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Engaged Pedagogy and Teacher Discourse: A Critical Examination of Public Education in Mississippi

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Engaged Pedagogy and Teacher Discourse:

A Critical Examination of Public Education in Mississippi

by

Kelsi Ford

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Mississippi K-12 public education in terms of inequality and critical pedagogy with a focus on historical factors, state testing, and personal accounts of current teachers. The research is based on ten in-depth interviews with current schoolteachers regarding their perspectives on education and personal experiences and draws from previous scholarship, notably bell hook's concept of engaged pedagogy. Critical pedagogy offers a model for transformative education for resisting social inequity and promoting democracy and citizenship, but teacher interviews suggest that the structure and culture of classrooms are contradictory to adopting critical pedagogy. Specifically, the research finds that both standardized testing and attempts to stay apolitical in the classroom are oppositional to fostering critical engagement and awareness about social realities.

Keywords:

education, critical pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, democracy, inequity, race, gender, intersectionality, teachers, Mississippi.

DEDICATION

First, this work is dedicated to my family. To my mother, Anita Page Ford, thank you for your unwavering support and love. To my siblings and cousins, I love you dearly and this is a testament to the example I want to set for you all. I would also like to dedicate my thesis to the faculty and staff of the University of Southern Mississippi who have taken an interest in me and continue to support me today. Lastly, this thesis is dedicated to my future self. This is only your beginning, so please keep moving forward.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BJS   Bureau of Justice Statistics

CCSO   Council of Chief State Officers

IRB   Institutional Review Board

MAAP   Mississippi Academic Assessment Program

MDE   Mississippi Department of Education

NGA   National Governors Association

NGO   Non-Governmental Organization

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of education? While many may argue that it is obvious, the controversy that surrounds fundamental educational issues indicates that there is little consensus. Many scholars and social philosophers have discussed the global importance of education in facilitating equality, democracy, human rights, and civil rights. Other influential leaders have stressed the role of education for assimilating individuals into the dominant culture or preparing workers for the job market. In 1947, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. exclaimed in "The Purpose of Education,"

> Education must train one for quick, resolute, and effective thinking. To think incisively and to think for oneself is very difficult. We are prone to let our mental life become invaded by legions of half-truths, prejudices, and propaganda. At this point, I often wonder whether education is fulfilling its purpose. A great majority of the so-called educated people do not think logically and scientifically. Even the press, the classroom, the platform, and the pulpit in many instances do not give us objective and unbiased truths. To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction. The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. (Carson et al., 1992)

Although his paper was written and recited over seven decades ago, his statements could just as well describe American education today.

In the United States and many other countries, the problem is less about access to schooling than equitable access to quality education. Educational gaps in society often reflect structural inequities based on race, class, and gender. To ensure democracy, society must produce citizens who are participatory, critical, and invested in the democratic process because they trust their voices will matter. Education, whether public or private, is a huge influence in Americans' lives and can either hinder or facilitate citizenship—the ability of members to participate in their community on equal terms.

Education is the most important social institution of a nation because access to information is crucial to creating and maintaining an open and ethical society. Acquiring knowledge is how we live informed lives and live without social ignorance, lacking knowledge about the world and people in our society and beyond. Social ignorance breeds political corruption though misinformation or the proliferation of "alternative facts" among citizens. It leads to societal stagnation and interpersonal biases, both explicit and implicit, rather than progress and engagement. Those who were once taught by someone in the educational system go on to become the members that populate and lead our political, economic, religious, healthcare, family, and other institutional systems.

As declared by the constitution at our country's founding, American values are rooted in life, liberty, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness. The promise of the American dream has pulled immigrants from around the world to the United States. Even in the era of globalized information and media, which has laid the nation's inequities bare for all to see, many still hail the United States as the most desirable and greatest country and as a model for other nations. To better understand some of the promises and

problems connected to the American educational institution, it is useful to look back at its foundations and history.

History of Public Education

United States

Education in the United States has been marked by attempts both to broaden citizenship and solidify inequality. According to Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation (2006), in 1647, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony decreed that every town of fifty families should have an elementary school, and every town of 100 families should have a Latin school. A century later, Thomas Jefferson proposed a two-track educational system described as "the laboring and the learned." In 1790, the Pennsylvania state constitution called for free public education for poor children. Later, schools operated by the "Lancastrian" model, in which one master taught hundreds of students in a single room by grouping students under the tutorage of more advanced students in the class. During the decade from 1846 until 1856, as more immigrants arrived, owners of industrial companies sought a docile, obedient workforce; therefore, they looked to public schools to provide their ideal workforce. Both Jefferson's and the Lancastrian model of schools emphasized discipline and obedience, qualities that factory owners wanted in their workers. As such, the reproduction of inequality was built into the educational system from its foundations. In 1827, the state of Massachusetts passed a law making all grades of public school open to all pupils free of charge (Race Forward, 2006).

However, of course, public education was not actually available to all young people of the nation. By the 1830s, most southern states had laws forbidding the teaching of enslaved people to read. As well, in 1864, Congress made it illegal for Native Americans to be taught in their native languages, which marked the beginning of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) off-reservation boarding schools. After the Civil War, from 1865 through 1877, African Americans mobilized to bring public education to the South that was accessible to them. The years to come would be the beginning of the public education system known today. In 1932, a survey of 150 school districts revealed that three-quarters of them were using so-called intelligence testing to place students on different academic tracks (Race Forward, 2006).

Post 1930s American education has a few similarities with current day American education. Furthermore, the acknowledgements of social ideology, institutional practices, and policies provide insight into past transformations and similar practices that we must improve. As mentioned above, obedience qualities were leading components of early American education. Furthermore, the Thomas Jefferson model of "the laboring and the learned" allows us to identify how unequal educational measures began. Education, its access and quality, was in accordance with whether a person was rich enough to be trained for leadership or poor enough to be trained for work and compliance with those in leadership. Obedience qualities can be described as complacency, ignorance, or fear ideologies that are instilled into people. To understand the last century of American education, close attention should be given to nationwide and Mississippi-wide education trends.

Mississippi

The Mississippi public education system was established in the latter 1800s during the Reconstruction Era, the period of rebuilding following the Civil War. Despite the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in the Brown versus Board of Education case that racially segregated education was unconstitutional—thereby overturning the previous doctrine of "separate but equal"—the Mississippi public education system stayed segregated for years. Up until 1967, two-thirds of school districts were still segregated and under 3% of Black children attended racially mixed schools, and the state did not desegregate completely until 1970 (Bolton, 2009).

Modern Public Education

United States

As seen through U.S. history, education has been created as an egregiously unequal system. To start, the continuing fight for equality up until today has proved that the virtues of equality and liberty commonly used to represent the U.S. and American democracy are highly questionable. National and state trends in K-12 education are the direct effects of historical socio-political practices mentioned above. Policies and practices have included instruction style and curriculum being adopted based on dominant cultures instead of cultures reflecting the many different pupils involved in the school system. As well, the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which was meant to increase accountability of schools, dramatically increased standardized testing and focused learning on subjects that were tested rather than other subjects that enriched students' lives. More than 15 years later, the national dropout rate

was 5.3% while the graduation rate was 85% for the 2017-2018 school year (NCES, 2020). Nevertheless, children are expected to receive formal schooling, and there were 47.3 million students enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools in 2016 (NCES, 2020).

American primary and secondary public schools suffer from a variety of critical problems, which include insufficient funding, chronic absenteeism, poor discipline, chronic stress of teachers and students, and the threat of privatization (National Education Association, 2020). However, these problems are not equally distributed across schools: conditions follow lines that reflect larger structural inequalities and the intersections of class and racial demographics of the student bodies. Since 2014, minorities account for more than half of the K-12 student population in American public schools. On the other hand, 80% of teachers are White and 77% of them are female; racial and ethnic minorities only make up about 20% of teachers, with a small percentage being Black men (Whitfield, 2019).

Mississippi

Public schooling in Mississippi is interesting regarding accessibility to educational resources, teacher availability, district demographics, and annual educational outcomes. In short, Mississippi's history of racism and poverty do not help its already dire situation. Since Mississippi is already one of the poorest states in the U.S., state education funding is less when compared to other states. Nationally, Mississippi's educational system is ranked incredibly low. Since at least 1970, Mississippi's educational resources have been underfunded (Bolton 2009). The statewide graduation

rate is 85.0% as of 2020, and Black students account for a smaller percentage of graduates when compared to White students (MDE, 2019).

As in most states, Mississippi public schools are funded primarily by property taxes, even though a majority of the communities are impoverished. The Parents' Campaign Research and Education Fund (2021) found that ill-funding of Mississippi schools in addition to the low wages that the teachers are paid represent the state's complexities. Mississippi pays its teachers the lowest when compared to other states and that reality leads to a teacher shortage crisis in addition to the other challenges that public schools face.

Another unique factor about teaching in Mississippi is its ever-present teacher shortage. Mississippi has faced a teacher shortage for many decades even after the Critical Teacher Shortage Act was passed in 1998, and the problem has only progressed into 2021. In fact, the Mississippi Department of Education (2018) found that 48 school districts face critical teacher shortages, and subjects in the math and sciences especially lack qualified instructors during the 2018-2019 school year. The alternative is hiring long-term substitute teachers or allowing unlicensed teachers into the classroom. In turn, students are subject to ill-prepared instruction in already poorly resourced schools in Mississippi. The teacher shortage only contributes to the number of teachers who are ill-trained in innovative pedagogical practices, and those who are underprepared to teach critically with their students.

According to the 2010 census, Mississippi is ranked 47th for educational attainment; 81% of the population has at least a high school diploma and 19.5% has at least a bachelor's degree. These figures compare to 87.1% and 29.9%, respectively, for

the U.S. overall, per the 2016 census (U.S. Census, 2010, 2016). Mississippi has a total of 1,063 schools served by a total of 162 school districts, and its education system is ranked number 43 out of 50, which indicates that the state is at risk educationally. The following figures describe the gender and racial breakdown of the K-12 public school population:

Figure 1. Gender of Mississippi students in K-12 public schools

Source: MDE, 2000

Figure 2. Race of Mississippi students in K-12 public schools

Source: MDE 2000.

Following the historic court decision of Brown versus Board of Education, though, many schools are still de facto segregated due to class inequality, residential patterns, and White flight. Black students represent the majority of Mississippi's public education population, and the rise of private schools and their disproportionate racial demographics are notable. Compared to neighboring states, Mississippi has more schools per capita although quality is questionable. The patterns of inequality demonstrated in the above descriptions and the far-reaching social consequences of the educational system for citizenship and society make educational liberation imperative. In the following last section of this chapter, I review how my research runs parallel to several sociological concepts and theories.

Social Inequity and Critical Pedagogy

In this thesis, I explore how concepts such as educational inequality and critical pedagogy are acknowledged or explored among other education researchers and among my participants. My research aims to add knowledge in this area as it applies to public education in Mississippi.

Structural Inequality

Structural inequality refers to systemic hierarchical groupings of people based on the organization and normal operations of society and its social institutions, including the economy, politics, education, and healthcare. Groups are based on a trait or identity— such as race, gender, class, and sexuality—which result in real and measurable differences in a person's life chances and lived realities. Since all people possess multiple identities, the intersections of their identities determine the level of privilege or

oppression for the individual. Although inequalities are often manifested in daily interactions, they are not dependent on individual behavior such as personal bias and often persist passively without requiring individual intentionality. In the U.S., the dominant culture is directly connected to White, American culture, reflecting the position it occupies at the top of the racial hierarchy. Critical pedagogy, which entails self-discovery, independent thought, and equity, leads to the recognition and refutation of dominant ideologies and the type of docile mind frame that facilitates oppression. Structural inequality hinders critical pedagogical practice because the dominant culture is taught and reinforced through the educational system and the use of what Paulo Freire calls a "banking model" of education, which simply accepts the status quo. This model is inherently contrary to questioning the status quo and the structure as it exists. A status quo may be described as the actions, practices, and beliefs that are most used or enforced. For the purposes of this research, understanding the social constructs in education as it relates to the intersections of race, class, and gender is crucial.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality can be defined in a multitude of ways. For the purposes of this research, intersectionality is defined as "the investigation of the intersection of power relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life" (Collins & Bilge, 2015). This project will frame its background, research, and findings to explore the intersections of race, class, and gender with structural inequalities and the possible implications of critical pedagogy in public education. The purpose is to interrupt the cycle between these theoretical and practical concepts to then change the status quo. Presently, there is a status quo being reinforced by the current education practices in

some institutions. By acknowledging the intersections of social identities, the next step is acknowledging the positive and negative effects of the education policies in relation to those identities. As such, to explore the effects of education systems, one must understand the importance of adequate education. I will now explain how this project came into fruition.

Introduction to the Research Project

I come to this research informed by my personal background and perspective arising from my intersectional identities, which includes being a Black woman. At one point in the history of this nation, my ancestors were not able to learn the fundamentals of reading and writing; therefore, they were not allowed to receive formal education in America. We must acknowledge that the American education system has never exemplified our country's core values; we should also recognize the detrimental impact of this fact to democracy.

I am a Mississippi native, and my familial roots are in Mississippi. I was introduced to the Mississippi public school system in 2005. I completed kindergarten through fifth grade in North Mississippi and completed sixth through twelfth grade in South Mississippi. My interest in the American education system stems from recognizing its massive influence on every person I have known. In my own life, I had seen this social institution largely from its positive side, one in which I had done well in and had been challenged to excel and pursue every level of education. Still, there had been daily stressors of systemic oppression and structural inequalities that I was mostly ignorant of throughout my thirteen years of public education in the State of Mississippi, which nonetheless took their toll. As a high school student, I was constantly reminded of the

"bad schools" versus the "good schools" and the most notable distinguishing factors between the schools were racial and socioeconomic.

It was not until entering college that I began to be exposed to the structural social realities and acquired sociological skills that spoke to the inequities of the real-world and my intersectional identities. For example, with my interest in history, I was never exposed to the existence or the bombing of Black Wall Street, the lives and influences of Black people prior to American enslavement, or any form of economic literacy to name a few. In primary and secondary school, I was often ridiculed for sharing my opinion during class. I now understand how classrooms could be framed differently rather than negating truths that were informed by my personal standpoint (Collins, 1990).

While the educational institution has a long history of perpetuating inequalities, I argue that it also holds the potential to construct the foundation for a more equitable, inclusive, and democratic American society. My argument rests on the power of critical pedagogy. Nine months out of the year, students are sitting in classrooms learning skills and information deemed necessary. K-12 education could very well ignore teaching or exposing students to creative thought, inquisitiveness, or the ability to think critically and independently about the world around them. Critical thinking can be defined as "self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way" which entails inquisitively, independence, and creativity (Elder, 2007).

In conducting this research, I had several goals. I wished to explore teachers' accounts of their perspectives and classroom experiences in relation to their profession, teaching, students, race, class, and gender. I also aimed to understand the inequities of the

educational system in terms of pedagogical approaches like critical pedagogy and engaged pedagogy by assessing the presence—or lack thereof—of critical thought, creativity, and inquisitiveness in the classroom. My goal was to explore some of the practices and policies that reflect and often perpetuate societal inequalities. My main questions are related to identifying some of the teaching methods that may contribute to diminishing, maintaining, or promoting critical classroom engagement in relation to the race, class, and gender of both students and teachers.

My research is guided by my model (Figure 3) for how critical pedagogy (Box B) mediates between society's structural inequalities and the formation of individuals and identities. As diagramed, structural inequalities (Box A) built into education (and other social institutions) shape the development of individuals and their race, class, and gender identities (Box C). Critical pedagogy (Box B) practiced within education engages individuals and impacts how identities are internalized (Box C), allowing their experience in education to help empower rather than oppress them. Individuals develop a critical consciousness of engagement, citizenship, and empowerment to resist the injustices of their society and transform it into a more equitable society. The societal practice of democracy feeds back into the system to strengthen critical pedagogy and further create participatory citizens who will shape society.

Figure 3. Representation of education as a context for relationships between structural inequalities, individuals and identities, and critical pedagogy

In the following chapter, I explore the theoretical premises and the research literature related to critical pedagogy.

CHAPTER 2. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Pedagogy

I approached my research in education from a theoretical framework and educational field that is collectively referred to as *critical pedagogy*. Other strands of this approach are also known as critical education, democratic education, democratic pedagogy, radical pedagogy, or engaged pedagogy. In the following sections, I explore the foundational ideas of this broad approach by reviewing the work of several notable educational theorists in the field. A better understanding of how equality, equity, and democracy are related and different is paramount to discussing critical pedagogy. Laura Latta (2019) explains that,

> *Equality* is often associated with access and outcomes. Equality asserts that every student should have the same access to a high-quality education regardless of where they come from. It also requires that all students be held to the same standards and objectives regardless of their circumstances, abilities, or experiences. [However,] *equity* recognizes that different students need different resources to achieve the same goals as their peers (emphasis added).

John Dewey

Known for his contributions to psychology, philosophy, and education, John Dewey (1959-1952) stated, "I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform" (Gibson, 2019). He believed that the interconnections of the world, education, and the educated crossed at democracy. For Dewey, democracy is an ideal that is not limited to the political realm but is also a way of life. His writings and theories

have been greatly influential on education throughout the last century up until today. He argued that education should provide learning that was active, creative, relevant, and engaging, and many credit him to be a founder of critical pedagogy and participatory democracy (Gibson, 2019).

Paulo Freire

Arguably the most well-known among critical education scholars is Paulo Freire, the author of the classic book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2005). His take on critical pedagogy debunks what he calls the "banking model" of education, in which material or knowledge is deposited by the teacher, consumed by the student, memorized and stored. Freire (1970/2005) proposed that teacher and student be collaborators in the learning process, subverting the traditional hierarchal authority of the teacher-student relationship, arguing,

> This solution is not (nor can it be) found in the banking concept. On the contrary, banking education maintains and even stimulates the contradiction through the following attitudes and practices, which mirror oppressive society as a whole: (a) the teacher teaches, and the students are taught;... (c) the teacher thinks, and the students are thought about;... (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined; (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply; (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher,...(i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she or he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students...It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing

the deposits entrusted to them, the less they will develop the critical

consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as

transformers of that world (Freire, 1970/2005).

Freire advocated for a pedagogy that develops students' critical consciousness, allowing

them to recognize and challenge domination. Critical pedagogy is "a teaching approach

which attempts to help students question and challenge domination, and the beliefs and

practices that dominate" (K12 Academics, n.d.). As Myers et al. (2019) defines Freire's

concept, "In a banking model of education, the teacher, who controls knowledge, deposits

it into obedient student recipients. This top-down narrative transmission of data is framed

so that knowledge is what someone in control has deposited and can retrieve."

Unfortunately, the U.S. education system—as well as most educational systems around

the world—follows a "banking-model," which does not encourage critical consciousness,

independent thought, of the systems of oppression surrounding each student. Freire also

aimed to expose the oppressive measures within education systems and to identify

strategies to make education a symbol (or tool) of freedom.

 To better understand Paulo Freire, it is important to unpack the mechanisms by

which the truth about social structures of inequality and power inequities, whether based

on social class, race, or gender, are hidden or rationalized through education. This leaves

the average student in ignorance—those both from privileged and from oppressed groups.

As critical educational scholar Henry Giroux states,

 "It is impossible to separate what we do in the classroom from the economic and

 political conditions that shape our work, and that means that pedagogy has to be

 understood as a form of academic labor in which questions of time, autonomy,

freedom, and power become as central to the classroom as what is taught"

(Bohorquez, 2019).

Freire seeks to turn up the volume on those dissonances that connect most closely with

his students' lived experiences of oppression, to awaken them to the possibility that they

can challenge the dominance that leads to their oppression.

bell hooks

In her book *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), professor and social activist bell

hooks included her personal encounters with education as a Black woman. She begins

with the premise that teaching includes respecting and caring for the souls of students

through what she calls *engaged pedagogy*. hooks' theoretical influences include Freire

and Buddhist peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh. From those and other influences, she

created her unique engaged pedagogical approach. hooks highlights the lack of access to

truth—the domination of racism, sexism, and classism—and on countering this through

antiracist living.

In other words, education should cease to exist as a tool that enforces the

marginalization of marginalized communities. As she notes, education can be the

"practice of freedom" that encourages and is equipped to handle the truth as it is revealed

by all parties involved, e.g., lawmakers, administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

As a practice of freedom, there should be a more holistic and conceptual approach to

educational practices everywhere. Within education, educators and students would be

able to freely discuss and cultivate understanding about the intersections of race, gender,

and class and the harsh structural realities faced by minority groups. In addition, bell

hooks called for a renewal and rejuvenation to our teaching practices which would impact

teachers' education. For example, hooks encourages teachers to share information, facilitate discussions, and allow students to generate their own thoughts as opposed to simply presenting information for the purpose of memorizing.

In *Teaching to Transgress,* hooks explains that engaged pedagogy is a means of achieving honesty and transformative impacts, but she also addresses the errors and barriers that many educators and students would have in achieving this pedagogical practice. Using examples from her firsthand experiences, hooks consistently references the banking model to which her engaged pedagogy stands in opposition. She ultimately makes clear the need for educators to be devoted to "education as political activism, going against the grain, [despite] receiving negative feedback" (hooks, 2004, p. 203) from the discriminatory systems and practices in place not only within education but within society at large.

Previous Research in the Field

Bartolome: Critical Pedagogy

Bartolome's (2004) research focuses on critical pedagogical components that should be used in the education of pre-service teachers. Bartolome establishes the importance of the study, explains ideological and political clarity, and highlights the types of students that would be discussed. Throughout the article, he makes several attempts to uncover why educators should not be apolitical and where each of his reasearch participants were on that scale. The study interviewed four educators who were identified as exemplary by administrators and colleagues at Riverview High School in California. The researcher conducted extensive in-depth interviews with these four

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diverse educators about their experiences and beliefs about the low socioeconomic, non-White, and linguistic minority students they taught as well as their personal educational experiences and thoughts on effective teaching.

The three main themes of participants' responses were that (1) they questioned meritocracy—the belief that people live and succeed based solely on their merit and acquired skills, (2) they rejected deficit views of students, and (3) they rejected the superiority of White standard or mainstream culture. Bartolome noted that the teachers exposed their students to their critical minded world view by identifying some of society's prevalent barriers based on race, gender, and class in United States. Next, they rejected negative and stereotypical (deficit) views of the students, and exposed their students to ways of life, ideals, and activities that were culturally responsive and culturally enhancing. Lastly, the educators rejected White superiority by acknowledging the students' standard way of life as non-White, poor, and non-English speaking children in the United States. For example, frequent educational field trips and competitions accompanied by corequisite fund-raising were common at the White, affluent school across town, but the educators participating in the study made sure to make these experiences a reality for their students as well. These educators were able to identify common belief systems in society, which translated to the normalized attitudes of many other educators, and then strategized to minimize the effects of dominant ideology on their students.

Bartolome (2004) then examined the teachers' use of cultural border crossing and counter-hegemonic discourse. In other words, he discussed how teachers approached and discussed the cultures present in the classroom(s) and how their rhetoric broke down the

social and political ideals that are typically based on White, American culture. Bartolome's main goal was to advance teacher education and its application of critical pedagogy as a means of exposing and abolishing the undemocratic values and practices of our schools. Bartolome was critical of mainstream teacher training, and he exposed the typical assumptions possessed by most teachers that they had an apolitical role in their student lives. He found that teachers could gain and maintain employment without the skills to identify and/or challenge the status quo of the American school system. This ability of passively complicit teachers to comfortably fit into an unjust education system reflected the inequities of society and its ultimate detrimental impacts on all students. As Bartolome stated, "Prospective teachers, all educators for that matter, need to begin to develop the political and ideological clarity that will guide them in denouncing discriminatory school and social conditions and practices" (p. 119). His research highlighted the importance of rejecting assimilation and encouraged transformative thinking.

Standardized Testing

In a transition from theory to practical realities, exploring standardized testing is crucial to understanding how critical pedagogy aligns with the current state of education. A major shift in U.S. education over the last few decades has been the rise of standardized testing in schools. A huge component of K-12 education is mandatory state testing programs. The level of teacher-student engagement and the entire curriculum are determined by each state's testing program. State tests require a commitment to teaching content that will be tested, which leaves little room for discussion about the world around us. In fact, "of 470 elementary teachers surveyed in North Carolina, 80% indicated that

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they spend more than 20% of their total instructional time practicing for end-of-grade tests" (Abrams et al., 2003). Studies have shown that elementary schools no longer place emphasis on science and history because the subjects are not tested (Abrams et al., 2003). As such, the state testing mandates force teachers to reinforce the status quo and allow the absence of discussions surrounding inequities in our education system. Test scores determine if teachers keep their jobs or if students advance to the next grade. Often, teachers acknowledge the damages of testing mandates but cannot find efficient solutions.

To better understand these current educational priorities and trends in the United States, one must examine relationships between numerous entities, including those that are governmental, non-governmental, and corporate. Foster (2016) found the existence of a coalition, what he called the national command center, which aligned with the quasi-governmental agencies of the Council of Chief State Officers (CCSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA). Consisting of governmental officials but functioning outside political jurisdictions as private, non-governmental organizations, unaccountable to the populace, the CCSO and the NGA have copyrighted the Common Core State Standards, which were paid for primarily by the Gates Foundation and designed in conjunction with educational services companies like Pearson and McGraw-Hill—and without the significant involvement of teachers. As a result, neither the federal government, nor the states, nor the teaching profession itself have control of the Common Core, which is nonetheless imposed on states and local school districts, forming the foundation of the entire system of high-stakes standardized testing.

A qualitative study (Thomas, 2005) about teachers' decision-making concerning state tests found that, "the state standardized testing imposed a limit on the amount of time teachers had for instruction, as well as limits on the instructional resources and the types of assessments teachers employed. Participants expressed their cognizance of a growing expectation for them to teach more rapidly and to cover more content during their instruction. The requirements for preparing students for a mandated assessment called for a quick mention of all content, not deep coverage of any academic topic.

In another study, the researcher Segall (2003) studied teachers' perceptions and discourse surrounding state testing mandates within public schools. Not only did the study discuss the often-debated presence of state testing, but Segall also discussed the ambivalent relationship between the new teaching standards and teachers as well as how the teachers were introduced to state curriculum changes.

> Teachers raised two concerns regarding these curricular changes. One was the
> limited focus of the new curriculum that emphasizes U.S. history at the expense
> of world history. The other concern was the requirement to teach students content
> irrelevant to their lives to accommodate a test. While teachers were told what to
> teach, to whom, and when, what seemed missing from that "telling" was the
> "why" (Segall, 2003, p. 13).

In other words, the new curriculum forced educators to undergo a change in curriculum requirements but did not fully explain why.

Teacher-Student Relationships

A study on the quality of teacher-student interactions in first grade classrooms (Cadima et al., 2010) examined academics and behavior incidents among 106 first

graders in 64 Portuguese classrooms. The quality of the teacher-student interactions was measured by a teacher's ability to impact classroom engagement, learning, classroom organization, and behavior in a negative or positive manner. The researchers incorporated the influence of parental interactions and the child's home life because "findings suggest that the quality of teacher–student interactions vary depending on the skills a student acquired prior to school entry" (p. 475).

Furthermore, there were far more female teachers than male, and a teacher's gender impacted his or her interactions with the students due to their ability or inability to fulfill certain needs of their students. According to the study, women or "teachers who were observed to be warmer and consistently responsive to students also tended to be more proactive, managed the activities and student behavior more efficiently, and provided activities that encourage higher-order thinking" (p. 475). In recent years, more research has shown that positive and enriching teacher-student interactions factor into student success (Cadima et al., 2010).

There are many negative trends in teacher-student relationships in the classroom. Studies have shown that there are discriminatory measures embedded into the curriculum. For example, people expect Asian students to excel more than Black students, and White students are reprimanded less for subpar individual performance and disciplinary issues (Lauria & Miron, 2005) than other groups. Classroom relations determine a student's classroom performance, so both teachers and students need to work toward a great classroom relationship.

There is training and research available to help teachers understand the classroom environment and the many roles they play in it. A teacher's vulnerability with her

students in the classroom is crucial to healthy teacher-student engagement. In fact, according to an article in the *Educational Leadership Journal*,

> When we are selectively vulnerable, we choose pieces of ourselves to share with our students and colleagues. These could be stories from our childhood, successes, failures, or aspects of our cultural identities that humanize us. Through selective vulnerability, we show one another that we, too, are human beings, wrought with imperfection. This helps us forge relationships in which colleagues and students alike feel comfortable being themselves and taking risks (France, 2019, p. 82).

Studies have shown that teachers more closely observe African American students, making it far more likely for them to see African American students' behavior and identify it as troublesome (Amemiya et al., 2020). The race, class, and gender of students and teachers alike determine the classroom environment as well.

The conversations held within classrooms are of great importance to teacher-student relationships. Research conducted by Brown et al. (2017) examined classroom conversations across several studies to understand race and the disruption of social and educational inequalities in American schools. Before reviewing the study's results, it is important to understand why racial and structural inequality conversations are needed. Brown et al. (2017) wrote,

> School leaders contributed to the promulgation of Whiteness (the taken-for-granted and hegemonic privileging of White people, their cultural capital, their history, their languages, etc.). Part of what makes Whiteness pernicious is that it is mostly unnamed and invisible and thus becomes the context for interpretation

and action as if it were the only conceive-able framework. A teacher or student's attempt to employ different knowledge, experiences, way of talking, and use of less dominant languages have the potential of marginalizing the person and labeling him or her as irrational" (p. 457).

Brown simply helps us understand how accustomed we are to White supremacy and the ridicule to be faced with the presence of different ways of life or ways of learning. Brown et al. suggest that,

> Curricular content may facilitate classroom conversations on race that deepen academic curriculum, facilitate the development of positive social identities for students, and disrupt inequalities; however, how teachers and students use language are critical to what is accomplished during and through classroom conversations on race (p. 472).

Many Mississippi K-12 educators have a much different classroom than those that are more common in other states, reflecting Mississippi's low ranking on various indicators. Studies show that teacher efficacy levels are lower in rural schools. Teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy are more prone to implementing innovative pedagogical practices in their classroom than teachers with lower levels of self-efficacy (Shoulders & Krei, 2005). Sadly, more often, race and social inequalities are not discussed in K-12 classrooms. The following framework for my research is an attempt to connect the current literature to expected findings.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Through a critical examination of Mississippi's public education system and first-hand accounts of classroom instruction, we may gain a better understanding of the intersections of race, class, and gender as those categories relate to a critical education. The research presented in this thesis will offer a look at the Mississippi public K-12 education system in relation to these intersectional identities from the perspective of teachers working in the state. To situate this research and offer a better understanding of the geographical relevance to studying educational inequality, I first offer a broad overview of Mississippi, including how it compares to the United States overall, in the next section.

Geographical Context: State of Mississippi Indicators

Mississippi is an important case for studying inequality in the United States. Mississippi has a history unlike any other state in our nation. The state suffers from lack of industry, poverty, poor health, and a greater percentage of uneducated citizens than its neighboring states and beyond. Yet, it is the birthplace of many cultural traditions embraced by the United States as a whole, from blues music to rock and roll, rich foods, habitat diversity, and hospitality. In terms of the American Human Development Index (HDI), which is based on the United Nations' concept of human development, Mississippi has the lowest state ranking in the nation (Social Science Research Council, 2021). *U.S. News and World Today* (n.d.) ranks Mississippi as 49 out of 50 overall in the United States, based on an index that considers 71 metrics in eight categories including the quality of the state's education, healthcare, and the economy, among others.

Mississippi is ranked among the lowest states on multiple specific indicators: It has the lowest annual median income at $42,781 compared to $63,179 for the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2019). It is ranked 49 out of 50 in poverty; 19.6% of Mississippians live in poverty (*U.S. News* 2020). Its child poverty rate is the highest with 27.8% of Mississippi children under 18 years living in poverty, including 14.3% who are in extreme poverty, compared to 16.2% and 6.9%, respectively, for children in the U.S. overall (U.S. Census, 2018). This is especially significant since 23.5% of the Mississippi population is made up of children under the age of eighteen, ranking it 11th highest in proportion of children in its population, compared to 22.3% for the U.S. population overall. The state also has the largest Black population per capita in the U.S.; Blacks compose 37.8% and Whites who are not Hispanic or Latinx compose 56.41% of the state population (U.S. Census, 2019).

Research Questions

I began my quest on this research project wanting to understand how and what teachers taught in their classrooms as well as what they learned in the training, whether continuous or not, that they received from their school and/or school's district. I prepared to learn about how teachers encouraged their students to think freely and how engagement was displayed in their classrooms. I also prepared to learn if teachers encouraged or engaged in political discussions or discussions about societal inequalities in their classrooms. Lastly, my quest for the topics mentioned above were meant to draw conclusions between my research findings and critical pedagogical practices, or lack thereof.

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Methodology

Method for Data Collection

Qualitative research can be conducted in more than one way, and I chose to conduct interviews. Interviews were chosen in the place of surveys with either open-ended or close-ended questions because I wanted the most genuine, immediate, and unscripted answers from my participants. Interviews also allowed me to ask pre-selected questions as well as follow-up questions to get more in-depth information depending on the participants answers. Participants could speak as much or as little as desired during interviews, which allowed me to analyze multiple aspects of each encounter. Lastly, interviews were ideal in terms of allowing me to observe facial expressions, hesitance in giving answers, and signs of how teachers reacted to me. Surveys would not have granted me those capabilities.

Recruitment of Participants

I targeted interviewing at least ten teachers for this research, which allowed balancing the constrained timeline for carrying out the research with the goal of hearing from a diverse pool of teachers and managing challenges related to research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mississippi K-12 teachers of any gender, race, socioeconomic status, and subject area background, were welcome to participate in the research project. Before this research, in the fall of 2017, I began volunteering at local public schools in South Mississippi. Over the years, I have built multiple relationships with teachers, students, and administrators within the Mississippi K-12 school system. When I was ready to recruit teachers to the study upon approval from the Institutional Review Board

(see Appendix B), I started reaching out to contacts within my network. I invited participants with whom I had worked previously as their former student and/or classroom aide. Other participants were invited by use of my university's professional network. Afterwards, participants were solicited using the snowball sampling technique. I contacted 30-40 teachers to invite them for interviews, but yielded only ten participants, which at least met my minimum goal.

One issue in recruitment was trying to find a diverse group to interview. My aim was to interview teachers representing different backgrounds, including gender. Throughout the interview process, I was in contact with three men who seemed willing to participate. Sadly, only one male participant completed the interview and was very thorough throughout both the recruitment and interviewing processes. The men who did not complete the interview had similar interactions with me. We made contact and they were extremely responsive in agreeing to participate and selecting an interview day and time as instructed in our emailed communication. All participants were required to review and sign an Informed Consent Form prior to the beginning of our interview. With both anticipated male participants, I sent several reminders prior to the interview and joined the Zoom call in advance to allot more time to sign the important form. Both participants were using cellular devices and were not able to sign and send the Informed Consent Form. Each time, a decision was made for the participants to sign the form, send the form, select a new interview day and time, and complete the interview soon after. Even though I contacted the potential participants, both men were unresponsive and failed to complete the process.

Another issue with recruiting male participants is that there are far fewer male teachers compared to female teachers in schools. Also, more men were simply less accessible and less responsive. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "about 76% of public-school teachers were female and 24 percent were male in 2017–18, with a lower percentage of male teachers on the elementary school level at 11% than on the secondary school level at 36%" (2020). Nevertheless, my use of snowball sampling factors into the lack of male participation in addition to the low percentage of male compared to female teachers at the primary and secondary of education. Lastly, all the male teachers I recruited were from high schools as opposed to elementary schools.

In the end, I interviewed ten public school teachers who were employed by the State of Mississippi at varying levels of the K-12 educational system and in a variety of subject areas. Some participants were completing their first year of instruction while others had taught for almost thirty years. Participants consisted of teachers in variety of subjects. Participants consisted of nine women, five White and four Black, and one White man. They were from eight public schools in Mississippi, including two high schools, two middle/junior high schools, and four elementary schools. Each school had unique student and teacher demographics along with differing administrative practices. For the purposes of reporting on this research, I have changed the names of all teachers and schools to protect the confidentiality of interview subjects and schools.

Interviews

All interviews were conducted in quiet areas away from the respective school's property and the respective teacher's classroom. I anticipated difficulty in scheduling interview time slots that were compatible with each participant's busy schedule, so I

established morning and late evening interview slots along with availability on Saturdays and Sundays. Most of my participants worked early morning and late nights to prepare for each day along with dealing with stressors due to COVID-19.

My preferred method was the use of one to two-hour in-depth interviews. This interview method allowed conversations framed around a set of questions that permitted researchers to capture direct and indirect feelings toward topic areas. Interviews were guided by fifteen questions that I constructed (see Appendix B). Some questions were open-ended while others were closed-ended. The questions covered a variety of subjects including whether they have discussions about societal inequalities in the classroom, the reason they became teachers, the importance (or lack thereof) of teachers in society, their favored teaching methods, and more. Throughout each interview, I asked follow-up questions to gain a better understanding of each participant and encouraged participants to elaborate on any points made throughout the interview as well.

Limitations

There are a few notable limitations to my study. Although I had originally wished to also do classroom observations, COVID-19 restrictions during the research period did not allow for that. I was not able to observe classrooms in-person, so students' perspectives or behaviors were not observed or included as part of the study. I was also not able to verify if teachers' responses were parallel to their actual practices in the classroom. Schools moved to virtual learning due to the pandemic, which changed the context in which observation of student-teacher interactions could have happened. As well, the pandemic forced all interviews to be conducted via Zoom rather than face-to-face.

Another limitation as explained previously is the gender ratio of nine female participants to one male participant. This impacted being able to include more diversity among the participants. Lastly, my research only covered ten teachers in the State of Mississippi. This is both a result of how many teachers responded to complete the interview after being initially recruited and also part of conducting qualitative research. Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research requires much more time per respondent, but it allows for much richer data with more nuance. As well, with the relatively small group of interviewees and the non-random selection method, I cannot generalize my findings to the entire state or other teachers.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Throughout the ten interviews with Mississippi public school teachers and during the interview analysis, I made some uncomfortable, yet fascinating, discoveries. Overall, teachers indicated that they were interested in practices associated with critical pedagogy and wanted to implement some of those practices, but there were a few barriers. In this chapter, I review those challenges and connect them with some national trends. I examine teachers' interview responses and discourse patterns to explore their perspectives on teacher-student relations, content of in-class discussions, standardized testing, religion, and the influence of teachers on the world.

Teacher backgrounds

Religious Calling

During interviews, I wanted to gain a sense of why my respondents became teachers in the first place. When asked, four participants stated that their decision to teach related to a religious calling. Paula stated, "God said, 'This is what you should be doing.' at bible camp one night [as a teen]." Rachel stated, "It was a God thing. I feel like I was made to be a teacher. I can't imagine doing anything else." Janet stated, "Came from a very religious, or Baptist, home in Louisiana." Elizabeth stated, "God told me 'I want you to teach, and I want you to teach at that school district' and that is why I am here." Notably, Mississippi is widely considered the epicenter of the Bible belt, so such responses may not be considered particularly surprising. However, I question whether the movement away from a master-pupil frame of education is more difficult for Mississippi

because of the strong religious influence. For example, preachers act as the master of knowledge from the Holy Bible for their church congregations. Often, Southerners are accustomed to receiving knowledge from a secondary source and living by that knowledge.

A major identifying characteristic of Mississippi's culture is the dominance of religion, specifically Christianity, which is an influence in Mississippi's government, communities, economics, industry, and its education. Religion often shapes members' morals, values, and principles; they then find a calling to become teachers. Those same morals, values, and principles transfer into the classroom either explicitly or implicitly. Hartwick (2015) conducted a research study which surveyed 317 Wisconsin public school teachers. The study showed that 87.9% profess to believe in God. Teachers use religion as a tool to, as they believe, influence the minds of tomorrow and teach necessary skills.

Teacher Training

Formal education is required of teachers as well as regular trainings throughout their time as teachers. Understanding the practices and procedures institutionalized by school or school districts through their formal training is important to being able to analyze a teacher role in their classroom. For example, Elizabeth stated, "My degree prepared me well in areas of classroom management, lesson planning. [I'm] thankful for training, but [they're] frustrating." Paula stated, "Lots of professional development. We meet three times a week with teacher groups." Both teachers explained that they have become comfortable in their ability to lead a classroom of students because their school districts provide plentiful training on classroom operations, disciplinary procedures, and

the development of their professional staff (teachers, school administrators, etc.). Both teachers also expressed a sense of fulfillment with their training.

In other words, Paula and Elizabeth feel that they have received enough training. Unfortunately, it was apparent that their training had not included learning about engaged pedagogical practices like teacher and student engagement. Throughout all the interviews, none of the teachers ever mentioned any philosophy or practice that aligned with deconstructing traditional power relations in the classroom or elsewhere. The teachers' training did not prepare them to empower students to pose questions about classroom materials or methods, and their training did not prepare them to possibly consider the power dynamics of the classroom. For example, bell hooks advocates for sharing information about one another to make students and teachers, alike, more comfortable to have open discussions in contrast to the typical, banking model of education. hooks also discusses the need for teachers' recognition of the oppressive effects of a master and pupil method of classroom instruction.

Implicit Bias

The typical primary and secondary classroom is composed of teachers and students. As such, the quality of the relationship and the power structure demonstrated in classroom interactions is relevant to examine and explore in relation to critical education. It is also important to consider both micro and macro aspects of teacher and student relations. To begin, the implications of implicit bias are important to note whilst examining classroom interactions. Implicit bias can be defined "[as] the possibility that people are treating others differently even when they are unaware that they are doing so" (Joll & Sunstein, 2006). Simply put, everyone has some form of bias that determines their

interactions with other people. In fact, Joll and Sunstein (2006) suggest that "it is now clear that implicit bias is widespread, and it is increasingly apparent that actual behavior is often affected by it." With proper knowledge and training, that harsh reality does not have to develop into outward bigotry or cause the continuation of oppressive practices in or outside of the classroom. For teachers, that same oppressive, bigoted reality is still very prevalent since they are surrounded by students from vastly different walks of life. During interviews, I asked each teacher about their background, their students' backgrounds, and how they function in relation to the engagement levels of students and teachers in the classroom. For each teacher, the examples varied, but the teachers' fight for a calm classroom was a similar theme as were differences in teacher-student relations based on race, class, or gender.

Regarding race, I noticed that half of the interviewed teachers who were a different race than one or more of their students struggled to relate or build trusting relationships with their students. For example, one school was a high-risk elementary school, with lower test scores and lower overall school ranking; in this school, Black and other minorities represent the district's school board, school administrators, teachers, and students. Though the school is not high risk because of the racial composition, it is high-risk because of the poverty level of students and the annual academic rating. At a school that is 80.6% Black (Niche, 2021), Elizabeth, a young, White teacher, recalls a conversation from her first year of teaching as one of only two White women in the school. The school's head principal told her, "This demographic is 99% Black and 1% Hispanic, [which is] different from Locust elementary; YOU'RE WHITE!" The principal attempted to warn her of the challenges ahead. Elizabeth's thoughts were automatically,

"Brace yourself." She later stated that her students were less responsive in the classroom because she asked her students, "Do you know anyone who looks like me?" and their responses were "Nope!"

Another identifiable difference or similarity between my participating teachers and their students was their upbringing and the teacher's ability to address and allow them to overcome their personal struggles to achieve. A few teachers mentioned some commonalities between their students. Although the schools differed and the teachers may have differed, according to the teachers, many students were being raised by single parents, grandparents, in low-income households, or communities with alarming rates of violence.

Another pressing issue in the classroom is the behavior identified and displayed by teachers and students whereas race is a compelling factor to consider. Those behavioral issues may also be highlighted by a teacher of the same race. For example, following my question about the level of classroom engagement and how teachers attempt to connect with students, Wanda, a Black elementary school teacher, exclaimed,

> My lil' Black babies, I'm not going to write them up as fast. My little Black
> babies I'm going to try to take care of them. Every principal has figured that out. I
> tend to have a classroom with all Black children. I may have five White children.
> So yes, that affects my teaching style because my class is filled with behavior
> problems. I don't do "fru-fru," no fun. My teaching style is mainly, "let's get
> down to business.

Throughout Wanda's interview, she made it known indirectly that she feels responsible for Black children because she was once a Black child, has raised a Black child, and so

connects with Black children. The double standard lies in the fact that Wanda consciously

allows Black children to experience schooling differently than their White counterparts.

Contrary to the stereotype, this occurrence was between a Black teacher and Black

students. The significance is that she believes she is helping all her Black students

because she is less likely to formally discipline them at school. Not only were students

being identified by their race and their behavior, but this teacher was, in some ways, not

allowing these students to indulge in an enjoyable experience for learning. A study

showed that "Black children are less likely to be afforded the full essence of childhood

and its definitional protections" (Goff, et al., 2014) when compared to children of other

racial groups. Black boys are also more likely to be mistaken as older, be perceived as

guilty, and face police violence if accused of a crime. This is alarming because it

inevitably robs children of the joys or carefree living that children of other races may

experience. Although Wanda's stance can be problematic, her fight to take care of and

help her students is heartwarming and does help students in more ways than one.

Wanda's quote is also notable in her use of African American Vernacular English during

the interview and her comfort level with me as a researcher.

Standardized Testing

Overview of Standardized Testing

  Standardized testing requires a customary curriculum and a customary instruction

manual to achieve desirable test scores. For decades, standardized testing mandates have

permeated the classrooms and minds of students and the exploration of their experiences

under this system is crucial to understanding the possible implications of critical

education. Mississippi has adopted the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) along with common core, a set of academic standards in mathematics and English language arts used in some states. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, "assessments tell you about students' progress on the path to future success, whether that's the next grade or the next course. They measure what students know and can do based on learning goals for the grade or course" (2021). "Teachers whom I interviewed explained how their course (i.e., subject) schedule was completely changed, and the teachers do not understand the state's motivation. Courses like Government and Economics were moved to the 9th grade curriculum rather than 12th grade curriculum even though 12th graders have more use for the skills. There was also reduced emphasis on World History in the classroom because the new state standards were testing U.S. History, but many teachers feared their students not understanding the world and its history" (Abrams, et al., 2003).

Teaching standards vary by school, school district, and state-adopted curriculum. The standards determine what is taught in each grade for each subject, along with how many times students will be assessed. State testing has been around for many decades, and the debate of its relevance is ever present. Because education has trends and changes just as any other system, these teachings standards must be examined.

Accountability and Ambivalence

During my interviews, I asked each teacher, "How do you feel about state testing?" Through responses, I learned about the ambivalent relationships that Mississippi teachers have with state testing mandates. On the one hand, they thought it was necessary for accountability, but on the other hand, they were ambivalent because it restricted them

from having time to cover other important topics, and the pressure to do well on the tests caused stress for both teachers and students.

Commonly, the teachers felt that such tests were a necessity, but they were becoming strenuous. Wanda stated, "I feel that if it were not for the state testing mandates a lot of teachers would not do much. They are the telltale signs that you tried as a teacher." Wanda's response is in line with a common theme: teacher accountability. She and others felt strongly that the absence of state tests would eventually equate to the absence of proper teacher instruction.

Although teacher accountability was an important theme, a few participants displayed ever-present ambivalence with standardized testing mandates. Janet stated, "I feel that state testing is necessary to test to see where they are, but we need to look at testing with a bigger picture. I don't know how I feel because I don't know about the rigor." First, she recognized that state tests could be useful but does not believe schools are utilizing the results in the most effective way for all parties involved. Secondly, although she has taught in public schools for twenty years, she still did not fully understand the rigor, whether too hard or too easy, of mandated state tests. Similarly, Paula spoke on the very themes discussed by researchers Bartolome (2004) and Segall (2003), specifically the effects of state testing on classroom instruction. Paula stated,

> Because they will be tested a certain way, I do have to teach a certain way. The testing is not real world. [There's] never a time when kids will sit alone in a room without the help of technology with a time frame like that.

Paula still endorsed the argument of teacher accountability. Even though she may want to explore different topics or teaching methods, she cannot do so fully due to state testing mandates.

Lastly, Tierra stated, "Pressure. Needed but lots of pressure. You're basically teaching to test." Tierra teaches at a predominantly Black elementary school that has great learning gaps when compared to predominantly White schools. Her relationship to the state test is not less ambivalent than other interviewees. She recognized that the mandate placed pressure on all parties involved, i.e., teachers, students, administrators. By acknowledging that tests are heavily enforced, she then indicated that teachers are forced to teach all test materials for students to ensure that students perform best on mandated tests.

There is great evidence on the ambivalence to state testing in their minds as teachers in Mississippi. Another question to pose is the difference between having necessary teaching standards and developing teaching standards that effectively and efficiently educate students and prepare teachers to give that efficient and effective instruction. Reading and comprehension are vital skills to develop from the start in everyone's life because those skills are the foundation to any activity. Although teachers identified the need for teaching expectations, there is still a need for all parties to identify the materials and skills being taught or not being taught.

Tests are timed, structured assessments that are specific to what state and district administrators have deemed necessary for students to learn. With the diverse backgrounds of students in schools, no tests or teaching outcome standards are culturally cognizant or responsive to the real lives of all students. Life outside of school may

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include working, paying bills, navigating poverty, raising children, building households, and the many others positive and negative elements of lives in the United States. In other words, life is well beyond answering multiple choice questions within a designated time. A participant from Segall's (2003) study showcased the exact same ambivalence as the teachers I interviewed by stating, "It's how teachers are graded right now, and whether it's right or not, it's the way it is. And so, how do you deal with something like that?" (2003).

When I spoke with Elizabeth about state tests, she stated, "Learning to answer multiple choice is not going to prepare them on the outside. It's just not real world." Although she recognizes that those mandated practices do not reference or prepare students for life outside of the education system, she still must follow the rules set forth and does so willingly. Notably, if teachers are not required to practice anti-racist living, teach inclusive instruction materials, or identify the harsh realities of life for minority students, poor students, or associated identities, how could there possibly be a real-life relevance in standardized testing? Teachers are forced to time students on their assessments and are not allowed, due to time constraints, to address topics aside from the teaching standards outlined by the state mandated curriculum. Standardized testing mandates are thus directly related to teachers' inability to incorporate critical pedagogical practices, which emphasize student learning through self-discovery rather than memorization.

Addressing Social Inequalities in the Classroom

Inequality as a Subject for Discussion

Exploring critical pedagogical practices means understanding how teachers approached conversing with their students about the discriminatory realities of our society. One of the most important questions during the interviews was "Do you address societal inequalities during class with students or as you prepare for class?" The follow-up question was "Do you feel that teachers should be political in the classroom?" On the one hand, they explored the importance, but on the other hand, they did not feel comfortable or equipped to address structural inequalities. Some responses showed that some teachers also decided to not discuss these structural inequalities and adopt other models like cultural competency and colorblindness. The responses were interesting and showed a form of negligence and doubt.

Tierra stated that the "curriculum does not include or encourage political engagement." Tierra is a Black woman who has been teaching for 10 years. After being asked the question above, she concluded that her curriculum standards do not allow her to include or encourage political engagement during classroom instruction. Her stance was not vastly different than a couple of the other teachers I interviewed.

Paula is a young White teacher at predominantly White elementary school. She stated, "I'm glad they don't truly understand 'the why' because it doesn't really make sense to me. I tell them that people's views change. Trends change, and we realize what we're doing." For clarification purposes, "the why" is why people are treated differently based on skin color. Although she did not mention her curriculum, her response was her recollection of responses she has given her students during classroom instruction. Paula

believes that it is better for students to not understand the reality of oppression and structural inequalities because she does not fully understand the concepts herself. Lastly, Rachel, a White teacher who has been teaching history for decades, stated, "Don't ask me anything controversial. It's hard to not discuss in a history class. I don't say anything at all. It's very hard to have discussions about things now. School advised us not to discuss the 2016 election."

Rachel's response is interesting because her subject area—history—provides a ready opening for political conversations. However, Rachel discouraged such controversial conversation although she recognized the important of open dialogue. Importantly, this is not only Rachel's position, but one supported by her school, which specifically told them to avoid discussions of the 2016 election, when the presidential candidates were Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. A note about the history of Rachel's school is relevant here: after the federal desegregation mandate and Mississippi's final attempt to avoid it in 1970, many Whites began fleeing inner-city schools to attend suburban schools like Rachel's school. As such, this school's administration, teachers, and students were White and affluent, but over time racial minorities began populating the school. Today, this school can be described as diverse because of a great rise in students of color and a mixture of socioeconomic statuses. In fact, because Rachel is teaching at a more diverse school, she stated that she had become more open to the world around her.

Each of the teachers mentioned above explained that their curriculum and school administrators did not engage with the realities of their student's lives. That could either be to protect the students from the evils of the world or to not have to face the tough

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conversations that may lie ahead. This study was completed in the fall of 2020, and the political and social climate of that period is relevant. During a time where there was an enormous uprising of civil unrest and protests all over the United States about racism and police violence against Black people, a few of the teachers interviewed were not fully aware of the root causes to said civil unrest. During a time when every topic is considered controversial and hypersensitive, the educational system and its agents of socialization—the educators—enforced and followed policies and practices that ignored the reality of Black people and other minorities in the United States. Developing a critical consciousness with which to go into the world requires access to this knowledge.

Cultural Competency and Colorblind Racism

Other themes that arose in teachers' discussion of social inequalities was the use of a cultural competency model and color-blind practices with their students instead a recognizing the structural basis of inequality and racism. Six teachers mentioned cultural competency, a model for engaging with diversity on an interactional level through recognition of cultural differences, rather than identifying and discussing structural inequalities in the classroom. They put emphasis on the importance of teaching children to not disrespect others and to understand the different cultures surrounding them. Paula emphasized the importance of having books in the classroom that shed a positive light on Black children. A significant difference between approaching group differences from the perspective of structural inequalities versus cultural competency is the acknowledgement of macro versus micro level causes, respectively.

Many teachers relied on the concept of colorblindness, an approach that promotes not seeing or ignoring color as a way to be more egalitarian, despite its inability to

address the causes and therefore solutions to structural racism. This approach is not only ineffectiveness in combating racism, but it actually promotes racism by arguing that the cure to this social ailment is to pretend race—and thus racism—does not exist.Janet, who is Black, stated, "Take away those abstract things like race. Talk as people." Janet who comes from a rural, religious background, has been teaching for almost three decades and was raised by schoolteachers. Her response to discussing societal inequalities in the classroom stems from the ongoing color blindness phenomenon. Although it is important to speak to people as people, a lack of awareness of the themes mentioned above breeds the cyclical nature of societal inequalities. In fact, a failure to acknowledge and fully understand the adverse causes and effects of inequalities woven into the fabrics of our society is the problem.

Wanda stated, "It comes with the incorporation with all students. Making everybody feel important. Don't show any kind of inequality. It can't exist in your head. You know what I mean?" Aside from her race, Wanda has been teaching for almost twenty years and was raised in a rural, religious community. Wanda's background contributes to having a similar mind frame and classroom instruction style as Janet. Although it is important to respect your peers and treat people fairly, that mindset fails to acknowledge the macro inequality, whether systemic disadvantage or privilege, that affects them all. Wanda is inherently misleading students to think of the world through a small lens instead of a larger and more realistic lens.

The next teacher who stated a thought-provoking response is Taylor, a young Black woman in her first year of teaching. Her school's demographic is majority White, as is her class. In response to the question of whether she addresses societal inequalities

during class with students or as she prepared for class Taylor stated that people

"shouldn't treat people different based on skin color." I argue that students should

understand that the oppressive structures and institutions surrounding them create policy,

procedures, and more based on skin color or race. Although this reality should not be

internalized, students who face oppression must first understand the oppressive tactics to

engage in bringing progress in their society.

As noted, all three of the teachers mentioned above were Black, and each seemed

to promote colorblindness. Colorblindness is rooted in the belief that racial group

membership and race-based differences should not be considered when decisions are

made, impressions are formed, and behaviors are enacted. An overwhelming half of my

teachers promoted colorblindness in their teaching and basic student interactions.

Colorblindness is a phenomenon that arose in a time where racism was being discussed

more, and people did not want to seem racist. The phenomenon has since been refuted.

According to one study,

> the fact that color blindness makes children less likely to identify overt instances
>
> of bias could lead people to mistakenly conclude that color blindness is an
>
> effective tool for reducing bias—perhaps one factor contributing to its continued
>
> support and proliferation in the educational system (Apfelbaum et al., 2012, p.
>
> 206).

Colorblind racism is not appropriate because it is a blatant refusal to acknowledge

oppressive measures, which diminishes the potential of critical pedagogical practices.

Gender Differences

Throughout the interviews, teachers mentioned gender differences among students. On one hand, teachers were not comfortable discussing racial inequalities but became very relaxed and even proud of their views regarding gender. While society has a long history of racism, in more recent decades, popular public rhetoric has condemned racism as unethical and discriminatory. However, gender stereotypes and the presumptions about gender differences continue to be normalized. In fact, Wanda stated, "my girls, I try to prepare her for society. You know like running up, jumping up, and being in cliques, that isn't good." Wanda also explained that girls cling to her more, especially the ones without moms or with older grandmas. Later, Tierra stated, "College is not for everybody. Get you a job that pays. Boys become a carpenter or a painter. Do something with your hands." Their comments allowed me to better understand their often unsaid expectations for their students.

Although their comments were made with an endearing tone, the effects of this mind frame may have negative implications. For example, the expectation for a boy to pursue hard labor versus academia is an oppressive measure. Similarly, the thought that girls must be prepared for society, not boys, is an oppressive measure. Lastly, to inhibit girls and boys from thinking of their future, without an authoritative figure's input, is the ultimate reason that gender stereotypes should be removed from classroom interactions and instruction. Again, trainings may assist teachers with understanding how oppressive tactics stem from unequal practices due to gender as well as race and class.

Future Success in Students

One of the last interview questions in my study allowed participants to identify characteristics of how they aim to prepare each of their students for the next grade or life in general. The purpose was to examine what they defined success as and how they viewed their preparedness to instruct their students. The responses were compelling. Paula stated, "Being self-sufficient, being able to problem solve on your own, and being independent and being kind." Rachel stated, "Doing what you're doing and are happy/healthy." Janet stated, "Success is measured by a student's fulfillment. That's personal, different for everybody." Those teachers referenced the happiness of their students and how that level depicts how successful someone is.

The most notable response was given by Tierra as she confidently stated, "Just finish high school and go to college or some of my students are starting businesses doing hair or selling clothes. Anything other than criminal activity. I just don't want to see their name across my TV screen." Although her measurement of success was more concrete than other participants, she mentioned a reality that is not only real because of people's personal choices, but also because of institutional racism and practices. She teaches in a school that is over seventy percent Black, with students who come from crime-filled and impoverished neighborhoods. Her opinion of success is not necessarily a direct reflection of the classroom instruction that heavily influences her students.

Tierra's school setting is vital to understanding her responses and the context. According to data from the Neighborhood Scout, 74.4% of students from The Piney Lakes Elementary school live below the federal poverty line. The Piney Lakes Elementary School serves an inner-city neighborhood with a higher rate of childhood

poverty than 99.1% of U.S. neighborhoods. Lastly, 100% of the school's students receive free lunch (Niche, 2021). Nonetheless, crime and schooling have a relationship. The U.S Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) found that more than 1 in 4 Black men are expected to serve a prison sentence at least once in their life (1997). The reality of overworked teachers in Tierra's school alone and the inability to effectively address behaviors and systemic practices that will affect her students make her claim contradictory. My analysis of teachers' perspectives on trainings, their teaching standards, their views of students, and their hesitance in uncomfortable conversations uncovered harsh truths. The theoretical frameworks mentioned in the previous chapters allowed me to examine each finding above in terms of critical pedagogical practices. The very core is a divergence from the dominance of only certain cultures for students to embrace their own as well as respect others. The last two questions included the importance of teachers and why the participants became teachers. Taylor stated, "People can't get to where they need to go without teachers." Wanda stated, "Teachers are at the beginning of every career and the most important person in a society." Janet stated, "Teachers establish the foundation for everything else a student will become."

Paula stated, "Teachers have the ability to change the world." Some of the reasons included: a teacher in school that sparked her interest, behavioral issues being alleviated by a teacher, and one teacher listened to her and formed a relationship. Another teacher recalled her elementary teacher giving her teaching materials to play with at home. More reasons include teachers showing compassion, personal vows to pay the compassion forward to future students, and the feeling of safety at school. Lastly, one participant explained that all her female influences in life happened to be teachers. Although there

are infinite reasons to become a teacher, the participants named similar reasons. Whether it be public schooling, private schooling, or home schooling, teachers, whether certified or not, affect the lives of children.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

When I began thinking about potential research topics, I could not help but to consider my passions for matters of social justice and equity. For the task of addressing such societal issues, I know that the most effective and efficient solutions are the ones that start by examining the root causes of these long-standing social problems, including racism, sexism, and classism. In society, as in medicine, we must seek to identify and cure the disease rather than simply treat the symptoms. As a student myself and working as a volunteer assistant in elementary schools, I have often thought about the impact that our educational system has on millions of children every day and how education could have a more substantive effect in maximizing not only individual human potential but also society's. We should ask ourselves, "How does education not only mirror but also shape the world around us? What do each of us owe to our formal education in terms of where we each stand in society today?" These questions allow us to reflect on our indoctrination, habits, and expectations that we are likely to maintain for a lifetime. From kindergarten through high school, we are socialized through this social institution in developing our self-image, our thinking, our writing, our speech, our relationships, and much more. We develop our ideals and a sense of our position in the world in relation to the people around us. Indeed, the influence of education on our ability to realize our potential both individually and societally cannot be underestimated.

This research project aimed to examine the connections among societal structure, social identities, students, teachers, school curricula, and the potential of critical pedagogy in the context of education in Mississippi. My findings indicate there is

significant progress to be made for the sake of all parties involved. Although Mississippi is not unique in its issues, the level of challenges it faces in terms of human development indicators suggests the state needs to be researched further to better understand the issues and strategies for improvement. This study can serve as the start for more in-depth and expanded studies, qualitative and quantitative, in the future. I offer my model of education (Figure 3) as a beginner's guide to the relationships between structural inequalities, individuals and identities, and critical pedagogy, the good and the bad. My research allowed me to appreciate how teachers operating within the educational structure demonstrated both compliance and resistance: they contributed to standard patterns surrounding typical classroom instruction, implicit bias, standardized testing, and silence on structural inequalities, but they also they defied the odds. It is important to acknowledge the endurance of these teachers. Despite their ambivalence, personal strife, daily school-related battles, and sometimes hopelessness in their professions' practices, they still found ways to remain present and optimistic for their students in some regards.

Education has been described, studied, and analyzed in a multitude of ways. Researchers have theorized and gathered evidence about widespread educational practices that are detrimental to those subjected to those practices, including both students and teachers. While a plethora of research has identified the shortcomings and failings of our educational system, I believe in the boundless opportunities that could be cultivated through education. The United States has a brutal history of discrimination, bigotry, and oppression, which has created the education system as we know it, but this current reality does not have to be the future's if we can lead with true freedom and independence. Education should strive to take a holistic approach in teaching, engaging,

and empowering students towards that freedom and independence. Building a foundation through critical pedagogy is a direct method to begin the process of alleviating our society of the inequitable, unequal, and undemocratic status quos enabled by our current educational system.

The problems at hand occur when we are not taught to recognize and challenge systemic realities as they are simply presented to us so we may be prepared later to demand changes for the betterment of our lives. The problem occurs when we are not equipped to analyze and understand our social structure and realize that the solution is not too far out of reach for participatory citizens within a real democracy, which is not simply about being able to vote at the polls but a way of social life and citizenship in which all voices may be heard. In the words of bell hooks (1994), education should be about "teaching to transgress." Such a change at the very core of public education could profoundly alter patterns of inequality and discriminatory institutional practices as we know them.

At the time of writing this thesis, when we are only a few decades from the Civil Rights Movement, are living in the wake of repeatedly televised events of racist police brutality, and are seeing an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes, the topic of education and inequality's interconnectedness is of heightened importance. At this time when states like Texas and South Dakota have introduced legislation to ban the teaching of critical race theory in public school, this topic is of heightened importance. Education must teach the truth and not shy away from reality. Our reality is that although acts of racist bias can occur on an individual or micro-level, systemic discrimination based on racism, sexism, and classism is structural and reinforced through everyday practices that are too rarely

scrutinized and corrected. Contrary to popular belief or followers of a colorblind approach to racism, we cannot simply teach that everyone is equal when certain categories of people are systemically treated unequally. Social change does not begin with developing ways to avoid uncomfortable truths; rather, it begins with acknowledging and confronting them.

Recognizing the role of education in our lives and its relationship to promoting either social justice or inequality allows us to see just how far we are living on the margins of democracy. Our reality, whether Black or White, teacher or student, old or young, is that even when we know the perpetrators with power who uphold social injustice, we cannot seem to demand for our voices to be heard. Partly, some people do not seem to believe that our demand is valid, and that too is a consequence of our educational system. A true democracy can only thrive if people are knowledgeable and empowered to act on that knowledge. As a society, we have yet to be exposed to a holistic approach in education that prepares us to think independently and critically as well as equips us to seek and accomplish the goals or pursue the dreams that seem so far out of reach.

In summary, based on my research, I argue that (1) public education has progressed, (2) critical thinking, or the lack thereof, needs to be addressed in school curricula, (3) there needs to be training on how to discuss political engagement and societal inequalities in the classroom, and (4) critical pedagogy would well serve the future of public education and society at large. I urge educational administrators and policy makers to lay the groundwork for teachers to be prepared to encourage and facilitate democracy in the classroom and in the minds of their students. We must work to

ensure that learning is a liberating experience and that the values of democratic

citizenship learned in the classroom carry over into students' future lives. We must

develop critical consciousness and begin examining the world around us from multiple

perspectives and from perspectives that are original and novel, not simply following in

the footsteps of how someone else has examined it. As many scholars have advocated, I

also argue that to be the true purpose of education. Overall, if we want to see a change in

oppressive realities, we must examine the social institution that is most influential in

developing us as citizens: education. This cannot begin until we utilize an educational

approach that is open, honest, and emancipating.

APPENDIX A Interview Questions

1. Why are you a teacher?

2. Explain your favorite method of teaching. How did you come up with your teaching style? Does it work for all of your students?

3. Describe your familial upbringing.

4. Do you believe that your background has impacted your teaching style?

5. If so, how?

6. Do you think that race, class, and gender may contribute to your students' learning curve during virtual learning? If so, explain further.

7. In relation to your prior years of teaching, do you actively engage your students in the classroom? Explain.

8. Do you think it is important for students to be engaged in the classroom?

9. Do you have any state or district mandated training? What do you think about them? How do you feel about state testing mandates? Has those training helped or harmed you as a teacher? How has state testing affected (negatively or positively) affected you as a teacher?

10. Do you address societal inequalities during class with students or as you prepare for class?

11. Talk to me about your students. Have you always taught at a school like this?

12. In what ways, if any, is your curriculum and teaching style determined by the classroom's demographics?

13. At the end of each year, how have you prepared each of your students for the next grade?

14. Tell me about how important teachers are in society. Why or why not?

15. How do you feel when students ask too many questions? Do you have any of those students? What kind of questions do you like to be asked in the classroom? What kinds of questions do you not like to be asked in the classroom?

APPENDIX B **IRB APPROVAL LETTER**

Office *of* Research Integrity

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.
- Face-to-Face data collection may not commence without prior approval from the Vice President for Researches Office.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-20-373
PROJECT TITLE: A Critical Scope: Public Education and Inquisitive Thought
SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Anthropology and Sociology, Honor's College
RESEARCHER(S): Kelsi Ford, Julie Reid

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Expedited
      7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: September 22, 2020

Donald Sacco Jr.

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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