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SWARTHMORE

Contents

About #CritEdPol

#CritEdPol, Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies at Swarthmore College is an open access journal published by the Critical Education Policies Studies (CEPS) group at Swarthmore College. #CritEdPol is a space for critical discussions of education policies and education-related issues, and their relationships to various communities and educational practice. The journal is focused on undergraduates and practitioners in fields related to education policy.

Doing critical education policy studies is an evolving perspective that counters views that frame policy as apolitical, intrinsically technical, rational, action-oriented instruments that decision makers use to solve problems and affect change[1]. Instead we view policy as social phenomena that are connected to socio-historical context, ideologies, institutions, and individuals involved in the formation and implementation of policy. As such, through our journal we seek policy papers and other texts (video, audio/podcast, photo narratives, etc) created primarily by undergraduates and education advocates: youth, parents, educators, activists, policy makers, etc—. We will also, to a limited extent, consider submissions by graduate students and early career scholars. Our intention is to have a broad appeal in order to make education policy accessible and encourage cross-sector conversations and collaborations.

Following the publication of its first issue, #CritEdPol will have a double-blind peer-reviewed section for undergraduate students (and graduate students), as well as an invitational section for education practitioners in the field. The journal is published in association with bepress and the Swarthmore College libraries (Pennsylvania, USA). #CritEdPol will publish two issues per year starting June 2016.

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[1]Inspired by Shore, C., & Wright, S. (1997). *Anthropology of policy: Critical perspectives on governance and power.* London; New York: Routledge.

Editor's Introduction

It is with the utmost joy that I welcome readers to the first issue of #CritEdPol, A Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies at Swarthmore College. After nearly 15 years of educator-scholar-activism (Suzuki & Mayorga, 2014) in New York City, I arrived at Swarthmore College in August of 2014 ready to teach, research, and engage in addressing the social conditions that shape education and the broader society. I do not privilege any one area of "the work" over the others, but instead attempt to *hacer trenza* (braid) these different strands (Gonzalez, 1998). I approach working with my students as invitation to do this kind of braiding work, and thus was born the Critical Education Policy Studies group (CEPS) and soon after our journal #CritEdPol.

So what is the purpose of #CritEdPol and what do we, the CEPS study group, mean by critical education policy studies? #CritEdPol is an open access, online, journal that centers on the perspectives and ideas of undergraduates and "on the ground" education advocates (teachers, youth, families, organizational activists, etc) as a means to make education policy accessible to a broader cross-section of people invested in the issues that shape education today. As we mention in our description of the journal, "#CritEdPol is a space for critical discussions of education policies and education-related issues, and their relationships to various communities and educational practice." By creating a space where the ideas and voices of those who are often directly affected by education policy formations but at the same time on the margins of policy, we hope to contribute to enriching policy conversation and being part of a push toward more responsive and just education policy.

But, what do we mean by doing critical education policy studies? To us, doing critical work is an evolving perspective that counters views that frame policy as apolitical, intrinsically technical, rational, action-oriented instruments used by decision makers to solve problems[2]. Instead we view policy as social phenomena that are connected to socio-historical context, ideologies, institutions, and individuals involved in the formation and implementation of policy. As such we are not so much thinking *about* policy but instead "thinking through" (Shore & Wright, 1997) educational policy and the many intricacies that are involved in forming a policy and its subsequent material and cultural effects.

Of course tied to thinking through policy is writing. Underlying the journal is the notion that "writing is thinking" (Stevens & Cooper, 2009). A common narrative

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[2]Inspired by Shore, C., & Wright, S. (1997). Anthropology of policy: Critical perspectives on governance and power. London; New York: Routledge.

about writing is that you only write when you have completed all research and are ready to "dump" all that you have learned into a formal paper. Moving away from this narrative I envision writing an article for #CritEdPol as a stopping point in a longer arch of inquiry that the author is following. In this first issue, I asked the authors to engage in a process of thinking and writing that follows our developing critical education policy framework. They were asked to, among other things, identify the policy problem, critique extant policy work, map who the policy actors involved in the issue are, and consider future directions.

The writing process in this issue was wonderfully supported by the good people at Swarthmore College's Writing Program. Under the guidance of Jill Gladstein, director of our Writing Program, and Maggie Christ, our indispensable Writing Associate (WA), the authors spent the last few months going through the process of drafting and refining their pieces (all while balancing their other academic work). After they had submitted their papers, the authors commented how much they enjoyed being able to think through both the content and structure of their writing. In the end this experience was, in my mind, a fine example of writing as thinking, and now that the pieces are presented in the journal the authors are inviting readers to think along with them.

The authors address education policy questions and problems that are as broad and deep as the field is. We begin with the fight for ethnic studies in California public schools. **Tania Uruchima** looks at this policy issue from two angles: the legislative push for the state to take action, and grassroots organizing by community organizers, students, teachers, parents, and others. Looking at the convergence of these two narratives, Uruchima argues that policy work in California must focus on funding and facilitating the centering of grassroots voices within this policy struggle.

Elias Blinkoff takes readers into the area of dyslexia on the state and federal levels. Blinkoff argues that "despite its prevalence as a language disorder characterized by impaired reading ability, researchers have struggled to define dyslexia, contributing to variability across state-level educational policies on dyslexia and preventing students with the disorder from being identified, and ultimately receiving appropriate intervention services"(p.20). Blinkoff suggests that there are important extant policies and pieces of legislation that can be used to move us forward in creating more optimal learning conditions for students with dyslexia.

Esteban Cabrera-Duran, then moves into the national question of recruiting and retaining teachers of color. Cabrera-Duran presents a case for recruiting teachers of color and examines the development and support for programs that would lower teacher turnover rates. What is most powerful in this piece is the recognition that this policy issue is about more than just diversity and inclusion of people of color in

the teaching force. Rather it is an issue deeply embedded in the effects of structural racism in education and our society.

Continuing with the theme of diversity, **Robert Zipp** examines the lack of diversity in gifted education. Zipp traces the development of gifted education in the United States and demonstrates how fraught and divided this aspects of education policy has been over the last century. Zipp proposes the implementation of overarching guidelines for gifted education programs in the United States based on a Controlled Choice model of admissions for gifted and talented programs that receive federal funding.

To close our first issue, we have a reflective piece by Swarthmore alumnae and educator-scholar-activist, **Sabrina Stevens**. Stevens reflects on her decade of work since graduating from Swarthmore, where she moves readers between being an emerging education scholar in Dr. Eva Travers Education Policy course at Swarthmore, to a young school teacher in Colorado, and to an education activist on multiple levels. While Stevens is not suggesting that her path is the only path or the best path, her narrative is powerfully grounded in an intellectual, political and affective spirit that is a tremendous guide to action for my students and anyone who reads this piece.

Ultimately, I hope that this first issue of #CritEdPol compels us all to imagine the "radical possibilities" (Anyon, 2014) that writing and research are, and can be, in policy work; pushing us all to engage policy formation and work to critique, strengthen or transform policy for a greater public good.

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Implementing Ethnic Studies in California Public Schools

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Abstract

This paper explores the fight for ethnic studies in California public schools from two angles: the legislative push for the state to take action, and grassroots organizing by community organizers, students, teachers, parents, and others. Considering the success of grassroots organizing in implementing ethnic studies programming on a district-by-district basis, in contrast with the stalling of legislative action, I propose a policy move that mobilizes the state to actively support local organizing within individual districts. California educational law mandates the deliberate engagement of targeted stakeholders in local school decision-making. Therefore, the state should fund and facilitate the regular convening of relevant grassroot actors to be able to form purposeful coalitions towards implementation. Building and sharing collective knowledge on the ethnic studies movement allows us to take advantage of existing knowledge to inform future practice as the movement works to expand in schools who might otherwise not have the resources on their own to begin.

Keywords: ethnic studies, California public schools

1. The Problem of Implementing Ethnic Studies

Ethnic studies has become widely recognized for its educational and social benefits in providing students an academic program that centralizes the salience of race and the experiences of people of color (de los Ríos et al., 2015). The struggle towards ethnic studies is not a new one—student protests on the secondary school level have occurred since the period of the civil rights movement as a way to move away from race-neutral curricular content in U.S. schools (de los Ríos et al., 2015).

Ethnic studies courses are interdisciplinary and focus on the experiences of people of color, looking at identity-related issues and the histories of groups that have traditionally not been taught (Donald, 2016). What is especially distinctive in ethnic studies courses is that they largely "aim to enhance social and political awareness" by using culturally relevant pedagogy, or pedagogy that seeks to connect students' out-of-school experiences with what happens inside the classroom (Wilson, 2016). In doing so, ethnic studies coursework engages with the idea that students need to "learn America's inconvenient and necessary truths," as sociology professor Camille Charles puts it (as cited in Anderson, 2016). Beyond simply studying histories of oppression, there is also a focus on people's struggles and movements towards social justice (Dee & Penner 2016).

Ethnic studies' reputation is not without controversy, and its reception varies from state to state. However, in California's public schools, the fight for ethnic studies curriculum has been steadily moving towards mainstream incorporation by schools and the state. There has been a push on multiple levels for schools to offer courses that reflect the perspectives of California's extremely diverse student populations. Various actors like lawmakers, teachers, administrators, and students have all been working to include ethnic studies in some way in schools. This has been met with moderate success, as there has been implementation of ethnic studies on a local, district-by-district basis, but it has failed to be broadly institutionalized on the state level.

In light of the state of California's resistance to take on the project of defining and implementing ethnic studies curricula, I ask three broad questions regarding ethnic studies policy. In what way do we envision ethnic studies being institutionalized, either on the local or state level? What are the strategies that will bring us to the realization of that goal? And, lastly, what is the role of the state in backing ethnic studies? This policy proposal seeks to take into account both the reluctance of the state and the strength of grassroots mobilization by proposing a way to support the mobilization of local actors with the institutional backing of the state. I propose that by asking for the state of California's financial and strategic support for existing grassroots movements, we would be able to engage in more rapid and politically viable avenues to pursue the goal of providing ethnic studies curriculum to students. Doing so would allow us to take advantage of the momentum of existing successful local movements, bypassing (for the moment) the slow bureaucracy of a reluctant state in favor of creating infrastructure that would

continuously support the efforts of enthusiastic stakeholders like students, teachers, and parents.

2. Background

In this section, I briefly review the scholarship that illustrates the specific benefits of ethnic studies before reviewing the landscape of current ethnic studies implementation in California. I conclude by discussing why ethnic studies is urgently needed, particularly in light of California's specific demographics.

The justification that propels the fight for ethnic studies includes research that shows that a well-designed ethnic studies program has strong academic benefits in supporting critical thinking in all students (Sleeter, 2011). Further, there are definitive social benefits to engaging with ethnic studies content, as students often experience a personal change in the way they view and engage with the world because of the ideas they are exposed to (Sleeter, 2011). Students of color can also feel their racial or ethnic identity validated by the introduction of this content in schools that may have previously felt unengaging (Molina, 2014; Hay, 2015). There is a myriad of other benefits that cross social and academic borders. For instance, in a pilot program for at-risk youth, ethnic studies courses not only boost GPA, but also have helped reduce unexcused absences (Clark, 2015). These same students also performed better in math and science, leading researchers to note that overall, positive results to this magnitude are rarely if ever seen in other interventions with at-risk youth (Wilson, 2016).

Ethnic studies courses are already offered throughout the state of California, but only haphazardly. In 2013, approximately 100 schools offered over 400 ethnic studies courses, with a total enrollment of over 4300 students (Caesar, 2014). The practical aspect of offering ethnic studies can take a number of different forms, from a single, mandatory, all-encompassing ethnic studies course, to more specialized and elective niche courses in larger schools. For instance, Appendix A shows a current list of ethnic studies courses offered by the Los Angeles Unified School District that count towards its new ethnic studies graduation requirement. In this example, there are a range of levels available, up to Advanced Placement languages and cultures, as well as a diversity in the ethnic and racial groups being studied. In this district, ethnic studies is not merely incorporated into history curriculum, but it also exists

and is validated as a separate study of literatures, cultures, and languages as well.

The explicit focus on studying nonwhite histories is important because 75% of California's public student body is composed of students of color, a dynamic that should not be ignored, and further, should be actively reflected in curricula (see Appendix B). Though the lack of standardization is frustrating in that students are not benefitting equally from the same courses, it also presents an opening for intervention in which we are able to see the test-runs of how different districts approach the same goal of implementation.

3. Pre-Existing Policies & Actors

In thinking about what infrastructure already exists in the ethnic studies movement, we can transition to examining the grassroots efforts occurring among invested local stakeholders like students, teachers, and community groups. Turning to some specific school districts as examples illustrates how communities push for and enact these policies, and also demonstrates how the logistics of implementation prove to be a significant challenge for many districts. In this section I also look at the failures in the legislative push for ethnic studies as a statewide effort.

Grassroots actors have been pushing school boards to consider further implementation of ethnic studies programs into individual school districts. This approach has been successful in that there have been eight school districts that, independent of the state, have created ethnic studies graduation requirements for their students. These school districts include some of the largest in California, like Los Angeles Unified, San Francisco Unified, Sacramento Unified, and Oakland Unified. In this section, I look at a few different examples—Santa Rosa City, San Francisco, and El Rancho Unified—to see more specifically how each district achieved implementation in their schools.

Santa Rosa City is one example of a district where the school board deliberated over the incorporation of ethnic studies as either an elective or a graduation requirement (Hay, 2015). A local community coalition organization had been pushing an ethnic studies proposal since March 2015, which meant engaging in talks with teachers and the school board over what form it could take, and how to develop an accompanying curriculum. It took the involvement of youth organizers and university professors to work out what the course could look like. A coordinator from Ethnic Studies Now (2015), a coalition of educators and civil rights groups, noted that the real challenge

was not in arguing for the salience of ethnic studies, but in working through the logistics of training teachers, deciding credit values, creating an implementation timeline, among other challenges. This example is reassuring in that the initial hurdle of having to argue for ethnic studies' importance is not the main issue in this district, but it also introduces other important problems about what it will take in practicality to bring this vision to life.

Turning to San Francisco, we can see an example of how some of the practical considerations might be addressed. In San Francisco Unified School District, a special coalition was formed, with input from 10 school teachers from the district, and faculty from San Francisco State University (Dee & Penner, 2016). This Ethnic Studies Curriculum Collective created course frameworks with examples from other districts, and met twice a month to critique plans and engage in teacher development. Thomas Dee and Emily Penner, the Stanford researchers who were part of this coalition, attributed the success of the program to teacher support, alongside with "careful planning, professional development, and teacher collaboration," (Wilson, 2016). That this program was so successful suggests that careful coalition-building should be integral to pursuing implementation, something that I work to address later on in my proposal.

A local report on implementation in El Rancho Unified School District reveals similar community responses and logistical considerations, followed by the decision to build a coalition as well. In this case, the requirement would replace a geography credit, but with the possibility of expanding into more electives (Molina, 2014). Of particular interest is that the district revealed that ethnic studies scholars had reached out to the school to help shape the curriculum, furthering my belief in the possibility of large-scale coalition-building.

As a contrast to the successes of the grassroot movement, I now turn to the state-level efforts, where there have been setbacks in the legislative push to support ethnic studies in California. In January 2015, Assemblyman Luis Alejo sent forward bill AB 101 that would require the state to create an advisory panel to develop an optional statewide model curriculum for ethnic studies. Though this bill passed in both the House and the Senate, the governor eventually vetoed it. In a brief memo, the governor argued that the State Department of Education's creation of a state-developed model ethnic studies curriculum would be a redundant process (Office of the Governor, 2015). The reason given was that another advisory board was already revising the general history-social studies standards to include "guidance on ethnic

studies courses" (Office of the Governor, 2015). It is not clear how the general history-social studies curriculum is being altered to include guidance from ethnic studies courses, or whether or not this change is in-depth enough to maintain the critical focus of ethnic studies. I would argue that this ambiguity is not surprising, as the state does not have a vested interest in maintaining the focus of ethnic studies on disrupting systems. Recognizing the limitations of what we can expect the state to do is key to my policy proposal, as I go on in the next section to argue that grassroots organizers are the best positioned to make change that is in step with the initial spirit of what ethnic studies is, as an educational but also political endeavor. These examples show that there are already alliances being built across different actors that suggest we may be able to bypass the state's reluctance to take on more work.

4. Policy Proposal

The successes and potential logistical hurdles of district-level reform alongside the state's unwillingness to engage with further ethnic studies curriculum guides the following policy proposal. In creating this policy, I centered two texts as direct influences: Laurel Weldon's "The Advocacy State" (2011) and Edwin Mayorga's "Critical Policy Studies Reading Guide." Fundamentally, this proposal was inspired by the theories on state support of social movements outlined in Weldon's chapter. Weldon argues that democratic states should actively provide openings for marginalized groups to independently mobilize (155). This could mean that the state provides cash support that ultimately supports the inclusion in policy-making of the diversity of opinions that may otherwise not have been able to sufficiently mobilize (in this case, parents and students) (157/7). Mayorga's text mirrors this point in arguing for the deliberate recognition of who is involved and who is excluded in the formation of policy. Therefore, I purposefully center teacher knowledge, as well as making clear the inclusion of students, parents, and community organizations.

In brief, I argue in favor of continuing the grassroots efforts that support districts' implementation of ethnic studies electives and graduation requirements, regardless of the state's legislative veto and resistance. I assign the role of the state to financially support the facilitation of the ethnic studies movement, as well as to provide funds for the hiring and training of teachers and purchasing of appropriate course materials for districts with more

limited budgets. In this section I also address the need to address political viability and the need to keep the critical rigor of ethnic studies courses from becoming just more testable material to memorize and not deeply engage with.

In regards to the state's role, I draw from Weldon's theory to propose that the state would help facilitate the regular meeting of relevant actors that work to organize ethnic studies for their respective schools. These conferences would primarily give teachers and administrators the opportunity to exchange ideas and strategies on ethnic studies curriculum and implementation. Further, conferences would actively bring together interested students, parents, scholars, community organizations as key stakeholders. The role of the state therefore is in providing space for the process of building and borrowing from a collective knowledge to reach a common goal.

There is already precedence in California state law for engaging with the community in making district-wide decisions. Established in 2013–2014, California's school finance system, the Local Control Funding Formula, dictates that the state requires parent and community engagement in local budgeting decisions as an accountability measure. All local educational agencies have to develop three-year plans of the actions and expenditures they are undertaking to support positive student outcomes, also known as the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) (Developing a Quality Local Control, 2014). The first part of these mandatory plans is a section regarding Stakeholder Engagement, where schools must show how they are holding public meetings for transparency and input from relevant actors. "Teachers, principals, administrators, other school staff, local bargaining units, parents, and students must be consulted to inform the LCAP's development," (Making a Plan to Develop the LCAP, 2014). California's legal commitment to bringing together these voices supports the feasibility of the first part of my proposal, and the emphasis on local control brings me to the second.

The second part of facilitated convenings would be the allocation of funds for districts with less extensive budgets to support training and the hiring of teachers qualified to teach ethnic studies, and the purchasing of materials needed to support the teaching of ethnic studies. Logistical challenges seem to be a salient factor identified by many teachers and administrators who hope to offer ethnic studies courses. This fund is in direct response to concerns that some teachers would need training materials before they were ready to engage with additional content. The decision of how to allocate this pool of money would be a system where districts can submit proposals

for funds, to be reviewed by members of these regular conferences. Again, this type of proposal is in line with California's state laws regarding local control in education. "Although the California public schools system is under the policy direction of the Legislature, more local responsibility is legally granted to school districts and county education officials than to other government entities and officials" (Local Control-Districts and Counties, 2016). The precedence to grant more local autonomy on decisions works well with this proposal on shifting the labor of individual decision-making from the state to the actors closely invested in the issue.

I move now to the influence of Mayorga's text on purposefully engaging with all actors in policymaking. My focus is particularly on teacher knowledge, which would mean to look towards them as experts in what is occurring in classrooms, and as uniquely qualified to provide expertise in advising on the practicality of new potential measures or curricular efforts in the classroom. While there is an obvious role for outside experts, it is important that teachers' experiences in developing and teaching ethnic studies programs be continuously centered in creating new policies, rather than simply consulted at one stage of developing a policy report.

Maintaining a district-level policy focus allows local teachers and school administrators to consult with the expertise and experiences of other districts to adapt existing strategies and programs to the needs of their own schools. Recall earlier the worry regarding the logistics of implementation, like assigning credit value or finding teachers to teach content. If the state were to redirect its energy away from creating (already existing) curricula, then it could instead focus on supporting those who work with what grassroots actors argue is the real problem —training teachers and finding funding.

A major influence on this policy proposal was the importance of appropriately framing a recommendation to keep it politically viable to pass. It is necessary that the state be involved to provide support for ethnic studies implementation. However, what is challenging is the need to put policy recommendations into politically palatable terms so it will be supported, but not allowing its full co-optation by the state because of the possibility that a movement could lose "its critical edge" (Weldon, 2011, p. 155). Regarding the potential to lose the critical and questioning nature of ethnic studies, one concern I have about integration into general history curriculum is that the content will be reduced to test-knowledge, where students are only engaging with a new set of facts and figures to memorize for state exams. If schools had the flexibility to shape their own ethnic studies electives or requirements

based on the local demographics and histories of the communities the school is located in, outside of the scope of state-mandated curriculum, we might have the benefit of avoiding this reduction of the purpose of ethnic studies, which, if we recall our earlier definition, is about a critical understanding of race and ethnicity.

5. Evaluating Proposal and Moving it into Action

In keeping with the spirit of centering local concerns and experiences, this policy would be considered successful if districts were able to develop action plans with timelines for implementing their choice of either ethnic studies electives or graduation requirements, depending on their circumstance. Some school districts that lack the existing ethnic studies infrastructure may set slower timelines, or may elect to only provide an elective first before graduation requirement.

In order to move this proposal into action, we need to secure the support of a number of actors. First and foremost, any plan of action must engage the state in supporting the advocacy work of ethnic studies actors. The state would not be willing to engage with policy that it believes is replicating existing programs. Therefore, in returning to Weldon's and Mayorga's concern about political feasibility, it will likely help to frame these conferences and additional funding in terms of teacher-training to teach ethnic studies content (considering that ethnic studies is already going into general curriculum), and in terms of improving academic experiences and achievements of students of color. Though we may have a goal of validating students' cultures and teaching race-based oppressions (Molina, 2014; Clark, 2015), it would be more politically palatable for organizers to frame ethnic studies implementation as preparation for college coursework or improving reading.

Beyond the state, we would need to secure the participation of the schools that have already implemented these programs, to ensure that they are able to effectively communicate their strategies and coursework. In both these "model" schools and in the participating schools, there must be teachers and administrators who are willing to step up as champion of ethnic studies.

Ultimately, a main priority of this proposal is creating infrastructure in a way that is politically palatable to be convincing to a wider audience. By framing this proposal carefully, we are able to create spaces for local actors invested in ethnic studies to move forward without having to wait for the state to catch up with these local movements. This flexibility is important in

ensuring that we take the best of what both the state and grassroots actors provide. The benefits of the former is in providing funding to facilitate convenings of what is the strength of local movements: dedicated players in the field of K–12 ethnic studies.

A recent convening in April 2016 at the American Education Research Association's annual conference brought together a few of these key grassroot players in the fight for ethnic studies in both Arizona and California to discuss the state of ethnic studies today. What the speakers emphasized was that ethnic studies curricula has something that others don't have: a social justice and activist agenda, one that it is ultimately about disrupting systems. In thinking about the future of ethnic studies, the speakers identified their central question as "How do we collectively organize?," a question that guides this paper as well. In this paper, I began with the data that illustrates the effectiveness of ethnic studies coursework in promoting student attachment and engagement. Ultimately I aimed to bridge together grassroot organizers' commitment to implementing curricula that promotes the disruption of systems with the state's capacity for helping implement curricula that is politically divisive to many. In finding a commonality between the two: the commitment and desire to work with a range of stakeholders, I sought in this proposal to find a realistic way to define the role of the state in a way that is politically feasible and useful to support a movement that has been carried out since the 60's and has no end in sight.

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Appendix A

Source: http://home.lausd.net/apps/news/article/434255

Ethnic Studies Course
Afro American History
Afro-American Literature
American Indian Studies
Asian Studies
H Mexican American Literature
History of the Middle East
Latin American Studies
Literature of Minorities in America
Mexican American Literature
Mexican American Studies
AP European History
AP Chinese Language and Culture
AP French Language and Culture
AP German Language and Culture
AP Italian Language and Culture
AP Japanese Language and Culture
AP Spanish Language and Culture
AP Spanish Literature and Culture

Current list of ethnic studies courses offered by the Los Angeles Unified School District that count towards its new ethnic studies graduation requirement

Appendix B
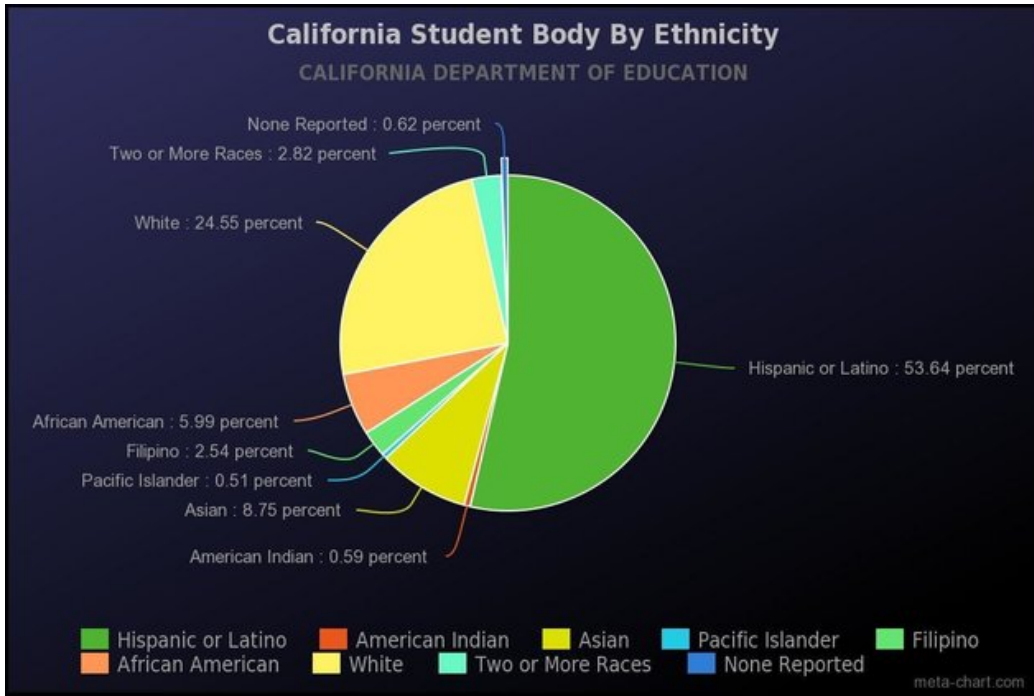
California's public student body

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Helping Students Read to Achieve: The Past, Present, and Future of Educational Policies on Dyslexia

Elias Blinkoff

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Abstract

Developmental dyslexia is among the most common neurobehavioral disorders in children, affecting approximately 8.5 million students across the United States (Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus, 2015). Despite its prevalence as a language disorder characterized by impaired reading ability, researchers have struggled to define dyslexia, contributing to variability across state-level educational policies on dyslexia and preventing students with the disorder from being identified, and ultimately receiving appropriate intervention services. Although federal policies have indicated greater recognition of dyslexia over time, continued use of the term "specialized learning disability (SLD)" in those policies as an umbrella term for students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities may subject students with dyslexia to educational interventions that are not specific to their disorder, jeopardizing their educational achievement. Three federal policy recommendations are presented here to support the needs of students with dyslexia. First, the recent passage of the *Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia Act* (READ Act) is commendable, but policymakers should ensure that dyslexia is recognized beyond the category of "specific learning disability." Next, the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus should support development of a best practices guide for educators that bridges dyslexia research and practice. Finally, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* should be amended to ensure America's predominant special education law recognizes and addresses the needs of students with dyslexia. Collectively, these recommendations should help identify and support students with dyslexia across the United States by recognizing their unique educational needs, allowing them to read and achieve in the classroom and beyond.

1. Understanding Dyslexia as an Educational Policy Issue

Developmental dyslexia is one of the most common neurobehavioral disorders in children, estimated to affect 17-21% of the school-age population, or approximately 8.5 million students in the United States (Ferrer et al., 2015, p. 1121; Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus (BCDC), 2015). That said, despite dyslexia's prevalence, current federal educational policies on the disorder do not sufficiently address the unique needs of students with dyslexia and state policies are inconsistent and highly variable (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 133–134 & 138). As a result of this tangled policy web, students with dyslexia may not receive the special education services that are necessary for their academic achievement. Thus, increased federal recognition of—and support for—students with dyslexia is necessary to spur state and local educational agencies into action, so that these vulnerable students can achieve long-term academic success in terms of classroom engagement and assessment performance.

This policy document will demonstrate that the current educational policy landscape for students with dyslexia results from incongruence across education, psychology, and neuroscience research with respect to the basic definition of dyslexia, its underlying causes, and appropriate classroom interventions (Katzir & Pare-Blagoev, 2006, p. 58–60). After outlining these underlying issues and the associated insufficiency and variability in federal and state dyslexia policies, respectively, this document will describe how the federal policy landscape has recently shifted towards greater recognition of dyslexia in a way that could support national adoption of dyslexia-specific educational interventions. Finally, this document will outline three policy recommendations for students with dyslexia. These recommendations are intended to be implemented progressively, harnessing recent political momentum around dyslexia to promote larger-scale policy shifts in the dyslexia policy landscape, specifically addressing its present variability in order to support the educational achievement of some of our nation's most overlooked special education students. First, this document will applaud policymakers for the passage of the *Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia Act* (READ Act) in February 2016, a federal law that prioritizes dyslexia research with the potential to clarify the definition of dyslexia, and ultimately support a greater national consensus around dyslexia policy and best practices. However, this document will provide a cautionary note regarding READ Act implementation, focusing on the fact that the Act defines "Specific Learning

Disability", rather than dyslexia itself, suggesting that policymakers continue to support a term that is insufficient for meeting the educational needs of students with dyslexia. Next, the document will suggest that the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus support the development of a best practices handbook for educators working with students with dyslexia. Finally, this document will recommend amendment to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA; 2004) to recognize and address the unique educational needs of students with dyslexia in America's predominant special education law.

2. Background

Before addressing the state of educational policy for students with dyslexia, it is important to understand the inherent complexity of the disorder itself, beginning with its basic definition. This is not a moot point, given that lack of consistency in the definition has led to variability in state and federal educational policies pertaining to dyslexia that that have, in turn, negatively impacted the academic achievement of students with the disorder. Dyslexia has been studied for over a century, but experts acknowledge that "a strong consensus regarding a clear, useful definition still does not exist" (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134). Within the past decade, however, researchers have identified signs and symptoms that are unique to dyslexia and critical for early identification of students with the disorder. According to psychologists and pediatricians, dyslexia is a language disorder marked by impaired phonological processing (Katzir & Pare-Blagoev, 2006, p. 58; Ferrer et al., 2015, p. 1121; American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), 2009, p. 838), so students with dyslexia often struggle with printed word recognition, spelling, reading comprehension, and writing (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134; Gabrieli, 2009, p. 280). Notably, dyslexia is not a visual impairment, as was claimed through the first half of the 20th century (Katzir & Pare-Blagoev, 2006, p. 57; AAP, 2009, p. 837). It is also important to recognize that language impairments among students with dyslexia are often "unexpected [by educators and child development professionals] in relation to other cognitive abilities" (Lyon et al., 2003, p. 2), meaning that a student with the disorder may exhibit "reading deficits that... can not [sic] be predicted by [their] age, other academic or cognitive abilities, exposure to instruction, or sociocultural opportunities" (Lyon, 1995, p. 15). This fact makes it challenging, but educationally critical, to identify students with dyslexia in the classroom so that

they can receive appropriate educational interventions to meet their unique needs and maximize their academic achievement as soon as possible.

Beyond the linguistic focus, dyslexia experts also agree that the disorder develops early in—and persists throughout—a child's life (Gabrieli, 2009, p. 281; Ferrer et al., 2015). A reading achievement gap between students with dyslexia and their typical peers can develop as early as first grade and remain through adolescence (Ferrer et al., 2015, p. 1121). As a result, researchers warn that "A student who fails to read adequately in 1st grade has a 90% probability of reading poorly in 4th grade and a 75% probability of reading poorly in high school" (Gabrieli, 2009, p. 280). Therefore, dyslexia's long-term effects on students have led experts, and non-profit organizations such as Decoding Dyslexia, one of America's largest parent-led dyslexia advocacy groups (Decoding Dyslexia, 2013), to put pressure on policymakers. Supported by numerous researchers (Ferrer et al., 2015, p. 1125; Gabrieli, 2009, p. 283; AAP, 2009, p. 839; Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139), advocacy organizations have urged policymakers to support mandatory dyslexia screenings for young students, followed by appropriate special education services for students with the disorder (Decoding Dyslexia, 2013).

Based on the research findings and advocacy work outlined above, current federal dyslexia policies are insufficient and complex, and state-level policies vary immensely with respect to the level of recognition and support given to students with dyslexia (Youman & Mather, 2013). Major federal policies for students with dyslexia include the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA; 2004) and the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*. However, they still fail to provide sufficient and specific educational supports for students with dyslexia.

Beginning with the IDEA, it classifies students with dyslexia as having a "specific learning disability (SLD)" (IDEA, 2004; Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134), but unfortunately for many students with dyslexia, "SLD" is a large umbrella term that fails to account for important distinctions between dyslexia and other learning disabilities. This has serious implications for the special education interventions that are provided to students with dyslexia. When their unique educational needs go unrecognized, researchers suggest that they typically receive "general intervention strategies and accommodations" by default that "may or may not fit the needs of students with dyslexia" (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138). Notably, these needs tend to be related to phonological decoding, recognition of sight words, and general fluency (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 148). Even if they are assigned to a

reading specialist, students with dyslexia often receive reading instruction with other struggling readers who may not need the same type of instruction", such as English-language learners or students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 148). While researchers admit that providing "general reading strategies" to "a heterogeneous group of struggling readers is not harmful for students with dyslexia", they emphasize that those strategies may not target the specific needs noted above, since they often fail to differentiate between dyslexia and other cognitive impairments classified as SLDs (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138, 147-148; READ Act, 2016). Lastly, this document recognize that the SLD designation does not automatically promote the use of generalized interventions in every classroom. However, the terms' broadness opens the door for schools to employ such interventions, posing an educational risk to students with dyslexia.

Turning to more practical concerns, the IDEA lays out a lengthy and complex screening processing for SLDs like dyslexia that prevents timely identification of—and interventions for—students with the disorder. According to the IDEA, if a student who has been given "appropriate access to education" continues to struggle in the classroom for reasons that cannot be explained by "cultural and environmental factors", they must be evaluated for an SLD using at least one of three evaluation procedures. Firstly, an "ability-achievement discrepancy formula" may be developed, which arguably quantifies a special education students' academic deficit (Kavale, 2001). However, the formula must be supplemented by other documentation (e.g., classroom observations or parent reports) if it is intended as the sole means of SLD identification (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139). Secondly, educators are urged to implement research-based interventions and monitor the students' responses. This is known as a "response-to-intervention (RTI)" approach. If the student fails to respond, then the SLD classification process continues. Lastly, educators are free to use "alternative research-based models", including those that search for patterns in the students' strengths and weaknesses (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139). Given the clear complexity of the SLD identification system, this document argues that students with dyslexia may not receive appropriate educational interventions in a timely manner.

As previously noted, the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* also aims to provide federal support for students with dyslexia. Under Sec. 504, these students have a disability in reading, which the law cites as one of nine "major life activities" (Rehabilitation Act, 1973; Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 140). Fortunately, the Rehabilitation Act helps students with dyslexia receive special

education services, even if they fail to meet the IDEA's strict requirements for SLD identification. However, researchers indicate that the Sec. 504 alternative is only considered in those states that acknowledge dyslexia as a distinct disorder in language and reading (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 140).

While federal dyslexia policies are characterized by insufficiency, state-level dyslexia policies are "characterized by variability and inconsistency", both in terms of identifying the disorder and the timely provision of interventions (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 133). In 2012, 22 states had statewide dyslexia laws, three of which mandated the creation of a dyslexia handbook to inform educators and parents about best practices for identifying and supporting students with the disorder. Of the remaining states, three had created a dyslexia handbook without a law mandating them to do so, two had designated dyslexia weeks or months to raise awareness about the disorder, and six had dyslexia laws pending in their state legislatures (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134).

Among states with dyslexia laws, policies still vary with respect to early identification, interventions, and accommodations for students with the disorder. Despite evidence for early identification (Ferrer et al., 2015; Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139), only a few states have mandated universal dyslexia screening for students in grades K–2 (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138), with several more having released voluntary guidelines for student dyslexia screenings (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139).

Moving beyond identification, dyslexia intervention policies also vary by state, especially with respect to the amount of teacher training schools must provide with respect to intervention strategies. In some states, students with dyslexia receive appropriate interventions in their public schools. Elsewhere, the same students may not receive any additional support if they do not meet the qualifications set by the IDEA, or they may receive interventions that are not appropriate for students with dyslexia (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 141-142). Focusing on teacher training as a key contributor to effective intervention implementation, some states, such as Louisiana, have mandated dyslexia training for general education teachers (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 147). However, that is not the case in every state, especially where dyslexia laws are non-existent (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 147). This deficit in teacher training is especially concerning in states that classify dyslexia as an SLD. There, researchers report that educators—including reading specialists—may employ strategies that are intended to help all struggling readers without considering the unique needs of students with dyslexia. As described previously,

this means that students with dyslexia "often receive reading instruction with other struggling readers who may not need the same type of instruction (e.g., English language learners, who mostly need vocabulary building activities; students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, who have fallen behind their peers)." By contrast, students with dyslexia tend to need support with "phonemic awareness, phonemic decoding, sight word development, and fluency" (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 147–48).

Based on the variability among state-level dyslexia policies, the federal government seems most likely to generate impactful policies for students with dyslexia, beginning with national recognition of the disorder, and then promoting best practices for identification and intervention techniques. Fortunately, the federal government has recently taken on this objective, thanks in large part to the efforts of the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus.

Led by Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX) and Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA), the Caucus has taken several steps to increase dyslexia awareness among educators, parents, and the public. In July of 2015, the members of the Caucus wrote to Assistant Secretary of Education for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Michael Yudin, requesting that the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) "issue guidance to states and school districts regarding the use of the term 'dyslexia'" in IDEA documentation (BCDC, 2015, p. 1). As the lawmakers noted, parents found school districts were unwilling to use the term in their children's Individualized Education Plans (IEP's), which are written plans "developed to ensure that [a primary or secondary school student] who has a disability identified under the law. . . receives specialized instruction and related services" (Do-It Univ. of Washington, 2015). Instead, school districts were continuing to use ambiguous SLD terminology.

In arguing for the term "dyslexia", members of Congress emphasized the chief concern about the SLD designation, namely that it is "too vague a description to communicate to a teacher that the child needs intensive, explicit, systematic, evidence-based instruction to make progress." (BCDC, 2015, p. 1). Responding to the Caucus, Asst. Secretary Yudin issued a letter to state and local education agencies explicitly stating that, "nothing in the IDEA. . . would prohibit the use of the terms dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia in IDEA evaluation, eligibility determinations, or IEP documents" (Yudin, 2015, p. 1). However, the use of those terms remained at the discretion of state and local education officials.

In February 2016, the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus helped

pass a new federal dyslexia policy, the *Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia Act* (READ Act; H.R. 3033) (Govtrack, 2016), backed by the parent dyslexia advocacy organization *#SayDyslexia* and the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), among other non-profit groups (Tucker, 2016). Originally introduced in the House by Reps. Smith (R-TX) and Brownley (D-CA), the Act supports translational dyslexia research to generate greater awareness of the disorder and provide evidence for best practices with respect to early identification and interventions. The READ Act requires the President's budget request to Congress to include a line item supporting the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Research in Disabilities Education program. It also mandates the NSF to direct \$5 million annually to dyslexia research intended to support early identification strategies, curriculum development, and professional development to raise awareness about dyslexia among educators (READ Act, 2016; BCDC, 2016). Lastly, the Act defines the term "specific learning disability" as follows, with implications to be addressed later in this document.

> The term specific learning disability' (1) means a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations; (2) includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia; and (3) does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (READ Act, 2016)

While more specific than the previous "general learning disability" designation (Lyon, 2003, p. 2) in federal policy, it is concerning that "specific learning disability" is explicitly defined in the READ Act. This suggests that SLD continues to be the legal and educational standard in federal dyslexia policy, despite being a broad term that encompasses a wide range of behavioral and cognitive learning disabilities, including dyslexia, all of which have unique characteristics (Lyon, 2003, p. 3) requiring unique interventions and accommodations (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138, 147–148).

Returning to the impact of the Dyslexia Caucus, its members—including Co-Chair Rep. Brownley (D-CA),who introduced the READ Act with Rep.

Lamar Smith (R-TX) (BCDC, 2016)—have been instrumental in supporting other Congressional actions to standardize the definition of dyslexia and recognize its educational implications. This aim has been represented through two resolutions, House Resolution 456 (H.R. 456), and Senate Resolution 275 (S. Res. 275). In 2014, Rep. William Cassidy (R-LA) and Rep. Brownley (D-CA) proposed H.R. 456 to define dyslexia and recognize its "significant educational implications" (H.R. 456, 2014). Seeming to address the state-level inconsistencies researchers had noted (Youman & Mather, 2013), H.R. 456 defined dyslexia as follows:

> Whereas, defined as an unexpected difficulty in reading in an individual who has the intelligence to be a much better reader, dyslexia reflects a difficulty in getting to the individual sounds of spoken language which typical impacts speaking, reading, spelling, and often, learning a second language (H. Res. 456, 2014)

Although this Resolution would have recognized a national definition of dyslexia in the House of Representatives with considerable support from dyslexia advocacy organizations and research programs (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2014), it failed to pass the House and has not been reintroduced in the current Congressional session (Govtrack, 2014).

Fortunately for students with dyslexia and their supporters, Senate Resolution 275 was passed unanimously by the Senate on October 7, 2015 (Govtrack, 2015). Borrowing language from H.R. 456, S. Res. 275 called on "Congress, schools, and State and local educational agencies to recognize the significant educational implications of dyslexia that must be addressed" (S. Res. 275, 2015) and presented a definition of the disorder that emphasized its phonological underpinnings and unexpectedness relative to a student's overall cognition. It also emphasized the critical nature of early diagnosis and intervention strategies, reflecting research reviewed in this document (S. Res. 275, 2015). While Senate Resolution 275 has been seen as "game-changing" for dyslexia policy and students with the disorder (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2015), it is important to recognize that simple resolutions like S. Res. 275 do not carry the force of law and only reflect the sentiments of one house of Congress (Lexis Nexis, 2007). As such, stronger federal policy actions will be required to bring order to the tangled web of dyslexia policy (Youman & Mather, 2013).

Overall, this series of legislative actions demonstrates that dyslexia has gained greater recognition in the federal policy landscape. However, the term

"dyslexia" itself—which is unique and entails serious educational implications for students with the disorder—has not risen to the level of law, as the READ Act's continued focus on "specific learning disability" demonstrates. More broadly, this section has highlighted persistent ambiguity in the definition of dyslexia, potentially a contributing factor to the federal and state policy challenges outlined here. Therefore, the series of recommendations outlined in the following section should help explicitly recognize dyslexia, and ensure that all students with the disorder are identified in a timely manner and provided with the specific special education services they need to achieve academic success.

3. 3-Part Policy Proposal: Overview, Evaluation, and Action Plan

This section of the document will present three policy recommendations that are meant to be implemented progressively, while taking both the variability in state-level dyslexia policy and the growing recognition of dyslexia at the federal level into account. First, policymakers and advocacy organizations should be congratulated for passing the READ Act, but they should maintain their collaboration to ensure implementation that focuses on the central issue of dyslexia's ambiguous definition and demonstrating its uniqueness among "specific learning disabilities." Secondly, policymakers and federal Department of Education officials should leverage the power of the READ Act to disseminate the resulting research as best practices through a dyslexia handbook. Finally, this document will recommend amending the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (2014) to codify the unique educational needs of students with dyslexia in our nation's predominant special education law.

First addressing the passage of the READ Act, policymakers and advocacy organizations should be applauded for their efforts, which stand to empower the National Science Foundation to address long-standing ambiguities around dyslexia itself (READ Act, 2016; Katzir & Pare-Blagoev, 2006, p. 58) that have trickled down to generate variability in the dyslexia policy landscape that is detrimental for students with the disorder (Youman & Mather, 2013). However, policymakers must recognize the importance of effective policy implementation. The Act passed with support from the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus, which consists of over 100 members of Congress who are collectively dedicated to "...increasing public awareness about dyslexia and ensuring all students have equal educational opportuni-

ties" (BCDC, 2015a). Some of the nation's largest dyslexia advocacy organizations, including *#SayDyslexia* and the National Center for Learning Disabilities also supported the Act (#SayDyslexia, 2015; NCLD, 2015). Specifically, Decoding Dyslexia (#SayDyslexia's parent organization) appreciated the Act's focus on early identification strategies, professional development for educators, and evidence-based curriculum development, all of which aligned with their policy objectives (BCDC, 2015a; Decoding Dyslexia, 2013).

Although the research funding provided by the READ Act is valuable, it is important to discuss effective policy implementation with a specific focus on dyslexia. As described previously, much of the variability in state-level dyslexia policy, and the apparent need for federal standardization, can be attributed to ambiguity in the definition of the disorder itself. Therefore, the NSF should initially focus on funding basic research to generate a standardized definition of dyslexia before progressing to applied research into early identification, professional development, resource development, and other key areas (READ Act, 2016). Otherwise, the central issue of ambiguity will remain unaddressed, and policies will remain variable. More importantly, the READ Act continues to define—and thereby emphasize—"specific learning disability" as an umbrella term that encompasses dyslexia (READ Act, 2016). Here, effective research-centered implementation of the Act stands to differentiate dyslexia from its SLD counterparts, a result with considerable implications for students with dyslexia and their specific educational needs.

With the passage of the READ Act, subsequent research should ensure a strong foundation of evidence-based methods for students with dyslexia. The next step will be to nationally disseminate those methods to support best practices in early identification, interventions, and professional development across the country. To accomplish this goal, policymakers should leverage the power of the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus and request that the U.S. Department of Education issue a national educators' handbook of best practices for students with dyslexia. This would address the lack of high-quality dyslexia handbooks in many states (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134) and provide a critical resource for educators.

Fortunately, a Department of Education dyslexia handbook would not be without precedent. As described above, the Dyslexia Caucus already spurred Assistant Secretary of Education Michael Yudin to issue a letter to state and local educational agencies about the use of "dyslexia" in IDEA documentation in 2014 (BCDC, 2015b; Yudin, 2015). This suggests a precedent of condition, in that the federal government has recently issued explicit

guidelines pertaining to students with dyslexia. The U.S. Department of Education has also set a methodological precedent. In 2004, the Department contracted with the American Institutes for Research to produce a report titled *Teaching Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Instructional Strategies and Practices*. As a research report, it did not require state and local educational agencies to adopt particular strategies for working with students who had attention disorders, but it did serve as a valuable resource for educators who wanted to ensure that they were using effective interventions (OSERS, 2004, p. 1).

Furthermore, a federal dyslexia handbook should avoid the political pitfalls associated with unfunded mandates, in which the federal government requires state and local governments to comply with a policy but then does not provide adequate financial resources for their compliance (Nivola, 2003). In relative terms, funding should not be a major concern when creating the handbook. Since the 2004 report was produced under an existing contract with the American Institutes for Research, a national dyslexia handbook should be able to be covered by another existing contract with a think tank or research institute. With respect to evaluating the effectiveness of this action, the Department of Education could commission a follow-up study by the research institute that produces the handbook several years after its release. This study would document the handbook's usage by educators, both in terms of frequency and its most valuable resources. The results would shape revisions in future editions of the book, as appropriate.

Lastly, this document recommends amending the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (2004) to address the unique needs of students with dyslexia. As previously emphasized, the current version of the law includes dyslexia under the umbrella term of "specific learning disability (SLD)" (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139), meaning that students with dyslexia may be receiving general interventions that are inappropriate for their unique educational needs (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138, 147–148). This policy action would rely on momentum from Congressional Resolutions, the READ Act and its subsequent research, and national support for best practices generated by the Department of Education dyslexia handbook to formally recognize dyslexia in America's predominant special education law. One key amendment to the IDEA could include the explicit identification of dyslexia—perhaps in conjunction with other learning disabilities—based on the definition of the disorder established in Senate Resolution 275.

After establishing recognition, an amended IDEA could then mandate

universal early identification programs for grades K–2, as researchers (Ferrer et al., 2015) and advocacy organizations (Decoding Dyslexia, 2013) have strongly recommended. Funding for this initiative would likely come from the existing Grants to States Program directed by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, which already assists states in "meeting the excess costs of providing special education and related services to children with disabilities", focusing on direct interventions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In this case, the grant monies would support the implementation of early identification and intervention strategies in an educationally and fiscally efficient manner. Lastly, it is important to realize that the effectiveness of an amended IDEA would depend on the success of the two prior recommendations outlined above. Assuming that the IDEA is amended as described here, Congress or the Department of Education could evaluate the effectiveness of their policy change by commissioning researchers to conduct a comprehensive follow-up study. If the situation improves over time with respect to identification of and support for students with dyslexia, that finding should be reflected in the researchers' report.
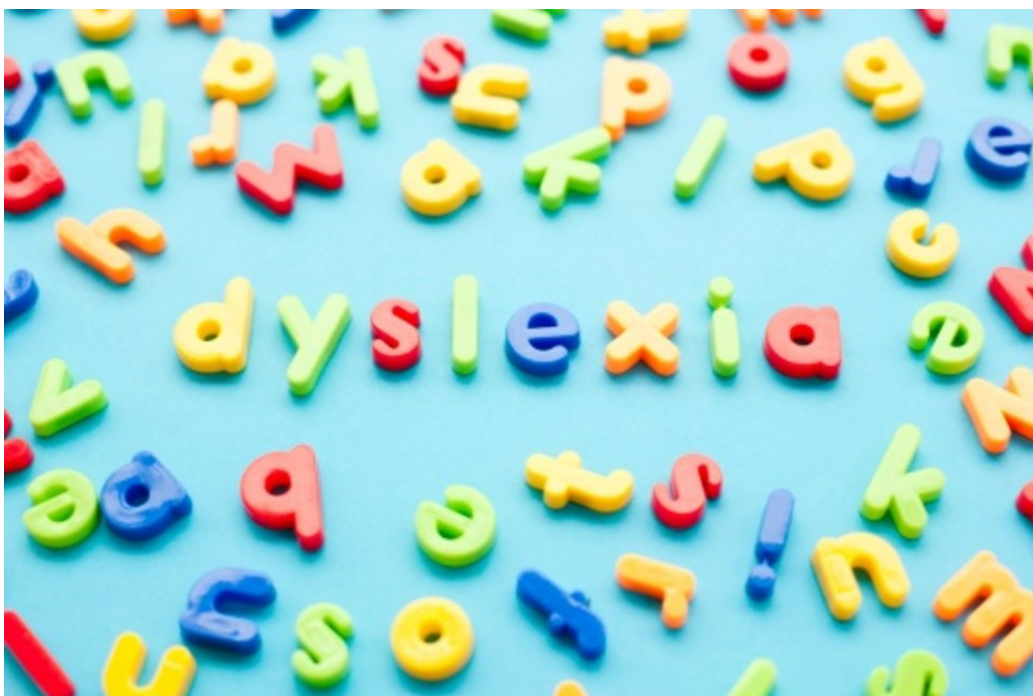
4. Conclusion

Surveying the current state of educational policy for students with dyslexia, it is evident that the long-running controversy over the definition of the disorder and appropriate interventions (Katzir & Pare-Blagoev, 2006) has bred confusion in terms of how to identify these students and best support their educational needs, as demonstrated by the current variability in state-level dyslexia policies. In the midst of this variability, federal education policies like the IDEA have combined students with dyslexia and those with other "specific learning disabilities", resulting in a situation where students with dyslexia may not receive appropriate educational interventions targeted to their disorder (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138, 147-148). Overall, the progressive implementation of the three policy recommendations presented here should contribute to their mutual success. By relying on the growing recognition of dyslexia at the federal level (BCDC, 2016, 2015a, 2015b; READ Act, 2016; Yudin, 2015), these recommendations should collectively help identify and support students with dyslexia across the United States by recognizing their unique educational needs relative to those of students with other learning disabilities, and ultimately allow them to read and achieve in the classroom and beyond.

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More than Numbers: Recruitment and Retention of Teachers of Color in U.S. Public Schools

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the improved educational outcome of students of color when their teachers are of a similar background (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). In addition to this work, there is research that shows that teachers of color leave the profession due to the lack of agency and voice in decision making and racially hostile climate for teachers of color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Kohli, 2016). This article presents a case for recruiting teachers of color and the development and support for programs that would lower teacher turnover rates. In addition, I present possible and endorse existing programs to recruit teachers of color and create more democratic schools. I end with a call for research to address the racial hostility that exists in schools to not only keep teachers in schools, but to improve the educational experiences of students of color.

Keywords: Teachers of color, diversity, racism, democratic schools, students of color, rationale, proposal

Introduction

In my 12 years of public education in working-class, predominantly Mexican immigrant schools, I had very few teachers of color [1]. Several of the

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[1] I utilize Kohli's definition for people of color, as it adequately addresses my conception of the term. Kohli uses the term, of color to collectively reference people of African, Asian American, indigenous, Latina/o, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander descent. These broad racial parameters are drawn to synthesize the discussion of communities with racialized colonial histories and/or who experience racial marginalization in the United States today" (Kohli, 2016).

white teachers, many with good intentions, had assumptions about students based on our culture. These assumptions were often reflected in the way they engaged with us and motivated them to uphold White dominant cultural values in the classroom. White teachers would comment on our general lack of care for our education, display concern only for students that willingly complied to their teaching, and discredit students because I am the one with a doctorate" [2]. Still, many of the teachers of colors that I did have were unable or uninterested in using culturally relevant pedagogies. I present this piece as someone who, until college, rarely had the opportunity to have teachers of color who engaged in work that was relevant to my life. The purpose of this article is to present the issue at hand and the need for teachers of color in schools with high populations of students of color. Nieto writes that teachers of color who are well trained and supported are able to engage with students and create conditions that facilitate learning in ways White teachers cannot (as cited in Villegas & Irvine, 2010). However, the impact that teachers of color may have in schools with high populations of struggling students of color are minimized by the experiences teachers have in schools. Policy must work towards supporting students and teachers of color.

This article will use teachers of color to address the needs of this group as a whole. However, this lumping" can make invisible the particular needs and experiences of certain racial and ethnic groups, since they are not individually addressed. This piece will find ways to address the problem as a whole, although specific needs, challenges, and policy changes need to be studied and addressed. To make the necessary changes to improve the educational outcomes of students of color, some existing recruitment and teacher certification and evaluation programs need to be developed and/or expanded, but others need to be placed into question when they do not prepare teachers to work in schools with high populations of students of color. Finally, schools should develop democratic leadership models to include teachers in school decision-making, and create environments that are not racially hostile and are instead open and grateful to the experiences and work of students and teachers of color.

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[2]After that instance, I lost respect for the teacher. In shock by their response, I decided to continue learning on my own without the help of the teacher. After receiving the highest grade in my class on the state exam for the subject, the teacher congratulated me and later tokenized me.

Disparities between Teachers and Students of Color in Public Schools

At an outstanding 81.9%, White teachers make up the majority of the teacher workforce of K-12 public schools (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013). This means that teachers of color only compose 17.1% of the workforce (Goldring et al., 2013). These numbers, in contrast to the actual percentage of these racial and ethnic groups, indicate the disparity between the percentages of students of color and teachers of color. A report from the US Department of Education shows that of the overall public school student population 51% are non-Hispanic White, 24% are Hispanic, 16% are Black, 1% are Native American, 5% are Asian, and 3% are mixed race. As a whole, students of color represent 49% of the total public school student population. Utilizing the Teacher-Student Parity Index developed by Ana Maria Villegas, we find that White teachers are overrepresented in schools in proportion to the percentage of White students in schools[3]. However, these numbers indicate the problem of diversity at the national level, but do not consider the specific populations of public schools and school districts.

When broken down by the family income level of students, the percentages of teachers of color in schools change. In schools where 50 to 74% of students received free or reduced-price lunch, White teachers make up 82.2%, while White teachers make up 63.3% of the workforce in schools were 75 percent or more students were in need. As the number of students in economic need rise, the number of White teachers decrease. Meanwhile, the percentages of Hispanic, Black, and Asian teachers nearly doubled in schools were the majority of students received free or reduced-price lunch. For Native American and mixed race teachers however, there is little change in percentage (Goldring et al., 2013). These percentages of teacher diversity indicate, in general, that teachers are color are more likely than their White colleagues to teach in lower-income schools (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). However, these figures fail to account for the racial and ethnic diversity of those schools where more than half of its students receive free or reduced lunch. Overall, teachers of color are more willing to work in low-income schools and work with students at those schools.

While, nationally, teachers of color are underrepresented in the workforce, there is more racial diversity in schools where more than half of students re-

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[3]Please refer to the appendix to find the teacher-student parity score tables.

ceive free or reduced-price lunch (Goldring et al., 2013). Additionally, the breadth of student-teacher diversity gaps vary by state and district (Boser, 2014a). Research on the state and district student-teacher diversity gaps indicate that although the population of students of color has grown by 3%, the population of teachers of color has only grown by 1% (Boser, 2014b). The widening gap between teachers and students of color should raise concern considering the impact teachers of color may have on the educational outcomes of students of color, which will now be discussed.

Student Culture, Teachers, and the Classroom

Creating parity between student and teacher of color populations is not enough to close the achievement gap that exists between students of color and White students. In addition, teachers must be trained to use culturally responsive pedagogy effectively in the classroom.

A teacher of color is an asset in schools and classrooms with high populations of students of color. These teachers are able to connect with students at a cultural level specially if they both share racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. Even if they do not share the same background, cross-cultural similarities may be found [4]. Cultural connection with students gives teachers of color a significant advantage over White teachers who may understand the cultures of their students as an outsider. For example, White teachers may be unable to understand cultural references, language, and worldviews of students of color. Teachers of color may be able to recognize the racial and ethnic differences of their students and infuse cultural language and symbols into their teaching. The lack of this recognition (colorblindness) feeds into the deficit attributes given to students of color (Nieto, 1996). Teachers of color are able to build connections between their teaching and the students, and challenge deficit traits often attributed to students of color.

Furthermore, White teachers can replicate white racist structures (Hyland, 2005). The replication of racist structures and attitudes towards students of color can create bias, especially in discipline. For example, racist bias against structures feed into the school-to-prison nexus when White teachers feel threatened by the presence of boys of color (Witt, 2007). However, this is not to say that teachers of color are not capable of replicating white racist

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[4]This does not, however, discredit the possibility of cultural misunderstandings and reproduction of stereotypes.

structures (Picower, 2009). Having teachers of color in the profession is not enough–they must be passionate and trained to work in low-income schools with large populations of students of color.

The Challenges of Teachers of Color in the Field

Teachers of color face a multitude of challenges as they aspire to become educators. While many participate in recruitment programs, teachers of color in the public schools leave the profession for many reasons. Among those reasons: the limited autonomy of teachers in schools and hostile racial climates. In order to complement the success many recruitment programs have in recruiting teachers of color, significant changes must be made in schools to keep teachers of color.

The limited autonomy of teachers hinders their ability to make the necessary decisions and steps to help their students succeed. Schools are often dismissive or uncooperative of the initiatives taken on by teachers of color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). This limited autonomy creates unfavorable working conditions for teachers (White, 2015). In addition, limited autonomy in school decision-making can leave teachers out of important decisions that impact them and students. Overall, non-favorable school structures lead to a high turnover rate for teachers of color (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Assessing the ways that individual schools function is important to create sites where teachers are given the freedom to utilize the methods at their disposal to help students.

On top of the limited autonomy teachers have in schools, hostile racial climate and the lack of support systems present additional challenges to teachers of color. This additional challenge leaves teachers of color to contemplate leaving the field. Teachers of color experience isolation when their work is dismissed by the school and often experience emotionally fatigue when dealing with micro and macro aggressions (Kohli, 2016). In order to keep teachers of colors, schools should actively work to ensure that the school provides a space that does not replicate racial hierarchies and oppression not only for teachers, but also for everyone else who is part of the school. In addition, alternate professional development should be available to teachers of color that address their particular needs and challenges in teaching in schools. For example, black male teachers have benefitted from professional development that allowed them to develop tools and strategies to navigate schools, and create conditions that facilitated learning for students (Bristol, 2015). Cre-

ating the necessary tools to support teachers of color is critical for their craft and to encourage them to continue working in schools. Schools must become sites where teachers of color are welcomed and given the necessary support to create classrooms where students engage and learn.

Diversity of the teacher workforce is not enough. Teachers of color must be adequately trained and supported to facilitate learning and close the achievement gaps[5] between White students and students of color.

Existing Policies and Practices

As mentioned before, several teacher education programs have been successful in recruiting teachers of color into the profession. In Grow Your Own" models from Illinois, people of color make up 84 percent of candidates in the program ("Grow Your Own Teachers: An Illinois Initiative," n.d.). Individuals in the program come from the neighborhoods and schools where they will be placed after certification (Center for the Study of Educational Policy, 2013). "Grow Your Own" models bring in teachers who are aware of the neighborhoods they work in because of their lived experiences being students themselves in those schools or similar ones. In addition to bringing in more teachers of color, "Grow You Own" models reduce teacher turnover and place teachers in hard-to-fill positions in schools. Finally, "Grow Your Own" models utilize federal and state funding to prepare teachers that allow the program to be cost effective. State programs, such as "Grow Your Own" can bring in teachers of colors into schools with need. Similarly, the Golden Apple Scholars of Illinois program recruits high school seniors and college students in their first and second year into teacher preparation and certification through scholarships, training, and mentoring ("Golden Apple Scholars Program," n.d.). State-level programs in Illinois have been very effective in recruiting teachers of color and supporting them through the process and once in the profession.

Other national programs such as Teach for America have attracted high numbers of people of color in Illinois into the teaching profession (White, DeAngelis, & Lichtenberger, 2013). Teach for America has several initiatives to recruit teachers of color, which have been successful when taking into

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[5]However, it is necessary to rethink and reformulate what achievement gap when it only refers to the gaps between the test scores earned by students of color and White students.

consideration that half of TFA participants are people of color (Teach for America, n.d.). However, Teach for America may not prepare participants well to teach due to limited training. However, the appeal to join Teach for America can be in the ease and speed at which participants can become teacher certified.

As mentioned earlier, it is not enough to have alternative teacher education programs that allow teachers of color be trained to work in schools. Teacher performance evaluation programs, such as edTPA, use alternative methods to certify teachers. However, programs, such as edTPA are objective in their evaluationthey do not consider the context of the classroom and the school. When teacher certification programs are objective, they exclude the subjective knowledge and the history and community of learners (Madeloni, 2015). Programs like these provide certification, but do not prepare teachers well to work with a diverse student body. Neither do they utilize culturally relevant pedagogies that are critical to utilize in classrooms with students of color.

Expanding and Developing Programs and Creating More Democratic Schools

Alternative teacher education programs are effective in recruiting teachers of color and should not be entirely dismissed. However, the approaches of the program in alternative certification should be placed into question when they create more harm than good for students. In addition, aspiring teachers of color should be supported financially to make it easier for aspiring teachers to become certified through traditional programs. A combination of federal and state funds can help keep down costs for individuals and specific scholarships can make it easier for many to take the time necessary to become trained and certified.

Creating teacher inclusive decision-making in schools will help teachers of color stay in schools. Community school leadership models may be an excellent way to incorporate not only teacher voice in decision-making, but also the surrounding school community (Frankl, 2016). Although it is clear how to create more inclusive school leadership models, dealing with the racial hostility of schools is a more difficult to dismantle. The first step to dealing with the issue is a recognition that racial hostilities exist as a legacy of a colonial system and the creation and continued existence of a racialized capitalist system in the US. Racial hostility has material consequences, and

in this case on the educational outcomes of students of color. Although this paper will not discuss specific action steps, significant research must be conducted to find how to create positive racial climates for teachers in schools.

In the meantime, several practices can be utilized to create welcoming schools for teachers of color. One way to create racially welcoming schools is the recognition of teachers of color and the experiences and practices they bring into the classroom (Kohli, 2016). Moving forward from this recognition, action steps must be taken to find ways to develop welcoming classrooms. One of those action steps may be to create welcoming environments is providing workshops where teachers, White and of color alike, engage in topics of race/ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability, class, etc.

The policy proposal provided is just a scope of what specific procedures can be utilized to recruit teachers of color and support them once they are working in schools. Policy must be reevaluated continuously to ensure that the program is being effective and shift in ways to achieve its goals. For these reasons, teachers of color must be involved and given a stake in the policy evaluation process in order to ensure that the goal of the policy remains to support the unique needs of teachers of color.

Conclusion

The lack of racial and ethnic parity between public, K-12 teachers and students is alarming. Students of color are likely to benefit from being taught by a teacher who may understand their cultural context and be able to use culturally responsive curriculum to engage them in ways other teachers cannot. State and national programs have been in many ways successful in recruiting teachers of color in schools. However, many of those programs have problems in their implementation and results. To amend such issues, new initiatives must be taken to support teachers of color in the profession. By creating parity between teachers and students of color along with culturally responsive pedagogy, students will be more likely to have greater educational outcomes.
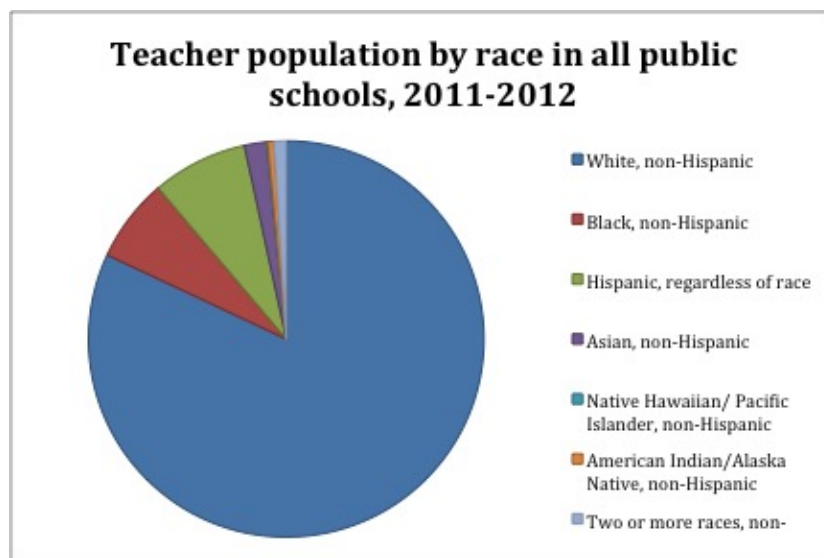
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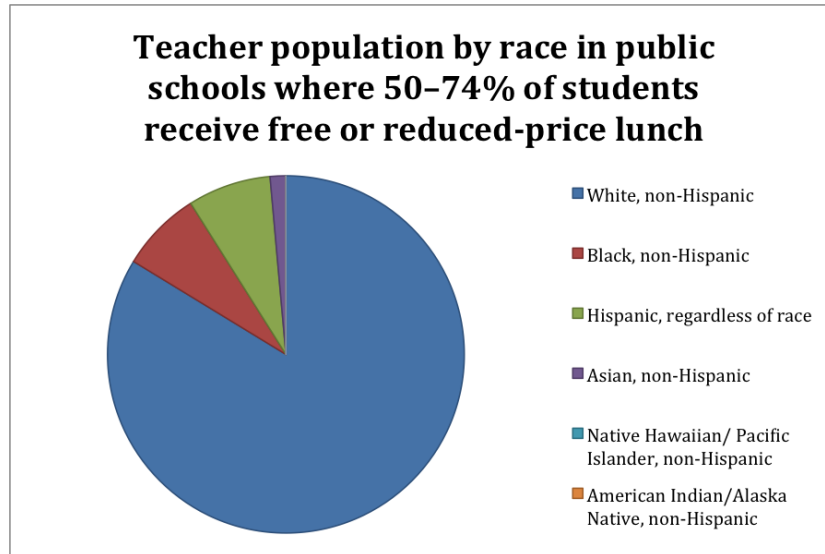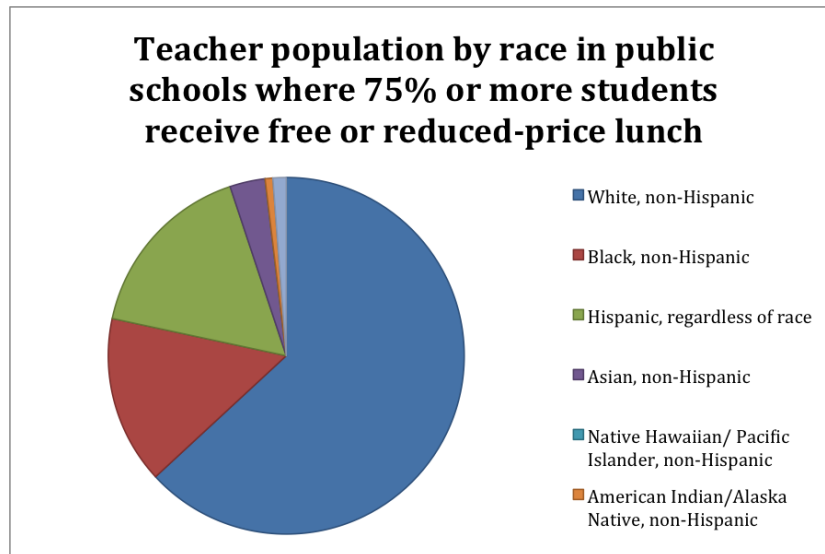
Appendix

Teacher population by race
The following figures are generated from Table 1 in Golddring et al. (2013)

Graph:1

Teacher population by race in public schools where 50–74% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch

- White, non-Hispanic
- Black, non-Hispanic
- Hispanic, regardless of race
- Asian, non-Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic
- American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic

Graph:2

Teacher population by race in public schools where 75% or more students receive free or reduced-price lunch

- White, non-Hispanic
- Black, non-Hispanic
- Hispanic, regardless of race
- Asian, non-Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic
- American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic

Graph:3

Student-student parity index school.

The following table is generated from data from the US Census on student enrollment and data from the Schools and Staffing Surveys from the National Center of Education statistics. Census information provided enrollment by year, thus the school year population is calculated by taking the average of both years. Since data on the racial makeup of the public school teacher workforce is collected every few years, the 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 school year were selected. In addition, the school years selected illustrate the increase in the population of students of color in school.

Year	White, non-Hispanic	Black, non-Hispanic	American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic	Asian, non-Hispanic*	Hispanic, regardless of race	Two or more races, non-Hispanic
2007-2008	1.50	0.41	0.42	0.29	0.33	**
2011-2012	1.59	0.43	0.42	0.38	0.33	0.37

* Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders were added into the Asian category.
** Omitted, since the percentages of students who are of two or more races were not collected in 2007.

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Not what, but who: Controlled choice in gifted education programs in the United States

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Abstract

Gifted education's most pressing problem, according to its critics, is a lack of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity. This lack of diversity can be attributed to the fractured nature of gifted education's historical development, and the also fractured development of its very independent and numerous stakeholders. By the 20th century, these factors caused an overreaching regulatory structure to be practically infeasible. This policy proposal attempts to push back against historical precedent and begin a process of implementing overarching guidelines for gifted education programs in the United States based on a Controlled Choice model of admissions for gifted and talented programs that receive federal funding. The new federal Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence will be tasked with enforcing and overseeing this policy change.

Keywords: Gifted education, education policy, gifted education policy, controlled choice, diversity education, Every Student Succeeds Act, Javits Act

Gifted and talented education is arguably the most controversial realm of education policy, theory, and practice because it appears, on a first glance, to be a simple and generally beneficial field when it is complicated and messy in reality. Controversies can occur when this public perception of gifted education as a universal good conflicts with the harsher realities of implementing such policies, which might be leaving the most deserving students behind.

1. Unpacking "Gifted" and "Talented"

Gifted and talented education is arguably the most controversial realm of education policy, theory, and practice because it appears, on a first glance, to

be a simple and generally beneficial field when it is complicated and messy in reality. Controversies can occur when this public perception of gifted education as a universal good conflicts with the harsher realities of implementing such policies, which might be leaving the most deserving students behind.

On the one hand, designing and implementing programs to support what Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth calls "...nurturing the bright young people who will go on to make significant contributions to our world" seems like a democratic and patriotic goal (2015). Educating our best and brightest students, as argued by Johnathan Wai in the National Review, "...[has] a long-term impact on GDP," suggesting that gifted education is a topic of national importance (2016). With this in mind, it is not hard to imagine that the next Albert Einstein or the child who will eventually grow up to cure cancer may be sitting in a classroom right now, becoming disinterested in the sciences because of policymakers' failure to advocate for their unique educational needs.

On the other hand, huge questions loom over the entire field of gifted education. Critics ask whether the entire system may be reinforcing structures of privilege and oppression in ways that no scholar, teacher, or policymaker would articulate as a part of the original goal of gifted education. For example, Donna Y. Ford, James L. Moore III, and Deborah A. Harmon (2005) argue in their work "Integrating Multicultural and Gifted Education: A Curricular Framework" that the lack of multiculturalism in gifted education hinders learning for many students of color in American public schools. Educational inequities are part of a larger system of inequity that stretches across many sectors, from public health to urban planning and beyond. But failing to address these shortcomings in access to specialized educational programming for students of color is particularly problematic because increasing levels of education, as argued by Ron Haskins (2008), have been shown to boost the mobility of children and directly affects lifetime earnings. Making access to educational programs equitable will produce a more equitable society, in the long-term.

Rather than being simply a facet of a larger nexus of problems plaguing gifted education policy, attempts at addressing the inequity of gifted education as a whole are simultaneously the most pressing and the hardest to rectify. The field is currently scattered across an array of different policyscapes at the local, state, and federal levels, and managed by different entities in different geographic areas, and is exceptionally difficult to regulate standards of practice and even harder to ensure admissions policies

are diverse and inclusive of traditionally marginalized populations. If Johns Hopkins and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) cannot agree on a common definition of what a gifted student is, how can they agree on what an inclusive gifted education policy agenda looks like?

This paper attempts to answer that question by presenting guidelines for inclusive policies for all institutions working with any students classified as "gifted" or "talented" in the United States. The policy recommendation set forth in this paper is simple: any program that works with gifted and talented youth that receives federal funding should update their admissions policies to reflect a controlled choice model, as exemplified by Cambridge Public Schools.

2. The History of Gifted Education Policy in the United States

Gifted education policy in the United States began alongside the invention of intelligence testing and the founding of the discipline of psychology in the early 20th century. However, as time progressed, gifted education as a field became more interested in student advocacy work, spearheaded by NGOs and followed by the federal government when it became politically advantageous for such advocacy to take place. The current gifted education policyscape has become fragmented in the wake of recent neoliberal education reform efforts and is primarily driven by special policy reports, scarce provisions for gifted and talented programs embedded into reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the creation or continued action of non-governmental organizations. This fragmentation is particularly important when discussing multicultural gifted education, because it obfuscates the very stark realities of inequity in gifted education. In other words, having many different players in the gifted education policy arena makes it more difficult for any one group to gain a clear sense of the problems affecting the system as a whole.

In December 1908, psychologist Robert Goddard published The Binet and Simon Tests of Intellectual Capacity, a scale of intelligence based on the findings of French psychologist Alfred Binet. Goddard began using it as a benchmark assessment for the students of both the New Jersey Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys and local public school children in Vineland, N.J (Ludy, 2009). The Binet test quickly became popular, and by 1914 Goddard was the first psychologist to include results from it in a court of law.

However, the foundations for the academic field of gifted education did not arise until Lewis Terman revised and updated the Binet test with his colleagues at the Stanford Graduate School of Education (Leslie, 2000). The Stanford-Binet, as the newly revised test was called, measured cognitive ability and academic potential and presented the concept of intelligence as a single number, called an "Intelligence Quotient", or IQ. By 1916, Terman's new test was being administered to public schoolchildren across California. Those that scored unusually highly were invited to participate in a longitudinal study of gifted and talented children at Stanford. While inconclusive and marred with design flaws, Terman's study is still in progress today with the few surviving subjects.

By 1954, the field of gifted education shifted away from studies of general intelligence and crystallized into more of a student advocacy apparatus with the founding of the National Association of Gifted Education (NAGC) by Ann Isaacs (2015). According to their website, the organization is devoted to pushing policy agendas that cater to gifted and talented youth from across the racial and socioeconomic spectra (2015).

The federal government lagged behind non-governmental organizations in the support and advocacy for programs for gifted and talented students and did not begin to allocate substantial resources until after the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957. After Sputnik, which scared many policy stakeholders into believing that U.S. was beginning to fall behind in math, foreign language, and science education, the U.S. government began to support programs for advanced learning in STEM fields, but it continued to neglect the needs of exceptional students in the humanities. These math- and science-centric initiatives were codified into the language of the National Defense Act of 1958.

The Office of the Gifted and Talented within the federal Department of Education was given formal status in 1974, and after that point gifted education policy at the federal level can be categorized into three distinct realms: the publication of special reports such as *National Excellence: The Case for Developing America's Talent* (1993) which detail the state of federal gifted education policy, provisions for gifted and talented programs embedded into reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the creation of separate non-governmental institutions like the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (1990) and The Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth (1979).

The history of gifted education policy in the United States sheds light on

how the policyscape arrived at its current state. Different organizations and groups each have their own goals for gifted education and their own metrics to define giftedness because they have worked independently from one another for such a long time in history. JHU's Center for Talented Youth does not interact with state-level policies on gifted education in schools extensively, and the National Association for Gifted Children (2016) is primarily interested in supporting and development, staff development, advocacy, communication, and collaboration with other organizations. Therefore, the very nature of gifted education policy makes it very hard to regulate, but recommending policies that affect the admissions practices of all gifted education programs is a manageable first step in the road to meaningful reform.

3. Pre-Existing Policies

Currently, the federal Department of Education articulates almost no direct policy initiatives for the education of gifted and talented students, preferring to leave the decisions up to the states. The Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, originally passed as a part of the 1988 reauthorization of ESEA and expanded to included competitive grants for states to complete gifted education policy initiatives in 2002, offers almost nothing in terms of actual recommendations for action other than a definition of giftedness. As of the 2002 iteration, giftedness is defined by the federal government as "students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities" (2015).

This vague definition provided by the federal Department of Education fails to include any concrete metrics to assess giftedness. This failure has helped to preserve the most pressing policy question in the field of gifted education: the lack of consensus on what giftedness really is, and different stakeholders define the term in various ways. One of the metrics provided by the Center for Talented Youth at Hopkins is "...Achievement at the 95th percentile or higher on one or more subtests of a nationally normed standardized test," while the state of Oklahoma considers "...identified students who score in the top three percent (3%) on any national standardized test of intellectual ability" as gifted (as quoted in National Association for Gifted Children, 2015).

Concrete policy initiatives on gifted education in general are clearly limited, but initiatives on diversity and inclusion within gifted education are even sparser. The lack of specific initiatives related to racial diversity is exemplified by the current admissions policies of the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY). CTY (2016) states on its website that "...Applicants to and employees of [CTY]...are protected under Federal law from discrimination on the [basis of] race," but the application process for the CTY Talent Search (the method by which CTY selects students to label as " ...talented") or its student programming does not mention this language. Rather, the only mentions of diversity and inclusion are in relation to student with disabilities or in relation to a more general diversity, which CTY believes "...is part of the educational experience the program provides, and [they] encourage students to embrace the opportunity to learn from others who are different from them." While CTY contains several smaller scholarship funds to promote access to its programming for students from under-represented groups, like their Goldman Sachs Scholars Program, by no means are their inclusion policies comprehensive, and much more work remains to be done. CTY's programming exemplifies the gifted education policyscape's general stance toward these types of policies: while a handful of targeted initiatives exist, the presence of comprehensive structures to promote racial equity remains lacking.

4. Current Stakeholders in Gifted Policy

As previously stated, the stakeholders acting in the gifted education policy landscape are diverse and each occupy a distinct niche that adds to the policymaking nexus. This variance causes problems when attempting to implement a policy agenda across all groups because each operates on a different policy level with a different scope and different goals for the gifted students they serve. However, it will become clear through an outline of the different stakeholders that the federal government is the best route to an effectively implemented policy proposal.

Nonprofit organizations like the NAGC, the Center for Talented Youth, and the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented make up the first group of stakeholders. These organizations conduct research and/or advocate for the advancement of policies specifically for gifted and talented students in the policyscape. Their work most directly informs legislators and lawmakers at the state, local, and federal level, and they may or may not

directly interact with gifted and talented students. With this lack of direct involvement in mind, attempting to change their perceptions of multiculturalism in gifted education will be especially challenging.

The second group of stakeholders is only a single constituent: the federal Department of Education (2004), which has taken a fairly hands-off approach to gifted education policy in its enactment of Subpart 6 of Part D of Title V of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), informally known as the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 2001. According to the US Department of Education's (2015, paragraph 1) website, the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program is designed to allocate grant money to states to support their work with populations typically underrepresented in gifted education, but so far only 11 states have been awarded funding under this program. What the Javits Act fails to do is to provide the states with any guidance as to what sort of gifted and talented programs they should propose grant money for in the first place. Because of this strange and tenuous relationship, the US Department of Education deserves to be categorized in a group of its own. It alone has the power to unify the other stakeholders across the United States with national policy initiatives, despite its historical unwillingness to do so. It is also original in this discussion of stakeholders because it is connected to gifted and talented programs in individual school districts, but only through the mediation of state Departments of Education. Thus, it is noteworthy because it neither fails to interact nor directly interacts with gifted and talented students, making it occupy a unique space in the gifted education policyscape.

Third, state-level Departments of Education can be classified as their own group of stakeholders. They are charged with creating and implementing their own gifted education policies under the provisions of the Javits Act, with no direct guidance from the federal government on policies to implement across the range of policies affecting gifted and talented students, much less multiculturalism in gifted and talented education. According to a report released by the NAGC (2015), 14 states did not provide any funding to local districts for gifted children as of the 2012–13 school year, and as mentioned above, only 11 states received federal grant money under the provisions of the Javits Act. Clearly, not all states are taking the steps to allocate funds specifically for gifted and talented students. This level of policymaking accounts for the greatest amount of inconsistency in the education policy landscape and thus, the most difficult place for change to take place.

Individual school districts can be seen as the fourth stakeholder group.

Their position varies depending on location, size, and demographic makeup of their student bodies. They have the most direct control over gifted education policy, as they exist on the "front lines" of policy implementation. School districts, under the oversight of a state Department of Education, are directly responsible for providing services to gifted and talented students and their families. This means that because they are the only governmental apparatus that directly implement gifted and talented programming (alongside non-governmental organizations), they deserve separate classification.

Respectively, the fifth and sixth stakeholder groups are gifted students and their families, who naturally would want special resources allocated for themselves, and students and families of students not traditionally labeled as gifted, who, according to Gallagher, Coleman, and Nelson (2004), are more likely to believe that better resources and "the best teachers" are allocated to gifted students disproportionately. As private individuals, students and families can choose to participate in the public education system's gifted and talented programs, where available, or exit the public school system and pursue alternative education strategies like private schooling or home-schooling. Thus, these two related stakeholders in the policyscape will not be subject to the same regulatory practices as the other stakeholders outlined in this paper.

After a careful discussion of the stakeholders involved in this policyscape, it becomes clear that the federal government is the best route to implement a lasting change through a policy proposal. It is the only stakeholder that has access to students in all 50 states while being removed enough to effectively administer and evaluate such a policy. A state-by-state initiative or an attempt to push policy through non-governmental organizations would not make sense for this proposal because it would fail to change the system as a whole, which—as ambitious as it sounds—is the necessary route for lasting change.

Policy Proposal

As argued by the Center for Social Inclusion (2003), race and poverty are inextricably linked in the United States. With this fact in mind, this policy proposal attempts to address the inconsistencies in diversity and inclusion that currently present across the gifted education policyscape via a secondary indicator of inequality: free-and reduced-lunch program participation rates. In order to ameliorate the situation outlined above, the proposed solution

requires public and private organizations that selectively admit students to "gifted" and "talented" programs that receive federal funding to implement "controlled choice" admissions processes. Controlled choice originally began in Cambridge Public Schools in a Boston suburb in 1980 and emphasizes the creation of balanced, equitable schools by matching students from diverse backgrounds (measured by free-and reduced-lunch eligibility) within the district to each school in the district. In order to ensure compliance, organizations would be required to regularly report their admissions statistics in a "Gifted Education Common Data Set", modeled after the Common Data Set (CDS) initiative in higher education.

Management of Policy

This policy could be managed as a joint project of the Civil Rights Division of the federal Department of Justice and the Office of the Gifted and Talented within the federal Department of Education. A 7-person Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence will be formed from the staff within the two offices, led by a Liaison that would act as the primary interlocutor between the two offices. The Liaison will also act as the executive of the Special Task Force while it is in session.

The task force would be responsible for implementing all aspects of the policy outlined below, and will stand for a minimum of two years before being evaluated for renewal.

Elements of Proposal

Effective as soon as possible, any program public or private that claims to work with "gifted" or "talented" youth that receives any source of federal funding would be required to implement a Controlled Choice-based admissions policy, modeled on the policies created by Cambridge Public Schools (2015). The two main groups tasked with operating and maintaining admissions for gifted and talented programs currently are non-governmental organizations and local school districts (through the oversight of a state DoE). Controlled Choice policies are aware of an applicant's status as a participant of the student's current school's Free & Reduced Lunch program and, in this case, any gifted and talented program receiving federal funding would be tasked with admitting a population of students on Free & Reduced Lunch programs that is representative of the applicant pool to a given program. For example, if 56% of the applicant pool for a gifted and talented program in a given school district participates in the district's Free & Reduced Lunch

program, the number of students admitted to a potential district-wide gifted and talented program should be reflective of that percentage.

Choosing to report Free & Reduced Lunch participation status when applying to a gifted and talented program will remain optional, as is currently the case in Cambridge Public Schools. As defined on their website:

> "When families [apply for such a program], they are asked to voluntarily disclose whether or not they qualify for the Free & Reduced Lunch program. This question establishes the family's assignment category. If a family discloses that they qualify for this benefit, their child's application is categorized as "Free/Reduced Lunch." If they do not qualify, or choose not to share this information, their application is assigned as "Paid Lunch." By voluntarily disclosing whether or not they qualify for this program, families help our system be more equitable,"(2015.)

These programs must keep record of their number of applicants, and be able to provide information regarding the Free & Reduced Lunch participation rates for both the applicant pool and actual participants in the program for any given fiscal year after this policy would be implemented. These data must be made publicly available on a regular basis, in a format similar to that of the Common Data Set (CDS) initiative used by colleges & universities.

If a given program is not compliant with the terms set forth above, then similarly to how state Departments of Education must meet make "adequate yearly progress" or AYP in the improvement of standardized test scores under the policy initiatives of No Child Left Behind, the program must make AYP towards accurate Free & Reduced Lunch participation status reflection in the admitted student population. This would not affect gifted and talented programs that already admit a reflective percentage of students on Free- and Reduced-lunch from the applicant pool. Rather, gifted and talented programs that admit fewer students on Free & Reduced lunch into their programs than the percentage of that program's applicant pool will be evaluated as "non-compliant" with the terms of this policy by the Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence and will be instructed to make the necessary changes in their admissions policy so that their admitted student pool matches the Free & Reduced Lunch participation status of the applicant pool to the program in a reasonable time frame.

Programs that do not meet AYP are in jeopardy of losing federal funding streams, even those beyond what is designated as specifically for gifted and

talented education under the Javits Act, if applicable. The Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence is responsible for evaluating whether or not programs are meeting AYP.

Funding

This policy requires no additional funding for any parties involved, other than the costs associated with reporting racial background during the application process, which are considered negligible by this proposal.

Policy Evaluation

As mentioned above, Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence is responsible for evaluating whether or not programs are meeting AYP.

Plan of Action

This policy shall be introduced as a bill to the House of Representatives of the United States Congress, where it shall be debated and amended and eventually become law. The provisions of this law shall be in effect for a five-year time frame, at which point Congress must re-evaluate the policy and, using the data from the reports provided by the Task Force, decide whether or not this policy should be renewed.

Conclusion

This policy proposal will begin putting the pieces of the fractured gifted education policyscape back together. This policy will be the first in a series of practices designed to provide greater coherence and much-needed standardization in a field that has been plagued by intellectual and ideological silo-ing. In the future, the federal DoE should be tasked with creating a universal (and inclusive) definition of what giftedness is, so that all parties involved in gifted education can be on the same page. Additionally, current allocations set aside for gifted and talented programs at the state and federal level should be significantly increased. But to begin the work that needs to be done, this policy proposal will serve as a way for gifted education advocates to push back against critics who argue that gifted education is currently an inherently inequitable system. In other words, this policy proposal will begin the long road towards equity. By no means is this policy exhaustive,

all-inclusive, or a panacea for all of the problems afflicting gifted education; but it is an absolutely necessary start.

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Author

Ten Years: Policy in 3-D

Sabrina Stevens

2006

> "There is always a question of how much information the
> members of any culture may be permitted to have; and
> throughout history it has been assumed that most of the
> population should be kept ignorant..."
>
> –Jules Henry, as quoted by Herbert Kohl in *Stupidity and Tears:*
> *Teaching and Learning in Troubled Times*

Ten years ago, I enrolled in Swarthmore's Education Policy seminar, then taught by Eva Travers. I was a year away from completing a Special Major in Educational Studies and Psychology, and deeply invested in looking at how school contexts worked—and didn't work—for students, especially low-income students of color.

Though barely five years old at that point, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—and the A Nation At Risk-inspired "standards and accountability" movement that gave rise to it– was the dominant theme in many of our classes. In our field work in classrooms all over the Philadelphia region, we watched how high-stakes testing and longstanding funding inequities affected what teachers could do for their students. Perusing my notes, I can still see these different classrooms, from places as diverse as Swarthmore-Rutledge School ("This feels like elementary school as I remember it"), Russell Byers Charter School in Center City (where my observation notes are an angry record of Kindergarteners crying over Terra Nova practice tests), and Blankenburg Elementary in West Philly (where "No Excuses! Posters lined the walls, and I was shocked to see five-year-olds resign themselves to doing test-reminiscent drill and kill on computers, with far less resistance than I'd expected).

In our classes, we took it as a given that both the law and its implementation were problematic. I remember learning of Diane Ravitch and her

contribution to the standards movement, and thinking of her quite harshly for her service under the first Bush Administration. The latter Bushs decision to inject steroids into an already problematic "Standards" movement, making high-stakes testing the law of the land, was universally understood among us as a problem. We recognized this as the culmination of a stealthy shift from a social responsibility for *inputs* to one-sided "accountability" for outcomes— a move that would almost certainly undo any progress toward equity that historically oppressed communities had made between the Great Society era and the inauguration of Ronald Reagan. Even outside of my policy courses, this law colored what we discussed. We discussed how standardization and high-stakes testing would affect educators' practice and day-to-day work, and talked about what teachers could do to try to subvert it.

While I started out imagining that I wanted to work in education policy, by the time I'd spent a year and change on my coursework, I'd read so many incisive, important critiques of current education policy and practice that I felt the most important thing I could do was to teach. I felt that simply by teaching differently from what I assumed was already happening in low-income public school classrooms, I would be making the most important contribution I could. All that needed to be written was written, I reasoned; what we needed now were the sort of teachers who would actually read those words and try to put them into practice.

After graduation, I went on to apprentice teach at a private school in Massachusetts, and then came back to Swarthmore to student teach at a Friends school in Philadelphia. In both places, we spent considerable time discussing what good pedagogy looked like, very explicitly in opposition to the current trends toward standardization. That's what these parents were shopping for, and that's what they expected for their children. I could hear the echoes of Jean Anyon's work in all of this.

2008

> "However, she has been forced to become stupid in order to keep
> her job. She has to deny what she knows, pretend to supervisors
> that she is abiding by the foolish. . . mandates, and sneak her
> sound pedagogy into the stupid and demeaning programs being
> imposed upon her. . . These strategies of inauthentic conformity
> complicate her teaching life. The stupidity game is painful to
> play, but more and more teachers who are forced to teach
> against their conscience and pedagogical experience are playing
> it because they do not want to give up on their students".
>
> Herb Kohl, *36 Children*

I was hired well into summer vacation after deciding to move across the country to Denver. I arrived mere days before I and my colleagues were scheduled to report for professional development and to set up our classrooms, which was only a few days before students were expected to be in their seats. Yet by the time my principal handed me the keys to my classroom, he still wasnt sure if he wanted me to teach fourth or fifth grade.

In hindsight, I should have recognized this level of disorganization as a giant red flag, and a harbinger of the stress to come. But I was too excited about my new work to care. I ultimately ended up being assigned to teach literacy for my own fourth grade homeroom as well as a fifth grade classroom, in a "platooning" situation where we as a fourth-and fifth-grade team would specialize in a given subject area and share responsibility for teaching our respective subject areas to all of the students. I also became part of a special professional development team that would focus on rebuilding literacy practices throughout the school.

I was reduced to tears by day two. As I would later learn was the norm in this school and others like it, the plan, the schedule, the requirements of teachers were always changing. Every few weeks, our principal and assistant principal would leave the building to go to a new professional development presentation somewhere, and each time theyd return with some new curricular gimmick that was supposed to radically alter our capacity to "drive results" for our students.

It created havoc in the building. Children crave routine, especially students like ours, who had so little consistency in every other part of their lives. And it was hell on a new teacher, trying to keep up with the wildly different

expectations of building and district leadership, plus an increasingly distant vision of all the stuff I'd learned I was supposed to do when I learned to teach. After several months of attempting to do it all—teach to tests, jump through my principal's hoops, and find ways to preserve a sense of community and an authentic learning environment for my students—I collapsed from anxiety and exhaustion in my classroom, and had to be rushed to the hospital.

The only thing that stayed consistent was the drumbeat for Data. For "results." The grumbles in the teachers' lounge stayed steady, too, as we tried one "intervention" after another, tossing curricular spaghetti at the wall in the hopes that something would stick.

What surprised me most (aside from the difficult realization, in my first truly "adult" role in life that no, the adults actually don't have it together as I'd always assumed) was that no one seemed to be thinking about why we were doing all the things they were asking us to do. The "strange girl in the cafeteria" feeling I'd felt from merely being new was quickly replaced by a sense of being a total alien, based on the looks I'd get whenever I stopped to ask about the research support for each new program, or the rationale for changing the schedule yet again, or administering yet another test. The conversation at Swarthmore and the private schools where I practice taught constantly linked practice to research or policy: "We do this in recognition of what we now know about human motivation and interest-development." "This is going on here because of the push for standards, because of No Child Left Behind." That kind of conversation was conspicuously absent at my school, and an insidious culture of fear made it difficult to cultivate it. I had never felt more alone in my life.

As I later learned, my colleagues had good reason to be afraid. Asking simple questions in faculty meetings, or asking my colleagues how they felt about what we were being asked to do, turned out to be shockingly subversive. While I'd gone my entire K–12 scholastic life only being summoned to the principal's office to receive awards, I became a regular in the hot seat as an adult. I now recognize how naive I was to think that teacher-administrator relationships had uniformly improved since Herbert Kohls experience in *36 Children* (especially in a weak labor state like Colorado), but at the time I assumed that critical conversations about research, policy, and practice were the professional norm. After all, they had been the norm in the private schools where I'd done all my practice teaching.

I was also still laboring under the misperception that when people know better, they automatically do better, as though simple knowledge is the only

thing that affects people's choices. As if getting the right answer, all on its own, is sufficient to change things in the real world. Not so.

By my second year, we were in the final year of the five-year timeline NCLB gives to turn a school around, so the pressure to make changes had gotten even more intense. But no one else in the building connected those two dots, while I could see the writing on the wall: If something didn't change, our school was going to be shut down and/or given to a charter school. Though it was a tough year, I did end up making some friends, as well as a reputation for rabble-rousing as a result of my continually questioning why Data was taking precedence over what we all agreed was best for our students. It struck me as silly to let our fear of being fired stop us from doing what was right for students, when we were probably going to lose our jobs in a mandatory turnaround, anyway.

2010

> "Living with stupidity alienates teachers from their work and is
> perhaps one of the main causes of teacher turnover among
> people who love children and find teaching magical. It is
> certainly what motivates many young and gifted teachers, who
> want to teach in the most underserved public schools, to migrate
> to charter schools and private schools and to open their minds to
> working in voucher-based programs, or to leave the profession
> altogether. Many intelligent and caring teachers simply do not
> want to pay the price of making themselves stupid as the cost of
> teaching in public schools."
>
> Herb Kohl, *36 Children*

You know that old comedy bit, "Well you can't fire me, cause I quit!"
I had the opposite happen to me.

I decided to resign at the end of the school year in order to take some time to figure out what had happened, and find a school where I wouldn't have to shelve what I knew in order to avoid trouble. I had seen the various cynical strategies some of my veteran colleagues had adopted to preserve their energy and keep their jobs, strategies that looked to any outside observer (and to me, before I knew better) like run-of-the-mill bad teaching.

I resolved that I didn't want to adapt to this level of dysfunction, because what it would take from me to become comfortable enough to stay long-term

in a situation like this was more than I was willing to concede. But my principal, aggravated by my questioning and attempts to embolden my colleagues, rejected my resignation so he could non-renew my contract instead, which at the time had the effect of banning me from working anywhere else in the district, and which I feared could hurt my chances to find a teaching position elsewhere.

I couldn't believe it. I honestly didn't think things like that actually happened to people in this day and age. (Again, naïve.) After unsuccessfully arguing in my own defense at a mass school board meeting where I met nearly a hundred other great teachers in the same unjust position, I started blogging about what was really happening in schools like ours, and telling the stories of students, parents, and teachers like me who were standing up to standardization and inequity. Still-novel tools like Twitter and other social media gave thousands of us in schools where these conversations weren't happening the chance to do what we couldnt always do in our offline lives: the chance to be something more than That Person, the lonely, odd one out who asks inconvenient questions. Through writing and speaking we found community, which gave us the courage to continue to resist.

After my own experience of being retaliated against, I realized that we really couldn't just teach our way out of this mess; we needed to organize and protest, too. We needed to change laws. All those great words in all those great readings wed been assigned hadn't made much of a dent on the ground, where it mattered most. And without the proper workplace protections or social support, it is impossible to actually stand up for what's right and win. Being right is risky when you have no rights.

So that's what I did: Blog, tweet, organize, protest, repeat. I helped mobilize hundreds of school stakeholders to protest privatization locally (including an attempt to save my old school from a charter takeover), and mobilized thousands to march for equity and against over-testing nationally. Together, we started changing peoples assumptions about the education policy conversation, if not yet policy itself.

2010

> ... "There are organizations and individuals who quite
> deliberately trade in the politics of division and deception in
> order to promote their political, ideological and economic
> agendas. They have taken advantage of a three-decades long
> head start in the mass media, using their platforms to spread
> misinformation about schools and teachers, and to promote
> education policies that bear little to no relationship to the ideas
> of actual public school stakeholders, or the best available
> evidence about what really works to improve schools. But we're
> fighting back".
>
> –myself, writing at Huffington Post

After some increasingly high profile grassroots organizing successes, I was invited to join the communications staff at the American Federation of Teachers. There, I quickly learned that far fewer people than I'd expected within the unions—the presumed and much-maligned opposition to the policies in place—had any experience teaching under the conditions imposed by NCLB. The leaders were years removed from the day-to-day realities of teaching, and many of their staffers had never taught at all. They were ideologically aligned with the cause on some level, but didn't have much (if any) on-the-ground experience as teachers, students or community members oppressed by the forces of privatization.

To be clear, there were and are lots of talented people working very hard within the union. But I knew from my own time organizing independently that members and their allies (self included) were working almost as hard to move their own union leadership on these issues as we were working to resist the policymakers and corporate interest groups directly responsible for them.

Once inside, it became easy to see why. If you haven't learned how things are supposed to be (as you do in any decent school of education), then lived through how they actually are (as you do if you teach), it's hard to appreciate just how painful and destructive bad policy really is. And if you spend enough time with many of the people responsible for those policies—as many of the union leadership have, at luxurious retreats, conventions, and so forth—it gets harder to see how the nice, well-intentioned philanthropist or policymaker you drink and dine with is the same person who is responsible for horrific destruction your constituency is facing, and that he needs to

be challenged accordingly. Their distance from the classroom, and their closeness to the folks in power, seriously threatened their ability to keep identifying with the people they are supposed to represent.

So once again, I thanked everything holy for social media, which gives people the ability to speak back. As the de facto "Twitter whisperer" to these leaders who didnt know why their members were so angry with their own organization, I was constantly translating for them what the complaints they received meant, and what that should mean for the unions strategic efforts. I spent more than a year working to undo a deeply-entrenched fear of being seen as "opposing reform"—the highly effective default attack against union leaders in all policy conversations—in order to build an internal sense of urgency to publicly fight back instead of cooperating with what passed for "reform." Before long, though, I traded that simultaneously satisfying yet arduous uphill battle for the opportunity to lead a parallel effort focused on changing the media narrative about ed policy, Integrity in Education.

Meanwhile, 2014—the year when we should have been able to answer "Yes!" to George W. Bushs question, "Is our children learning?"—came and went. According to the test scores, they wasn't. But by then, a growing number of parents doubted those tests or the new national standards to which those tests were connected, and had started to let their kids opt out of taking them. At the same time, policymakers were years overdue to change or reauthorize NCLB. So after years of struggle, NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015. In some ways its a victory, but the law leaves some huge problems, challenges, and questions in place.

For starters, the culture of testing—of privileging a certain way of thinking, knowing, and doing over all others—is still very entrenched, even if its no longer the federal government that's pushing for those tests. There is still an assumption, shared by many non-governmental national policy organizations as well as many state and local policymakers, that test score Data is an important marker of what's happening in schools.

More fundamentally, we're still only just starting to engage practitioners as well as policymakers in a serious reckoning with the inherent racism, classism, sexism, adultism, and other manifestations of systemic oppression that animate every aspect of the schooling process. With or without these tests, we still have a curriculum that has very little to do with the real world, and which doesn't reflect the lived reality of the students learning it. We still have a student body whose diversity isn't reflected by their teachers, many of whom who do not understand their own biases or their responsibility to

unpack them, and to help students do the same. EduColor, a collective I helped found, is working to spread awareness about this, but there is a lot of work to be done.

We are still just beginning to re-situate education issues in the broader context of social and economic policy, in a public policy arena where so many forces conspire to stop us from connecting the dots between who and what has impoverished our communities, immiserated our families, and undermined our students' and teachers' best efforts to make miracles in the classroom.

At every opportunity, we must organize and make common cause with everyone else who demands real efforts toward social and economic justice, while resisting efforts to treat education as an isolated issue/policy area. And though many great things have already been written, we need as many of you as possible to think more, write more, and bring that consciousness into classrooms, into school districts, into PTA meetings, into school board meetings, into the halls of power, and into the streets.

If there is one thing I've learned in the ten years since I sat where you are now, it's that having the right knowledge isn't enough. Those of us with that knowledge are a distinct minority, and we go out on a limb every time we dare to apply it. The connections you create with your community are the only things standing between you and the cold, hard ground when that limb breaks; do everything you can to make sure they're as strong as possible.

Jacobs, S. (2014, May 4).   [Sabrina Stevens speaks] [Photograph].   Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/NYSUTUnited/photos/a.661136640600047.1073741838.1172705683199 93/661138503933194/?type=1&theater

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Sabrina Stevens is a teacher-turned-writer and education advocate. A proud public school graduate and an alumna of Swarthmore College, she originally intended to spend her career as a public school teacher. After an eye-opening experience teaching in a so-called failing school in Denver, Sabrina left the classroom to speak out against the abuses of the movement to privatize public education.

Through her writing and creative online presentations, Sabrina quickly established herself as a leading voice for a democratic, community-driven vision for education reform. In 2011, she helped organize the first Save Our Schools March and National Call to Action. Since then, she has worked with numerous education advocacy organizations and campaigns as an organizer, trainer, communications strategist and spokesperson.

Having witnessed and experienced the destructive effects of education policies driven by corporate interest groups unconnected to public school communities, Sabrina has dedicated herself to ensuring that the interests, needs and aspirations of real public school stakeholders are represented honestly in the education reform debate. She lives with her family in Washington, DC.

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