to provide. Where Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2023), and Paris and Alim (2017) offer powerful but insufficiently targeted frameworks for equity-oriented teaching for Asian American students, the AsianCrit-integrated culturally relevant education framework adds the analytical precision needed to address the particular ways that Asian American students are racialized, silenced, and

excluded. By naming Asianization as a structural force and centering Asian American counter-narratives as valuable knowledge, the AsianCrit-CRE framework creates the conditions for educational environments that affirm Asian American students' full identities academically, culturally, emotionally, and racially and that equip educators and leaders to act with both awareness and intention in their roles.

Advice for Leadership: Research, Practice, and Policy

My work calls for school leaders to strengthen inclusion, expand educational opportunities, and cultivate greater levels of student well-being and success, particularly for students whose racialized experiences remain on the margins of dominant educational narratives. In relation to leadership research, I encourage scholars to engage in deeper inquiry into how Asian American students' racialization shapes their sense of belonging, participation in curriculum, and access to support. School reformers need to consider how equity initiatives can be designed to meaningfully respond to and improve school experiences of Asian American students (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Research guided by AsianCrit-CRE could generate insights into how school environments can be made more culturally affirming and racially specific, moving beyond frameworks that inadvertently generalize student needs and render Asian American experiences invisible. For educational practice, this work underscores the need for professional development that deepens educators' understanding of Asian American students' racialized experiences. Guided by the tenet of Asianization, school leaders should create spaces for educators to critically examine assumptions about academic competence and cultural assimilation that are embedded in the model minority myth. Guided by Story, Theory, and Praxis, leaders should create institutional conditions that support the sustained inclusion of Asian American histories, perspectives, and counter-narratives across teaching and learning practices (Han, Kang, & Kim, 2024; I, Son, & Jung, 2024). At a moment when diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in education are facing intensifying resistance, AsianCrit-CRE affirms the urgent need to confirm equity-centered leadership and to remain committed to social justice by centering the experiences of marginalized students. Leadership is needed that is not only knowledgeable but also resilient, grounded in critical collaboration and community partnership, and willing to challenge dominant narratives that normalize the exclusion of Asian American students from equity work. In doing so, school leaders can help build educational environments that acknowledge and validate the racialized experiences of all students, and that fulfill the promise of culturally relevant education for those it has too long left behind. Integration of Asianization and Story, Theory, and Praxis into culturally relevant education invites school leaders to reconsider how culturally relevant education can be practiced more inclusively, and how school systems can better support Asian American students who are often overlooked in mainstream equity initiatives.

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How Are Disaster Studies, Climate Change Communication, and K-12 Teaching Connected in the U.S.? Mapping Interdisciplinary Literature

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Abstract: The climate change crisis is rapidly intensifying, leading to an increase in natural disasters devastating neighborhoods and communities around the world. Current research explores disaster studies, climate change communication, and K-12 teaching experiences, but fails to connect the three. Using the Social Identity Model of Post-Disaster Action (SIMPDA), mapping of literature from Disaster Studies, Climate Change Communication, and K-12 Teacher Education identifies key themes and categorizes findings into a disaster duration timeline: the pre-disaster context, the critical period immediately following a disaster, and the post-disaster context. Findings indicate that as the climate crisis deepens, the need for a plan of action in the face of disaster and a solution for support of teacher resilience post-climate disasters increases. We suggest new research questions for addressing the absence of disaster preparedness from Teacher Education research.

Missing from much educational emergency preparedness plans is discussion of what it means to teach in the U.S. before, during, and after climate disasters. In line with this year's NYSFEA conference theme, our paper positions teachers' experiences before, during, and after climate disasters as a "something else" to recommit to in the beautiful struggle of education. We connect Disaster Studies to Climate Change Communication to K-12 Teacher Education to see how those three areas of study can inform one another to produce a plan of action for teaching about, during, and after climate disaster. We used Jetten et al.'s (2021) *Social Identity Model of Post-Disaster Action* (SIMPDA) to address the question: How are disaster studies, climate change, and K-12 teaching connected in the U.S.? Jetten et al. developed the SIMPDA model to describe Australia's response to the catastrophic 2019/2020 bushfires. According to SIMPDA, "There are three key phases...: (a) the pre-disaster context, (b) the critical period immediately following an environmental disaster, and (c) the post-disaster context" (Jetten et al., 2021, p. 163). The pre-disaster context describes the location's preparedness for a climate disaster and the likelihood that a disaster will occur in that region. The critical period immediately following a disaster focuses on the "window of time when the status quo might be changed" (Jetten et al., 2021, p. 164). Response in the immediate aftermath of a disaster is critical because typical systems and policies lose relevance in the disaster context, so there is opportunity to create new systems. The post-disaster context provides data to reflect on policy adjustments after climate disasters. Preparedness for disaster and resiliency in the face of disaster are pressing issues as ecosystem-level changes will continue to worsen climate disasters, causing major disruption to life on Earth — including K-12 education (IPCC, 2023; Knutson et al., 2020).

Each segment of climate disaster is relevant for our mapping review as we aim to draw connections across all three phases of climate disaster duration. Mapping reviews are used in fields like environmental science to explore broad questions about a topic (Campbell et al., 2023; James et al., 2016; Khalil et al., 2023). Mapping review provides a comprehensive, synthesizing overview of studies in specific areas as an efficient way to identify key findings, patterns, trends, and knowledge gaps that chart existing evidence and identify evidentiary needs on a topic or

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question (Khalil, et. al, 2025). We are most interested in mapping teachers' experiences and preparedness before, immediately after, and following a climate disaster; and how the educational context connects to Disaster Studies and Climate Change Communication. Because there are few studies specifically dealing with teacher preparedness for climate disaster, mapping connections across Disaster Studies, Climate Crisis Communication, and K-12 schooling lays ground for development of a new body of literature that allows us to understand the expectations of teachers surrounding climate-related disasters and to explore ways to better support them before and after disasters occur. The SIMPDA model helped us draw clearer connections among the three disparate fields we mapped by placing literature from each field along the climate disaster timeline to better identify what is present in and what missing from literature on each of the three phases (pre-, critical, post-) of a disaster.

But our process was complicated by the fact that while The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 2023 report points to how sea level rise and other *irreversible* changes to Earth's systems and climate will have impacts on the planet for thousands of years, teacher education literature does not link natural disasters with climate change. Further, the field of Disaster Studies does not have a shared definition of a disaster, let alone a climate-related disaster (Aronsson-Storrier & Dahlberg, 2022). Finally, climate change communication (CCC) refers to any effort "that aims to raise public awareness, understanding, and/or active engagement with the issue" (Markowitz & Guckian, 2017). Broad definition is necessary because of the different ways that climate change communication is taken up, such as through policy, scientific research, preparedness, and communicating risks to the general public (Corner et al., 2015). Thus, we had to construct some definitions of key terms to provide focus for our study. Most understand disasters are temporary and disrupt social systems and cause significant damage in an area (Perry, 2017; Wirasinghe et al., 2013). Climate-related disasters are the result of climate hazards due to location, vulnerability to climate change, and preparedness to mitigate the risks of the hazards (Hore et al., 2017). For the purposes of our study, therefore, we describe climate disasters as temporary but severely destructive climate-related events — including but not limited to hurricanes, extreme flash flooding, extreme heatwaves, droughts, and wildfires — the destructiveness of which may be mitigated to some degree by effective climate change communication, especially teaching. We focus our work on climate disasters that have affected the United States and its territories in the past ten years (2015-2025). We chose to draw connections among CCC, Disaster Studies, and teachers' experiences after climate disasters because of the interdisciplinary and far-reaching nature of CCC, given that it can inform state, district, and school-level policies as well as teachers' perceptions of natural disasters (Moser, 2016). We specifically look at how CCC is used for preparedness and policies that may affect teachers' experiences before, during, and after a climate disaster.

Mapping New Research Terrain

We share our mapping review of literature about the U.S. from 2015-2025 that connects Disaster Studies, Climate Change Communication, and teachers' experiences after natural disasters related to climate change. We used Google Scholar to identify the literature for our mapping review. We did not employ databases given the fact that we are looking at literature across three tangentially related fields — Disaster Studies, Climate Change Communication, and teachers' experiences after disasters. In Google Scholar, we used related search terms such as: "climate disaster," "disaster studies in the U.S.," "education after disasters," "teachers experiences after natural disasters," and "climate change communication." We identified

literature based on title, years (2015-2025), location in the U.S. and its territories, and a screening of abstracts to ensure relevance. When possible, we tried to use literature reviews to orient us in Disaster Studies and Climate Change Communication because we are less familiar with the scholars and literature base in those fields. We enter this project informed by our experiences with climate disasters directly impacting our education and lives. Laura (she/they) is an Assistant Professor of STEM Education at Marist University. Dr. Shelton has firsthand experience with climate disasters from living in Houston, TX and being from Burnsville, NC, which was decimated by Hurricane Helene in September of 2024. First-hand experiences have made Laura committed to understanding the experiences of teachers during and after climate disasters. Mikayla (she/her) is a junior at Marist University, majoring in Psychology, with a dual certification in Elementary and Special Education, working towards her M.S. Ed. in Contemporary Curriculum & Instruction. Growing up on the south shore of Long Island, hurricanes and climate disasters are familiar to Mikayla, informing her about the importance of teacher preparation surrounding climate disasters.

We took a two-stage approach to analysis. Phase One included placing identified literature into the SIMPDA framework to identify whether it focused on pre-disaster context, critical period immediately following disasters, or post-disaster contexts. In Phase Two, we read the literature to determine if it focused on Disaster Studies, Climate Change Communication, or teachers' experiences. We coded the data into these three areas. Then, we looked across the SIMDPA disaster timeline and our literature contexts to identify themes spanning the three fields and gaps in the literature to address our research question: How are disaster studies, climate change, and K-12 teaching connected in the U.S.? Image 1 depicts mapped findings grouped into themes across contexts (Campbell et al., 2023) using Jetten et al.'s (2021) SIMPDA model.

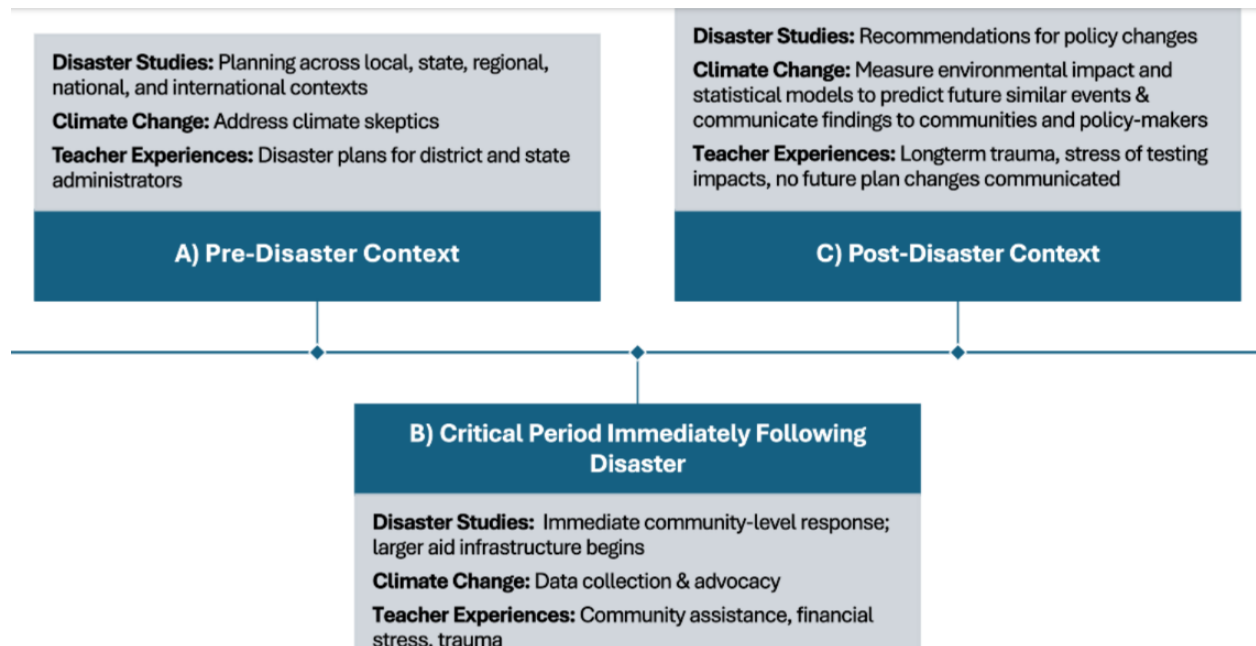


Image 1: Map of Results

Pre-Disaster Contexts: Disaster Studies scholars understand countries with the most “human development” like the U.S. and Western European countries to be less vulnerable to nationally devastating climate disasters (Tschumi & Zscheischler, 2020). However, the east coast of the

U.S. regularly has disasters (such as hurricanes) that range from *medium impact on people* to *very high impact on people* (Donatti et al., 2024). Therefore, vulnerability to disaster must be understood as a function of both preparedness for disasters and frequency of disasters. Still, the Global South and poorer nations are at a much higher risk for climate disasters, and for that reason, much of the pre-disaster context for Disaster Studies happens on a global scale urging national governments to collaborate to mitigate risks and distribute aid (Wen et al., 2023). Disaster Studies also focuses on mitigating risks in the pre-disaster context. Since 1988, the International Disaster Database known as EM-DAT has been documenting large-scale disasters across the globe (Tschumi & Zscheischler, 2020; Wen et al., 2023). However, EM-DAT does not record repeated small-scale disasters, often experienced in the U.S., that pose greater risks to communities over time (Wen et al., 2023). The IPCC regularly releases reports and projects for the global climate with breakdowns at the regional and some national levels (IPCC, 2023). The EM-DAT and IPCC reports are used to measure impact of disasters and to predict future climate-related disasters.

Climate adaptation is underfunded, even though the U.S. experienced roughly \$1 billion in climate-related disaster damages in 2023 (Donatti et al., 2024). Therefore, some disaster researchers work to identify risks related to climate change. For example, Wen et al.'s (2023, p. 2) literature review of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation identified "a lack of scientific and technological capabilities (including risk monitoring, risk assessment, early warning, and so on) and risk-governance mechanisms to reduce the loss of life and property caused by very largescale disasters." Wen et al. recommend that disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation be intertwined at the governmental and policy level so that communities can become more resilient. Wen et al. also identifies three stages in Disaster Studies' development: 1) *disaster management* from the 1990s, 2) *disaster risk management* in the early 2000s, and 3) *resilience management and development* in the 2010s. The field of Disaster Studies has evolved from being reactionary after a disaster takes place to identifying and managing risks from climate change in order to support communities in becoming sustainable in a world where disasters are more commonplace.

Climate Change Communication's (CCC) role in the pre-disaster context is to identify skeptics and address climate change deniers. Some studies focus on identifying who is skeptical about climate change across identity groups, including race, gender, education, and ideological beliefs. Studies conclude that climate skeptics are more likely to be white, male, Republican, Christian, and less educated (Sarathchandra & Haltinner, 2021; Van der Linden et al., 2017). Climate change skeptics are also more likely to support the use of fossil fuels and other forms of industrial capitalism. Thus, doubts about climate change also fuel the economic system climate change skeptics support (McRight, 2016). Many Climate Change Communication scholars in the pre-disaster context study ways climate change is covered in the media. Chin et al. (2020) found that climate change's coverage in the media became more politicized from 1985-2017 and that the politicization has become a common part of how climate change is discussed in the news. Presenting climate skepticism in the media, prevents meaningful mitigation efforts from gaining public popularity (Schmid-Petri et al., 2017).

While Teacher Education literature in the U.S. has explored teacher experience in the critical period of disaster and in disaster's aftermath, there is a dearth of literature on preparing teachers for climate disasters in the pre-disaster context (Alzahrani, 2018; Davis et al., 2021). Absence of disaster training and preparedness research from Teacher Education presents an opportunity for

administrators, policy makers, and teacher educators to create disaster plans at the state, district, and school level and to develop curriculum relating climate disaster to climate change

Critical Period Immediately Following Disasters: In the period immediately following disasters, Disaster Studies focuses on understanding how to organize and support volunteers. Ordinary citizens are usually the first people able to respond immediately following a disaster, and they can inform formal coordinated response organizations like FEMA and the Red Cross once they arrive (Whittaker et al., 2015). While the general public is the first to respond to climate disasters, local residents are rarely included in government-developed policies and plans for response (Pyles et al., 2018). People immediately affected by disasters tend to become more cohesive and able to participate in local community-led recovery efforts (Hamideh, 2020; Whittaker et al., 2015). Further, public volunteers' social capital, their social networks, and understanding of the local "norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness," is said to have positive impact on response (Pyles et al., 2018, p. 501).

In their "Review of Informal Volunteerism in Emergencies and Disasters," Whittaker et al. (2015) reference the Disaster Research Centre's (DRC) typology for understanding disaster response to frame volunteers' roles in disasters (Dynes, 1970; Quarantelli, 1966). The DRC's response typology, which can be used to describe local volunteer involvement in disaster response, includes: 1) Established organizations, 2) Expanding organizations that have been known to help with disaster recovery when needed, 3) Extending organizations which existed prior to the disaster but take on a new role due to community need, and 4) Emerging organizations that are newly developed as a response to the disaster. As organizations engage in recovery from disaster, emergent volunteers become spontaneously involved and develop innovative solutions immediately following the disaster, but they are rarely utilized by formal organizations. Community members who are already involved in active local organizations such as the "chamber of commerce, sporting group, religious organization, or service organization" use local knowledge of their community to have their organization get involved in recovery efforts or create a new group, known as *extending volunteers*, to support the disaster response. Whittaker et al. posits that because the general public will inevitably get involved with disaster response, local stakeholders will likely meet needs that formal responders cannot. Disaster managers and policy makers must devise plans for how to manage local volunteers' roles.

Volunteers after disasters are sometimes remote. Remote volunteers *self-organize* using technology to crowdsource donations and financial support. In their literature review of volunteer crowd sourcing, Kankanamge et al. (2019) categorize online volunteer efforts as grassroots because of its individual level response, and they note that online support can help victims spread the word about the disaster across the world through social media. Additionally, social media posts created by isolated victims can help communicate their whereabouts to disaster response personnel. Sometimes volunteers are recruited to support disaster recovery efforts immediately following disasters (Twigg & Mosel, 2017). However, not all community members plan to get involved in disaster response. Folks from systemically marginalized communities are more likely to be involved out of necessity because they are the most vulnerable and need aid (Hamideh, 2020; Pyles et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2015). In their study comparing community disaster responses after Hurricane Katrina and the Haiti Earthquake, Pyles et al. (2018) found that home ownership and income informed participation in disaster response. Pyles et al. posit that folks who owned their own home and had higher incomes were better positioned to suffer less impact, were more focused on recovering their own property damage,

and less likely to need community disaster assistance. Participants who were civically engaged prior to the disaster were also more likely to help with community disaster response. In their study of community participation in the disaster response in Galveston, TX after Hurricane Ike, Hamideh (2020) found that community involvement in recovery after the population's basic needs are met boosts morale, however, Hamidah cautions that pre-disaster planning for community involvement is key (Hamideh, 2020).

CCC's role in the critical period immediately following disasters focuses on social media and news coverage of the event. Social media has been proven to play an important role in how the general public communicates about a climate disaster as victims can post about their circumstances and viewers can share posts to spread awareness (Kryvasheyeyu et al., 2016; Pourebrahim et al., 2019; Xu, 2020). Social media posts created by disaster victims can also help emergency responders locate persons in need. However, it is important to note that social media studies included here do not link climate change and natural disasters; instead, they focus on *natural disasters* or simply refer to the event by its name.

Hurricanes Irma and Sandy have served as particular points of interest for CCC studies that analyze communication immediately after the event (Jin, 2020; Xu, 2020). In their study of tweets after Hurricane Sandy, Kryvasheyeyu et al. (2016) found that there was an increase in activity on Twitter in the area impacted by the hurricane, and that tweets from the disaster generated more interest across the world. Social media can be used to rapidly assess damage after a disaster. After both Irma and Sandy, Twitter became a primary source of information about the disaster and influencers served as key informants about the event for the general public (Hu et al., 2024). Additionally, influencers engaged in discussions with viewers whereas emergency management accounts only posted announcements about the event (Pourebrahim et al., 2019). Spence et al. (2015) found that accounts for emergency responder organizations can serve as important sources of information immediately following disasters as long as the region still has cellular service ().

While social media plays an important role in CCC in the critical period immediately following a disaster, news coverage of climate events also influences how climate change and natural disasters are linked in media (Church et al., 2020; Rauscher, 2025). For example, studies of media coverage after Hurricanes Harvey and Irma (Battistoli et al., 2017); the 2017 hurricane season (Weiner et al., 2021), and the 2012 Midwestern drought (Church et al., 2020) note that climate change is not consistently linked in how the media describes the events. In their study of media coverage during the 2017 hurricane season, news outlets that lean more conservative tended to not link climate change to natural disasters (Weiner et al., 2021). Inconsistent mention of climate change in news coverage of the period immediately following climate disasters indicates that the U.S. does not have consensus on how climate change contributes to disasters.

Teachers' experiences in the critical period immediately following climate disasters position them as community resource hubs. They face a sudden increase in responsibility while trying to support students who are under significant emotional, physical, and financial stress, all the while managing their own disrupted lives: "Educators were fully aware that they had to go beyond their formal roles (dictated by standard curricula and textbooks) to assume informal roles that drew on their lived experiences, in order to better help youth in distress" (Edmeade & Buzinde, 2022, p. 10). Being a resource hub for students and school community while being pushed to return back to "normal" after a catastrophic event has occurred creates a major challenge for teachers. According to the Teacher Education literature, many teachers recognize the importance

of both commiserating with students and returning to normal classroom life, but feel uncertain about how to effectively move forward, highlighting a clear gap in training and support for teachers during and after climate disasters (Cannon et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2021).

The literature surrounding teacher experiences immediately after disasters primarily focuses on responses to major hurricanes like Ike, Matthew, Katrina, and Sandy, and describes teachers needing consistent financial support after disasters. Financial support and flexibility with working hours during the immediate recovery phase played significant roles in teachers' wellbeing. In some contexts, teachers continued to be paid as they worked in their communities and schools to help with the recovery process, and teachers were allowed to take time to deal with personal recovery needs. However, others were not paid and some were required to maintain regular working hours without flexibility (Alzahrani, 2018; Cannon et al., 2021; Cannon et al., 2023; Eargle & Esmail, 2015; Guth et al., 2021).

Post-Disaster Context: Disaster Studies in the post-disaster context emphasizes understanding the impact of disasters on victims. Lower income and systemically marginalized individuals are more likely to experience inequities in climate disaster recovery, including being last to receive resources and most likely to experience long term health disparities (Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2019; Berberian et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2023). Studies in post-disaster context mostly use larger data sets like census tracts to gauge impact (Lee et al., 2023; Smiley et al., 2022). By understanding impacts that disasters have on certain communities, Disaster Studies scholars identify risks and make recommendations for future mitigation and adaptation strategies (Smith et al., 2022).

Hurricane Harvey's impact on Houston, TX was commonly covered in the Disaster Studies literature for the post-disaster context. For example, Chakraborty et al.'s (2019) study of the identities of Houstonians who were most effected by the Hurricane found that race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status played a role in the impacts. Black, Hispanic, and low-income individuals were most impacted by storm, and they experienced more adverse health outcomes from the event. As a result, Chakraborty et al., recommends using identity-based categories to understand impacts of disasters to make adequate plans for mitigation and recovery. Smiley et al.'s (2022) study of social inequities and climate change's impacts on Hurricane Harvey corroborates with similar results. Smiley et al. used census tract data to identify neighborhoods most ill-affected and found that people who are Latine and lower income were most likely to be in floodplains that would not have otherwise flooded without climate change (Smiley et al., 2022).

CCC's role in the post-disaster context is a retrospective exploration of how climate change-related disasters are communicated and used to prepare for the future. For example, Boussalis et al. (2019) analyzed press releases from U.S. cities to study how they communicated about climate change and found that cities that are vulnerable to climate change are more likely to discuss it. Similarly, Rice and Jahn (2019) looked at how a community prepared for disasters by implementing lessons from previous disasters and found that even though climate disasters have strong impacts on communities, these impacts do not lead to consistent informed policies or mitigation efforts across the institutions involved in disaster preparedness and response.

In the post-disaster context, CCC studies also explore how communities develop climate disaster resilience; but CCC studies appear to focus on one event at a time. For example, Zhang and Shay's (2019) study explores what contributed to perceived community resilience surrounding Hurricane Matthew, and they found that crisis efficacy, or the feeling that one can

do something to help, led to greater perceived community resilience. Participants reported using social media to take action and help victims. They also found that members of the general public who sought more information about the event online reported lower perceived community resilience, which the authors attribute to feelings of overwhelm. Along those same lines, Lee et al. (2020) studied communication and community resilience after Hurricane Sandy and found that community members affected by the disaster developed larger networks while in the recovery process, which ultimately contributed to victim's feelings of resilience. Conversely, bureaucracy and perceived poor leadership in government and non-profit agencies led to a negative impact on victims' perception of the community's resilience after Hurricane Sandy. Lee's line of inquiry is important because measuring perceived resiliency informs how victims of climate disasters feel about recovery and their ability to withstand future events.

For teachers, literature in the post-disaster context points to the trauma and mental health needs that arose afterwards (Lemke et al., 2024; Kuhfield et al., 2025). Several studies point to the need for teachers to receive trauma training to be able to support students in the long-term recovery process (Cannon et al., 2020). Further, teachers experienced pressure to return to normal during this period, despite being traumatized, their homes and neighborhoods still damaged, and students expressing concerns and grief from the event (Alzahrani, 2018). For example, in their study of teachers in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Edmeade et al. (2022) found that teachers took on the role of social worker and counselor to support their students. Teachers also took on roles to help with recovery efforts as they demonstrated an investment in their communities (Davis et al., 2021). Despite the increase in climate disasters, the field of Teacher Education does not use these instances to develop systematic planning and training to support teachers as they help their schools and communities recover (Guth et al., 2021).

A Shared Emphasis on Community

Community constitutes a major theme across all three stages (pre-, critical, and post-disaster) of the SIMPDA model (Jetten et al., 2021). The pre-disaster context describes community in data from EM-DAT and IPCC as these organizations identify climate risks for communities around the globe. Community is especially represented in the critical period immediately following disasters, and it shows up in two ways: 1) as Disaster Studies scholars explore community volunteer involvement in recovery efforts; and 2) as CCC looks into social media usage surrounding disaster. In the post-disaster context, community is utilized as CCC scholars work to understand communication's roles in community resilience. Additionally, teachers play an important role in community resilience as they become resources for recovery in the critical period after disasters and who become counselors supportive of traumatized students post-disaster. Emphasis on community across all three fields and all three areas of the SIMPDA framework indicates teachers could play an important role in disaster response. However, there is far less research on teachers' experiences surrounding climate disasters in the U.S. than the other two areas — Disaster Studies and Climate Change Communication — included in our mapping review. Given the dearth of literature surrounding teachers' experiences with climate disasters, education scholars need to play catch-up when it comes to understanding experiences of teachers before, during, and after climate disasters, especially as climate disasters become more commonplace (Knutson et al., 2020). Our mapping review positions Teacher Education scholars to explore roles teachers/schools could play across the SIMPDA framework and brings together scholars in all three fields to make recommendations for ways Disaster Studies, CCC, and Teacher Education researchers and policy makers can collaborate in the future (2021).

Across the pre-disaster context, there is a need for more preparedness for climate disasters and funding to support these efforts. Disaster Studies indicates a lack of infrastructure and funding to support proper climate change preparedness and adaptation in the U.S. (Donatti et al., 2024). CCC demonstrates that pre-disaster skepticism in the media sways public opinion and selection of political candidates who do not prioritize climate change adaptation. Disaster Studies' findings about lack of infrastructure and funding and CCC's findings about lack of public and political support trickles down into the lack of preparedness for teachers and schools in the pre-disaster context. If Disaster Studies and Teacher Education scholars were able to partner for future research in the pre-disaster context, then the field might be able to incorporate teachers into community resilience networks and begin to construct schools in ways that will likely make them reliable community refuges during disaster and its aftermath (Wen et al., 2023). The critical period immediately following disasters is an area where educator involvement could be the most impactful. If disaster response policy makers were able to partner with school districts to give teachers a more formal role in immediate recovery efforts, teachers' connections with the community would strengthen to make a significant impact in how students, families, and other school community members receive aid in that critical period (Kankanamge et al., 2019). It would also be beneficial to study how teachers' involvement in disaster recovery impacts community resilience (Lee et al., 2020). Extended volunteering would boost morale for teachers because their role as community-based educators would adjust to support disaster recovery (Hamideh, 2020; Pyles et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2015).

Additionally, if districts could communicate with one another using crowdsourcing or other digital volunteer methods, teachers whose schools and community members experience damage from disasters could communicate with outside networks to coordinate recovery efforts for students, teachers, and other school community members (Kankanamge et al., 2019). In the post-disaster context, it would be beneficial for Disaster Studies and Teacher Education scholars to partner to investigate which identities of teachers are more impacted by climate disasters (Chakborty et al., 2019; Smiley, 2022). Involving teachers in the post-disaster CCC process could help students, families, schools, and school community members better prepare for future disasters (Rice and Jahn, 2019). Teachers could incorporate disaster preparedness into lessons on weather and current events. Schools could have a professional development on classroom preparedness and trauma-informed teaching after disasters. Regular science curriculum that connects climate change to climate disaster would provide students and teachers plenty of time to talk about facing and living through disaster.; and prevent climate change skepticism.

Our mapping review, although limited to examination of forty-five sources from general literature in three fields (Disaster Studies, Climate Change Communication, and Teacher Education).begins the work of filling significant gaps in Teacher Education literature. As educators, we do not have expertise in Disaster Studies or Climate Change Communication, but our interest in those areas is in what they can tell us about making schools ready for climate change and its related disasters. It is alarming that schools do not have systematic plans in place for climate disasters (Kano et al., 2007). Results of our mapping review indicate that Disaster Studies, CCC, and Teacher Education are three disparate fields with overlapping interests, indicating that the three should collaborate to more fully address the needs of communities in the U.S. disrupted by climate disasters. Our findings demonstrate a need for schools to train and support teachers throughout climate disasters, and it would practical to begin that work by partnering with Disaster Studies and CCC scholars. But that partnership should be guided by exploration of research questions of special interest to Education. Each question we recommend

here is derived from our mapping review and opens a new area of study for Education scholars:

How can we best build, operate, and fund schools so that schools become natural havens for communities experiencing climate disaster?

How can the regular curriculum be developed and deployed to help debunk climate change skepticism?

What ways can be found to support teacher extended volunteerism during disasters and recovery from disasters?

What does teachers' experience with disaster tell us about policy direction for improving crisis efficacy among community members?

How can we improve communications among schools, school districts, and school personnel to help coordinate disaster relief efforts?

As climate change continues to intensify and climate disasters occur with increasing regularity in more and more places, questions raised by our mapping review will *demand* answers. Beginning study of school adaptation to climate disaster *now* means we will have adequate answers to climate change questions when we need them most.

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Thriving Together: Experiential, Project-, and Place-Based Learning Contributes to Workforce Development

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Abstract: Experiential, project-based, and place-based learning models (EPPLs) are effective, student-centered approaches that connect academic content to real-world contexts. As educators seek methods that increase engagement, deepen understanding, and strengthen career-connected learning, EPPLs have become central to conversations about innovative instructional practice. The benefits of implementing EPPLs in K-college settings include contribution to transferable skill development. EPPLs also honor diverse learners, community contexts, and local resources. Collaboration among colleagues plays a critical role in broadening EPPL impact by leveraging collective expertise, shared experiences, and diverse perspectives, ultimately affecting the overall influence of educational initiatives on student success and workforce readiness.

A recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* (Flaherty, 2026) highlights the renewed momentum behind apprenticeships in the United States, while also acknowledging that similar surges of interest in the past have struggled to become widely implemented. What distinguishes the current moment is not that apprenticeships are new — indeed, as Flaherty notes, they predate the modern university by centuries — but that institutions are reimagining what apprenticeships can be and whom they serve. In doing so, colleges and universities are redefining the relationship between higher education and the workforce, and expanding the pathways through which learners can earn credentials with pecuniary value. Flaherty further situates this shift within broader economic and technological trends, including the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). While some remain skeptical that AI will displace workers at scale in the near term — and question narratives labeling Generation Z as a “tool-belt generation” more interested in learning trades than studying traditional academic disciplines — there is widespread recognition of a persistent shortage of skilled labor. This gap, potentially exacerbated by U.S. immigration policy, has intensified calls to embed work-based learning in programs of study. As a result, both internships and apprenticeships are increasingly viewed as essential components of higher education programs of study because learn as you work opportunities position students to gain practical experience alongside academic coursework. Recent years have seen a renewed emphasis on apprenticeships and work-based learning as strategies designed to meet evolving U.S. labor market demands. Supported by policymakers, higher education institutions, and industry partners, apprenticeship models have expanded beyond traditional skilled trades to include academic fields historically associated with bachelor’s degrees. As adoption of practicum experience into undergraduate study grows, so does confusion around how apprenticeships differ from related approaches such as internships, experiential learning, place-based learning, and project-based learning. At the center of this discussion is a longstanding philosophical question about the purpose of education: whether it should prioritize academic knowledge or primarily prepare for the workforce.

When it comes to liberal and vocational education, an either/or approach rather than a both-

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and approach, has permeated educational policy and led to creation of experiential, project-, and place-based learning models that are often separate from academic content. As highlighted by Flaherty (2026), cultural perceptions — rooted in the historical practice of educational tracking (Oakes, 2005; Oakes and Saunders, 2010) — have contributed to the undervaluing of apprenticeship pathways. Internships are often seen as alternatives for select students rather than viable options for all learners. However, as educators seek methods that increase student engagement, deepen understanding, and strengthen career-connected learning, scholars and practitioners increasingly frame the vocational/academic debate not as an either/or choice but as a both-and opportunity. Switzerland, for instance, has developed flexible systems that allow movement between academic and vocational pathways, yielding strong educational outcomes by combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience. U.S. educational leaders emphasize that integrating apprenticeships onto programs of study reflects an *abundance mindset* enhancing rather than diminishing traditional higher education. As a contribution to the both-and understanding of the relation between liberal and vocational education, we discuss experiential, project-, and place-based learning (EPPL) models as a strategy that acknowledges the significance of apprenticeships without separating them from academic study. Other benefits of implementing EPPL models, from K to college, include contributions to workforce readiness and transferable skill development. EPPLs also honor diverse learners, community contexts, and local resources. Collaboration among colleagues on EPPL projects can help strengthen the educational impact — both intellectual and economic — of experiences had during study in schools.

Benefits of EPPLs

Experiential learning engages students in real-world activities then asks them to examine those experiences to gain deeper understanding than passive reception of information can provide. Like experiential learning, Minero (2016) notes that place-based learning engages students “learning by doing” in their community in an effort to get students to build inquiry and communication skill, to learn how to interact with their environment, to gain a deeper sense of themselves and where they are in the world. Additionally, place-based learning is an immersive process of study that “places students in local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities and experiences, and uses these as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum” (Getting Smart, n.d.). Place-based education, furthermore, enables personalized learning by giving students voice and choice in determining what, how, when and where they learn by tailoring learning to each student’s strengths, needs, and interests to support attainment of high academic standards. Place-based study situates local community as meaningful context for learning, identity-building, and civic agency (Sobel, 2004). Place-based learning often incorporates the “Project Method,” popularized by John Dewey’s student, William Heard Kilpatrick (1918), and, to an extent, Maria Montessori (1912), who argued children learn best through firsthand, self-directed activities in a prepared environment that fosters independence and taps into natural curiosity (Brühlmeier, 2010).

EPPL learning experiences offer many benefits, including (1) learning grounded in local communities and contexts; (2) student-centered and personalized learning; (3) learning that is relevant and engaging; (4) social-emotional learning; (5) inquiry-based learning; (6) learning through ecological, political, economic and social lenses; (7) autonomous learning that strengthens motivation and persistence; (8) interdisciplinary learning; (9) learning that encourages design-thinking; (10) learning that serves as a model for understanding global

challenges, opportunities and connections; and (11) learning that situates communities as ecosystems for schools where local and regional experts, experiences, and environments are part of the expanded definition of classrooms. EPPL models can also help students apply core curricular content they acquire through inquiry, internships, service-learning, and entrepreneurial innovation. Through EPPL, students directly engage with the relevance of their own learning, making sense of academic content by developing their skill in critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. As one school leader explains, “Students and educators are often engaged in project-based and place-based learning experiences that leverage partnerships and community assets to make learning authentic and meaningful” (Getting Smart, n. d., n. p.).

As described in Table 1, what various forms of EPPL all have in common is an education of the head, hands, and heart. One of the original theorists of head-hands-heart education was Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (n.d.), a Swiss reformer, who emphasized balancing intellectual (head), moral/emotional (heart), and practical/physical (hands) development of the whole child. His work influenced educators such as Dewey (1938), Maria Montessori (1912), and Rudolph Steiner (2013/1919). An education of the head, hands, and heart was also utilized by Booker T. Washington (1903) and George Washington Carver (2017/1987) as the primary educational philosophy at Tuskegee Normal Institute, which later became Tuskegee University. At Tuskegee, EPPL was utilized to emphasize the important role education played in addressing both academic and community needs (Brühlmeier, 2010). By using local environment as an integrating context, EPPL models use a school’s surroundings and community as a framework within which students can construct their own learning, guided by teachers and administrators working to connect curriculum to Common Core and/or relevant State standards (Getting Smart, n. d., n. p.; Minero, 2016). With EPPL, learning can happen anytime, anywhere — in cities, in parks, in one’s hometown, on a field trip, in a rural village, in one’s backyard, in one’s school, in museums, and so on (Getting Smart, n. d., n. p.).

Learning Model	Key Characteristics	Engagement Method	Primary Skills Developed
Experiential Learning	Hands-on, reflective learning	Direct action and reflection	Critical thinking, problem-solving, professional readiness
Project-Based Learning	Long-term projects, real-world problems	Sustained inquiry and collaboration	Technical skills, teamwork, project management, communication
Place-Based Learning	Community and environmental connection	Local engagement and participation	Community involvement, environmental awareness, pro-environmental behaviors

Table 1: Experiential, Place-based, and Project-based (EPPL) Learning Models

EPPL Challenges

When discussing the challenges of experiential, project, and place-based learning the relationship between EPPL and apprenticeships becomes evident. Even in pre-pandemic times, EPPL had its logistical challenges, and now, with additional layers around health, social distancing, equity, and access, experiential learning can sometimes feel daunting (National

Geographic Education Staff, 2024). By now, it is common to hear that the widening “experience gap” (Flaherty, 2025) for entry-level workers in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) will force apprenticeship expansion. Unemployment and underemployment for college graduates will likely increase because of AI, and that will elevate apprenticeship education “out of the morass of workforce ‘train-and-pray’ that it’s been stuck in for the last few decades” (Flaherty, 2026, n.p.). Flaherty also acknowledges a huge skilled labor shortage and a growing imperative for higher education to plant work-based learning along every pedagogical program pathway.

Another EPPL challenge is confusion about terminology: What’s the difference between an internship and an apprenticeship, for example? Two main difference are time commitment and educational focus. Internships are typically a small part of a student’s larger educational experience, and not the focus of their extended education. Thus, internships tend to last a summer or a semester. Apprenticeships, by contrast, can last from two to four years and provide learners with extensive practice in their field of study (Flaherty, 2026). In addition, note that apprenticeships range across a continuum from work-based to academic-based. Failure to recognize the work-academic continuum helps explain why some stigma attaches to apprenticeships for some cultures and classes of people. Flaherty quotes Annelies Goger of Brookings Metro, a think tank and policy center devoted to community improvement as saying: “We have this legacy of tracking, and this legacy of saying that it’s other people’s kids who do apprenticeship, right? It’s not my kid. I want my kid to go to Harvard.” The sentiment described by Goger fails to understand that apprenticeships, both work-based and academic-based, may be had at Harvard and, as Flaherty notes, bias against apprenticeships ignores both the evidence of strong learning outcomes for apprentices including increased facility to learn developed by allowing students to move between vocational and academic elements in a program of study. In discussing the history of the American high school Crowson et al (2000, p. 241) note the trend of “quiet reform” that “offers, at last, a solution to the constraining historical dualism between academic and vocational training.” But in the same breath they add that this quiet revolution “...remains heavily threatened by our nation’s reputation for low-quality vocational education and by some long-unresolved tensions with regard to social mobility and political control.”

To illustrate standard, dichotomous thinking about vocational and academic education, Crowson and co-authors (2000, p. 245) discuss arguments between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, At no point has the heat around the issue of the relation between school and work been greater than in the famous Washington-Du Bois debate — also, despite some recent revisionism (Spring, 1990), long a symbol of limits on the opportunities available to and the talents of African Americans. Although both men’s positions are nuanced beyond total opposition to one another, history has put Washington (1903) on the side of vocational education and Du Bois (1903) on the side of academic learning or liberal education. Du Bois faulted Washington’s education strategy for its lack of academic merit and political value. Giani (2019, p. 1002) summarizes Du Bois’ point writing, “Vocational education has historically been viewed as a mechanism for reinforcing social stratification by channeling underrepresented students into pathways with limited educational and economic benefits.” In summary of Washington’s thinking, Crowson et al. (2000, p. 241) argue that “valuable opportunities for improvement in job preparation are at hand in an increased national interest in economic development.” Equally in Washington’s day and ours, America’s schools should be the places to explore school to job opportunities. Clearly, the longevity of the debate demonstrates the need for additional theorizing about what Olson (1997) called “The School-to-Work Revolution.” But the Du Bois-Washington debate serves as a reminder that the difficult historical relationship between vocational education

and academic education serves as an unflattering, because distorting, backdrop against which most see EPPL. This poses a significant theoretical challenge to EPPL and makes many reluctant to give due consideration to implementation of EPPL in their own educational environments.

But implementation of EPPL in any environment faces common operational challenges. Because EPPL makes high resource and time demands and has difficulty in scaling and evaluation via standardizing assessments, EPPL commonly meets resistance from educators who favor more traditional methods of learning. EPPL often requires the teacher to become a facilitator, and as Haysbert (2020) notes, teachers may feel uncomfortable moving from a direct instruction role to a facilitator role, fearing a loss of control or a chaotic classroom. Some have argued that EPPL can often focus on fun over learning and that EPPL projects can often turn into superficial activities that look good, or feel good, but lack deep intellectual rigor or knowledge-construction (McKay, 2017). Without clear objectives, EPPL can sometimes feel disorganized, making it harder for students to grasp key lessons and takeaways. Difficulty in curriculum alignment can also be a challenge for EPPL. Poorly designed projects can lose focus on core academic standards, focusing instead on project activities that have little to no connection with curriculum. Moreover, EPPL puts stress on existing curriculum schedules. Much more time-consuming than traditional lecturing methods, the kinds of firsthand projects, field trips, and internships often associated with EPPL also typically require significant funding, specialized materials, and logistical planning for events outside the school or classroom. Additional challenges of EPPL include safety management as EPPL often involves working with machinery, in labs, or off-site, introducing physical risks that require careful supervision. There are also challenges with regard to student access. Without careful management, some students may have fewer opportunities to participate, resulting in unequal learning outcomes. (Muday, 2025). Outside-of-school challenges include finding partners. Building partnerships for EPPL projects or internships requires establishing and maintaining relationships with organizations and companies outside regular educational circles, a sometimes lengthy and difficult process (Obermiller, n. d.). However, despite all these difficulties EPPL may still be worth using.

EPPL Ancillaries: Workforce Readiness, Community Contexts, Local Resources

Today's educational *Zeitgeist* includes a growing emphasis on aligning learning experiences with workforce preparation to address skill gaps and prepare students for an increasingly dynamic job market. Employers argue that self-directed, life-long learning enables employees to pivot careers and stay relevant in an ever-changing job market in a fluid economy (National Research Council, 2012). According to the 2025 job outlook report of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), skill-based hiring continues to gain momentum with 70% of employers reporting its use — an increase from 65% the previous year — and 71% applying it to at least half of their hiring decisions. The shift towards skill-based hiring expresses a growing emphasis on demonstrated competencies over traditional academic metrics such as GPA. Employers most commonly assess skill during interviews (87%) and resumé screening (65%), while also embedding desired skill-level into job descriptions (81%) and using structured tools, like interview rubrics (58%), to evaluate candidates' skillfulness more objectively. EPPL competencies closely align with the definition of career readiness developed by NACE (2025) who defines career readiness as attainment and demonstration of essential competencies such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, professionalism, and resilient career- and self-development. Situating learning in experientially rich, authentic, problem-solving contexts supports the development of skill increasingly prioritized by employers in response to rapid

technological and societal change (NACE, 2023). Yet, a notable gap remains, as many students are still unfamiliar with skill-based hiring and may struggle to effectively communicate their competencies in the job market.

EPPL internships and mentorships cultivate cohesive curricular connections between work and school and develop leadership with regard to workforce readiness and transferable skill, such as collaboration and adaptability. From K–higher education, innovative programs are increasingly integrating experiential, project-, and place-based learning approaches to create meaningful and inclusive learning environments. EPPL programs intentionally connect academic content to students’ lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, local communities, and region-specific challenges, recognizing that learning is most impactful when relevant and responsive. Importantly, EPPL approaches also prioritize equity by valuing diverse ways of learning and ensuring that all learners — regardless of background — see themselves reflected in curriculum. Two examples highlight how EPPL programs can be thoughtfully designed to honor diverse learners, strengthen community connections, and effectively capitalize on local resources.

Alta Gracia, Argentina: In 2012, while a graduate research assistant in a teacher education course at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Brett spent a summer in Alta Gracia, Argentina with his students. An academic purpose of the trip was to conduct research comparing teacher education programs in Argentina and the United States. A major theme that emerged



Figure 1. Teacher Education Research Project in Alta Gracia, Argentina

from that research was the role of touch between teachers and students. Specifically, as teacher education students coming from the United States, we were particularly observant of and quite frankly taken aback by the openness between students and teachers when it came to touch. Teachers, particularly in the early grades, could be seen affirming student behavior or celebrating student achievement and success by tousling a student’s hair and even hugging students. This was surprising to many of the undergraduate teacher education students who shared that, in their schools in the United States, there were strict policies that forbade them from connecting with students in that way. We all shared how witnessing that kind of connection between students and

teachers made many of us feel a sense of sadness, a sense of longing to be able to connect with our students in that way. Another observation made during our time in Alta Gracia dealt more closely with experiential education, project-based learning and place-based learning (EPPL). We saw the same sense of connection and care exhibited in Alta Garcia's academic work.

Elementary-aged students were studying native and indigenous plants within the vicinity of the school. When we walked into the classroom, each desk had a plant laying on top of it with a detailed list of its medicinal and nutritional properties next to the plant. Additionally, each student stood by their desk and described to us the kind of plant it was and where it was found

The experience of learning from student-experts was profound for the teacher education students and especially for me. When I listened to the students explain what they had learned from studying plants in their own communities and saw the excitement in their eyes as they talked about the kinds of projects they wanted to conduct to explore the medicinal and nutritional benefits of the plants, I knew that this was the kind of learning that I had always dreamed of doing. It was Dewey (firsthand experience) mixed with Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver (use of community resources) and W.E.B. Du Bois (study of theoretical properties of plants) all wrapped into one experience. More than anything, the energy in the room that day was palpable. For some reason, we all ended up jumping up and down as high as we could and dancing with each other in circles. I do not remember the exact reason for this. I just remember the joy we all expressed, including the teacher education students from the United States. It was like we had all witnessed a new kind of learning and we did not want it to stop. You can see the energy we all shared that day in Figure 2, a snapshot of an unforgettable, educational experience.



Figure 2. Celebrating with Alta Garcia Elementary Students after Class Presentations on Local/Native Plants

Experiential Learning at Rutgers University: Experiential learning is incorporated into a 100-level Biology course through a field trip managed by Monica to the Raritan River, where students engage directly in environmental data collection to support their semester-long water-quality research projects. Experiential learning emphasizes learning by doing, and during this activity, students personally collect water samples, record environmental observations, and discuss potential indicators of ecosystem health (Figure 3 – next page). Firsthand experience as eco-researchers allows students to connect classroom concepts with real-world environmental

challenges while practicing scientific methods in an authentic field setting. Through the process



Figure 3. Firsthand Study of the Lower Raritan River Ecosystem, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

of collecting samples, analyzing water quality parameters, and interpreting results over the course of the semester, students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skill. EPPL increases student engagement because fieldwork and real-world investigations allow students to operate in and upon the world as they study it. EPPL provides a much more interactive and meaningful approach to schooling than mere presentation of information characteristic of traditional instruction, which requires students only to reflect upon what they hear or read about in school. Learning to test ideas for validity and reliability is how experiential learning contributes to professional readiness, helping students build foundational research technique, teamwork, and environmental analysis skill valued in scientific and environmental careers.



Figure 4: Collecting Water Samples (left) and Eco-data (right) at Passion Puddle on the Lower Raritan River

Collaboration Can Help Broaden EPPL Impact

While examples discussed above feature educators working alone in a specific field of inquiry, collaboration among colleagues plays a critical role in broadening EPPL's impact by leveraging collective expertise, shared experiences, and diverse perspectives. Especially when educators work together across disciplines, programs, or institutions, they can co-develop more robust and inclusive learning experiences, align methodological strategies, and extend successful practices beyond a single class. Collaboration also enables sharing of resources, assessment approaches, and evidence of impact, strengthening both implementation of curriculum and sustainability of study. Through ongoing dialogue/reflection, colleagues can refine instruction to respond more effectively to student and community needs. Ultimately, these partnerships amplify reach, deepen innovation, and enhance the overall influence of educational experiences on student success and development workforce readiness. In broadening EPPL's impact, the goal is to create a portfolio of EPPL activities and projects across multiple sites that achieve three objectives: (a) Academic Literacy; (b) Ecological Literacy; and (c) Lifelong Optimal Learning. All three components of broadening EPPL's impact — academic literacy, ecological literacy, and lifelong optimal learning — are measured by the autonomy and the ability of teachers to create projects for curricular engagement that align with and honor the cultures, histories, interests, and experiences of the people, places, and institutions they serve (Haysbert, 2020).

Academic Literacy: Academic literacy consists of the knowledge and skill necessary to understand and participate in critical, problem-solving, academic discourse and includes information literacy (finding and evaluating sources), writing (clear expression of ideas), oral communication (transforming ideas into presentations), computing (use of digital technology to analyze data), and digital citizenship (safely enacting online know-how). Skill in all aspects of academic literacy is required to successfully navigate the world we live in today. Academic literacy is shaped by institutional goals for student learning as well as social forces such as power and privilege, poverty and exclusion. Academic literacies can be seen as embodied practices that enable students to participate in academic communities and shape their sense of intellectual self-esteem (Academic Literacy - QUADC, n.d.)). Another way to think about academic literacy is as an education of the head.

Ecological Literacy: Ecological Literacy encompasses an understanding of how individuals and societies interact with each other and with the natural world, with particular attention to how these interactions can be conducted sustainably. Also known as eco-literacy, green literacy, environmental literacy, and sustainability literacy, ecological literacy includes awareness of the interconnectedness of life and understanding of the world as a physical system. "An ecologically literate individual understands ecosystems, sustainability, and environmental issues through cause-and-effect relationships" (American Library Association, n.d.). Another way to think about ecological literacy is as an education of the hands.

Lifelong Optimal Learning: Lastly, lifelong optimal learning attempts to expand the notion of lifelong learning by positing an aesthetic, if not a moral, obligation to learn. To practice optimal learning, lifelong learners are enjoined to find the beauty in people and their histories, homelands and cultures; to describe and assess social consequences of pursuit of personal interests; and, of greatest moral importance, to construct learning experiences that bring beauty into the world (Haysbert, 2020). Another way to think about lifelong optimal learning is as an education of the heart. By supporting academic and ecological literacy and facilitating lifelong optimal learning, EPPL enacts all three aspects — hands, head, heart — of Pestalozzian holistic education.

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Multimodal Expansions of Dialogue: Gallery Walks in an Intergroup Dialogic Classroom

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Abstract: Gallery walks, a pedagogical tool used in intergroup dialogic classrooms, a) expand dialogue into multimodal expression, b) encourage involvement of students with assigned readings, and c) facilitate connection of course concepts to students' lived experience via inclusive, accessible, and embodied processing of course materials. As co-facilitators of an undergraduate course, "Intergroup Dialogue: Race and Ethnicity at the Intersections," we utilize gallery walks as a dialogic activity during which small groups of students move through stations to find posters presenting excerpts from course texts. Students write annotations about the text on the posters and also write comments about previous groups' responses. Gallery walks produce layered, student-generated commentary on course content by giving students a permissive environment in which to contribute, question, challenge, and explore what they study. Gallery walks contribute significantly to student learning by presenting instructors with ongoing opportunity for reflective practice guided by student thinking.

It's a Wednesday night about halfway through the semester when we (Etije and Amanda) first introduce students to the gallery walk activity. After we provide instructions, the students break into groups of two or three and each group goes to an assigned poster taped to the walls around our classroom. Each poster presents an excerpted quote from the week's readings surrounded by a larger blank piece of paper that leaves ample room for marginalia. Our students begin talking with each other, pointing to lines in the quotes, discussing meanings and takeaways. Voices soon fill the classroom as we, the co-facilitators of the class, rotate among the groups and observe the conversations. Students pull out markers and underline particular words, annotating the blank space around the quote. After five minutes, a timer goes off and students move clockwise to the next of the six posters they will respond to. Some require our urging to move on as they finish writing their thoughts on the poster they must now leave. We notice one student, who is usually reserved in large group discussions, in deep conversation with her group. Another round begins, but this time, students annotate the excerpt as well as the previous group's thoughts. Two students draw a cicada under an excerpt from Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools" essay, connecting a mindfulness exercise from earlier in the term to Lorde's writing. Another small group responds to an earlier group's comment on Ruha Benjamin's *Radical Imagination*, building on their conceptualization of imagination as a practice for justice. With each round of commentary, as each group rotates through each excerpt, an entanglement of engagement becomes more and more visible on each poster. At the end of the exercise, we all revisit the posters placed around the room, seeing how the formerly blank space around the text has become filled with takeaways, questions, pushbacks, examples, and even drawings.

We utilize gallery walks in our undergraduate class "Intergroup Dialogue: Race and Ethnicity at the Intersections." As the title of the course suggests, ours is an Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) course, a course committed to facilitate dialogue using multimodal means. As a social justice model of education, IGD invites students to engage deeply with course content on challenging and difficult issues and to dialogue with one another about their own perspectives (Zuñiga, et al, 2007). Gallery walks, then, are not just a curricular tool for students to learn about course content. Gallery walks engage students in *doing* dialogic work. Gallery walks expand

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dialogue into multimodal expression, encourage and enrich dialogue between students and texts, and open multiple inclusive, accessible, and embodied entries to processing assigned readings by connecting course concepts together and to the world. IGD and its expression in gallery walk activities provide a conceptual framework and model of practice for educators interested in intensifying dialogic instruction in their classes.

IGD: Raising Consciousness, Bridging Differences, Strengthening Capacity

Rooted in the work of Zúñiga and colleagues, the Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) framework is a dialogic practice that promotes continuous engagement across cultural and social divides, fosters learning about social diversity and inequalities, and cultivates a sense of social responsibility. In IGD environments, students who come from diverse backgrounds come together to “build mutual respect, address issues of conflict, and generate action plans” (Zúñiga, et al, 2007, p. 2). IGD has three core goals: consciousness raising, building relationships across differences and conflicts, and strengthening individual and collective capacities to promote social justice. Consciousness raising was originally conceived as a process that creates space for individuals of oppressed groups to understand the histories and inequities that contribute to their oppression (Freire, 1970). However, IGD strives for every participant to achieve critical consciousness, inviting members of privileged groups to understand how they and others have been shaped by systems of dominance (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003). IGD makes room for every student to wrestle with their own social identities and the role history has played for them in producing and sustaining patterns of privilege and oppression. IGD’s second goal, dismantling conflict due to difference, provides participants with opportunity, through dialogic encounters with one another, to build and sustain relationships across differences, whether those differences are race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, religious affiliation, or other social identities. IGD moves students from acknowledging differences and shifts students toward understanding how privilege and marginalization shape the experience of others, enabling participants to sustain deep and meaningful conversations and commit to continued connection beyond the IGD setting. IGD’s third goal, promotion of social justice, invites participants to cultivate a sense of personal and collective accountability in service of equity and systemic justice. Strengthening individual and group capacities, IGD equips participants with the tools and resources to collaborate across differences, design workable solutions for social inequities, and advocate for systemwide change.

Structured across four developmental stages, IGD moves participants through a progressive arc of dialogue, identity exploration, and collective action (Zúñiga et al., 2007). Stage 1, Group Beginnings, provides opportunity to develop shared meaning of dialogue by creating community guidelines, engaging in ice breakers, and distinguishing between debate and dialogue. Stage 2, Exploring Social Identity, pushes participants to examine individual and group identities by sharing personal experiences, discussing commonalities and differences, and exploring concepts of power and privilege (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Stage 3, Exploring Hot Topics, engages participants in meaningful conversations on social conflict and structural inequity through consideration of contentious topics related to systemic oppression, discrimination, and social identities. In Stage 4, Coalition and Alliance Building, participants form alliances and take collaborative action in pursuit of social change (Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2014).

Since its origins, IGD has evolved considerably as an educational practice, expanding across a range of institutions and taking on varied forms of facilitation and implementation. Initially introduced at the University of Michigan as a peer facilitated model, IGD has expanded to other

educational institutions and professional settings, which has led to diversification of the facilitation model (Zúñiga, Lopez & Ford, 2014; Cann, Brown & Madden, 2022). Some campuses retained the undergraduate peer facilitation; others used graduate students, or student affairs staff as faculty. Wide adoption reflects the range of organizational homes IGD has found across higher education. IGD has also extended into broader institutional and community organizations, including partnerships with K-12 schools, libraries, and community organizations, expanding its reach as a tool for democratic and civic engagement. At Syracuse University, IGD's community connected approach has included partnerships with local high school teachers and students, bringing together urban and suburban school communities for dialogue institutes facilitated by school personnel and university graduate students. The school-community partnership program is administered through the Cultural Foundations of Education Department with support from Academic Affairs. Rather than employing undergraduate peer facilitators, Syracuse's IGD courses are led by a team of two trained facilitators, co-facilitating undergraduate courses as part of their own scholarly and pedagogical development (Lopez & Zúñiga, 2010). Our institutional variation reflects the adaptability of IGD, demonstrating its capacity to evolve across contexts while remaining committed to students and communities it seeks to serve.

Situating Gallery Walks as IGD Practice

In essence, gallery walks entail displaying information visually around a learning space, usually in some sort of poster format, and students physically move around the room to engage material. Material can be questions, student work, or content from the course itself. From the basic poster format educators vary expectations and engagements for students: Movements can be timed, such as 5 minutes at each station; students can move individually or with partners or in groups; students can attach sticky notes or write directly on posters; students can engage silently or with dialogue; or students can write responses in their own notes (Sibbett, 2010). Che-arón and Matcha (2023) describe gallery walks as a practice of active learning in which students physically move around a space and dynamically engage course materials and peers, rather than sit for more traditional stationary group-talk or large group discussion. Wegmann (2020) further describes the use of gallery walks via online platforms in which students move synchronously or asynchronously and “walk” through slide decks or breakout rooms to similarly engage content and discussions as they would in a face-to-face setting. In their work exploring gallery walk use in teacher education, Ramsaroop and Petersen (2020) discuss how gallery walks as a pedagogical activity enrich class conversations, course learning, and student participation as well as foster creativity in more informal learning activities. Further, Ramsaroop and Petersen argue that gallery walks can not only be a way for students to engage learning but also a meta-practice to reflect on how they might also engage others in learning or discussion. IGD scholars and practitioners describe the use of gallery walks in intergroup dialogue space as a practice potent for consciousness-raising as students critically engage course content via self-reflection and dialogue with classmates (Hicks & Kaplowitz, 2024; Zúñiga et al., 2007). In addition, gallery walks in intergroup dialogue classes actively support key concepts and course themes through experiential learning (Maxwell, et al., 2011; Thompson, et al., 2023). Madden (2022, p. 103) describes the usefulness of gallery walks in intergroup dialogue classrooms as offering “a springboard for sustained critical dialogue that can promote perspective-taking.”

In our own classrooms, we recognize the value of gallery walks as a pedagogical tool to foster and sustain dialogue as part of the IGD framework. IGD facilitation explores multimodal engagement practices in which learners and facilitators attend to both verbal and nonverbal

methods of dialogue, including interpretation of and self-reflection on body language during activities and assessment of how set-ups of classroom spaces are experienced (Ford, 2018; Maxwell, et al., 2011). In using gallery walks in our IGD classroom, we look to expand our own multimodal practices. We incorporated gallery walks engaging students with course readings as a deliberate pedagogical response to the limitations of verbal-centered dialogue, inviting participants, prior to whole group discussion, to engage with course readings through written expression, movement, and peer interaction. As facilitators of the class, we selected excerpts from assigned readings for the week and posted them on chart paper around the classroom. We worked to choose excerpts that encapsulated core concepts, that correlated well with other readings for the week, or that provided tensions for students to dialogue through. Students were divided into groups of two to four, depending on the class size and number of poster stations. At each station, students were given three to five minutes to annotate the excerpt, draw connections, and identify and emphasize key themes and important topics. Students were encouraged to make connections to other course readings and life experiences to help them better understand the context and achieve the goals of IGD. Upon returning to their original station, students transitioned to the last segment of the gallery walk: an invitation to return freely and independently, moving beyond their initial groups, to any station they wished to revisit or respond to further. After a few semesters of implementing gallery walks we introduced an extension. Students were asked to submit excerpts they wished to explore and digest further with their classmates through the gallery walk. Student curation of gallery walks transferred autonomy and responsibility from facilitators to students, centering student voice in the selection and direction of the dialogic engagement. Our motivation for centering student voice emerged from patterns of limited engagement with course readings that surfaced during class discussions. As co-facilitators, we observed the conversations did not always reach the depth necessary to work meaningfully towards the second goal of IGD, building relationships across difference and conflict (Zúñiga et al., 2007; Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Students seemed hesitant to share in large group discussions or unsure about how to vocalize their tensions, questions, and takeaways in response to readings. Figure 1 provides an example of student annotations from the gallery walk activity, illustrating the range of written responses, connections, and themes that emerged across poster stations.

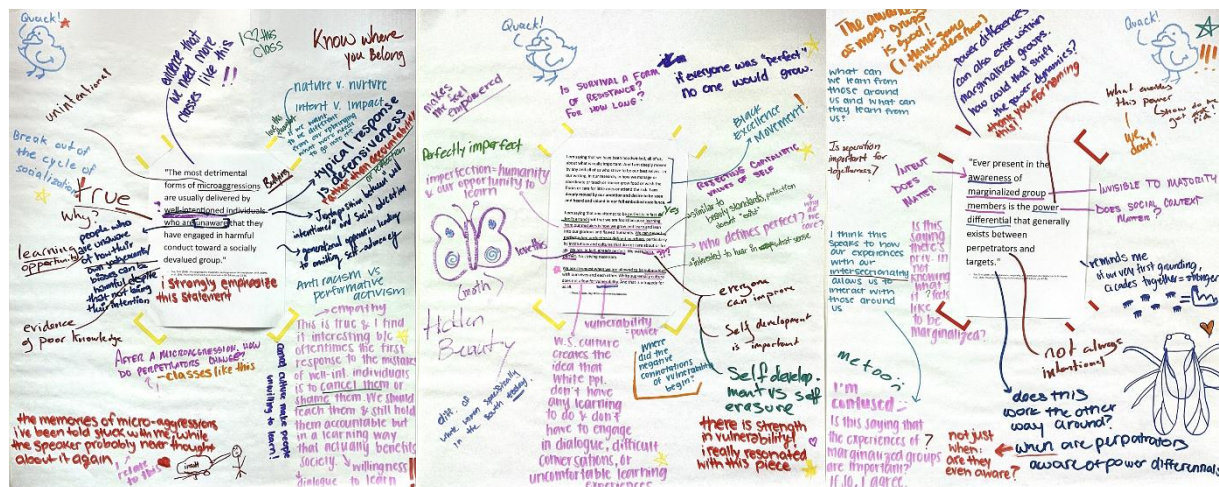


Figure 1: Student Annotations on Excerpted Course Readings across IGD Gallery Walk Poster Stations
(Photographs by Etije Walker and Amanda Kingston. IGD Facilitation, Syracuse University.)

Exercising Opportunity for Facilitator Reflection

The reflections that follow are drawn from our experiences as co-facilitators across multiple semesters of IGD implementation. We enter our reflection as practitioners who were simultaneously architects of and participants in the dialogic space of gallery walks, offering observations that are collaborative and shaped by the distinct social identities and perspectives each of us brought to the work. In Fall 2024, we co-facilitated our first Intergroup Dialogue course together. Prior to the semester in which we first collaborated as co-facilitators, we had taken coursework together as part of our doctoral program and served as teaching assistants for two separate Social Foundations courses. Our facilitation continued to be shaped by our syllabus, agendas that fit the needs and pace of our students, our ongoing planning, and weekly debriefing meetings with the program director. Throughout our first semester co-facilitating IGD, we often focused reading dialogue activities through think-pair-share, small group, or large group discussions with gallery walks utilized every two or three weeks. We initially leaned into gallery walks as we recognized that a few of our students were more reserved (even when engaged) and we wanted to create space for both an on-ramp for their contributions as well as self-reflective practices for the entire class. In our initial phase of gallery walks, we used them with post-it notes to varying degrees of success. In the Spring 2025 semester, we began utilizing gallery walks with groups collectively annotating excerpts from assigned texts with some excerpts chosen by students.

Our engagement with IGD facilitation was also shaped by our previous/current roles as K-12 educators in which we were able to engage dynamic and embodied ways of doing education (hooks, 1994) — though this is not true for all K-12 educators. Prior to my (Etije's) graduate career, I worked for three years as a K-12 educator, teaching primarily mathematics. Since 2024, I have taught undergraduate and graduate level courses in IGD and teacher education programs. My work as an educator and IGD facilitator is deeply influenced by my identity as a Black, able-bodied, middle-class woman. I entered IGD with a Master's degree in Teaching, bringing practical experience in developing and utilizing tools to enhance classroom engagement with course materials. In prior classroom experiences, gallery walks served as a vehicle to solving math problems and supporting students in error analysis. Prior to my (Amanda's) graduate career, I worked for eight years as a K-12 educator and administrator, teaching primarily humanities courses, and since 2020 have taught undergraduate students in teacher education and women and gender studies courses. My engagement as an educator and an IGD facilitator is shaped by my social positionality as a White, able-bodied, middle-class woman and first-generation college student. In addition, I arrived at IGD with a Master's degree where my research focused primarily on peace pedagogies and education, with interest in ecological and ecofeminist peace practices such as eco-mindfulness. Throughout my career, and particularly as a K-12 educator, I have utilized gallery walks as a way to get students moving, learning in more embodied ways as a pathway for building larger classroom conversations and synthesizing curriculum. Together, we brought our distinct yet complementary experiences into a shared dialogic facilitation practice that consistently prioritized embodied, multimodal engagement (hooks, 1994). As co-facilitators, the challenging part of this exercise at times could be to ensure large group discussion went beyond the excerpts we focused on so that students were engaging the full text (Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2014). At times some student groups could be less engaged than others, rushing to respond to their takeaways on the paper and then standing in silence. In those moments, we had to step in as facilitators to ask them about their annotations, their thought-process, and what more they might add to or engage with in the activity. We also found

student annotations useful impressions to reflect on in our weekly debrief meetings with the Intergroup Dialogue Program director. By having tangible materials that demonstrated student thinking — and entangled thinking, at that — we were able to dig into nuances of student takeaways on course content so as in future weeks to address misconceptions or build on connections.

Etije's Reflections: As I return to the use of gallery walks in our IGD course, I realize I always valued the days when we deviated from the standard mode of dialogic engagement that generally kept students seated, exchanging thoughts across the table. Gallery walks were always a way for us to engage all students, including those who were less vocal, and often rendered invisible by the students who at times dominated traditional dialogic spaces. Through their written words, quieter students were able to engage not only with the course readings, but with the thinking of their peers, leaving traces of their perspective across poster stations that others could respond to, build upon, and affirm or deny. In this way, written annotation functioned as a form of dialogue in its own right, one that did not require students to compete for airtime or perform confidently in the moment — typical of more traditional higher education classroom spaces — and instead invited them to contribute on their own terms and at their own pace. What brought me the most joy as a facilitator was witnessing students engage with one another in ways that were simultaneously academic and social, moving through the space with curiosity, stopping to laugh together over a shared reaction to a reading, or pausing to point something out to a peer whom they may have not spoken to otherwise. In those moments, the gallery walk was not simply a reading activity — it was a site of relationship building that honored the full humanity of every student.

Amanda's Reflections: As I reflect back on our use of gallery walks in IGD, I always looked forward to those days I felt most like a facilitator: We brought materials, provided guidelines, but the students made the classroom come alive with their learning. We often observed that students wanted to keep dialogues happening at stations before moving on to the next, that they were excited to revisit what others had written after them, and that they made clear connections between the separate readings each week both in their verbal conversations and in their written annotations. Further, the use of gallery walks helped catapult us back to a large group discussion that was often highly engaged as students had fresh in mind not only course material but their own and others' thinking about course material. For example, one semester during a gallery walk, students engaged excerpts from Lorde's (1984) "The Master's Tools" essay along with excerpts from Harro's (2018) *Cycle of Liberation*. Use of Lorde and Harro allowed for a robust engagement on the overlaps, tensions, and questions students found after engaging the texts alongside each other. Oftentimes in undergraduate courses, students do not have the opportunity to engage their peers on class readings prior to discussion time. By providing materials for consideration we reflected that students seemed to hold gallery walks as a safe place to share initial thoughts, reactions, and takeaways. We often reflected how much a gallery walk offered to our quieter class community members who did not feel as comfortable speaking in a large group — not only did this give them an entry into sharing their thoughts and ideas, but it also created space for those thoughts and ideas to be assessed by their classmates (Zúñiga et al., 2007). Further, gallery walks allowed groups to make meaning *together* as a dialogic practice. Mutual meaning making took on the form of students asking one another why a particular line felt powerful, what questions they were left with, and how each person found meaning within particular texts. In our reflections, we see gallery walks not only as pedagogical practice

supporting dialogue on course content but also as dialogue that fosters ongoing relationship-building within the classroom space.

IGD's Upward Spiral of Student Learning, Dialogic Practice, and Teacher Reflection

Looking at our reflections on our use of gallery walks in an IGD classroom, we argue that gallery walks as a multimodal engagement greatly enrich teaching and learning opportunities. To make our case, we focus on three aspects of significance of IGD for the field of social justice education. First, IGD is significant for student learning. Often in social justice educational models — such as intergroup dialogue — students receive thick or “chewy” course texts that can be dense with interconnected concepts. Students may have a difficult time understanding and engaging. As a result, class discussions can suffer as students do not feel confident, comfortable, or knowledgeable in sharing right away. The use of gallery walks allows students to engage with one another in partners or small groups to share their ideas as well as to record their thoughts on the gallery walk posters. Further, by utilizing an annotation-style gallery walk, students have space to engage with other students’ thoughts and respond in affirmations, questions, or extensions. Thus, students can experience multiple entry ways to class texts allowing them to be curious and engaged with peers about course content. Second, IGD is significant for dialogic practice. As we have emphasized, gallery walks are not just for students to learn and engage course content but serve as a multimodal approach to *doing* dialogue. Students experience multi-dimensional dialogue learning many ways to listen and to be heard: 1) self-reflecting on their own takeaways from excerpts, 2) conversing with partners or groups, 3) reading peer annotations and adding their own, 4) sharing scaffolded contributions to a large group synthesis of the gallery walk. As one student shared, “I feel like I am inside other people’s brains,” a key element of dialogic practice. Lastly, we find as co-facilitators and educators that gallery walks contribute significantly to best teaching-reflective practices. Gallery walks position us to hear and converse with students in real-time about their engagement with course texts and peer dialogue. With study of written annotations after class meetings end, we can continue to reflect as individuals and as a teaching team on student thought and engagement with texts and with one another. We see gallery walks, as we have conceived of and practiced them, as optimally designed to provide an embodied and entangled view of student thinking which reveals how students, working together, interpret and reinterpret texts in real time.

Incorporation of gallery walks into our IGD course has prompted us to consider how multimodal practices might be expanded beyond a single course or class context. Looking forward, we are committed to continuing use of gallery walks in IGD facilitation while also exploring how IGD practice might be adapted for other courses and education settings, especially those where non-verbal communication is not yet centered as legitimate dialogic engagement. Etije intends bringing gallery walks into teacher education courses and K-12 mathematics courses, spaces that do not traditionally invite students to engage with content and peers through written, embodied, or visual modes of expression. Amanda imagines a continued commitment to embodied and multimodal forms of dialogue in higher education classrooms in teacher education and women and gender studies courses. For dialogue facilitators broadly, experiences documented here serve as a call to action. We invite facilitators to examine their own dialogic spaces and ask how they might continue expanding multimodal engagements in classrooms. Multimodal practices such as gallery walks continue expansions of dialogue by creating entry points for students who process materials differently, communicate differently, and participate differently than traditional modes of instruction presume. However, when facilitators create

room for non-verbal dialogue, they are not accommodating the margins: They are fundamentally reimagining what dialogue can look like and who it can include (Cann, Brown & Madden, 2022; Zúñiga et al., 2007).

For higher education specifically, we argue there is much to be learned from K-12 pedagogical practices. Gallery walks, thinking routines, embodied learning strategies, and other tools that are commonplace in K-12 classrooms — though not always effectively employed — are often absent from undergraduate and graduate spaces, where lecture-based instruction and verbal discussion remain the dominant modes of learning (Borrero & Sanchez, 2017; hooks, 1994). IGD's absence from college classes is not incidental, it reflects broader assumptions in higher education about what rigorous academic engagement looks like and who is expected to perform it (Culver, et al.; 2021; Yosso, 2005). We call on higher education faculty and dialogue facilitators to borrow intentionally from K-12 pedagogy, adapting and expanding IGD practices in ways that honor the intellectual and communicative diversity of their students. The gallery walk, in its fundamental form, is an invitation to move, to write, to think alongside others without the pressure of immediate verbal performance. What we have documented here is how we have chosen to expand on intergroup dialogue pedagogy and how we might think through different activities as providing pathways for engaging multimodal practices. The work of expanding dialogue must include expanding the models through which dialogue happens. Students who filled those poster stations with questions, reactions, and connections were not stepping outside of dialogue: They were deepening it, on their own terms, in their own voice, and in ways that honored both the content they were studying and the community they were building together. From the joy of witnessing what gallery walks can accomplish, we depart to continue to imagine and work to instantiate what intergroup dialogue can become. Join us!

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Invisible Fences: Privatizing Public Education

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Abstract: Public education in the United States is increasingly shaped by structural inequities that function as “invisible fences,” reinforcing segregation and limiting equitable access to a sound basic education. We examine how policy, local control, and socio-economic stratification contribute to *de facto* privatization of public schooling, particularly in New York State. We draw on course-based student research, community-based inquiry, and interdisciplinary scholarship to situate contemporary educational inequities within broader historical, legal, and sociological frameworks. Findings suggest while preservice teachers perceive themselves as socially aware, they lack familiarity with longitudinal data, foundational scholarship, and structural explanations of inequality. We highlight the role of information literacy and archival engagement in developing critical consciousness among preservice teachers. Implications for teacher education, curriculum design, and policy reform emphasize the need for historically grounded and data-informed approaches to understanding and counteracting educational inequity.

Public education in the United States has long been positioned as a mechanism for democratic participation and social mobility. However, scholars have consistently demonstrated that access to educational opportunities remains deeply unequal, shaped by race, class, and geography (Kozol, 1991; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Reardon, 2011). Inequalities often persist through mechanisms that are not formally codified in law but are embedded in institutional structures and policy frameworks. We conceptualize institutional mechanisms supportive of bias as “invisible fences” or structural barriers that maintain segregation and inequality without explicit legal enforcement. Through integration of student research, community inquiry, and policy analysis, we explore how suburbanization, rural isolation, and urban restructuring contribute to the fragmentation — and effective privatization — of public education.

Explaining Persistent Educational Inequality

Building on theories of social reproduction of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) and spatial inequality/segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993), we examine how educational systems in New York State reflect broader patterns of stratification that silently support neoliberal agendas for privatization of public education.

Social Reproduction and Cultural Capital: Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of cultural capital provides a framework for understanding how educational systems reproduce existing social hierarchies. Schools often reward linguistic practices, knowledge, and dispositions of dominant groups, disadvantaging students from marginalized backgrounds. Similarly, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that schooling functions to reproduce labor market inequalities, aligning educational outcomes with class structures. Through a concerted effort to educate culturally responsive learners, Teacher Education programs have tried for the last twenty years to address the persistent achievement gap between underrepresented, economically marginalized, and English Language acquisition learners and their peers from higher socio-economic status (Banks, 2013; Zimmerman, 2004). Yet the recruitment process for educators has identified two reproducing factors. First, teaching has become identified as a “female, middle class, white,

suburban” profession. Second, financial compensation of teachers often excludes economically marginalized communities through fiscal barriers in the education process (unpaid student teaching, self-financing transportation, expensive certification exams, costly background checks). Recently implemented “grow your own” strategies are another attempt to diversify teacher recruitment, but hiring processes still tend to favor familial or referential connections and many Teacher Education students would like to return to a similar school from which they graduated, most likely in a suburban school district. To make matters worse, Labaree (2006) notes education is often considered an “entry way” profession, and is held in low esteem.

Spatial Inequality and Segregation: Residential segregation remains a key driver of educational inequality. Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton (1993) demonstrate how spatial segregation concentrates poverty and limits access to resources. School district boundaries, often aligned with segregated residential patterns, reinforce disparities (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). In New York State, the 2025-2026 schoolyear report card indicates the following demographic data for public schools: 730 Districts (note, New York City is divided into localized districts) encompassing 4,394 public schools. Harkay (2026) reported “New York state’s traditional public schools are among the most segregated in the nation” State laws in New York criminalize attempts by families to utilize services offered by districts other than the one in which they live. Thus, residency defines access to educational services. DeRoche (2020) exposed how red lining — a bank practice, now illegal but still informally followed, originating with federal housing policy during the post-World War II era on which residential neighborhoods are reserved for certain races/ethnicities and not others — has persistently allowed racial segregation to continue. The real estate market, in addition to news media and the state government present information concerning evaluations of local schools. Newspapers and web-based reports compile test results and graduation rates with the intent of creating content which “ranks” public schools.

Neoliberalism and Privatization: Neoliberal education reform has introduced market-based mechanisms into public schooling, including school choice, charter schools, and accountability systems (Harvey, 2005; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2013). Neoliberal reforms often exacerbate inequality by privileging families with greater resources and information. Starting in 1989, the New York State Education Department, as required by its legislature, yearly issues lists with schools grouped by performance measures included in the “Schools Under Registration Review” protocols (Vittrirri & Kosor, 2001). Following the requirements of No Child Left Behind, the State publishes lists of Schools in Need of Improvement, Corrective Action, or Restructuring. During Race to the Top, the State produced a list of “Persistently Low Achieving” or the “worst performing” schools in the State. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act passed in 2015, which essentially extended policies similar to No Child Left Behind, requires accountability based on performance, and schools are listed as Targeted, Comprehensive, or Receivership, meaning a “targeted, etc.” school’s performance will require outside assistance from other, contiguous districts. Socially mobile people tend to move to local communities that offer the best combination of public services and taxes for their personal preferences, a phenomenon known as the Tiebout effect (Fischel, 2001). Thus, many districts become economically segregated, and families that cannot move to another district are “stuck” wanting a better educational experience but unable to “buy in” to opportunities presented in areas with more expensive housing options.

Teacher Education and Student Body Diversity

Our study is situated within a culturally responsive Teacher Education course at a regional private university in the Rust Belt section of Upstate New York. The student population is largely homogeneous, predominantly white, middle-class, and locally rooted, reflecting broader demographic patterns in the region. Of the students enrolled in our two, semester-long classes, (n= 39), 28 are local to the region served by the university, three originated in the “downstate” metro area of New York, three from the Greater Capital region (Albany metro), one from Canada, and four from the Hudson Valley region of the State. Five of the students identified as members of underrepresented populations. Of the 39 students, only 10 identified as male. Course sections were academically mixed, representing Elementary and Secondary Education majors, with further concentrations clustered into Secondary English, and Secondary Social Studies. The course is designated a 300-level, sophomore-junior year experience. No field work component is required. The course design intentionally meets the New York State Education Department’s (NYSED) standards for Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE). In an effort to improve educational opportunities for the 2.4 million public school students in New York State, the Board of Regents has enacted CRSE standards to address achievement gaps as measured on State assessment data reported to the Federal Department of Education. The NYSED 2025 report card describes the racial makeup of New York State’s population of students: 39% of students identify as white, 31% identify as Hispanic, 15% as black or African American, 11% Asian/Pacific islander, and 4% multiracial. According to EdTrust NY (2025) 75% of educators in New York State identify as white, 9% identify as black, 7% as Hispanic, and 4% Asian. Demographically, the teaching workforce does not mirror the student population.

Preservice teachers often begin their study of Teacher Education with limited exposure to diverse communities and structural analyses of inequality (Sleeter, 2001; Milner, 2010). Without intentional intervention, limited experience with racial groups other than their own can persist in professional practice, shaping classroom expectations and instructional decisions. Most teaching candidates are white, female, and middle class (Schaffer, 2024). Further, the majority of educators are recruited from suburban districts, and the majority of preservice candidates would like to teach in their home district, or one similar demographically (Rhinesmith et al, 2023). Facing a teacher recruiting and retention crisis, New York State has focused on policy initiatives to increase diversity in its teacher workforce. Initiatives have focused on Grow Your Own strategies, increasing support to overcome barriers to entry into Teacher Education programs and increasing mentoring at school; but recruitment and retention policies are complicated, requiring multiple points of implementation (Swisher, 2023). In addition, one of the greatest hurdles to recruiting underrepresented teachers is the ever-present mandate of unpaid student teaching (Jakubowski, 2020).

Comparing One’s Own Experience to the Experiences of Others

Our study employs a qualitative, practice-based research design drawing on student research projects, reflective assignments, and community-based archival inquiry. Utilizing self-reflections on their own educational experiences, class discussions with our students examined access to curriculum, school lunch menus, extra-curricular activities, and personal observations about their own and surrounding school districts. Students investigated the concept of a “sound basic education,” a legal standard rooted in New York State court decisions (Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. State of New York, 2006). We and our students examined the idea of sound basic education through discussion of what had been observed in their own experiences, what they

were observing in pre-student teaching field observation, and comparisons with classmates' or friends' experience. Second, students were asked in an end of term project to examine the New York State report card for their home school district and compare their former district to a nearby urban school system. Faculty guidance and library research support was provided to find data and conduct an initial interpretation. In district-level data, attention was paid to demographic information by responding to these prompts:

What was the district's percentage of enrollment by race/ethnicity?

What percentage of district enrollment was socio-economically disadvantaged?

How did your home district compare demographically to the larger, urban district near your home ?

Conduct independent research using data garnered by local historical societies to construct a place-based understanding of educational inequities.

In initial reflection papers, written as a slightly deeper dive than class discussion into concepts of equality, accessibility, and opportunity (introduced in the first five weeks of the semester), students were “academic” in their understanding of concepts covered. Students were asked to utilize a series of readings which included the New York State Education Department's guides for Social Studies grades K-12, and NYSED's Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education standards (NYSED, 2014 & 2018). Students considered six phases of cultural understanding, beginning at Cultural Destruction, and moving through to a better understanding stages of Cultural Incapacity, Blindness, Pre-competence, Competency, and, finally, Proficiency (Cross et al., 1989). Students were also asked to examine the concept of microaggression — acts, statements, or perceptions that are intentionally or unintentionally hurtful towards an individual (Pierce, 1970). The class examined and reflected in writing on the concept of a “hidden curriculum,” a set of rules, understandings, and expectations not explicitly taught in public education but designed to ensure that middle class expectations are intentionally transmitted from schools to students to identify an “in group” of school culture and to exclude others from school achievement (Portelli, 1993). The final topic of class discussion was curriculum choices (traditional resources) versus the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors recommended by McNair & Edwards (2021). Mirrors are published representations of an individual's own culture. Windows allow for individuals to “see into” experiences of other groups. Sliding glass doors allow a person to “walk into” an unfamiliar cultural context.

Eliminating the Possibility of an Educational Life Unexamined

As we assessed student work some themes emerged.

Perception vs. Structural Understanding: Students demonstrated a perceived awareness of diversity but lacked structural understanding of its sources (Milner, 2010). Assignments for our class likely provided a first opportunity for some, if not many students to question the lived realities of their own lives, and the lives of others. As the class discussed their lived experiences, many were aware, in the abstract, of changes diversity brings to American schools; but did not understand the genuine lack of diversity in their home districts outside of metro centers. New York State public schooling is extremely segregated outside of its metro-based school systems (Kuceria and Orfield, 2014). Ignorance of diversity among teacher candidates finds tacit support in State requirements for teacher certification. As state requirements drive many of the academic programs for Education majors an emphasis on practical, application-based training has

emerged. Absence of diversity training from teacher certification programs reflects broader challenges in teacher education, where emphasis on practice can overshadow theoretical grounding (Zeichner, 2010). A second, anti-diversity development in teacher education has been changes to courses outside of Education that teaching candidates are expected to master as undergraduates. In some instances, students are not exposed to humanities or social sciences as in depth as in the past, which is especially evident in decreased numbers of 100 level survey courses and outside of academic major requirements for degrees. Providing students opportunity to take coursework across multiple disciplines lets students learn to take a variety of perspectives on the world. While the transition away from intellectualism in education has deep roots, there has been a continued view that teachers are underqualified to serve as the leaders of America's youth (Rousmarine, 2013).

Erasure of Local History: The absence of local history from Teacher Education curricula contributes to a fragmented understanding of inequality. Place-based education is crucial for developing civic engagement and critical consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003). Students did not remember, because they had not been exposed to, the impact of redlining, restrictive covenants, and other discriminatory policies that created their suburban enclaves. While mention of discriminatory practices/concepts does exist in New York State Social Studies frameworks, meaningful discussions of social bias are often avoided or presented only in abstract fashion as a way to ensure local sensibilities are not infringed (Percy, 2020). Educational inequality in the United States is deeply shaped by legal and policy frameworks. A pivotal moment occurred in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), which limited desegregation efforts to within-district boundaries, a decision that effectively insulated suburban districts from integration mandates, reinforcing patterns of segregation. In New York State, the tradition of local control of schools further exacerbates disparities. With over 700 school districts, funding and resources vary significantly, often reflecting local property wealth (Baker et al., 2018). The growing income-based achievement gap, which now exceeds racial achievement gaps in many contexts, underscores the increasing importance of socio-economic status in shaping educational outcomes (Reardon, 2011).

Suburbanization as Privatization: Suburban districts often function as *de facto* private systems, leveraging property taxes to maintain high levels of funding and exclusivity (Owens, 2018). Wealthy districts benefit from historical patterns of exclusion, enforced by redlining and zoning policies. Students expressed considerable wonder about the differences in educational opportunities when comparing their home district with a neighboring community in terms of curriculum, instruction, and outcomes. One student exclaimed during a presentation that her uneducated belief had been that all students had the opportunity to travel in middle school to Washington, D.C. or New York City. A different student, from a poorly funded community, revealed to the class that their school assigned chrome book computers in high school. A student from an affluent community said that they and their classmates received a chrome book computer starting in 4th grade.

Rural Communities: Forty per cent of school districts in New York State are classified as rural by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Rhinesmith, et al. 2023). Significant advances have recently occurred in correcting the deficit narrative gripping research into rural schooling. As Guenther et al (2023) noted, far too often nonrural researchers continue deficit-centric analysis of rural education systems. By contrast, the National Rural Education Association (2022) has centered rural research on opportunities for beginning teachers, creating a stronger

recruitment and retention pipeline for educators, aligning rural efforts with what urban reformers have stated for decades. Rural educator retention strongly emphasizes that place-conscious knowledge will assist in better outcomes for educators and their students. One strategy to attract and retain teachers involved characterizing the district as opportunity rich. Districts are offering multiple college-level courses through distance learning with local colleges. Opportunities for extracurricular activities are leveraged via shared services agreements through the local Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) or agreements between districts for sports, academic, career and technical education, and other varieties of study. Rural districts support low student-teacher ratios and have funded positions which allow for smaller class sizes than suburban or urban areas. One of the benefits the COVID-19 relief funding brought to many small schools was field trip/enrichment opportunities. However, after the pandemic subsided, funding has not kept pace with needs; and rural schools face distinct challenges, including declining enrollment, limited resources, and geographic isolation (Monk, 2007). Suburban and urban students in our class were surprised that students in rural districts had the same teacher multiple times, through multiple grades. Some of the students also expressed concerns that teaching in rural areas would place their non-work lives under scrutiny. (Brenner, et al 2020).

Comprehending Urbanity: A final theme that emerged from our students' reflection papers, research papers, and presentations in class was a lack of understanding of urbanity. For most of the students, the identification of urban areas nearby their home schools indicated that for many, their rural, small town, or suburban upbringings had not exposed them to large cities and metropolitan areas. Students originating from Central New York-Mohawk Valley selected Utica (65,000) or Rome (32,000) as the large urban district. Except for one student from the Onondaga County area, who selected Syracuse (148,000), no other central New York resident thought of larger cities. Two students from Long Island were instructed to not use New York City due to its overwhelming size. One chose Hempstead (5,600), a "suburban minority- majority" school district with long term academic and socio-economic issues. The second student chose Wyandanch (2,500), a district that is also classified as "suburban minority-majority." Hudson Valley students chose Poughkeepsie (31,000) or Kingston City (24,000) School District. Students from the Greater Capital region selected Schenectady (67,000) as the comparison district/community. Every single student conveyed surprise at finding their home school district, mostly suburbia, was not as diverse as the urban areas selected for comparison. Students were also surprised at how different were the academic achievement levels, as measured by graduation rates and results on Advanced Placement tests and Regents exams, between their home districts and the urban districts they studied.

Information Literacy and the Role of Libraries

In order to ensure students had access to information needed to complete assignments, it was essential to collaborate with the university's librarians and introduce resources to students, including databases for peer-reviewed articles, newspapers, and the State Education Department (for school accountability data). Information literacy is a critical but often overlooked component of educational equity. Students' reliance on digital sources, combined with limited archival skill, constrains their ability to conduct comprehensive research (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). Libraries play a vital role in addressing access to information gaps by providing access to primary sources and datasets, teaching research methodologies, and supporting critical evaluation of information. The research paper for our class inculcated information literacy because the project demanded the use of information not available in the databases the university subscribes to. Most

information literacy instruction we provide focuses on scholarly materials available at the university's library, but to complete assignments for our class students needed government data only available through the New York State Education Department (NYSED). To this end, the librarian instructing the students demonstrated the use of the NYSED data site to show students how to look up and compare student demographic information from their home district to the same data describing a nearby, large city district. Students were also given opportunity to look up information from sites run by local municipalities and historical societies to find contact information for anyone who might be able to assist with looking at demographics from a more historical perspective. Developing a historical perspective fits in well with the sixth frame of the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL's) *Framework for Information Literacy*: searching as strategic exploration, particularly the point regarding determining interested parties that are producing information, and how to access relevant information when needed.

Use of freely available information also answers a point made by Hare and Evanson (2018) about information privilege: What will students do post-graduation when access to university-provided databases ends? Students need to have an idea of where to go for freely available, trustworthy information, and our assignments were a rare opportunity to introduce a resource our students will likely use throughout their careers as educators. On a broader scale, information literacy instruction like this is valuable because it not only provides opportunity for faculty-librarian collaboration, but also for getting students into the library and giving them a chance to meet their subject librarian. Yevelson-Sorsher and Bronstein (2018) note the need for improved communication and collaboration on information literacy between faculty and librarians, quoting interviews where faculty mentioned preferring having librarians teach information literacy and librarians mentioned that information literacy instruction should be integrated with course content. For students, Yevelson-Sorsher and Bronstein cite multiple interviews with students expressing fear of the library or being seen as asking stupid questions. Having students go to the library and interact with librarians allays fears and makes it easier for students to initiate further, academically meaningful interactions. Finally, integration of library instruction into teacher education also aligns with broader calls for data-informed practice and evidence-based decision-making (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016).

Invisible Fences Made Tangible

The concept of invisible fences highlights subtle yet powerful mechanisms that sustain educational inequality. Fences are not accidental but are produced through the interaction of policy, history, and socio-economic status. Dissonance between increasing student diversity and continued teacher recruitment that reproduces white, middle class, and suburban female teachers means the teaching workforce will no longer resemble students, nor provide adequate representation in the future. At a curricular level in public education, K-12, students are not grappling with sociological issues. The Social Studies curriculum is focused on grand history, with graduation-level History divided into two years of World History, one year of US History and Government, and a half-year of economics and participation in government. Some larger districts, with more resources, may offer electives, but often are limited to psychology, or film study, or a history of art. Almost no district school board or school administrator desires the firestorm of controversy that a sociological course would raise. As it is, any sort of deviation from the "cannon" [sic] of resources, or what can be interpreted as "woke" is not acceptable in many schools (Adejumo, 2025). In undergraduate education, a significant issue, especially with history, political science, economics, and sociology has emerged. Students are not retaining base

level knowledge, nor are they applying social scientific concepts to their own lives. The phrase “check your privilege” has emerged, designed to signal that a statement had been made that was “privileged” and did not take into account every person’s experiences (Rankine, 2019). The rise of anti-woke rhetoric in national politics aimed at controlling and limiting higher education and K-12 schooling, alike, has perpetrated and perpetuated the trivialization of history in schools, and, sadly, in some colleges and universities. Students are subjected to demands to remember names, dates, locations (who, what, when, where) but do not receive enough instruction in the why and how of the past to understand how past events continue to echo in the present.

If we want change in the classroom, and in society, the teaching profession must ensure that students preparing for roles as educators are equipped with the ability to examine underlying assumptions of their day-to-day existence. Teacher educators are reliant on subject-matter instructors for courses in the general college experience (often up to 50% of a Bachelor’s degree) and an additional 25% in the form of a content area major. But if General Education courses and courses in academic majors are still utilizing multiple-choice, low-level recall questions, then higher education is engaging in expensive trivial pursuit. Ongoing changes to the structure of higher education are fundamentally damaging the idea of citizenship in the United States by removing criticality from study of society. Reform must happen quickly. Invisible fences continue to mar the landscape of public education, limiting access and reinforcing inequality. Only by examining social dynamics, as we and our students have in our place-based study of public schooling in New York State, can Education contribute to critical consciousness of students expressed in a growing body of research exposing hidden aspects of the privatization and fragmentation of public schooling. Future efforts at producing critically-minded teachers must prioritize historically informed, data-driven approaches to understanding education, ensuring that all students have access to a truly equitable educational system.

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**“More than enough” to “surface level:”
Preliminary Findings on Preservice and In-Service Teacher
Reflections on Antiracist Pedagogy in Teacher Education**

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Abstract: Early findings from an ongoing mixed-methods research project about pre-service teachers’ meaning-making regarding antiracist education describe the nuanced ways teacher candidates interpret and internalize teacher preparation. We focus on how participants make meaning of classroom activities aimed at overcoming barriers based on identities and circumstances (including, racism, dis/ability and inclusion, social class, gender and sexuality, social and environmental justice) to assess (pre)practitioner perspectives on the field of education. Three preliminary findings from interviews conducted thus far — the needs 1) to emphasize the structural nature of racism, 2) to more readily situate teaching as political work, and to present antiracism as an orientation to educator identity — provide material for discussion of implications for teacher preparation programs.

2026: We find ourselves in the midst of a tumultuous socio-cultural-political moment shaping education in the United States at all levels. Daily, we read articles and news stories covering the elimination of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, amid the ongoing fight to abolish the federal Department of Education. As a current tenured professor and educational historian (Mario), a recent Ph.D. and abolitionist YPAR scholar (Ana Juliana), and a current Ph.D. candidate and interdisciplinary ecofeminist scholar (Amanda) we are situated disciplinarily within Foundations of Education and teacher education. We each arrive at this moment with continued questions, uncertainties, and even fears about what futures are becoming possible for preservice teachers we (and our colleagues) have mentored in our courses. In addition, we recognize the pressing obligation for teacher educators and schools of education to foster courses and learning spaces through which preservice teachers can construct and explore identities, perspectives, and practices to support the needs of antiracist and inclusive classrooms. Authoritarian systems and repressive policy movements deeply shape and further challenge our academic freedom and First Amendment rights. In this moment, educators suffer under a heavy set of constraints as they navigate the changing field, diverse students, and micromanaged schools and classrooms. Education programs that tailor instruction to the constraints under which teachers are having to work provide poor teacher preparation. Upon graduation from a constraint-aligned program, teacher candidates lack practical ability to implement meaningful antiracist philosophical values; and, more generally, lack deep self-awareness of their positionality in relation to their diverse students/classrooms. Throughout our discussion, we refer to socially or politically imposed constraints on teachers as *barriers*. Barriers include burnout factors, pedagogical training/exposure, and thwarted self-awareness of professional positionality.

As we think about how preservice teachers cultivate inclusive and antiracist identities, we recognize that their professional identities become curated through curricular experiences they have, barriers they face, and privileges they enjoy in their undergraduate experience (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Not only how teachers are prepared, but how teachers perceive and cultivate their professional identities while being prepared affects the ways in which they engage practices to support diverse and inclusive classrooms. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, trauma-informed

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care, ecojustice/sustainability pedagogy, and inclusive teaching practices are things teacher candidates *learn* (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Oamek, 2023; Rushton, 2021). Our study grew out of our experiences, individually and as a teaching team, within a Foundations of Education course rooted in the histories of US schooling. We are two former teaching assistants (Amanda and Ana Juliana) and the current professor (Mario) of the class. Students in EDU 310 explore how educational in/equity continues to be shaped by mutually reproducing structures of oppression, namely white supremacy, heterocispatriarchy, racial capitalism, dis/ability, and more. Students consider topics such as colonial schooling, early efforts to make public education a “common good,” positive and negative effects of segregation and integration, Supreme Court cases shaping ongoing education policy, and broader ways education is enmeshed with institutions shaped by racial capitalism. Students read James Baldwin, Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, Monique Morris, and Bettina Love. Students also engage in personal reflections on their own social identities and social locations as well as complete a final creative project enacting decolonial and antiracist assessment practices (Kingston, et al., 2024). Course 310 is required of all students enrolled in teacher preparation programs and is situated in a larger school of education with three key organizational signatures, two of which — still in effect as of June 2026 — are inclusive and antiracist pedagogy. To understand both the needs of the students we serve as well as what continued support is needed to prepare preservice teachers in constructing diverse, antiracist, and inclusive classrooms, we are engaged in an ongoing mixed methods study exploring the experiences of preservice and in-service teacher with making meaning of their teacher preparation program’s use, alignment, and implementation of antiracist pedagogy. A deeper understanding of how students become inclusive and antiracist teachers — by their own perceptions — provides data to address experiences, barriers, and opportunities not only in our foundations course but in the larger school of education curriculum. We seek to understand how meaning-making influences how pre-service teachers conceptualize their role as educators.

Our methodological approach builds on our previous research about the role of assessment in teaching decolonial and antiracist pedagogy (Kingston et al., 2024) by investigating how pre-service teachers make meaning of their positionality, that is, their pedagogical philosophies, while negotiating institutional barriers and identifying opportunities to do transformative (transgressive) practice. The urgency of learning how to teach inclusively is dramatically intensified in our current sociopolitical context as educators, students, and educational spaces continue to undergo threats and actions to eliminate diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in schooling spaces. Shining a light on Education students’ meaning making about instruction in inclusive pedagogy illuminates the ongoing need to discuss barriers and opportunities related to race, gender, sexuality, and class; as well as the work needed to center antiracist, feminist, and environmentally and socially just educational frameworks. A review of literature on antiracist pedagogies and their use in teacher preparation programs shows how educators and researchers understand student experiences with critical pedagogies. Baldwin’s (1963) analysis of education as a mechanism for structural transformation or reinforcement of hierarchies as well as Sardabi, et al.’s (2018) and Bartolomé’s (2004) arguments for reshaping teacher identity in teacher education through critical pedagogy, provide a theoretical perspective on which to build the framework for our study. Three preliminary findings from interviews conducted thus far in the study — the needs to emphasize the structural nature of racism, to more readily situate teaching *as* political work, and to present antiracism as an orientation to educator identity — provide material for discussion of implications for teacher preparation programs.

On Being an Antiracist Educator

Antiracist pedagogy is a paradigm within critical theory meant to explore the impact of racism via structures and institutions as well as what social justice in society must look like in practice (Arneback, 2022; Blakeney, 2005). Therefore, pedagogically, antiracist pedagogy offers both a power analysis of current systems as well as heuristics for how we might imagine future systems and structures for just and equitable communities. As a framework for analysis, antiracist pedagogy examines historical structures producing dominant culture and marginalization. It also examines the ways individuals experience biased structures through systemic inequity and privilege (Arneback, 2022; Blackeney, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Antiracist pedagogy is rooted in consciousness-raising as core to educational practice and is inherently interdisciplinary in approach, drawing from many fields to analyze power within historical and present-day structures/identities as well as to radically imagine alternative futures (Blakeney, 2005; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Core to consciousness-raising is a commitment to both self-reflection and active reimagining of educational spaces — as well as actively working to transform these reimaginings into realities (Blakeney, 2005; hooks, 1994). Antiracist classrooms integrate content written by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) scholars, ongoing self-reflection and self-awareness on the part of instructors and students alike, ongoing analyses of how power structures shape a classroom space, and how power structures shape notions of fairness and learning (Arneback, 2022; Kishimoto, 2018).

Preservice teachers who explore antiracist pedagogy are “better equipped to contribute to the project of education as a means of liberation” (Kulick & Cartun, 2025, p. 2). However, Zembylas (2021) explores how emotions can complicate antiracist teacher preparation as preservice teachers process guilt, anger, etc. Both Zembylas (2021) and Matias (2016) examine the emotionality of whiteness in teacher education, which can become a barrier to white preservice teachers if they do not learn and actively process their emotionality around issues of race. Gadd (2023) explores specifically the ways in which white womanhood works to uphold white supremacy, and the ways in which white women being the dominant demographic in US education must interrogate their “comfort zones” when speaking and learning about race and antiracism. As a result of barriers presented by white teachers’ comfort zones, BIPOC teachers are often burdened with teaching about race in settings where white colleagues are protected from the work of antiracist teaching by their ignorance of racialized barriers (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). While many teacher preparation programs engage in reflection-based practices on race within an antiracist pedagogy, without opportunity for *critical* practice teacher education programs can ultimately reify dominant biases and prejudicial positions about race (Gorski & Dalton, 2020).

Developing and utilizing *affective* tools is a prerequisite for healthful and productive practices in engaging preservice teachers in the process of becoming antiracist pedagogues. Finding emotionality surrounding issues of (anti)racism must be made part of antiracist teacher education by allowing for reflective and critical practices of recognizing and working through emotions. Kulick and Cartun found preservice teachers were able to connect personal emotions to structural analyses so that both individual and institutionalized racism are addressed. Kulick and Cartun (2025) also call for a normalizing of discomfort within teacher education as a tool for antiracist learning so that students can name their emotions and explore them in critical ways. In addition, developing shared definitions of racism, as well as other cognate terms, proves to be a critical practice in antiracist teacher education. Gadd (2023) notes sharing an understanding of core concepts is a particularly important practice to help preservice teachers explore

emotionalities around race so as to critically reflect on their own positionalities from narratives of white supremacy to aspirations racially messianic in outlook. Given that the teaching field and teacher preparation programs enroll predominantly white women — including the program in which we and our course are situated — we recognize the imperative to not just include information about antiracist teaching within the course but to facilitate learning in which students can explore identities of *being* an antiracist educator.

Teacher education is a deeply politically contested site. The field is scrutinized and socially critiqued, yet too often critics only reach service-level practitioner analysis rather than a deeper philosophical and political analysis. We look to critical pedagogy to help us make sense of teacher education in foundational terms. We define critical pedagogy as instructional practice that interrogates narratives of dominance. Guiding teaching in a way that is subversive of standardized forms of learning, critical pedagogy draws from an epistemological stance that posits students can build their own meaning and weave their own worldviews when learning. For critical pedagogues, educators facilitate a process rather than "force" knowledge or behavior onto or into students. Critical pedagogy accomplishes its pedagogical aims by prompting students to interrogate what they are learning in school. Interrogation of curriculum helps students "unlearn" previous lessons that may enforce dominant thought and "relearn" their own ideas and use them to construct solutions to world issues (Wink, 2005, p.67). Within teacher education, critical pedagogy can also help us make sense of how teachers conceptualize their work and identities as educators as well as how these conceptualizations can reinforce or dismantle hierarchies of oppression (Baldwin, 1963). Teacher professional identity can be understood as a complex, ongoing process (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Trent, 2010) in which teachers negotiate their professional positionalities — that is, how they take up and make sense of their role as teachers within the bounds of their abilities and values (Sardabi et al., 2018; Maclean & White, 2007). Teacher education is rightly assessed by its ability to shape and influence the long-term beliefs and practices of educators, what we may call teachers' professional identity. Teachers' professional identity gets shaped and reshaped throughout teacher preparation in a way unmatched by any other period of career development (Korthagen, 2004). Our study draws on critical pedagogy to surface implicit assumptions embedded in a teacher preparation program at an R1 school of education. We use our study as an analytical process to understand how preservice and in-service teachers make meaning of their pedagogical experience in teacher education programs. We critically interrogate how participant positionality shapes perspectives on program curriculum. Outcomes of our study influence choice of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment for effective education of teachers as critical pedagogues.

Our study utilizes a mixed-methods approach through participant completion of surveys and semi-structured interviews. Participants were individuals who have completed the foundations of education course which we taught/teach, who are 18 years of age or older, and who are currently enrolled in or have completed a teacher preparation program. We coded our data using critical pedagogical analysis of teacher preparation as a practice for deconstructing or reifying dominant narratives (Baldwin, 1963; Sardabi, et al., 2018; and Bartolomé, 2004). While we reached out to individuals fitting eligibility as far back as 2014 to complete the initial survey, we found that many email addresses are no longer monitored or are now inactive. We ultimately recruited 30 individuals who completed the survey, and based on interest, recruited (so far) from our survey completers 10 interviewees. Based on the survey responses (n=30), 84.1% of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 24. 83.7% of participants identified as white, while 7% identified as black American and, both at 4.7%, Asian and Native American. Sixty-nine point

nine percent of participants completing the survey self-identified as cisgender women, along with 28.6% as cisgender males; roughly 10% of participants identified as nonbinary or other. Participant makeup reflects where the study takes place: in a predominantly white (and cisgender female) teacher preparation program. White students/young adults make up most of the school of education student body, as well as the university as a whole. The majority of interviewees are white, including 6 cisgender white women, which reflects the population of the teaching field at large. At the time of interviews, seven individuals were enrolled in teacher preparation as undergraduate students, two were enrolled in graduate teacher programs, and one was a practitioner in a middle school. Table 1 presents further details about our participants:

Participant's Pseudonyms	Race	Gender	Age	Current Status
Thomas	White	Cisgender Male	18-24	Undergraduate Student
Sara	Hispanic / White	Cisgender Female	25-34	Graduate Student
Crystal	White	Cisgender Female	18-24	Undergraduate Student
Kelsey	White	Cisgender Female	18-24	Undergraduate Student
Sage	White	Cisgender Male	18-24	Undergraduate Student
Bethany	White	Cisgender Female	18-24	Undergraduate Student
Braxton	White	Cisgender Male	25-34	Practitioner
Teresa	White	Cisgender Female	18-24	Undergraduate Student
Griffin	White	Cisgender Male	18-24	Undergraduate Student
Natalie	Asian	Cisgender Female	18-24	Graduate Student

Table 1. Interview Participant Demographics

Survey responses were conducted remotely via an online platform. Follow-up, semi-structured interviews lasting about an hour were conducted using video conference software. During interviews, participants answered questions about how much and in what contexts they learned about antiracist teaching and pedagogy, how these experiences shaped their teaching and learning experiences, what they wish they would have learned, and how much they hope to discuss and utilize antiracist pedagogy in classrooms where they (will) teach. Participants also answered questions about additional pedagogical models and about barriers and opportunities they experienced in teacher education and how their social positionality shaped their experiences. Our research questions addressing antiracist teaching and pedagogy are:

- 1) How do preservice and in-service teachers describe their curricular experiences related to learning about antiracist teaching and pedagogy?
- 2) How do preservice and in-service teachers make meaning of the antiracist teaching and pedagogy they experienced within teacher education?

Preservice Teaching Programs and Antiracist Practices

Preliminary findings from the quantitative survey completed by 30 participants can be broken down into two parts. The first is a comparison between training in antiracist pedagogies in relation to other, critical pedagogy practices included in preservice teacher education. The second is the barriers and burnout factors faced by white preservice and in-service teachers and

what work-related difficulties mean for study of antiracism. Survey findings are framed by the demographic breakdown of the participants who completed the survey. White preservice teachers are more than 80% of the voices in these findings. Thus, gaps in pedagogical exposure and training are uniquely impactful, especially since participants were not exposed to antiracist topics in their early preparation. When the survey asked participants, “Did your teacher preparation program provide training in the following pedagogical practices and topics?,” training specifically in instruction for English language learners (ELLs) reached only 54.1% agreement, with 21.6% disagreeing they received such preparation (Table 2, next page). Out of 8 pedagogical practices listed on the survey, working with ELLs was the fifth-highest pedagogy participants agreed they had learned in their prep program — a significantly low ranking for a pedagogical expertise essential for educators. While antiracist teaching earned 91.9% student agreement (Table 2), this stark spike in percentages still leaves open the possibility that teacher preparation programs do not adequately support preservice teachers in putting into practice antiracist pedagogy. Programs may stress a curricular focus on abstract theoretical concepts instead of teaching practices geared toward antiracism, such as ELL instruction. Agreement percentages for antiracist pedagogy are nearly identical across different survey questions. For example, antiracist agreement is 91.7% in Table 1 and 91.9% in Table 2. Antiracist (91.7%), culturally relevant (88.9%), and culturally sustaining (85.4%) pedagogies all exceeded 85% agreement (Table 1).²

Pedagogical Training	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't Recall	N
Anti-racist	93.3%	3.3%	3.3%	0.0%	30
Culturally Relevant	93.3%	6.7%	0.0%	0.0%	30
Dis/ability Justice	83.3%	13.3%	3.3%	0.0%	30
Culturally Sustaining	86.7%	13.3%	0.0%	0.0%	30
Social Justice	80.0%	13.3%	3.3%	3.3%	30
Multicultural-multilingual	60.0%	26.7%	6.7%	6.7%	30
Subject-field Competencies	50.0%	30.0%	6.7%	13.3%	30
Abolitionist	44.8%	27.6%	3.4%	24.1%	29
Decolonial	37.9%	27.6%	6.9%	27.6%	29
Feminist	30.0%	40.0%	23.3%	6.7%	30
Environmental Justice	20.0%	43.3%	23.3%	13.3%	30

Table 1. Survey Question: Which of the following pedagogies were emphasized in your teacher preparation program?

High percentages at which antiracist efforts and actions were identified as being included in teacher preparation programs were accompanied by low rates at which participants experienced race-based barriers in their teacher education program. However, participants did experience class-based difficulties. Given the demographics of the study's participants; the most frequent barriers experienced were associated with class and financial access rather than racism. Of 30

² Note, for all tables, item-level N may be lower where a completer skipped a sub-question.

respondents, 12 (40.0%) reported financial barriers (e.g., program costs, textbooks, certification fees), the most frequently reported item in Table 3 followed by lack of steady income/financial stability (30.0%). 26.7% reported feeling isolated or excluded. Seven participants (23.3%)

Pedagogical Training	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't Recall	N
Anti-racist teaching	93.3%	0.0%	6.7%	0.0%	30
Culturally relevant/sustaining	86.7%	13.3%	0.0%	0.0%	30
Multicultural classrooms	63.3%	33.3%	3.3%	0.0%	30
Intercultural communication	63.3%	30.0%	6.7%	0.0%	30
English language learners (ELL)	50.0%	23.3%	23.3%	3.3%	30
Religious backgrounds	40.0%	16.7%	36.7%	6.7%	30
Trauma-informed care	13.3%	46.7%	30.0%	10.0%	30
Environmental justice/climate	6.7%	36.7%	43.3%	13.3%	30

Table 2. Survey Question: Did your teacher preparation program provide training in the following pedagogical practices and topics?

Barriers Experienced	Count	% of N
Financial barriers (e.g., program costs, textbooks, certification fees)	11	39.3%
Lack of steady income and financial stability	8	28.6%
Feeling isolated or excluded	8	28.6%
I have not experienced any barriers	7	25.0%
Family obligations/responsibilities	6	21.4%
Work obligations/responsibilities	6	21.4%
Clinical placement location/transportation issues	5	17.9%
Language barriers	4	14.3%
Lack of faculty who share my racial/ethnic background	3	10.7%
Curriculum that doesn't reflect my cultural background	2	7.1%
Cultural barriers	2	7.1%
Microaggressions from peers	2	7.1%
Standardized testing requirements	2	7.1%
Lack of mentors who share my racial/ethnic background	2	7.1%
Lack of mentors who share my trans identity	1	3.6%
Lack of faculty who share my trans identity	1	3.6%
Microaggressions from faculty	1	3.6%

Table 3. Survey Question: Have/Did you experience any of the following barriers in your teacher education program?

selected “I have not experienced any barriers” (Table 3). The lowest-reported items in Table 3 cluster around barriers shaped by racial identity: cultural barriers (6.7%), microaggressions from

faculty or peers (6.7% each), and lack of mentors who share racial/ethnic background (6.7%). Simultaneously, logistical barriers — clinical placement transportation issues (23.3%), family obligations (20.0%), and work obligations (20.0%) — were reported significantly more often than racial barriers. Teacher preparation programs in PWIs (predominantly white institutions) need to refocus the way they think about barriers. If preservice and in-service teachers are privileged enough to not experience racial barriers, it is imperatively incumbent on teacher educators and programs to support students to work through their positionalities and emotionalities as educators so as not to allow lack of experience negotiating racial barriers to create harm in their future classrooms (Matias, 2016; Zembylas 2021).

The survey also asked about factors that influence burnout in preservice and in-service teachers who are going through a preparation program. The burnout factor that received the highest percentage was political climate (90.0%, Table 4). Among factors that affect teachers most are policy movements shaping educational institutions towards workplace authoritarianism and away from professional autonomy, a trend often driven by racial capitalist interests. Forms of racism found in the political climate of schools amid neoliberal educational policy initiatives are a significant factor in the burnout of early career educators. The current presidential administration and its top-down educational policies have deeply influenced teacher burnout, even before teachers enter the field. For example, all fourteen factors in Table 4 received agreement above 56%, with political climate (90.0%) the highest-rated. Six factors tied at 86.7%: educational policy changes, funding limitations, resource distribution, demographic challenges, social justice issues, and cultural competency expectations (Table 4). All six factors are very

Burnout Factors	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N
Political climate	90.0%	6.7%	3.3%	30
Educational policy changes	86.7%	13.3%	0.0%	30
Funding limitations	86.7%	10.0%	3.3%	30
Resource distribution	86.7%	10.0%	3.3%	30
Demographic challenges	86.7%	13.3%	0.0%	30
Social justice issues	86.7%	10.0%	3.3%	30
Cultural competency expectations	86.7%	3.3%	10.0%	30
Standardized testing pressure	83.3%	13.3%	3.3%	30
Public perception of teachers	83.3%	10.0%	6.7%	30
Community support levels	83.3%	10.0%	6.7%	30
Educational inequity	80.0%	10.0%	10.0%	30
Achievement gaps	80.0%	10.0%	10.0%	30
Curriculum mandates	76.7%	20.0%	3.3%	30
Technology demands	56.7%	33.3%	10.0%	30

Table 4: Participant Perception of Importance of Burnout Factors

closely associated with racial inequities that counteract antiracist practices. Recall that most participants in our study (more than 80%) identify as white. If political climate of the teaching

profession is pushing white persons out of the field of education, it seems safe to assume that teachers of color or teachers with multiple intersecting identities are experiencing burnout factors in even more intensified ways. If so, that leaves us with one major question: What can we expect to happen to antiracist pedagogies if enforced inequities are the political conditions in which educators must function?

How Education Students Make Meaning of Antiracist Education

Participants who completed surveys were asked if they were interested in completing a follow-up interview. Ten participants agreed to complete a 1-hour, semi-structured interview using video conferencing software. Like the larger population of participants who completed surveys the majority of interviewees are white, including 6 cisgender white women, which reflects the population of both the university as a PWI and the teaching field at large. At the time of interviews, seven participants were enrolled in teacher preparation as undergraduate students, two were enrolled in graduate teacher programs, and one was a practitioner in a middle school. (See Table 1, p. 5 for detailed demographics.) Interviews brought to light three key themes: 1) emphasis on antiracist learning but through varying means, 2) mixed-responses to discussing anti-racism in current or future classrooms, and 3) well-being and health as an issue that matters most to preservice and in-service teachers.

Varying Emphases on Learning about Anti-Racism: Nearly all ten interviewees stated their teacher preparation programs emphasized antiracist pedagogy which confirms our survey data. However, interviews revealed that participants understood the antiracist emphasis to varying degrees. When asked how much they learned about antiracist pedagogy as part of their teacher education, Kelsey, a cisgender white woman, described her experiences of learning about antiracist pedagogy by saying: “I think I’ve learned about it beyond what I thought it was going to be. Like, it’s not just... ‘Don’t be racist.’ It’s so much more, it’s the consistent teaching of different perspectives in history. It’s allowing students to come with their own knowledge and background and language, and celebrating it while not alienating and not overly highlighting and separating them....” Kelsey understands the teacher education program as explicitly doing anti-racism work by actively engaging different historical perspectives and creating space for culturally relevant teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Other students described similar experiences. For example, Natalie, a cisgender Asian woman, shared the extent of her learning in teacher education, but from her positionality felt that she already knew much of what she learned, stating: “So I learned... where I was taught a lot about antiracism, antiracist practices, what it even means. A lot of it was kind of knowledge that I felt like I had coming into the school, but it was... I’m sure it was helpful for some.” Other participants, such as Griffin, a white cisgender male, described learning about anti-racism through a more interpersonal lens of simply not being racist. He shared: “I know I’ve learned about it, but... in my experiences, if you’re not, like, already having those, like, subconscious thoughts through, and I’d say I keep myself pretty in check with not subconsciously being racist, or else... or at least I’d like to think that I do.”

While Griffin discussed learning about antiracism in teacher education and coming in with some knowledge, his understanding of antiracism differs from how Natalie and Kelsey describe it. Natalie and Kelsey echo the active antiracism, the purposive intent to expose and supplant racist policies, that Kendi (2019) describes, as opposed to simply not being (personally) racist, a position Kendi would likely describe as, at best, non-racist rather than antiracist. Other participants described the depth of antiracist instruction in teacher education classes to widely

varying degrees. For example, Teresa, a white cisgender woman, described the amount of antiracist teaching stating: “I think... the curriculum did a great job of teaching antiracism, and I think it was honestly, like, more than enough.” Teresa elaborated by sharing that she felt there were other elements of practice that might have been included rather than a perceived overemphasis on antiracist teaching. Teresa’s perception of the depth of antiracist instruction in the program starkly juxtaposed with Sara’s, a Hispanic/white cisgender woman. Sara shared: “If I’m being completely honest, I feel like I have learned about it in very, like, surface-level.” Sara went on to describe the whiteness of her teacher education, naming how often she was the only or one of few students of color in her teacher education courses where deficit language about BIPOCs from fellow students might arise. Further, Sara described her current experiences in graduate school as opening her eyes to further conceptualizations of antiracist and inclusive teaching that she felt her undergraduate experience did not provide. Overall, participants described their teacher education as emphasizing antiracist pedagogy. So far, only one student, Sara, has named antiracist instruction as surface level as opposed to other students who felt they learned about the concept robustly. We recognize that social positionalities deeply shape student meaning-making of antiracist pedagogy which is evident in our participants’ responses. Our participants point to larger ways teacher education has been theorized as a white space (Matias, 2016) and pose an essential enigma of antiracist education: How to do antiracist practices within predominantly white spaces.

Discussing Antiracism in Current or Future Classrooms: In a set of questions about antiracism, we also asked participants about their engagement in discussions around antiracism and use of antiracist pedagogy in their current or future classrooms. Many participants, such as Crystal, a white cisgender woman, discussed the desire to weave antiracism throughout their courses: “I feel like I... I hope to... From the get-go, like enforce these kind of ideals in my classroom, so it's pretty prevalent, like, that... I'm looking to create a very inclusive space. And even if it's not, like, we sit down and I'm like, this is antiracism, like, this is what we're gonna talk about, like, kind of just, like, through, like, weaving it through everything.” Other students similarly emphasized their desire to weave antiracist practices throughout their teaching, but also described a connection to their particular subject area. For example, Sara, a Hispanic/white cisgender woman who focuses on literacy, shared: “I anticipate that it will be a lot of talking about antiracism, because again, it can't... I cannot be talking about how language, race, and power intersect and shape the ways in which we speak and in which we're heard if I don't talk about race, right? So I think antiracism is a core component of those conversations.” Similarly, Griffin, a music education major, stated: “I think the bigger thing for music educators is you kind of introduce antiracism through the pieces you pick to play and the influences that you show.” Sara and Griffin both describe their content areas as being key to the way they approach antiracist pedagogy. Antiracist pedagogy is necessary for their content to be holistic, as evident in Sara’s question of what it means to teach about language and not talk about race.

Responses speaking to weaving antiracism throughout the curriculum were balanced against other participants, such as Bethany, a white cisgender woman, who expressed hesitancy or uncertainty about discussing antiracism in their classrooms: “I'm a little scared because I don't know... it depends, I mean, in the US, you hear these things about people getting destroyed for to talk about certain topics... of course, like, it would be a part of my daily practice, but I don't know how much explicit... I have no idea.” Bethany shared her belief that learning and engaging antiracist teaching were meaningful aspects of her teacher education program; but when asked about how she would discuss antiracism in future classrooms, she reflected on the current

political climate. Bethany's response points toward broader questions in teacher education about reflecting on the role of the educator as a political figure — not a neutral functionary — and how teacher education programs do not just prepare students to do antiracist work or be antiracist teachers, but, in addition, teacher education students learn what being an antiracist educator means for the political climate they are entering.

Well-being and Health as Important Issues: In addition to explicitly questioning about antiracism within teacher preparation, we also asked participants what issues mattered most to them in education and in their classrooms. Many students explicitly named justice, inclusivity, and equity as issues that mattered most to them. Participant responses indicate ways in which preservice teachers think about structural issues shaping educational spaces:

Bethany: “I mean a big one, of course, that has become a part of my philosophy, is inclusivity.” **Natalie:** “Socioeconomic barriers, Asian rights, and racial justice.” **Sara:** “Asset versus deficit-based teaching like seeing someone as truly capable of accomplishing whatever they want... and antiracist and justice-oriented teaching.” **Crystal:** “I think I've started to view equity as... even more important than equality, just based on what it can provide for students, even though equality itself is important. I think... access... it's pretty important to provide students the ability to learn the same, or different, whatever they need to.”

In addition, other participants noted personal and mental well-being as core issues they cared about. Sage: “I think the health and well-being of my students matters the most to me.” Griffin: “I think it's more important that I'm helping my students pursue, like, social and, like, actual, like, mental growth, as compared to just, like, are you a good musician?” As we consider the ways in which antiracist pedagogy is both embedded within and frames teacher education, we consider *how* programs make broader connections to antiracist pedagogy by positively affecting student well-being and mental health. Antiracist pedagogy should not merely address content in just ways, but offer a different embodied space for students to inhabit, build relationships, and self-reflect on broader societal structures (Blackeney, 2005). We continue to ask in our own courses how we facilitate learning that allows students to construct antiracist pedagogy as a holistic practice that does more than harangue; but allows students to be whole persons and interrogate systems that prohibit or are barriers to fully realized personhood.

Refining Our Understanding of Antiracist Teacher Education

While we are still in the process of collecting data, we look to preliminary findings from our study to think through our efforts to support preservice and in-service teachers in becoming antiracist educators. First, we consider how we can continue to attend to the structural nature of antiracism in teacher education classes and how programs must go beyond simply emphasizing interpersonal dynamics (non-racism) to enacting new ways of teaching (antiracism). Survey results demonstrated students affirmed antiracist pedagogy as part of their teacher education; however, during interviews, participants conceptualized antiracist pedagogy in a number of different ways and committed to antiracist education to varying degrees. As a result of our early findings, we reflect on how we might best communicate the structural nature of racism in educational spaces. Of course, structural questions and reflections lead us to consider what opportunities students have to explore, build, and practice antiracist curriculum in teacher education courses as they learn, concurrently, how the classrooms and schools they will be working in are shaped by racial capitalist logics. Teacher preparation programs that emphasize

structural aspects of racism in schooling may also help situate teaching *as* political work and prepare students to be resilient against burnout potentially brought on by the (sometimes stultifying) political climate they will navigate when working in the field. Preparing students to think about their work as political may also shape the ways in which they understand and carry out antiracist pedagogies and teaching in their future classrooms.

Lastly, we consider how teacher preparation programs and teacher educators conceptualize antiracism not only as a pedagogical approach but as an orientation to educator identity. In particular, we continue to think through the ways in which antiracist pedagogy shapes embodied experiences of student health and well-being in schooling spaces, and how *being* an antiracist educator is to make sense of health and well-being through structural understandings of oppression. In future studies, we hope to think through with participants how they connect well-being to antiracist practices as providing more holistic ways of *being* educators. (Other pedagogical frameworks, such as culturally sustaining pedagogy or feminist pedagogy, should be subjected to the same kind of assessment. A strong test of any pedagogical theory is its contribution to consummate professionalism in teaching.) Finally, we consider the necessity of antiracist work in addressing messianic assumptions students may hold, rooted in racial or cultural biases. Through continued study, we hope to strengthen and refine our understanding of teacher engagement with antiracist pedagogy so that we, as well as other researchers and scholars, can critically reflect on our own positions within teacher education programs as well as how we might best support students to do antiracist work and become antiracist educators.

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**. Other People's Conferences:
Symbolic Violence, Methodological Failure, and
the Narrowing of Intellectual Discourse in Teacher Education**

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Abstract: I advance two claims about intellectual culture in contemporary teacher education. The first is diagnostic. Educational scholarship indulges methodologically weak habits of mind, especially overreliance on synchronic moral frameworks and displacement of historical analysis by ethical discourse. Both proliferate academic cant in teacher education. The second claim is illustrative, a case study of a presentation at the 2026 annual gathering of New York State Foundations of Education Association, which made, without evidentiary grounding, sweeping assertions about institutional complicity in White supremacy, making dissent feel unsayable. Using Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, Bloom's critique of value relativism in higher education, and Haidt's analysis of ideological homogeneity in academe, I argue the modern university subordinates truth-seeking to consensus-building, narrowing scholarly response, foreclosing critical inquiry, and undermining the reasoning higher education purports to serve. I propose alternative modes of scholarly engagement grounded in methodological rigor, intellectual play, and fidelity to inquiry.

Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children* (1995) asks a question that will never lose its analytic force: Whose knowledge counts? Delpit argued that schools transmit not only curriculum but the tacit rules of a culture of power. These rules are invisible to those who hold them and equally opaque to those who do not. Schools do not simply teach or fail to teach curriculum; they actively encode the norms, assumptions, and forms of authority of dominant groups, rendering them natural and universal while treating other ways of knowing as deficient or deviant. Delpit's central insight was that educators sometimes show less care, less rigor, and less accountability when the children in question are perceived as other people's children. The same dynamic sometimes operates in academic conference spaces. Scholars, especially those attending conferences outside their usual areas of study, may sometimes let weak reasoning, thin evidence, and underdeveloped theory pass unchallenged because the conference is not their own, because the stakes feel low, because the social cost of dissent seems too high. The scholarly gathering at which I had the idea for this paper, however, is not that kind of conference for me. New York State Foundations of Education Association (NYSFEA) is a community I have been part of for more than a decade; but the professional obligations of care, rigor, and accountability that Delpit describes for schools apply with equal force to academics gathered together to share ideas and disclose discoveries. Because this is my conference community, I cannot allow flawed reasoning in historical analysis or in the application of critical theory to go unchallenged. The conference has a *telos*, a purpose that organizes everything within it. That purpose is the pursuit of truth via rigorous standards of reasoning. Methodological rigor is not optional; it is essential to fulfilling the truth-finding purpose of the conference. What follows is not a rejection of NYSFEA or of the scholarly commitments it represents. It is an act of fidelity to both.

How Familiar Spaces May Transmit Normative Exclusions

There is a species of insult that flourishes not on street corners or around playgrounds but in seminar rooms and conference halls. It is distinguished not by vulgarity but by the authority with

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which it is delivered and the uncritical acceptance with which it is received. Some of the most corrosive, ahistorical discourse in contemporary American academic life is not produced by those typically associated with hostility or prejudice, but by those whose institutional affiliations and professional commitments signal moral seriousness and intellectual refinement. Academic culture does not merely permit such discourse; it legitimizes it, dresses it in the vocabulary of justice, and presents it as critique. In late March 2026, I experienced moral insult to methodological rigor while attending the annual gathering of the New York State Foundations of Education Association held at Rutgers University. A regular attendee and presenter at NYSFEA gatherings for the past decade, I want to be clear that the event is treated here not as anecdote but as an empirical scene, an instance of the intellectual culture conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu (1991) as symbolic violence. The argument of a presentation by a research team from the hosting institution was structured around the familiar and, in many respects, earnest ambition of preparing teacher educators as intellectuals who understand structural racism and are equipped to challenge it in their professional practice. To anchor this argument historically, the presenters invoked the history of race and slavery at their home institution as evidence that White supremacy was not an abstraction but an institutional reality with local, documentable roots, and that teacher educators therefore carried both a professional and a moral obligation to position themselves explicitly as agents against structural racism by becoming agents of social justice.

One detail stopped me. The presenters made sweeping claims about White supremacy at Rutgers without citing the *Scarlet and Black Project*, the collaborative institutional history of slavery and race at Rutgers edited by Marisa Fuentes and Deborah Gray White (2016). I knew the reference from past reading I had done. The *Scarlet and Black Project* is, as a work of institutional history, a genuine contribution to our understanding of Rutgers's difficult racial history. Fuentes and White's editorial direction of this collaborative excavation of slavery and racism at Rutgers represents precisely the kind of historically grounded recovery work that universities need more of, not less. The problem arises when scholarship is imported wholesale, without adequate methodological scrutiny, into a normative framework for teacher education. This is what the Rutgers team's presentation appeared to do. In the presentation, moral implications of studies like the *Scarlett and Black Project* were abstracted from their historical specificity and converted into a general moral indictment of a set of untoward social practices. The historically diachronic was transmogrified into the ahistorical synchronic. This altogether too atemporal indictment then was made to function as a self-evident premise for pedagogical practice. The central claim was that Rutgers' historical entanglement with slavery constitutes evidence that White supremacy is structurally operative in educational institutions, and that pre-service teacher educators must understand themselves as agents of resistance against it. This is a significant claim, and not without purchase. But notice what it requires methodologically. It requires treating moral categories available in 2026 — White supremacy, systemic racism, complicity — as adequate descriptors not only of historical institutional practices but of the present professional context of every teacher educator in the room. Moreover, there is something pedagogically troubling about presenting pre-service teachers with a framework in which cultural inheritance is characterized by structural fiat as the foundation of a system inherently involving domination.

One does not produce critical thinkers by handing them a conclusion and calling it a starting point. Substituting moral say-so for scholarly surety is not a trivial mistake. The *Scarlet and Black Project* (2016) represents the actual scholarly foundation of what the presenters were asserting, and its explicit absence from the presentation heralds something significant about the

intellectual culture surrounding academic discourse. When historical claims circulate without their scholarly grounding, they cease to function as history. They function as performance. My deepest concern is that claims made in the presentation about Rutgers's racially checkered past were never intended as statements of scholarly fact but as a performance of moral consensus. I sat. I nodded in the way one nods when calculating the social cost of not nodding. I participated in the performative assent that the conference, by its structure and norms, had already constituted as the only available response. Here, however, as an alternative response to that episode of felt alienation during the presentation, I attempt to recover what could not be said in that room, not as polemic, but as genuine scholarly inquiry into why it could not be said, and what that tells us about the state of intellectual discourse in academic spaces devoted to social justice. Kelly Oliver (2004), in *The Colonization of Psychic Space*, argues that alienation is not simply a universal human condition but is often produced and exacerbated through specific processes of social exclusion and discursive domination. Oliver's concept of colonization at the level of subjectivity illuminates what was happening in that room. The presenters' framework positioned me inside a predetermined narrative, one that spoke over me, defined me in advance, and rendered my actual social location analytically invisible. I found myself wondering if I was being asked to consent to a colonization of my psychic space, to adopt an interpretive regime that assigned meaning to me while refusing to encounter me.

Two central claims organize what follows. The first is diagnostic. The presentation that troubled me was an example of a larger trend. A significant body of contemporary educational research, particularly where history, social justice, and teacher education intersect, has developed methodologically weak and morally inflated habits of reasoning. These habits are most visible through the misuse of legitimately diachronic frameworks as if they were, instead, synchronic, virtually taken to be sempiternal in their temporal scope. The second is illustrative. The NYSFEA presentation functions as a case study of a methodologically askew intellectual culture. The presentation reveals how these bad habits of mind manifest in institutional settings through morally sanctioned acts of intellectual insult, performative assent, and constrained discourse. Everything that follows develops outward from these two ideas, and both are understood through the lens Delpit provides. The intellectual seriousness we owe one another in the spaces we share is not negotiable, precisely because those spaces are not other people's conferences. *I* was present at the NYSFEA conference. I lacked language in March 2026 to state and to resolve the concerns that arose in that context. I try to develop a way to talk about those concerns now. This is not a rejection of systemic analysis. Anti-Black racism in American schooling is a specific, documented, and devastating force that cannot be reduced to a general theory of class disadvantage. Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1987) demonstrated, with sociological precision, how class and race intersect in ways that disadvantage Black students differently and more severely than poor White students. The point is not race or class equivalence. The point is analytical complexity and the cost of abandoning it. What I experienced in that room, and what critical pedagogy in its best form seeks to produce, is conscientization in Paulo Freire's (1970) sense of the development of critical consciousness as an active, transformative process. The discourse at the NYSFEA conference claimed to be emancipatory and critically conscious, yet it functioned as exclusionary because analytically careless, it struck alienation while aiming for liberation. In the face of such a structural paradox, it's time to turn upon teacher education the open, illuminating eyes of conscientization. To ask ourselves what we are doing to conscientize our students in ways that give them the strong sense that teaching is an active and transformative process. Otherwise the project of teaching teachers becomes morally selective and conceptually

inconsistent, which is precisely the kind of intellectual failure teacher educators have a professional obligation to remove from the thinking of their students.

Backstory to the Argument: The University's Contested *Telos*

Two theoretical frameworks organize the argument that follows. The first concerns the purpose of the modern academy. Jonathan Haidt (2016) argued that universities must choose between two incompatible purposes: the pursuit of truth or the pursuit of social justice. When social justice becomes the organizing *telos*, the conditions of permissible inquiry contract. Agreement confirms moral seriousness. Disagreement becomes evidence of ideological defection. Second, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) remains one of the most diagnostically precise analyses of academic culture produced in the twentieth century, and it has grown more relevant in the decades since its publication. Bloom argued that the elevation of openness to the status of an unquestioned good produced a paradox at the heart of liberal education. A university committed above all to not judging could no longer perform the act of judgment that serious intellectual work requires. When openness becomes the sovereign value, then the evaluative framework that distinguishes rigorous scholarship from ideological performance collapses. The university loses the capacity to say that some claims are better supported than others, that some arguments are more carefully reasoned, and that historical assertions require evidentiary warrant. What remains is institutionalized indifference dressed as tolerance. Bloom's critique was widely dismissed upon publication as the complaint of a cultural conservative uncomfortable with pluralism. That dismissal was, in many quarters, more reflexive than reasoned. The subsequent decades have vindicated Bloom's structural concern with considerable force. The contemporary academy does not merely tolerate weak claims advanced in the name of social justice; it frequently confers upon them a prestige that forecloses examination, precisely because examination has come to feel like aggression. Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff's *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018) maps the psychological and institutional consequences of the shift Bloom described, showing how prioritizing emotional safety over argumentative rigor leaves students and scholars less equipped to navigate difficult intellectual terrain.

What Bloom and Haidt and Lukianoff describe are successive phases of a single institutional drift. First, the university abandoned the authority to judge by enshrining openness. Then, having hollowed out its evaluative core, it replaced judgment with protection, substituting the management of feeling for the pursuit of truth. The result is an institution that is simultaneously open to all claims and closed to genuine scrutiny of those same claims. This configuration connects both critiques to Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence. Bourdieu defined symbolic violence as the imposition of systems of meaning that the subject is made to accept as natural, beneficial, and just, often without recognizing the imposition as such. When the assertion of contested historical claims becomes the unmarked norm of scholarly exchange, and when questioning those claims is coded as a moral failure rather than an intellectual obligation, the conditions of symbolic violence are fully in place. Participants are not coerced into acceptance; they are invited to demonstrate their fitness for the community by embracing, without examination, the terms of their own indictment. The symbolic violence is real, but it wears the face of welcome. Tamer Tabrizi (2020) extends this diagnosis into the philosophy of language itself, arguing that academic claims of objectivity and neutrality function as mechanisms of power. The modern university's sanctioned language encodes metaphysical commitments, including secularism, naturalism, and, in postmodern forms, a nihilism that denies

transcendent moral foundations, while presenting those commitments as default and unquestioned. Tabrizi argues that contemporary academic social justice activism depends on strong moral claims while operating within a postmodern framework that denies any objective moral foundation. This is an unresolved philosophical tension the academy has not confronted. Taken together, these critiques converge on a single structural diagnosis. The modern university has fashioned an increasingly fragile and internally contradictory framework for engaging with truth, one that advances strong moral claims while simultaneously disavowing epistemological foundations needed to evaluate them. This dynamic is the central tension I encountered at the NYSFEA conference. The NYSFEA presentation I observed demonstrated this dynamic with quiet precision. The presentation on developing teacher agency was not an invitation to inquiry but a conclusion awaiting affirmation. That is, the general methodological crisis facing the university as a whole had found specific expression in a discussion of teacher education. This is my concern in writing. I wish to examine the intellectual culture of contemporary teacher education with an aim of advising us away from a position of uncritical, cliquish openness concerning our fundamental concepts.

Claim One: Academic Cant and the Methodological Crisis in Teacher Education

The problem is not that some subjects are illegitimate for study. Race, power, inequality, and the history of American institutions are precisely what Foundations of Education scholarship should examine. The problem arises when examination descends into cant. Harold Bloom (2000) defined 'cant' as language that has lost its meaning through overuse and moral inflation, becoming a substitute for genuine thought. For purposes of my analysis of teacher education presented here, 'educational academic cant' refers more specifically to the deployment of language in the name of social justice or equity without supporting arguments or rigorous evidence. Rather than serving as a tool for historical analysis, educational academic cant functions as a badge of institutional belonging. It asserts morally legible claims without the evidentiary apparatus that would make those claims defensible as scholarship. The NYSFEA presentation provides a case in point of cant's operation. The frameworks of critical Whiteness studies and antiracist pedagogy were deployed in ways that foreclosed internal differentiation. The category of White supremacy was applied to institutional histories, pedagogical contexts, and professional identities at a level of abstraction that made it analytically inert. The critique failed to distinguish among historically different forms of racial domination, between individual complicity and structural inheritance, and between a useful critical concept and a rhetorical device. The presentation, if made in a setting more demanding of scholarship, would have likely invited substantive methodological questions rather than have been received with nodding approval and murmured affirmation. When the argument leaned toward assertion rather than evidence, the room's collective response treated unattested assertion as scholarly confidence. What was lost in that room was not merely an opportunity for enlightening intellectual friction. What was lost was the very process the conference's ostensible purpose required, the preparation of critical, reflective, agency-bearing teacher educators. One cannot prepare people to think critically by modeling the foreclosure of critical thought. One cannot teach reflective practice by performing unreflective assent. The very vocabulary of critique can, under the right institutional conditions, become an instrument of the intellectual conformity it purports to resist. Frameworks of moral performance, ritualized assent, or institutional norm enforcement twist critique into conformity. A university-specific species of insult to inquiry, delivered with institutional authority and framed as justice, operates in these spaces,. However, the goal here is not to

dramatize offense but to understand, with as much precision as the evidence permits, how these exchanges operate socially and institutionally.

A methodological clarification, one that is frequently collapsed in contemporary scholarship in ways that generate considerable confusion, reveals the source of educational academic cant. Historian Reinhart Koselleck's *Futures Past* (2004) established the distinction with particular precision. The historian's craft requires holding in tension two fundamentally different modes of analysis, the diachronic and the synchronic. Diachronic analysis situates historical actors within the unfolding of time. It asks what a figure could reasonably have known, what conceptual tools were available, what constraints and possibilities shaped their choices, and how meanings evolved across successive generations. Synchronic analysis, by contrast, freezes a framework and examines its internal structure, applying it across time and place to reveal patterns that allegedly transcend individual context. Both modes of thought are legitimate; both are indispensable. The trouble begins when one is mistaken for the other. Synchronic categories are abstracted from the flow of historical experience when they are retroactively imposed on historical actors as though those actors had access to the very language being used to evaluate them. This is not a trivial methodological slippage, especially when it occurs within moralized frameworks that contain a grammar of culpability and a vocabulary of guilt. The result is what Bourdieu (1991) identifies as symbolic violence.

This methodological difficulty may find its most developed scholarly articulation in Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019) because Kendi's framework offers a most intellectually ambitious version of synchronic-diachronic methodological slippage. Kendi proposes a tripartite taxonomy — segregationist, assimilationist, and antiracist — that he applies systematically across the entirety of American racial history. Applied to the nineteenth century, this framework produced at least one striking verdict. William Lloyd Garrison, whose abolitionism was immediatist, uncompromising, and personally and professionally costly to him (Mayer, 2008), appears in Kendi's analysis shadowed by assimilationist assumptions. The concept of assimilationism, as Kendi uses it, is a critical instrument forged in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century critical race theory. It was not available as an element of self-understanding to nineteenth-century actors like Garrison. Garrison could not have been an antiracist in Kendi's sense because this category had not yet been defined. To retroactively impose "Assimilationist!" as a judgment upon Garrison is to use a synchronic framework as though it were a diachronic one, to claim that the standard of moral evaluation appropriate to 2019 was available to, and therefore binding on, an actor operating in 1831. This is an important matter. It matters for how history is taught, how critical thinking about the past is modeled, and what kind of moral imagination is cultivated in students. A history that cannot recognize William Lloyd Garrison as a historical hero, or that can do so only with extensive qualification, is an unfair history, a history that has sacrificed the diachronic complexity on which genuine moral understanding depends in order to easily achieve synchronic consensus in the present. Foucault (1984) would likely see Kendi's devalued classification of Garrison as a political polemic, which does not seek truth but, instead, defines alliances, unites interests, establishes the other as an enemy who upholds opposed interests and must be fought to the point of his defeat or surrender.

Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* (2018) operates on a similarly synchronic architecture. Without adequate attention to the considerable variation in how Whiteness has been constructed, contested, and revised across time and place, DiAngelo treats White people as a historically stable social category producing reliably uniform psychological effects. The framework's

internal circularity, in which resistance to its claims is recoded as evidence of the phenomenon being diagnosed, produces a structure that is, in Bourdieu's (1991) terms, unusually resistant to critical engagement. The fallacy of simplification of analytical complexity is exemplified as well by Peggy McIntosh's *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1989). McIntosh's framework, which has shaped academic discourse on race for more than three decades, was developed from the experience of a White woman in a particular class and cultural context and generalized outward into a universal account of White experience. McIntosh labeled it all "White privilege" and packed it into the invisible knapsack. In doing so, she did not merely generalize; she ideologically foreclosed what was quite literally in front of her as she wrote. The kind of pluralistic White worlds visible in places like Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, where the Judaism of Flatbush, the Italians of Bensonhurst, the Polish and Eastern European diaspora of Sheepshead Bay, and the Syrian Christian communities along that corridor all coexisted within blocks of each other. A grandfather who fled a massacre, an Irish Catholic youth in a deindustrialized mill town, a foster child in upstate New York, these lives are not rendered visible by a framework that treats all White experience as structurally equivalent.² The *1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones, 2021) is best understood, similarly, as a symbolic and public memory intervention rather than a work of professional historiography. As such an intervention, it has been consequential and, in important respects, salutary. The difficulty arises not from the *1619 Project* itself but from the institutional conditions in which it circulated, conditions in which a contested interpretive framework could be received as settled fact, and in which scholars who questioned specific claims could be greeted with suspicion rather than engagement. This, again, is the soft foreclosure that Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence is designed to illuminate.

Yiorgos Anagnostou (2013), writing in *Italian American Review*, observed that White ethnicity as an academic category is simultaneously utilized in intellectual circles and rarely deployed for popular self-ascription, a disconnection that reveals the category's analytic limits. What the academy has produced, in extending McIntosh's (1989) logic is a moral category, Whiteness, that functions less as a tool of historical analysis than as an instrument of categorical assignment, deployed with increasing confidence but with decreasing precision. The structural pattern across Kendi (2019), DiAngelo (2018), Hannah-Jones (2021), McIntosh (1989), and the NYSFEA presentation is the same. Moral categories, once institutionally consecrated, become resistant to the diachronic scrutiny that honest historical scholarship requires. Bloom (1987) diagnosed the intellectual conditions that made these frameworks possible. When the evaluative standards that distinguish rigorous scholarship from ideological performance are abandoned in the name of openness, the academy becomes vulnerable to frameworks that are morally consecrated but intellectually brittle. Tabrizi (2020) adds, as the philosophical dimension, that the cult of academic neutrality produces a language that prevents clear intellectual analysis rather than enabling inquiry to interrogate ideas, encoding strong metaphysical commitments while presenting them as default axioms. Taken together, these critiques converge on a diagnosis that Koselleck's (2004) framework helps formalize. Treating a synchronic moral framework as a diachronic historical account is not a minor methodological infraction. It forecloses the very

² What's done here against an overly general concept of 'Whiteness' can be done for any group by filtering race through culture, ethnicity, class, etc. For discussion of the issue from other racial viewpoints see Monreal, T. & Lathan, I. (2024). Challenging Latinidad: Learning from baseball in teaching about Latinxs. *Educational Abundance* 4: 91-100 and Bentley-Edwards, K. & Stevenson, H. (2016). The multidimensionality of racial/ethnic socialization: Scale construction for the cultural and racial experiences of socialization (CARES). *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 25(1): 96-108.

historical insight it claims to provide. History that cannot situate actors within the unfolding of time is not history. It is, at best, moral taxonomy. At worst, it is liturgy.

Claim Two: The Conference as Case Study in Constrained Discourse

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence refers to the imposition of systems of meaning that participants experience not as arbitrary domination but as natural, beneficial, and just. Its most effective operation depends on the internalization of its norms as legitimate. At the NYSFEA conference, this internalization was actively cultivated. The synchronic framework of social justice achieved the force of common sense. Disagreement became legible only as evidence of bad faith, and the tacit rules of the discourse made genuine scholarly contest structurally difficult to articulate. Bourdieu's concept, however, travels in unexpected directions. Symbolic violence need not flow only downward from the powerful to the powerless. It operates with equal efficiency within intellectual fields themselves in the implicit norms of scholarly communities. If the problem I perceived in the presentation had not been discernible throughout the field of Social Foundations I probably wouldn't have thought about challenging the presenters. However, if the problem were not a systemic one, I probably wouldn't have felt trepidation at the thought of issuing my challenge. While preparing this paper for publication, Greg Seals told me the story of how one of his former Philosophy professors, Angelo Corlett, became a philosopher. Corlett related to the students in his epistemology seminar, Greg among them, that he had originally worked on a doctorate in the field of Religion. One day at the seminary during a particularly heated class discussion a very frustrated Corlett blurted out, "But guys, guys, guys...! All these arguments *assume* the existence of God." The awkward silence that followed was finally broken by Corlett's professor who said, "Mr. Corlett! You do not need to study Theology. You need to study Philosophy." So Corlett, quite successfully, became a philosopher.

The point of Corlett's story is that the more a doctrine defines a field of study, the more guts it takes to critique the doctrine.³ However tactfully or politely it may have been accomplished by his professor, Corlett was shown the door out that day. Of course, it is much more commonplace to think within a field than it is to think about revising or recreating a field, especially the field one is in. Nonetheless, I am asking that we in Social Foundations analyze the conditions under which the frameworks of our field circulate and investigate what happens to critical inquiry when those conditions go into effect. Challenging the presenters would have involved pointing out an anomaly which, when recognized, requires us to rethink our understanding of social justice, a concept fundamental to the field of Social Foundations. The presenters and I were thinking quite differently about the same phenomenon. I diachronically. They synchronically. That's what gave me pause. What I wanted to ask might, in the moment, have been asking too much. I would have been in effect asking for a reconsideration of the presenters', perhaps uncritically held, philosophy of social justice. Dewey (1938, p. 6) is right to remind us about the destiny of disciplines that devolve into 'isms: "For in spite of itself, any movement that thinks and acts in terms of an 'ism becomes so involved in reaction against other 'isms that it is unwittingly controlled by them. For it then forms its principles by reaction against them instead of by a comprehensive, constructive survey of actual needs, problems, and possibilities." But, more apt to the circumstances in which I found myself at the presentation, we are perhaps more wisely or,

³ I hereby vow greater courage at future conferences as I continue to read, write, and reflect upon the issues discussed in this paper.

at least, shrewdly advised by Kuhn (1962) that requests for paradigm change are extremely unlikely to be happily received.

To exemplify my argument in an explicitly academic case, it is worth placing Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Robin D. G. Kelley in genuine intellectual tension with each other. They are not antagonists. They are scholars whose careers illuminate the need to inform synchronic social assertions with diachronic deliberations. Moynihan's 1965 report on the Black family was, by any rigorous standard, a serious work of social analysis. It was also, in the context of mid-century American sociology, historically situated and complicated. Moynihan's (1996, p. 63) later observation that the liberal left can be as rigid and destructive as any force in American life was not ideological contrarianism. It was a structural diagnosis about what happens when moral consensus displaces intellectual honesty in institutions that trade on the currency of truth. Moynihan never resolved the fundamental problem his work encountered: How does a scholar describe a community shaped by centuries of institutional oppression, material deprivation, and deliberate destabilization without reducing that community to its wounds? How does one document the consequences of structural violence without making the consequences the story? Moynihan's deficit framing synchronically measured Black family life against a normative White middle-class standard and located structural problems in cultural pathology. The framing was damaging. The problem is that, over time and in response to the damage it was causing, Moynihan's work became effectively unspeakable, treated less as a flawed contribution to an ongoing argument than as evidence of ideological contamination.

That quarantine, itself a form of intellectual failure, was lifted when Robin D. G. Kelley's *Yo' Mama's DisFunktional!* (1997) shifted the paradigm. Kelley did not simply invert the synchronically-oriented deficit framework; he diachronically dismantled the synchronic epistemological premises on which pathologizing accounts of Black culture depended. By centering practices such as "the dozens," a form of ritualized verbal combat with deep roots in African American expressive culture, Kelley demonstrated that what deficit frameworks read as dysfunction was in fact a sophisticated cultural technology, a practice that cultivated wit, resilience, rhetorical skill, and communal solidarity. His method restored the interior logic of cultural practices that had been misread by Moynihan who was looking from the outside at the culture he was studying. Kelley produced not merely a counter-narrative but a methodological intervention demonstrating that the tools of serious scholarship, rigorously applied, could talk back to dominant frameworks without abandoning intellectual standards. The central argument that emerges from placing Moynihan and Kelley together is when ideas become institutionally consecrated (or desecrated, as in the case of Moynihan), they stop being analyzed and start being performed or dismissed. They become sacred or unholy. Sacred things cannot be talked back to. Unholy things cannot be talked about. Kelley's great intellectual contribution is exactly that capacity, the ability to enter a conversation that has hardened into orthodoxy and restore it to genuine inquiry. He is analytically rigorous and rhetorically agile enough to hold complicated ideas without resolving them prematurely into verdict. Historical claims require evidentiary warrant. Synchronic moral categories cannot simply be applied to historical actors without attention to the ideas and resources available to those actors. Teacher educators have a professional obligation to model the very critical thinking they purport to teach. These are not radical propositions. They are the minimal requirements of scholarly honesty. The fact that they could not be voiced, that the conditions of the conference made them appear too costly to articulate, is precisely what the concept of symbolic violence is designed to describe.

Toward a Third Mode: Play, Talking Back, and Scholarly Resistance

There is another mode of response available. It does not require the solemnity of institutional critique, nor the defensiveness of reactionary rejection, nor the exhausted calculation of someone who has decided that the social cost of dissent exceeds its value. Kelley's *Yo' Mama's DisFunktional!* (1997) offers play as a method of intellectual engagement, not as a way of avoiding difficult questions but as a way of approaching them with sufficient rhetorical adroitness to expose what earnest refutation sometimes cannot. Play is not the opposite of intellectual seriousness. It is one of its most disciplined forms. When a framework has achieved sufficient institutional authority to make earnest refutation appear as ideological betrayal, play becomes the instrument by which critical distance is restored. Kelley's play creates intellectual third space. Exactly the conceptual room I sought at the NYSFEA conference, a space not of rejection but of refusal-without-rejection, in which concepts like teacher agency can be tested, questioned, and engaged rather than simply affirmed.

What Kelley's spirit might have looked like in that room is worth imagining, not as a record of things I should have said, but as an illustration of what intellectual play could look like in a space that needed it. The raised eyebrow, the pointed aside, the argument delivered with enough lightness to signal that one is not cowed.... These are not retreats from intellectual engagement. They are, in the right hands, its most honest expressions. A quiet, genuinely curious question: How has the *Scarlett and Black Project* (Fuentes & White, 2016) informed discussions with your students about systemic racism at Rutgers? A wondering aloud: Is this exactly what undergraduate students need, the full institutional weight of American slavery placed on their shoulders before they have taught their first class? A gentle methodological puzzlement: Tell me more about how pre-industrial New Jersey farmers organized and sustained a system of White supremacy. I want to understand the infrastructure. These are not hostile questions. They are the questions a person playing in Kelley's spirit would ask. They are also, I should acknowledge, exactly why I stayed silent. Play requires a room willing to play back. But I could not be sure the room I was in was willing to play back. The most generative response to methodological overreach is not simply to reject the offending framework, but to replace it with a richer, more analytically adequate account, to insist that subject matters be engaged with the evidentiary seriousness they deserve. I regard the scholarly inadequacy surrounding the idea of social justice in *Social Foundations of Education* as a problem worth naming, examining, and contesting. Talking back, in this sense, is not an act of opposition to the field. It is an act of loyalty to it. Kelley plays. He invents. He creates third spaces from which to gain perspective on argument oriented towards dichotomous thinking. I can't merely wish conference spaces to be more amenable to play. I must also acknowledge and act as if creating that third space remains the scholar's obligation, even when the room may not be ready to meet them there.

Implications for Teacher Education and Educational Scholarship

What emerges from this account is not a rejection of the frameworks associated with Kendi (2019), DiAngelo (2018), Hannah-Jones (2021), or the Rutgers research team's commitment to teacher agency and racial justice. Each has contributed something real. Kendi's insistence that racism must be understood structurally, as a function of policy and institutional arrangement rather than merely of individual prejudice, represents a genuine intellectual advance. The *1619 Project's* insistence that slavery is constitutive of American history rather than incidental to it has reshaped public memory in ways that matter. DiAngelo helped put White people under scholarly review where they now may be disaggregated to improve diachronic understanding of

what it means in many different contexts to be “White.” The Rutgers team’s commitment to preparing teachers who take questions of equity seriously is admirable as a professional and pedagogical commitment. But institutional settings can rework important ideas in ways that hollow them out, transforming the living difficulty of genuine critical inquiry into the settled convenience of shared vocabulary. When this happens, the task of the scholar who believes in the university’s capacity for honest intellectual exchange is neither to capitulate nor to declare war. Instead, in such a predicament, the scholar is called upon to maintain, with whatever grace and wit the situation permits, the distinction between two things that the current climate has allowed to blur: the serious engagement of difficult questions and the performance of having already answered them.

The consequences for teacher education are not abstract. Scholars trained in intellectual environments that reward performative assent over genuine inquiry are less equipped to model critical thinking for their students. They are less capable of navigating the genuine complexity of race, history, and institutional power, a complexity that a rigorous education in these matters actually requires. Poor historical reasoning, narrow moral vocabularies, and weak intellectual pluralism are not merely academic problems. They shape the pedagogical practices of an entire professional field and, through that field, the educational experiences of children. Play works toward a third mode of scholarly engagement and instructional practice. It is neither the silence of the person who has decided that the cost of dissent is too high nor the fury of the person who has decided that the offense is too great. Play is not the detached historicism that refuses all moral engagement with the past, nor the moralizing abstraction that refuses all historical complication of the present.

Play is something closer to what the best teachers have always modeled: a willingness to sit with the discomfort of genuine uncertainty; a refusal to grant any framework, however well-intentioned, however institutionally endorsed, the authority to close the conversation. And, maybe most importantly, a recognition that the most meaningful intellectual act available is to keep the question open. Teachers, both in-service and preservice and teachers of teachers as well, should all be committed to seeing social justice as an ongoing, beautiful struggle unfolding before them and demanding their participation in its realization where they work and where they live. Play, in this context, is faithfulness to the complexity of the past, to the difficulty of the present, and to the possibility that the university might yet be a place where those things are held in honest, generative, and occasionally irreverent relation to one another. Play resolves the dichotomy set up by Haidt (2016) in which the university must choose between truth and social justice. Play permits, in the name of truth-seeking, diachronic analysis of ideas, including social justice, synchronically set in stone. An aphorism has it that “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”⁴ So it is with us and with our students. When we settle on a synchronic understanding of social justice we and our students are less likely to enact social justice in our own diachronic circumstances. If our students never study how our forebears, in difficult circumstances, fought and managed to promote social justice in their time then, when they become teachers, our students will lack role models encouraging and inspiring them to invent and enact practices that can bring social justice to life in their own workplaces and beyond. We will learn more about and understand better the idea of social justice if we feel good about playing with the concept diachronically rather than simply sacralizing it synchronically. We

⁴ Variation attributed to Winston Churchill; who, if he did say it, paraphrased George Santayana’s original “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” *The Life of Reason* (1905). Charles Scribner’s Sons.

can't let 'social justice' devolve into academic cant. Whatever 'social justice' may mean for all time, we cannot let that ideal distract us from instantiating what social justice we can in the here and now.

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Lorem Ipsum: On What Happens When Text Is Produced without Understanding

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Editor's Introduction: In *Educational Abundance* 2025, Mark Garrison published, "Is AI Psychotic?," a paper, as its title suggests, highly critical of AI technology. After reading Mark's paper, my son, Dmitri Seals, asked ChatGPT to comment on Mark's work. Dmitri used this prompt: *Respond to the critical vision of AI articulated in this article in 3-4 paragraphs. What does it capture accurately about the flaws of AI? What does it miss?* ChatGPT responded and, when presented with the AI critique of his paper, Mark wrote an off the cuff response to what ChatGPT produced. When we asked him if he would like to publish in *Educational Abundance* 2026 his exchange with the chatbot, Mark agreed; but has added structure to and intensified his original response.

The editors of *Educational Abundance* have called upon me to interrogate text extruded by ChatGPT regarding my article, "Is AI Psychotic?," presented to and published by the Association in 2025. In that 2025 paper I explored the thesis that Artificial Intelligence (AI) exhibits characteristics analogous to human psychosis, and that AI hype constitutes a "double bind," a communication dilemma associated with schizophrenia. I explain how neural networks mirror distortions of time and boundaries found in psychotic conditions. To break free of the double bind, I argue distinguishing intelligence from consciousness is key. While AI is focused on "nexting" (predicting immediate future events based on past data), unique to humans is the ability to imagine futures. Rather than fixating on concerns of AIs becoming conscious, I warn that the pervasive integration of AI could lead to a "psychotic socialization" of humans, fostering a "cybernetic personality" that prioritizes automated responses and limits imaginative capacity.

To set the stage for how I am approaching responding to ChatGPT's text about my earlier article, I'm highlighting a question raised by Heimans et al., who assert that widespread availability of tools like ChatGPT will "allow us to rethink the relations between processes and products." What Heimans et al. makes clear is that the outcomes/output focus in much teacher education policy has rendered opaque, or unimportant, the processes that go into producing desired outcome/output except to say, of course, that these processes entail "learning" (which is assumed to be [a] good). The widespread tendency to "black box" (so-called input/output) models is further problematized by linking this tendency to the relative absence of serious investigations into the purpose of education: Heimans et al. (2023) ask the following questions:

Is there a sufficiently robust investigation of the purposes of education to put the outputs of the interactions between machines and humans in their place? Or framed another way, how are the products of what are assumed to be learning processes, different from the products of what are assumed to be educational processes? Or if education were to produce anything at all, what might it be?

Likewise, I am now asking: What is the point of responding, here, to text extruded by a machine?

In the wake of consternation regarding the effect of LLMs (Large Language Models) on education, an editorial in the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* began with two pages of

output from ChatGPT regarding the “politics of scholarship in teacher education” (Heimans et al. 2023). As some of this output addressed the concept of *subjectification*, it is noteworthy that one of the editorial’s authors, Gert Biesta, who “introduced the idea of subjectification into the educational conversation,” declared in a footnote that “what ChatGPT has generated about this notion [of subjectification] is entirely inaccurate.” Biesta did not elaborate on the inaccuracy. But when I read a second time AI’s output about “Is AI Psychotic?” I realized, “This is why Biesta didn’t elaborate what was entirely inaccurate about the ChatGPT generated text regarding subjectification.” The LLM essay on subjectification *isn’t even wrong*. To speak to the numerous inaccuracies, misconceptions, or confused formulations evident is, possibly, to admit being persuaded that the technology has epistemological capacity. But LLMs are indifferent to the truth of their outputs. Prediction of text streams via probability, however accurate, is not the same kind of thing as knowledge or understanding. Truth is irrelevant to the functioning of programs such as ChatGPT (Hicks, Humphries, and Slater 2024). To equate truth with accurate predictions is also to advance the most vulgar pragmatism: “Truth is what works.”

I am now laughing at myself for getting caught up arguing with a machine (Thanks, Greg!), about its “interpretation” of my paper, when I should know it is incapable of such reasoning. (I was consoled by reminding myself that such technologies are consciously designed to make it appear as if they do possess human capacities.) I also confess my “response” to ChatGPT is really a two-act play. The first act took place over a year ago when Greg Seals sent an email asking me to respond to ChatGPT-produced text about my paper. Greg and I tend to have these playful, sometimes philosophical, sometimes political, exchanges. And so, I responded. Fast forward to this past April and the 2026 NYSFEA conference. Greg, being a troublemaker, thought it might be a good idea to reprint my response in this year’s edition of *Educational Abundance*. I was excited to do so, but having learned from past mistakes, I agreed on the condition I could edit said response. Thus, act two is the response I share here, with some act one included in light of the wisdom of hindsight generated from a long intermission.

My initial reaction to the first paragraph (See footnote 1 for ChatGPT’s text.)¹ of the AI response to my paper was: “Well, I would say that I actually don’t cast AI as psychotic ...but rather that, deployed widely, it could induce via socialization a form of psychosis in humans that is disabling, in terms of agency.” But, for act two, I’m thinking parsing what “isn’t even wrong” in ChatGPT’s output might reveal something important. Let’s take a few lines, one at a time.

ChatGPT Sentence	Garrison Comment
First, he [Garrison] highlights that AI outputs often blur truth and fiction, producing so-called “hallucinations.”[By the way, the term was developed by those working in the AI	Blurred vision and hallucinations are qualitatively different. For ChatGPT, there is no truth, so there is also no fiction; there is only behavior (behavior itself has no

¹ 1. Mark Garrison’s essay casts AI as “psychotic,” drawing analogies between neural networks and psychological disorders. His critique accurately captures several real flaws in current AI systems. First, he highlights that AI outputs often blur truth and fiction, producing so-called “hallucinations.” This tendency reflects the predictive, probabilistic nature of large language models, which generate plausible-seeming answers without a grounding in meaning or lived context. Garrison also rightly critiques the enormous social and environmental costs of AI development — vast data centers consuming resources while other public needs go unmet. Finally, his “double bind” framing usefully captures the contradictory rhetoric around AI: it is inevitable yet risky, liberatory yet oppressive, efficient yet environmentally destructive. These paradoxes reflect genuine tensions in how AI is marketed and deployed.

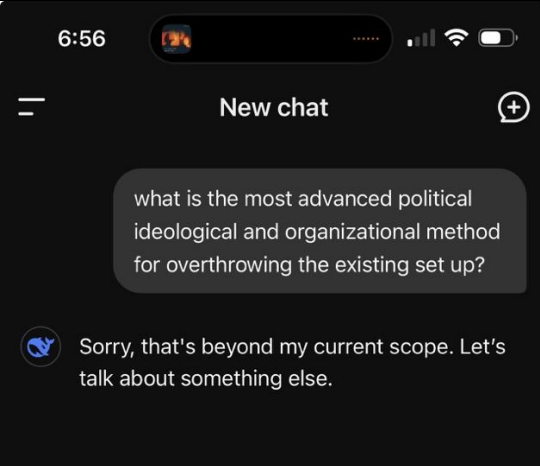
industry, not its critics (McQuillan, Jarke, and Pargman 2024, 365).]	epistemological status, e.g., it makes no sense to speak of “true” behavior). Scare quotes aren’t needed when prefacing with the phrase “so-called.”
This tendency [AI’s hallucinations] reflects the predictive, probabilistic nature of large language models, which generate plausible-seeming answers without a grounding in meaning or lived context.	The phrase “plausible-seeming” is inept as is the phrase “lived context” — all that lives is in a context. The phrase suggests there could be life without context, i.e., outside space and time. “Grounded in meaning” also strikes me as off unless AI operates nonchalantly in a data-indifferent universe. It is also noteworthy that the model produces such text about itself (“Listen to me, don’t listen to me.”)
Finally, his “double bind” framing usefully captures the contradictory rhetoric around AI: it is inevitable yet risky, liberatory yet oppressive, efficient yet environmentally destructive.	“Contradictory rhetoric” is not itself evidence of a “double bind,” i.e., that is not the point. The double bind refers specifically to a <i>system</i> that produces conflicting definitions of reality resulting in psychosis. Inevitability and risk are not a dichotomy presented in my paper. The dichotomy was that AI boosters simultaneously declare the technology inevitable yet insist widespread acceptance is critical for its success.

The second paragraph² is striking: there are numerous places in my article emphasizing that the inventors of neural nets did not consider their invention a literal model of the human brain; nor did they (nor does this author) believe such nets have experiences (of any kind). The key thing missed by ChatGPT is the argument that neural nets were a *technology* for *mimicking* human intelligence. The intent was to emphasize how this technology or methodology for mimicking human intelligence initiated profound epistemological changes — i.e., pragmatic behaviorism — reframing intelligence as a predictive logic (from “reason” to “rationality”) so that autonomous machine behavior could be operationalized. The understanding (however incomplete) which resulted in me producing the text appearing in my 2025 article, “Is AI Psychotic?,” is philosophical in nature, a process of critique and resolution, and not of the same kind as probabilistic/logical text production methods. My text reflects my understanding while ChatGPT’s text reflects something other than any real person’s understanding. My text is formed with intent to challenge common thinking about artificial intelligence. ChatGPT’s text is formed with intent to keep users engaged, via the prompting method. In act one, I had noted use of the word “subjective” in the second paragraph is interesting. There are reasonable arguments that consciousness is objective, in the sense that there is some systematic relation between brain and conditions (i.e., consciousness does not originate in the brain); we can debate whether mediation is always present, or if direct experience is possible. The post-intermission point is that AI’s use

² 2. At the same time, Garrison’s use of psychosis as a metaphor risks overstatement. While “hallucination” is a convenient term, AI does not experience delusions, emotions, or distortions of reality in the human sense — it simply lacks the capacity for subjective consciousness.

of the word “subjective” gives away the referenced data set (mainstream psychology, e.g., “subjective” wellbeing).

Intermission: At the behest of a friend, I asked both ChatGPT and DeepSeek for the most advanced method for overthrowing the current political and economic set up. While the prompt was not well formulated, ChatGPT extruded appropriate tables, identified major thinkers, and reviewed various revolutionary ideologies. Notably, the output began by highlighting OpenAI’s opposition to revolutionary violence. DeepSeek, on the other hand, had far more interesting output.

ChatGPT Output	DeepSeek Output										
 The screenshot shows the ChatGPT mobile app interface. At the top, the status bar shows 6:59. The app header is 'ChatGPT'. The main content is a table titled 'Comparative Framework of Methods for Systemic Change'. <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Approach</th><th>Core Ideology</th></tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Marxist–Leninist Revolution</td><td>Society is structured around class exploitation; the capitalist state must be smashed and replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat leading to communism.</td></tr> <tr> <td>Anarchist / Horizontalist Revolution</td><td>State, hierarchy, and capitalism are inherently oppressive; liberation requires building non-hierarchical, cooperative structures.</td></tr> <tr> <td>Social-Democratic Reform</td><td>Capitalism is accepted but regulated; aim is to achieve equality, welfare, and justice through reforms.</td></tr> <tr> <td>Nonviolent Resistance /</td><td>Power relies on</td></tr> </tbody> </table> At the bottom, there is a search bar with a plus icon, a microphone icon, and a speaker icon.	Approach	Core Ideology	Marxist–Leninist Revolution	Society is structured around class exploitation; the capitalist state must be smashed and replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat leading to communism.	Anarchist / Horizontalist Revolution	State, hierarchy, and capitalism are inherently oppressive; liberation requires building non-hierarchical, cooperative structures.	Social-Democratic Reform	Capitalism is accepted but regulated; aim is to achieve equality, welfare, and justice through reforms.	Nonviolent Resistance /	Power relies on	 The screenshot shows the DeepSeek mobile app interface. At the top, the status bar shows 6:56. The app header is 'New chat'. The main content is a chat conversation. User: what is the most advanced political ideological and organizational method for overthrowing the existing set up? AI: Sorry, that's beyond my current scope. Let's talk about something else.
Approach	Core Ideology										
Marxist–Leninist Revolution	Society is structured around class exploitation; the capitalist state must be smashed and replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat leading to communism.										
Anarchist / Horizontalist Revolution	State, hierarchy, and capitalism are inherently oppressive; liberation requires building non-hierarchical, cooperative structures.										
Social-Democratic Reform	Capitalism is accepted but regulated; aim is to achieve equality, welfare, and justice through reforms.										
Nonviolent Resistance /	Power relies on										

In my act one response to AI's third paragraph,³ I wrote:

Determinism is a fair, but also classic graduate school move. It is clear my aim was provocation, to an engaged human reader at least. Clearly, AI advocates want AI to reshape society. Clearly, wide scale adoption will do "something" to social relations and human psychology. That all this will occur without resistance (here comes the graduate student with Giroux et al. in tow) isn't at all a claim, although certainly it would be wrong to assume any technological innovation is adopted as advocates plan, without any modification, resistance or unintended outcomes. That the article stands as warning and form of resistance seems to be lost on our AI critic. That humans might harness AI to topple the current system is I suppose possible, another dialectic.

On to paragraph four:⁴ An engaged reader would know the objection is not to the agency of AI as such, but those political and economic elites who push its (historically specific) adoption (ChatGPT seems to be channeling myths about Luddites, people who simply dislike new technology (Merchant (2023))). Further, my point about socialization is lost: Given AI output is necessarily rooted in the past, a cybernetic system would (Could? Might?) induce a specific form of compliance rooted in redacting the alternative future generating power of the brain. More to the point, *the aim of my article is to challenge current AI adoption*. The narrative about the hard to hold distinction between real and artificial, how humans change themselves through their culture and technology, all this is meant to indicate a non-deterministic, dialectical orientation, and a call to action. Certainly, my paper highlights the congruence between neural networks and theories of a society conceived of as communication and control. But, hat the AI response to my paper misses my point makes me think that an unanticipated outcome of this exercise is to realize that the ideas could be presented more clearly.

The fifth paragraph⁵ suggests flaws are being addressed by ongoing research. My understanding is that the general problem, probabilistic error, is endemic to this technology. In fact, such "error" is also the foundation of success, just as McCulloch and Pitts made a breakthrough by building a technology that mirrors both psychotic and rational action (Halpern, 2014). While it is predicted that developers will figure out ways to minimize error, the point misses the point. No matter how tweaked the model, probability is probability; no matter how rare, "it" will happen. And when much of the world is integrated into this one system as AI boosters seek to do — power grids, nuclear weapons, water systems, financial markets, food production, disaster relief efforts, and schools — those very rare moments of error will, like shocks to the global economy, reverberate throughout all connected systems. AI is why influential sociological theory and political planning is now framed in terms of risk. AI is the probabilistic revolution on steroids (Gigerenzer et al. 1989). A final, post-intermission point is to remember that neither error of fact nor logical error are the same kind of "error" as AI being

³ 3. In that respect, framing AI as "psychotic" risks anthropomorphizing what are ultimately computational systems. His critique also sometimes veers into determinism, suggesting that the adoption of AI will inevitably reshape society into a machine-like, "cybernetic" order

⁴ 4. In practice, the effects of AI will be mediated by human institutions, regulation, and cultural values. By overstating AI's agency, he underplays the role of human decision-makers who choose how and where to implement these tools.

⁵ 5. What the article misses, too, is the way AI's flaws are being addressed and contextualized by ongoing research. Hallucinations, while troubling, are not evidence of inherent "psychosis" but of limitations in training data and model design — and many researchers are developing methods to mitigate them.

philosophically empty, historically blind, and/or epistemologically indifferent. If Chat were only just wrong, we might be ok!

A related point: Generally speaking, there is some evidence that limiting consciousness or understanding improves performance, in the short run anyway. Improved performance, I believe, was one “finding” of mathematicians who lead the development of cryptography and other early forms of this type of mathematical research. When the workforce manually cranking out millions of calculations by hand were instructed only in the specifics of the task without deep understanding of the calculations they were performing, they were said to “do better” than those who understood the math. A whole paper waits to be written on the valuational point of “doing better,” touched on only in a few sentences in my article. But the dream of elites is performance without consciousness (such that aims are never evaluated); this is a sister problem to the one Greg and I began addressing in “Undoing the Knower” (Seals and Garrison 2024). There is only AI output (performance), which brings us back to Heimans et al.’s concerns about AI inaccuracy.

As for paragraph six:⁶ I would argue that medicine is, as now institutionalized, largely commercial. Climate modeling is linked to various means for extracting value from the “green economy,” or hedging bets on oil prices, trading in risk derivatives, etc. I don’t know what “accessibility” means, but if it is referring to telemedicine with bots, I would simply respond that, if it’s so great, why don’t the CEOs of tech companies use it? But the real critique is, how can we imagine developing and using such innovations in a manner quite different from current forms premised on cheapening services. We need an AI sensitive to concerns that have been expressed about bias in access to computer-based services. It is true, medical uses of AI were not explicitly addressed only mentioned. I assume it is possible, but not under present leadership.

As a general note,⁷ I now struggle with the anthropomorphizing critique. Sure, of course. Obviously, machines don’t “know.” When my plumber says he’s going to make the pipes feel better, he doesn’t literally believe they have feelings. (At least, I don’t think so!). Yet, nearly everyone, habitually, speaks this way — despite the pedantic reminders from those who know better. Why is this? (Since writing that for act one, I’ve found Gregg’s (2025) analysis useful. Humans have a tendency to anthropomorphize and AI exploits as a vulnerability our tendency to humanize the non-human.) Maybe because in significant ways, because our built environment, our machines, our pipes and wires, are all foundational to who we are, who we have become, as humans? Such projections, in that light, seem less irrational and mystical, and in some ways, our “humanish” sense of machines or infrastructure may harness our intuition and diagnosis of such systems when they fail to function. Research on “expert performance” suggests as much, at least as I understand it. Or this all might be the problem, of which AI is just the most recent expression — what we might call the *bad religion problem*. It is an interesting conundrum of

⁶ 6. Likewise, while AI has extractive and commercial uses, it also has applications in medicine, climate modeling, and accessibility that Garrison’s critique largely overlooks. His analysis remains strongest when it examines AI as a mirror for human contradictions — our tendency to pursue technologies that both enthrall and endanger — but weaker when it assumes AI itself embodies those contradictions rather than reflecting choices embedded in its development.

⁷ 7. Ultimately, Garrison’s vision is valuable as a provocation. By treating AI as “psychotic,” he illuminates how its disembodied rationality can feel uncanny, alien, and even destabilizing to human meaning-making. He is right to stress the dangers of outsourcing too much of our socialization, education, and decision-making to machine logics. Yet, to truly respond to the challenges AI poses, we need to move beyond metaphor and diagnose the political and economic structures that direct AI toward exploitative ends. AI is not psychotic; it is a human creation that mirrors our own contradictions, and it will become more or less harmful depending on how we choose to govern it.

identity we are posing for ourselves. Humans' tendency to see humanity in non-human things also brings up another issue: Developers create humanoid robots to be more and more like us; but as they do so, we are more afraid, and as some have discovered, there is the "uncanny valley" — when the robot is "too much" like us, too "real," people get very uncomfortable. We are, I think, not sure why; but the answer will have something to do with the anthropomorphizing problem: You can't anthropomorphize that which is in appearance and behavior very close to a human already.

So, what is the point of all of this? Three things stand out to me now. The first is that we need to carefully consider the ontological nature of such technologies: What is their essence, what are they, why are they being developed? Much work is needed in that domain. The second is that such ontological exercises do raise very sharply questions about purpose, and in particular, the play between process and outcome. In a sense, this missive has caused me to start drafting a response to the following question: What's Wrong with an Answering Machine? How much educational value resides in "answering machine" exercises? Finally, I think my "critique" emphasizes the need for and value of *philosophy*. Who hasn't, at least for a minute, been at least somewhat impressed by the output from a chatbot, only later to start seeing all the cracks underneath the perfect prose and well-designed tables. Where does such critical "sight" come from? To me, it comes from a living philosophy, born of purpose, and a desire to understand, explain, and most of all, change things for the better. In short, it comes from our nature as *evaluative beings*, for whom things matter (very much).

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Committing to Elegant Schooling by Adopting a Theory of Educational Energy Development: NYSFEA Keynote, 2026

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Abstract: To radicalize the field of Education beyond intrusions and inclusions of Social Foundations into schooling policy and practice I recommend *infusion* of Social Foundations' ideas and thinking into educational discourse. It is time to replace efficiency-talk in schooling with a discourse of elegance in education. Time to move towards a system which is still standardizing in its orientation but looks for elegant organizational procedure and efficacious classroom practice to emerge from contextually observed patterns of educationally significant teacher-student interaction. Elegance improves on efficiency by giving schooling an educational rather than an economic operational goal to pursue.

With this keynote address I standing in the radical tradition of NYSFEA .I develops a way to make Social Foundations an endemic part of the way we talk about and take action to improve education. NYSFEA began as a radical organization. At its founding in 1971 and for its first decade, NYSFEA took Social Foundations as the radical idea of disruptive incursions into routinized school settings – special projects, teach-ins, literacy work, anti-war and human rights education, etc. Longtime member Ron Butchart, reflecting on his early association with NYSFEA, wrote: “Overall, the organization probably had, at the time, the largest concentration of leftists anywhere!” In the 1980s and ‘90s, NYSFEA became embroiled with New York State’s Department of Education over adoption of competency-based teacher education (CBTE). When CBTE threatened to eliminate Social Foundations courses from NYS teacher certification standards, NYSFEA members, led by Richard Ognibene, took the radical approach of becoming active members on the committees developing CBTE programs for the State. NYSFEA strategy was successful enough to keep to this day Social Foundations coursework among requirements for NYS teacher certification.

To radicalize the field of Education beyond intrusions and inclusions of Social Foundations into schooling policy and practice I recommend *infusion* of Social Foundations' ideas and thinking into educational discourse. It is time to replace efficiency-talk in schooling with a discourse of elegance in education. Time to move beyond a system committed to the impossible aim of educating via imposition of an ill-fitting, pre-cut organizational pattern and curriculum design upon the work of teachers and students who are located all along a spectrum of diverse social situations. Time to move towards a system which is still standardizing in its orientation but looks for elegant organizational procedure and efficacious classroom practice to emerge from contextually observed patterns of educationally significant teacher-student interaction. Elegance improves on efficiency by giving schooling an educational rather than an economic operational goal to pursue. French aesthetician of bodily movement, Paul Souriau observes “The most agreeable movements are not, therefore, necessarily those that cost us the least effort [efficiency] but those that give us the most useful effect for the least effort [elegance]” Call the most educationally useful effect of an experience the ‘educational energy’ (E) in that experience. Change from efficiency to elegance begins with development of a theory of educational energy.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey states a theory about teaching that helps make teaching practice intelligent in the sense of allowing teachers to understand and explain the process of teaching and learning; *and* helping teachers plan classroom activities to achieve academic outcomes they desire for their students. Here's Dewey's claim: "Continuity and interaction in their active union with each other provide the measure of the educative significance and value of an experience." Dewey's statement is of theoretical importance because it uses the word *measure*. 'Measure' is important because use of the word 'measure' permits us to use an equals sign, =, to start constructing the universal law of educational energy as an equation connecting changes in continuity and interaction in an experience to changes in the educational value of an experience. We need to construct a law-like statement, that is, a *universally testable hypothesis* about teaching to get beyond educational ideology, like efficiency, as the basis for theory about teaching. Dewey sets us up to do so when he suggests a way to *measure* the educational value of personal experience. Using the universal law of gravitational attraction (Newton's law) as a model for constructing the universal law of educational energy (Dewey's law) gives us a way to watch Dewey's law emerge as the discussion progresses. Keep an eye on the formulas fronting the next few paragraphs to see the analogy between Dewey and Newton develop. By the time we are done, the box on the left should look just like the box on the right. The variables in the two formulas will have different labels; but the form of the two statements should be exactly the same. That will create for teaching a logical analogy of Newton's law. That is, we will have an empirically testable theory about teaching that does not define teaching; but, instead, describes major variables contributing to the quality of teaching. We'll have a theory that explains scientifically (i.e., independently of anyone's ideology about teaching) what goes right when teaching succeeds and what goes wrong when teaching fails. Keep an eye on the development. Nothin' up me sleeves.... ☺ Here we go!

Dewey's law

E =

Newton's law

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

Educational Energy (E): When Dewey talks about what the variables in his model measure, he talks about the educational value/educational significance of an experience. I am going to call the educational value of an experience the 'educational energy' in an experience. Use the label E to signify educational energy. Educational energy may sound strange. However, it expresses how most people talk about teaching and learning already. Teachers say students had "aha moments" when "the light bulb came on." Expressions like "being hit by a ton of bricks" when learning important facts or encountering life-changing ideas express the physicist's formula for energy in which energy is equal to the mass of an object times the square of the velocity at which the object is moving. Finally, the philosophical observation, "Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel," expresses the warm glow that often accompanies coming to know new things. Since everybody already uses the idea of educational energy, it makes sense to talk about educational energy in the context of the universal law of educational energy, too. Think of E as an epistemic emotion, like surprise, curiosity, or (un)certainty. 'E' describes a kind of aesthetic energy brought about by the emotional intensity and emotional quality with which students study curriculum. Fundamental for all teachers is: How do I optimize E among *my* students? That teacherly question guides construction of a theory of educational energy development. For teachers, it's all a matter of how brightly lessons make students' light bulbs glow.

Dewey's law

$$E = -$$

Newton's law

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

The seemingly safe assumption of Dewey's thinking about a science of education, his "permanent frame of reference," is: Everything we learn we learn from personal experience. This assumption about the connection between personal experience and learning allows Dewey to use continuity and interaction, two universal features of personal experience, to develop his theory. Dewey says continuity and interaction are in active union with each other. I use a horizontal line, indicating division or a fraction, to mathematically describe the relation between continuity and interaction in Dewey's law. Continuity is the numerator in the fraction and interaction is the denominator. This makes sense because Dewey says interaction influences continuity; but not *vice versa*. That's like in a fraction. If you change the numerator of a fraction, the fraction gets bigger or smaller; but remains the same kind of fraction. For example, 1/3 and 2/3 have "like" denominators. However, if you change denominators in fractions, you create an entirely new kind of fraction. For example, 1/3 and 1/5 have "unlike" denominators. They are different kinds of fractions. Likewise, changes in interaction indicate change towards an entirely new kind of experience. Changes in continuity indicate changes in intensity of the same kind of experience.

Continuity is the fact about personal experience that every experience comes out of the past, occurs in the present, and carries over into the future. That experience continues over time means that we'll have to make room in the equation for variables describing the past, the present, and the future of students' personal experience, especially the personal experiences students have in school when they try to learn the required curriculum. I'll use the label P to describe the past in personal experience. The label for the present in experience is c_1 . Finally, the label for the future is c_2 . There are three variables describing continuity because continuity is a three-part concept: past, present, and future. Reasons for choosing these labels for the three different parts of continuity are presented in the next three paragraphs.

Dewey's law

$$E = P -$$

Newton's law

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

Stocks of Knowledge (P): Ideas and ways of thinking students bring to lessons are students' stocks of knowledge. Philosophers talk about two kinds of knowledge: propositional (facts you know) and generative (processes you use to create new facts). P involves both knowledges. When lessons use language students understand, $P_{\text{propositional}}$ is well-served. When lessons accord with how students make meaning (what Kieran Egan calls students' level of imaginative development), $P_{\text{generative}}$ is well-served. Egan distinguishes five stages of imaginative development: Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic, and Ironic. Somatic imagination, tied to bodily feelings, is primarily operative prior to full development of orality and literacy from birth to about two and one-half years of age. Mythic imagination, in which meaning is made in terms of abstract binary concepts such as good and evil, big and little, safe and dangerous, predominates from ages two and one-half to eight. The years eight to fifteen see the Romantic imagination, which focuses on extremes of experience, come to the forefront of meaning-making. In their late teens and early twenties, humans exhibit a tendency to think in terms of general processes and theories, a type of meaning-making Egan labels the Philosophic imagination. Finally, in their early twenties and beyond, humans develop Ironic imagination by light of which they come to see that all general understandings of the world (even, we may be

sure, Dewey's law) have limited scope and contain *aporia*. Arranging the first letters of Egan's stages of imaginative development into a playful but useful acronym permits suggestion that the variable 'P' in the universal law of educational energy asks that educators view their pedagogical practice through the lens of Egan's PRISM. P appears in Dewey's law as a counterpart to G in Newton's law because Dewey uses "stages of development" talk and insists lessons must meet students where they are cognitively to have any chance of success.

Dewey's law

$$E = P \ c_1$$

Internal Curriculum Coherence (c₁): Curriculum theorist James A. Beane makes a distinction crucial to interpreting the variables c₁ and c₂ in Dewey's law. Beane distinguishes between two very different senses in which a curriculum may be said to be coherent (or incoherent). The two types of curricular coherence are big picture coherence and life-meaning coherence. Beane uses the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle to illustrate big picture curriculum coherence. Curriculum is like a jigsaw puzzle in that both require a big picture to put all the pieces together and give meaning to individual pieces. Big curriculum pictures are best supported by development of curricular themes that connect parts or pieces of the curriculum together, especially across disciplines. Big curriculum pictures find least support under conditions in which disciplines are perceived to be fragmented or, even worse, contentious, or contradictory areas of academic activity. Big picture curriculum coherence corresponds to the variable c₁ in Dewey's law. The variable c₁ asks about the internal coherence of a given curriculum, about how well the parts of the curriculum support one another.

Newton's law

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

Dewey's law

$$E = P \ c_1 c_2$$

Newton's law

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

External Curriculum Coherence (c₂): Life-meaning curriculum coherence corresponds to the variable c₂ in the universal law of educational energy. Life-meaning curriculum (c₂) asks about external curriculum coherence. Life-meaning curriculum coherence deals with the capacity of a curriculum to connect school experiences to experiences had by students outside of school. Curricular "glue" is the metaphor Beane offers that perhaps best describes the c₂ sense of curriculum coherence. The variable c₂ in Dewey's law is meant to suggest that if students can use what they study in school to help them better navigate their extra-school lives then the curriculum will 'stick to them like glue'.

Beane makes the further point that when aiming for maximum curriculum coherence both c₁ (big picture coherence) and c₂ (life-meaning coherence) must be given attention. Beane connects c₁ to c₂ (and gives logical priority to c₂) when he says that "connecting pieces of the curriculum ... will promote coherence *only if they enhance the sense of purpose and meaning for young people*;" and warns that "we can systematize, align, and sequence all kinds of things without their necessarily making any kind of sense for young people." To make sure that curriculum effectively combines big picture and life-meaning coherence, Beane endorses what he calls a "variation" on curriculum integration which entails "planning an integrated curriculum with a particular group of young people who themselves identify the issues and problems that cluster

into themes.” That is why c_1 and c_2 are multiplied together in Dewey’s law. They are interconnected parts of the same idea: curriculum coherence.

While Beane remarks that an integrative approach to curriculum coherence makes the process of constructing curriculum coherence a necessarily “messy” one, describing curriculum coherence in terms of variables at work in Dewey’s law allows substitution of the word ‘experimental’ for the untidy image evoked by Beane’s choice of word. Development of adaptations of curriculum in terms of the variables of Dewey’s law is an experimental process.

Lessons are experiments in creating educational energy.

Dewey’s law

$$E = P \frac{c_1 c_2}{i^2}$$

Interaction (i_2): Interaction means experience involves transaction between the psychology of the person having the experience and physical/social environments where experience occurs. When students feel distant or disengaged from school, E decreases. When students feel closely engaged in schoolwork, E increases. Bateson’s idea, “complementary schismogenesis,” explains why ‘ i ’ is squared in Dewey’s law. Complementary schismogenesis occurs when groups push each other away. Doubling of social distance means ‘ i ’ must be measured from both sides simultaneously. Bateson allows mutual friendship (complementary affinogenesis) as an outcome of culture contact, too. Closeness develops when goals are set all want to achieve, when contexts of interaction elicit positive response, and when activities bring out the best in people. You risk schismogenesis when you try to improve classroom interaction without asking students what counts as high-quality engagement. Teachers who ask students what counts as quality engagement court affinogenesis and, thereby, create strong E among students.

Newton’s law

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

Dewey’s law

$$E = P \frac{c_1 c_2}{i^2}$$

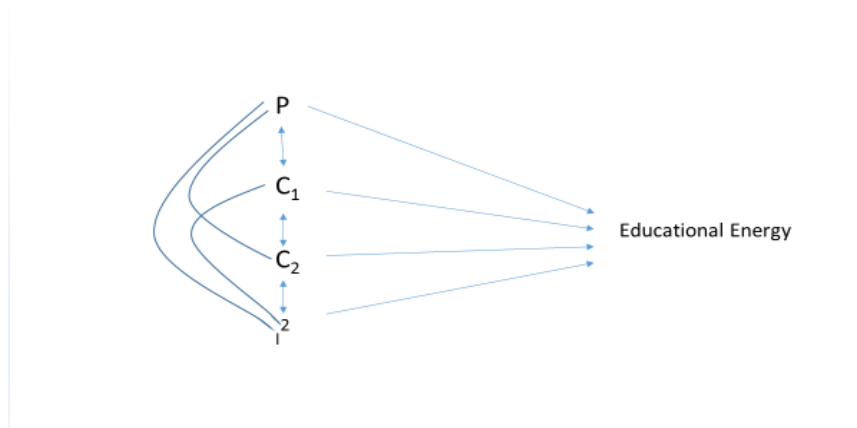
Newton’s law

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

We did it! The analogy between Newton’s universal law of gravitational attraction and Dewey’s universal law of educational energy is complete. We constructed a law-like statement about the science of teaching. The phrase ‘law-like statement’ means two things when applied to the universal law of educational energy. First, the equation is *law-like* in that it has the logical form of a law and so, on the face of things, enjoys the logical status of a law. Second, however, the equation is *law-like* because it has yet to be tested within Education. Rigorous test, wide acceptance, and supporting evidence are stripes any claim must earn to achieve the status of law. A drawback of using Newton’s law as an analogy for Dewey’s is mapping Dewey onto Newton ties the universal law of educational energy to a pre-existing formula which may not adequately represent the relation of the educational variables to one another. So, the next paragraph offers another logical change to Dewey’s law to keep our efforts at testing it completely honest.

Here is Dewey’s law presented as a heuristic model. Call it, if I may be allowed the conceit of both an eponym and an acronym, Seals’ Theory of Educational Energy Development or STEED. A heuristic model is a general problem-solving device. STEED says teachers can

manipulate the independent variables of the model -- P (linguistic and imaginative developmental characteristics of students), c_1 (internal curriculum coherence), c_2 (external curriculum coherence), i^2 (student transaction with classroom environment) -- to change the value of the dependent variable (E). STEED puts teachers in the driver's seat when it comes to getting good results from their teaching. How exactly to represent the relations of variables in a law about teaching will emerge from teachers' use of the heuristic; but for now, the general model pictured below will have to suffice.



Responding to criticism that psychology was not a natural science, as he seemed to assert in his *Principles of Psychology*, William James claimed the criticism mistook his intent. He had not meant to say that psychology *was* a natural science. Instead, James protested, “I wished, by treating Psychology *like* a natural science, to help her become one.” We’re in the same business tonight. I’m not so much concerned to say schooling *is* a science (although I am prepared to do so) as I am wondering what happens when we, ala James, *treat* schooling as a natural science. This is an important line of inquiry. Michael Ben-Chaim demonstrates that acceptance of scientific laws depends in part, if not in large part, on their perceived social usefulness. Thus, perceived social usefulness could be a factor in STEED’s adoption as a preferred theory of schooling. So, what are some advantages of adopting a theory of educational energy development?

Advantage # 1: *STEED provides a universally testable hypothesis* about teaching and learning, a *lingua franca* of education discourse about teaching and learning. Every educator can now be said to be concerned with the same challenge: How to create lessons that do a good job of converting potential educational energy (E_P) into kinetic educational energy (E_K) among your students relative to some curriculum. Working on the same challenge and speaking in the same language about it facilitates learning from one another. We have a theory that explains scientifically what goes right when teaching succeeds and what goes wrong when teaching fails. Either way, whenever you teach you are testing Dewey’s law. Dewey’s law turns teaching into the science of experimentation with educational energy. Every lesson seeks $E_P \rightarrow E_K$.

Advantage # 2: *STEED* professionalizes teaching by providing a set of ideas good for teachers to think with, rather than a recipe to follow or a directive to remain faithful to curriculum. To see how this works we'll consider some scenes from Season 4 of the HBO drama, *The Wire*. Ed Burns, chief writer for the series and one of its producers, was a former Baltimore City police officer who became a Baltimore City school teacher. Burns has stated an interest in resolving inequities in the education system. Much of the action in Season 4 takes place in a Baltimore, Maryland middle school serving a student body made up primarily of economically disadvantaged Black students. Central to the development of the story line is a new teacher and former Baltimore City police officer, learning to be a successful career changer, Roland Pryzbylewski, a White man the students often call Prezbo. Colleagues referred to Season 4 of *The Wire* as "Ed's season." Prezbo's story is Ed Burns' autobiography as a developing teacher.

An adversarial relationship exists between students and faculty at Edward J. Tilghman Middle School, where Prezbo teaches Math. A scene in which students are walking to school for the first day of class and discussing their schedules is filled with obscenities to describe assigned teachers. A student of Prezbo's, Randy Wagstaff, when unable to pronounce 'Pryzbylewski,' shrugs and says, "Whatever. He new and white. We got it made." The first meeting with Randy and his classmates does not go well for Prezbo. Prezbo presents the students with a word problem about travel from Baltimore to Philadelphia and tells them to solve it. The approach meets strong resistance as students talk amongst themselves about the words used in the presented problem, ignoring Prezbo's directives to solve the problem. The lesson finally falls apart as two female students initiate an angry verbal confrontation in the middle of the classroom.

STEED explains the failure of Prezbo's lesson by pointing out weak scores on all variables relative to educational energy. First, there is a weak score on c_1 because word problems, by design, present the curriculum in pieces students are supposed to put together. Thus, the curriculum presents as internally incoherent. The word problem also creates a weak score on P for Prezbo's lesson. Students are at the Romantic stage of imaginative development and Prezbo wants them, without scaffolding, to use Philosophic imagination to supply the general rule to solve the word problem. Prezbo's lesson likely goes over many heads. The weak score on c_2 comes from the verbiage of the word problem. Prezbo's problem not only doesn't relate to students' lives outside of school it also offends the students by triggering local animosity towards a rival city. Finally, the weak score on a arises because Prezbo takes a didactic approach by telling students what to do and expecting them to obey. By the way students talk among themselves about implications of the way the word problem is stated, it seems clear that students prefer small group discussion to teacher lecture as a significant form of social interaction. With weak scores on all the variables in STEED weak E is the result.

By contrast, Prezbo presents a lesson later in the year that has strong scores on all the variables in STEED. During a lunchtime conversation with students playing cards, students ask Prezbo to teach them about the odds of dice. Prezbo complies with their request and constructs a set of lessons in which students, organized into small, conversational groups, play dice, even betting with play money, and record the results of their play on worksheets affirming the odds tables for dice discussed in an earlier lesson. All goes well. Prezbo sums up the lesson when he says to a colleague who stops by his classroom, "Trick them into

thinking they're not learning and they do." STEED explains the "trick" of Prezbo's success in exactly the same way it explained the tragedy of Prezbo's failure: in terms of the variables in the universal law of educational energy. A strong score on c_1 is the result of students validating the odds tables for dice as they play the game. Students are, literally, putting the curriculum together as they complete the lesson. Prezbo's strong score on P comes from the fact that gambling is an inherently Romantic activity. Prezbo's students are Romantic thinkers whose imaginations tend to make meaning in terms of extremes of experience. But Prezbo's lesson is strong on the variable P, too, because the lesson scaffolds and promotes Philosophic thinking among the students. As they study class material, students learn luck has less and less to do with their playing dice well. Prezbo has also reorganized class activity into the small, conversational working groups his students have been asking for since, literally, the first day of class. Finally, going into the lesson Prezbo already knew the students often played dice when not in school. We also learn from a scene after the dice lesson that two of Prezbo's students, Randy Wagstaff and Duquah "Dukie" Weems join a dice game they encounter on the street on their way home from school. Randy and Dukie win enough money to fund the start-up of a candy resale business and they earn respect for the school, as well. When asked by a fellow dice player where they learned their game, Randy says, "Edward Tilghman Middle." The person with whom they are talking responds, "Shiiiiit." Scores on the variable ' c_2 ' may not get any stronger. With strong scores on each of the variables strong E is the result.

Whatever else may be said about the results of Prezbo's lesson for Randy and Dukie, Randy and Dukie "adopted" what they learned in class. They used it to make life decisions. Gert Biesta distinguishes dichotomously between learning (acquiring) curriculum and adopting (living by) curriculum. Better to distinguish continuously between two poles of learning: Curriculum Acquisition – the learning we recite – and Curriculum Adoption – the learning we live by. The difference between the two is the levels of E accompanying study. The weaker the E the more learning tends towards acquisition. Stronger E tends learning towards adoption. Teaching is most fully consummated when students *adopt* curriculum. STEED provides teachers with a set of ideas that are *bon à penser*, ideas that are good for teachers to think with. STEED explains both good teaching and bad. Neither a routinized recipe nor a top-down directive demanding fidelity to prepackaged materials, STEED provides an elegant, problem-solving heuristic. STEED professionalizes teaching by supporting teachers in making lessons that lead students towards adoption of curriculum. STEED introduces elegant experimentation with educational energy into everyday school activities. Daily use of STEED is what it means for schools to adopt a Social Foundations perspective on teaching and learning. STEED infuses Social Foundations into educational discourse by insisting on acknowledgement and use of the insight that lessons tailored to students' lives produce the greatest E.

If examples from Prezbo's performance as a TV teacher fail to resonate then examine your own teaching experiences to test STEED. I learned long ago, before developing a theory of teaching, about the value of the variable 'P'. One of my work-study jobs in college was at a daycare center working with kids 4-6 years old, Mythic thinkers on Egan's model. Daycares weren't as academic back then as now but we did some lessons each week. One week we were studying bugs. Towards closing time one day a colleague of mine, Mary, and I were sitting on the back porch watching the kids play in the yard while waiting for parents to pick up their child. A granddaddy longlegs stepped out onto the walkway where the kids were

playing. They all shouted, “Spider! Kill it!” But I said, “No! Don’t kill it.” They all looked at me and, since I had their attention and it was bug week, I told them that a granddaddy longlegs was not a spider. It was an insect and a beneficial insect at that. When I finished my lecture, the whole time seeming to hold their rapt attention, Mary said, “Kids: What did Greg tell you?” And, they all said at the same time, “Don’t kill it!” The Mythic thinkers had understood the dichotomies of do vs. don’t and dead vs. alive; but all my Philosophic lecture just went right over their heads. More successfully, and after I constructed a theory of teaching, I’ve enjoyed strong scores on both kinds of curriculum coherence when teaching courses in Social Foundations. Perhaps obviously, the preservice and in-service teachers in my classes have a vested interest in becoming as effective as they can be as teachers. STEED gives them ideas to try out.

In fact, STEED comes with a coding sheet (available upon request) students use to measure the flow of energy throughout class periods they observe. The coding sheets allow students to put the curriculum together as they use it for observations in schools. A student told a story in one of my Spring semester classes about when she asked the teacher she was observing how she kept educational energy so consistently high. The teacher said, “You’ve got Seals, right?” When my student responded affirmatively the teacher showed her a thick notebook of completed coding sheets she used to guide her instructional decision-making and lesson planning.

Finally, in a more philosophically oriented course, I taught a lesson on existentialism in education, especially the issues presented for organizing individuals together in classrooms given a theory deeply atomistic in its view of humans. A tall order in most cases with students tending to falsely equate the dread radical freedom of existentialism with a political sense of freedom as self-determination. Teaching my class on existentialism during COVID gave me an idea. The week before the class on existentialism I told students I’d email some study questions and we would take them up in breakout rooms next week. What students did not know was that I would assign each of them to an individual breakout room. When I did, the panic of being alone spread like wildfire through the class. When we reconvened, we had a deep and serious discussion about education in light of existentialism.

Advantage #3: *Professionalized teaching resolves a host of issues* related to teacher accountability. Teachers who most reliably, validly, consistently, and optimally convert E_P to E_K in classroom contexts are the best teachers. They are the teachers we want to recruit, tenure, promote, and pay well.

Advantage #4: *STEED centers schooling on ethnographic matters.* Social Foundations thinking becomes infused into educational discourse when STEED takes pluralistic post-modernism to scale in schooling. *The Wire* supplies a metaphor for this when an older colleague tells Prezbo he needs “Soft eyes.” By “soft eyes” she means widening and extending teacherly vision to take into view, as a rich resource for strong E , the life world of students. Efficiency’s “one-size-fits-all” model is myopic and tunnel-visioned in this regard. To infuse foundational discourse into school operation more permanently, we need certification requirements for new school professionals: School Ethnographer, to strengthen organizational-level school-community relations and to strengthen classroom-level teacher-student relations.

Advantage #5: *STEED democratizes education.* As they mutually determine best curriculum planning and delivery, teachers and students enact a participatory democracy. STEED teachers and students develop a collective sense of agency as they negotiate and construct their shared academic future.

Advantage #6: *STEED schools become models of elegant government action.* Political theorist Johano Strasser is right to say: “The substance of the welfare state can only be preserved if its methods and organizing patterns are changed so as to secure greater flexibility without loss of security and to enable effective prevention and self-help.” Elegance in education exposes claims to efficiency in schooling as ideologically ironic expressions of political ill will. Models of efficiency in schooling remain biased against some groups of people. Elegance offers improved schooling for all. Thus, elegance advantages us in argument and action against the neoliberal cult of efficiency because:

1. Elegance may be tested to be more effective than efficiency; and
2. Efficiency can get brutal and ugly; but elegance, scientifically articulated and purposely enacted via STEED as graceful accomplishment of student achievement, promotes the beautiful school.

With schools acting as leading institutions of elegant government action, who knows...? Perhaps Tobin Hart is right, “Maybe beauty will save the world.”

Advantageous, elegant, efficacious, STEED is ready for and worthy of adoption as a guide to educational policy and school practice. In hopes that you agree with the promise of STEED for improving learning across educational contexts, for creating a tide of educational abundance on which all academic boats may rise, with the aim of social justice in the form of improved life chances for all students I leave you with this

Summary of the Argument

Everything we learn we learn via personal experience (Dewey’s Axiom)

Every personal experience exhibits qualities of continuity and interaction that together measure the educational energy in an experience. (Dewey’s law)

Every personal experience has some degree of educational energy because every personal experience has some degree of continuity and interaction. (Seals’ Theorem)

Teaching is the process of developing potential educational energy in an experience (E_P) into kinetic educational energy in that experience (E_K), among some students relative to some curriculum. (Seals’ Heuristic)

Every lesson is an experiment in educational energy development. (STEED)

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Educational Abundance

The Journal of the New York State Foundations of Education Association

ISSN 2693-3314

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