CRITICAL QUESTIONS IN EDUCATION

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

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Readers of *CQIE*,

Happy New year! And, Happy Year Seventeen of *CQIE*.

I have, in past issue introductions, waxed a bit political…all I can say at this moment is, whew, what a mess we are in…I'll leave it at that.

Before getting to this first issue of year seventeen, I want you to know that the Academy is looking for a new editor or editorial team for both *CQIE* and *Thresholds*. After sixteen plus years, I am ready to pass the torch. Should you be interested, send me an email.

Volume 17, Issue 1 provides some thoughtful play between the article topics. Ginney Norton starts us off with a historical case study analysis of moral panic and how that moral panic has been used, and still is used, to suppress marginalized voices. Madalina Tanase and Dilek Kayaalp follow Norton on one of those historically marginalized groups of voices. They present a study analyzing the ways black students are "pushed down the school-to-prison pipeline."

Our third article, penned by Benjamin Brumley, Lauren Brumley, and Dana Morrison reminds us of the historic connection between eugenics and testing—a history worth remembering in light of current continual testing of students. The fourth piece brings us back to the very current and continuing question of social media's impact; in this case, its impact (or not) on teacher stress. Finally, Volume 17, Issue 1 closes with a curriculum suggestion culled from the writings of Edward Abbey. Matthew Clay and Paul Parkison suggest that "monkeywrenching" curriculum, as an act of care (and subversion), is meaningful work.

I hope everyone stays warm as we march ever so slowly toward spring. And, as always, Happy Reading!

PAX,

Eric C. Sheffield, Editor
Critical Questions in Education

Critical Questions in Education

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Moral Panic & the Struggle for Democratic Education: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Education has long served as a central battleground where moral panic is leveraged to enforce ideological conformity, censorship, and exclusion. This paper critically examines how moral panic has historically and currently been deployed in educational contexts to suppress marginalized voices, particularly related to race, gender, and sexuality. Using a comparative historical analysis of two case studies—the Johns Committee investigations in Cold War-era Florida and Section 28 legislation in the United Kingdom—this paper reveals recurring patterns by which schools become instruments of social control, surveillance, and ideological repression. The analysis demonstrates that moral panic disproportionately targets educators and students whose identities or pedagogies challenge dominant societal narratives and established power structures. Situating recent manifestations of educational censorship, particularly as they relate to race, gender, and sexuality, within this broader historical context, the paper emphasizes how current political struggles replicate past cycles of exclusion and fear-driven governance. Concluding with strategies for resistance, the paper underscores the vital roles that educators, activists, and scholars play in recognizing, confronting, and ultimately disrupting moral panic. It calls for reclaiming educational institutions as democratic spaces committed to equity, intellectual freedom, and inclusive dialogue.

***Keyword**s: moral panic, censorship, democratic education, LGBTQIA+, comparative history*

Introduction

In recent years, educational institutions around the globe have once again become central battlegrounds in contentious political and cultural conflicts. From legislative restrictions on teaching racial disparities and gender identity to state-driven historical censorship, educators increasingly face heightened surveillance, public scrutiny, and ideological pressure. However, these tensions are not new. They are contemporary manifestations of historical cycles in which education has consistently been targeted as a site for moral panic, a mechanism used strategically to manufacture fears leveraged by dominant groups to maintain social control, shape public perception, and restrict intellectual freedom (Cohen, 2011; Hall et al., 1978).

For example, in 1959, a Florida educator was interrogated, publicly humiliated, and terminated solely on suspicion of homosexuality. She was deemed incompatible with the "moral stand-

ards" of the community (Graves, 2009). This incident was not an isolated event but was emblematic of the broader Cold War-era persecutions orchestrated by Florida's Johns Committee, which systematically targeted educators, civil rights activists, and other marginalized individuals in the name of preserving moral purity and national security. Similarly, the introduction of Section 28 in 1980s Britain institutionalized fear-driven censorship by explicitly prohibiting the "promotion of homosexuality" in schools, stigmatizing LGBTQIA+ identities amid the moral panic surrounding the AIDS epidemic (Lowe, 2007; Hubbard & Griffiths, 2019).

Today's legislative and ideological conflicts within educational spaces strongly echo these historical episodes. Recent policies in the United States invoking parental rights, censoring curricula around racial history and sexuality, and promoting so-called ideological neutrality mirror earlier efforts to restrict intellectual diversity and silence marginalized perspectives. Once again, educators find themselves in the crossfire, caught between fostering critical inquiry and fearing professional retribution. Their autonomy is constrained by policies that position inclusive teaching as morally dangerous and politically subversive (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Dudziak, 2021). These recurring cycles reveal moral panic not merely as spontaneous public reactions but as intentionally crafted political strategies used to reinforce dominant ideological positions, marginalize vulnerable populations, and suppress dissent.

Moral panic, as theorized by Stanley Cohen (2011) and Stuart Hall et al. (1978), refers to the deliberately manufactured societal fear toward specific groups, identities, or ideas and the framing of these as threats to prevailing moral or social order. Such panics are strategically employed by dominant groups to justify policies of ideological conformity, censorship, and exclusion, particularly within educational contexts. This paper critically examines moral panic as an enduring mechanism of social control through a comparative analysis of two historical case studies: the Johns Committee's persecution of educators during Cold War anxieties in Florida, and the institutional censorship of LGBTQIA+ issues under Section 28 in the United Kingdom. Drawing from these cases, I illuminate the consistent tactics of fear-mongering and ideological control, highlighting their implications for contemporary education and democratic society. This analysis also emphasizes possibilities for resistance. By learning from historical precedents, educators, policymakers, and communities can confront and dismantle moral panic's cyclical recurrence and advocate for equitable, inclusive, and critically engaged education. Together, these two cases offer distinct yet parallel examples of how moral panic functions across democratic contexts to restrict intellectual freedom and reinforce dominant ideologies within education.

This paper argues that education cannot fulfill its democratic promise while entrapped within the confines of moral panic. Democratic education demands unwavering commitment to intellectual freedom, curricular diversity, and the active inclusion of marginalized perspectives. Following Dewey (1916) and Biesta (2011), democratic education is not merely procedural. It rests on cultivating civic participation, critical inquiry, and inclusion as constitutive goods. When policies constrain who can be represented and what can be asked, they undermine those goods and narrow the purposes of schooling. As Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) contend, education must be a space for critical consciousness and liberation. When fear, surveillance, and exclusion become normative, the transformative potential of education is compromised. By clearly understanding the historical patterns and strategic uses of fear and exclusion that shape educational policies, stakeholders can reclaim educational institutions as transformative spaces of empowerment and hope. This ensures that schools remain resilient against the persistent threat of moral panic and committed to the pursuit of a more just, inclusive, and democratic future. These values are directly undermined when moral panics reduce education to a tool of ideological discipline.

Historical Background

As a note on methodology, this study uses comparative historical analysis and critical discourse analysis of policy texts, debates, press coverage, and testimony. The unit of analysis is policy discourse events and their media uptake. Analytic procedures included coding for constructions of danger and deviance, institutional remedies proposed, and targeted identities (Fairclough, 2003; Hall et al., 1978; Cohen, 2011).

Historically, education has been a battleground for cultural values and a barometer for social anxieties. Waves of fear shape the educational landscape by targeting specific groups or ideas as existential threats. Moral panic, as theorized by Cohen (2011) and Hall et al. (1978), refers to moments of intensified social anxiety in which particular groups are portrayed as threats to societal norms, prompting exaggerated responses that reinforce existing power structures. The following case studies illustrate how such panic was strategically mobilized during periods of cultural upheaval, such as the Cold War in the United States and the AIDS crisis in the United Kingdom, to marginalize vulnerable populations and enforce ideological conformity.

The first example takes place in the mid-twentieth century with the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, also known as the Johns Committee. This committee was established in 1956 to combat civil rights activism and, in later years, to target LGBTQIA+ educators as threats to moral and social order (Graves, 2009; Braukman, 2012). Teachers accused of being subversive or morally unfit were subjected to intrusive investigations, public humiliation, and termination, often without evidence. This pattern was not confined to the United States. In the United Kingdom, Section 28 banned the promotion of homosexuality in schools, leading to the suppression of LGBTQIA+ visibility in education and reinforcing social hierarchies (Local Government Act 1988, sec. 28; Weeks, 2007). Although these examples occur in distinct national and political contexts, both rely on vague moral arguments to exclude particular groups and protect dominant norms.

Theoretical Framework: Moral Panic & Intersectionality

Building on Cohen's (2011) concept, moral panic functions as a regulatory discourse that constructs targeted identities or behaviors as threats to social order. Media amplification and state responses work together to discipline deviance, often through policies of surveillance, control, and punishment. These panics are sensationalized in public discourse, where the scapegoat becomes fixed as the root of social decline. Typically, the response is disproportionate to the actual threat and garners public support for increasingly punitive policies. In education, moral panic has resulted in attempts to regulate curricula, restrict teacher autonomy, and surveil marginalized identities. For example, the Cold War-era Johns Committee framed LGBTQIA+ educators as moral threats, conflating their identities with communism and labeling them as deviant and subversive (Braukman, 2012). Similarly, present-day Critical Race Theory bans and rollbacks of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives rely on fear-driven rhetoric to suppress discussions of racial disparities, casting educators as ideological agitators rather than facilitators of critical inquiry.

Stuart Hall et al. (1978) approach moral panic by emphasizing the power dynamics that shape public discourse. They argue that these panics are not spontaneous but are orchestrated by those in power to reinforce or recalibrate dominant social hierarchies. By focusing public attention on deviant individuals or ideas, moral panic diverts scrutiny from systemic inequities and legitimizes state control that marginalizes dissenting voices.

While moral panic provides a lens for understanding societal fear and control, intersectionality elucidates why certain groups are disproportionately targeted. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality examines how overlapping social identities such as race, gender, and sexuality create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. Rather than operating independently, these identities interact in ways that amplify vulnerability and exclusion. In educational systems, the intersectional nature of moral panic is evident. LGBTQIA+ educators targeted by the Johns Committee were often women, whose professional authority was already contested within a gendered and feminized teaching profession (Graves, 2009). Simultaneously, men who entered the profession were questioned about their motives and subjected to suspicion for entering into a feminized field (Graves, 2009). Black educators advocating for desegregation faced compounded scrutiny, accused not only of political subversion but of undermining the moral fabric of white society (Anderson, 1988). For example, Black music teacher William James Neal lost his teaching license in 1961 as a result of the Johns Committee's investigations but later successfully challenged the decision, becoming a rare case of resistance (Braukman, 2012). The broader political context, including the actions of the Pork Chop Gang, led to the revocation of over 70 teaching licenses and intensified scrutiny of Black educators aligned with civil rights activism (Florida Memory, 2014; Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, 1964).

Contemporary bans on classroom discussions about race and sexuality similarly silence those whose identities or pedagogies challenge dominant norms. These actions reflect broader cultural anxieties about social change and emerging demands for equity (Sainato, 2022). bell hooks (1994) emphasized the transformative potential of education as a site for critical consciousness and liberation. When moral panic targets educators at these intersections, it exploits their identities, framing them as threats to societal stability. This approach is not a deviation from the system but an expression of how it maintains itself. Understanding the interplay of race, gender, and sexuality is essential to reveal how moral panic functions as an embedded feature of systemic control. The combined use of moral panic and intersectionality offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing educational exclusion. Sex panic and race panic frequently operate together, reinforcing each other across policy and discourse. Intersectionality helps reveal who is most vulnerable and why.

Together, these frameworks illuminate the cyclical nature of exclusion. Marginalized identities are not only erased from curricula and pedagogy but are also scapegoated as the cause of societal unrest. When organizers fight to reclaim previously held rights and freedoms, media and official narratives often describe these moments as new progress, rather than as recoveries of what was lost in a prior wave of moral panic. This synthesis is particularly valuable for comparative analysis. Historical cases such as the Johns Committee and Section 28 illustrate how moral panic repeatedly targets those at the intersections of marginalized identities, regardless of time or location. Recognizing these intersectional dynamics equips educators, researchers, and policymakers with the analytical clarity needed to disrupt historical cycles of exclusion and support education's democratic potential.

Methodology & Approach

This study employs comparative historical analysis to examine how moral panic has shaped educational policy in two cases: the Johns Committee investigations in mid-twentieth-century Florida and the United Kingdom's Section 28. I follow comparative historical analysis and historical-institutionalist approaches that trace how past policy paradigms structure later outcomes (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; Skocpol & Somers, 1980; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson,

2004). I situate contemporary moral-panic-driven policies within a longer lineage of state efforts to regulate marginalized identities in schools, showing patterns of continuity, rupture, and reinvention. Recent work on homophobic populism helps explain why sexuality-focused backlash remains politically useful in the present (Corrales & Kiryk, 2022). While this study focuses on the United States and the United Kingdom, both cases illuminate how sexuality and dissent are framed as threats to social order and how education policy becomes a tool for enforcing ideological conformity.

The study is further informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA), which serves as a methodological tool for examining the ideological underpinnings of policy discourse, legal rulings, and media representations. Drawing on the work of Hjörne and Säljö (2008), this study applies CDA to analyze how moral panic narratives are constructed and deployed to justify exclusionary educational practices. Their research demonstrates how policy texts encode systemic exclusion through language that frames certain identities as threats to social and educational stability. Within this framework, discourse is not merely a reflection of policy but an active force in shaping public perception and institutional decision-making. Peters (2004) extends this argument, illustrating how educational texts are instrumental in constructing moral panic narratives that regulate knowledge production in schools. This study engages with these insights by interrogating the language of legislative debates, policy documents, and curriculum guidelines that have historically framed LGBTQIA+ identities and racial justice initiatives as existential threats to societal order. Such discourse analysis illuminates the ways in which these policies, while framed as protective measures, function as mechanisms of control that restrict intellectual freedom and perpetuate systemic discrimination.

The analysis also considers media and public discourse, recognizing the role of newspapers, court cases, and political speeches in amplifying fear-based narratives. Lester's (2016) work on discourse analysis in education highlights how policy rhetoric constructs threats in ways that reinforce dominant power structures. Examining media coverage and public statements surrounding the targeted policies provides insight into the broader cultural anxieties that fuel and sustain moral panic-driven legislation. By combining comparative historical analysis with critical discourse analysis, this study seeks to move beyond a descriptive account of policy decisions and instead interrogate the ideological forces that drive moral panic in education. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how exclusionary policies emerge, persist, and evolve, offering insights into both the mechanisms of oppression and the potential for resistance within educational systems.

Comparative Case Studies: U.S. & UK

This section examines how moral panic has been operationalized to shape educational policies and practices across the United States and the United Kingdom. Despite different political and cultural contexts, these nations exhibit striking parallels through the use of moral panic to increase state surveillance through exclusionary policies. By comparing these cases, I uncover shared mechanisms of control and surveillance and explore lessons for resisting the impact of moral panic on education.

United States: The Johns Committee

The Cold War tactics of Florida's Johns Committee calcified moral panic as a tool of social control in education. Founded in 1956 under the pretense of combating communism, the committee initially targeted civil rights activists before redirecting its focus toward LGBTQIA+ educators. Teachers accused of *moral deviance* were subjected to invasive interrogations that often led to coerced confessions or implicating other teachers to shift the focus off of themselves (Graves 2009). This environment of fear led to many resignations and normalized self-censorship of countless educators afraid of losing their job, pension, as well as the social death affiliated with the legacy of the committee. One example of this fear-driven approach appears in the 1958 interrogation transcript of a teacher, which reveals the extent of personal intrusion: "Are you now, or have you ever been, engaged in activities contrary to the moral standards of the community? Do you associate with known homosexuals?" (Braukman, 2012, p. 76).

Such questions exemplified the Johns Committee's efforts to frame LGBTQIA+ teachers as both a moral and political threat (Johnson, 2004). David Johnson (2004) argues that this conflation of homosexuality with subversion was deeply embedded in Cold War tactics. Social death, in the form of public shaming, extending beyond hearings leading many to self-censor in order to avoid the coercion and humiliation that emanated throughout circles of surveillance. In one instance, a retired school principal recalled trying to get ahead of the witch hunts by conforming to acceptable norms. In 1953, she broke off her long-term relationship with her lover to marry a man. She explained, "I just thought this is what all nice girls do, you know, get married," and later described lifelong regret (Bath, 2009, p. 2). Escaping the influence of the Johns Committee was not easy. Beyond shaming, the Johns committee had local allies. Several lesbians recounted being pressured by Tampa police officers during interrogations. In one instance, under threat of a three-year prison sentence for "crimes against nature," a woman was forced into unwanted sexual encounters in police cars to prove her straightness (Hull, 1993). This form of sexual coercion was another way the committee could extract names to further tighten the purge network.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, and similar dynamics are evident in contemporary culture wars. Laws such as Florida's "Parental Rights in Education" Act, commonly referred to as the "Don't Say Gay" law, create ambiguous guidelines, based on normalcy and deviance (Florida Senate, 2022) that provoke uncertainty and fear among educators and anxieties around community members. Many teachers report removing books with LGBTQIA+ themes or avoiding discussions about racism to evade accusations of indoctrination (Sainato, 2022). This climate of heightened fear and surveillance mirrors the chilling effects of the Johns Committee Era, with fear acting as the primary apparatus of control. State-aligned outlets amplified "anti-grooming" rhetoric during the HB 1557 cycle, while national wire coverage documented the spread of the "groomer" slur into mainstream politics (Anderson, 2022; AP News, 2022a; 2022b).

United Kingdom: Section 28 & its Repeal

In 1988, the United Kingdom passed Section 28, explicitly prohibiting local authorities and schools from "promoting homosexuality" or teaching "the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (UK Parliament, 1987; 1988a; 1988b; Lowe, 2007, p. 139). Emerging from moral panic amid the AIDS epidemic, this legislation reinforced fear-driven narratives that positioned LGBTQIA+ identities as inherently deviant, psychologically pathological, and threat-

ening to societal stability. For example, the Earl of Halsbury invoked these pathologizing narratives by publicly framing homosexuality as symptomatic of psychological sickness, linking it with AIDS and sexual promiscuity to justify the law (Hubbard and Griffiths 2019, p. 948). Official campaigns intensified this stigma; a UK government AIDS leaflets and TV spots framed sex and risk in stark terms, helping normalize a climate of alarm. The 1987 "Don't Die of Ignorance" campaign mailed AIDS leaflets to every UK household and ran high-profile TV spots with tombstone and iceberg imagery, shaping a climate of fear and urgency around sexuality and risk (The National Archives, n.d.; British Broadcasting Corporation, 2017). Such inflammatory language solidified misconceptions and public anxieties, setting a hostile tone for the introduction of Section 28.

Within educative settings, the chilling effect of Section 28 was profound, suppressing educators' ability to respond to anti-LGBTQIA+ harassment and violence or provide inclusive support to students. Melissa, who attended school under Section 28, provides a vivid testimony stating, "One of the worst things about growing up under Section 28 was that teachers did not really intervene in the violence that was done to me because I was thought to be gay. I think they were afraid too, because Section 28 meant they couldn't really name it" (Birkett, Sandal-Wilson, and Young 2024, para. 5). Educational policy under Section 28 institutionalized homophobia, rendering heterosexuality as the unquestioned norm, thus marginalizing any deviation as deviance (Epstein, 1994, p. 139). Melissa's experience as a student illustrates the demanding silence institutionalized by the law, leaving LGBTQIA+ students and teachers vulnerable and unsupported in hostile educational environments.

The chilling effects permeated across institutions, extending beyond education into policing. Police culture's emphasis on hypermasculinity framed homosexuality as deviance and disorder, forcing LGBTQIA+ officers into a double existence, severely damaging their mental health and professional performance (M. E. Burke 1994, p. 192). Similarly, the cultural and artistic communities felt the impact of Section 28's implicit censorship. Lowe (2007, p. 140), reflecting on this period, highlighted the pervasive self-censorship and chilling effect artists experienced, "The threat of censorship was as effective as actual censorship itself in curtailing a set of visual investigations into identity and sexuality." This narrative underscores how Section 28 forced compliance and curtailed expressions of LGBTQIA+ identity, silencing voices within the arts.

Resistance to Section 28 was spearheaded by coalitions of educators, students, artists, and activists. The emergence of professional bodies, such as the Lesbian and Gay Section of the British Psychological Society, provided institutional counter-narratives that rejected pathologizing discourses that framed LGBTQIA+ identities as deviant. Hubbard and Griffiths (2019) emphasize that this establishment signaled institutional recognition of lesbian and gay psychologists, offering legitimacy and professional authority to the fight against discriminatory legislation. The personal testimonies collected by advocacy groups underscored the urgency and necessity of ongoing resistance. Amy, reflecting on the personal and political struggles surrounding Section 28, urged continued vigilance and activism, "The main message lost of the interviewees expressed was not to be complacent, and to recognize that the fight for LGBTQ rights is ongoing" (Birkett, Sandal-Wilson, & Young 2024, para. 6). Such narratives were pivotal in humanizing the debate and shifting public opinion, ultimately contributing to Section 28's repeal in 2000 in Scotland and in England and Wales in 2003 (UK Parliament, 2023). As these stories attest, the repeal did not fully eliminate the lasting cultural, institutional, and personal consequences of Section 28. Instead, it marked a critical turning point in a prolonged struggle against moral panic, institutional homophobia, and the ongoing stigmatization of LGBTQIA+ identities. The interconnected experiences of

education, policing, psychology, and arts collectively illustrate the multilayered nature of moral panic, highlighting both the devastating impacts and resilience fostered in response. The repeal symbolizes both a significant legislative victory and a powerful reminder of the enduring necessity for vigilance and action against authoritative forces.

Comparative Insights

Taken together, the two cases reveal three recurring mechanisms: targeted censorship, institutional surveillance, and punitive policy design. Across different contexts, these mechanisms enlist educators and schools to police social order. By explicitly targeting educators and students at intersectional vulnerabilities, such as race, gender, and sexuality, these panics reinforce social hierarchies and limit intellectual freedom. Recognizing these patterns is essential not only historically but also in responding effectively to contemporary efforts to legislate curricular exclusion, such as recent anti-Critical Race Theory laws and LGBTQIA+ book bans.

First, the Johns Committee exemplified Cold War anxieties, conflating sexual nonconformity with political subversion and moral degeneracy creating an environment in which surveillance, fear, and self-censorship became institutional norms. These dynamics disproportionately affected Black educators, especially those involved in civil rights organizing. Their demands for desegregation, racial justice, or pedagogical autonomy were often reframed as radical or subversive, making them especially vulnerable to accusations of moral or political deviance (Anderson, 1988; Dudziak, 2021). The intersection of race and sexuality functioned to heighten scrutiny, linking racial justice efforts with broader fears of societal destabilization. Teachers accused of homosexuality faced humiliating interrogations designed not merely to enforce conformity but to produce public examples of deviance. For example, in March 1962 an advisory committee to the Florida Children's Commission urged a school health course "geared toward preventing homosexuality," called for lectures to train teachers to "recognize the symptoms," and discussed notifying law enforcement, with Senator Charley Johns and investigator R. J. Strickland present ("Homosexuality: School course education urged," 1962, p. 16).

Public documents from the Committee framed homosexuality as "a disease which can be spread through the classroom," explicitly aligning queerness with contagion and infiltration (FLIC, 1964). As Braukman (2012, p. 76) documents, interrogations explicitly aimed to equate LGBTQIA+ identities with "activities contrary to the moral standards of the community," creating an environment in which surveillance, fear, and self-censorship became institutionalized norms. This systemic policing of sexuality, under the pretense of protecting youth and community standards, demonstrates how moral panic was leveraged to justify invasive measures against educators, framing them as existential threats to social and moral stability. The committee's 1964 report, *Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida*, labeled queer teachers as "moral degenerates," asserting that "the homosexual is too frequently associated with the seduction of the young" (FLIC, 1964, p. 10). Such language framed LGBTQ educators as a danger to children and as ideological subversives. Florida coverage and campaign materials repeatedly cast queer people as a threat to youth, from a 1962 call for schools to "prevent homosexuality" to later Save Our Children messaging in Miami (The Tampa Tribune, 1962; Fejes, 2008). These discourses constructed queer identity as a threat to youth and to national integrity.

Notably, Black educators and students faced compounded scrutiny, as civil rights activism was often equated with communist and sexual deviance, creating a racialized queer panic. Archival records show Black teachers were more likely to be accused of moral unfitness and communism

during this period, reinforcing the racialized nature of moral panic (McGuire, 2010). This pattern aligns with McGuire's account of how sexualized racial terror functioned politically, making clear that sex panic and race panic often operate together (McGuire, 2010). A clear U.S. example is Anita Bryant's 1977 Save Our Children Campaign in Miami, which framed gay teachers as threats to children and helped repeal a local anti-discrimination ordinance; that framing reappears in later Florida school policy debates (Encarnación, 2022; Frank, 2013).

Similarly, the United Kingdom's Section 28 legislation drew on moral panic narratives amplified by the AIDS crisis to stigmatize LGBTQIA+ identities explicitly. As Lowe (2007) underscores, Section 28 did not simply censor educational content; it created an enduring atmosphere of implicit censorship wherein even mentioning homosexuality became professionally risky. Personal testimonies illustrate how the law's chilling effects left LGBTQIA+ students particularly vulnerable, with educators reluctant or unable to intervene in anti-LGBTQIA+ harassment. British tabloids amplified panic with headlines like "Save the Children from sad sordid sex lessons" and "Vile book in School: Pupils see Pictures of Gay Lovers," linking classroom materials to moral decline (Baker, 2022; London School of Economics Library, 2018). Parliamentary speeches leading up to Section 28's enactment referred to homosexuality as "a pretended family relationship" and framed LGBTQ+ inclusion as a direct threat to traditional British values (UK Parliament, 1987; 1988a; 1988b). These harms were exacerbated for racialized and migrant LGBTQ+ communities, who were frequently excluded from both institutional protections and mainstream queer advocacy (Monro & Richardson, 2010). Oral histories and witness seminars suggest that the impacts of Section 28 were particularly acute in schools with high numbers of racialized students, where silence and stigma compounded existing inequalities (Preston, 2001; Bhopal, 2018).

Like the Johns Committee, Section 28 positioned educators as gatekeepers of morality, charged with policing sexual norms rather than promoting inclusive education, reinforcing social hierarchies through fear-based governance. Racialized LGBTQIA+ youth from migrant communities—particularly South Asian, Black Caribbean, and African backgrounds—faced unique forms of marginalization during the enforcement of Section 28. Their experiences were often rendered invisible within both mainstream educational discourses and predominantly white queer movements, leading to a compounded sense of exclusion and cultural alienation (Bhopal, 2018; Monro & Richardson, 2010). This intersectional erasure reveals how race, migration, and sexuality converged to structure silence and invisibility within schools. Parliamentary speeches framed "promotion" in explicitly protectionist terms. Speakers warned against exposing children to "insidious propaganda for homosexuality," insisted there was "no place in any school" for teaching that presents homosexuality as "the norm," and defending the wording "pretended family relationship" (UK Parliament, 1987; 1988a; 1988b). Section 28's language prohibited "the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (*Local Government Act*, 1988, sec. 28), using discourse that framed queer identity as both counterfeit and dangerous. These narratives positioned LGBTQIA+ presence in schools as inherently corruptive, shaping a climate of institutionalized fear and erasure. These impacts were even more acute for Black and Asian queer youth, whose racialized identities compounded their marginalization. Organizations like Black Lesbians and Gays Against Media Homophobia (BLGAMH) challenged both racism and homophobia in school systems, emphasizing how Section 28 amplified intersecting exclusions (Davis, 2020). Scholars have noted that Section 28's effects were compounded for racialized LGBTQ+ youth, who faced both structural racism and cultural homophobia within U.K. schools (Dos Santos, 2022).

These cases collectively reveal critical patterns. Each moral panic emerges during moments of social tension or cultural shift, whether Cold War paranoia or anxieties over public health. Each panic strategically positions educators and educational institutions as frontline defenders of social order, assigning them responsibility to enforce dominant cultural narratives and restrict intellectual and cultural freedom. Additionally, moral panic invariably targets intersecting identities, amplifying vulnerabilities already imposed by systemic inequalities. For instance, LGBTQIA+ educators in the United States and United Kingdom faced intensified scrutiny due to intersecting stigmas around gender conformity and sexual morality (Graves, 2009; S. K. Burke, 1994; M. E. Burke, 1994). The comparative lens highlights that moral panic is cyclical rather than linear. Rather than disappearing with legislative victories or societal progress, moral panic resurfaces in renewed forms, adapting to contemporary anxieties and political landscapes. Today's wave of "anti-woke" legislation, book bans, and curriculum restrictions across the United States reflects historical patterns reminiscent of Section 28 and the Johns Committee's campaigns. The targeting of racial disparities and LGBTQIA+ topics illustrates moral panic's continued effectiveness as a reactionary tool, renewing public fears to suppress progressive educational reforms.

In identifying recurring mechanisms such as censorship, surveillance, punitive policy, and ideological conformity, educators, policymakers, and activists can better recognize and anticipate moral panic. This comparative analysis underscores the necessity of vigilance against cycles of fear and suppression. Recognizing moral panic as inherently political rather than authentically moral equips community members to advocate proactively for inclusive curricula, protections for educators, and meaningful intellectual freedom. Moreover, it emphasizes that resisting moral panic requires not just reactive defense but active reclaiming of education as a site of democratic possibility, critical reflection, and social transformation.

Discussion & Implications for Democratic Education

Strategies for Resistance

The historical case studies of the Johns Committee and Section 28 highlight not only the cyclical nature of moral panic but also successful forms of resistance. Drawing insights from these contexts, stakeholders in education today, including educators, policymakers, and community advocates, can develop proactive and multilayered strategies to reclaim education as a democratic, inclusive, and critical space. These strategies operate across legal, institutional, pedagogical, and community spheres, requiring sustained collective effort.

Legal & Institutional Advocacy

Legal advocacy remains an essential strategy for confronting moral panic and protecting democratic education. Educational institutions have long served as sites where rights are contested or defended, underscoring the necessity of clear legal protections. Educators today need explicit institutional backing, clearly delineating protections against censorship and retaliation. Professional organizations and educators' unions play critical roles by supporting legal actions against repressive policies and advocating for policy frameworks that prioritize academic freedom and inclusivity (Berliner & Glass 2014).

Counter-Narratives & Historical Memory

Central to resisting moral panic is the strategic use of counter-narratives and historical memory. Moral panics frequently exploit collective amnesia or distorted history. Documenting and teaching about historical episodes of repression, such as the Johns Committee hearings and Section 28 campaigns, not only enriches historical understanding but equips students and communities to recognize and challenge contemporary moral panics (Apple, 2018; Zinn, 2005). Embedding these histories into curriculum and public discourse creates continuity between past and present struggles and fosters critical awareness.

Coalition-Building & Collective Action

Collective action remains one of the most powerful tools against moral panic. Historical cases demonstrate that resistance is most effective when coalitions cross boundaries of profession, identity, and geography. Resistance to Section 28 in the UK was amplified significantly through coalitions that brought together teachers, psychologists, artists, and students, exemplifying interdisciplinary and cross-sector solidarity (Hubbard & Griffiths 2019, p. 949). Today, fostering collaborative alliances among educators, students, unions, civil rights organizations, and international groups offers potent strategies against moral panic-driven legislation. These alliances provide mutual protection and resource-sharing, increasing capacity for sustained resistance (Giroux, 2020; Picower, 2012).

In the United States, such coalitions have emerged in response to Florida's "Don't Say Gay" legislation. Even as partisan outlets framed HB 1557 as an "anti-grooming" measure, national reporting tracked pushback against the slur's normalization (Anderson, 2022; AP News, 2022a, 2022b). Groups including the ACLU, Equality Florida, teacher unions, and student-led LGBTQIA+ organizations have coordinated protests, filed lawsuits, and developed inclusive teaching materials to counteract state censorship (National Education Association, 2022; Human Rights Campaign, 2022). These efforts represent the continuity of intersectional resistance and demonstrate how community-led advocacy can directly challenge the narratives and policies underpinning moral panic (ACLU, 2022; Equality Florida, 2022). In Florida, grassroots resistance has been especially visible in response to HB 1557 ("Don't Say Gay"). Students in Orange and Duval counties organized walkouts and public forums, challenging the bill's effects on their mental health, identity formation, and classroom discourse (Turner, 2022). In 2024, Equality Florida and partners secured a settlement that narrowed enforcement and clarified schools' obligations (Equality Florida, 2024; Atterbury, 2024; Najarro, 2024).

Democratic Pedagogical Practices

Classroom practice itself constitutes an essential site for reclaiming education from moral panic. Democratic pedagogies promote inclusive, dialogical environments. Practices such as creating safe spaces, clearly defining respectful boundaries for dialogue, and involving students actively in classroom governance significantly transform the educational experience from authoritarian control to participatory democracy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Educators today must explicitly cultivate democratic pedagogies, embedding principles of critical pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and participatory decision-making. Such approaches affirm classrooms as spaces for critical engagement rather than compliance, directly challenging the logic underpinning moral panic (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Giroux, 2020).

Public Engagement & Community-Based Advocacy

Community engagement is integral to sustaining resistance against moral panic. In contemporary contexts, public forums, community dialogues, teach-ins, and digital media campaigns are essential for counteracting misinformation and promoting informed debate (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017; Giroux, 2014). Schools, museums, libraries, and civic groups must collaborate in public education initiatives, creating inclusive spaces where democratic education is discussed openly and actively defended. Such community advocacy expands the reach of educational resistance beyond institutional walls, directly addressing public misconceptions and mobilizing broader societal support (Apple, 2018; Anyon, 2005).

Protecting Educators & Students from Retaliation

A persistent theme across historical cases is the vulnerability of educators and students who resist moral panic-driven policies. Institutionalized surveillance and censorship were hallmark features of Cold War-era educational policies (Braukman, 2012; Graves, 2009). Modern institutions must establish transparent protections for educators and students alike, clearly outlining disciplinary policies, guaranteeing due process, and publicly supporting educators who face censorship or retaliation for inclusive teaching practices (Dudziak, 2021; Berliner & Glass, 2014). Professional organizations must vocally defend academic freedom and ensure support structures are robust enough to withstand political backlash. Publicly documenting instances of censorship and repression further strengthens resistance efforts, creating historical records that clarify patterns and mechanisms of moral panic (Zinn, 2005).

Conclusion: Reclaiming Education's Democratic Promise

The cyclical emergence of moral panics across educational contexts, from the Johns Committee hearings in Cold War-era Florida to Section 28 in the United Kingdom during the AIDS epidemic, reveals a persistent political strategy designed to marginalize vulnerable populations, control public discourse, and maintain entrenched hierarchies. These cases demonstrate that moral panics are not isolated events but strategic responses to social transformation, regularly employed to suppress dissenting voices and limit democratic engagement in education (Braukman, 2012; Lowe, 2007).

At its core, education serves as a foundation for democratic life. It fosters civic learning, cultural exchange, and critical thinking. However, moral panics disrupt these purposes through censorship, surveillance, and professional retaliation, narrowing what can be taught and who belongs in educational spaces. Such constraints erode the ability of schools to cultivate informed, empathetic, and engaged citizens (Giroux, 2020; hooks, 1994). As this analysis has demonstrated, the persistence of moral panic requires continuous critical awareness, intentional advocacy, and efforts to uphold democratic principles in educational settings.

History also offers examples of meaningful resistance. Even under repressive conditions, educators, students, families, and community allies have mounted effective opposition. From institutional defiance of the Johns Committee to broad coalitions challenging Section 28, collective action has reshaped public discourse and brought about important reforms (Hubbard & Griffiths, 2019). These examples underscore the value of solidarity, policy engagement, and public education initiatives in protecting intellectual freedom and fostering more just learning environments.

Contemporary struggles against curriculum censorship and so-called "anti-woke" legislation reflect earlier moral panics and demand similarly sustained responses. Addressing these challenges involves legal strategies, assertive public messaging, and inclusive curricular practices that counter erasure with visibility (Apple, 2018; Berliner & Glass, 2014).

This comparative analysis of the United States and United Kingdom reveals how democratic institutions can be mobilized to suppress dissent through educational policy. Recognizing moral panic as a global phenomenon emphasizes the need for shared resistance across borders and systems (Corrales, 2018; Applebaum, 2020). Identifying recurring strategies—moralized rhetoric, targeted censorship, and institutional control—helps educators and advocates prepare for and respond to emerging threats. Defending the public mission of education involves confronting these mechanisms and advancing more inclusive, participatory, and critical approaches to schooling.

As bell hooks reminds us, education must remain "a practice of freedom," a space where individuals are empowered to challenge oppression and imagine alternative futures (hooks, 1994, p. 13). The historical examples explored here show that this transformative potential depends on environments free from fear and supported by community action. Through collaboration, advocacy, and a steadfast commitment to justice, education can continue to serve as a vital space for democratic learning, critical reflection, and collective hope.

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How are Black Students Pushed Down the School-to-Prison Pipeline?

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Abstract

This study aims to incorporate conceptual and empirical knowledge about the School-to-Prison Pipeline and foster social change by implementing relevant and meaningful pathways to eliminate it in Florida. The research design provides two years of qualitative inquiry at a mid-sized university in Florida, involving the participation of 54 undergraduate students. Results indicate that our participants consider a series of factors responsible for funneling Black students into the prison pipeline, such as lack of educational opportunities in schools, a lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class, teacher and administrator biases, internalized racism, as well as structural racism. These findings suggest that it is imperative to help teacher candidates and school administrators develop a social justice mindset and educate them about the structural and historical inequalities and their effects on Black students' educational participation, so they confront educational inequities, instead of perpetuating them.

Keywords: *BIPOC students; in-school factors; STPP; systemic racism; teacher bias*

Introduction

School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP) refers to the process by which children are pushed out of school "into the juvenile, and eventually, the criminal justice system, where prison [becomes] the end of the road" (NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2005, p. 11). To Heitzeg (2009), STPP is a mechanism that worked to remove students of color from schools, likely resulting in incarceration.

This trend emerged in the early 2000s following a shift in school discipline from graduated penalties to Zero Tolerance Policies (Milner et al., 2021), an increase in school policing, and the emergence of laws requiring schools to refer youth to law enforcement for violating certain school rules. Puckett et al. (2019) argued that Zero Tolerance Policies result in student suspensions and expulsions, which have significant ramifications later in life. These policies often lead to student disengagement from school. In this regard, Zero Tolerance Policies can be seen as contributing to the STPP. Similarly, Mohammad (2019) explored the enduring association between Blackness and criminality in U.S. history, emphasizing that the negative treatment of Black students in schools is rooted in historical legacies such as slavery and segregation.

Consequently, the STPP is a disturbing trend that mostly targets students of color, specifically Black students, including youth struggling with trauma (Allen & White-Smith, 2014).

Therefore, in this study, we will examine what preservice teachers believe to be the causes responsible for funneling Black students into the prison pipeline. Researchers indicate that, unlike non-Black youth, Black students are disproportionately subject to harsh disciplinary punishments such as school suspension and expulsion (the Government Accountability Office, 2018) that alienate students from schools and further marginalize them. This is true from PK onward and applicable to boys and girls (Morris, 2016). In her book, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, Morris describes how historical legacies of oppression (from racialized gender bias to differential dress code policies) alienate Black girls in schools. These restrictions and biases affect Black female students' educational outcomes.

Excluded, marginalized, racialized students eventually find themselves in contact with the criminal justice system (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011). In this regard, STPP is like a passage that channels Black students from out of school to the criminal legal system. Most importantly, the current political climate ("the culture wars"), bans, and discriminatory legislation in Florida (Tanase & Kayaalp, 2023), directly affect Black students (including their identities and histories), making them more vulnerable compared to the other students of color and White students and legitimizes their mistreatment in schools.

Who is at Risk

Black male students continue to receive disproportionate disciplinary practices. Nationwide, 2.8 million K-12 students received one or more out-of-school suspensions (OSS hereon); of these 1.1 million were Black students; 610,000 were Latinx; 700,000 were students served by IDEA; and 210,000 were English learners (The US DOE Office for Civil Rights, 2016). The report on Equity and Opportunity Gaps revealed that as young as preschool, Black children are 3.6 times more likely to receive one or more OSS than White children (US DOE Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Black boys represent only 19% of male preschool enrollment, but 45% of them receive one or more OSS. Racial disparities in suspensions are equally apparent in K-12 schools: 6% of all K-12 students received one or more OSS. Of these, 18% were Black boys, and 10% were Black girls, but only 5% were White boys, and 2% were White girls.

Florida schools still rely on exclusionary discipline practices, mirroring the nationwide statistics: nearly 345,000 suspensions, 570 expulsions, and 7,000 alternative placements occur each year in Florida (Florida Department of Education, n.d.). Similar to the nationwide statistics, Florida's Black students are 2.5 times more likely to be pushed out of their school through exclusionary discipline (Florida Department of Education, n.d.; Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, n.d.).

The reasons for these exclusionary practices are diverse and range from Zero Tolerance Policies applied disproportionally to Black students (US DOE, Office of Civil Rights 2014), to teacher and administrator bias who punish Black students for more subjective behaviors, as well as the criminalization of school facilities (i.e., the transfer of power; schools transfer disciplinary problems to school resource officers (hereon SROs) who are retired or current law enforcement officers, and who interpret misbehaviors as criminal acts (Tanner-Smith & Fischer, 2016). Excluded from schools, students are more likely to drop out and/or to be arrested (Hirschfield, 2018). In conclusion, these exclusionary practices put more strain on at-risk students and their families, further disconnect them from the school environment, and stigmatize at-risk youth (Hirschfield, 2018).

Objectives

This study proposes to (a) incorporate conceptual and empirical knowledge about STPP in Florida, and (b) foster social change by implementing relevant and meaningful pathways to eliminate this vicious cycle and develop new forms of education that are humane, equitable, and just. We propose the following research questions: (i) How do pre-service teachers perceive STPP? (ii) What are the reasons for STPP and ways to eliminate it? (iii) How will the findings of this study affect research on teacher education?

Literature Review

Inside-of-School Factors

Researchers have long discussed the impact of school factors on school discipline disparities that continue to feed STPP. Mirroring societal injustices, STPP is funneling a high percentage of Black male students straight into the juvenile justice system. Do Black male students misbehave more (severely) than all the other students? Or rather, are Black male students targeted more (consciously or unconsciously) by their teachers and/or administrators, through the district and school disciplinary plans they have in place?

For example, Zero Tolerance Policies are disproportionally applied to Black students (US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). While initially developed and implemented to keep under control the drug abuse and use of weapons (Skiba & Rausch, 2006), these policies are currently administered for subjective offenses such as dress code violations, using foul language, or absenteeism (Milner et al., 2021). Zero Tolerance Policies generally result in in-school suspension (hereon ISS) and/or expulsion, which may further lead to school dropout (Fabelo et al., 2011), or to students being sent to alternative schools that partner with juvenile facilities (Carver et al., 2010). In the school context, this pattern starts with the teachers and school administrators and their overuse of subjective practices. This stems from a lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class (Milner et al., 2021).

Lack of Educator Preparation

While the teaching force is predominantly represented by White, middle-class females (82%), half of the student population is non-white (US Department of Education, 2016). Given this discrepancy between the teacher and the student populations (who may belong to different cultures, races/ethnicities, and SES), teachers may form assumptions about their diverse students, perceiving certain behaviors as inappropriate, disrespectful, or rude. As a result, "Black students are punished for doing something acceptable in their culture, but not in the culture of their white teachers" (Tanase, 2023, p. 6). To prevent and eliminate these misunderstandings, teacher educators should help equip preservice teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to teach diverse students (Gay, 2010).

Culturally responsive teachers understand the relationship between students' home contexts and behavior and consider their students' home environments when planning classroom management strategies (Tanase, 2020a; Tanase, 2020b; Pas et al., 2016). Operating in this frame of mind, teachers can recognize their biases and values and reflect on how this influences their inter-

actions with students (Weinstein et al., 2004). Since teachers' expectations for behavior are informed by cultural assumptions, they may inappropriately judge culturally defined actions as resistant (Hambacher et al., 2016). When teachers consider minority students as lacking, they "adopt and maintain deficit and pathological thinking about the academic potential of students who come from impoverished backgrounds" (Ulluci & Howard, 2015, p. 172). Teachers need to educate themselves about their students' cultural backgrounds (e.g., language, values, norms) and accompany this knowledge with the skills that help students dismantle the status quo (Gay, 2018).

Over a decade ago, Gay (2010) declared that teacher education programs, whether traditional or nontraditional, struggled to equip teachers with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions, and practices for urban school teaching. According to The Center for Technology in Education (n.d.), urban schools generally have larger enrollments than suburban and rural schools and mostly serve low-income students. Moreover, 40% of urban school students attend high-poverty schools, where more than 40% of the students receive free/reduced lunches. Additionally, because of the United States' history of segregation and racism, the majority of the students attending high-poverty schools are students of color from families of low socioeconomic status (Carleton, 2020). In the 20 largest urban school districts in the U.S., an average of 80% of students are non-white, and urban classrooms are composed of a diverse mix of students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

The urgency becomes for teacher preparation programs to introduce preservice teachers to the concept of Culturally Responsive Classroom Management (hereon CRCM) (see Milner et al., 2021) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (hereon CRP). Yet despite the overwhelming research findings pointing to the benefits of adopting a culturally responsive mindset, teachers are still not taught "to build on the historical context of a community and school, understand the socio-political landscape of the environment, or develop partnerships with family and community members of their students" (Milner et al., 2021, p. 45). This fact is confirmed by Kendrick (n.d.), who echoed 2019 high school graduates' perceptions that their White teachers lacked a cultural understanding. Similarly, Lew and Nelson (2016) found that recent teacher graduates of a teacher preparation program did not feel prepared for classroom challenges. According to Eckert (2013), "The lack of knowledge regarding how to train teachers for high poverty/high minority urban areas…have created a policy problem that is especially detrimental to the urban districts that contain a majority of the high poverty/high minority schools in the US" (p. 75).

Teachers who enter the profession without the proper training and experience in CRCM and CRP have greater job dissatisfaction and teacher turnover when teaching in culturally diverse settings (Coffey & Farinde-Wu, 2016; Durante, 2022). According to Durante (2022), without proper preparation and opportunities to explore self-biases, teachers are not properly prepared and do not remain in the profession. On the other hand, highly qualified teachers are better prepared to teach in diverse urban schools. Similarly, Tanase and Kayaalp (2023) discussed the significance of preparing and exposing teacher candidates to field experiences rich in culturally sustaining practices (Paris et al., 2017), through partnerships with urban schools.

The conclusion underscores the importance of teacher preparation programs in cultivating cultural responsiveness among candidates. By intentionally embedding culturally responsive teaching strategies, these programs equip future educators to value and honor the diverse cultures and lived experiences of their students (Allen et al., 2017).

Subjective Teacher and Administrator Practices and Biases

There continues to be a discrepancy in the number of referrals students receive: K-12 Black students are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than White students (US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Black students, who represent approximately 16% of the U.S. public school population, account for more than 30% of the suspensions and expulsions (Haight et al., 2016; McCray et al., 2015). This trend starts in kindergarten and mirrors societal practices (i.e., a Black male has 1 in 3 chances of being sent to prison in their lifetime when compared to 1 in 17 chances for a White male) (The Sentencing Project, 2017). When analyzing statewide data from North Carolina, Shi and Zhu (2022) found that Black students are 0.4% more likely to be suspended than White peers and receive suspensions that average 0.05 days longer than White peers for the same behaviors. The researchers attributed these disparities to racial bias, specifying that "racial disparities are unlikely to be driven by differences in behavior" (p. 1); the problem, instead, was bias in the interpretation of and responses to student behavior depending on race. Nationally, Girvan et al. (2017), who reviewed office discipline referral records for more than one million students across more than 1800 U.S. schools, found that the primary causes of disproportionalities in exclusionary discipline were racial variances in those whom adults referred to the office for *subjective* behaviors.

Absent an understanding of cultural norms and practices, different forms of family engagement, and/or different forms of learning and behavior, teachers and administrators may marginalize students who do not adhere to the traditional White middle-class norms (Marschall & Shah, 2016), punishing Black students for behaviors that are subjective in interpretation. Some of these subjective behaviors include, among others, violating the dress code, unkempt hair, noise, and disrespect (i.e. back talk/being loud (Milner et al., 2021; Vavrus & Cole, 2002)). On the other hand, White students receive office referrals for objective behaviors, such as being late for class, smoking, and vandalism (Skiba et al., 2014). For example, teachers might correct talk among White students with a verbal reprimand, but they would consider a Black student loud and write a referral (Milner et al., 2021). Teachers who use loudness as a stereotype perceive Black (female) students as aggressive and having an attitude (Lei, 2003). Many teachers deem such behaviors defiant, rather than viewing them as student responses to their feelings of being disrespected (Baker, 2019).

In addition to the behaviors discussed above, researchers reflected on how dress code violations are inequitably applied to Black students. Pendharkar (2022) pointed out that more than 80% of U.S. school districts ban head coverings such as hats, hoodies, bandannas, and scarves. While some of these rules refer to hair coverings (i.e., such as the drags used by Black students to protect their curly hair), others refer to students' hairstyles (i.e. excessive curls or longer hair). These bans disproportionately impact Black students. Whether and to what extent dress code violations are enforced, is yet another contributing factor to the disproportionate number of referrals. Currently, schools that predominantly enroll students of color are more likely to enforce strict dress codes and to remove students from class. Pendharkar (2022) called this fact alarming, as more than 81% of predominantly Black schools and nearly 63% of predominantly Hispanic schools enforce a strict dress code, compared to about 35% of predominantly White schools.

The consequences for such behaviors are ISS and OSS or in some cases, school expulsion. Excluded from the classroom, the students are deprived of learning opportunities (Morris & Perry, 2016), they fall behind in their studies and may eventually drop out of school (Balfanz et al., 2015; Milner et al., 2021).

Racial discipline disparities have impacts outside of schools, too: more than one-third of males suspended for 10 or more days had been confined in a correctional facility in their twenties (Shollenberger, 2015). Similarly, Fabelo et al. (2011) found that suspension and expulsion tripled students' likelihood of juvenile justice contact within the subsequent year. For example, incarcerated youth had a 70–80% recidivism rate within two to three years of release (Mendel, 2011).

In conclusion, consciously or not, teachers and administrators punish marginalized students (i.e., Black and Latinx students) more than students from other ethnic groups. To some extent, the punitive approaches and exclusionary practices currently used in the US school system contribute to marginalized students being pushed down the juvenile detention system into the prison pipeline. These school factors contribute to students' academic success or failure. It behooves teachers to acknowledge and assess their own biases, reflect on the relationships they develop with all their students, and analyze any variations in their classroom interaction with marginalized student populations. Acting on assumptions and biases, failing to understand the core causes of racial discipline disparities, and particularly letting go of deficit-oriented explanations related to Black students' cultures, mindsets, and attitudes (Tanase & Gorski, 2025), educators will revert to exclusionary practices, instead of formulating meaningful solutions to the problem (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023).

Outside-of-School Factors

Research shows that macro-level factors (e.g., racism) and group categories (e.g., race, class, gender) influence both inside- and outside-of-school relations. "In-group choices" and teaching practices are made through group membership (Trent et al., 2019) in school cultures. The overrepresentation of Black students in disciplinary actions compared to non-Black students (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011) makes us consider race as an important punishment measure in schools. It should also be noted that the power imbalances in school relationships are much more complex and cannot be explained with only one signifier. Therefore, we need to examine other structural factors such as structural racism and inequalities to understand these complex relationships in the STPP link.

According to Essed (2013), "systemic racism is the interweaving of racism in the fabric of the social system" (p. 185). Essed highlighted the omnipresence of racism in societal institutions such as the education market. Systemic racism, in this regard, is embedded in and reproduced by the structures of the system (Hall, 2002a). It is thus difficult to target and eliminate it. As Anthias and Yuval-Davis (2005) argued, racist practices need not only to rely on an explicit notion of racism but "practices may be racist in terms of their effects" (p. 2). For example, the lack of Black role models at schools, the hidden curriculum, and recent bans (erasing Black history) in the educational system alienates and marginalizes Black students in school.

The interplay between racism and schools makes us consider the relationship between educational policies and practices. Through regulations and legislation, Black students are excluded from school, which in turn reproduces inequalities in schools. According to Hall (2002b), racist practices in legal, political, and ideological structures provide the framework for other forms of oppression (e.g., marginalization) in societal institutions (e.g., education and housing). In this regard, systemic racism, as an ideology, transforms social structures, social relations, and identities. It has ideological, social, and economic impacts on Black students. Similarly, the current political climate in Florida, the denial of Black students' cultural differences and needs (Tanase & Kayaalp, 2023), has a direct impact on Black students' identities and the misrepresentation of their cultural

background and histories. This can legitimize their mistreatment and overrepresentation in disciplinary actions in underfunded public schools.

In sum, the STPP is a complex relationship affected by micro and macro-level factors (from subjective biases to historical inequalities). These components impact the quality of education Black students receive and how they are treated at schools.

Methods

Context and Participants

The participants of this study were fifty-four undergraduate students (81% female and 68% White) enrolled in a teacher preparation program from a mid-sized university in Florida. These preservice teachers had an average age of 23.1 years. These demographics are typical of students enrolled in the teacher education program. Most of the students had taken a diversity course (74%) and all participants took/were taking a classroom management course at the time this research was conducted. This suggests that most students were already exposed to field knowledge and diversity-related topics, which could have influenced their narratives.

Measures and Procedures

The instrument used in this study was a survey that contained 4 factual statements; each statement was followed by 2 questions.

1. Fact: National studies in the United States show that Black students are suspended and expelled from school at higher rates than white students. 1a. Why do you think Black students are suspended or expelled at higher rates than white students? 1b. What would you suggest as a way to address this disparity?

2. Fact: Research has shown that Black students are overrepresented in special education programs and underrepresented in gifted programs in US schools. 2a. Why do you think Black students are overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in gifted programs? 2b. What would you suggest as a possible solution for this disparity?

3. Fact: Black and Latinx teachers leave teaching careers more quickly on average than white teachers. 3a. Why do you think Black and Latinx teachers leave teaching careers more quickly on average than white teachers? 3b. What can be done to address this disparity?

4. Fact: The disparities in school discipline continue to feed the school-to-prison pipeline, with a disproportionate number of Black youth filling our jails and prisons. 4a. Why do you think Black people account for most of the prison population in the US? 4b. What can teachers do to prevent the school-to-prison pipeline?

This instrument was developed by Tanase and Gorki (2025). For this study, only the last statement was analyzed; the other statements are the subject of other research studies. This instrument, in addition to a demographic questionnaire, was administered at the end of the semester in which the participants were enrolled in EDG 4410, Classroom Management and Communications. This course was purposefully selected, as it incorporated readings, discussions, and assignments that deal with social justice/equity issues (including recent conversations about STPP).

To ensure that ethical considerations were followed, as one of the authors taught the students in 4 of the 6 sections of the course where data were collected over two years (Fall 2021-Fall 2023), the participants in the four sections were recruited after grades had been posted. At the end of the semester, the instructor-researcher emailed all her students, communicating the intent for this study and informing them about voluntary participation. She further explained that participants would not be compensated for their time and that their real names would not be used in the study to ensure confidentiality. In the course sections in which the researcher was not the course instructor, after obtaining permission from the course instructor, the researcher visited these classes, explained the study, and encouraged students who wished to participate to share their names and email addresses. A week after the class visit, the researcher contacted all the students who wanted to participate in the study, emailed them the survey, and established the end of the semester as a deadline. The study was conducted after obtaining IRB permission from the university.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we used a qualitative research design. The main goal of qualitative research is to explore and understand the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals or groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). The researchers use thematic analysis (Merriam, 2009) to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data. We conducted four rounds of coding. To ensure investigator triangulation, we first coded the data individually; this open coding resulted in 16 categories. In the second round, we discussed the similarities and inconsistencies in the categories via Zoom and aligned the individual codings. Four of the sixteen individually identified categories overlapped: the deficit perspective, external factors, school factors, and structural racism. In the third round, we conducted axial coding (Scott & Medaugh, 2017), breaking down the core categories into sub-categories and relating codes to each other. Together, we refined the four big categories, recategorizing them. We ended up with 2 major categories and 4 subcategories. These are the final two big categories: 1) internal factors, and 2) external factors. In turn, the internal factors category has the following sub-categories: a) inside-of-school factors, and b) internalized racism; the external factors category has the following sub-categories: a) systemic racism, and b) educational and economic inequalities. The last round of coding was conducted via email: after having placed the data from the 29 participants into the 2 main categories and the 4 sub-categories discussed above, we have both shared our results and reached a final consensus about our data.

Positionality

Identity is group membership. Individuals' identities and their social positions are determined by the social categories they belong to. Therefore, people's race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, language, religious affiliations, and citizenship status are significant factors in determining their identities (dominant and marginalized), social locations, and access to institutions and services. We argue that researchers' positionality (i.e., group membership) affects the research process (Tanase, 2020b). Therefore, we acknowledge that our subjectivity (e.g., beliefs and cultural background) shaped our research (Kayaalp, 2020).

In the context of this study, Author 1 is a White, female, college professor in the US. The second author, a college professor, teaches DEI-related courses at the same university as Author

1. While she identifies herself as an ethnic, religious, and language minority, her minoritized position makes her an insider and an outsider at the same time–depending on the context, time, and place. She has contributed equally to this study, from data analysis, and findings to conclusion.

Results

Internal Factors: How Schools are Failing our Black Youth

In essence, the data showed that schools are failing our youth through a lack of proper education and educational programs, as well as through a lack of teacher support and teacher biases, often leading to over-disciplining minority students.

Inside-of-School Factors

Inadequate programs and funding, as well as teacher biases and negative behaviors towards the youth of color, were considered the main school-related factors that push students down the prison pipeline. For example, Participant 1 (hereon the word participant is replaced with P) commented on the courses offered in low-income schools: "many children in suburb schools have had drug prevention courses in elementary schools. We need to give the same intervention to lower-income schools…Black people inhabit prisons because they are not intervened at a younger age like White children." Similarly, P18 believed that Black people account for most of the prison population because of the lack of support for these students:

> Sports has taken men from all walks of life, yet to get your son or daughter into sports you need to be able to financially afford it, and it's not cheap…There needs to be more after-school organizations that teach life skills, that build an individual's character, and show them a future beyond their circumstances.

Similarly, P34 links students dropping out of school to a lack of school support: "If they are not supported in school, they drop out of school." Lastly, P36 reflected that Black youth are not given a chance:

> Black youth often grow up in low-income areas where the school system does not necessarily care for Black youth, due to low funding, which in turn accounts for the Black prison population. By not having funding and resources, school systems in the U.S. often give up on Black students.

In addition, this participant noted how the school system is geared towards White culture "due to testing bias that only benefits the White population." Similarly, P20 believed that schools do not give Black students the proper tools to be successful in life: "…it seems the best way to deal with Blacks in this country is to throw them out of school and then lock them up later. The School-to-Prison Pipeline is what our country sets them up for." Lastly, P28 commented that most schools prepare students to work rather than educate them:

> Uniforms, designated periods, regulated eating times and bathroom breaks; conformity at its finest perpetuates racism and much more, such as the commonly known dress code for

example. The argument is that it is for structure but it is clear to see that really isn't the case, especially since this pipeline is so easily identified.

The participants reflected that this system prepares students for a designated life and ensures students become compliant. If students are non-compliant, they are punished. Similarly, P34 commented: "If the school is not opening the minds of students to a life greater than their circumstances, then they are going to end up stuck in the same place."

Other participants believed that students are pushed through the prison pipeline by teacher biases and severe disciplinary practices. While P5 believed the students don't receive the discipline they need at home or school, "then they go into the regular world and they think they're allowed to act however they want," P15 argued that students "are overly and unreasonably punished in school for minor actions, and they develop negative views of school…It shows them that everything they do, even if it is simply talking to a classmate, is wrong." P15 concluded that teachers do not recognize norms that do not belong to their own culture, viewing them as disrespectful and/or abnormal, and severely punishing youth of color.

Similarly, P19 concluded that teachers and the community don't give the kids a chance: "The Black students can make one mistake in their youth and White adults give up." P27 commented that some teachers have negative attitudes towards students, "telling students that they won't amount to anything," further leading to low self-esteem. Two participants argued that students need teachers who believe in and advocate for their students. P18 noted, "it would take a person with compassion, and genuine love without bias or prejudice, someone who truly wants to make a difference, such as the woman in Freedom Writers," while P19 commented: "Black students need someone to fight for them."

Internalized Racism and Negative Self-Perceptions

The above-mentioned factors contribute to Black students' internalized negative feelings, which may result in students giving up on themselves. P5 commented that students "go into the world with people already not believing in them." In addition, P15 reflected that students develop negative self-perceptions and negative attitudes towards school, as "they are unreasonably punished in school for minor actions…students see that everything they do is wrong, even if it is simply talking to a classmate." On the other hand, P20 reflected on how teachers treat students differently: "White students are practically begged to do well in school both behaviorally and academically, but Black students are expected to beg for their education." The result, according to P20, is the self-fulfilling prophecy: "When you feel like the system is against you, you're more inclined to deliver the results they expect from you already." Similarly, P23 stated: "The entire country is biased against people of color…children have an expectation that they will end up in prison. With this mindset, they will drop out of school and end up in trouble." Lastly, P27 stated that "Black students, especially male students, mostly believe that they will never be more than where they were raised." As these beliefs are heightened by teachers' bias towards Black students, the latter are more likely to drop out or not graduate.

Another contributing factor to students internalizing racism is the fact that people generally give up on our Black youth, blaming them and their environments for their life circumstances. For example, P6 inquired at what point someone becomes responsible for breaking a cycle:

> There is a stereotype for Black people, how they act, how they dress, etc. This stereotype is taught by cycles—a child acts a certain way because of the way their parents taught them. IF children are being taught that it is okay to live below the poverty line (accept things like unemployment without trying to find a job), disrespect authority, not go to/finish school, THEN that child can live their life the same way as their parents…

In addition, P29 reflected that when students do not receive proper education from schools, this "can lead to poor decisions or circumstances where the students feel forced to do some sort of crime to be able to survive." Lastly, P53 largely attributes this to the environment in which the students grow up, such as "Black students' culture, gang culture, and the environment in which they live."

External Factors

The data indicate that preservice teachers can articulate how economic and educational disparities, including discriminatory housing policies, and inequalities in the justice system are the outcomes of structural and systematic racism that impact the STPP relationship. Preservice teachers discuss economic and educational disparities in a cause-and-effect relationship. That is, educational disparity in underfunded predominantly Black schools is the outcome of economic inequalities (funding inequalities) and discriminatory housing policies such as racial segregation and redlining. Racially segregated housing limits Black students' opportunities and access to institutions. Therefore, educational inequalities, and minoritized students' academic struggles should be seen as part of structural issues of society.

Participants also report that racial profiling, misrepresentation, biases, and stereotyping of Black people also intersect with structural racism and inequalities in the justice system. Structural racism, in this regard, embedded into the structures of societal institutions, affects not only the decision-making processes, policies, and practices but also the perceptions and attitudes toward Black people in the justice system (Banaji et al., 2021).

Structural Racism in the Justice System

Participants' accounts indicate that racial profiling, misrepresentation, and stereotyping of Black people (e.g., violent, potential criminals) are the outcomes of systemic and structural racism. Participants report that systemic racism influences the justice system. As a result, Black people are disproportionately subject to mistreatment and double standards in the justice system.

The following excerpts from our participants confirm the relationship between systemic racism, the stereotyping of Black people, and inequalities in the justice system. For example, P4 highlighted the relationship between the misrepresentation of Black people and inequalities in the justice system:

> Black people are thought to be more violent, delinquents, and menaces to society. Anyone who is portrayed or thought to have those aforementioned traits is going to be seen as a threat to society/public and will be treated, seen, and judged as such by police officers, judges, and juries.

The following statements show how systemic racism goes hand-in-hand with biases that influence law enforcement officials' approaches and mainstream people's opinions. P5 stated:

> Individuals who are Black are more likely to be charged with a crime than let go, even if the crime is the same. Black individuals are more likely to be stopped, arrested, and even harassed by police. There is racism running rampant throughout the justice system.

Similarly, P36 expressed the unfairness in the criminal justice system and Black people's demonization by law enforcement officials:

> These are unfair drug charges and racism in our legal system. A White person can murder someone and get off with a scratch while a Black person gets arrested and because of this bias in our system, we lock them away for years.

Additionally, P47 echoed: "This is related to prejudice and racism within the American justice system. African Americans are more likely to be profiled by law enforcement and also receive harsher prison sentences." Lastly, P34 added:

> The amount of Black people in prisons is racially motivated. There are a multitude of occurrences where we see that Black people are not treated the same as White people when it comes to how cops handle their arrests and in general, how people are quicker to blame the Black person rather than a White person.

Other participants emphasized the double standards in the justice system and explained that Black people face racial profiling due to White supremacy and historical inequalities going back to slavery. For example, P32 stated:

> There is a long dark history behind the School-to-Prison Pipeline that relates to larger concepts such as previous and current government regulations and nationwide stereotypes. Black people account for most of the prison population in the U.S. because of negative stereotypes perpetrated by government initiatives and these stereotypes that affect Black children today can be traced back to times of slavery and racial persecution.

Similarly, P12 added on the interrelationship between structural racism and historical inequalities in society:

> Black people account for most of the prison population in the U.S. because cops intentionally target Black communities. There are far more raids and cops in Black neighborhoods and Black people tend to be pulled over while driving more often than White people. It's systemic racism that was included when Black people gained freedom from slavery.

In addition, P29 confirmed the relationship between White supremacist ideologies and Black people's criminalization:

Black youth tend to be overpoliced and wrongly and unjustly harassed and profiled as a threat and/or a culprit without evidence and/or proof. It's an occurrence that happens constantly to suppress and terrify the Black population into submission in an effort to gain control and uphold the foundations of White supremacy.

Finally, P26 explained Black people's struggles with police brutality in the justice system: "Black men are also disproportionately stopped and questioned by police and are often accused of crimes they did not commit, see the number of innocent Black men that have been shot by police," while P56 echoed: "like teachers, the police continue to racially profile people of color whether it be on purpose or not. This is just due to either a lack of education or passed down beliefs from their friends/ family members."

Income Inequalities, Educational Disparities, and Housing Policies

Participants' accounts show that income and educational inequalities, including housing segregation, are the results of structural racism. While income inequalities and racially segregated housing policies and practices limit Black students' educational participation and opportunities, biased curriculum, and culturally offensive teaching exclude Black students and affect teachers' and school administrators' perceptions of their minoritized in underfunded inner-city schools.

The following excerpts from our participants highlight the interrelationship between structural racism, educational inequalities, and the STPP link. Participants' statements also indicate that biases towards Black students and offensive teaching practices push Black students out of schools. P45 reported:

The school system is failing youth because rather than helping them when they make mistakes they are just isolating or removing from them their schools. This results in them having a lack of support to help them stay on track. However, this does not go to say that prejudices and racism don't take place against black youth which can result in harsh and unjust treatment and imprisonment.

On the other hand, P12 explained the relationship between the mistreatment of Black students in schools and society due to stereotyping and racial profiling:

Black people account for most of the prison population in the U.S. because of the stereotype that Black people are more violent than White people. In schools, this causes harsher punishments for Black students. Harsher punishments can lead to less adequate education in some cases because the Black students facing the punishments can be expelled or forced into OSS, which ultimately forces them to miss crucial instruction.

P49 also explained the harmful relationship between educational inequalities due to stereotyping: "When Black students are punished more often than they are labeled as trouble, it is something that follows them for the rest of their lives. This either becomes a label they begin to believe or people around them believe." P18 also believed that school culture and teaching practices fail to accept and treat Black students fairly in classrooms: "Black kids are treated differently even if not intentionally compared to many other groups. I feel that people think of them differently."

Similarly, P43 explained that culturally offensive teaching, not knowing and valuing the identities and cultural backgrounds of Black students, alienates Black students in schools: "Teachers aren't allowing most Black youth to express themselves creatively and the teachers don't give much effort to truly know their students." On the other hand, P42 reflected on the cultural clash between White teachers and Black students, which leads to the exclusion of Black students: "White educators do not understand the cultural differences between them and Black students, causing them to view their culturally acceptable behavior as unacceptable. This means that Black students get punished more often than White students."

Participants also argued about the Euro-centric, monocultural, White-centric curriculum's effect on Black students and their alienation in classrooms. P40 reported:

> Schools have historically only given out educational material and literature about White people. Many schools have very few minorities among students or staff. When a child only sees or hears about one race, how will they ever be able to be 'culturally sensitive'? Even if a school is diverse with minorities, there are still obstacles to systematic racism.

The data also indicate that discriminatory policies (e.g., housing and education) increase the racial divide between the groups and mostly target the Black community. Discriminatory housing policies limit Black students' access to quality education (due to funding inequalities) and lead to economic disparities between dominant and minoritized groups (Tanase & Kayaalp, 2023). P10 addressed the housing policies and their effect on the Black community in Jacksonville:

> I learned about the red lining of districts [in Jacksonville], the government separating the neighborhoods and communities by building I-95 through them and evicting most of the downtown Black population from their homes and businesses and promising to build up downtown but never doing so. With a mix of the government making these choices and the plethora of racist people out there, unfortunately, Black people are targeted.

Similarly, according to the participants' accounts, discriminatory housing policies overlap in economic disparities and racial profiling. That is, Black students from working-class families in lower-income neighborhoods are subject to more policing which increases their chances in education and life. P17 commented, "There are more police in lower-income areas so they 'find more crime' whereas in high-income areas there might be the same amount, but nobody is looking for it." Another participant (P18) echoed the relationship between structural racism and income inequality and criminalization of Black youth in lower-income neighborhoods:

> Cops wait in low-income areas to ticket people for minor things, like jaywalking; the people who get these tickets are in a minority group, and due to the fact that the area is low-income, they cannot pay the tickets and eventually wind up in prison. This is a vicious cycle because the retention rate in US prisons is very high.

In addition, P35 explained the relationship between income and educational disparities and structural racism: "if teachers and school systems were properly funded and supported—if crime went down and neighborhoods were built up, it would not be like it is, but again, institutional racism," while P37 emphasized the impact of economic inequalities on educational disparities and marginalization of Black students in the US educational system:

Black youth often grow up in low-income areas where the school system does not necessarily care for Black youth, due to low funding, which in turn accounts for the Black prison population. By not having the funding and resources, school systems in the US often give up and do not try to give Black youth a chance.

Discussion

Internal Factors

Largely, our findings confirm that preservice teachers possess a solid understanding that important structural inequalities lead to the STPP. A series of school factors, such as subjective teacher practices and biases, a lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class, Zero-Tolerance Policies, as well as the lack of educational opportunities, perpetuate societal injustices, funneling a high percentage of Black male students straight into the juvenile justice system (Hambacher et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2021). Similarly, our participants believed that lack of educational opportunities, teacher bias, and negative behaviors and attitudes towards youth of color continue to be responsible for pushing students down the prison pipeline.

Some of the participants believed that some urban teachers hold biases against youth of color, punishing them for minor actions harsher than they would White students for more severe behaviors (Haight et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2021). These biases are due, in part, to a lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class. Absent such preparation, teachers view customs different from mainstream norms of behavior as disruptive and they severely punish youth of color (Hambacher et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2021). On the other hand, such biases might be explained as racial discipline disproportionality (Gregory et al., 2011; Ispa-Landa, 2018). That is, educators are interpreting students' behaviors and referring them to the most serious discipline (Ispa-Landa, 2018).

On the other hand, participants also related inadequate funding to the lack of educational opportunities for students of color. For example, some participants commented that Black students are not given the proper tools to succeed in life, being prepared for the workforce, rather than for a well-rounded education. Other participants commented on the quality of the courses offered in lower-income schools (i.e. lack of drug prevention, courses, and free courses). These findings mirror previous research findings: the schools attended by Black urban students are situated in low-income areas of the town, and are generally characterized by lacking safe buildings, small class sizes, well prepared teachers, high-quality curriculum, and advanced courses (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Milner et al., 2021).

Moreover, the cultural disconnect between the teacher and student populations exacerbates the challenges in teacher student-relationships; while Black teachers represent only 20% of the workforce (White et al., 2019), over 50% of the public-school students are students of color (US DOE, National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.). When White teachers lack the cultural preparation to understand race and class, they disproportionately punish students of color for behaviors less severe than those displayed by White students (Morris & Perry, 2016). All these factors lead to sub-par preparation of students of color.

To address these disparities, teacher preparation programs must prioritize culturally responsive training that equips educators to understand and challenge systemic biases related to race and class. This includes fostering self-awareness of implicit biases, providing in-depth training on

equity-centered classroom management, and incorporating curriculum content that highlights diverse perspectives.

Programs should also create opportunities for preservice teachers to engage with students of color, gaining firsthand insights into the lived experiences of their students. Additionally, embedding ongoing professional development focused on cultural competence can ensure that educators remain committed to equity throughout their careers. By adopting these strategies, teacher preparation programs can better support preservice teachers in addressing biases, reducing disproportionate disciplinary practices, and fostering inclusive learning environments that empower students of color.

In addition, some of our participants believed that students (their behaviors, their circumstances, and environments) are responsible for them ending up in the juvenile justice system. This deficit mindset, in which one blames the victim, is used to explain the academic failures of low socioeconomic students of color (Valencia, 2010). Academic failure is seen as solely the fault of the student rather than the fault of a broken system (Clycq et al., 2014). Teachers who embrace this perspective believe that Black students fail because they are not as smart and as hardworking as White students, and/or they hold the students' environments responsible for academic and behavioral challenges (McKay & Devlin, 2016). Demoralized and targeted, constantly being dealt harsh disciplinary practices, Black students may internalize these negative perceptions, lose interest in school, and eventually drop out (Mittleman 2018; Morris & Perry 2016; Owens, 2020; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017).

External Factors

Our participants' accounts confirm the interplay between structural and systemic racism rooted in historical inequalities and STPP. Educational and income disparities push Black students out of school and society and intersect with structural and systemic racism. In this regard, educational disparities (e.g., poor quality education in predominantly Black schools in inner-city neighborhoods) and racism (e.g., Euro-centric offensive teaching) are the outcomes of discriminatory housing policies (redlining and gentrification) and income inequalities (Tanase & Kayaalp, 2023). Similarly, some participants discuss the relationship between social class and policing. In this regard, working-class Black students in lower-income neighborhoods are subject to policing and racial profiling more than non-Black students from middle-class families.

Similarly, our participants argue that racial profiling, biases, and stereotyping of Black individuals go hand-in-hand with structural racism in the criminal justice system. Structural racism as an ideology and practice (Essed, 2013) affects not only policies but also law enforcement officers' practices and approaches toward Black youth. Misrepresentation of Black people through stereotyping practices (violent and potential criminals) and historical misconceptions rooted in slavery make them easy targets of police brutality and victims of racism.

Conclusions and Implications

In the United States, Black students are more likely than White students to be suspended/expelled from school and/or punished (The Government Accountability Office, 2018). Our participants attributed this differential treatment of Black students to a variety of factors, such as lack of educational opportunities, lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class, teacher and administrator biases, internalized racism, as well as macro-level factors such as structural and

systemic racism and its outcomes, including educational and economic disparities, racial profiling, policing, criminalization and stereotyping of Black students.

Our findings warrant the following conclusions: firstly, to break the cycle of discouragement and to prevent both educators and students of color from giving up on themselves, students need teachers who understand the relationship between students' culture and behavior, and consider their students' cultural backgrounds (including values, norms) when planning classroom management strategies and activities (Tanase, 2020a; Tanase, 2020b; Pas et al., 2016). Conversely, when teachers lack the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use CRT in their classrooms, the achievement gap between students of color and their White peers increases (Bell et al., 2022), and students of color are at risk of dropping out of school and/or being pushed into the juvenile justice system (Milner et al., 2021).

This conclusion warrants the following implications for teacher education preparation: firstly, it is essential to equip teacher candidates with the knowledge and skills necessary to serve a diverse student body effectively (Wiseman, 2012). This includes fostering cultural competence, developing inclusive teaching strategies, and ensuring that teachers can address the unique needs of students from various backgrounds. Second, teacher preparation programs must emphasize the importance of cultivating a social justice mindset among teacher candidates (Rojas & Liou, 2017). By doing so, educators will be better positioned to identify and challenge systemic educational inequities (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016), fostering a more equitable learning environment for all students.

Additionally, the persistent cultural mismatch between the student and teacher populations often contributes to challenges in classroom management and student engagement. To address this issue, teacher education programs must prioritize efforts to diversify the teacher workforce by actively recruiting and supporting teachers of color (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Gershenson et al., 2017). Increasing the representation of educators from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds can foster stronger student-teacher relationships and improve educational outcomes for historically marginalized students. Finally, beyond teacher preparation programs, school administrators and policymakers must consider the long-term effects of structural and historical inequalities on working-class Black students, particularly those in inner-city schools. These systemic barriers impact students' educational opportunities and overall participation in the academic environment. Addressing these challenges requires policies that not only support equitable resource distribution but also acknowledge and rectify the longstanding disparities that affect students' academic success and future prospects.

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Learning About the Past to Leave it Behind: Eugenics & Norm-Referenced Educational & Psychological Testing

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Abstract

Over the past century, standardized educational testing has become deeply embedded in practice, policy, and teacher preparation in the United States. Institutions, most notably the Educational Testing Service, have been influential in shaping and promoting these practices. Yet the origins of standardized, norm-referenced educational and psychological tests are closely tied to early 20th-century eugenics and scientific racism. Although these practices have been challenged and critiqued for more than a hundred years, teacher educators are still expected to learn and use them. This article traces the historical development of standardized testing, highlights long-standing critiques of norm-referenced measurement, and concludes with recommendations for preparing future teacher educators to understand the historical influence of eugenics on the field.

Keywords: *eugenics, norm-referenced testing, Educational Testing Service (ETS), standardized testing, IQ*

During each year of the past decade, over a hundred thousand new teachers entered public education to embark on their teaching career (National Center for Educational Statistics 2022). Many of these aspiring educators have grown up taking standardized, educational tests which comprise a core element of their educational experience (Au 2022; Angrist & Guryan 2004). Standardized testing extends beyond their own educational experience, and continues upon their entry into teacher education programs, deeply integrated into both their certification requirements and coursework (Warren 2023). However, one critical component often absent from their curriculum is an exploration of the origins of standardized testing and its significance in shaping the education system.

Standardized educational and psychological testing in the United States has deep roots in eugenics and systemically racist educational gatekeeping, influencing everything from the development of teacher certification exams to the SAT (Au 2022; Lemann,1996). Yet, this troubling history is rarely included in training on test administration or test interpretation for future teacher educators and is frequently overlooked in the broader curriculum of teacher preparation programs (Warren 2023). By learning this history, educators can better critique the

testing system and push for more equitable and inclusive practices. In what follows, we explore a century of the implementation of and resistance to standardized testing through the fields of education and psychology, providing vital context for preparing the next generation of teachers.

Standardized Intelligence Tests Ascendent

The concept of modern intelligence testing began in the early 1900s with the work of French psychologist Alfred Binet (Gould 1988). Alfred Binet developed the first standardized intelligence test in 1905, aiming to identify children who needed special educational support. [Binet] decided to bring together a large series of short tasks, related to everyday problems of life (counting coins, or assessing which face is "prettier," for example), but also involving such basic processes of reasoning as "direction (ordering), comprehension, invention and censure (correction)" (Binet, 1909 as cited in Gould 1988). Binet suggested the "mental age" of a child, in terms of their peers, should be divided by chronological age and thus the *intelligence quotient,* or IQ, was born (Gould 1988).

While Alfred Binet intended the test to be used as a diagnostic tool to help children, it was soon, translated and adapted by other psychologists for different purposes (Gould 1988). In the U.S., psychologists Lewis Terman and former West Chester Normal School (now West Chester University) Professor Henry H. Goddard revised and translated Binet's test to create the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, which became the foundation for modern IQ testing (Zenderland 2001; Gould 1988). Lewis Terman, Henry Goddard and other early adopters of IQ testing were proponents of eugenics, a movement advocating for the selective breeding of human populations to improve genetic qualities (Gould 1988; Black 2012). Eugenicists believed that intelligence was a fixed, heritable trait and that IQ tests could scientifically classify individuals and races as superior or inferior.

These prejudiced beliefs led to the misuse of IQ testing to support racist and classist policies (Gould 1988; Black 2012). For example, IQ tests were administered to immigrants at Ellis Island in the early 20th century, and the results were used to justify restrictive immigration laws targeting groups considered less desirable, such as southern and eastern Europeans (Gould 1988; Zenderland 2001). Similarly, IQ testing was used to support forced sterilization and institutionalization programs in the U.S., with laws allowing for the sterilization and forced institutionalization of individuals deemed "feeble-minded" or unfit to reproduce (Black 2012). In this context, IQ tests were not neutral measures of cognitive ability but tools to enforce social and racial hierarchies.

Standardized intelligence testing soon took the stage out of the eugenics movement in the US education system. Most notably, the original Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for college admissions also has roots in this eugenic history. Carl Brigham, a Princeton psychologist and eugenicist, developed the SAT in 1926 near the height of the American eugenics movement (Gould 1988; Brigham 1922; Lemann 2000). Carl Brigham alongside Henry Goddard and Lewis

Terman, had previously worked on the first mass-scale Army intelligence quotient tests (sometimes referred to as the "Alpha" and "Beta" tests), which were purported to assess the intellectual abilities of U.S. soldiers during World War I. These World War I army intelligence tests were a precursor to the SAT and shared a similar purpose: to classify and rank individuals based on presumed innate intelligence (Lemann 1996; Lemann 2000).

Carl Brigham's work on the SAT was influenced by his belief in the superiority of certain races and classes as enumerated in his work *A Study of American Intelligence* (1922). The SAT was initially intended to identify academically talented students regardless of their social background, but it was designed within a framework that assumed innate differences in intelligence among races and ethnicities (Warren 2023). While the SAT evolved over the years and eventually sought to distance itself from these ideologies via aptitude and achievement reorientation, its norm-referenced characteristic is still marked by these eugenic roots and its correlation to modern intelligence tests is quite high (Warren 2023, Lemann 2000).

Carnegie and the Educational Testing Service

The Carnegie Institution, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT) played a central role in both funding eugenics-related initiatives in the United States and advancing standardized testing in the early 20th century (Schambra 2013; Lemann 1996). One of their primary contributions was providing financial and research support for the study and institutionalization of educational assessment and measurement, particularly in developing early intelligence tests within educational contexts like the SAT (Lemann 1996). CFAT's support extended to the creation and popularization of early educational and psychological assessments, solidifying the view that standardized testing could serve as a key tool for evaluating academic performance and shaping educational policy (Zheng & Walton 2024). It was also instrumental in establishing the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing program in 1966 which continues to administer standardized tests in all 50 American States (Carnegie Corporation of New York 2025).

Following World War II, the increasing interest in standardized testing within both military and civilian domains led to the founding of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in 1947 with support from the CFAT (Lemann 1996). ETS was established to develop and administer standardized tests and house the growing U.S. standardized testing industry, including the SAT, building on frameworks initially established by military testing practices (Lemann, 2000). The United States military's focus on quantifiable assessment and efficient personnel selection reinforced the broader acceptance of standardized tests in both educational and business settings (Lemann 1996). And substantial military investment in these assessments provided resources and momentum for ongoing research in psychological testing and assessment methodologies (Lemann 2000). The military's influence on the development of standardized testing underscored the adoption of similar sorting mechanisms in business and education.

ETS remains a significant presence in the educational testing field, both domestically and internationally including the administration of the SAT and educator certification tests

like the PRAXIS (Lemann 1996). As one of the largest testing organizations globally, ETS is still renowned for its role in designing and administering tests for a wide range of educational and professional purposes (ETS 2025). Among its notable contributions are the (1) Graduate Record Examination (GRE), widely used by graduate programs as part of their admissions processes; (2) the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which evaluates English proficiency for non-native speakers applying to English-speaking institutions; (3) the PRAXIS Series, employed by many states to assess candidates for teacher certification. Historically, it has also had a role in the creation and administration of the MCAT, LSAT and GMAT used for professional school admissions (Lemann 1996; Lemann 2000). Furthermore, ETS has been involved in the development and scoring of the SAT and other College Board assessments, reinforcing its influence on educational testing and admissions practices.

Despite its nonprofit status, ETS has long faced criticism for its significant financial influence in the testing industry (Nairn 1980). The organization generates over a billion dollars in revenue from its testing programs (ProPublica 2025), prompting discussions around the commercialization of education and potential conflicts of interest. ETS, along with other large testing organizations like ACT, Inc., Pearson, Kaplan and others, contribute to a testing culture that shapes education and teacher education by emphasizing standardized assessments to the detriment of alternative forms of learning and evaluation (Warren 2023; Anderson 1998). In addition, its roots and preferences for norm-referenced testing methods that give way to a critique that it carries on a legacy of eugenical educational measurement (Warren 2023).

There is a clear conflict of interest when the same corporations that develop standardized tests are also responsible for evaluating their own products for bias, while simultaneously profiting from their widespread adoption (Nairn 1980; Warren 2023). Alan Nairn's original report, part of a Ralph Nader report on the Educational Testing Service, entitled T*he Reign of ETS The Corporation That Makes up Minds* highlighted the fact that for years many insiders had been criticizing the test and recommending changes only to be met with a "wall of resistance" (Nairn 1980, p xii). The standardized testing ideology was quite a "closed circle..." and a culture of "fear and secrecy which pervade ETS" when trying to reform their internal evaluation processes (Nairn 1980, p xiii). These large, lucrative corporations, like ETS, often operate without meaningful public oversight, and their test development processes remain largely opaque (Nairn 1980; Warren 2023). This lack of transparency raises serious concerns about accountability, especially given the high-stakes nature of these assessments in determining educational opportunities, teacher assessments, and school funding (Nairn 1980). When private interests dominate the design, validation, and distribution of standardized tests, it undermines public trust and limits the potential for truly fair and equitable assessment practices.

The legacy of eugenics and early intelligence testing continues to shape standardized testing practices today. Critics contend that tests like the SAT and IQ assessments remain biased, often disadvantaging marginalized groups and thereby perpetuating social and educational inequalities (Warren 2023; Au 2022). These concerns have fueled ongoing debates surrounding the fairness, validity, and relevance of standardized testing within education but also

the representation of historically disenfranchised voices in the creation and administration of these tests. A historical understanding of these developments is necessary to explore more equitable approaches for evaluating student learning and potential.

Norm-Referenced Standardized Testing: An Evolution of Intelligence Testing

Modern day norm-referenced standardized tests including tests like the SAT and GRE are like the original intelligence tests in that both are designed to compare an individual's performance to a larger, pre-established group (Warren 2023; Taylor, 1994). In many cases the performance of students on tests like the SAT closely correlate to IQ tests (Lemann 1996, Lemann 2000). Both types of tests use standardized scoring systems, which means each test-taker's performance is compared against a "norming group", i.e., a representative sample of normal, average test takers (Warren 2023). These tests are primarily designed to differentiate between test-takers rather than assess absolute performance, helping identify outliers, such as those with significantly high or low scores rather than mastery of content (Taylor 1994). In both cases, the aim is to assess where an individual stands in relation to others rather than to measure achievement based on a set standard, what is called criterion-reference testing.

The normal part of norm-referenced can be traced back to Francis Galton and other key figures in eugenics in the late 19th and early 20th century England. Francis Galton was instrumental in promoting the concept of normality in statistics, influencing how we view data distribution and individual differences (Grue & Heiberg 2006). Galton, known as the father of eugenics, was deeply interested in the variation of traits in populations. In the 19th century, he used the concept of the "normal distribution" to analyze human characteristics like height and intelligence (Davis 1995). Galton observed that these traits tended to cluster around an average and became less frequent as they deviated from it, which fit the bell-shaped, "normal" curve.

His work popularized the idea that many human traits and behaviors conform to this distribution, reinforcing the notion of an average as a central tendency. Karl Pearson, a protégé of Galton, formalized the mathematical foundation of the normal distribution (Grue & Heiberg 2006; Schambra 2013). He developed statistical techniques, like correlation and regression, that relied on the assumption of normally distributed data. Pearson's correlation coefficient has become a ubiquitous tool in the social sciences and educational research (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008).

By providing methods for analyzing data that assumed normality, Pearson helped institutionalize the belief that normality was the default (Grue & Heiberg 2006). Pearson applied the normal distribution concept to human populations, suggesting that individual differences, whether in intelligence, physical ability, or behavior, could be ranked and linearly ordered along a bell-curve distribution. Their work made it more acceptable to quantify and compare people, which laid the groundwork for norm-referenced tests, standardized testing, and psychometrics, which often assume a normal distribution of scores and ability (Warren 2023). Pearson's work established normality as a critical concept in data analysis and the study of

human traits, creating a foundation that is still used in fields ranging from psychology to education.

A Century of Critique

Critiques of IQ tests and other norm-referenced tests can be traced back to their rise in the early 20th century (Lemann 1996; Warren 2023). Walter Lippmann in the 1920s argued forcefully that IQ tests often reflected cultural biases, disadvantaging individuals from different backgrounds (Pastore 1978). He believed that intelligence cannot be measured accurately through standardized tests, as these assessments often favor certain cultural and educational experiences over others. Lippmann was also critical of how IQ scores were interpreted and used, particularly in policy-making as they would be used to shape immigration policy in particular. He warned against using IQ testing as a definitive measure of a person's potential or worth, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of intelligence that encompasses a broader range of human abilities (Lemann 2000; Lemann 1996). He also expressed concern about the implications of labeling individuals based on IQ scores, suggesting that this could reinforce social hierarchies and limit opportunities for those deemed lower in intelligence.

As an early advocate for public education, Horace Mann Bond emphasized the importance of equitable access to quality education (Bond 1924; Thomas 1982). He critiqued IQ testing as potentially undermining efforts to provide fair educational opportunities, particularly for marginalized groups. Horace Mann Bond believed that intelligence could not be reduced to a single numerical score. He emphasized the importance of character, creativity, and moral education, arguing that a well-rounded education was essential for personal and societal growth. This made him wary of the reliance on standardized tests to assess student abilities (Bond 1924). He believed that such tests could not capture the full range of human potential and could misrepresent the abilities of students from diverse backgrounds. Horace Mann Bond highlighted significant, early concerns about the limitations and implications of IQ testing, advocating for a more comprehensive understanding of intelligence and educational equity.

Civil Rights and the Association of Black Psychologists

The Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi) was formed in 1968 as an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing inclusion of Black students and professionals in psychology, promoting research to solve prominent social problems including racism and poverty, and improving the wellbeing of Black individuals and communities (Williams 1974). Since its formation, ABPsi has raised several critical critiques of IQ testing regarding the ways it has perpetuated educational inequities for Black individuals and communities. One such critique is that traditional IQ tests reflect the cultural and linguistic norms of predominantly White, middle-class populations, disadvantaging Black test-takers and others from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Hillard 1983). A second critique is that an IQ score

can be misinterpreted as a definitive measure of a person's potential or worth. This critique emphasizes that test scores often fail to account for environmental, socioeconomic, and educational factors that significantly impact performance. Together, these two critiques raised concerns about the validity and reliability of IQ tests, particularly when applied across diverse populations. Third, ABPsi highlights the historical misuse of IQ testing to justify racial discrimination and segregation, critiquing how these tests have been used to support racist ideologies and policies, reinforcing stereotypes about intelligence and ability, and resulting in an overrepresentation of Black children in special education (Graves & Mitchell 2011). Due to this, the Association has argued that IQ testing should not be used for educational tracking and resource allocation, as reliance on these tests can perpetuate systemic inequalities in education and social services.

These critiques played an important role in the most famous court cases concerning intelligence testing, Larry P. vs. Riles (Wade 1979), which resulted in a ban on IQ tests in the State of California for special education purposes. As part of this class action suit, ABPsi organized for two Black psychologists (Drs. William Pierce and Harold Dent) to re-administer intelligence tests to five Black children whose previous scores placed them in classes "for the educable mentally retarded". Drs. Pierce and Dent used rapport-building strategies during testing and the children all performed above the cut-off for needing placement in separate special education classrooms (Hillard 1983). This case argued that the tests and test administration procedures were biased against Black children resulting in inappropriate educational placements. ABPsi adopted a statement on testing stating that "The Association of Black Psychologists fully supports those parents who have chosen to defend their rights by refusing to allow their children and themselves to be subjected to achievement, intelligence, aptitude, and performance tests, which have been and are being used to: (1) label Black children as uneducable; (2) place Black children in special classes; (3) potentiate inferior education; (3) assign Black children to lower educational tracks than Whites; (5) Deny Black children higher educational opportunities, and (6) Destroy positive intellectual growth and development of Black children" (Williams 1974). This statement was followed by calls for a moratorium on the use of all standardized psychological and educational tests with Black children (Williams et al., 1980).

Overall, the critiques from the Association of Black Psychologists underscore the need for a more equitable, comprehensive, and culturally responsive approach to understanding intelligence and assessing individuals' needs for support within school and work contexts, particularly within marginalized communities. Even contemporary research on updated versions of prominent IQ tests, such as the current version of the Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children, Fifth Edition (WISC-V), notes differences in the factor structure and performance on some subtests by race (particularly those with extensive, linguistically demanding instructions), indicating ongoing issues with cultural biases in the tests, administration procedures, and/or processes for establishing samples on which the tests are standardized (Graves Smith & Nichols, 2021).

Disability, "Normalcy," and IQ

Scholars in the field of Disability Studies have also provided critiques of IQ testing, articulating the role such instruments played in the development of contemporary conceptualizations of "normalcy," ability, and disability, as well as in the enforcement of social hierarchies based on individual capacities. As documented by Robert Chapman (2023), the industrializing economy of the late 19th and early 20th century spurred a growing emphasis on productivity and mechanization, shifting societies toward an instrumental view of human abilities. The productive body and mind became central to pursuits of economic and national progress, and a new concept of normality emerged to determine whether bodies and minds were working or broken (Chapman 2023, p. 44). As articulated by Leonnard Davis (1995), it was believed that "individual variations would accumulate into a composite national identity" (p. 44). Disability, then, would subsequently degrade the nation. This belief was often combined with "an industrial mentality that saw workers as interchangeable and therefore sought to create a universal worker whose physical characteristics would be uniform, as would the results of their labors" (Davis 1995, p. 36).

Animated by the eugenics movement, societies became consumed with assessing ability in order to identify *dis*ability. It was in this context that a new apparatus was created to systematically rank individuals and populations in terms of physical and mental ability (Chapman 2023). Early operationalizations relied on a variety of methods that would quickly fall out of favor. Jay Dolmage (2018), for example, documented the use of photography at immigration checkpoints like Ellis Island as one of many systematic attempts to discern physical and mental "defects" and cast groups and individuals as "disabled upon arrival."

As such methods faded from relevance, the use of IQ tests to identify disability was solidified in the broader society as well as in the field of education. In fact, some of the earliest IQ tests were developed at institutional "schools" for disabled youth; Henry Goddard's revisions to Binet's intelligence test were conducted on students at the Vineland Training School for Feeble-Minded Boys and Girls. While IQ tests were created and used at these "schools," very little of what we call education was taking place. Instead, these facilities were mere tools for the eugenics project, where individuals with disabilities could be segregated from the public to "protect" against the "social contagion of rampant feeblemindedness" (Downey 2017).

Individuals with disabilities would be segregated for decades in facilities like the Willowbrook State School (New York) and the Pennhurst State School and Asylum (Pennsylvania), both of which would later be the subject of infamous exposés that revealed the horrendous physical and mental conditions experienced by the child and young adult residents. In the years that followed the widely publicized news reports (Andrus, 2025; Downey 2017) former residents and their families fought for the closure of these institutions as well as for the educational rights that had been denied to students with disabilities for decades simply because they had been identified by instruments like IQ tests and deemed uneducable.

Connor and Ferri (2005) note that this process of segregation was deeply intertwined with the racial segregation and subsequent *de*segregation of schools after the *Brown v. Board*

of Education ruling in 1954. Importantly, they highlight how the segregating of students with disabilities occurred not only via institutions like Pennhurst, but also *within* schools themselves.

> A response to the integration of students of color was the increase in special classes, located in different parts of the school building…in one example, perhaps to curb the flight of white students from the district, school officials in Washington, DC, placed over 24 percent of their newly admitted African American students in separate special education classrooms. (Connor & Ferri 2005, p. 108)

In fact, in the two years following the *Brown* decision, special education classes in DC schools doubled in enrollment and over 77 percent of the students in those classes were African American (Connor & Ferri, 2005 p. 108). Subsequent court cases challenged the biases in standardized assessment policies, like *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970) and *Larry P. v. Riles* (1971-79), and "revealed that school personnel, tests, and testing practices played a major role in deciding who received the label of "disabled" and were thus responsible for the disproportionate placement of racial and linguistic minorities in separate special education classes" (p. 108).

Despite revisions to assessments and legal directives requiring schools to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (i.e. IDEA), children of color, specifically Hispanic, Black, and Native children have higher risk ratios for being identified with disabilities than White students (National Center for Learning Disabilities 2023). Likewise, Black students are still more likely than white students to be taught in more restrictive environments in separate special education classes, where they miss out on the social inclusion and more rigorous learning opportunities of a general education classroom (National Center for Learning Disabilities 2023).

Further complicating questions of equity in education is what disability studies scholar, Sarah Triano (2000) has called the "enshrinement of the medical model in disability policy" via requirements for categorical eligibility as determined by standardized instruments like IQ tests. As explained by Triano (2000), to qualify for the right to a free and appropriate public education, students with disabilities must meet categorical eligibility requirements as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which are often determined by standardized instruments administered by professionals like school psychologists. While IQ tests cannot, since the Larry P case, be the sole justification for identification, as argued by Triano (2000), their dominance reinforces the medical model of disability, which places disablement within the student while ignoring the sociocultural and historical construction of normalcy, ability, and disability. As stated by Triano (2000), "The harm in this arrangement is self-evident when one considers the cost involved in attributing the problems experienced by disabled children in the educational system to a fundamental part of their identity—their disability" (p. 2).

At a Crossroads

Education is at a crossroads regarding how and whether to continue to use standardized intelligence testing (Murdoch 2009). Since the Larry P. case in the 1970s, education policy and practice has assumed that using norm-referenced standardized intelligence tests as one point of data within broader assessment battery is more inclusive and less biased than basing decisions about classifications or placements solely on children's performance on the tests. We are faced with the question: is this approach sufficient or perpetuating a eugenics mindset of medicalizing need for accommodations in school?

We are approaching a moment where we could put ourselves down a different path, one that genuinely leaves eugenics behind, rather than adapting around it and using its tools. Imagining the direction to take to diverge from a eugenics-driven policy and practice framework while embedded within its constraints is like trying to "detoxify racist waters while submerged in their waves" (Anderson & Jones 2024). We acknowledge that professionals using these tools are most often intending to help children, and this is often in tension with a system that requires standardized intelligence or achievement testing for children to access supports and accommodations. However, given that these tools have a history of harming Black children (Hillard, 1983) and biases remain within the tests themselves (Graves et al., 2020; Aston & Brown, 2021), it is time for structural changes in how students can access accommodations. Below we summarize actions and movements that resist or pivot from the eugenics agenda that could assist with envisioning a possible future without use of standardized intelligence testing as a way to rank and sort children.

Apologies for the Eugenics Movement

Several organizations and institutions have issued formal apologies for their historical involvement in eugenics, acknowledging the harm caused by supporting or implementing such practices. In 2021, the American Psychological Association (APA) formally apologized for how psychological research and testing had been misused to support racist theories, including eugenics, which marginalized and harmed vulnerable communities.

More than a dozen universities, including Stanford University and University College London, have also apologized for their involvement in eugenics, such as supporting forced sterilization programs in the early 20th century (University College London 2021). Similarly, states like California, North Carolina, and Virginia have issued public apologies for the harm caused by eugenics policies. Additionally, philanthropic organizations, such as the Carnegie Institution for Science, have expressed regret for their roles in advancing these harmful ideologies (Isaacs 2020). These apologies signify a broader reckoning with the legacy of eugenics across fields like psychology, academia, and government, acknowledging the lasting impact on individuals and communities targeted by these ideologies.

In Pennsylvania, West Chester University's Board of Trustees voted to rename the Schmucker Science Center on its main campus in 2023 (Fiorentino 2023). The building had been named after Samuel Christian Schmucker, a science education professor at West Chester Normal School in the early 1900s, whose involvement in the American eugenics movement was brought to light by Aaron Stoyack, a history undergraduate at WCU. Stoyack's undergraduate research supervised by West Chester University history professor Brent Ruswick, revealed Schmucker's connections to another prominent eugenicist, Henry H. Goddard, a fellow professor at the West Chester Normal School (Fiorentino, 2023). Schmucker's work contributed to the spread of eugenics ideologies, which had devastating social consequences, particularly for historically marginalized groups. Despite his other contributions as a teacher and public intellectual, his strong advocacy for eugenics, including ideas about forced sterilization and genetic superiority of western Europeans were extreme even during his own time (Fiorentino 2023).

The Schmucker Committee Final Report, issued by West Chester University (WCU), recommended to remove the name of Samuel Christian Schmucker from the university's science center due to his advocacy for eugenics (Fiorentino 2023). The committee's investigation included extensive research, interviews, and community engagement to evaluate Schmucker's legacy. The overwhelming majority of students, faculty, and staff supported removing Schmucker's name. West Chester University's renaming of Schmucker Science Center in 2023 is part of a decades-long movement among institutions to confront and reconcile their ties to eugenics (e.g., Issacs 2020; University College London 2021). However, despite these efforts, the history of eugenics and its key figures remains absent from required coursework for future educators even in Pennsylvania.

Grassroots Resistance to Standardized Testing

Grassroots resistance against standardized testing has expanded significantly in the United States during the 21st century, exemplified prominently by movements such as the Opt Out movement and the Bartleby Project (Paladino 2020; Garrison 2012). These initiatives encourage parents and guardians to refuse student participation in high-stakes standardized tests as a protest against the adverse impacts these assessments can impose on students, educators, and schools. Originally emerging as a response to educational accountability policies like No Child Left Behind, these movements gained momentum as parents, educators, and activists highlighted concerns about narrowed curricula, punitive actions against schools with poor performance, and increased stress on students. In particular, the Opt Out movement reached significant public prominence in 2015, notably in New York State, where many families refused participation. Although these grassroots efforts have not eliminated standardized testing, they have substantially shifted public conversations, empowered communities to challenge the legitimacy of test-centric accountability systems, and influenced policy changes such as the reduction of standardized testing in California and Pennsylvania, as well as waivers to NCLB

mandates under the Race to the Top initiative (Pennsylvania State Education Association 2017; Ujifusa 2012).

Internationally, various educational systems provide alternatives by minimizing or eliminating the role of high-stakes standardized testing (Darling-Hammond 2017; Morgan 2014). Finland is frequently cited as a successful model due to its equitable, high-performing education system, which avoids frequent standardized tests and instead employs teacher-designed, classroom-based assessments (Morgan 2014). Alternative educational philosophies such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf also reject standardized testing, favoring developmental assessments, portfolio evaluations, and qualitative feedback (Aljabreen 2020). These international and alternative educational models offer concrete examples and pathways for educational reformers advocating for a significant reduction or abolition of standardized testing within the United States.

The Neurodiversity Movement: Affirming Disability and Disabled Identity

Introduced by Australian sociologist, Judy Singer, in the late 1990's, *neurodiversity* parallels familiar concepts like cultural diversity and biodiversity, emphasizing that identifiable differences in human neurology and cognition should be understood much like the differences between cultures and species, that is as naturally occurring and beneficial distinctions. As concisely articulated by Walker (2014), "Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species" (p. 1). Since its first conceptualization, neurodiversity has been developed by disability scholars and activists into a theoretical paradigm that provides analytical tools for understanding disability and advocating for disability rights in contemporary society.

Core principles within this paradigm hold that a) neurodiversity is not only a naturally occurring fact of life, but that it is also a valuable form of human diversity, b) there is no singular "norm" of neurocognitive functioning, and c) social power dynamics and inequities that impact other forms of human diversity (e.g. race, ethnicity, or gender) also manifest within neurodiversity (Walker, 2014). In stark contrast to the eugenicists who believed that neurocognitive divergence was a threat to humanity that should be eliminated, contemporary disability rights activists contend that neurocognitive differences should be uplifted as essential components of human identity. This contention has shifted not only conceptualizations of disability but also accepted language practices around disability. Neurodiversity advocates, for example, have encouraged the adoption of identity-first language (i.e. "I am autistic") rather than person-first language (e.g. "I am a person with autism") to outwardly emphasize the conceptual shift.

Neurodiversity, however, has become more than just an ideological paradigm with the emergence of vast network of individuals and organizations operating under the umbrella of the *neurodiversity movement,* a "social justice movement that seeks civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for the neurodivergent" (Walker, 2014, p. 1). This movement

has led to concerted political efforts via groups like the Autism Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), but also to a broader cultural shift with the proliferation of social media accounts dedicated to content about neurodiversity, the creation of Neurodivergent Pride Day and Neurodiversity Celebration Week, and even the widespread popularity of shows featuring neurodivergent people such as "Love on the Spectrum." While these cultural shifts have not been free of critique from movement activists, they highlight a significant change in the social perception of disability that stands diametrically opposed to that offered by eugenics ideology.

This societal shift, while not all-encompassing, can also be observed in educational and psychological theory and practice. The inclusion of—rather than the segregation of—students with disabilities in general education classes has become the ideal rather than the exception. Likewise, neurodiversity-affirming practices like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), have become mainstays in teacher-education and teacher professional development. Mental health and clinical psychology practitioners and scientists have also issued calls to move away from practices rooted in a medical, deficit-focused model aimed at "healing" or "fixing" intellectual disabilities and autism, and rather developing neurodivergent-affirming interventions in partnership with individuals with lived experience to promote wellbeing (Baron-Cohen 2017; Lerner et al, 2023; Najeeb and Quadt, 2025). Such theoretical and practical shifts have been articulated not merely as for efficacy, but also as necessary to remedy the injustices experienced by students with disabilities (Bailey 2023; Hanesworth et al, 2019; Sweetapple 2022). Many in the neurodiversity movement argue that larger changes are still needed. The widespread use of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) for autistic students, for example, has been critiqued by autistic self-advocates as treating their autism as a problem to be fixed and thus damaging to their mental health and identity as autistic (Anderson 2023). Movement advocates have also critiqued the exclusivity of professional testing and diagnoses, recognizing their class-, race-, and gender-based bias and economic inaccessibility, and uplifting the relevance of self-diagnosis in the pursuit of positive mental health, identity development, and accommodations (Abdulle 2025; Hendrix 2024; Feucht 2025). Such advocacy highlights how the neurodiversity movement, and the disability rights movement more broadly, can be understood as an ongoing response to the deeply engrained history of eugenics theory, policy, and practice.

Conclusion: A Reminder about Eugenics and Testing

The historical connections between standardized, norm-referenced intelligence testing and the eugenics movement underscore the need for critical examination and educational reform in teacher preparation programs (Warren 2023). The US education system, deeply influenced by standardized testing, has historically overlooked the problematic origins of these assessments and their role in perpetuating systemic inequities. The intertwining of eugenics with the development of intelligence testing reveals the pseudo-scientific roots of practices that

sought to categorize and rank individuals based on discriminatory, racist, and ableist ideologies. Understanding this history is essential to addressing the lingering impact of these ideologies in modern educational practices and fostering equitable learning environments.

Institutions and organizations have increasingly acknowledged their historical complicity in advancing eugenics, offering formal apologies and making efforts to reckon with this legacy (e.g., Issacs 2020; University College London 2021; Fiorentino 2023). The renaming of the Schmucker Science Center at West Chester University exemplifies such efforts, as it reflects a broader movement to confront historical wrongs and align institutional practices with contemporary values. These actions, while important, also highlight the ongoing need for a more comprehensive integration of this history into educational curricula to ensure future educators are equipped with the knowledge to uphold the responsibilities outlined by the Model Code of Ethics for Educators (MCEE), including a) to advocate for equitable educational opportunities for all students, b) to protect students from any practice that harms or has the reasonable potential to harm, c) to respect the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual student, and d) to maintain an environment that promotes the emotional, intellectual, physical and sexual safety of all students (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification [NASDTEC] 2023). Future educators should be required to learn about this history, its impacts on educational theory, policy, and practice, and the ongoing efforts to address it as part of their educational certification programs. What's more, they should learn about the historical and contemporary advocacy movements that have fought against the status quo of eugenics-based standardized testing and demanded transformative change in schools for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and disabled students.

The American Educational Research Association (AERA) in 2020 issued a *Statement in Support of Anti-Racist Education* (2020) which supports learning about the history of racism and discrimination in education by emphasizing the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion in academic inquiry (AERA 2020). It acknowledges the historical and ongoing inequities in education, including exclusionary practices and biases, and highlights the necessity of critically examining these issues to promote integrity and inclusivity. The statement critiques political efforts to suppress discussions on systemic racism, such as bans on the *1619 Project,* arguing that such measures undermine democracy and the pursuit of truth in education. Furthermore, the statement advocates for educational institutions to examine their own biases and systemic barriers while opposing federal restrictions on curriculum content, reinforcing the need for schools and educators to have the freedom to critically engage with the realities of racism and discrimination in education (AERA 2020). As attacks on such curricula have been expanded under the second Trump administration, we must reaffirm the call for critical anti-racist learning in PK-16 education, and especially teacher-education, which provides the foundation for meaningful changes in practice.

This means that teacher-educators must not merely be aware of such histories, but that they must also hold the line on the inclusion of such histories in the teacher education curric-

ulum. It is essential that those of us who prepare future teachers maintain a robust and rigorous course array in our programs, which includes opportunities for preservice teachers to explore not only classroom methods and subject-area content, but also essential questions about how teachers can work against the past to ensure schools are sites of diversity and inclusion rather than identification and segregation. For the authors, this has meant developing and leading classes on ethical approaches to educational assessment and the social, cultural, and historical foundations of education in the United States. With pressures from accreditation and teacher certification standards, these courses are often under threat of being cut to provide additional space for the required content demanded by such policies. Yet we believe, like Cochran-Smith (2020), that teacher educators must commit to preparing principled professionals who ""teach against the grain" of taken-for-granted practices and policies by recognizing and challenging the assumptions, systems, and structures that produce and reproduce inequities in schools and societies" (p. 51).

Another way that this can be done is by advocating for more holistic and inclusive assessment methods, which value diverse ways of learning and understanding over the narrow frameworks of standardized metrics, which provide only one data point without context. The persistence of norm-referenced testing, despite its roots in eugenics, underscores the systemic challenges in dismantling entrenched practices, but leaving standardized intelligence testing in the past could be one way to divert away from the legacy of eugenics and detoxify the racist waters that psychology and education have been operating within. Addressing these issues requires both institutional reform and a commitment to equitable education practices from new and future practitioners in the fields of education and psychology. It is for this reason that we also urge university faculty to engage in interdisciplinary research collaborations such as this one, where intersections between the histories, policies, and practices across fields can be explored to uncover important linkages and to envision ways that we can work together to undermine the established approaches that have made our educational institutions unjust.

Ultimately, the legacy of eugenics in standardized testing serves as a cautionary tale about the intersection of science, education, and societal values. Educators, psychologists, policymakers, and institutions must confront this history to foster a more just and inclusive educational landscape. Incorporating the history of eugenics into teacher preparation programs is a critical step toward ensuring that future professionals are not only aware of the inequities in past practices but are also empowered to advocate for systemic change. By understanding and addressing these historical injustices, the broader education system can work toward a future that prioritizes equity, diversity, and fairness in assessment and education.

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Stress, Self-Care, and Social Media: Are Pre-Service Teachers Reducing Stress or Simply Scrolling?

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Abstract

Strong evidence supports the overwhelming stress of pre-service teachers and the need for self-care to positively handle the stress. This study examines pre-service teachers' self-care practices and their use of social media in an effort to better understand how and if pre-service teachers are using social media to support their self-care. With billions of users, social media is a ubiquitous source of information, and has the potential to provide a positive mental health experience for individuals seeking self-care information. In a survey of 26 pre-service teachers, participants were asked about their social media usage, whether they followed accounts connected to various aspects of mindful self-care (e.g., supportive relationships, being physically active, etc.), how frequently they practice self-care, and the elements of self-care they find most important. Findings indicate up to 54% of pre-service teachers use social media, but not intentionally for self-care. Additionally, the few social media accounts that are followed for the purpose of self-care are not run by mental health professionals. This study highlights a need for educator preparation programs to better educate pre-service teachers on comprehensive self-care practices and the importance of evaluating social media accounts connected to self-care.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, teacher education, self-care, social media

Introduction

Teaching is stressful. Educators of all ages are responsible for the emotional, social, and instructional well-being of 15-30 children who each bring a variety of needs and desires to the classroom (Marcus & Munger, 2022). While individual teachers may be a part of a grade-level team or curricular team, when the door closes, everything rests on the shoulders of the person at the front of the room. As if that were not enough, rarely is the one, 45-minute daily planning period enough to plan, prepare, provide feedback on work, and communicate with families. These factors could be why teachers report 40% more frequent job-related stress and anxiety symptoms than other working adults (Kush et al., 2022; Steiner et al., 2022). The stress of teaching not only impacts teachers but also the students in the classrooms of stressed teachers (Peck, 2024). When teachers have exhausted their professional and personal ways to address this stress, the result is burnout (Walker, 2021). Unfortunately, the stress of teaching starts during the educator preparation process when undergraduates are considered pre-service teachers. One resource for appropriately dealing with

stress is practicing self-care, which is an acknowledged, beneficial way of reducing stress and improving mental health. Self-care is also a term that has become prevalent across multiple social media platforms. With 4.76 billion global users, social media has also recently been shown to have positive and helpful self-care content (Lekgothoane & Kaminer, 2023; Mullis et al., 2021). Knowing that the stress of teaching begins at the pre-service level, acknowledging that self-care can help alleviate the impact of stress, and understanding that there are potential benefits to using social media, we wonder: How do pre-service teachers (PSTs) define self-care, what practices do they implement as self-care, and how do social media sites play a role in their understanding and practices?

Multiple studies have shown evidence of the connection between self-care and well-being in relation to positive academic progress, classroom dynamics, career success, and job resilience (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Çimen & Özgan, 2018; Kerns et al., 2014; Lemon, 2021; Turner & Theilking, 2019). This has led researchers to acknowledge the need for education systems (i.e., teacher education programs and school systems) to make self-care and well-being a priority for pre-service teachers (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Lemon, 2021). Students in teacher preparation programs not only need a deep understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become transformative educators, but also a strong foundation based on how to effectively take care of themselves and manage their stress. However, little research has been conducted on the self-care perceptions and practices of pre-service teachers.

Preliminary research is being conducted on self-care and social media (Lekgothoane & Kaminer, 2023), but this research is not focused specifically on pre-service teachers, their specific levels of stress, and their means of addressing that stress. This means that there is a gap between what we think pre-service teachers need, how they are addressing those needs, and the research that currently exists. The present study responds to this gap in the research by asking a sample of pre-service teachers (N =26) to define self-care, what practices they implement as self-care, and how social media sites might play a role in their understanding and practices.

Literature Review

Stress in the Lives of Pre-Service Teachers

University students are expected to juggle a variety of experiences, including but not limited to classes, extracurricular activities, friendships, romantic and family relationships, and employment, all of which are compounded by the stress that comes with each of these experiences. This stress often manifests in mental health care struggles that are becoming more prevalent. Oswalt et al. (2020) found that college students' mental health diagnoses and treatment increased between 2009 and 2015. Additionally, Deng et al. (2021) and Hamza et al. (2021) found that the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted college students' mental health and well-being. However, when post-secondary students experience mental health issues, they also experience barriers to seeking the appropriate help (Dunley & Papadopoulos, 2019). Barriers range from institutional to personal. For example, non-white students are more likely to seek help from their personal social network, while others may not realize they need professional help or have time to seek it (Dunley & Papadopoulos, 2019). Further, treatment has been strongly connected to health insurance, which is not universally available to all students. Based on this information, college students are struggling with their mental health while also struggling to seek and get help for their mental health

needs. This means pre-service teachers (PSTs), college students enrolled in an educator preparation program, are also likely experiencing increased negative mental health and barriers to improving it.

In addition to increasing poor mental health and barriers to seeking help, pre-service teachers carry the additional burden of their profession. As mentioned earlier, teachers experience a significant amount of stress (Chaplain, 2008; Kush et al., 2022; Marcus & Munger, 2022; Schonfeld et al., 2017; Steiner et al., 2022; Travers & Cooper, 1996). As PSTs embark on clinical experiences, they begin to more fully experience the stress connected to teaching (Hand et al., 1996; Lemon, 2021). These clinical experiences are a time of shock and awe, as PSTs realize the classroom is different on the other side of the looking glass. Suddenly, they are no longer in the role of pupil but educator, and the theories and practices honed during their teacher training do not fit seamlessly into the reality of modern schooling (Bain & Moje, 2012; Caires et al., 2010). Further, PSTs are awakened to the fact that they will not be able to control all aspects of their classroom and instruction. First, students are not passive receptacles waiting to be filled with knowledge. They are active, unique, individual humans who on any given day may or may not want to participate in the learning process. Then, there is the physical classroom itself, which comes with a variety of variables including technology, HVAC systems, noise from other rooms, size, and furniture, none of which a pre-service teacher can control. Finally, there are local and state mandates about what content to teach, what materials to use, and more recently, what material not to use. All of these issues wrestle elements of control from the hands of PSTs, which can leave them feeling both unsettled and stressed.

Lemon (2021) found PSTs reported multiple stressors during their placements that included what was happening in the classroom, but which also extended beyond it. These stressors and stress affected their mental clarity, classroom performance as both learner and teacher, and touched every element of their lives. While PSTs are under incredible stress, they are also aware of the need for improved well-being. PSTs admit they need to work on strategies and take better care of themselves and their well-being, while also acknowledging the need for positive relationships in their lives (Lemon, 2021). Lemon (2021) argues that students' expressions of stress, awareness of the need for improved well-being and positive relationships are "entangled, influencing one another at every stage," (p. 946). When thinking of this entanglement, self-care should also be considered because, while personal, it is also highly connected to quality teaching and quality teaching experiences. Lemon echoes Head et al.'s (1996) call for teacher education programs to recognize and address the stress of pre-service teaching experiences.

Self-Care

For many pre-service teachers, the growth into a professional teacher is stressful and difficult, and it is important to consider the coping strategies they use, (Hand et al, 1996) as these practices can have an impact on their future professionalism. All coping strategies are not equal and Head et al. (1996) state that for most PSTs, their stress results from poor coping strategies. While many coping strategies are available to PSTs, they are not all created equal. For example, some people cope with stress by binge eating, using or abusing drugs or alcohol, or completely disengaging with the world around them. However other folks might take a different path, choosing professional care to help them learn how to cope. Unfortunately, not all PSTs have access or finances necessary to seek professional care. This is why self-care should be highlighted: these

particular strategies are things that individuals can manage on their own, can potentially cost nothing, and can be supported in a variety of ways that best suit the individual.

The National Institute of Mental Health (2022) defines self-care as "taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both your physical health and mental health" (How can I take care of my mental health, para. 2) and suggests that self-care is not one-size-fits-all. INTERFACE (2021), a non-crisis helpline run through William James College, suggests that self-care consists of reflection, regulation, and relaxation. Cook-Cottone (2015) argues that intentional mindful self-care may prevent and reduce negative outcomes like burnout, and increase positive outcomes like productivity. This can be seen in the large body of research that supports a variety of effective self-care strategies and skills (Cook-Cottone, 2015; Edenfield & Blumenthal, 2011; Lev & Owen, 1996; Norcross & Guy, 2007). Mediation, relaxation, and visualization have also been shown to decrease ratings of stress in those actively engaged in those practices, compared to individuals who did not use such strategies (Lev & Owen, 1996). Self-compassion is a self-care skill that supports emotional regulation and a growth mindset (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018). Additionally, exercise and good nutrition are consistently linked to well-being (Cook-Cottone, 2015, Edenfield & Blumenthal, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2012; Norcross & Guy, 2007). Finally, Timmerman (1999) reported that self-care strategies of social support, tailoring, and self-monitoring effectively helped participants achieve lifestyle change goals. Clearly, there is a vast body of research that has attempted to define what self-care is and can look like, while also providing examples of practices that can aid in self-care.

Self-Care as Professionalism

Mental health difficulties are an increased risk factor for unemployment (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2014) and workplace mental stress is higher for teachers than many other professions (Turner & Theilking, 2019). However, research indicates that teachers who are doing well in multiple areas of well-being are happier with their job, more dedicated to their school, more resilient, and have students with higher grades (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Caprara et al., 2006; Kern et al., 2014). Additionally, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) found a strong link between well-being and positive work outcomes and McCallum and Price (2010) argue that well-being strategies are required if beginning teachers are "to be retained as effective practitioners" (p.32). This is key, given the current high rate of teacher burnout and turnover, as well as the shortage of well-qualified teachers. Self-care for educators is then not simply about personal mental health, but also about maintaining a higher level of professionalism. By understanding PSTs' self-care strategies, teacher-educators can better understand their readiness to be professional teachers

Self-Care and Social Media

At the start of 2024, social media platforms in the United States such as Instagram and TikTok had "239 million active social media user identities" which is equivalent to 70% of the entire population of the country (Kemp, 2024). Social media platforms therefore offer a highly accessed means of sharing information, including information on, and support for, self-care. While much of the research on social media has largely focused on its potential harm to users' mental health, Mullis et al. (2021) examined how self-care is portrayed on Instagram and found generally positive data. Mullis et al. (2021) specifically looked at posts that included the hashtag #selfcare. Tags or hashtags, the symbol # followed by a word or phrase, are frequently used on social media

platforms to indicate key ideas or groups connected to the post. It is common for social media users to search for information via tags. Mullis et al. (2021) analyzed 200 Instagram posts using #selfcare and found that 62% were considered positive, 45% of the posts were explicitly health related, and 23% were related to emotional health. Additionally, they found 69% of studied posts were aimed at "a female audience, featured women, were posted by women, or contained tags directed toward women," (p. 6). The results of this study indicate large social media platforms like Instagram have the potential to provide a positive mental health experience for individuals specifically seeking information on self-care. This data also suggests that pre-service teachers, a group of individuals that frequently identify as women, are likely to find information tailored to their experiences as women.

Lekgothoane and Kaminer (2023) examined South African university students' experiences with mental-health content on Instagram and their results echo the positive findings of Mullis et al. (2021). Lekgothoane and Kaminer (2023) found that 67% of participants regularly follow specific mental-health-related accounts, 69% engage with mental health content on the "Search and Explore" page, and 23% search for mental health related hashtags. When asked about the type of mental health content accessed, 80% of participants reported accessing self-care and coping material. Additionally, most participants indicated that the information on Instagram ranged from somewhat to extremely helpful. In open-ended responses, 18% of participants expressed value in the concrete and practical self-care information on Instagram, and some participants specifically stated that the information found via the platform has helped them make positive changes to their lives. This study, like Mullis et al. (2021), indicates the potential for a positive social media platform experience around self-care. Further, this study indicates university students actively utilize social media to support their mental health specifically in the area of self-care.

Both Mullis et al. (2021) and Lekgothoane and Kaminer (2023) highlight a positive portrayal of self-care on a major social media platform, as well as social media platforms as potential sources for users to proactively access self-care information. Additionally, self-care information on social media platforms may provide individuals with healthier ways of dealing with mental health as opposed to excessive drinking, eating, and/or television watching (Mullis et al., 2021). Given the stressors pre-service teachers experience, the importance of self-care to the professional work of teaching, the abundance of social media accounts in the United States, and the indications of social media as a positive source of self-care content, it is only logical to investigate the self-care practices of PSTs as well as how PSTs are using social media accounts for self-care. Therefore, we place self-care at the center of this investigation because personal well-being is a critical component of the professional work of teaching. The self-care practices of PSTs are an important aspect of their developing professional identity as they proactively take actions to help them navigate the world of being a teacher, versus the process of learning to be a teacher.

With that in mind, in this study we attempt to answer three questions: Q1) To what extent do pre-service teachers utilize social media accounts to support various elements of self-care? Q2) To what extent do pre-service teachers enact self-care? and Q3) To what extent do pre-service teachers' following of "self-care" accounts correlate with their self-care practices?

Context of Study: Preservice Teacher Education

Participants in this study were students enrolled in initial certification programs in PK - 12 education programs at two different universities - one mid-size university in the Midwest and one mid-sized university in Texas. Both programs require regular clinical experiences.

Students at the Texas-based university start clinical experience upon their acceptance into the educator preparation program. Students in the secondary program complete 30 observation hours in grades 7-12 at public schools near and far (as much as a 2+ hour drive) from campus before entering clinical teaching placements during their final semesters. While the observation hours are required by the state and the program, they are not tied to courses, so students must fit observations around their course schedule, work, childcare, and other time commitments. Changes to the state education code will soon require students to log 50 hours of observation, increasing the additional scheduling burden. Apart from one module entitled "Staying Sane" which addresses the importance of appropriately handling the stress of teaching, but provides only generic suggestions, and which is included in a required course during students' last semester, there is no direct instruction on self-care or maintaining mental health.

Students enrolled in the initial certification programs at the institution in Michigan experience field placements across four semesters that vary in grade level, district location, and district resources. In their Junior 1, Junior 2, and Senior 1 semesters, participants have a 40-hour field placement requirement. This field placement work is spread across the 14 weeks of the semester and occurs on a weekly basis. While these hours are required, students must fit them into their schedules, but classes in this program meet only two days a week in order to alleviate some schedule stress. Additionally, participants also have an embedded literacy course during these semesters, where they attend their course in a different local school district, learn skills from their instructor, and then immediately implement these skills with children. In their Senior 2 semester, participants are in their internship, which requires more than 400 hours in the classroom.

Methods

Data Sources

The participants represented a spectrum in regard to where they were currently in their programs of study, with some just finishing their first semester of professional courses and others who just finished their internships. Because we decided to keep the survey responses anonymous, we are unable to determine from which university responses came, as well as the age of the participants. This is important, as the midwestern university uses a cohort model as a means of supporting students, which could potentially alter feelings of well-being and self-care. Additionally, age could be a factor in the responses, as social media usage varies, based on age, race, gender, income, education, and community location (Pew Research Center, 2021).

After obtaining appropriate IRB approvals, surveys were sent out via email to approximately 160 students total, between the two universities. The initial survey was sent toward the beginning of the Winter/Spring semester and gave respondents an approximate four-week window of time for completion. Additionally, the survey was sent again to the same potential participants two weeks later as a reminder. After this second email request, we ended up with 26 research participants (85% female, 15% male). The majority of respondents indicated they were preparing to teach elementary (77%) followed by high school (15%) and middle school (8%). Additionally, the majority of respondents reported they were preparing to teach general education (73%) followed by Art (15%), ELA (English-Language Arts) (8%), and History (4%).

Data Collection and Analysis

Our inquiry took a quantitative approach, as we worked to gain an understanding of how pre-service teachers (PSTs) define self-care, what practices they implement as self-care, and how social media sites might play a role in their understanding and practices. Quantitative studies focus on how often a phenomenon occurs, which, in the case of this study, is the importance of self-care practices and the misunderstanding of self-care definitions, practices, and the relationship between self-care practices and social media usage.

In order to collect data, the researchers created an online survey. This survey contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions as a way to collect both quantitative data as well as in-depth descriptions from participants. The survey questions were based on the Mindful Self-Care Scale (MSCS) (Cook-Cottone and Guyker, 2018). The MSCS was developed with the explicit purpose of aligning to actionable self-care practices connected to physical care, supportive relationships, mindful awareness, self-compassion and purpose, mindful relaxation, and supportive structure. It is well known that students in educator preparation programs are stressed and struggling, but what is less known is how they are using social media to manage this stress and identify actionable areas for change. With this in mind, we used a modified MSCS which included open response, Likert, and multiple-choice questions to help better understand actionable ways to support PSTs. The survey can be seen in Appendix I.

Taking a quantitative approach allowed us to collect and analyze data in order to discover potential trends or relationships, while also developing insights that can improve future practice - both our own and that of other teacher educators. By engaging in survey research, we were able to interact with a pool of PSTs from two different universities, using convenience sampling given our proximity to PSTs. Once the data was collected, we first engaged in descriptive statistics (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2006), working to calculate the mean and mode for each question, while also looking for any potential outliers. Next, we worked to visualize the data by representing the data graphically in order to identify patterns, trends, and outliers. Finally, we followed that analysis with open-coding of the follow-up questions to look for any potential themes.

While there were opportunities in the survey for participants to elaborate on their "yes" or "no" answers, across the survey, only 30.7% of respondents did so, outside of the question that asked explicitly for PSTs to describe their self-care practices. This speaks to flaws in the survey design. While the intention was to collect more details, the follow up questions ended up becoming redundant, which could be why most PSTs either chose not to respond or stopped responding as the survey went on.

Results

Social Media and Dimensions of Mindful Self-Care

Q1) To What Extent Do Pre-Service Teachers Utilize Social Media Accounts to Support Various Elements of Self-Care?

The analysis of the survey responses showed that respondents regularly (54%) use Instagram, followed closely by both Snapchat (42%) and Tik Tok (42%), with 23% of these users purposefully following accounts connected to what they perceive as self-care practices (Figure 1).
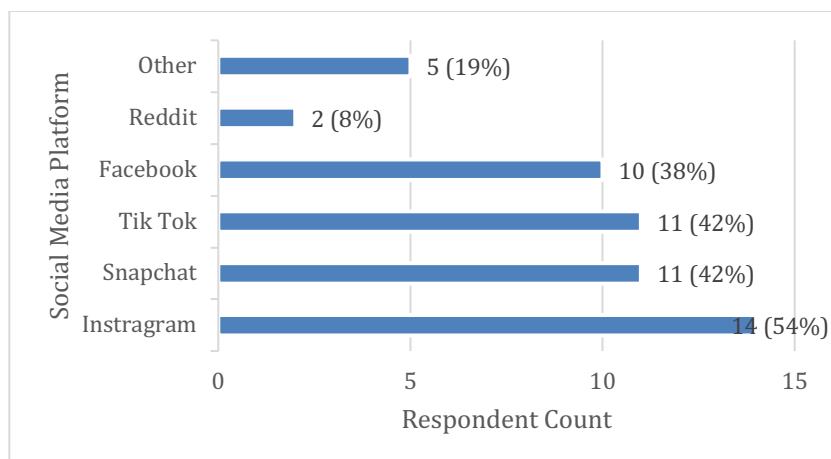
Figure 1: *Social Media Platforms Regularly Used*

The majority (77%) of respondents reported they do not follow accounts on social media connected to their self-care, however, respondents did report following accounts connected to various dimensions of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018). When asked about specific dimensions of mindful self-care, 46% of respondents reported following accounts who contribute to their having supportive relationships and self-compassion, 42% reported following accounts who contribute to their having a calm awareness of their thoughts, 31% reported following accounts who contribute to their practicing mindful relaxation, 27% reported following accounts who contribute to their maintaining an organized space for work/school tasks, 23% of respondents reported following accounts who contribute to their being physically active, and 19% reported following accounts who contribute to maintaining a manageable schedule and a balance between the demands of others and what is important to them (Figure 2).
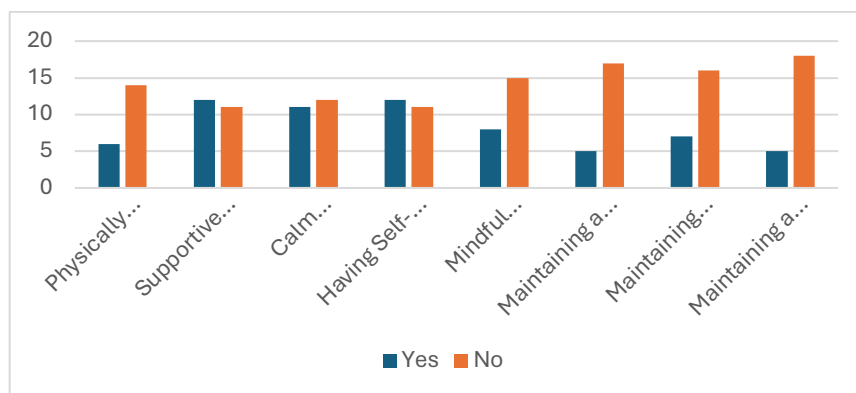

Figure 2: *Follow Accounts that Contribute to Mindful Self-Care*
(Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018)

When asked who they follow on social media and why, there were no common responses. However, there were themes across the accounts that participants mentioned. Respondents specifically named 14 social media accounts all with large followings (hundreds of thousands to millions of followers). Most accounts (71.4%) were female-led. The other four accounts were run by men, and two were run by heterosexual couples. Additionally, most accounts (71.4%) were focused on

lifestyle content (cooking, personal life, travel, etc.). Four accounts were focused on faith-based or mindset content (motivation, habits, non-professional mental health advice) and two accounts were focused on mental health from professional mental health practitioners.

Responses about followed accounts frequently spoke to emotional aspects of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018) and included explanations for why this area of self-care is important for the respondent. For example, one participant shared,

> These accounts give me daily reminders that it is okay to have different types of emotions, like getting upset, or being stressed or exhausted. But they also give reminders that it's okay to take a break, your body needs time to reset and breathe. Everyone needs time to themselves or to do something they enjoy.

Other responses spoke to areas of personal growth. For example, one participant explained, "Yes, I watch a lot of media analysis videos that encourage me to be aware of how I think about subjects". Additionally, some participants shared that they follow accounts focused specifically on mental health needs, sharing, "I do follow a psychologist who talks about understanding anxiety and depression, along with strategies that help it". While many responses were focused on using social media for mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018), some respondents spoke of social media as an escape; "I like to escape through beautiful and stimulating visual content."

The responses of respondents who indicated they did not follow accounts on social media connected to their self-care ranged from a desire to add such accounts, "No, I would definitely love some referrals" and "No, but I should!", to a belief that social media is not helpful, "Social media ends up being more of a hindrance than a tool…"

Self-Care

Q2) To What Extent Do Pre-Service Teachers Enact Self-Care?

Almost half of respondents (42%) reported participating in self-care five or more times a week and one-third of respondents reported participating in self-care two times a week (Figure 3).
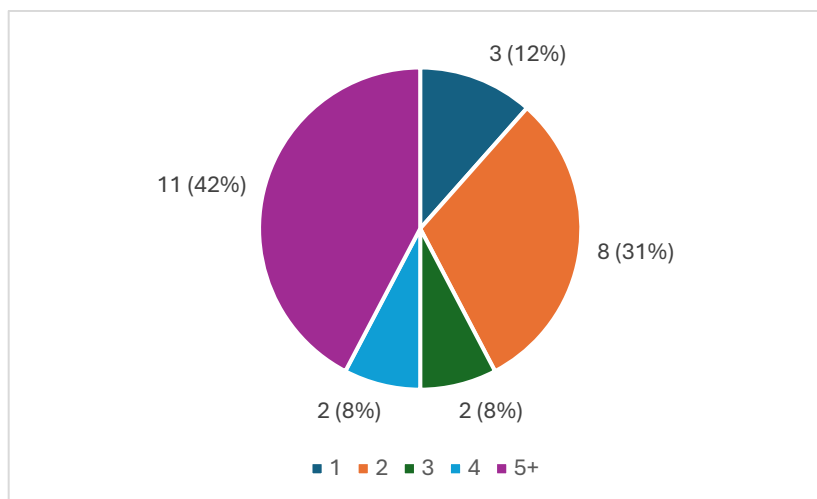

Figure 3: *Count of Practice of Self-Care During the Week*

When asked to rank the most important element of self-care (when given the options of reflection, relaxation, or regulation), regulation was ranked first by the majority of respondents (54%), followed by relaxation (33.3%), and reflection (13%) (Figure 4).
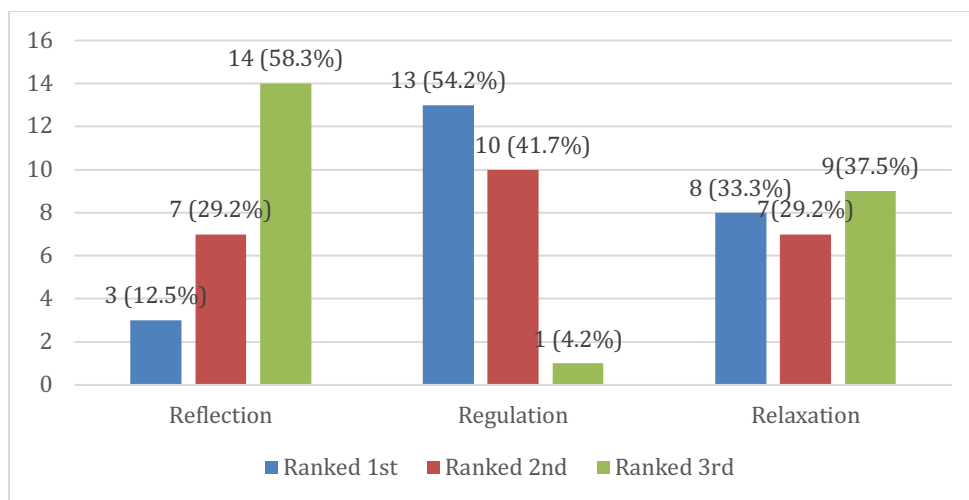

Figure 4: *Ranking of Most Important Elements of Self-Care*

When asked how strongly respondents agreed with statements about mindful self-care, the majority of respondents positively agreed (6 or higher) that they spend time with supportive people (85%), they keep their work/school space clean (78%), remind themselves that failure is part of human experience (74%), maintain a manageable schedule (62%), participate in effective self-care practices (59%), practice good physical care (57%), and balance the demands of others and what is important to them (54%).

When asked to describe the self-care practices they participated in regularly, the most common responses connected with themes of exercise (42.3%), beauty routines (30.8%), and getting outdoors (30.8%). However, the least common themes connected to getting proper sleep and practicing proper nutrition (15.4%), spending time alone (11.5%), and journaling (7.7%).

When respondents described their self-care practices, one participant shared, "I like to get outside and run often and that definitely helps me with my self-care." Other responses looked similar, with several participants mentioning "going on walks," working out a specific number of days per week, frequent bike rides, or spending time gardening. The data indicated that most participants took their physical well-being seriously. Additional respondents indicated that they preferred activities focused on personal grooming such as "long baths," "skin care every day," and putting on makeup. Finally, some respondents stated they knew when they needed time alone and planned for that in their schedule while others stated they "journal to free space in my mind."

This awareness of the need to take care of their physical and mental well-being speaks to Lemon's (2021) work; specifically, the understanding that there is room for improvement as it relates to strategies for true self-care. However, the PSTs' responses also echo the work of Head et al. (1996); namely, that while there might be a recognition of the need for self-care, the coping strategies that many PSTs mentioned are often very poor and do not address how the National Institute of Mental Health (2022) defines self-care.

Q3) To what extent do pre-service teachers' following of "self-care" accounts correlate with their self-care practices?

Nearly one-quarter of respondents indicated they follow individuals on social media that are connected to their self-care, however, when the accounts were described, they did not match with respondents' stated self-care practices. This is interesting, given what Mullis et al. (2021) found regarding the number of posts on Instagram that were devoted to women and that were positive and/or health related. While there are social media accounts out there that might help with self-care, it appears that the PSTs in this survey are not following them.

Discussion

Understanding the self-care practices of pre-service teachers, their conceptualization and enactment of these practices, and how the practices interact with social media usage is important for teacher educators. Teachers' plates have always been overwhelmingly full and that constant state of being overwhelmed seems to be even more prevalent today. The support and care that pre-service teachers need are at the front of our minds as teacher educators. We know it is critical to meet PSTs where they are by understanding their current habits in an effort to support them in developing behaviors, skills, and dispositions that will best serve them in becoming successful educators who can handle the overwhelming nature of a job in education. With that said, despite the knowledge that teaching is an emotionally, physically, and professionally stressful job, it is rare that PSTs are given explicit direction as it relates to how to care for themselves.

Social Media

Most respondents reported using social media, which is not surprising; however, they reported not following accounts connected to their self-care. This was somewhat surprising given that 19-46% of respondents reported following accounts connected to various dimensions of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018). This contrast suggests that pre-service teachers may not have a full understanding of what constitutes self-care. This is understandable as there is a long history of research dedicated to clarifying the definition, as well as students' conceptualizations of self-care (Levin& Idler, 1983; Martinez, et al., 2021; Wilhelm, 2023). This also suggests that there is a need for educator preparation programs to work with PSTs to better understand the wide spectrum of self-care and its connection to well-being. Educating PSTs in this area is critically important, given the number of accounts followed that speak more to being an influencer than being a trained professional.

The 14 specifically named accounts that students reported following can, based on the number of followers, be considered "influencers". Peter & Muth (2023) point to multiple definitions of influencers, however, their inclusion of Schach's (2018) description of influencers as "individuals who, due to their digital network, personality strength, topic expertise, and communicative activity, have perceived credibility regarding certain topics and can make them accessible to a broad group of people through digital channels" (Peter & Muth, 2023, p. 165) best fits with the focus of this paper. Peter & Muth suggest that influencers can be conceptualized as opinion leaders who "range somewhere between friend and role models, which is why followers are more likely to trust their recommendations" (p.165). This trust and perceived credibility can provide influencers with the "ability to shape and change their follower's behavior with their content" (Durau 2022,

p. 212). This ability was clear in many of the PST's comments explaining why they followed the accounts they follow. Many respondents indicated they followed accounts because the accounts provided "motivation," "advice," or "help." Additionally, a few respondents commented specifically on the personality of the individual(s) running the accounts as the reason for following the account.

The lack of credentials for the followed accounts, however, is concerning. Only two stated followed accounts were connected to professional mental health practitioners; the others were generally *average* individuals with no clear training in the elements of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018) in which PSTs listed them as an account followed. This lack of training was especially glaring in the social media account of a former lawyer who has millions of followers and is well known for offering life advice.

Another concern connected to influencer-run social media accounts is the general lack of transparency. While influencers present themselves as friends and role models (Peter & Muth, 2023), the reality influencers present is highly curated and commonly considered a "highlight reel" publicly showing the highs while keeping the lows private. Influencers are concerned with engagement and follower numbers. These concerns do not lend themselves to radical honesty. This is not to say that every influencer-run account is smoke and mirrors, but as a whole, influencers are less likely to post content showing the full reality of their lives.

The responses of PSTs indicate they truly listen to and are influenced by the accounts they follow. This speaks to one of many reasons why teacher educator programs should and could better support their PSTs by vetting popular accounts offering self-care, mental health, psychological, and health advice and creating a curated list of accounts specifically connected to well-being from individuals with recognized training and certifications within their specific areas of knowledge and expertise. Such a list may help PSTs better connect with high-quality and honest support to improve or maintain their well-being.

Self-Care

Most respondents ranked regulation: utilizing strategies to calm down and cope with stress as the most important element of self-care. This ranking interconnects with the accounts the preservice teachers reported following. For example, the top categories of followed accounts included accounts that contributed to PSTs having supportive relationships and self-compassion, calm awareness of their thoughts, and practicing mindful relaxation, all of which support regulation. Many of the statements about dimensions of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018) to which PSTs responded positively connect with regulation (i.e., time with supportive people, reminders that failure is part of life, manageable schedule, balance desires and demands of others). Further, PSTs' stated self-care practices such as exercise, beauty routines, proper sleep, and journaling can help with self-regulation (Ishizawa, et al. 2012; Oaten & Cheng, 2006). This indicates that while PSTs may be unsure of the definition of self-care, some are practicing elements of it.

Other responses indicated that pre-service teachers not only did not understand the concept of self-care, but were in possible need of intervention. For example, one PST reported dedicating two days a week to washing their hair, another reported taking care of their hygiene, and a third reported being excited about taking a shower and doing their hair and make-up on the same day. This suggests that the PSTs may be so over-stressed that basic grooming is the highest level of self-care of which they are capable. Interviews with students would help bring clarity to these types of statements. Ensuring teachers have skills to care for their students as well as themselves— both

personally and professionally—is critically important if we have the goal of sending field-ready, transformative educators out into the profession. When teachers have stronger self-care habits, they are better able to work with children who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as those who come from culturally diverse backgrounds (Turner & Theilking, 2019). They are also more likely to have the skills and determination to stay in the profession long-term (Jackman, 2022), a critical need given the current teacher shortage across much of the United States. Clearly, self-care is much bigger than just taking care of oneself.

While trends and hashtags are great, they don't compare to educative spaces that make clear what is and is not beneficial to health and well-being. In order to build a future workforce of teachers who are not only sound in their professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions, but also in their personal care habits, continuing to learn more about this issue is critical.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the small number of respondents to the survey, as well as the limited nature of the survey. Also, a high portion of the respondents identified as female. A larger number of respondents in general and specifically a larger number of respondents who identify as male would provide increased generalizability. Additionally, participants in the study anonymously self-reported which may have caused problems with validity as participants may not understand the questions, lack the self-awareness to assess their stress and self-care practices, and/or feel uncomfortable discussing their mental health practices even in an anonymous format. Removing the anonymity of the survey would have allowed us to hold post-survey focus groups, which would have allowed respondents to clarify and elaborate on their self-care practices. Additionally, asking the students to share the accounts they follow on social media would have allowed us to better code the accounts for connections to self-care and well-being. Head et al. (1996) pointed out that reliability and validity are difficulties in assessing stress in pre-service teaching candidates. Representation of respondents, student recognition of stress, and how to respond to it are all difficult to assess via survey in reliable and valid ways. This is also true for assessing participant enactment of self-care strategies. While we attempt to specifically address elements of well-being, we must consider that students follow social media accounts and participate in self-care tasks that they do not consider self-care, and vice versa.

Implications for Practice and Research

Multiple studies have shown that teacher self-care practices are critical but have not fully investigated how teachers come to these practices. Future studies need to continue to examine not only self-care practices, but teachers' understandings of what self-care is and the resources used to support self-care. Directions for future studies include additional survey questions that ask preservice teachers to share demographic information such as first-generation college student status and eligibility for PELL grants, the rating of their stress before starting their education preparation program, during their program, and currently (if an in-service teacher), as well as their beliefs about how teachers care for themselves. Additionally, conducting structured interviews, coding of followed social media accounts, and longitudinal data collection that follows pre-service teachers into their first years of teaching will improve the quality of the data.

Additional survey questions and interviews will allow respondents to better clarify and elaborate on their self-care practices, which in turn will support a deeper understanding of self-

care practices and perceptions. A longitudinal study that follows pre-service teachers through field experiences, internship/student teaching, and their first three years of professional teaching will increase the data on how self-care practices build on and support the whole teacher.

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Appendix

Quantitative Questions	Multiple Choice Responses
Before beginning, please share some general information about yourself and your program of study. First, gender identity:	Female Male Non-binary Choose not to say
Before beginning, please share some general information about yourself and your program of study. Next, preparing to teach at what level:	Elementary School Middle School High School
Before beginning, please share some general information about yourself and your program of study. Finally, preparing to teach what content:	General Education (elementary, all content areas) ELA Math Science History Art Foreign Language
What social media apps do you use on a regular basis? (Select all that apply.)	Instagram Snapchat Tik Tok Facebook Reddit Other (please specify)
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I practice good physical care.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I spend time with people who are supportive, encourage me, and/or believe in me.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I remind myself that failure and challenge are part of the human experience.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I keep my work/school space organized.	A value between 1 - 10.

With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I maintain a manageable schedule.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I maintain a balance between the demands of others and what is important to me.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I practice effective self-care.	A value between 1 - 10.
How often do you participate in self-care during the week?	1 time each week 2 times each week 3 times each week 4 times each week 5+ times each week
Do you follow individuals on social media that are connected to your self-care?	Yes No
Rank the following elements of self-care by which you feel is most important.	Reflection: noticing your reactions and patterns so that you can plan for self-care Regulation: utilizing strategies to calm down and cope with stress Relaxation: engaging in activities that bring joy, play, and connection
Qualitative Questions	**Response Type**
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you being physically active? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you having supportive relationships? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you having a calm awareness of your thoughts? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you having self-compassion? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended

Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you practicing mindful relaxation? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you maintaining a manageable schedule? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you maintaining an organized space for work/school tasks? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you maintaining a balance between the demands of others and what is important to you? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Please describe your self-care practices.	Open-ended
If yes, please describe who you follow and why [Follow up to quantitative question: Do you follow individuals on social media that are connected to your self-care?]	Open-ended

Monkeywrenching the Curriculum:
Curricular Subversion as an Act of Care

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Abstract

In the era of education dominated by high stakes testing and accountability, homogenized and scripted pedagogy, and narrowed academic standards, achieving curricular relevance for particular students and classrooms is increasingly difficult for educators. This conceptual analysis suggests that the practice of monkeywrenching, borrowed from environmental activism, can serve as an action by teachers to address this challenge. Monkeywrenching consists of direct action subversion, applied to curricula for the sake of specific students, and is constituted as an act of care as described by Nel Noddings. Specific consideration of sustainability education indicates that curriculum subversion through monkeywrenching can be a powerful tool in demonstrating care for place and students.

Keywords: *action, agency, environmental curriculum, sustainability curriculum, curriculum implementation, curriculum theory, place-based education*

> *There comes a time in a man's life when he has to pull up stakes. Has to light out. Has to stop straddling, and start cutting, fence*
> (Abbey, 2006 p. 99).

Edward Abbey offered this phrase in his iconic work *The Monkey Wrench Gang. The Monkey Wrench Gang* has served as inspiration for many environmental activist groups for nearly half a century (Irvine, 2018). Although influential for organizations such as the Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front (Joosse, 2014), the concept of monkeywrenching has not been utilized as an educational or a curricular lens. Thinking about the times within an educator's classroom experience when it is time for them to *pull up stakes* from high stakes testing and accountability, homogenized and scripted pedagogy, and narrowed academic standards has been explored by critical educational scholars from multiple perspectives. The challenge for contemporary teachers involves when and how to *light out* and *stop straddling and start cutting* curricular fences.

Within the institutions of education, we currently find society placing demands on teachers and students that are out of alignment with traditional expectations. The cultural scripts that have traditionally been available to educators are being replaced by more "efficient" and automated scripts. These scripts are the mechanisms used to sustain hegemonic conditions and contexts. The professional ideals within this institutional framing are fidelity of implementation and instructional

alignment. Issues within schooling like effective teacher rubrics, high impact/leverage practices, and the accountability mechanisms of standardized testing illustrate the framing and foreclosing of potential that educators face. This institutional framing disrupts the project of justice and liberation. Also, as Santiago Rincon-Gallardo (2019) argues, the demands of standardized testing and employability limit how learning is valued for its own sake. He states, "Learning is rarely seen as an intrinsic value, a liberating act, a deliberate practice with larger societal implications" (p. 4). Liberating learning from the acquiescence of historic political-economic expectations and hegemonic standards and outcomes will require the recognition of the impact of systems of oppression tied to neoliberalism, white supremacy, and colonialism. As a society, we have failed to consider the relationships involved in justice and liberation as a concern central to the purpose, process, and mission of schooling. Educators need to recognize when, how, and why it is time to *pull up stakes* and *start cutting fences.*

In his text *Scripted Bodies: Corporate Power, Smart Technologies, and the Undoing of Public Education* (2017), Kenneth Saltman provides an insightful analysis of the ringfencing of education that has occurred. The need for a strategy like monkeywrenching to counter the repressive enclosure of schooling becomes evident if we intentionally consider the immediate, local context of education. As Saltman writes:

> In a society theoretically committed to democracy, all schools should be teaching youth to not only engage in dialogue, debate, and questioning but also to relate knowledge to lived experience, broader social realities, and the material and symbolic contests that structure it. Repressive pedagogies succeed in isolating knowledge from the subjective and objective conditions that give rise to it. (p. 11)

Cutting fences will require the reacquaintance of curriculum with the local. The place and the immediate students that occupy the classroom deserve prioritization and the intentional consideration of educators.

Paulo Paraskeva's text *Curriculum and the Generation of Utopia: Interrogating the Current State of Critical Curriculum Theory* (2021) provides those interested in transgressing and overthrowing the hegemony, of *pulling up stakes* and *lighting out,* with a map of obstacles and pitfalls that have prevented success. Emphasizing the failure of critical curriculum studies to unseat the neoliberal hegemony despite its significant disruption of the common modes of being and doing within school, Paraskeva gestures toward the epistemicide that has decimated education and continues to foreclose and oppress through the epistemic privilege of the coloniality matrix of power. Monkeywrenching provides educators with an immediate and intention-driven intervention strategy to disrupt the hegemony as enacted within classrooms.

Themes of Monkeywrenching

The Monkey Wrench Gang tells the story of a group of environmental vigilantes, including the legendary George Hayduke, the fictional character in Edward Abbey's novel. Hayduke represents a brand of individualism that valorizes working independently yet he works through his skeptical hesitance to collaborate with co-conspirators. Hayduke works with the monkey wrench gang to impede the process of industrial development through the destruction and sabotage of bulldozers, power plants, trains, technology, and infrastructure. Although the characters in the book turn

toward destruction and violence, as have some groups who claim the work as inspiration, the concept of monkeywrenching itself does not equate to wanton destruction or sabotage (Lemke, 2017). Within critical theory when we cite "violence" the intent is anything that prevents individuals from achieving or recognizing their authentic potentiality, or living their identity with integrity. Anti-violence seeks to recognize, limit, and, when possible, remediate when trauma, pain, hurt, and harm occur due to the actions of agents within shared systems. This violence occurs intentionally and unintentionally as systems become more entrenched and hegemonic. Within the current hegemony, the system consistently inflicts violence, fencing in stakeholders and limiting their/our agency.

Stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, community members, and citizens) are challenged to find a language, an action, through which to register dissent. As is evident in the prominent, though politically and ideologically charged, call for increased parental and student rights, the system has been designed to limit stakeholder agency. Attempts to protest tend to lodge complaints in the language of academic standards and standardized test scores. As stakeholders advocate for the sanctity of local education in opposition to homogenized and standardized schooling, they are ensnared in a debate that devolves into the mundane and banal. This is a captured narrative. Hegemony is totalizing. It captures not only the language, the metrics, and structures of the institutional system, but the ontology, epistemology, and axiology through which we attempt to make sense of it.

The voice of the powerless needs to speak a different language in order to fracture the hegemony of the system. By continuing to speak the language of the system, the language of standards, fidelity, test scores, and accountability, dissent only serves to support the system. The ideology requires and embeds the resistance that takes the form of alternative narrative. When stakeholders speak of competing systems, transgressive, fugitive, or abolitionist alternatives, the ideology of competition can be implicitly legitimized. When educators compare test scores and academic outcomes, they legitimize the ideology of standardization. Within education there are multiple, diverse, and generative experiences that can form a counter-narrative that fractures and disrupts the hegemonic ideology (Parkison, 2013).

Table 1 helps illustrate the ways in which different theoretical traditions emphasize teacher agency and social justice.

Table 1: *Theoretical Traditions Emphasizing Critical Teacher Agency*

Theoretical Tradition	Key Concepts	Key Thinkers	Teacher Agency Focus	Goals	Social Justice Emphasis
Critical Pedagogy	Education as liberation-Critical consciousness (conscientização)- Dialogical learning- Oppression and power dynamics	Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Henry Giroux	Teachers as facilitators of critical dialogue, challenging oppression	Transforming educational structures to promote equity and empowerment	Challenging oppressive power structures (class, race, gender)

Theoretical Tradition	Key Concepts	Key Thinkers	Teacher Agency Focus	Goals	Social Justice Emphasis
Abolitionist Pedagogy	Abolition of punitive systems, Restorative justice, Reimagining education as a liberatory space, Radical imagination	Bettina Love, Angela Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal	Teachers as agents of resistance to punishment, creating restorative, community-centered learning environments	Dismantling punitive and oppressive educational practices; creating alternative, equitable models	Dismantling school-to-prison pipeline, advocating for restorative justice
Transformative Learning Theory	Critical reflection, Transformation of perspectives, Personal and social change	Jack Mezirow, Paulo Freire (influential)	Teachers as facilitators of transformative learning, promoting critical reflection	Encouraging deep, transformative shifts in thinking, identity, and action	Empowerment through critical reflection and challenging societal norms
Post-structural and Feminist Theories	Power and discourse, Identity and agency. Intersectionality	Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, bell hooks	Teachers as agents of change who deconstruct norms and challenge power structures	Transforming education through critical engagement with power, identity, and representation	Addressing gender, race, class inequalities and subverting hegemonic structures
Critical Race Theory (CRT)	Racism as central to societal structures, Intersectionality, Counter-storytelling	Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, Gloria Ladson-Billings	Teachers as agents who disrupt racial inequities in education, promote racial justice	Understanding and dismantling racism in education and society	Advocating for racial justice, decolonizing curricula, empowering marginalized students
Restorative Justice Education	Healing, accountability, and repairing harm, Building community and relationships	Howard Zehr, John Braithwaite	Teachers as facilitators of restorative processes, creating safe and supportive environments	Replacing punitive measures with restorative practices for conflict resolution	Promoting healing, reconciliation, and justice in educational settings

(OpenAI, 2025)

While each theory may have a unique focus, they share common goals of promoting equity, challenging oppression, and fostering transformative educational practices. Teacher agency in these contexts is not just about individual action but is deeply intertwined with intentional efforts to create more just and inclusive educational systems. Each tradition emphasizes teacher agency in different ways.

Monkeywrenching, from this perspective, is distinctly counter-hegemonic and counter-violent. It is best to identify monkeywrenching as direct action, motivated by care, and intentionally symbolic in nature. Direct action in the case of monkeywrenching refers to actions which do not use official or policy channels to enact change, but instead work to cause the change directly without asking for permission. These actions are intentional attempts to disrupt the system, to *pull up stakes.* Tree sitting is an example within environmental contexts. In the case of tree sitting, individuals directly stop logging in an area by occupying trees themselves as opposed to writing letters to policymakers. Several theories of teacher agency emphasize a critical stance and direct action, particularly those rooted in critical pedagogy, transformative learning, and sociocultural theories. These frameworks view teacher agency not just as the capacity to act within existing structures, but as the ability to critically evaluate and transform those structures in the pursuit of justice, equity, and empowerment.

Understanding the potential of monkeywrenching, or subversion, in education involves the recognition of Care as the intentional grounding of educator actions and agency. Nel Noddings' pedagogy of Care (Noddings, 2002; 2013) emphasizes the importance of fostering caring relationships within the educational process. It challenges traditional views of teaching by promoting the idea that education should be a holistic practice that nurtures not just intellectual growth but also emotional, moral, and social development. Through Care, educators can create a learning environment that empowers students to become compassionate, engaged, and responsible individuals. In actions motivated by Care, educator intention is foundational to how the relationship between teacher and student develops and how curriculum subversions are integrated into the learning environment. Educators must have the intention to create an atmosphere of Care where students feel safe, valued, and respected. Educators' actions are guided by their commitment to prioritize the well-being of students. Educators must intentionally foster relationships, showing genuine interest in students' personal lives, concerns, and emotions. Educators must intentionally listen, empathize, and be responsive to students' needs. By acting with intention, educators set an example for students, teaching them not only academic content but also how to care for others and respond to different emotional and social situations. Educators must reflect on their intentions to ensure they are creating an environment that truly supports student well-being. If intentions are misaligned with the needs of the students, reflection helps adjust practices. The intentionality with which educators approach their role is what makes Care central to monkeywrenching and specific curriculum subversions in education (hooks, 1994). Without intentionality, care may become passive or superficial rather than a transformative element in the learning process.

Though this Care is a *periphery politics*, excluded by the system's ideology, it is essentially an intentional manifestation of concern for the immediate stakeholders. It is on this periphery that concrete causes (relationships, community, sustainability, wellness, and justice) gain access to the political realm and create fractures and potential openings to authentic politics and thus education. As Vaclav Havel writes in "Disturbing the Peace:"

> We introduced a new model of behavior: don't get involved in diffuse general ideological polemics with the center, to whom numerous concrete causes are always being sacrificed;

fight "only" for those concrete causes, and be prepared to fight for them unswervingly, to the end. In other words, don't get mixed up in backroom wheeling and dealing, but play an open game. (Havel, 1990, p. 83)

By playing in the open, the concrete issues can stand as an example of the domination that an ideology maintains over the human element of the world. Monkeywrenching provides teachers with an authentic pathway to participate in shaping curriculum that is foreclosed by standardization, commodified curriculum content, and high-stakes accountability systems. Guided by the intention of Care, subversion becomes intentionally symbolic by playing in the open, when educators stop straddling, and start cutting, fence. Teachers gain agency in their monkeywrenching subversion.

Referring to monkeywrenching as intentionally symbolic actions is not to imply that they are superficial or vain, but rather that they are actions which are meant to be seen, actions which embody local meanings and significance. Monkeywrenching is a way of demonstrating the presence of latent values or marginalized voices where it is perceived that official curricula and systems are inadequate, too slow, or contributing to the marginalization of those voices. In the more extreme examples of monkeywrenching, such as organizations like the Earth Liberation Front, organizations actively claim their actions, even when illegal. Monkeywrenching is not just about reaching a particular outcome, it involves making visible the process necessary to reach outcomes, sanctioned and unsanctioned. Intentionality on the part of the educator is the crucial element. Awareness and a willingness to make public the subversive actions being taken for and with stakeholders is crucial.

Education Monkeywrenching: Curriculum Subversion

In applying the themes of monkeywrenching to classroom settings, it is important to start with emphasizing that all three elements 1) direct action, 2) motivated by care, 3) done in an intentionally symbolic manner must be present. With respect to curriculum subversion, it is helpful to refer back to Abbey's quote which started the article. In many ways, the structures and intentions of curricula, particularly commercial standardized curricula, can be thought of as fences. Curricula restrict or constrain what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is represented. As with physical fences, some of these restrictions are necessary, but "There comes a time in a man's life when he has to pull up stakes." For example, elementary science curricula should restrict topics such as molecular genetics or quantum mechanics as those are not developmentally appropriate nor likely to contribute toward students developing a cohesive understanding of life or physical science. Although some of these curricular fences are necessary and useful, others are not (hooks, 1994). The first action in educational monkeywrenching is to not banally accept without intentional consideration a fence which bounds a curriculum (Parkison, 2019). There is the necessity of recognizing the potential that the fence inappropriately constrains a curriculum in a particular way, for specific students, within specific geographic settings and educational contexts.

In the spirit of monkeywrenching, educators who identify fences that ought naught exist for their particular students should take direct action to move or remove those barriers: "Has to light out. Has to stop straddling, and start cutting, fence." This direct action is different from submitting a request to curriculum review committees or administrators, but instead, within the daily practice of teaching the teacher makes the change (Gay, 2000; Sleeter, 2004; hooks, 1994). In the instructional arc (McConnell, Conrad, & Uhrmacher, 2020), these are changes which are made in

the operational curriculum. Although curricular materials and resources may contain many fences, it is only in the operationalization of that curriculum that students are made to experience those fences.

Monkeywrenching: A Curriculum Subversion Strategy for Educators

The obvious question to ask in considering educational monkeywrenching is why would a teacher utilize a curriculum which needs to be subverted? In fact, there are many alternatives to curricular structures, such as a fluid curriculum (Conrad et al., 2023), which would better serve educators and their students and make monkeywrenching unnecessary. However, in the era of education dominated by high stakes testing and accountability, homogenized and scripted pedagogy, and narrowed academic standards, decisions about what curriculum is to be used are made further and further from educators and local communities (Sleeter, 2004). Those decisions are often made with little consideration or specificity toward a particular educational setting. As a result, curriculum subversion in the current education era is an intentional action, guided by Care, and performed with the awareness of stakeholders for the purpose of making changes necessary to serve particular students in specific classrooms.

Curriculum subversion is offered as an alternative to the often-preached fidelity of implementation within strict curriculum and pedagogical guidelines. The phrase fidelity of implementation implies that educators have a compliant obligation or responsibility to a mandated curriculum. Subversion implies that educators' responsibility is directed toward something else, ideally their students and community. An educator intentionally chooses to subvert a curriculum not because they personally disagree with it, but because in its standardized form it does not attend to the full needs and experiences of their particular students (hooks, 1994; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Parkison, 2008).

Typology of Curriculum Subversion: Recognizing Educator Agency

It would be difficult to find educators that do not express being motivated by Care for their students and that use Care in guiding instructional decisions. Monkeywrenching in the form of curricular subversion has the opportunity to be an act of Care, but only when done in a way that students, parents, or a community are able to see the way in which the educator is changing curriculum to better serve the needs of their specific students. In recognition of this act of Care there is also the potential for those individuals to see educators as not just deliverers of curriculum, but as intentional agents working on behalf of and with students and their communities.

Teacher agency refers to an educator's capacity to make informed, independent decisions, take initiative, and adapt teaching strategies to meet the needs of their students and the goals of the community *and* curriculum. It encompasses their ability to:

- Reflect on and refine their practices.
- Navigate constraints (e.g., policies, standardized testing).
- Advocate for and implement changes to improve educational outcomes.

Teacher agency is highly relevant in the context of educator intention because it represents the ability to act purposefully and autonomously within the constraints of their educational environ-

ment. Teacher agency influences how intentions are realized in practice and how effectively educators can adapt to and shape the curriculum structure. Educators with high agency can align their intentions (e.g., fostering critical thinking, nurturing holistic growth) with their instructional choices. Agency enables teachers to interpret and adapt curriculum guidelines to fit the classroom context.

In recognizing curriculum subversion as an intentional act of Care it becomes clear that not all curricular modification meets the criteria set forth here. There are many times that curricula are modified for logistical reasons, to fit different timelines, or even just to make things easier for the teacher. These types of modifications do not meet the criteria of curriculum subversion as they are not motivated by Care, but instead logistics or ease. In contrast to these types of modifications, educational monkeywrenching represents a more professional and political act as it consists of actions motivated by Care, not convenience.

Although these actions can be motivated by Care, they do not meet the criteria established by Noddings's (2002; 2013) work to say care is the motivation. Without the intentional, performative, and political element of monkeywrenching, for all the students know the tasks and resources they are presented are those designated within the mandated curriculum. Unless the teacher is vulnerable in the performance of their subversion, it is impossible for students to recognize the intentional act of Care.

Table 2 provides a taxonomy of educator agency which helps to frame the efforts of teachers as they monkeywrench the curriculum to meet the immediate needs of their students and community.

Table 2: *Taxonomy of Educator Agency*

Type	Common Features	Curriculum Structures	Teacher Intention	Examples
Knowledge and Content-Centered	Structured content delivery, mastery of essentials	Subject-centered, Core Curriculum, Outcomes-based	Deliver subject knowledge, ensure mastery of content, and meet predefined objectives	High school subject divisions (e.g., Biology, History); general education requirements in college.
Learner-Centered and Growth-Oriented	Focus on individual needs, holistic development	Learner-Centered, Humanistic, Activity-based	Facilitate exploration, foster personal growth, and empower students to take ownership of learning	Montessori schools; social-emotional learning programs; project-based learning activities.
Problem-Solving and Skills-Based	Real-world application, skill acquisition	Problem-centered, Competency-based	Develop critical thinking, real-world problem-solving skills, and ensure skill mastery	STEM projects like designing solar devices; vocational training programs for certification.

Type	Common Features	Curriculum Structures	Teacher Intention	Examples
Integrated and Progressive	Connecting ideas, building understanding progressively	Integrated/ Interdisciplinary, Spiral	Create interdisciplinary connections, deepen understanding over time, and reinforce core concepts	Thematic units integrating science, literature, and policy; progressively complex math topics.
Implicit and Hidden Influences	Indirect lessons, cultural or social norms	Hidden Curriculum	Model values, shape behaviors, and convey implicit lessons through environment and interactions	Emphasis on punctuality through attendance rules; modeling respect through teacher-student interactions.

There are two aspects of curricula which can be subverted: the impacts and the structure. With regard to impacts, curricula are often presented as having purely academic intentions (i.e. to teach students to read or do math), however there are numerous implicit impacts which may be less obvious and not as objective as presented. In particular, all curricula have impacts related to the teaching of place (Clay, 2023). In many cases, the message about place is that it is irrelevant to academic success or perhaps that success can only be found by moving to particular places (i.e. areas with higher education institutions or greater economic opportunity). The implicit impacts of curricula in these cases are for students to not think about place. Related to the analogy of fences, the curricular fences restrict intentional teaching of place. In recognizing these impacts, a teacher might choose to subvert the apparent placelessness by including activities where students consider concepts within the context of their communities or activities which seek to foster engagement and connection with their surroundings.

Structures in curricula which teachers might choose to subvert include both organization and assessment. This is particularly true in curricula which use standardized assessment that rely only on particular types of questions. A teacher might recognize that some of their students will be better able to represent their understanding in other formats (Eisner, 1994). In that case, the subversion is in cutting the metaphorical fence which says 'learning can only be demonstrated this way.' Even in cases where there might be formal structures that allow for modifying assessments, such as students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP), the particulars of an assignment, topic, or even particular point in time may require a teacher to subvert an assessment beyond the formally approved modifications. This is particularly true when the changes need to be made on a timescale much faster than formal IEP writing and rewriting process.

Implications for Teacher Evaluation

In recognizing the potential for curricular monkeywrenching as an act of care, and more specifically an act of care in response to the needs of students or a community, it is important to

consider how current teacher evaluation practices recognize, or fail to recognize, this skill of educators as well as how evaluation structures may or may not encourage this practice. In the standardization era of education, teacher evaluation is often reduced to quantifiable metrics and rubrics (Schneider, 2017). Many of these evaluation measures focus on the elements which form ideas or images of what constitutes good teaching, but may not actually identify effective teaching itself (Gottlieb, 2015). As related to curricula, these metrics can be thought of as evaluating how effectively a teacher delivered the curriculum. However, in the case of standardized curricula, that metric would measure (or more fairly claim to measure) how effectively a teacher delivered a curriculum which was not designed for their students and not designed for their school.

As with most standardized elements of education, the focus in teacher evaluation is presented as evaluating teaching that would be 'good' in any school. However, the reality is that teachers need not be good for any school, they should be great for the particular students which are in front of them. In this light, we argue teacher evaluation should include points of evaluation specifically related to the ways in which teachers did *not* deliver the curriculum as intended. Whether modifications or additions of resources, experiences, or assessments, the true professional skill of an educator with a curriculum is not delivering it as intended by the curriculum writers, but instead actualizing a version that meets the needs of their students and community.

Additionally, if educators should be encouraged to subvert curricula as written to serve the needs of their students, it is important for administrators to create a culture in which they feel safe to do so. Administrators through demonstrated support have the opportunity to reduce the perceived risk for teachers. This could be through asking and encouraging teachers to change curricula and to clarify that as an administrator they understand that subversion of standardized curricula need not be perceived as subversion of themselves or their leadership.

Conclusion

Teaching as a craft has always consisted of creating meaningful and engaging experiences for the students in a particular classroom. Although that aim has not changed, with increasingly standardized curricula, the starting point for most teachers is now something that, by definition, was not designed for the students in front of them. By no means does this mean that impactful teaching is no longer possible, as there are numerous examples daily of educators doing amazing work. However, this change does demonstrate that creating meaningful and engaging experiences for a particular classroom of students requires a different skillset. Teachers must recognize the metaphorical fences in their curricula which might prevent students from having these types of experiences and, as Abbey suggested, start cutting.

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