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"I Kind of Pushed Back": Efficiency and Urgency in a No-Excuses Writing Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research has emphasized how policies work to impose ways of writing on teachers and their students (Benko et al., 2020). However, no research has explored the beliefs or practices of writing teachers earning their master's degrees in education through what Cochran-Smith, Miller, and Carney (2016) have termed *new graduate schools of education* (nGSEs).

Under 2015's *Every Student Succeeds Act*, various policies have allowed for the creation and expansion of nGSEs as standalone institutions that are unaffiliated with university-based teacher education but still grant teaching credentials. Some nGSEs, designed for the sole objective of creating a pipeline of teachers to be placed in growing "no-excuses" charter management organization (CMO) networks, operate from multiple campuses throughout the country (Mungal, 2019). Typically, schools within these CMO networks measure their success through the raising of students' standardized test scores. Although they have moved away from the no-excuses label in recent years, these networks represent the majority of charter school choices available in several major cities, relying on shared common practices that include centrally designed curricula that heavily narrate both teacher and student behavior (Golann, 2021).

This article draws on findings from a larger study focused on the experiences of teachers entering the profession through nGSEs in a large Northeastern city. This study analyzes Mr. David's[1] experiences as a writing teacher at Inspire High School, one of more than forty schools within the Excellence Academies CMO network. The research question guiding this study's

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

inquiry is: How does a charter management organization's writing curriculum reinscribe whiteness in Mr. David's teaching?

THE RESEARCHER

As an English teacher earning a master's degree through a hybrid partnership between a university and an alternative certification program, I completed coursework with university-based teacher educators who introduced me to aesthetic education and approaches to writing workshop that emphasized student creativity, agency, and self-expression. Both the alternative certification program and some administrators in my public school, however, evaluated the quality of my teaching based largely on my students' standardized test scores, the majority of whom were Black or Latinx. As a new teacher I sought support from veteran teachers who were generous with their experience, though that experience in our school included seeing a slew of young white savior types like myself come and go over the years.

I continued to teach middle school English for several more years with a growing recognition that an organization of which I had once been a proponent allowed me to do well while supposedly doing good (Labaree, 2010). In those early years in the classroom, I did not consider how my teaching practices and my own misguided attempts to bring the curriculum closer to my students' experiences were steeped in and shaped by my whiteness. My students were talented writers who often became discouraged by the continual misreading of their abilities. Over time, I began to question why adolescents in schools like ours labeled by accountability metrics as "at risk" were often assumed to not already be sophisticated in their use of literacies. Why had it taken so long for me to see that this deficit framing was a form of false generosity (Freire, 2018) and white supremacy? Some white educators think they are being antiracist by guiding their students of color to approximate middle class white standards of literacy achievement, and I was one of them.

As a qualitative researcher, I approach my work with the understanding that who I am informs the questions I pose, and the theoretical frameworks and methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation I utilize (Merriam, 2009). Throughout the course of this study, I continually reflected upon my experiences as a white teacher of writing, including my own lack of awareness as to how I often racialized and continue to racialize language in my own judgments of students and their writing. My ongoing archeology of the self involves considering how my own racial identity mattered and continues to matter in my interactions with students and colleagues (Sealey-Ruiz, 2018). This research reflects my commitment to name and confront whiteness in writing assessment amidst the current policy terrain as its normalized invisibility can too often obscure white supremacy in the English classroom (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In what follows, I rely on two complementary theoretical frameworks to unmask the dominant discourses in the nGSE and CMO milieu around writing achievement and how they influenced Mr. David's teaching. In order to document the ways that whiteness works within the writing curriculum and assessment practices despite stated broader organizational commitments to culturally relevant teaching, I draw from the Critical Race frameworks (Bell, 1992, 1995; Lawrence, 1987) of interest convergence and whiteness as property specifically.

Critical Race Theory allows for an analytical shift from attributing racism to individual experiences to a structural engineering of oppression replicated by institutions and society at large (Sleeter, 2017). Mr. David's case provides an illustrative example of how structuring contexts (Berchini, 2016) shape and distort white educators' stated commitments to enact culturally responsive pedagogies (Matias, 2013). As the scholarship of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), responsive (Gay, 2010) and sustaining (Paris, 2012) pedagogies are increasingly taken up uncritically by CMOs as evidence of a New Civil Rights Movement for educational equity (Scott, 2013), I found it important to frame the study through these systematic and critical lenses. Doing so reveals how Mr. David was encouraged to apply the theory of culturally relevant teaching in reductive ways to improve students' written texts as measured through scores on an Advanced Placement (AP) exam.

INTEREST CONVERGENCE

As a conceptual tool, interest convergence uncovers concealed racism to ask how Civil Rights gains might serve to benefit the interest of white people without truly improving the lives of people of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Bell (1980) argued that any advances that benefit people of color typically must coincide and keep pace with the interests of white people. In analyzing the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court case, Bell demonstrated that the eventual decision to end school segregation was only a result of the judicial elite choosing to keep pace with white interests. Desegregation efforts were not a product of a desire to radically change existing power relations, but rather one that was allowed as it also benefited those in power without considerably altering existing racist structures. As such, there is a hesitance to fully interrogate or destroy policies that benefit whites materially, physically and financially (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Applying Critical Race Theory allows for the centering of race and racism to consider how discourses around literacy and writing in the nGSE context only appear neutral or meritocratic to white leadership and administration because they work to protect and serve the interests of the dominant group. In this case, the beneficiaries of these oppressive policies are the entrepreneurial reformers creating

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and expanding no-excuses charter schools and staffing these schools through newly created and aligned nGSEs (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018).

This study builds upon the work of scholars who have used founding documents such as Wendy Kopp's thesis and her 2011 autobiography to uncover "endemic racism in the textual corpus" of TFA (Barnes et al., 2016, p. 2). Following these researchers, I begin with the understanding that nGSEs and their affiliated CMO networks promote a narrative that underserved students benefit from educational interventions through increased college access and opportunities to attain a higher education. Racialized students' abilities are assumed to be less than those of their white peers and these narratives prescribe strict adherence to raced, classed, and linguistic norms.

It is important to ask, however, how a closed system of educational entrepreneurs themselves benefits from the continual framing of students of color as requiring literacy intervention. Critical Race English Education (Baker-Bell et al., 2017) is explicit about naming and dismantling white supremacy and anti-Black and anti-Brown racism, asking "what should be the responsibility of all English educators in the wake of terror, death, and racial violence?" (p. 123).

Thus, interest convergence leads to asking who benefits from policies and practices in CMOs, particularly those that do not disrupt racial violence in English classrooms or sustain Black and Brown students' literacies. The CMO messaging that college access alone promises youth of color uncomplicated social mobility does not address systemic racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and how these forces intersect (Lu & Lamboy, 2017), or the negative consequences of assuming escaping poverty is students' primary goal, or that they can do so just by enrolling in college or accessing higher education (Sondel, 2015). The promise of a college education, which these CMOs offer, must also be interrogated for the ways that white supremacy and saviorism are entangled with these broader goals. To open and expand pathways to post-secondary education for students typically excluded in these spaces is admirable. To do so as the single objective of education through dehumanizing management of student bodies, however, runs the risk of positioning students of color as no more than what Golann (2021) calls *worker learners*, which centers the interests and benefits of the white venture philanthropists invested in CMO expansion.

CURRICULAR WHITENESS AS PROPERTY

A recent review of the literature of no-excuses charter schools recommended that promising CMO practices be replicated both beyond existing CMO networks to remedy the achievement gap (Cohodes, 2018). Yet the prioritization of learning classroom management as a prerequisite to learning to teach content, for one, is consistent across many CMO partner school networks. Vasquez-Hielig et al. (2019) discuss how Teach for America's (TFA) curriculum

operationalizes whiteness as property, which ensures that the educations that students tend to receive in CMOs is inferior to the educations their white, middle-class, and wealthy peers enjoy. As Harris (1993) explains, white interests "may speak the language of equality but subordinate equality."

In line with Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) consideration of whiteness as property for analyzing educational inequality, scholars continue to demonstrate how schools in affluent areas are often able to create and enact curricula that encourage predominantly white students to make decisions, develop and use their own reasoning, and engage in critical thinking. Meanwhile, students of color in markedly less affluent areas are routinely denied access to these benefits of a quality education, including in CMO classrooms (Brewer, 2014; White, 2015). For example, both Mr. David's CMO and its affiliated nGSE train teachers to enact highly structured teaching moves codified in part by *Teach Like a Champion* approaches to pedagogy (Lemov, 2012), as well as texts such as *Get Better Faster: A 90-Day Plan for Coaching New Teachers*.

As described earlier, entrepreneurial reformers often problematically take up Ladson-Billings' scholarship in the name of educational equity. Originally theorized as a way of combating deficit-oriented thinking about Black students, Ladson-Billings' work relied on three tenets to characterize the art of culturally relevant teaching: (1) academic achievement, (2) cultural competence, and (3) socio-political awareness. The rhetoric used by many CMOs, however, often equates the so-called achievement gap with a literacy gap, subsequently reifying the emphasis on literacy in schools as neutral and universal (Street, 1994) and neglecting Ladson-Billings' framing of culturally relevant teaching as a creative, agentic, and artistic endeavor (1995).

Just as entrepreneurial reformers have recently begun to rebrand the no-excuses label, they have also adopted the term "opportunity gap" in place of the contested achievement gap language. However, some scholars have called into question a tendency to reduce complex rich scholarship to misrepresentations that serve the philanthropic expansion interests of CMOs overwhelmingly led by white actors (Scott & Quinn, 2014). CMOs like Excellence Academies rely on their college acceptance rates as an indicator of their ability to provide a rigorous college preparatory education to students of color and to justify their own expansion, but we do not often hear from teachers, students, or their families about how they experience curriculum in no-excuses schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this review of the literature, I first turn to the literature on second wave whiteness studies and antiracist literature instruction in English education. I then situate Mr. David's case as a white writing teacher within a larger history of research concerning hegemonic writing teaching practices and racial inequities

reflected within writing assessment. Finally, I engage the research that documents teachers' efforts to engage in culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), responsive (Gay, 2010) and sustaining (Paris, 2012) writing pedagogies.

ANTIRACIST LITERATURE INSTRUCTION IN ELA

Ahmed (2004) notes that,

> "Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don't, it is not hard to see whiteness; it even seems everywhere" (p. 1).

Second wave critical whiteness studies enriches our understanding of the need to explicitly confront white supremacy in the classroom as more than a matter of individual teacher resistance in the face of oppression, and of white teachers' efforts to teach about race and racism in English language arts classrooms. This second wave of theory and empiricism has allowed the field to move beyond white privilege frameworks (McIntosh, 1988) to consider the structures that teachers work within and against in order to ensure that attention is paid to both teacher and student agency as well as structural oppressions that simultaneously inform daily classroom interactions (Kinloch & Dixon, 2017). In doing so, second wave whiteness studies recognizes that whiteness is uniquely localized, working to de-essentialize white teachers and instead nuance their experiences and how they attempt to make sense of their white identities in their teaching and efforts to teach towards antiracism (Berchini, 2016).

Recent research documents how critical whiteness studies lends itself to better understanding whiteness as a complicated problem for white people to grapple with in English education (Tanner, 2019). In essence, whiteness studies asks white educators, "how does it feel to be the problem?" Specifically, some scholars engage with how English teachers face that question as they attempt to teach literature from an antiracist lens (Berchini, 2016; Borsheim-Black, 2015, 2019; Dyches, 2016; Grinage, 2019; Thomas, 2013, 2015).

White teachers' concerns about the legitimacy of racism as content to be studied in the English classroom, the potential for tension with their students, and a need to appear objectively neutral can compromise their efforts to utilize literature towards antiracist teaching goals in predominantly white teaching contexts (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019). Teachers, white and of color, who take on explicitly antiracist teaching often experience resistance as they work to advance their white students' criticality. For example, Dyches & Thomas (2020) found that white students pushed back on critical race/critical whiteness readings of *Huckleberry Finn* in a unit designed to interrupt dominant canonical readings of the

text. Scholars also study how whiteness interferes with teachers' antiracist teaching goals, noting the power of affective solidarity through unconscious body language and how a white teacher sides with a white student during classroom discussion in ways that marginalize a Black student (Grinage, 2019).

Borsheim-Black (2015) demonstrates how a white teacher challenged the normalization of whiteness as she taught her students to think critically about their pronoun use, specifically how students use vague but still exclusionary and evasive terms like "they" and "we" to reference race without explicitly naming racial groups. Thomas (2013) illustrates how a white teacher continues to lean into discomfort, and that her willingness to continue to learn how to lead and mediate discussions about race in the classroom are assets to her students despite the challenges of color-evasiveness. Berchini (2019) finds that a high school English department's traditions, leadership, and social organization frustrated and complicated the efforts of a white cis-male teacher to teach his white students about white privilege.

These barriers to teaching about white supremacy in the ELA classroom are interconnected and structural in nature, and therefore require a more systematic approach to change. It is also key to consider the contextual layers and demands that inform white teachers' racial identities (Berchini, 2016, 2019).

CRITICAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS

While research and practice have advanced the teaching of literature in English Language Arts classrooms towards antiracism, the field of writing studies and secondary teachers continue to grapple with enacting antiracist writing instruction and assessment. The 1974 Conference on Composition and Communication resolution "Students' Right to Their Own Language" was a hard-fought compromise, and scholars revisiting the resolution now recognize that theorizing about affirming language diversity is far easier than developing concrete classroom practices that truly sustain the breadth and depth of all students' languages and literacies, particularly those most often subjected to linguistic racism (Kinloch, 2010).

The attention to literature, as opposed to the nature of language, is an important factor in the discipline. Critical language awareness and pedagogies remain underdeveloped in an overwhelmingly white teaching profession. Despite efforts to enact principles of antiracist composition in college writing classrooms (Inoue, 2015), university instructors still focus most of their feedback on the perceived correctness of texts, measuring students' literacies against the hegemonic norm of what Baker-Bell (2020) calls *White Mainstream English.* Writing teacher education might position English teachers as agents of change that are racially literate rather than colorblind (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Skerrett, 2011), recognizing that "race awareness is a process of becoming rather than being, a matter of practice

rather than an identity one takes on" (Leonardo & Grubb, 2013, p. 148). This shift requires reframing priorities away from perceived correctness and toward engaging in the arts of language use and learning to teach and respond to student writing in ways that sustain and extend their languages, cultures, and literacy practices (Paris & Alim, 2017).

To combat language ideologies that harm and erase the linguistic and cultural identities of Black students who communicate in languages deemed non-standard by the white gaze of institutions and individuals (Morrison, 1998), teachers must continue to seek learning and support beyond the confines of a curriculum and language policies that perpetuate eradicationist pedagogies (Baker-Bell, 2020). The tendency to monitor, change and repair (Razfar, 2005) marginalized students' spoken language is all too common among well-intentioned teachers. Martinez (2017), for example, examines how a teacher responds to and surveils the language of Black and Latinx youth; even when students critically examine their corrections and feedback to resist the revoicing of their speech, the teacher still assumes they, their speech, and their writing are in the wrong.

As this article centers on Mr. David's work teaching a predominantly Black student population, I turn to scholars who suggest that we cannot truly subvert racism in writing pedagogies without acknowledging the covert racism inherent in many writing assessments. For example, Inoue (2019) proposes that although writing prompts are often presumed to be neutral, they can actually obscure a white racial habitus. Hegemonic white discourse informs expectations of readers while tools like rubrics prescribe certain narrative structures or require certain details, under the assumption that they are clear and accessible to everyone, while valuing these structures and details over others. Embedded within many layers of assessment is "a student judgment" which can inadvertently center whiteness in the writing classroom (Inoue, 2015, p. 52).

TOWARDS ANTIRACIST WRITING PEDAGOGIES IN ELA

There is a growing body of research devoted to explicit aspects of the writing curriculum and teacher practices at the elementary and secondary levels that work to resist the standardization of students of color as writers and respond to students in ways that recognize their humanity in the ways they deserve. As described here, much of the literature engages in documenting the practices of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining writing instruction demonstrates how teachers resist aspects of mandated curriculum and find creative opportunities to conceptualize their curriculum. These studies suggest that teachers find their beliefs and practices, however new or deeply held, complicated by administrators and parents who view English teachers as cultural experts on standard language ideologies (Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018; Woodard, et al., 2017). Another obstacle to fundamental change in instruction is school leaders', teachers', and often parents'

concern that students need to learn how to write to succeed on high stakes exams in order to continue to succeed academically and in the job market in the future.

An emphasis on form and limitations with respect to genre, audience and purpose as outlined earlier often thwarts teachers' attempts to teach in ways that they themselves feel are humanizing. A specific structured approach to writing geared towards attaining proficiency test scores has detrimental effects on students' creativity and writerly flexibility, while also robbing students of opportunities to experiment with "personal and cultural issues in their writing" (Winn & Johnson, 2011). This is particularly damaging, however, for Black students, as they often experience writing pedagogies and assessment practices that reflect rather than subverts the larger systemic inequities in our educational system (Johnson & Sullivan, 2020). Schooled writing often devalues literacies of Black youth; in part, Kirkland (2004) specifically highlights the continual mismatch between the predominantly white writing teacher population and Black youth writers, noting that while there ought to be a recognition of the legitimacy of a multitude of textual forms, that classroom writing pedagogies are often reflective of a traditional understanding of logos.

In advocating for more critical writing pedagogies, other scholars have also emphasized the importance of not only an understanding of the value of expanding what counts as writing, but also the myriad language practices that Black students utilize as well as their enacted literacies. The literature demonstrates that teachers can interrogate uncritical approaches to language and question assimilationist models of language pedagogy in their classroom teaching but require support learning about both critical language policies as well as how whiteness has shaped hegemonic language practices to move from awareness to action. Students and teachers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds require continual support and learning to recognize anti-Black linguistic racism (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 11) and teach against it.

The discrepancy between the possibilities of humanizing writing pedagogies and culturally responsive writing instruction for Black youth in schools (Johnson & Sullivan, 2020) continues to reveal the pressing need for administrators and teachers to acknowledge the work of Black teacher scholars who have been working for many decades to support youth in their literacies. These scholars center Black youth as writers in the classroom, drawing from culturally responsive pedagogies to honor students' literacies and seeing them as gifted creators of knowledge. In her work, for example, Johnson (2020) crafted a semester-long creative writing course for high school youth to foster opportunities for them to celebrate their lives through writing and bring themselves more fully into their classroom, arguing that to be a good teacher of writing for Black students means inviting students to bring their lived experiences to their texts.

Utilizing a framework of consequential writing pedagogies, Everett (2018) demonstrates how a high-achieving Black male student grappled with metaphor as part of a larger framework that she developed for and with Black and Latino/a youth in her writing course. Drawing on one Black male student's sophisticated use of metaphor to refuse aspects of his prior relationship to schooling, she shows how critical, creative, and cognitive thinking are always possible for students when they are invited to humanize themselves through writing their own thoughts as a way to move towards action.

Teachers have the capacity to resist aspects of the mandated standards or curriculum that they feel are not in the best interest of their students and guide students to inquire into how language can be used for and against them. A culturally relevant writing curriculum is inquiry driven and requires empathy and flexibility from a teacher who is amenable to adjusting curriculum based on student interests and needs (Winn & Johnson, 2011). A great deal of research, however, documents the impact that standardized testing has on the teaching of writing and how it can limit teachers from being responsive to students' need for meaningful opportunities to compose for reasons beyond testing.

METHODOLOGY
RESEARCH SITE AND PARTICIPANT

It was evident throughout the research that my completion of an alternative teacher certification program shaped the limited access that I was able to secure to conduct the study. I believe that nGSE leadership read my interest in researching the experience of nGSE teachers as support for their program, which likely helped gain me institutional permission. Data collection spanned from June 2019 to January 2020.

Another nGSE teacher in the larger study nominated Mr. David as a participant through purposeful snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The nominating teacher noted that Mr. David was "very critical of the ways we are learning to teach." I was interested in learning about how Mr. David's critique operated as a white teacher in this setting. I believe our shared racial identity and my completion of an alternative certification program that utilized *Teach Like a Champion* encouraged both Mr. David to be more open to discussing his experiences. In this way, my whiteness and past insider status enabled me to relate to and complicate Mr. David's story. It is also my belief that our shared racial identities prevented us from decentering whiteness in our discussions.

I sought Mr. David's input throughout the course of the research into how much identifying information he might want included in this article. He, like teachers across the larger study, expressed concerns about being easily identifiable in the research because critiques would very likely impact their job security as at will network employees and their status as nGSE graduate students. Inspire's

student population is typical of Excellence Academies network schools which almost exclusively serve students of color. School data reports that approximately 500 students attend Inspire High School where Mr. David teaches; approximately 60% of students identify as Black and 40% as Latinx. Most students in Mr. David's classes identify as Black.

While salient to his teaching, I have chosen not to disclose additional information regarding the grades that Mr. David teaches or certain details about his school and his background.

DATA SOURCES

The analysis of Mr. David's individual case draws from interview data with Mr. David; his colleague and curriculum writer, Mrs. Smith; and from a critical analysis of the CMO writing curriculum. Mr. David's agential capacity as an educator derives from his continual negotiation of both network and school-level policies and practices, so these data sources provide insight into how he made sense of his responsibilities while navigating the complexity of his contexts.

I had hoped to observe Mr. David and his students in the classroom to develop a better sense of how his talk about teaching related to his daily classroom practices. However, Mr. David's nGSE did not permit me access to teachers' school sites. This lack of access presents the opportunity for further research within an nGSE or CMO that is willing to allow classroom interactions.

EXCELLENCE ACADEMIES WRITING CURRICULUM

Mrs. Smith and her colleagues are responsible for the design and implementation of the writing program curriculum across the Excellence Academies CMO network. This network contains more than forty schools, including the one where Mr. David teaches. Curriculum designers create all materials for the duration of the school year, including a pacing calendar, units, lessons, and assessments. The curriculum included for analysis in this study was secured through network open-source platforms.

Mrs. Smith explained that testing determined the design of the centralized curriculum to ensure student preparedness for future exams, calling the writing program "a mix of alignment to an AP bar and a state testing bar." There were frequent references in Mr. David's curriculum to network goals and statistics across individual schools around passing rates and expectations for increasing those rates as a measure of both students' college readiness and teacher effectiveness.

INTERVIEWS

I conducted three semi-structured hour-long interviews with Mr. David. Within these sessions, Mr. David discussed his beliefs about teaching, his

interactions with his students, and his understanding of his racial identity as they related to his teaching.

Additionally, I conducted a one-hour long interview with Mrs. Smith to better understand Excellence Academies' broader approach and to contextualize the discourses of writing that Mr. David had access to in practice (Ivanič, 2004). In the interview with Mrs. Smith, we focused on her beliefs about teaching writing, her experiences as a white teacher and teacher educator, and the design and implementation of the writing curriculum for Excellence Academies.

DATA ANALYSIS

I began by reviewing the centralized network curriculum documents that Excellence Academies provided Mr. David and his fellow teachers throughout the network. For this article, I chose to focus on Mr. David's first unit of the school year, since this writing unit most vividly foregrounded many of the discrepancies between the prescriptive teacher moves that both Mr. David and Mrs. Smith described with asset-based pedagogies and stances, and therefore many of the dilemmas that he navigated in his teaching.

After this initial review, I followed my researcher hunch (Miles & Huberman, 1984) that terms for specific behaviorist teacher actions (e.g., *criteria for success, batch feedback,* and several other moves coined by *Teach Like a Champion* and other influential actors in no-excuses charter schools) were important to explore as they revealed a skills-based discourse and approach to teaching writing that values language precision and correctness (Ivanič, 2004). This approach allowed me to trace how curricula, policies, and administrators in Mr. David's teaching context influenced his discursive moves as well as my discussions with both participants. These terms resurfaced repeatedly in subsequent interviews with Mr. David as well as Mrs. Smith.

I deductively coded the interview transcripts to consider to what extent Mr. David's and Mrs. Smith's talk aligned with the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogies, noting moments where they explicitly referenced it, as well as moments that indicated a partial understanding of the theory, such as when Mrs. Smith mentioned "social justice texts" while describing the network's inclusion of texts written by people of color.

I returned to the interview data again to consider the structuring contexts (Berchini, 2016) that Mr. David encountered that seemed to influence his teaching. In this stage, I developed an overarching theme as I read through and organized the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006); I identified the emphasis of Mr. David's writing curriculum on time, efficiency, and urgency as the most powerful structural elements influencing his teaching.

In an effort to accurately represent his voice and experiences, I invited Mr. David to read through each of the transcribed transcripts from our conversations.

He alerted me to small clarifications (Maxwell, 2005). In one instance, for example, he reflected upon his understanding of culturally relevant teaching as it related to his graduate coursework and his school's focus, noting the sense of frustration in his response to my question. After completing his review, he wrote to me that he felt that "overall, it looks like it represents what I said well."

RESULTS
THE DISTORTION OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGIES

It became evident throughout the data that Mr. David felt continual demands to prioritize efficiency and production when it came to his teaching practice as well as his students' composing processes. Consistent with earlier research (see Sleeter, 2012), administrators encouraged Mr. David to approach culturally relevant pedagogy as a series of practices for his teaching toolkit, rather than as a stance or way of being within and beyond the classroom. In what follows, I trace how Mr. David navigated teaching his students in a context that privileged skills-based understandings of writing and efficiency as a path to academic success.

Mrs. Smith shared that Excellence Academies had not "totally figured out" culturally relevant teaching and was very committed to doing so:

> I would estimate it's on the minds of 98% of the teachers in our network. I mean we're a very social action-oriented network. Teachers feel the pressure. That's something. It probably starts with really not knowing how to do it. And then the second barrier, I think, is time and feeling like, 'I am barely keeping up with getting, you know, the main version of my lesson, to think about how I might either differentiate or mixing up materials up is not something I can do.' And I'll say, for my end, because I'm producing resources, I'm having to think about pitching to some mythical middle ground. I'm usually thinking from my perspective as a middle-class white woman. I'm someone who is social action-oriented, antiracist, but in terms of strategies and getting to that level, I don't feel super confident. I feel more confident making recommendations for ELL students, after my coursework, but not so much other ways for students of other backgrounds.

Importantly, Mrs. Smith equated culturally relevant teaching to differentiated instruction and speaks about her ideas around this concept exclusively as a curricular concern. However, one of the hallmarks of a classroom grounded in principles of differentiated instruction and culturally relevant teaching is that teachers use time flexibly in accordance with student needs and assets (New York University Metro Center, 2008). In Mrs. Smith's comments she admitted to

othering the students attending Excellence Academies network schools when she frames her curricular design work as "having to think about pitching to a mythical middle ground." Here she distanced herself, and by extension, network teachers in general, from the responsibility of truly getting to know their students, their experiences, and their cultures. Mrs. Smith's talk vividly expressed what Toliver and Hadley (2021) theorize as a failure to imagine antiracist English education. Calling the audience for her curriculum "a mythical middle ground" positioned whiteness as neutral, the norm, the default. In her comments she also evaded responsibility from the work of centering Black and Brown students when she spoke to how she was better prepared to work with "ELL students" by her coursework.

After accessing the open-source curriculum for the network that Mrs. Smith referenced, I received an email thanking me for viewing the centralized resources:

> Imagine working in a place where everyone is driving that high level of impact for kids by using the same curriculum. Imagine kids going farther because vertical alignment is built in, and teachers have more capacity to scaffold their lessons. Imagine the entire building being more well rested because people are not spending hours searching high and low for lesson plans on the Internet each week.

While the network may suggest that standardized curricular resources promote teacher well-being by removing the burden of curriculum design from their workloads, a fixation on efficiency also has the potential to structure and restrict teacher pedagogy as well as students' writing. Mrs. Smith explained that she produced materials for use by network teachers that are products of her own positionality and worldview, but did not discuss, or perhaps realize, how this practice ensured that Excellence Academies curriculum perpetuates hegemonic narratives and conceptions of knowledge.

In his work on white supremacy culture in nonprofits, Okun (2010) describes several often invisible but commonplace organizational attributes that protect and maintain white interests. A sense of urgency is one of the characteristics of white supremacy culture. Even as Mrs. Smith characterized both herself and the Excellence Academies network as antiracist, prioritizing organizational efficiency and the mass distribution and implementation of centralized instructional materials places the needs and experiences of network leaders and administrators above the needs and experiences of students.

MR. DAVID'S NEGOTIATION OF TIME, EFFICIENCY, AND URGENCY

Mr. David questioned certain aspects of the writing curriculum, which led to tensions as he worked to reconcile his beliefs and instructional practices with the

institutional expectations for efficiency. The lesson plans Mr. David was provided with worked to standardize both teacher and student behavior, indicating the time allotted for teacher delivery of information in the lesson, controlling teacher pacing, and naming appropriate teacher and student responses. Mr. David was frustrated by the constraints of the curriculum and how he felt it confined both teacher and student decision making, stating:

> They're teachers who didn't want to teach and then moved into curriculum design. So, lessons say, 'Have your sophomores write a 500-word paper in 35 minutes.' They're out of touch with the classroom. One curriculum designer doesn't even live here. He lives in a cabin far away and just sends us curriculum. He has never been in my classroom. It will say "give students two minutes to write four sentences." And then they won't finish. And then it will say "ok turn and talk for two minutes. Each of you turn. Each of you share two ideas." I don't think they factor in kids. It's to leave no time for kids to understand or misbehave.

While the network might intend to offer a rigorous college preparatory education through mandatory Advanced Placement (AP) courses, Mensah and Jackson (2018) note that "any educational practices that continue to restrict or deny access for students of color, or Teachers of Color, can be analyzed through the lens of Whiteness as property" (p. 8). In touting a rigorous college preparatory curriculum with AP course offerings, it is important to note that this writing curriculum had been modified from the College Board's materials which offer students and teachers opportunities for group presentations and multimodal composing of texts. Mr. David explained that curriculum designers prioritized rehearsal of the AP exam's on-demand essay over these other forms of communication and textual production, continuously simulating standardized forms and assessments. The CMO's own regular internal interim testing had indicated that students "struggled with the timed essay the most," which led to a sustained focus on this form of writing.

Mrs. Smith and her fellow curriculum designers build lessons for English teachers like Mr. David's to train students to be efficient writers. In so doing, they treat the writing process as if it is about the quantified output of words, sentences, or paragraphs that students put to paper, rather than the ideas, stories, or skills that students want to share. It is telling that Mr. David recognized that the tight management of every minute was not conducive to student thinking or self-expression. The objectification of students under time constraints paradoxically excluded students from a curriculum that purports to encourage critical thinking and prepare them for college level discourse.

Mr. David felt frustrated by how heavily external assessment influenced the curriculum, exemplifying the concepts of negative washback and unanticipated consequences of the assessment (Jeffery, 2009). The emphasis on standardized test preparation, preparing students to write for college, and preparing students to enter the workforce seriously limits pedagogical possibilities for literacy and literary exploration for students of color (Wilcox, Jeffery & Gardner-Bixler, 2016).

Academic achievement as theorized by Ladson-Billings (1995) is hardly realized when students are prevented from thinking beyond rote task completion and experience all composing as teacher-directed. As the teacher and the curricular designer controlled students' mental efforts, and as classroom management practices only permitted students to talk with one another to fulfill the requirements of the task, this curriculum prevents students from engaging deeply with their own thoughts or the lesson itself.

MR. DAVID'S NEGOTIATION OF TOKENIZED VOICES OF COLOR

Mr. David's case also offers an important example of how the inclusion and selection of "critical" texts alone does not necessarily work to ensure equity. In addition to regimenting how his students interacted and moved in the classroom, the curriculum focus in the first unit was on mass incarceration. Additionally, while the unit included what Mrs. Smith called "social justice-oriented" texts such as Michelle Alexander's paradigm-shifting 2010 book *The New Jim Crow,* students wrote exclusively for imagined audiences, specifically for the gaze College Board evaluators. To be clear, texts like *The New Jim Crow* could be taken up in ways that thoughtfully engage students in important discussions and writing about the enduring nature of racism. However, Mr. David described how a sustained curricular focus on racism without an emphasis on social change felt potentially damaging to his students, detailing his ambivalence as he attempted to adapt the material:

> I go back and forth. I am not a huge fan of teaching about prisons to these kids. It's kind of triggering, especially since a lot of them are Black males. They hear about the statistics around Black males going to prison. And while [the subject]'s important, I think they should have a well-trained person doing this with them. If the students want me to do it with them, that's fine, but I would love it if they would have training on how to respond to students when they are...triggered. And I am thinking along the lines of how to introduce it to them because I think it's introduced to them as.... they look at structurally, why it's like this...which is showing that it's not a Black person's fault if they're going to jail, but that it's a structural issue. I don't know…spend more time on that. The curriculum goes straight

to, 'yeah there is racism in the system.' I don't know...maybe positive change? Maybe analyze the movements and how they are aimed at stopping this situation instead of just saying here's what's happening.

Teachers in other schools that go to this conference, when I talk to them...they will be doing something in the class that is kind of positive, like Black Lives Matter and how that is impacting society. And then there are other schools who are doing food and stuff like that. Talking about topics such as health, which I think is cool. And the students learned the same skills without being...pushed in that way. I feel like a lot of the curriculum here...every class seems to be talking about race in some way. And again, important, but they get very tired of it. They're asking, can we just talk about something happier? And I kind of pushed back so I ended up just not telling them I was changing it and changed the last unit to just choose whatever you want. And the kids loved it. The curriculum designer got pretty upset. But we ended up getting the best results in the network. So, they couldn't really protest too much.

We can read Mr. David's discomfort with the unit materials in several ways. Mr. David expressed that he did not feel adequately prepared to teach lessons on the subject, especially when said instruction's aim was achieving high scores. Although the network identified mass incarceration as an area of interest and inquiry for students in the curriculum, Mr. David questioned this prescribed focus as the line of research for his students. He seems to problematically assume that the topic of prison is triggering for his students, especially his Black male students, as if his students might see prison as a part of their everyday experiences. Furthermore, the curriculum design prevented students from engaging with or articulating the subject with the same depth with prescribed rehearsals of timed responses and mirroring of example AP prompts. Notably, the CMO only allowed Mr. David more latitude to adapt his curriculum *after* his students' performance on network metrics met CMO goals for passing scores on high stakes exams (Okun, 2010).

I do not mean to suggest that silence on these subjects is preferable, especially when many teachers across the country are advised or legally obligated by their state legislature and school boards to refrain from teaching about racism. However, a curriculum that dwells on pain and injustice without any attention to ways forward, or even simple joy, is incomplete and damaging for students. White curriculum designers and teachers attempting to enact culturally relevant pedagogies can cause students harm by recentering pain as the core narrative about people of color (Muhammad, 2020).

Simply exposing students to authors of color is insufficient to teach students true critical engagement. In their portraits of two culturally responsive English teachers, Winn and Johnson (2011) show how educators situate their teaching within issues of immediate concern to students. These teachers' assignments valued dialogue, discussion, and other oral communication as vital, and therefore legitimate, parts of the writing process. These teachers also facilitated contexts for students to regularly talk with one another and with community members outside school walls, and in doing so, signaled to students that they can construct knowledge, too, and that writing flows from an authentic desire to share and further develop that knowledge. After noticing how concerned their students were with police brutality, one teacher subsequently mapped their writing curriculum to students' engagement with the subject. Students developed as writers in the genre out of a real need to utilize their writing for social change.

On the contrary, curriculum designers can do harm with the uncritical inclusion of texts by authors of color, especially when the designers only include these token texts to teach discrete hegemonic writing skills or to meet hegemonic goals like securing high test scores (Muhammad, 2020, p. 139).

MR. DAVID'S NEGOTIATION OF LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES

It is admirable that Mr. David critiqued the lack of choice in his writing curriculum and sought to cultivate more authentic writing opportunities for his students beyond the theme chosen by the network. As Behizadeh (2014) recognizes, the lack of access to authentic writing for real purposes and audiences is a social justice issue. Yet while he critically analyzed certain aspects of his students' positions as writers within the context of their schooling, ultimately, he appeared concerned about what he believed to be his students' mastery of "proper" English. This contradictory set of ideas surfaced as Mr. David recounted a story about a student's essay:

> There's this student in my class who is very [on the] cusp – she could easily qualify for AP. Last night she sent me this essay that was atrocious. One of the worst essays I have ever seen. And it was really shocking. In a timed setting, their grammar is very bad. We very much need them to get some basic writing skills, like how to use subject-verb agreement. I can teach them how to make an argument about why nuclear energy should be banned. But a lot of them don't know how to...if they hand that paper into a college professor or someone...the job that they'll have...I think that's going to dramatically hurt a lot of these Black and Brown kids, because they're going to be perceived as...undereducated. And I think we're

devaluing them as people if we don't teach them these very basic structures of writing.

Mr. David's almost visceral reaction to his bright student's "atrocious" timed writing exercise revealed that he seemed unaware of the ways in which he policed his students' writing according to standard language ideologies (Lippi-Green, 1997). He characterized a student as "very [on the] cusp," as if her value was contingent on her assessment results, and he lamented that his students need to learn basic grammar.

One example Mr. David offered as evidence of deficiency was a reference to subject-verb agreement. Many (white) teachers are unaware of the habitual "be" as a valid grammatical form and a unique feature of AAL (Boutte, et al., 2021). In another conversation, Mr. David referred to adapting the curriculum he was given in order to encourage students to revise their writing, but what he described as revision appeared to be a focus on editing out of concern for the evaluative (white) gaze:

> I've had to eliminate a lot of the lessons to put in revision. Go back and look for specific grammar fixes, all that kind of stuff. They're not taught how to use grammar. They're not taught how to spell. There are a lot of kids at our school who are sixteen years old who sometimes can't spell the word 'the,' which was shocking. We have resorted to having spelling tests.

In his description of the technical revision process and subsequent spelling test regimen for high school students, Mr. David noted that he "slows down for revision" because he worried that his students would not have ample opportunities to correct their writing. He accepted basic tenets of the CMO, including the network's discourses of college readiness and the need for students to master specific skills and use "correct" English.

Mr. David's desire to return to spelling and grammar basics reflected Inoue's (2015) notion that a white racial habitus and reading of writing exists "beyond or outside of bodies, in discourse, in methods of judging, and in dispositions toward texts" (p. 47). A reliance on error correction is commonplace when teachers lack the linguistic knowledge to understand that what they often deem to be error is an equally valid use of language. Consistent with earlier research, some teachers remain unaware of the dissonance between their curriculum which demands adherence to a skills discourse, their own teaching practice, and their talk about their teaching of writing (McCarthey et al., 2014).

Mr. David's comments lead one to consider to what extent the CMO curriculum and expectations for its implementation unintentionally uphold standard

language ideologies. Mrs. Smith reiterated Mr. David's concerns about "basic writing skills." She noted that many network teachers struggle with what they perceive to be grammar errors in students' texts "[b]ecause they see it in the students' writing and they're not sure how to address it." When asked what she meant by "it," Mrs. Smith noted that she meant students' language errors.

In response to these concerns about "poor writing," the network shifted away from a writer's workshop approach, which included long stretches of independent writing time, and toward a more direct instruction model. Network curriculum designers were also experimenting with training from The Writing Revolution (Hochman, 2017) and piloting approaches to teaching grammar more prescriptively and uniformly across all network schools to more closely align with the demands of standardized testing.

Flores (2020) holds that proponents of so-called *academic language* often suggest that simply providing marginalized students basic access to and instruction in academic language will equip them with all the communication skills necessary to transcend their marginalization and succeed in college and the job market. However, proponents of *academic language* use a deficit perspective to conceptualize Black and Brown students, their languages, and their skills. As a result, curriculum designers and teachers both tend to revert to the corrective and evaluative stance as assessors (Sherry, 2017).

Rhetorical scuffles about academic language, therefore, thinly veil larger issues of inequity. The "Delpit question" (Metz, 2017) remains a sticking point for many English teachers who believe that instruction in *White Mainstream English* might provide their students with access to the "codes of power" (Delpit, 1988). Regarding the "skills versus process debate" in writing instruction, some teachers feel a responsibility to render explicit the codes and rules of the culture of power as a means of granting entry to those who would otherwise be excluded. Making visible the contingency and contestability of the culture of power itself, however, is extremely important to addressing and dismantling white supremacy in the English language arts classroom.

Similarly, Mr. David expressed commitments to altering his curriculum to allow students to have more choice as to their writing topics in his classroom, but he still appeared to feel pressure to enact a narrow definition of language use due to his sense of himself as a gatekeeper (McBee Orzulak, 2013) for *White Mainstream English*. A partial awareness resulted in his taking up some of the network discourses that position his students as struggling writers in need of remediation.

DISCUSSION

Though networks like Mr. David's may insist upon the centralized design of teaching materials by distant curriculum designers in pursuit of standardized testing goals, an overreliance on efficiency as a measure of good teaching and good writing, as well as an overreliance on college preparation and so-called academic language, have several unintended consequences.

For one, these foci reinscribe whiteness through the normalization of token texts by authors of color and an emphasis on maintaining *White Mainstream English.* Further, Mr. David's dissonance reveals that whiteness as property is of particular relevance in the nGSE milieu, as teachers and curriculum designers can be unaware of their own racialized readings of students' written work and the extent to which a sense of urgency around test preparation can exacerbate already harmful practices. His context reduced the dynamic concept of culturally relevant pedagogies to the instrumental and assimilationist goal of "moving" student learning and increasing student achievement as defined by increases in student scores on AP exams. The curriculum and the monitoring of its implementation directly incentivizes teachers to increase student achievement without developing students' sociopolitical consciousness around their language use, neglecting to consider, as Paris and Alim (2014) ask, "what are we seeking to sustain?" When the purpose is solely to operationalize a larger mission to close a so-called achievement gap, the true aims of asset-based pedagogies and antiracist teaching are lost in service of these larger goals.

As an early career teacher still earning his certification, Mr. David was professionally vulnerable and still chose to take risks in his approaches to teaching within this system. Despite the explicit focus of the first writing unit of the year on mass incarceration and racism, an interrogation of whiteness or white supremacy was not considered central to the curriculum or to teachers' critical self-reflective work.

Prominent CMOs have issued public statements to express institutional solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and to share their new orientation towards racial justice. KIPP announced the retirement of their slogan, "work hard, be nice," and Achievement First proclaimed a commitment to examining "all practices with an antiracist lens." We can and should question these efforts to distance for-profit corporations from negative public images of racialized pedagogy and disciplinary practices. Oppressive literacy practices that contribute to the control of student bodies and minds must also be dismantled.

Mr. David noted that teachers at Inspire High School had pushed for more emphasis on anti-bias training, and that, in the wake of highly publicized incidents concerning the network's discipline practices, network administration was responding with more training focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. This institutional introspection and DEI work at the time did not seem to extend to an

interrogation of curriculum or the intersections of teacher identities, racial literacies, and how teachers and students were positioned to inspect and repair student texts.

Considering these priorities and practices, nGSEs and their affiliated CMOs must commit to examining and uprooting not only their overt disciplinary practices, but their curricular choices and overarching assessment model as well. As Matias (2013) warns us, there is danger in the way these pedagogies get taken up, particularly by white educators, when claims on antiracism and culturally relevant pedagogies clash with a lack of examination of whiteness, among teachers and administrators as well as in classroom teaching itself.

Mr. David critiqued how his curriculum prevented him and his students from engaging in real, open discourse. Part of this critique was rooted in a concern that curriculum designers did not know students on a personal level despite the network's stated commitments to teach towards a culturally relevant education. Mr. David appeared less attuned, however, to how the curriculum structured his teaching to inspect student language according to language ideologies that maintained *White Mainstream English* as the prestige dialect and prioritized essay writing as test preparation.

It is not only CMOs that instruct teachers to correct student language or teach formulaic writing to achieve test results. In a national survey of teacher education programs, Ball and Muhammad (2003) found that preservice teachers rarely study language, and even a single course in linguistics does not equip teachers to consider language use as an integral part of literacy pedagogy. It is crucial to determine methods for educating teachers, curriculum designers, and administrators about linguistic subordination and disrupt entrenched language ideologies through critical language pedagogies across all educational contexts (Baker-Bell, 2020). This work is particularly urgent in schools that are often heralded as innovative saviors for communities of color, as many CMOs tend to be framed in the public eye.

Given the uniformity and coherence of CMO curricula, Mr. David's negotiations also suggest that other network schools might intend to offer a rigorous college preparatory education but instead perpetuate eradicationist language pedagogies (Baker-Bell, 2020) in and through their writing programs. To protect students from the erasure of their cultural and linguistic identities, Mr. David's network must interrogate curriculum steeped in linguicism and white saviorism while also working to address other deeply ingrained organizational practices.

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