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OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO PROVIDE A BRAVE, LGBTQ-AFFIRMING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: THE MAGIC CITY ACCEPTANCE ACADEMY

Incidents of bullying and harassment due to identity, identity expression, or otherness are well-documented in the literature. Students who identify as LGBTQ, LGBTQ-allied, or disenfranchised experience such intimidation in public schools in the United States at a much higher rate than do students who identify as heteronormative or neurotypical. In this qualitative case study, we describe the process of one group of highly committed individuals to develop, propose, and eventually establish one of the first LGBTQ-affirming charter schools in the United States. Data were collected through observations, document review, and individual interviews with key leaders and stakeholders to describe the process of opening the Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA) near Birmingham, Alabama. This study documents the successes and challenges of gaining approval for the charter school and opening the doors to this highly unique public-school setting in the fall of 2021. Now in its second year of operation, the MCAA is growing in enrollment, and students are clearly experiencing success, both socially and academically, in this student-centered, caring, and brave school setting.

Introduction

In August 2021, the Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA) opened as a charter school in Alabama to serve students in grades 6 through 12. Located near Birmingham, MCAA's (2023) mission is to "empower all learners to embrace education, achieve individual success, and take ownership of their future in a brave, LGBTQ-affirming learning environment" (para. 1). As such, it is one of the first charter schools of its kind to explicitly address the social, emotional, and academic needs of LGBTQ and other disenfranchised students.

The purpose of this case study is to explore and document the experiences of key stakeholder groups regarding the inception, development, application, approval, and eventual opening of MCAA as a charter school. We begin with a brief overview of charter schools in the United States and in Alabama. We continue with a discussion of the rationale for MCAA and steps related to the application and appeals processes. We conclude with a summary of actions taken to prepare MCAA for opening in fall 2021.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are tuition-free schools of choice that are publicly funded but independently run (Prothero, 2018). The concept of charter schools originated in the United States in the 1970s based on the idea that groups of teachers could set up contracts or charters with their local school boards to discover new approaches and ideas in the field of education (Public Charter Schools Insider, 2022). Charter schools are frequently centered around a theme such as college preparation, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), or service-learning and recruit students based specifically on this area of interest.

By 2019, 45 states and the District of Columbia had passed public charter school legislation permitting charter schools to be governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). Under the terms of the charter, school leaders have the autonomy to make choices about curriculum, personnel, and budgets without adhering to certain state regulations. In exchange for this high level of flexibility, charter schools are subject to greater accountability by an authorizer who can close a school that does not meet the terms of its contract (Prothero, 2018).

Charter Schools in Alabama

Charter schools in Alabama are a relatively new phenomenon (Zohn, 2019). After decades of opposition, Alabama's Legislature passed the School Choice and Student Opportunity Act, also known as the Charter School Bill or SB45, in March 2015 (School Choice and Opportunity Act [SB45], 2015). Proponents of SB45 argued that it would give students in Alabama another educational choice that would improve student learning (SB45) while opponents suggested that public charter schools would further segregate the existing public-school infrastructure and place greater strain on existing financial resources (Cason, 2019).

Senate Bill 45 was introduced in 1999 and revisited in 2003 and 2009. However, it was not given serious attention until 2012 when it was reintroduced by bill sponsor, Senator Pro Tempore, Del Marsh (SB45, 2015). According to SB45, charter schools may be either newly formed "start-ups" or "conversion" of an existing public school to a charter school (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020, para. 7).

As stipulated in Section 2a of SB45, all public charter schools in the state are public schools and, therefore, part of the public education system in the state. Alabama's charter school policy provides two options for authorization: a local school district with the approval of the Alabama Department of Education (ALSDE) or the Alabama Public Charter School Commission ("the Commission") (Alabama State Department of Educa-

tion [SB45], 2015). The Commission was established under Section 6c of SB45 (2015) to authorize and deny charter schools in Alabama.

The application process for local school districts to become a charter school authorizer in Alabama opened in fall 2015. To date, only six of 136 public school districts in Alabama have applied and been approved to become charter school authorizers by the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE, 2021); the Birmingham Board of Education is one of these six charter school authorizers.

Conceptual Framework

Our team used a multi-dimensional ethical educational leadership conceptual framework (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Starratt, 1994) to guide reflection and analysis of the data collected and reported in this article. In 1994, Starratt developed a multi-dimensional conceptual framework for educators in establishing an ethical school. Starratt's framework consists of three ethics of school leadership which Starratt encouraged school leaders to apply in their daily practice of decision-making and leadership in schools. Starratt explained that the multi-dimensional ethical framework comprises the ethic of justice, the ethic of critique, and the ethic of care. The application of the ethic of justice encourages ethical educational leaders to consider whether a law, policy, or individual right is involved in an ethically-charged situation. The ethic of critique encourages ethical leaders to consider who may have written that law or policy, who benefits from its application, and whose voice(s) may be silenced or left out. It is the ethic of care, however, that our current study leans on most heavily. The ethic of care, according to Starratt (1994), "requires fidelity to persons, a willingness to acknowledge their right to be who they are, an openness to encountering them in their authentic individuality, [and] a loyalty to the relationship" (p. 52).

Methodology

Our team conducted a multifaceted phenomenological case study of MCAA. We drew content for this case study from non-participant observations, document analysis, and key informant stakeholder interviews (N=7) with individuals who were integral to the design, implementation, and operations of MCAA. All interviews were recorded either in-person or via Zoom and transcribed by a third-party vendor. Participants discussed the processes of locating, securing, and preparing facilities for the school and challenges and successes leading up to the first year of operation. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in supplemental content.

The research team discussed observational data and documents and reviewed transcribed notes line-by-line to explore the topic from multiple perspectives. We used multiple methods of verification to trustwor-

thiness of the data, including: (a) peer debriefing, (b) member checking, and (c) thick, rich description (Yin, 2011). All participants provided informed consent prior to engaging in interviews. This study was approved by the University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board: IRB-300008486, by the Magic City Research Institute, and by MCAA administration.

Magic City Acceptance Academy

The MCAA charter school application was developed by Birmingham AIDS Outreach (BAO), a 501(c)3 nonprofit founded in 1985 to provide services to persons living with HIV. The application was heavily influenced by feedback from staff at the Magic City Acceptance Center (MCAC), an affirming LGBTQ youth center established by BAO in 2014 in response to the growing trend of HIV cases impacting youth under 25 years of age.

Rationale

As early as 2014, MCAC staff members reported a large percentage of youth failing in school, dropping out of school, or claiming to be home-schooled but not actively receiving educational support. Youth also reported excessive bullying and a lack of support from school administrators and teachers which students often attributed to queer or other marginalized identities. Dr. Karen Musgrove, CEO of BAO and MCAA stated, "We had students coming in [to the MCAC] who were beat up mentally, emotionally, [and] physically from school." Dr. Mike Wilson, inaugural principal and superintendent of MCAA added:

> The kids would literally come in the afternoon [to MCAC] and have to decompress for 30, 45 minutes. There were kids that hadn't been to the bathroom all day, kids that would carry around all their books because when it was locker time, that's one of the key places kids get bullied, pushed up against the locker, called names, and the stress within all of that…just adds to the anxiety.

BAO and MCAA Board Member, Dr. Tracee Synco, confirmed Wilson's account and added that some transgender students were further stigmatized by being directed to only use the bathroom in the teacher's lounge. Synco also noted that some students were not eating during the day:

> [t]hey were all coming in, and they're starving because they wouldn't eat when they were at school during the day. Because apparently lunchrooms in some schools, that's a good spot where they might have gotten bullied if they were identified as LGBTQ or they were allies, they were with friends who are LGBTQ. So, they might not eat all day.

According to Dr. Tommy Bice, MCAA Board Member and former Alabama Superintendent of Education, the origin of MCAA was based on the work of multiple groups that recognized traditional public schools were not meeting the needs of various students and families for a variety of reasons. Bice stated:

> It's [MCAA] not just for children who identify as LGBTQ, but for others that feel comfortable in that affirming environment. It [the need] was easily actualized because they had data to show how many kids weren't in school and were needing some sort of alternative educational opportunity.

Ms. Amanda Keller, Director of MCAC, said, "We knew this was a crisis. We knew that education should be a basic right for everyone. That includes just being able to be affirmed and supported and showing up wholly and authentically." Keller identified multiple challenges students faced in the schools including "blatant homophobia, blatant transphobia, any kind of lack of response to students being bigoted and biased and bullying." She intimated administrators and teachers were largely responsible for creating hostile environments for students by not intervening when they saw or heard biased language or harassment, "[w]hen an adult who's supposed to create a safe space doesn't do that, it causes so much harm."

Keller acknowledged that some public-school educators were "doing the work of holding space for youth," but suggested that there were typically few spaces for students to feel safe in the entire school. Arguably, Keller offered the most compelling rationale for the creation of the MCAA:

> [w]e have attended more funerals [due to suicide] than I would like to say for young people we've lost because they were not supported in any number of their social environments. That's caused a lot of despair for a lot of young people.

Student experiences recounted by MCAA stakeholders are not unique nor limited to Alabama. Incidents of bullying and harassment due to identity or identity expression are well-documented in the research literature (Earnshaw et al., 2017; Eisenberg et al., 2017) and further supported by national and state statistics collected by the 2019 Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey regarding bullying, harassment, and physical violence (Kosciw et al., 2020). Survey authors reported national statistics of issues reflective of those experienced by LGBTQ youth in Alabama such as (a) a lack of intervening by school faculty and staff on behalf of LGBTQ youth in the face of harassment and assault; (b) concerns about school safety in both public and gender-segregated spaces (e.g., locker rooms, bathrooms, cafeteria); and (c) challenges to psychological well-being (i.e., self-esteem, depression).

MCAA Charter School Application

In response to growing concerns about student safety and wellness, BAO leadership began exploring educational options for LGBTQ and other disenfranchised students in 2019. Leaders considered the possibilities of private school or online curriculum but determined these options were either cost prohibitive or failed to reach their target demographics. Therefore, BAO pursued the charter school option since legislation had recently been passed in Alabama. Musgrove stated, "the charter school became kind of the mechanism for what we wanted to do, which was to open up a free public school." The BAO Board of Directors approved a plan to apply for charter school status in March 2019.

BAO identified Birmingham as its preferred location for MCAA since BAO and its affiliated partners are co-located in the downtown area. BAO reasoned that this site would place MCAA students close to wrap around health and wellness services including MCAC; the Magic City Wellness Center (MCWC), which provides primary care and services for LGBTQ individuals and their allies; and the Magic City Legal Center, which specializes in pro-bono legal services for the LGBTQ+ community (MCAA, 2023). As previously noted, charter school applicants must have an authorizer to oversee its charter. Since the Birmingham Board of Education is the authorizer for charter schools in Birmingham, BAO submitted its application to the local school district in November 2019.

Birmingham Board of Education

During a specially-called meeting in January 2020, Birmingham's review committee recommended board members deny MCAA's application due to a lack of detail regarding its educational program design, operations plan, and financial plan. The board accepted the review committee's request for denial with a 5-3 vote (Dunigan, 2020). Wilson noted that he and his collaborators had spent nearly a year addressing the Commission's extensive application prior to submitting it to the Birmingham Board of Education. Moreover, MCAA had met all the necessary requirements to qualify as a start-up charter school including 501(c)3 status, acquisition of a facility, and committed financial resources, including a $1.5 million start up grant from New Schools for Alabama.

MCAA stakeholders suggested the denial of their application was based on anti-LGBTQ sentiment as well as a scarcity mindset by members of the Birmingham Board of Education. To date, the Birmingham Board of Education has yet to approve a charter school application. MCAA building architect, Mr. Scott Burnett, said, "I watched the Birmingham City School Board meeting in disgust…it almost seemed like they [Birmingham Board of Education] became an authorizer so they could shut down charter schools." Mr. Chris Fisher, past BAO Board Chair and current

MCAA Board Member, added:

> We had funding, we had location, we had ticked all the boxes on the application. [We] walked in with a plan in place, with an award-winning principal in tow and were rejected. Not because of the value or validity of our application but because of the mission of what we wanted to do.

Appeal and Reapplication

In May 2020, MCAA appealed the decision by the Birmingham Board of Education to deny its application to the Alabama Public Charter School Commission. Since the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic had just reached Alabama in March 2020, the appeal was heard by the Commission via Zoom. The Commission rejected MCAA's appeal with a final vote of 2 "Yes", 6 "No", 1 "Abstention", and 2 "Absent". According to Musgrove, the Commission counted abstention and absentee votes as "No" votes, although Commission rules were ambiguous regarding this specific rule. Musgrove expressed a sense of utter shock and dismay by this decision:

> I was like, 'Oh my God, they just denied us.' And so my whole dream of going into the city of Birmingham, at that moment, crashed. There was no way we could build the school in Birmingham. They shut that down.

Rather than repeat the process with a new application to Birmingham, MCAA leaders accepted the advice of others to abandon their preferred location and find a site that did not have a local school board authorizer. In September 2020, after months of review and revision, MCAA submitted a new charter school application directly to the Commission for a site located in Homewood, Alabama.

MCAA selected the city of Homewood due to its proximity to Birmingham as well as the fact that Homewood City Schools had not elected to be a charter school authorizer. Wilson noted that MCAA completely revamped the application by placing greater emphasis on their intentions to implement trauma-informed curriculum and restorative justice disciplinary principles.

The Commission reviewed MCAA's new application in September 2020 along with applications from three other proposed charter schools. All applications were reviewed by an outside evaluator, and MCAA received a score above 90% based on the Commission's rubric. Because of this score as well as committed financial resources, Wilson said he felt sure the application would be approved. Moreover, one of the other three applicants scored 40 points lower than MCAA without adequate funding yet was approved by the Commission. Once again, however, MCAA was denied based on "No" votes and "Abstentions" which were also counted as

"No" votes.

Several Commissioners argued that MCAA was attempting to establish an identity school for LGBTQ youth, or a gay school, despite statements in MCAA's application describing the school as learning community for all students. Wilson reiterated, "We're a school that is for any student that feels marginalized in their current educational setting for whatever reason, and may or may not have been bullied, experienced significant trauma. They're just not comfortable." According to Fisher, the outgoing Commission Chair criticized the Commission's decision saying, "Y'all have not done what is right." Fisher continued, "He [outgoing Commission Chair] proceeded to basically call out the people on the Commission who were using their religious beliefs and their bigotry and ignorance to prevent us from being able to move forward."

After the Commission denial, BAO attorneys reviewed transcripts of the Commission's first appeal as well as the reapplication hearing and submitted a four-page letter to the Commission alleging discrimination on the part of the Commissioner. The letter requested a review of the appeal denial, and the Commission voted to hear statements. On November 4, 2020, after statements were heard, the Commission went into executive session and agreed to take a revote of the appeal. The Commission approved MCAA's appeal with a final vote of 7 "Yes", 1 "No", and 1 "Abstention." By early December 2020, BAO signed a charter school contract with the Commission to launch MCAA in fall 2021.

Actions Taken to Open MCAA

According to Wilson, once the charter school application was finally approved, MCAA leadership essentially spent nine months building a new school from the ground up. In response to school experts who suggested MCAA should take two years to open, Musgrove stated:

> "No way." And now I completely understand why it takes them two plus years to do it. But I think that's the great thing about this organization [BAO]…We do things fast, and we make smart decisions. We don't have a lot of red tape to go through. And so I knew we could do it. It was just really, really difficult. And I did not want to take two years. I just thought that was ridiculous.

In researching potential sites, the team identified and acquired an office building in Homewood that had been vacant for more than 20 years. MCAA leaders secured all building permits by February 2021, and the developer gutted the entire building. Musgrove stated, "I think they [developer] basically had three shifts that were working on that building and never stopped." In addition to the tight timeframe, she noted that building supplies (i.e., steel, wood) were in short supply due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Logistics

Concurrent with building renovations, the MCAA team began hiring administrative personnel including the Chief Operating Officer, Director of Operations, and Registrar. As a charter school, MCAA serves as its own school district; therefore, administrators are responsible for all logistics of a central office including accounts payable, payroll, student recruitment, professional development, and compliance. Musgrove stated, "Logistics. Logistics was a nightmare…it was just this mess…And so everything was just made harder because of COVID."

Musgrove further noted that the individuals they brought on before the beginning of the school year were hired as BAO employees because the funds committed to MCAA were not yet available. She stated:

> [t]his is the first charter school that we can find that has ever started from another nonprofit…I don't know how they [other charter schools] do it. Because without the infrastructure of BAO, that's what allowed us to move so quickly and to make big decisions... the infrastructure of BAO is still sitting right next to the school and supporting it as it moves along.

By design, MCAA is a 501(c)3 separate from BAO, but the organizations are interconnected. Musgrove is the CEO of BAO as well as MCAA, and the Board President of BAO serves on the MCAA Board of Directors. Additionally, BAO maintains a significant financial commitment to the school to support operations and leases the building from the developer. Musgrove stated, "the school is the most expensive endeavor that I have ever been a part of."

Student Recruitment

According to Musgrove, MCAA spent approximately $15,000 between November 2020 and August 2021 to recruit students, "We did print ads, yard signs, lots of public 'Who are we? What is our mission? What are we trying to do?'" Others noted that MCAA also did public service announcements, billboards, word-of-mouth, presentations to counseling associations, and networking events. Bice suggested that one of the challenges of marketing MCAA was reaching students and families for whom school was not a positive experience. Moreover, MCAA was promoting a charter-based theme of inclusion and acceptance, which is a far more complex concept than STEM education, for example.

Epilogue

For academic year 2021-2022, MCAA had between 204 students at the beginning of the school and 240 students by January 2022. The target goal for enrollment in year one was 250 students. Additionally, MCAA

graduated 13 seniors. Other successes included a schoolwide musical in the spring as well as prom, which Wilson described as a "beautiful, beautiful night…and it was so peaceful and kids just got to be themselves, whether they were straight, LGBTQ, or anything else."

Despite these achievements, there was one seminal event that tested the resolve of MCAA stakeholders. In spring 2022, MCAA was the target of negative political ads in which an Alabama candidate for governor, Tim James, called MCAA the "first transgender public school in the South chartered in Alabama with millions of your tax dollars." The candidate further stated, "My heart is for the protection of our children, and this needs to be shut down. This isn't education. It is exploitation, and it needs to stop" (Cann, 2022). Furthermore, television ads featured unauthorized images and faces of staff and students. After the advertisement was released, MCAA immediately increased security to protect students and collaborated with MCWC to provide counseling services to those who needed it.

In a public statement, Wilson expressed his belief that ads like this "fuel hatred in the community and could, in some cases, inspire violence" (Hedgepeth, 2022). According to Synco, school administrators were concerned about MCAA students who had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from past traumas. However, support for MCAA and against the hatred and bigotry was widespread:

> School administrators started getting emails from Hong Kong and Australia, and New Zealand and all these words of support. So, they [school administrators] started just printing them out on pastel paper and sticking them [messages of support] on the wall so that students would see it.

Ironically, media attention to the controversy in Alabama raised the school's profile and generated unsolicited financial contributions, "Since the Tim James attacks, we've raised $15,000 on our GoFundMe account. And we've also received checks from all over the country." Wilson observed that one of the results of the negative attack ads was to bring the community closer together, "By the end of the year, after going through all this [political ads controversy], we felt much more like a tight-knit community of students, teachers, and families that were on the same mission, who were determined to stay the course."

For the 2022-2023 academic year, MCAA set an admission goal of 350 students; they admitted 381. According to Wilson, the total capacity of the building is between 400 and 450 students. At the time of this writing, BAO and MCAA were in negotiations to acquire and renovate an adjacent building to accommodate a growing student population. When asked about MCAA's greatest success, Bice described the students who attend MCAA, "They're smiling, they're happy, they're learning. They've developed peer groups. It [MCAA] has fulfilled its mission. It's a very affirmative environment because they're happy in they're learning."

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CONSIDER ALL THE EVIDENCE ON PRE-K PROGRAMS FOR LOW-INCOME CHILDREN: WHY RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL RESULTS MUST NOT DICTATE PUBLIC POLICY

The recently published randomized controlled trial (RCT) study of the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program by Durkin et al. (2022) has sparked wide interest among educators, researchers, and policymakers. The study finds that sixth graders who participated in VPK in school years 2009–10 and 2010–11 performed more poorly on their academic and behavioral outcomes than children who did not participate. This finding has been used to argue against public investment in pre-K programming. We join other education researchers and advocates in urging caution in interpreting the results and particularly in generalizing them to apply to today's pre-K programs in Tennessee or to programs in other states or cities. Our concerns are related to the challenges of implementing RCTs and using RCTs in studying early childhood education programming. Using the Tennessee VPK study as an example, we illustrate how those challenges can hinder the generalization of the findings. We also do not agree that the Tennessee VPK findings should—at least, not in isolation—lead to an assumption that public pre-K cannot improve outcomes for disadvantaged children. Evidence from other kinds of studies beyond RCTs should also inform decisions about public investment in pre-K education. Equally important is the need to "open the black box" to find out what is actually happening in pre-K classrooms—the approaches and interventions that are most effective, as well as what can happen after pre-K that helps sustain early benefits.

Keywords: randomized controlled trial (RCT), public pre-K, early childhood policy

Introduction

What is at stake in the ongoing debate over publicly funded pre-K programs is whether such an investment truly helps bridge the opportunity gap between more and less affluent children and families. The latest evidence in that ongoing debate is the most recent findings of the randomized controlled trial (RCT) of the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program (Durkin et al., 2022). The study found that sixth graders who participated in VPK in school years 2009–10 and 2010–11 performed

more poorly on standardized tests and had more disciplinary problems than children who did not participate (Durkin et al., 2022). Some commentators (e.g., Goodkind, 2022; Levitz, 2022) have used such findings to argue against public investment in pre-K programming. In response, some education researchers and advocates have argued for caution in interpreting the results and particularly in generalizing them to apply to today's pre-K programs in Tennessee or to programs in other states or cities (Barnett, 2022; Weiland et al., 2022).

We join other education researchers in urging caution in the use of the Tennessee and other pre-K RCT results for pre-K policy decisions. Calls to defund public pre-K, in particular, are based on a misunderstanding of the import of RCT findings; cutting access to a vital service for disadvantaged families is likely to reinforce the structural racism and socioeconomic oppression that put them at risk in the first place.

The authors of the Tennessee study, who are highly respected researchers in the field, have implemented a solid research design whose findings command respect. However, we cannot agree that their findings can or should be generalized to apply to other publicly funded pre-K programs, past or present. We also cannot agree that these findings should—at least, not in isolation—lead to an assumption that public pre-K puts disadvantaged children further at risk in the long run. Our reasons have to do with the limitations of RCT designs in education research and specifically in pre-K interventions; this article systematically outlines some of those issues. Furthermore, the few RCTs in the field constitute a tiny portion of a vast literature on the short-, medium-, and long-term effects of pre-K programming. Evidence from other kinds of studies beyond RCTs should also inform decisions about public investment in pre-K education. Equally important is the need to "open the black box" to find out what pre-K approaches and interventions are most effective. In addition, researchers and policymakers should attend to the well-established link between the sustainability of pre-K's early benefits and the quality of children's subsequent education.

The Challenges of Using RCTs in Early Education

RCTs are generally accepted as a scientific method to evaluate cause-and-effect relationships; some consider RCTs to be the "gold standard" for deriving causal inferences (Grimes, 1991; Shadish et al., 2002; Sullivan, 2011). The most appealing feature of RCTs is that, when properly implemented, they create treatment and control groups that are statistically balanced on known and unknown confounding factors. With this balance in place, researchers can attribute observed differences between the treatment and control groups to the treatment rather than to any preexisting differences between the groups (Shadish et al., 2002). This feature also eliminates selection bias in treatment assignment and yields unbiased

estimates of causal effects that align with statistical sampling theories and methods.

The RCT method was instituted in the agricultural sciences in the 1920s and in medicine in the 1940s (Armitage, 2003). The success of RCTs rests on the ability to create laboratory conditions in which confounding factors can be controlled (Morrison, 2001). In the social sciences in general, and educational programs in particular, such control is neither ethical nor feasible (Morrison, 2001; Sullivan, 2011). The challenges of using RCTs to study early childhood programming are illustrated by the fact that only two other published manuscripts to date, in addition to the Tennessee VPK study, have demonstrated the use of RCT designs for large-scale impact studies of public preschool programs: the Head Start impact study (Puma et al., 2012) and the more recent study of Boston's pre-K program (Weiland et al., 2020). We have grouped the challenges of implementing RCTs and using RCT results in studying early childhood education programming into four categories:

- The inability to blind participants
- Treatment contamination
    - Assignment noncompliance
    - Spillover effects
- The lack of representativeness of the sample
- The inability to control for post-randomization influences

The Inability to Blind Participants

In early childhood education studies—unlike, for example, RCTs in medicine or agriculture—participants and families know whether or not they have been selected to receive the treatment. Lack of blinding in RCT can bias the results and weaken the validity of the inferences derived from the study, as medical (e.g., Karanicolas et al., 2010; Schulz et al., 1995) and medical education (Sullivan, 2011) researchers have pointed out. Grimes (1991) cautions that both random assignment and subsequent treatment (or lack of treatment) must be blinded, or the RCT can produce misleading results. Schulz et al. (1995), speaking of medical trials, go so far as to say that "without proper application of measures to achieve concealment, the whole point of randomization vanishes and bias is likely to distort results" (p. 412).

Yet blinding is virtually impossible in studies of educational interventions (Thomas, 2016). In pre-K RCTs, families know whether they have been assigned to the program, and it is unethical to prevent families in the control group from seeking alternative options for their children. Participants who know their treatment assignment status can modify their

behavior in ways that influence subsequent outcome measures; for example, control group members may compensate for not receiving the treatment by working harder or getting external support, while treatment group members may relax their efforts simply because they have extra support that presumably benefits them (Conrad & Conrad, 2005). In the Boston RCT, the authors found that 97% of control group participants ended up attending some center-based preschool program. They noted that this level of center-based pre-K attendance is an "unusual counterfactual in the public pre-K evaluation literature" (Weiland et al., 2020, p. 1402). This finding might be a real example of compensation for comparison group assignment. The magnitude and impacts of such efforts may be hard to examine or quantify. Still, the possibility of this compensation limits the ability of the RCT to reveal the true effects of the treatment.

Treatment Contamination

In pre-K RCTs, two types of treatment contamination are common: assignment noncompliance and spillover.

Assignment Noncompliance

The change of roles between treatment and control group participants violates the assumption of assignment compliance, which is vital to the validity of RTC designs. In the Tennessee study (Durkin et al., 2022) and the other two large-scale early childhood RCT studies (Puma et al., 2012; Weiland et al., 2020), control group members changed their assignment status by attending the program when seats became available after random assignment. Meanwhile, some children assigned to the treatment group did not attend the program. Such role-switching, based on families' practical choices, is typical in educational program settings; however, assignment noncompliance can bias the results of an RCT (Keogh-Brown et al., 2007).

In some studies, researchers provide compensation to control group families in the form of guaranteed enrollment either in the same program in the next round or in other programs. For example, in the Head Start study, three-year-olds assigned to the control group were eligible to enroll in Head Start the next year as four-year-olds (Puma et al., 2012). Although such an approach is considered ethical, the effect of later enrollment or of enrollment in an alternative program dilutes the effect of the program being studied, making longitudinal comparisons of the effects on treatment and control groups difficult if not impossible.

To compensate for this common limitation of RCTs in social science, researchers often implement complier average causal effect (CACE) analyses (Keogh-Brown et al., 2007) to minimize the bias introduced by noncompliance. The Tennessee (Durkin et al., 2022) and Boston (Weiland

et al., 2020) studies used this statistical method to compensate for crossover between treatment and control groups. However, the CACE method is effective in addressing contamination only if the contamination has been correctly documented (Keogh-Brown et al., 2007). The contamination produced by spillover, in which control group children benefit from interacting with treatment children, is difficult to measure and therefore cannot be addressed by CACE estimation.

Spillover Effect

As treatment and control children and families interact with each other over the many years between pre-K and third or sixth grade, control children may benefit from the treatment without directly receiving it. Early childhood educators and researchers are well aware of— and often welcome—such spillover effects. Some studies have shown that children who do not attend public pre-K programs but later attend schools or live in neighborhoods with high pre-K participation have better academic outcomes than children in schools or neighborhoods with lower rates of pre-K participation (Neidell & Waldfogel, 2010; Williams, 2019). Spillover is therefore a desirable effect for families and communities.

However, for RCTs of effective interventions, spillover reduces the gap between the treatment and control groups, leading to an underestimation of the treatment effect (Keogh-Brown et al., 2007; Williams, 2019). The larger and more pervasive a program is in a given community, the more likely it is that control and treatment families will interact, thereby producing spillover effects (List et al., 2019). Also, spillover that occurs over a prolonged period through school and neighborhood interactions is difficult if not impossible to track. One way to partially compensate for spillover and strengthen RCT estimates of the long-term effects of pre-K participation would be to control for the pre-K population of the child's cohort in school or community settings. However, this step was not taken in the Tennessee study or in any current preschool RCT literature.

The Lack of Representativeness of the Sample

The extent to which RCT findings can be applied to large populations depends on the representativeness of the sample and appropriate randomization of equally representative participants. Our concerns about the representativeness of the Tennessee VPK sample center around ways in which the oversubscribed sites on which the RCT design depends differed from other sites in Tennessee. In their report of results through grade 3 (Lipsey et al., 2018), the researchers identified differences between the oversubscribed sites and other program sites, including geographic concentration of oversubscribed sites in one region and over-concentration of partner sites as opposed to those run by school districts.

Furthermore, like many other state-funded pre-K programs (Friedman-Krauss, 2021), Tennessee VPK is designed primarily for low-income children but also admits children with other risk factors. In 2009–2011, when the study pre-K cohorts were defined, the other criteria included disability and English language learner status (Lipsey et al., 2013). If the Tennessee Department of Education followed then the procedure in place today (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020), low-income children were prioritized in admission, and then children with other risk factors were admitted if slots were still available. The implications of this eligibility and admission structure affect the representativeness of the sample. If applicants at an oversubscribed site consisted entirely of children who were eligible on the basis on income, then the treatment and control children were appropriately randomized but the site was not representative of all sites, because sites that were not oversubscribed were more likely to have room for children with secondary eligibility factors. If applicants at oversubscribed sites included children who were eligible on the basis of secondary factors, then randomly assigning all children, regardless of eligibility criteria, to be admitted or to be waitlisted would have utilized a different implementation policy because other programs prioritized income eligibility over other factors. In either case, the student populations in these oversubscribed sites can be expected to be different from those of sites that did not waitlist students.

The Tennessee researchers applied weighting factors to control for the observed characteristics of the sampled children (Lipsey et al., 2018). None of the study reports describe any attempt to control for differences among sites (Lipsey et al., 2013; Lipsey et al., 2018; Durkin et al, 2022). The random assignment of children to treatment or control conditions, irrespective of risk factors, is not common practice in state-funded pre-K programs. More generalizable findings might result from an RCT that reserves a percentage of slots for each stratum of children based on eligibility factors and randomizes within each stratum. Results could then be generated for the entire sample and for each subgroup.

The Inability to Control for Post-Randomization Influences

Good RCT studies present strong evidence when selection into control and treatment groups is completely random and the two groups are identical, so that the treatment is the only factor that can cause the effects. For the Tennessee and similar pre-K RCTs, control for subsequent influences on pre-K treatment and control group children and changes in their circumstances would inspire more confidence in the results. However, access to such follow-up data would require a level of data collection that may not be feasible in large-scale pre-K studies like the Tennessee RCT.

For example, an important data point to be included in the model is later school quality and teacher effectiveness. In a 2020 study based on the Tennessee RCT data, researchers connected the Tennessee VPK data with school performance data (Pearman et al., 2020). They found that VPK participants were most likely to maintain their academic advantage over nonparticipants when they experienced *both* high-quality schools *and* highly effective teachers after pre-K. They found no significant difference between treatment and control groups in the quality of their kindergarten teachers or schools (Pearman et al., 2020). Citing this equivalence, the Tennessee VPK researchers did not control for school quality or teacher effectiveness (Durkin et al., 2022). The problem is their assumption that school quality and teacher effectiveness remained unchanged from kindergarten, when Pearman et al. (2020) correlated VPK participation with school data, throughout elementary school and into grade 6 (Durkin et al., 2022). This assumption is problematic not only because children typically change teachers every year and often change school buildings between kindergarten and grade 6, but particularly because the previous study found that the ability of the VPK children to sustain their pre-K gains depended on *both* high-quality schools *and* highly effective teachers after pre-K (Pearman et al., 2020 p. 547). Failure to take into consideration a fundamental factor known to affect child outcomes poses a threat to external validity that should be acknowledged as a limitation.

Considering All the Evidence

These concerns about RCT studies of pre-K interventions generally and the Tennessee study, in particular, suggest that policy and program decisions, when they affect children placed at risk, should not rely solely on RCT evidence. Decision-makers should also consider qualitative evidence from families and educators as well as quantitative evidence from quasi-experimental studies, including, for example, propensity score matching, difference in differences, and regression discontinuity designs. Many voices in education research have pointed out that the findings of RCTs have limited generalizability to settings beyond the ones studied. Meanwhile, ample evidence is available from other kinds of studies to add to the field's knowledge base. One problem is that nonacademic audiences—including policymakers—still tend to believe that the results of RCTs are "the truth" (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018). Our concern is that misusing RCT results to the point of cutting funding for public pre-K can have enormous consequences for disadvantaged children and families, reinforcing structural inequities by blocking access to a kind of intervention proven to promote economic and educational advancement (Bustamante et al., 2022). Ultimately, in order to inform policy and practice, the field needs a much better understanding not only of whether public pre-K programs are effective but particularly of what interventions most improve the out-

comes of children from low-income backgrounds, how those interventions work, and under what circumstances they are effective.

The Limited Generalizability of RCTs

RCTs are generally accepted as the ideal means of establishing causal relationships. However, the careful conditioning necessary to design an RCT with strong internal validity often limits the external validity of its findings (Frieden, 2017)—that is, the extent to which the results can be applied in any situation beyond the one being studied. As Deaton and Cartwright (2018) put it, "Establishing causality does nothing in and of itself to guarantee that the causal relation will hold in some new case, let alone in general" (p. 12). They go on to say that even a perfectly designed RCT, one that is completely free of bias or confounding variables, would produce estimates of average treatment effects that apply only to the RCT sample, not to any other sample—even of participants in the same program at a different time or in a different setting (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018). This limitation alone should give pause to those who would use the Tennessee findings to argue that public pre-K in general does not work to improve outcomes for low-income children and therefore is not worthy of public investment.

The findings of the Tennessee study, to the extent that they achieve validity in light of the questions raised above, apply to the VPK cohorts of 2009–2010 and 2010–2011. Advocates have argued that program improvements and quality assurance systems implemented in TN-VPK since a quality improvement act in 2016 make today's program substantially different (Barnett, 2022; Tennesseans for Quality Early Education, 2022). Furthermore, the population of eligible families in Tennessee may have changed since 2009–2011. Nationwide, low-income families, on average, are better educated and have more access to early childhood programming than a decade ago (Bustamante et al., 2022; Phillips et al., 2017). For these and other reasons, a new study of the Tennessee VPK might well yield different results.

Finally, applying findings from one state's program as it was implemented more than a decade ago to all publicly funded pre-K programs today ignores the differences among those programs. As the latest State of Preschool report from the National Institute on Early Education Research shows, some programs target low-income families, while a few are universal. The mechanisms for enrolling eligible children differ. The report also outlines substantial differences in state policies governing teacher qualifications, classroom size, program content, quality assurance mechanisms, and a host of other factors known to influence educational quality (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). Generalizing from one state's program to all states' programs goes well beyond the level of evidence RCTs on education interventions can provide.

The Need to Use Other Forms of Evidence

Meanwhile, although RCTs are valuable, they are not the only or even the most trustworthy source of information to guide policy decisions. As Thomas (2016) puts it, RCTs are one "part of the epistemological ecosystem of education inquiry" (p. 393). Designed to expose cause-effect relationships, they may not be capable of doing so in the complex contexts in which education takes place (Morrison, 2001; Norman, 2003; Thomas, 2016)—where caregivers, family members, teachers, program sites, schools, neighborhoods, media, and myriad other factors influence what happens to children.

In light of these considerations and the many challenges of implementing sound RCT designs in educational settings, researchers and policy makers should also consider the large body of evidence from careful quasi-experimental studies. As many researchers have pointed out (e.g., Sullivan, 2011), different research methods have different strengths and weaknesses. Compared to relying on a few RCTs, aggregating the findings of many diverse studies provides a more holistic picture of the landscape of public pre-K and the effectiveness of pre-K programs.

Meta-analyses of rigorous quasi-experimental studies have found, like the Tennessee RCT, that preschool helps make children ready for kindergarten (Burger, 2010; Camilli et al., 2010; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Yoshikawa et al. 2016). Effects on readiness skills have often been found to be more pronounced for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and for English language learners (e.g., Burger, 2010; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Phillips et al., 2017).

Less clear is how pre-K participation affects medium- and long-term outcomes. Some researchers have found that pre-K participation improves elementary school outcomes, particularly in cognitive domains (see, e.g., a meta-analysis by van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018). Many others have found, like the Tennessee and Head Start RCTs, that the positive effects of preschool fade out by grade 3 (Camilli et al., 2010; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Yoshikawa et al., 2016). The Tennessee RCT is, as the authors admit, the first to find negative effects in grade 6 (Durkin et al., 2022). Some longer-term quasi-experimental studies have found positive effects on academic and social outcomes in adolescence and adulthood (Burger, 2010; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; McCoy et al., 2017; Vandell et al., 2010). The findings of many high-quality quasi-experimental studies on public pre-K should be given equal weight in policy decisions with the findings of the three RCTs.

The Need to Discover What Works and What Doesn't

Ultimately, both policymakers and program leaders need data that generally are not yet available: findings on the mechanisms by which pre-

K participation can affect later academic and social outcomes (Camilli et al., 2010; Heckman et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2017). Research has established that quality matters: not only the quality of the preschool (e.g., Bustamante et al., 2022; Sylva et al., 2011; Vandell et al., 2010; Yoshikawa et al., 2016) but also the quality of later education (e.g., Bailey et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2016)—as Pearman et al. (2020) found using data from the Tennessee study. We agree with Durkin et al. (2022) that more attention needs to be paid not only to *whether* pre-K programs work but *how* they work. Context matters; within a given program, implementation can vary widely, and individuals—site leaders, teachers and aides, children, caregivers—act independently (Morrison, 2001). As some of the best minds in pre-K evaluation have noted, the field needs to open the "black box" to discover what is happening at individual sites and in individual classrooms (Phillips et al., 2017, p. 2). In addition to findings from RCT and quasi-experimental quantitative studies, the field should add rich, context-sensitive data from qualitative studies of pre-K programming to learn about what works and what does not (Thomas, 2016).

Also necessary is careful attention to the interactions between pre-K education and the complex array of experiences that affect students' outcomes after they leave pre-K. In the long interval between pre-K and grade 6 or, better yet, between pre-K and young adulthood, what is the nature of children's educational experiences? How do their social environments affect their development? To concentrate solely on whether or not children participate in public pre-K is to explore only one mechanism among many that add up to a diverse set of effects. The kind of direct cause-effect relationship RCTs were designed to produce in medicine and agriculture is far simpler than what actually happens among children and families in their multiple contexts. The more and more varied kinds of data the field can amass, the better our policy decisions will be. In the meantime, policymakers should carefully consider all the currently available evidence in order to decide on funding for programs that benefit children from low-income backgrounds.

Conclusion

In summary, we agree that the Tennessee study, like other RCT studies, provides important information to the pre-K literature. However, in light of the points discussed here, we stress the need to acknowledge the common limitations of RCT designs for generalizability and use for policy purposes. In most cases, the implementation of RCTs requires strict restrictions and conditions that qualify their external validity. Coupled with the state-to-state and back-then-and-now differences in pre-K programs, we recommend caution in the interpretation of this study's results beyond the Tennessee pre-K program that was in existence when the study was done. In addition, the study's findings on the positive effect at

kindergarten and the negative effect afterward suggest the need to evaluate other factors, such as subsequent school quality and teacher effectiveness, that might have interacted with children's pre-K experience to support, decrease or negate pre-K gains in later years. Considering these additional pieces of evidence would greatly enhance our understanding of pre-K impacts and lead to more robust and effective policy decision-making.

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UTILIZING QUANTITATIVE INSTRUMENTS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP

There are a limited number of quantitative tools intended to interrogate social justice leadership. The ones that do exist tend to focus on the attitudes, awareness, or perceptions of school leaders related to theorized facets of social justice. However, awareness of social (in)justice does not automatically equate with realized behavior on the behalf of school leaders (Brown & Shaked, 2018). The development of quantitative tools that investigate the behaviors that school leaders engage in to create socially just outcomes and the contextual factors that they encounter in such pursuits would aid practitioners and scholars alike. Such tools would aid in improving the collective understanding of social justice leadership and its enactment within diverse contexts (Tackett, 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). This paper explores two instruments, the Social Justice Behavior Scale (SJBS) and the Social Justice – Barriers and Supports Instrument (SJ-BAS), that can support future investigations of leadership for social justice. The SJBS measures the behaviors that principals engage in to lead for social justice (Flood, 2019). The scale has three components that disentangle these behaviors. The three components of the SJBS indicate where the behavior is intended to most directly effect. The three components are: School-Specific, Community-Minded, and Self-Focused. The SJ-BAS measures the contextual elements that principals encounter within the complex environments where they find themselves as actors (Angelle & Flood, 2021). The SJ-BAS measures both macro and meso level constructs that support principals in their work as socially just school leaders as well as those constructs that act as barriers to social justice in schools. The SJ-BAS is composed of two scales, the Barriers Scale and the Supports Scale.

Introduction

The ability to lead for social justice is an essential skill for school leaders. As schools have become increasingly diverse over the past few decades, it has been imperative for school leaders to demonstrate a commitment to equity and inclusion through socially just practices. However, how to develop a school-wide, student-centric culture of equity has not often been given significance in the literature.

Socially just principals understand that students trust more in what they see in adults, rather than what they hear from adults. Their values are linked to their daily behavior including their (un)conscious awareness and biases. Values define situations, prompt goals, and influence action (Verplanken & Holland, 2002). According to Schwartz (1999; 2005; 2006),

when we encounter situations, we look at them in light of the values we hold. We decide what action is most desirable to take, based on the priority we assign to the values pertinent to the situation at hand. The higher priority we give to the value, the more likely we will act and behave to express those values. When values are activated by a situation, alternative actions and consequences of these actions are internally judged by whether they support or obstruct valued goals.

Bardi and Swartz (2003) inform us that the ways in which we behave express our values to others, even though, subconsciously, we may not be aware of the link between values and behaviors. Values are stable and motivational and rarely change throughout our lifetime. Behaviors more strongly correspond to values that are personally important to the individual (Bardi & Swartz, 2003; Pappas & Pappas, 2015). Values serve as motivation for behavior; however, the values that motivate said behavior differ from person to person (Arieli, Sagiv, & Roccas, 2020). Thus, behavior is a way to express the values that are important to them through their actions. As posited by Arieli, Sagiv, and Roccas (2020):

> People in leadership roles seek to act on their values. Their position in the organisation, however, allows them to infuse their values into the organisation, influencing the organisation and their employees. Several studies have demonstrated how managers'values penetrate other organisational levels, influencing strategic decisions, organisational culture, and subordinate behaviour. (p. 253)

Thus, tools that investigate the behaviors in which school leaders engage to promote socially just outcomes and the contextual factors that they encounter in those pursuits would aid practitioners and scholars alike in improving their understanding of social justice leadership and its enactment within diverse contexts (Tackett, 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). There are a limited number of quantitative tools intended to interrogate social justice leadership. The ones that do exist tend to focus on the attitudes, awareness, or perceptions of school leaders related to theorized facets of social justice. However, awareness of social (in)justice does not automatically equate with realized behavior on the behalf of school leaders (Brown & Shaked, 2018).

Practitioners and researchers should have access to an instrument that accurately measures leadership behaviors that support social justice goals and, therefore, improve schools to meet those goals. Furthermore, the ability to understand how school leaders perceive the extent to which current context supports or inhibits leadership for social justice is equally important (Tackett, 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). Context and behavior cannot be examined separately but should be understood in tandem as context inevitably influences the agency of the school leader (Arar, 2019; Oldham et al., 2020). Context can also play a role in decisions that are made as principals may be influenced by colleagues, parents, students, and the "specific educational circumstances in which they find themselves" (Dempster, et al., 2004,

p. 165). DeMatthews and colleagues (2015) echoed the need for deeper understandings of principal actions framed within their own unique context. They noted that the "relevance and applicability of social justice leadership will remain limited without a more robust understanding of context and contradictions" (p. 29).

In that same spirit, this paper will explore two instruments, the Social Justice Behavior Scale (SJBS) and the Social Justice – Barriers and Supports Instrument (SJ-BAS), that can support future investigations of leadership for social justice. By interrogating and communicating the use of instruments that measure aspects of social justice, practitioners and researchers alike can benefit. Fietzer and Ponterotto (2015) keenly noted that this type of pursuit should be of interest and benefit to researchers and practitioners alike:

> By critically examining these instruments, practitioners maintaining a social justice agenda will have access to tools which can identify allies, stimulate introspective approaches to self-knowledge about social justice, and identify new ways to encourage engagement in advocacy in others. Researchers would be able to identify psychometrically sound instruments in social justice, leading to more complex theoretical development about social justice engagement, a better understanding of the factors contributing to social justice, and a way to demonstrate how engagement in advocacy and social justice directly benefit communities. (p. 20).

The following sections will situate the instruments in the relevant socially just leadership literature, provide an overview of the SJBS and SJ-BAS, examine opportunities for both practitioners and researchers to use these instruments, and discuss the implications for both practice and research.

Socially Just Leadership

The construct of socially just leadership has been central to educational leadership research, framed as both a concept and an enactment. The importance of studying the practices principals employ to create equitable educational opportunities for marginalized students is underscored in the literature, primarily with qualitative studies. As such, the lack of quantitative perspectives on the phenomenon become apparent. As we introduce two instruments which may allow for greater breadth in understanding socially just leadership, we first offer this overview of social justice through an operational lens and as a practice in schools. We conclude this section by placing social justice as a representation of principal agency.

Difficulties arise when attempting to narrow social justice to a singular definition, particularly in school settings. Social justice, as an action, as part of a school culture, or as a philosophy held by those within the school organization, is shaped by the context of the school. Equity for marginalized children may refer to abilities, culture, gender, identity, or race and the

extent of the social, economic, or educational needs of marginalized children. Moreover, as Hayes and Angelle (2020) pointed out, views of social justice are often articulated through the lens of western culture, views that may be contrary to cultures in other parts of the world. Hatfield and colleagues (2011) provide the example of American and Chinese cultures. As a capitalist society, Americans value hard work and individualism. Chinese society, on the other hand, value deference and approaching society as a collective whole. The lens through which cultures view the idea of social justice is markedly different across the globe. Thus, values play a role in the importance of "citizens' ideas of what makes one a worthwhile person and their views of social justice" (p.113).

While social justice in schools may be viewed as providing "the conditions to improve one's position or social mobility" (Blackmore, 2013, p. 1007), others have written about social justice in terms of "academic achievement, critical consciousness, and inclusive practices" (Grant & Sleeter, 2007, p. 116). A wider view of justice (and injustice) was furthered by Cribb and Gerwirtz (2003) who discussed the concept in terms of distributive, associational, and cultural justice. They explained the idea of distributive justice as the "absence of exploitation and deprivation" (p.18), cultural justices as the absence of "domination, non-recognition, and disrespect" (p. 19), and associational justice as the inclusion of voices. While these three forms of social justice provide an understanding through a larger sociological perspective, the ideas may be placed in schools as guides to actions and behaviors meant to counteract injustice. White and Cooper (2012) remind us that social justice "can devolve to nothing more than a politically correct term that really only identifies those who are excluded, as if those who are marginalized require further marginalization in order for false prophets to introduce personal agendas that the authors refer to as 'social justice for me'" (p. 519). Brown (2006) looks to educators as the "frontline civil rights workers in a long-term struggle to increase equity" (p. 701). As such, oppression must be faced head on by the adults in the school building. When racism, classism, and other forms of social injustice infect an organization, not only students but adults are infected as well. This leads to limiting points of view which then allows differences to sabotage learning and collaboration (Osta & Perrow, 2008). The struggle for equity is lost when educators embrace a deficit theory of social justice.

Leaders who work for socially just schools reject a deficit theory of social justice and embrace a value and vision for equity. Osta and Perrow (2008) describe three related aspects of equity:

> 1) Equity in our educational system entails removing the predictability of academic success or failure based on social, economic, or cultural factors. 2) Equity thus entails interrupting inequitable practices, eliminating biases and oppression, and creating inclusive school environments for adults and children. 3) Ultimately, equity means discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents, and interests that each human being possesses (p. 3).

Moreover, Osta and Perrow (2008) reiterate the need for leaders to create schools that are dedicated to the teaching and learning of all students, regardless of their race, class, gender, or culture. Modeling equity practices and demonstrating skills are ways in which leaders can reveal to adults in the school the importance of a socially just school. DeMatthews, (2015) views socially just leadership as a balancing act, noting that a socially just leader "identifies, focuses, and acts to address marginalization in schools and communities, but also an ongoing struggle complicated by personal, cultural, societal, and organizational dimensions associated with the leader, school, community, and society as a whole" (p. 19). Placing principals at the center of social justice practices establishes a focus on equity as an unspoken norm in the school culture. This holds true for establishing ways of being as well as dismantling harmful practices and behavior. Ross and Berger (2009) provide examples of ways in which principal behavior can eliminate barriers and promote support for socially just school cultures for students with special needs. Principals can establish partnerships between general education and special education teachers. These partners can work to create interventions and dual teaching situations to support learning for special needs students. Furthermore, principals can coordinate teacher planning time to promote collaboration. Ross and Berger (2009) posit that:

> The unifying theme of these strategies is that principals' influence equity indirectly, by increasing the technical skills of staff, transforming their beliefs about equity, and strengthening school partnerships with parents and the community (p. 472).

Thus, principals who work for social justice are called upon to follow mandates and policy, while also ensuring that no child is marginalized as policy is implemented. These same leaders must adhere to the parameters of mandates while remaining true to their innate values and beliefs. Socially just leaders serve as role models for school and community stakeholders as they continue to shape the culture and attitudes of the school organization. This underscores the importance of examining and measuring the behaviors and practices of socially just leaders as well as the organizational supports and barriers that promote or impede the work of social justice.

Social Justice Behavior Scale (SJBS)

The SJBS measures the behaviors that principals engage in to lead for social justice (Flood, 2019). The SJBS was constructed in a number of strategic phases including: meta-analysis, Delphi Process, principal components analysis, and components analysis, and convergent/divergent validity analysis. A comprehensive meta-analysis was conducted across the literreature on social justice leadership behaviors to conceptualize a theoretical construct of social justice behaviors and develop survey items that measure these behaviors (Flood, 2019). This meta-analysis included 18 published articles from 2007-2019 that exclusively focused on behaviors principals

utilized to support social justice. These articles were open coded according to action words that support social justice and in total, 335 codes were constructed and sorted into 15 categories (Flood, 2019). From these categories, three themes emerged: Self-Focused, School-Specific, and Community-Minded components (Flood, 2019).

Survey items were created to measure aspects of each theme. To aid in their development, survey items were created with special attention to the verbiage and definitions within the literature to help reduce researcher bias and provide clarity (Flood, 2019). Initially, 39 items were constructed: 10 for Self-Focused, 18 for School-Specific, and 11 for Community-Minded. Once these survey items were developed, a Delphi Process was utilized to gain multiple rounds of feedback from a panel of experts. This instrument was sent to six content experts on school leadership/and or social justice and based on their extensive feedback; 11 items were revised to improve the precision and scope of the instrument (Flood, 2019). Following the first round of revisions, the instrument went through two more rounds of feedback and revisions until the final 38 items were remaining. These 38 items were then sent to 230 participating principles from 27 states: 72.69% (White), 58.1% (Female), held a master's degree (51.5%), and 37.9% from suburban schools (Flood, 2019b).

Factor structure and item inclusion was determined through principal components analysis including the inspection of eigenvalues, scree plots, and item loadings to guide decisions (Flood, 2019). The final solution was a three-component, 23 item solution (Table 1) that accounted for 62.16% of the total variance. The three components were: School Specific (nine items), Community Minded (seven items), and Self-Focused (seven items).

Further, these participants were also sent the Social Justice Scale (SJS) and the Global Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS) to investigate the convergent validity between the two instruments. As outlined by Campbell and Fiske (1959), convergent validity indicates the statistical relationship between two instruments that are theorized to share or assess similar constructs (Flood, 2019). Positive relationships were determined between the three subscales (Self-Focused, School-Specific, and Community-Minded) and SJS subscales.

Divergent validity was assessed by analyzing the relationship between the SJBS and the Global Belief in a Just World (GBJWS) scale (Holton III et al., 2007). Correleations were run between SJBS subscales and the Global Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS). The GBJWS is a 7-item Likert scale used to measure participants beliefs in a just world (Lipkus, 1991). Across all SJBS subscales and the GBJWS, negative relationships ($r = -0.05$ to -0.23) were discovered and Self-Focused and School-Specific subscales were statistically significant at $p > 0.05$, while the subscale Community-Minded, was not statistically significant (Flood, 2019b).

Lastly, group differences (i.e. age, gender, highest degree completed, and school urbanicity) were examined between participants that took

the SJBS through a series of one-way ANOVAS. No statistically significant mean differences existed between participant demographic variables at alpha level 0.05 (Flood, 2019). However, there was a statistically significant difference between individuals that self-identified as a social justice leader and those that did not on the SJBS.

The School-Specific component includes social justice behaviors that occur within the schools themselves. These include dismantling barriers that hinder achieving social justice outcomes within schools, contextualizing professional development to make sense of issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender, and preparing students to confront the challenges that face historically marginalized communities (Cooper, 2009; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Jean-Marie, 2008; Kose, 2009; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis, 2009; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011; Wasonga, 2010). The Community-Minded component measured social justice behaviors that expanded out into the community such as engaging in community advocacy and organizing work (DeMatthews, 2018; Theoharis, 2009). The Self-Focused component explored social justice behaviors that emanated from and occurred within the principals themselves. Principals indicated the frequency with which they critically reflected on their work, their biases, and how they engaged with others (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; Jean-Marie, 2008; Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011).

The SJBS provides a way to classify and, in turn, understand the extent to which principals are enacting particular behaviors (individual survey items and components with reliability information: Table 1) and the frequency of enactment within each domain (Table 2). In doing so, practitioners and scholars can understand how often principals engage in behaviors linked to social justice leadership, discern the domain where principals tend to engage in social justice behaviors, and measure changes over time related to social justice behaviors. Scholars have stressed the complexity and current limitations of investigating and understanding social justice beliefs, values, and leadership behaviors quantitatively (Flood, 2019; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Shields, 2021). Our ability to understand social justice leadership behaviors and practices quantitatively continue to be limited and even disappointing as Jean-Marie et al. (2009) described. Many of these limitations and dissapointments may be due to lack of reliable and valid quantitative instruments that measure social justice behaviors and the overabundance of qualitative research investigating social justice leadership (Flood, 2019).

However, it may also in part be due the inherent challenges related to self-reporting and the need for multiple measures that are designed to fully situate facets of leadership practices that enable equity and societal transformation (Shields, 2021). Although the SJBS relies on the self-reporting of principals, it does offer interesting research possibilities on how principals report their engagement in social justice behaviors and can be used in tandem with other instruments to better situate and bring into focus the leadership behaviors of principals that enact social justice in educational settings.

Multiple scholars have recently discussed the behavioral themes and their implications related to leadership outlined in this instrument (Angelle & Flood, 2021; Burke, 2022; Gibson, 2021; Howley et al., 2021; Khan, 2021; Phillips, 2023; Smith, 2022). Scholars have dicussed the practicality of the use of this instrument, specifically, and other quantitative instruments, generally, for investigations of social justice leadership (Angelle & Flood, 2021; Howley et al., 2021, Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Howley et al. (2021) highlighted the need for more scholarship to utilize the SJBS to understand the relationships between social justice leadership practices and other school-level measures, but few studies have done so. Much of the current contributions of the SJBS has been used by scholars to further conceptualize the theoretical aspects related to social justice leadership.

Table 1. Social Justice Behavior Scale

I pose solutions to structural injustices in education. I provide students with greater access to their culture. I dismantle barriers that hinder the practice of social justice in my school. I empower marginalized student groups through collaborative strategies. I nurture socially conscientious teacher-leaders. I enact a vision for my school focused on equity. I prepare students to confront the challenges that face historically marginalized communities. I contextualize professional development in a way that tries to make sense of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. I embed professional development in collaborative structures.	School Specific Subscale (Cronbach's Alpha = .914)
I engage in community advocacy work. I act as a catalyst for advocacy work within the community. I engage in community organizing work. I utilize parent networks to strategically recruit teachers, parents, and other community leaders with social justice agendas. I access community cultural wealth to benefit my school. I participate in political and policy-related advocacy work on behalf of marginalized student groups. I raise awareness to advance the school communities' levels of understanding about social inequities.	Community Minded Subscale (Cronbach's Alpha = .916)
I continuously reflect to avoid making unjust decisions. I engage in self-reflective, critical, and collaborative work relationships. I actively work to understand my own bias so I can better counteract inequity within my school. I am transparent about my practice as a school leader. I consciously account for and resist my personal biases. I work to develop a reflective consciousness. I extend cultural respect to individuals from diverse backgrounds.	Self-Focused Subscale (Cronbach's Alpha = .872)
23 Item Social Justice Behavior Scale Cronbach's Alpha = .933	

Table 2. SJBS Response Options and Associated Values

Value	Response Option
0	Never
1	Rarely, in less than 10% of the chances when I could have
2	Occasionally, in about 30% of the chances when I could have
3	Sometimes, in about 50% of the chances when I could have
4	Frequently, in about 70% of the chances when I could have
5	Usually, in about 90% of the chances I could have
6	Every time

Social Justice – Barriers and Supports Instrument

The SJ-BAS measures the contextual elements that principals encounter within the complex environments where they find themselves as actors (see Angelle & Flood, 2021). The SJ-BAS measures both macro and meso level constructs that support principals in their work as socially just school leaders as well as those constructs that act as barriers to social justice in schools. Simililarly to the SJBS, the SJ-BAS was constructed through a multiphase approach that integrated both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to develop a reliable and valid barrier and support scale (Angelle & Flood, 2021). For the qualitative phase, transcripts from interviews with 18 school principals from 12 different countries were intereviewed to understand leadership barriers and supports that enable social justice in educational contexts. Qualitative data from these interviews produced seven themes related to supports and six related to barriers that enable social justice:

> From that analysis, seven themes related to perceived supports for social justice and six themes related to perceived bariers were identified. The support themes were Principal Behaviours, School Culture, Teacher Characteristics, Community Involvement, Teacher-Student Interface, Policy, and Resources. The six barrier themes were: Student's Family Situation, Perceptions of the School, Lack of Resources, Policy and Politics, Staff Variables, and Organisational Culture. (Angelle & Flood, 2021, p. 127)

Initial survey items were constructed according to the themes identified from the qualitative phase. A Delphi Process was utilized to gain feedback from a panel of experts to revise items on both the Support Instrument and Barrier Instrument. Four reviewers (three male and one female) were selected to participate on this panel who possessed significant expertise in school leadership and social justice. In response to panel feedback, the survey was revised down to 50 items. Following the Delphi Process, the intital SJ-BAS was distributed to princiapls across the Univted States. In sum, 226 principals in the United States from 27 different states responded.

Principal components analysis was utilized on both instruments to understand factor structure and as a method for item reduction (Angelle & Flood, 2021). For the Support Instrument, eigenvalues, scree plots, and item loadings were inspected, resulting in a four factor, 24-item solution. Three items were removed due to cross loadings and another was removed as a result of independent factor loading. The final product accounted for .279% of the total variance (Angelle & Flood, 2021). The Cronbach Alpha was then utilized to determine the reliability and internal consistency of the remaining survey items. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for the Social Justice-Supports instrument and found to be .965 (Table 3).

This process was then repeated for the barrier portion of the survey. Three items of the Social Justice-Barriers Instrument were removed due to cross loading and one for not meeting the minimum loading requirement. Analysis of the principal components analysis identified a four-factor, 19-item solution that accounted for 68.989% of the total variance. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for the instrument and produced a coefficient of .923 (Table 4).

As mentioned previously, the SJ-BAS is composed of two scales, the Barriers Scale and the Supports Scale. The Barriers Scale is made up of four components: Student's Family Situation, Perceptions, Resources and Policy, and School Culture (Table 3). Student's Family Situation measured issues presented by the home environments and economic situation of their students within their context as barriers (Morrison, 2017). Perceptions measured the negative ways that various stakeholders view schooling and marginalized student groups (Miller & Martin 2015; Theoharis, 2007). Resources and Policy looked at how school bureaucracy, including policy and the lack of/limited access to resources, served as barriers to social justice work (Chiu & Walker, 2007; Morrison, 2017). School Culture measured how the culture of a school could serve as a barrier to social justice work (Chiu & Walker, 2007; Taysum & Gunter, 2008).

The Supports Scale measures four components: School Culture and Practices; Parental and Community Support; Communication, Collaboration, and Guidance; and Resources (Table 4). School Culture and Practices was comprised of items related to the supportive attitudes, processes, practices, and culture within schools (Morrison, 2017; Theoharis, 2007). Parental and Community Support addressed how parental and community support aided principals in their social justice work (DeMatthews, 2018; Normore & Blanco, 2008). Communication, Collaboration, and Guidance are indicators of the synergistic relationship between principal and stakeholders to support leadership for social justice (Sarid, 2020). Resources gauged how fiscal, information, instructional, and human resources aid leadership for social justice. Each scale utilizes a 7-point Likert response option (Table 5).

Table 3. Social Justice Supports Scale

Attitudes within my school community support social justice leadership. Within my school, processes are organized to support social justice leadership. Data available at my school are used to support social justice leadership. Reflective practice is required to be a successful socially-just school leader. The culture of my school is supportive of social justice leadership. Staff collaboration in my school supports social justice leadership.	School Culture and Practices (Cronbach's Alpha = .918)
At my school, fiscal resources are available to support social justice leadership. At my school, school information resources are available to support social justice leadership. At my school, instructional resources are available to support social justice leadership. At my school, human resources are available to support social justice leadership.	Resources (Cronbach's Alpha = .928)
Reciprocal communication between teachers and students at my school supports social justice leadership. Communication among stakeholders at my school supports social justice leadership. The level of trust between students and teachers at my school supports social justice leadership. Principal and teacher focus on students' best interest at my school supports social justice leadership. Valuing student voice in my school supports social justice leadership. School policy documents that guide decision-making are supportive of social justice leadership. School-level decision-making processes are supportive of social justice leadership. Local guidance/control of decision-making is supportive of social justice leadership. The extent of the principal's autonomy to make decisions for the school supports social justice leadership.	Communication, Collaboration, and Guidance (Cronbach's Alpha = .940)
Parents at my school support social justice leadership. Collaboration between teachers and parents in my school results in increased support of social justice leadership. Principal and parent connections at my school result in increased support of social justice leadership. Principal involvement in the community results in increased support of social justice leadership. The extent of values cohesion between the community and school results in increased support of social justice	
24 Item SJ Support Scale Cronbach's Alpha = .965	

Table 4. Social Justice Barriers Scale

Lack of communication with stakeholders is a barrier to social justice leadership. Principal isolation in advocacy work is a barrier to social justice leadership. Principal's vision can be a barrier to social justice leadership. Value systems can be a barrier to social justice leadership. School's hierarchical structure is a barrier to social justice leadership.	School Culture (Cronbach's Alpha = .863)
Lack of financial resources is a barrier to social justice leadership. Limited time during the workday is a barrier to social justice leadership. Limited access to current research is a barrier to social justice leadership. Lack of input on policy is a barrier to social justice leadership. Inconsistent policy implementation is a barrier to social justice leadership. Bureaucracy is a barrier to social justice leadership.	Resources and Policy (Cronbach's Alpha = .875)
Focus on achievement outcomes is a barrier to social justice leadership. Societal expectations of schooling are a barrier to social justice leadership. Societal bias against marginalized groups of students in my school is a barrier to social justice leadership. Parental resistance to school initiatives is a barrier to social justice leadership. Staff perceptions of students' socioeconomic circumstances are a barrier to social justice leadership.	Perceptions (Cronbach's Alpha = .862)
Students' socioeconomic circumstances are a barrier to social justice leadership. Income inequality between students is a barrier to social justice leadership. The home environments of my students are barriers to social justice leadership.	Students' Family Situations (Cronbach's Alpha = .888)
19 Item SJ Barrier Scale Cronbach's Alpha = .923	

Table 5. SJ-BAS Response Options and Associated Values

Value	Response Option
1	Strongly Disagree
2	Disagree
3	Moderately Disagree
4	Neither Agree Nor Disagree
5	Moderately Agree
6	Agree
7	Strongly Agree

Opportunities

School leaders and their daily agency are in the public eye, both from their school stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and most importantly, students, as well as the eyes of the larger community. As student populations continue to increase in diversity, the public nature of the work of school leaders will persist to ensure that schools are welcoming and safe places for all children.

The student population in the United States is changing. In the past decade, Hispanic students in public schools increased from 22% to 28% while the population of White students decreased from 54% to 46%. Black student population in public schools also decreased from 17% to 15% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). To put this in perspective, public schools enrolled 49.4 million students in fall 2020. Of these 22.6 million students were white while 13.8 million were Hispanic. Schools enrolled 7.4 million Black students and 2.7 million Asian students. In every US state, the population of white public school students was lower in fall 2020 than in fall 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Given these demographics as well as the public nature of school leadership, understanding behaviors demonstrated by school leaders that lead to socially just schools and the extent to which these behaviors are evident to school stakeholders becomes even more important. The SJBS and the SJ-BAS can offer schools and district leaders the tools with which to gain this information.

For example, district-level administrators can utilize the SJBS as a baseline measure to increase their understanding of the extent to which school leaders engage in behaviors indicative of social justice leadership. Moreover, the domains in the instrument can inform district administrators about the areas where school levels focus in their social justice work and those areas where leaders spend little time. This may encourage dialogue with the school leader regarding areas that are not addressed. Given the intense workload of principals and their limited time, the district leaders

may use the instrument to see where support and/or professional development may be warranted.

The SJ-BAS may be useful for both school and district leaders as well as policymakers and program evaluators in understanding the contextual environment of today's US schools. The environmental conditions that engender support or act as barriers can inform all stakeholders about school needs for addressing social justice issues, needs which may include resources, training, or potentially, intervention.

Both instruments are useful tools for those researchers who study school improvement and the organizational constructs that situate social justice at the forefront of their work. Moreover, these tools may be helpful for program evaluators at the state level who work to improve schools under their purview. Professional development and coaching consultants can use the SJBS and the SJ-BAS as equity audit tools to offer recommendations for increasing equity and diversity.

Conclusion

Given the growing diversity and needs of children in today's schools, we must continue to work for socially just places of safety and learning. Principals must be the catalysts for ensuring that marginalized children are treated with respect, knowing that school is a place where they can be recognized and a place of learning. School leaders demonstrate this through their values, decision-making, practices, and behaviors. We offer two instruments to help district and school leaders to measure the extent to which these constructs hold true in schools. As Chunoo et al. (2019) remind us, "Working toward a more equitable democratic society starts with explicitly naming the seemingly intractable social issues that require leadership. By doing this, we can move from leadership for social justice toward leadership as social justice" (p. 91).

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THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS: A PATH TOWARD COLLABORATION IN READING EDUCATION

Relentless reading wars call attention to how reading education policies are formed and transformed, and to the equity dimensions of literacy development. This historical review and analysis examine the trajectory of reading education policies within No Child Left Behind/Reading First, Race to the Top Fund, and the Every Student Succeeds Act. This analysis reveals unique dynamics that shape reading education policies (e.g., wide-ranging policy actors and media influences) from creation through enactment, implementation, and outcome. This analysis can also inform contentious public discourse surrounding reading achievement because regardless of policy design, research-based ideas vary widely in practice, and these variations significantly impact outcomes for diverse learners. This analysis aims to shed light on the reading education policymaking process and includes important implications for future directions grounded in collaboration and social justice, rather than conflict and competition.

Introduction

Literacy development is necessary for acquiring knowledge, for engaging culturally, for social mobility, and for workplace success. The ability to read is, arguably, the foundation of democracy (Castles et al., 2018). The inability to develop satisfactory literacy skills is costly socially and economically, and it contributes to inequality through increased likelihood of poor physical and mental health, involvement in crime, and welfare dependency (World Literacy Foundation, 2015). The gravity of the personal and societal consequences associated with low literacy levels calls attention to how reading education policies are formed and transformed, and to the equity dimensions of literacy development (Benavot, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021).

The field of literacy has endured a counterproductive, decades long pendulum swing between conflicting orientations to reading instruction (Goldberg & Goldenberg, 2022; Pearson & Cervetti, 2017). Opposing views have resurfaced under different names over the past seven decades (Alexander & Fox, 2019). Most recently, a movement toward a simple view of reading based in what has been termed the Science of Reading (SOR) has revived this conflict (Cervetti et al., 2020; Shanahan, 2020). This movement have been characterized as reigniting a "relentless drive for ideological domination" symptomatic of reading wars and it significantly influenced legislation related to reading education (Reinking et al.,

2023, p. 110).

Scholars of reading research contend that this movement is heavily influenced by non-expert media sources, and a few outspoken academics who misrepresent the certainty of scientific research used to support their ideology by asserting a direct connection between research and instructional practice that does not attend to variabilities in instructional context and student populations (MacPhee et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2021). These influencers are promoting an ideology which views learning to read as essentially a technical endeavor achievable almost entirely by mastering specific phonics skills while subordinating equally important aspects of learning to read including oral language development, vocabulary, fluency, motivation, and overall comprehension (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Bondie et. al., 2019). Thus, SOR advocates are promoting instructional imperatives and legislative mandates that contradict the corpus of reading research (Reinking et al., 2023).

The social justice implications of these developments should concern literacy researchers, teacher educators, educators, policy makers, parents, and the public. Namely, the instructional practices associated with the SOR have the potential to perpetuate inequities in reading education because they narrowly bound professional flexibility, teacher judgement, and the ability to differentiate for the needs of diverse learners (MacPhee, 2021; Milner, 2021). Instructional practices that do not adapt to the needs of diverse learners are particularly problematic because a disproportionate percentage of students who struggle with reading are culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). Due to changing demographics, there are many more non-native speakers of English in U.S. classrooms (Avineri et al., 2015). Due to increasing economic disparities, there are also many more students affected by income and wealth inequality, a primary influencer of academic achievement (Berliner, 2013).

Additionally, students who struggle with reading tend to be from marginalized communities that are historically underserved, oftentimes attending underfunded schools with uncertified teachers (Shannon, 2014). For these students, it is particularly important that teachers implement culturally informed literacy practices (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Milner, 2021). Culturally informed practices require teachers to learn about students' unique cultures and intentionally craft instruction that is responsive to local conditions, but these practices are prone to oversimplification and not easily translated to large-scale, prepackaged curriculum characteristic of the SOR (Kelly et al., 2021; Paulick et al., 2023). Consequently, students from diverse backgrounds who tend to struggle with reading and who are most in need of differentiated literacy instruction are the very students most likely to receive governmentally mandated curriculum that is not

designed for differentiation, and not culturally informed (Kane & Savitz, 2022).

Another persistently misleading aspect of discourse surrounding the SOR movement is the vagueness of how reading proficiency is defined and discussed. Reading proficiency is evaluated primarily through the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Reinking et al., 2023). Rosenberg (2004) characterized NAEP's proficiency rating as aspirational and warned that there is no national standard for reading proficiency and no clear definition of what constitutes grade-level texts. Scholars of reading research have also argued that NAEP's proficient rating is a rigorous standard compared to the way grade level proficiency is represented in other state and district assessments, and that NAEP's basic rating more accurately represents grade level reading achievement (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023; Loveless, 2023). Thus, scoring below proficient on NAEP does not necessarily indicate an inability to read on grade level as is commonly asserted in public discourse surrounding reading achievement.

While a rigorous standard of proficiency should certainly be the goal of reading education, to manufacture a crisis by characterizing two-thirds of fourth graders as functionally illiterate based on this criterion is misleading and confusing (Loveless, 2023). Moreover, apart from a slight upward trend in the late 1990s, and a recent drop presumably due to COVID-19, NAEP reading scores have revealed minimal shifts in reading proficiency despite instructional interventions based on policy initiatives such as A Nation at Risk (1983), No Child Left Behind/Reading First (2001), and SOR (2013+) (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023; Thomas, 2022).

A plausible explanation for this confusion can be attributed to the misinformation propagated by journalists, media influencers, and SOR advocates who lack the expertise to interpret claims about reading achievement (MacPhee et al., 2021). Many of these influencers disseminate blogs, podcasts, documentaries, and news reports that reduce literacy development to phonetic decoding and recommend highly prescriptive, under-researched instructional approaches not supported by the corpus of reading research (e.g., see Goldstein, 2022; Hanford, 2018, 2022; Moats, 2020; Nanton, 2023; Paige, 2020; Spear-Swerling, 2019). Politicians, publishers, and parents who desperately seek definitive answers to children's reading difficulties can be enticed by these reductive syntheses because the complexity of reading development is inconvenient and not easily mandated, packaged, and sold (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023; Stark & Education Week, 2019).

Given these crucial concerns, scholars are calling for an end to reading wars in favor of non-legislative, developmentally informed policies and practices supported by the corpus of reading research and based on an understanding of the complex equity dimensions of literacy acquisition (Aukerman & Schudlt, 2021; Castles et al., 2018; Gabriel, 2018; Spence & Mitra, 2023). To this end, there is a need for greater understand-

ing of why and how ideas about reading education become part of policy initiatives embedded in legislation; why and how certain approaches and voices become influential in the policy crafting process; why and how certain bodies of research move in and through policy networks; and what forces facilitate change in policies over time (Gabriel, 2020; Torgerson et al., 2019).

To address this need, the following historical review and analysis examine three important areas in policy related to reading education: policy outcome studies, policy implementation studies, and studies on the dynamics of the policymaking process. Given the pressing need to examine equity dimensions of how reading education policies are formed and transformed, particular attention is paid to research on dynamics of the reading education policymaking process -- how issue networks form, how policies change over time, and how certain research and researchers become key in the policymaking process (Coburn et al., 2011).

Understanding this trajectory can inform public discourse surrounding reading achievement and overall academic attainment because reading education policies are shaped by unique dynamics (e.g., wide-ranging policy actors and media influences) of the processes and environments in which they develop (Alexander & Fox, 2019; Reinking et al., 2023). Additionally, regardless of policy design, ideas of what constitutes a research-base and the way research-based ideas are implemented always vary widely in practice (Gabriel, 2018). These are crucial concerns because influencers of reading education policies and policy outcomes significantly impact the educational trajectories of diverse learners (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). Thus, this analysis sheds light on the broad landscape of the reading education policymaking process and includes important implications for future directions that are grounded in collaboration rather than conflict.

An Overview of The Reading Wars

Understanding the equity dimensions of literacy development requires analysis of the way reading education policies and practices have evolved. Thus, the following overview of the reading wars provides important context for the policy discussions that follow. A persistent debate known as the "reading wars" began in the 1800's when Horace Mann questioned whether children should learn to read first through identifying sounds of letters or through recognition of words and their meaning (Alexander & Fox, 2019; Cremin, 1957). This mostly academic debate entered the public sphere in the mid-1950's with Rudolph Flesch's (1955) *Why Johnny Can't Read*.

The pendulum in this debate swings back and forth between a skills-based model of reading and one focused on meaning-making. The skills-based model of reading instruction prioritizes decoding, listen-

ing comprehension, and assessed reading proficiency and conceptualizes reading development through a primarily cognitive lens (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Shanahan, 2020). As a result, skills-based reading instruction involves relatively limited attention to individual student needs, experiences, or cultural diversity (Afflerbach, 2022; Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). Most recently, proponents of skills-based instruction cite the SOR and argue that while the human brain is naturally wired for oral language, it is not naturally wired for written language (Shanahan, 2020). According to proponents of the SOR, young brains must be rewired through a strong focus on explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness to connect sounds heard to letters representing sounds in text (Cervetti et al., 2020; Shanahan 2020).

Conversely, the meaning-making model is empirically grounded in decades of reading research and conceptualizes reading as a complex, idiosyncratic process involving multiple dimensions (Afflerbach, 2022; Spence & Mitra, 2023). The meaning-making model of reading education is grounded in sociocultural theory and situates literacy development in a cognitive, social, cultural, historical, and institutional context wherein meaning is negotiated between the person, the text, and the tools of one's environment (Perry, 2012). Importantly, scholars who advocate for a meaning-making model are not anti-phonics, nor do they diminish the cognitive aspects of literacy development supported by the SOR. Proponents of the meaning-making model maintain that basic-skills instruction is necessary – but not sufficient – for a comprehensive approach to reading education integrating the five pillars of effective literacy instruction (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary) (National Reading Panel, 2000) necessary for continued reading and writing success in the upper grades (Afflerbach, 2022; Duke et al., 2021).

For example, neuroscientific research emphasizes the importance of reading instruction that nurtures neural networks crucial for efficient, automatic, and ultimately fluent reading (Spence & Mitra, 2023). This research finds that phonological, visual word form, and semantic processing networks are distributed across brain regions. When readers encounter unknown words in unfamiliar contexts, phonological processing regions are activated. However, when a word is familiar, visual word form and semantic areas are activated simultaneously (Spence & Mitra, 2023). As students develop into skilled readers, neuroscientific research has found that neural networks across brain regions interact and reciprocate to produce the most efficient processes for reading particular texts (Yu et al., 2018). Thus, phonics instruction is most effective when embedded in a comprehensive program of literacy instruction that adapts to individual student needs and nurtures development of the neural networks that support the habits and dispositions characteristic of skilled readers (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

Apart from the findings of neuroscience, proponents of the mean-

ing-making model contend that phonics instruction can be effective when conceptualized more expansively than the relatively narrow, synthetic approach promoted by SOR advocates (Reinking et al., 2023). It has also been argued that SOR advocates have failed to establish a causal relationship to show that a lack of phonics instruction in classrooms has resulted in a national reading crisis (Reinking et al., 2023). Finally, given what is known about the strong influence of out-of-school factors on academic achievement, it is highly unlikely any one in-school factor or one instructional variable such as phonics could account for a dominant share of variation in reading achievement (Berliner, 2013; Shannon, 2014).

Ultimately, the diversity of learners, complexity of the reading process, and importance of prioritizing overall comprehension render it impossible to effectively apply a simple, or universal, approach to reading instruction (Castles et al., 2018). The corpus of reading research promotes a robust and more socially just science of reading to help students from diverse backgrounds learn to decode, comprehend, apply, and critique text while also nurturing literate dispositions such as reading engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Duke et al., 2021; Elleman & Oslund, 2019). Literacy scholars agree that these conflicting views are complementary parts of a complex whole, yet the controversy has persisted across decades and policy environments (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). The resulting climate precludes innovation and collaboration and impedes productive relationships with the potential to disrupt this polarization (Elleman & Oslund, 2019; Torgerson et al., 2019).

Policy Outcome Studies

The following analysis aims, in part, to disrupt this counterproductive cycle by examining dynamics of the literacy policymaking process. The first level of analysis examines policy outcome studies. Policy outcome studies systematically evaluate the impact of policies on student achievement. Considering the significant level of funding allocated for reading education, one would expect policy outcomes to be an active area of study. For example, $1 billion was allocated annually for No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) Reading First (RF) program (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, 2015). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the eighth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which replaced NCLB, federally mandates comprehensive literacy instruction for P-12 reading education with an annual budget of $190 million (ESSA, 2015a, 2015b; ESSA Federal Funding Guide, 2018).

Individual states also prioritize significant funding for reading education. For example, the state of Tennessee devoted $100 million to an initiative aimed at helping students develop strong phonics-based reading skills, and many states prioritized generous Covid-related American Res-

cue Plan funds for early reading instruction (Schwartz, 2021; TDOE Announces $100 Million Initiative, 2021).

Despite this considerable investment, reading education policy outcome studies represent a relatively small body of knowledge (Coburn et al., 2011; Torgerson et al., 2019). Evaluation studies of reading education policies rarely have the resources necessary to answer the questions they ask, and reallocation of resources is needed to garner a better understanding of the impacts of policy on student achievement (Castles et al., 2018). This is a significant concern for all who endeavor to improve reading education. Without thorough evaluation of policy outcomes, information is lacking on the efficacy of policy initiatives. This lack of knowledge limits the field in its ability to interrupt counterproductive patterns in favor of more robust, socially just perspectives on reading education policy and practice (Gabriel, 2018; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

The Reading Excellence Axt and Race to the Top Fund

The Reading Excellence Act (1998) is an example of a major piece of federal legislation with inadequate resources devoted to evaluating outcomes (Coburn et al., 2011). Similarly, Race to the Top fund (RTT) was allocated $4.35 billion, making it the largest competitive grant program in the history of U.S. education (RTT Publications and Resources, n.d.). RTT functioned as powerful de facto policy, yet there were no funds reserved for an outcome study, nor is there a mechanism in place by which to evaluate the U.S. Department of Education's claims that RTT inspired long-term initiative and creativity (Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014; U.S. Department of Education 2015a, 2015b). For example, RTT's final report "Fundamental Change, Innovation in America's Schools Under Race to the Top" (2015) framed its success as something that must be measured based on RTT's long-term impact on students. The report cited increases in student performance on reading tests through programs such as "The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative," but neither of these legislative initiatives offer evidence consistent with an outcome study. Considering All the Evidence

Reading First

Conversely, NCLB's RF program provides a rare example of an official policy outcome study. Federal funding was allocated for in-depth analysis of RF using rigorous, quasi-experimental studies including the Reading First Impact Study Final Report (Gamse et al., 2008) and the National Evaluation of Early Reading First (Jackson et al., 2007). These studies yielded parallel findings, such as strong effects on measures of program implementation (e.g., time spent on reading, professional development, focus on the big five components, deployment of reading coach-

es) and weak effects on student outcomes with no statistically significant impact on students' reading comprehension (Calfee, 2014; Dee & Jacobs, 2009; The Reading First Impact Study, n.d.).

RF findings demonstrate how outcome studies can provide crucial insight on conflicting orientations to reading education. For example, NCLB demonstrated important progress for reading education because to receive competitive grants, states were required to develop plans for increasing teachers' use of instructional approaches integrating the five pillars of effective literacy instruction (Allington, 2006). However, literacy scholars found a disturbing trend in RF implementation. Professional development and adequate yearly progress (AYP) assessments in urban schools at the K–3 level convinced teachers that reading instruction in the early grades was fundamentally about learning phonological awareness, decoding, and fluency. This variation in implementation resulted in a curriculum gap in which comprehension instruction focused on developing children's knowledge of the world and writing instruction were insufficient for the kind of balanced literacy necessary for continued reading and writing success in the upper grades (Meier & Wood, 2004; Pearson, 2006; Yatvin, 2002, 2003). This variation in implementation might explain why RF outcome studies found strong effects on measures of program implementation and weak effects on student outcomes as noted above.

Every Student Succeeds Act

Author (2020) examined dynamics of literacy policy within the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015a). Author found ESSA comprehensive literacy policy came into being under the guidance of relatively few policy actors, through a competitive grant program that was outside of Congressional purview and not required to satisfy the traditional equity agenda of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (ESSA, 2015b; Heitin, 2016). Led mainly by former pre-school teacher and Democratic Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), ESSA's comprehensive literacy policy was developed and enacted under the "Literacy Education for All, Results for a Nation" (LEARN) Act between 2009 and 2015, within a discretionary grant program known as Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) (Murray, 2011, 2015; Striving Reader Comprehensive Literacy Resource, n.d.).

Despite being exempt from ESEA's equity agenda, Author (2020) contends that the ESSA mandate for comprehensive literacy instruction is a remarkable accomplishment for the field of literacy because it integrates the cognitive, linguistic, social, motivational, and affective factors essential for a developmental theory of reading. However, Author also found comprehensive literacy policy under ESSA to be potentially vulnerable when implemented due to its expansive conceptualization, potentially inadequate funding, and continued reliance on standardized assessments.

Specifically, ESSA promotes an expansive approach by incorporating the continuum of literacy development (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). This presents an enormous undertaking for implementation because effectively balancing and measuring all components of comprehensive literacy instruction requires tremendous skill in planning, execution, and assessment (Afflerbach, 2022; Gabriel, 2018). This complexity is particularly relevant given that the policy is potentially underfunded. Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) program (ESSA's pilot program) received $200 million (FY 2010) and $190 million (FY 2016) to be allocated across programs in six states (Heitin, 2016; Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy State Profiles, n.d.). ESSA comprehensive literacy policy's national budget is $190 million annually, amounting to less than one-fifth of the $1 billion funding for NCLB's Reading First program (ESSA Federal Funding Guide, 2018; Heitin, 2016).

Additionally, ESSA comprehensive literacy policy continues to rely on standardized assessments. While ESSA encourages multiple and varied assessments, the policy does not provide specific guidance on how to measure progress and communicate the program's unique value to students, families, and policy makers. The primary means of measuring and reporting progress on student achievement remains the NAEP and state-level standardized assessments (Sharp, 2016). This reliance reinforces the importance of an ESSA policy outcome study because standardized assessments are not designed to thoroughly evaluate and communicate the complexities of comprehensive literacy instruction (ESSA, 2015a; Moss et al., 2005).

Author (2020) also identified relevant changes in the policy environment surrounding ESSA literacy policy. Due to considerable objection from members of Congress, the civil rights community, and teachers' unions (e.g., see Opportunity to Learn Campaign, 2010) to the perceived overreach of past policies (e.g., NCLB and RTT), the final version of ESSA was fundamentally altered and federal involvement in education policy and practice significantly reduced (Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014). For example, ESSA allows state education agencies (SEA) and local education agencies (LEA) greater discretion in the use of federal funds, and in their handling of underperforming schools. States are still required to submit accountability plans to the Department of Education to secure federal funding for school improvement, but responsibility for choosing goals, establishing timelines, and intervening in low-performing schools has been returned to the purview of SEA's and LEA's (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b).

Finally, ESSA withdraws what had been a major tenet of the equity stance under RTT, i.e., federal involvement in teacher evaluation and tenure policies as means of accountability through teacher effectiveness and student growth, and ESSA explicitly removes federal incentives for

the adoption of common standards (Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014). The potential vulnerabilities and changes in environment identified here are crucially important because the mandate for comprehensive literacy instruction represents one of the few measures with the potential to productively influence reading education and student success (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

Initial ESSA state education departments' implementation plans were due during the 2017–2018 school year, but after four years, ESSA had not fully commenced, and Covid-related teaching and learning conditions further hindered its implementation (Blad & Ujifusa, 2019, Luscombe, 2022). Although an evaluation of the program's effectiveness is not available, federal funds have been reserved under section 2222(b)(1) for the Director of the Institute of Education Sciences to conduct an outcome study of ESSA's comprehensive literacy policy (ESSA, 2015a, p. 1944).

The potential importance of the ESSA outcome study on comprehensive literacy policy cannot be overstated. The policy explicitly mandates a developmental orientation combining cognitive, linguistic, social, and motivational aspects of reading development (Afflerbach, 2022). In this way, ESSA answers the call for a robust, socially just perspective that integrates the conflicting orientations to reading instruction that have fueled the reading wars. However, the policy continues to rely on standardized assessments which cannot effectively evaluate or communicate the complexities of comprehensive literacy instruction (Elleman & Oslund, 2019; Moss et al., 2005). Consequently, if comprehensive literacy instruction is implemented according to ESSA's policy mandate, then an outcome study detailing its impact on student achievement could offer historically meaningful insight for the field of reading education specifically and P–12 education broadly.

Policy Implementation Studies

Compared to outcome studies, reading education policy implementation studies represent a larger existing body of knowledge (McDonnel & Weatherford, 2016). Implementation studies open the "black box" zone between enactment and outcomes by examining the ways in which policy implementation varies from policy enactment as policies move into schools (Coburn et al., 2011; Levinson et al., 2009). Research examining this zone is crucial to interpreting contentious public discourse on reading achievement because regardless of policy design, research-based ideas vary widely in practice and these variations can significantly impact outcomes for diverse learners (Coburn, 2016; Gabriel, 2018, 2020).

Education implementation studies generally address two questions: 1.) How are teachers responding to policy initiatives? 2.) What factors influence the implementation process or the ability and inclination of

teachers to change their practice in response to policy demands (Coburn et al., 2011; Moss, 2012)? Policy implementation research based in the cognitive approach contends that policies are reconstructed as they move into schools not due to lack of skill or will on teachers' part. Rather, policy reconstruction is a normal part of the social process of teacher learning and change (Spillane et al., 2002). Policies are implemented differently in different contexts because teachers interpret policy ideas through the lens of personal identities, pre-existing knowledge, professional judgement of students' needs, and through interactions with colleagues and school leaders (Coburn et al., 2009; Moss, 2012).

Sensemaking Theory Research

Implementation studies based on sensemaking theory investigate how cultural ideas within social structures influence policy implementation (Coburn, 2016; Spillane et al., 2002). In this line of research, Coburn (2004) emphasized three ways principals influence teachers' adaptation and transformation of instructional policies through sensemaking processes: 1.) by focusing attention on some aspects of policy ideas and not others, 2.) by creating technical limits that frame the boundaries within which teachers' sensemaking can unfold, 3.) by providing a framework that teachers adopt in constructing their understanding of specific policy initiatives.

For example, Coburn (2005b) found principals significantly influenced how teachers adapted, adopted, and transformed reading education policy in two California elementary schools. Principals' preexisting understandings of what constituted effective reading instruction were found to cause teachers in different schools to encounter the same policy very differently. Acting as sense makers, principals drew on their own conceptions of reading instruction when making decisions about what to emphasize in policy discussions with teachers and in the opportunities they chose to provide for teacher learning. In one instance, a principal and a small group of teachers were given first access to professional development representing different ideologies on reading instruction. This small group of school leaders acted as policy gatekeepers by choosing which ideologies to present to the wider faculty. In another instance, a principal took the initiative to recruit university professors who provided professional development aligned with the principal's understanding of reading instruction to supplement the state-adopted reading series.

According to Coburn (2005b), both teachers and principals gravitated toward aspects of policy ideas that reinforced preexisting understandings and focused less on aspects that challenged preexisting epistemological and pedagogical assumptions. These examples of sensemaking theory research illustrate the importance of school leaders' work as instructional leaders in reading education, yet their impactful roles in policy implemen-

tation are often ignored (Coburn, 2005b, 2016). In the absence of content-specific professional learning opportunities, school leaders have been known to depend on pre-existing knowledge and generic leadership strategies (Coburn, 2005b; Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). Consequently, when called on to act as knowledgeable instructional leaders, school leaders' decisions about what policy messages to emphasize and what messages to buffer can shape implementation significantly (Coburn, 2005b; Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018).

Structure-Agency Theory Research

Implementation studies based on structure-agency theory are used to investigate how individual policy actors make choices maximizing personal interests and how such choices produce intended and unintended consequences (Coburn, 2016). For example, Coburn and Woulfin (2012) examined how instructional coaching as a policy initiative influenced classroom practice. Their study found that literacy coaches helped reading teachers learn and integrate new approaches to learning, but coaches also pressured teachers, shaping their perceptions of reading education policy based on personal objectives as opposed to policy design. Subsequently, teachers were encouraged to make substantial changes as policies moved into classrooms. This example of structure-agency theory research demonstrated the way in which teachers were influenced by policy actors who sought to implement instructional practices that are often inconsistent with policy design. Thus, like school leaders, teachers can be placed in circumstances in which they lack the content-specific expertise to assert themselves as knowledgeable instructional leaders and implement policy initiatives that are consistent with policy design (Coburn, 2005b; Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018).

Teacher Autonomy Research

Despite the powerful influence of policy actors, teachers have also been known to act autonomously in the policy implementation process. Implementation studies surrounding responses to high stakes accountability have indicated that teachers exert agency by shifting, narrowing, and expanding instruction based on the nature of assessments. Policies that promote overly ambitious or unfamiliar approaches to assessment have tended to result in superficial change (Diamond, 2007). Teachers also resist implementing policies that require instructional approaches they do not support (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Williamson, 2017).

Williamson (2017) examined how teachers adapted to what they perceived as decontextualized English language arts (ELA) instruction in the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The teachers exerted agency by preparing students for what they perceived as

inauthentic testing requirements while simultaneously designing individualized instruction according to their professional standards. The teachers in Williamson's (2017) study intentionally resisted the predetermined nature of standardized assessment by balancing instruction between the STAAR writing genre (a 26-line timed essay responding to a prompt) and a writing workshop incorporating student choice and independent work time. During the writing workshops, students chose texts on topics of personal interest, were given flexibility to create their own writing prompts, and practiced writing stories from their own perspectives (Williamson, 2017). This is an example of how teachers acted autonomously and advocated for a vision of ELA instruction consistent with their professional standards and pre-existing knowledge.

The implementation studies discussed above shed light on the inherently subjective zone between policy enactment and policy outcomes. As policies move into schools, variability in policy implementation creates an interdependence between policy implementation and outcome studies (Coburn, 2016). To be effective, implementation and outcome studies must be based on understanding of this variability (Levinson et al., 2009). In other words, variations in implementation must be identified to analyze the efficacy of policy initiatives and to examine how variations in policy implementation impact diverse learners (Gabriel, 2020; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

Policymaking Process Studies

Compared to outcome and implementation studies, research on the dynamics of the reading education policymaking process represents a growing – but incomplete – body of knowledge (Alexander & Fox, 2019). Given persistent conflict surrounding reading education, this line of research is of timely importance because it explores the complex, nuanced process of how some ideas about reading instruction (and some researchers) become part of policy initiatives embedded in legislation (Castles et al., 2018). This line of research also explores the processes by which some ideas about reading instruction (and some researchers) become part of policy initiatives embedded in legislation, thereby revealing how particular agendas become prominent in reading education policy agendas (Coburn et al., 2011).

Issue Networks

Dynamics of the reading education policymaking process involve continuously shifting voices and forces. Issue networks involving policy entrepreneurs from professional organizations, teachers' unions, the business and medical communities, political elites, and special interest advocates are integral to the reading education policymaking process (Calfee,

2014; Coburn, 2005a). These powerful actors influence education policy by investing their time, energy, reputation, and money in return for anticipated future gain (McDonnel & Weatherford, 2013). Similarly, membership in the reading community is historically interdisciplinary and fluid, including researchers and policy actors from linguistics, developmental psychology, cognitive science, and special education, in addition to powerful media influencers (Alexander & Fox, 2019; Pearson & Cervetti, 2017).

Currently, these voices and forces are contributing to a revival of the reading wars and substantially influenced legislation related to reading education. As such, this line of research provides timely insight on why and how certain forces facilitate change in reading education policies over time. This insight is needed to support productive relationships between researchers, policy makers and practitioners that can interrupt counterproductive patterns of disinformation and distrust (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

Social Network Analysis, Document Analysis, and Interview Findings

Existing research in the reading education policymaking process was conducted in an exceptionally active period leading up to implementation of RF using social network analysis, document analysis, and interviews with key policy informants (Coburn et al., 2011). Social network analysis research revealed how issue networks influence the reading education policymaking process through professional organizations, teachers' unions, and a host of government and community actors. For example, Coburn (2005a) explored shifts in California's reading policy between 1983 and 1999. She found tremendous change in the network of actors – and the positions being advocated for – between policy eras. The influence of state-level issue networks on reading education policy, however, revealed a key difference. Government actors at the state level were more influential than professional organizations or interest groups because they focused on education policy generally rather than reading as a content area. State-level issue networks were also more focused on policy implementation than the policymaking process (Song & Miskel, 2005). McDaniel et al. (2001), Miskel and Song (2004), and Song and Miskel (2005) found an unusual expansion of the issue network influencing reading education policy in the late 1990's. Their studies identified 131 organizations (e.g., reading professional organizations and teachers unions) actively involved in shaping policy at the national level, but new actors from the business, medical and special education communities, and advocates for children living in poverty were also becoming involved. Of these 131 organizations, the researchers identified 18 organizations and five individuals who were most influential in policy debates (e.g. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, American Federation of Teachers, International Reading Association, Reid Lyon, and Congressman Bill Goodling). Interview data identified this group as

highly influential due to their collaboration skills, formal and informal contacts, ability to disseminate research promoting their viewpoint, and their appearance to policy makers as objective (McDaniel et al., 2001).

Furthermore, Calfee (2014) identified similarly sharp shifts in reading education policy through Reid Lyon's (2006) position as an influential psychologist with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Lyon significantly shaped policy and practice surrounding the NRP, NCLB, and RF. Lyon was chief architect of these policies in which controlled experiments were determined to be the gold standard in education research, and phonological awareness and phonics were essential foundations for reading acquisition. Based on Lyon's guidance, the NRP Report devoted 170 pages to phonological awareness and phonics versus 99 pages to vocabulary and comprehension. In response, the federal government implemented NCLB's $1 billion annual RF program, and the Lyon model was reflected in the 2010 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) early reading foundational skills (Calfee, 2014).

Similar research revealed how policy entrepreneurs influenced education policy by investing their resources in return for anticipated future gain. Availability and perceived usefulness of research and intentions for using alternative justifications (e.g., constituent preferences and political ideology) were found to influence decisions about whether and how to use research-based evidence in the policymaking process. Additionally, factors shaping research use varied because political agendas and policy goals changed as policies developed (McDonnel & Weatherford, 2013). Despite calls for research-based policy, McDonnel and Weatherford (2013) found political elites integrated personal experience, professional expertise, and normative values with other types of evidence in different stages of developing the mathematics and English-language arts (ELA) CCSS.

Thus, research-based evidence is only one resource policy entrepreneurs draw upon in the policymaking process. Even in areas with solid research bases such as early literacy acquisition, the complexity of the policymaking process allows for variable interpretation of findings. The way that problems are defined shapes the solutions proposed, and policy entrepreneurs have been found to select evidence enabling them to define policy problems with preplanned solutions (McDonnel & Weatherford, 2013).

Bertrand et al. (2015) examined dynamics of the education policymaking process by investigating how policy insiders' discursive strategies maintain systemic racism and classism. Through interviews with 50 state policy makers, the authors found three sometimes veiled discourses used to explain educational gaps: 1) social structural inequity, 2) family and community deficits, and 3) teachers' unions and teacher seniority. The structural inequity discourse challenged systemic inequity

by naming factors (e.g., class and economic structure) as having influence on achievement. However, policy insiders used deficit discourses covertly to minimize structural issues, and to advance racist and classist ideas. For example, the family and community deficits discourse maintained the status quo by framing families, communities, and cultures as responsible for inhibiting their own academic achievement. Discourses related to teachers' unions and teacher seniority were used to blame tenured, more experienced teachers' ability to choose school placements in white, middle-class neighborhoods rather than lower socioeconomic status neighborhoods (Bertrand et al., 2015).

Policy insiders who used deficit discourses asserted that the families and communities impacted by inequity caused the inequity. They also used discursive strategies to make inequity appear natural by using substrategies such as obscuring the identity of those negatively impacted by inequity. Despite their typically limited interaction with non-elites, Bertrand et al. (2015) found policy insiders to be highly influential in shaping public opinion through these discourses. They also found a strong socially reproductive influence of public discourse on concrete policy and social structures in the study's main implication that: "'policy insiders' discourses and discursive strategies either limit or expand possibilities for policy changes supportive of educational equity agendas" (Bertrand et al., 2015, p. 23).

In a study on the influence of media on policy making, Welner (2011) analyzed how policy insiders' media ties – and their ideologies – influenced the school choice and accountability movements. This research uncovered a highly influential network of state-level, market-oriented think tanks funded predominately by benefactors with strong media ties (e.g., the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Sarah Scaife Foundation, and the John M. Olin Foundation) that induced major shifts in education policy discussions. While university scholars produce the most research, Welner (2011) found that publications of private think tanks were disproportionately represented in major national newspaper reports, producing a high level of activity influencing the education policymaking process.

The Tennessee Literacy Success Act

Still, powerful issue networks are influencing reading education policy and practice through the SOR movement (MacPhee et al., 2021). Journalists, media influencers, and SOR advocates who lack the expertise to interpret claims about reading achievement are interfering with the teaching of reading by misrepresenting the state of reading education as being in a state of crisis that necessitates legislative action (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). Since 2015, 145 bills addressing reading instruction in public schools have been initiated, as this legislative process is used to sup-

port political agendas that define and mandate a single science of reading as opposed to evidence-based sciences of reading (Reinking et al., 2023).

The Tennessee Literacy Success Act (2021) is a representative example of how issue networks who advocate for the SOR substantially impacted the reading education policymaking process at the state level. In this instance, the Tennessee Department of Education (DOE) initiated a reading instruction program aimed at expanding the state's improved scores on national measures of reading achievement that was not created or implemented through legislation. The original, unlegislated initiative included multiple approaches to teaching phonics within a comprehensive curriculum including language and vocabulary development, background knowledge, and comprehension strategies. The original initiative also included literacy coaches for each elementary school and integrated professional development materials in early literacy instruction. Additionally, as part of the original initiative the DOE consulted with literacy professors and researchers in teacher education to develop tools to differentiate for the needs of individual learners (Reinking et al., 2023).

However, when political leadership changed in the state of Tennessee, the initiative underwent a dramatic about-face. As a result, the Act's final, legislated form cites non-expert media influencers to support its aim of promoting foundational literacy skills, a term that is often a code for a phonics-first ideology associated with the SOR ("TDOE Announces $100 Million Initiative," 2021). In its final form, the Act has been critiqued by scholars of reading research as promoting an overly simplified view of phonics and as subordinating the importance of oral language development, vocabulary, fluency, and motivation (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

This research on the policymaking process illustrates how different people from different political and professional backgrounds generated sharp shifts in reading education policy in relatively short periods of time. Additionally, policy actors identified in this research represent a wide area of expertise, many of which are not related to reading education. These dynamics are an important consideration because they involve voices and forces that influenced public discourse surrounding reading achievement and informed policy makers and practitioners on reading education. If educators are to interrupt counterproductive debates between conflicting orientations to reading education, it is important to distinguish which influential voices and forces are rooted in knowledge and expertise from those which are not (Morrell, 2017; Reinking et al., 2023).

Discussion and Implications

The teaching of reading is, and has always been, a political endeavor (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023; Cremin, 1957). The current resurgence is what literacy scholars have predicted, continued oversimplifications and rival camps symptomatic of reading wars (Reinking et al., 2023;

Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). The resulting distrust and disinformation have diminished meaningful integration of ideas and practices within the field of reading education (Gabriel, 2018). This is not for lack of knowledge. Theory and research over the past half century have been in broad agreement that the goal of literacy development and reading education should always be comprehension, and that stages of learning to read and reading to learn are intertwined throughout reading development (Afflerbach, 2022; Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Spence & Mitra, 2023).

Nevertheless, conflict and confusion have been exacerbated. At the policy level, current federal and state mandates on reading instruction conflict. Federal literacy policy under ESSA demonstrates important progress through its mandate of culturally informed, comprehensive literacy instruction. However, many states are concurrently adopting the SOR in direct conflict with a comprehensive approach (Reinking et al., 2023; Smylie, 2023). Similarly, Covid-related emergency education stabilization funds followed federal Title I-A equity formulas designed to close opportunity gaps, yet many states prioritized these funds for early reading instruction based on SOR, which does not align with the federal equity agenda (ESAA, 2015a; Schwartz, 2021).

These contradictions illustrate the confusing and counterproductive effects of reading wars. Under ESSA, states are required to submit accountability plans to the Department of Education to secure federal funding for school improvement that articulate a plan for comprehensive literacy instruction, which by design adapts to learners' social and cultural needs and balances components of effective reading instruction (Sharp, 2016). States, however, are moving toward literacy plans that focus heavily on SOR, an approach that has been critiqued for not addressing the individual needs of diverse learners (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Reinking et al., 2023). Furthermore, SOR does not incorporate disciplinary literacies or balance components of effective literacy instruction necessary for continued reading and writing success in the upper grades (Afflerbach, 2022; Shanahan, 2020).

Resultantly, evidence-based practices mandated by ESSA are not making their way into practitioners' classrooms (Elleman and Oslund, 2019; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). This should be concerning not only to literacy researchers but also to policy makers, parents, and the public. The ESSA mandate was achieved through a hard fought, years-long policymaking process resulting in an integrated program of historical significance (Heitin, 2016; Murray, 2011, 2015). Fortunately, ESSA reserved funds for an eventual outcome study (ESSA, 2015a). If an ESSA outcome study is conducted in contexts that implement comprehensive literacy instruction with fidelity to the policy mandate, its effects on student achievement could offer historically meaningful insight into assessment and instruction that addresses the complexity of the reading process and meets the needs of all learners. This potential is particularly timely given chang-

es in the policy environment. ESSA's scaled back federal role places increased responsibility on state policies for influencing reading education in productive ways (Sharp, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Today's unique conditions underscore the importance of making the policymaking process understandable and transparent for stakeholders to impact implementation and practice.

Implications

Given the detrimental effects of prolonged conflict, it is incumbent upon all who endeavor to improve reading education to nurture productive relationships between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the public and to ensure governmental groups act based on the best available knowledge (Auckerman & Schuldt, 2021; Goodman, 2014). There exists a significant body of knowledge on how literacy policies move into schools through variations in implementation, and how these variations impact policy outcomes (Coburn, 2016). There are outcome studies on some, but not all, major pieces of reading legislation, and there is a need for more information on dynamics of the policymaking process that occur throughout all stages of policy development (Alexander & Fox, 2019; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

First, as existing implementation research indicates, education policies are experienced differently in different contexts in part due to the impactful role of school leaders and the willingness of teachers to act autonomously. Research indicates teachers do exert agency in policy implementation based on their professional judgement of students' needs (Williamson, 2017). However, small groups of school leaders, principals, and university professors also act as gatekeepers by buffering policy messages based on ideology, pre-existing understandings of instructional approaches, and personal agendas that are inconsistent with policy design (Coburn, 2016). As a result, teachers need the content-specific expertise to identify policies and practices that are inconsistent with policy design and not supported by the corpus of reading research. To this end, teacher preparation programs need to integrate literacy coursework that is empirically grounded in the corpus of reading research and acknowledges the inconvenient complexity of reading development, particularly for diverse learners (Elleman & Oslund, 2019; Milner, 2021). Additionally, school systems need to provide school leaders and teachers with increased, and continuing, content-specific professional learning opportunities to act knowledgeably when they are tasked with understanding and disseminating policy ideas (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012).

Second, existing research on dynamics of the policymaking process reveals how policy trajectories can be guided by relatively few powerful actors who may or may not have expertise in reading education (Calfee, 2014; MacPhee et al., 2021). Similarly, non-expert media influencers

and policy insiders shape public perception of education and influence legislative agendas through their connections, collaboration skills, ability to promote their viewpoint, and their appearance to policy makers as objective (McDonnel & Weatherford, 2013; Bertrand, 2015).

As a result, educators need to be armed with knowledge of how educational policy agendas form, who the influential policy actors are and how they become informed on literacy instruction and assessment, and how contextual forces shape policies (Alexander & Fox, 2019). To this end, teacher preparation programs need to integrate coursework in education policy that will enable educators to inform themselves on the state and federal policies that directly impact their classroom practices and their ability to differentiate for the needs of diverse learners (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). Educators also need to be prepared, and willing, to effectively resist policies which are not created in the best interests of their students, and to object when policies are implemented in ways that are inconsistent with policy design (Goodman, 2014; Paulick et al., 2023).

Third, this research underscores the urgent need for experts in reading instruction to develop the media presence and political engagement necessary to communicate their expertise to teachers, teacher educators, administrators, policy makers, parents, and the public. Yetta Goodman (2014) argued similarly that literacy scholars have an obligation to ensure knowledge from research is being counted, but this will require political sophistication and action to communicate beyond our professional communities and to demand governmental and policy groups act based on the best available knowledge. The equity dimensions of literacy development render it crucial that all parties understand what is at stake when journalists, special interest groups, and policy entrepreneurs contradict the corpus of reading research and interfere with the teaching of reading for personal, political, and financial gain (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). Experts in reading instruction cannot deny a measure of complicity in prolonged reading wars if non-experts are allowed to misinterpret and disseminate their research, as these matters in fields such as medicine and law are the responsibility of certified professionals (Reinking et al., 2023).

These implications emphasize the critical need for educators, teacher educators, and experts in reading education to exert their influence in the literacy policymaking process. These are broad implications which will necessitate organized initiatives, persistence, and cooperation on the part of educators, teacher educators, school systems, policy makers and others who endeavor to improve reading education. The importance of these implications cannot be overstated given the grave personal and societal consequences of low literacy levels, and the timeliness of these implications for the field of reading education.

Conclusion

Literacy policies and their outcomes directly impact public perception of reading education, practitioners' instructional choices, and students' academic achievement and attainment. Thus, understanding the dynamics of the literacy policymaking process, and the equity dimensions therein, is of the utmost importance for all who endeavor to improve reading education. At this critical juncture in the field of literacy, policy has unique potential to transform reading education in a forward-thinking way that acknowledges the deeply complex nature of literacy development (Avineri et al., 2015; Morrell, 2017).

Scholars from multiple domains reinforce this call for deeper analyses of achievement patterns by all educational stakeholders to examine which actions, by whom, and in what situations impact children's academic attainment (Pollock, 2008; Shannon, 2014; Benavot, 2015). Increasing cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity also demand this more robust and socially just perspective on reading education policy and practice (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021). Most crucially, these demands require increased intellectual awareness, political activism, and media engagement in a collaborative effort to improve the life trajectories of all learners (Milner, 2021; Morrell, 2017).

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ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL-RELATED COVID-19 CONCERNS AMONG PARENTS OF SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN – UNITED STATES, JANUARY 2021

COVID-19-related disruptions to K-12 schooling were documented throughout the pandemic, along with parental concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on children's education. This study describes school-related COVID-19 concerns among parents of school-aged children across the United States in January 2021. Cross-sectional data (n=916) were analyzed from parents of children enrolled in public or private K-12 schools through an opt-in internet panel survey. Weighted prevalence estimates were calculated based on the U.S. Census Current Population Survey and differences were examined by race/ethnicity. Analyses were performed using SAS, version 9.4, with a significance level of $p<0.05$. Almost half of parents (46.4%) reported their children received virtual-only learning, 24.0% in-person only learning, and 29.6% combined in-person/virtual learning during fall 2020. School learning mode differed by parental race/ethnicity ($p = 0.01$). Parents reported concerns (somewhat/very concerned) about educational quality (85.2%) and disruption to routines due to virtual learning (70.8%), as well as children contracting COVID-19 at school (82.9%). Parent concerns about children contracting COVID-19 at school differed across racial and ethnic groups ($p = 0.03$), with a higher proportion of non-Hispanic Black parents (94.0%; $p = 0.003$) reporting concerns than non-Hispanic white parents (80.2%). Results document racial and ethnic differences in parental concern about the pandemic's impact on children's school experiences. Intentional monitoring and understanding of parental concerns may help education and public health leaders provide more effective supports for students and families as new school-related emergencies arise.

Keywords: Schools; parental concerns; COVID-19; racial and ethnic differences; educational leadership; emergency preparedness and communication

Introduction

Beginning in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions in schools across the U.S., with school closures affecting over 50 million K-12 students nationwide (Zviedrite et al., 2021). For many school districts, closures continued into the 2020-2021 school year, pro-

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longing pandemic disruptions and parental concerns about virtual learning (Oster et al., 2021). For example, a survey fielded in July 2020 found that most parents were highly concerned about the impact of school closures on the quality of their children's education and daily routines (Gilbert et al., 2020). Though these concerns were shared by parents across racial and ethnic groups (Gilbert et al., 2020), by September 2020, non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic students were found to have less access to in-person learning opportunities compared with their non-Hispanic white peers, placing them at greater risk for poor learning and mental health outcomes associated with prolonged virtual learning (Oster et al., 2021). For those tasked with making decisions about school reopening at state and local levels, such concerns had to be weighed alongside those related to COVID-19 transmission in schools.

In the same July 2020 study, Gilbert and colleagues also investigated parental concerns about COVID-19 transmission. Their findings highlighted racial and ethnic differences in concerns about schools' ability to implement COVID-19 prevention measures ahead of the new school year, with Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Alaska Native, multiracial, and parents of other non-Hispanic race or ethnicity reporting significantly higher concerns compared with white parents. Fewer non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic parents agreed that schools should reopen compared with non-Hispanic white parents, and most non-Hispanic Black parents were uncomfortable with schools opening at full capacity in the fall. In contrast, two-thirds of non-Hispanic white parents agreed that the experience of being in school was more important for students, despite ongoing COVID-19 concerns (Gilbert et al., 2020). Given the disproportionate burden of COVID-19 infection on racial and ethnic minority communities at the time the survey was fielded (Azar et al., 2020), it is possible that racial and ethnic minority parents perceived higher risk for COVID-19 infection and related negative health outcomes than non-Hispanic white parents (White et al, 2021; Gilbert et al, 2020).

Taken together, the literature reveals what can be viewed as competing concerns of parents leading up to the start of the 2020-2021 school year — their children experiencing COVID-19 transmission at school versus their children experiencing continued virtual instruction that might have a direct detrimental effect on educational outcomes and indirectly affect children's health. Despite significant contextual changes that occurred during the 2020-2021 school year (i.e., the gradual reopening of schools for in-person and hybrid learning; emergence of new COVID-19 variants), the extent to which these concerns evolved over time, and for whom, has yet to be fully explored.

The rapid and ongoing evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic and other school-related emergencies highlights the importance of monitoring and reporting on community concerns, including those of parents of school-aged children. Understanding where concerns converge and dif-

fer within communities may help to inform communication and decision-making across multiple levels. To support continued understanding of parental concerns at different timepoints during the pandemic, this study builds on existing research to assess the evolution of parental concerns throughout the 2020-2021 school year. Concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on educational quality, disruptions to daily living, and transmission at school are described and discussed, both overall and by parent racial and ethnic groups.

Methods

Data Collection

Data were collected from three online CARAVAN omnibus national surveys conducted among U.S. adults during January 13-17, 2021 by ENGINE Insights (Big Village, 2024), on behalf of Porter Novelli Public Services. Each wave surveyed approximately 1,000 adults and quota sampling was conducted to identify potential opt-in respondents from Cint Exchange (2024). Respondents were informed that their answers were being used for market research and that they could refuse to answer any question; upon survey completion, respondents received cash-equivalent reward points (worth approximately $10) for their participation. Statistical weighting was used during analysis to match the 2019 edition of the Current Population Survey proportions, so the sample represented the U.S. population by sex, age, region, race/ethnicity, and education. Respondents were eligible for this study if they were aged ≥18 years, had not participated in the previous 20 survey administration waves to avoid sampling the same participants for multiple surveys, and had a school-aged child living in the household. While ENGINE Insights is not subject to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Institutional Review Board review, they do adhere to all professional standards and codes of conduct set forth by the Insights Association. This activity was reviewed by the CDC and was conducted consistent with applicable federal law (i.e.,45 C.F.R. part 46; 21 C.F.R. part 56; 42 U.S.C. Sect. 241(d), 5 U.S.C. Sect. 552a, 44 U.S.C. Sect. 3501 et seq).

Instrument

Surveys were administered online in English and included items to measure parental concerns about disruption to daily routines due to virtual school, internet access for virtual schooling, and overall quality of education during the pandemic (Supplement A). Response options were dichotomized into very/somewhat concerned and not very/not at all concerned for each measure, except enough internet access for virtual school (strongly agree/somewhat agree and strongly disagree/somewhat agree).

Additionally, parents were asked about concerns related to their child(ren) contracting COVID-19 at school and bringing COVID-19 infection home from school during fall 2020. Parental sociodemographic variables included sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, household income, geographical region, and children's grade level and school learning mode (Table 1). Mutually exclusive grade levels were created for statistical analysis (K-4, 5-8, 9-12, and multiple grades [any combination of grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12]). We created three categories for school learning mode: (1) all children in household attended school in person only; (2) all children in household attended school virtual-only; and (3) household had combined in-person and virtual learning (i.e., one or more children in a mixed in-person and virtual setting; one or more children in virtual-only and one or more children in in-person; and/or a combination of the two).

Statistical Analysis

All analyses were conducted using the statistical analysis system (version 9.4; SAS Institute). Weighted prevalence estimates and 95% confidence intervals (CI) were calculated for overall differences (chi-squared statistics) and by race/ethnicity (chi-squared pairwise comparisons). Statistical tests were considered significant if $p<0.05$.

Results

Among 916 parents with school-aged children living in the household, 50.6% were female (n=430); 59.5% were non-Hispanic white (n=655), 11.3% were non-Hispanic Black (n=83), 23.2% were Hispanic (n=137), and 6.0% were Other non-Hispanic racial groups (including Native American or Alaska Native, Asian, multiracial, and other racial groups [n=41]; see Table 1). Sample demographics closely align with the U.S. population at large, by both race/ethnicity and household income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Approximately one third of parents (30.3%) had children in multiple grade categories (any combination of grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12); 30.5% had children in kindergarten through grade 4 only; 20.2% had children in grades 5–8 only, and 19.1% had children in grades 9–12 only. Almost half of parents reported all children in their household attended virtual learning only (46.4%); whereas 29.6% of parents had combined in-person and virtual learning in their household, and 24.0% had a child attend in-person-only learning. School learning mode differed by parental race/ethnicity (Table 2). We found significant differences across learning modes of children reported by non-Hispanic Black parents (p=0.003) and Hispanic parents (p=0.0004) compared with non-Hispanic white parents.

Overall, most parents (85.2%) were concerned (very or somewhat) about the quality of their children's education being negatively affected due to the pandemic and disruptions to daily routines due to virtual

learning (70.8%) (Table 2). Twelve percent of parents did not have enough internet access for their children to attend virtual only learning. No differences were found between racial and ethnic groups. Overall, concerns about COVID-19 transmission to their child in school were also prevalent among 82.9% of parents and differed across racial and ethnic groups (p=0.03). Specifically, concerns were more prevalent among non-Hispanic Black parents (94.0%, CI: 88.8-99.2, p=0.003) followed by Hispanic/Latino (85.0%, CI: 78.9-91.1, p=0.198), Other racial groups non-Hispanic (81.1%, CI: 68.5-93.6, p=0.889), and non-Hispanic white parents (80.1%, CI: 76.8-83.5, ref) (Figure 1). See Online Supplement B for results of pairwise chi squared tests in table format.

Discussion

Administered approximately five months into the 2020-2021 school year, this study provides further evidence of school-related COVID-19 concerns among parents of school-aged children during a time when many schools were reopening for in-person instruction and others continued offering hybrid or virtual learning (Parks et al., 2021). Our findings indicate that as of January 2021, most parents remained concerned about COVID-19 affecting the quality of their children's education and about virtual learning disrupting daily routines. Prevalence of concerns were consistent across racial and ethnic groups and persisted even as an increasing number of schools transitioned operations from virtual to in-person learning between fall 2020 and spring 2021 (Gilbert et al., 2020; Parks et al., 2021). This survey was administered when many U.S. communities faced high levels of transmission and families navigated changing school policies related to COVID-19 exposures, cases, and outbreaks, including temporary school building closures and shifts to virtual learning. These factors coupled with the emergence of COVID-19 variants and lack of vaccine eligibility for school-aged children may have contributed to enduring parental concerns about quality of education and disruption to routines and influenced concerns about COVID-19 transmission in school, even as schools began to reopen for in-person learning (CDC, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020).

Consistent with previous studies reporting on primary student learning modes amidst the pandemic (e.g., Oster et al., 2021; Verlenden et al., 2021), differences were observed in learning mode between children of non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic parents compared with children of non-Hispanic white parents. Non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic parents more frequently reported having children in virtual learning. This suggests that while most parents were concerned about disruptions due to virtual learning, there are demographic differences in who experienced such disruptions and for how long. Research related to racial and ethnic disparities in learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic points to high

levels of community transmission in urban school districts as a potential explanation for increased prevalence of virtual learning among racial and ethnic minority students (Oster et al., 2021). Emerging evidence also suggests that virtual learning can contribute to poorer academic outcomes and worsening mental health for children and families, as well as reduced access to school meal services (Dorn et al., 2020; Oster et al., 2021; Verlenden et al., 2021). Differences in access to in-person learning may worsen educational and health disparities among racial and ethnic minority students in the U.S. (Dorn et al., 2020; White et al., 2021).

Across all groups, the prevalence of parental concerns about their children contracting COVID-19 in school remained high, and in particular, among racial and ethnic minority parents. Non-Hispanic white parents had the lowest prevalence of concern. In prior research, Gilbert et al. (2020) found that racial and ethnic minority parents were more concerned about schools' ability to effectively implement COVID-19 prevention measures than non-Hispanic white parents, which may help explain persisting concerns about school-related COVID-19 transmission and ongoing uncertainty about the safety of in-person learning. Further, racial and ethnic minority populations have historically experienced disproportionate illness, hospitalization, and death during public health emergencies (Dee et al., 2011; Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2017; Azar et al., 2020), which can exacerbate concern and reduce trust that systems (e.g., schools) will adequately protect the health of community members during emergencies (Akintobi et al., 2020). In the context of COVID-19, disproportionate rates of COVID-19 cases, hospitalization, and mortality among racial and ethnic minority populations in the U.S. may contribute to differences in observed concerns, as well as differences in virtual learning (Karaca-Mandic et al, 2021; Oster et al, 2021; White et al., 2021).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. This incentivized opt-in internet panel of English-speaking adults may not fully represent concerns of those with limited English literacy or those without internet access. Sampling bias is also a risk with online panel surveys; parents who opted into this survey may be more active online or have significantly different opinions about COVID-19 than those who did not respond. Data were also self-reported, and responses may be subject to social desirability bias. Administered in January 2021, the responses reflect a period during which the U.S. experienced elevated SARS-CoV-2 cases and vaccine availability was limited (CDC, 2020). Because some families had more than one child living in the household, some parent responses may not reflect variance in concerns by each child's grade or school environment. Further, due to sample size, this study did not adjust for other factors, such as socioeconomic status, urbanicity, or geography, which might also affect parental

concerns about COVID-19 and schools.

Implications for Schools

Irrespective of contextual changes that occurred between July 2020 and January 2021, our findings reveal a continuation of parent concerns regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their children's school experiences, as well as racial and ethnic differences in concerns about school safety. Since data were collected for this study, schools have transitioned back to in-person learning while navigating ongoing uncertainty about potential new SARS-COV-2 variants, and vaccines have emerged as a critical strategy to prevent severe disease and hospitalization and reduce transmission. CDC continues to provide resources and strategies that schools can use to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and other infections in school environments (CDC, 2024). As such, identifying sustainable practices for documenting parental attitudes, concerns, and experiences remains critical to inform communication strategies and decisions that can potentially support effective responses to parent concerns and future school-related emergencies for leaders in education and public health alike.

In this study, non-Hispanic Black parents reported heightened concerns about children getting COVID-19 in school. Continuing school practices that facilitate infectious disease prevention, and ensuring schools have adequate resources to do so, can reduce school-related transmission and may foster confidence among parents regarding the safety of school environments (CDC, 2024; REMS, 2022; Dawson et al, 2021; Doyle et al., 2021). Proactive communication from leaders and decision-makers across multiple levels (i.e., school, state, and local levels) about the steps being taken to protect the health of students including reducing infectious disease transmission may also boost parent confidence in strategies. Likewise, establishing clear and accessible mechanisms for parents to express concerns and for schools to respond to concerns and communicate with families can facilitate improved trust and engagement (Hoover, Heiger-Bernays, Ojha, & Pennell, 2020; Szilagyi et al., 2021). Such actions are critical for leaders to mitigate mistrust of educational institutions among racial and ethnic minority youth and families (Hochschild & Shen, 2014). Creating digital platforms for parent discussions along with email, social media, school blogs, and mobile apps have been identified as tools to support communication (Beecher & Buzhardt, 2016; Pavlakis, Conry, & del Rosal, 2019). Such strategies have the potential to strengthen school-family partnerships by elevating the concerns and voices of all parents, while also ensuring parents and families with the highest need are prioritized.

Findings from this study revealed that most parents had concerns about the potential impact of the pandemic on their children's education, as well as about COVID-19 transmission at school. Understanding parental concerns can help strengthen the continued efforts of schools to im-

plement and communicate about emergency response measures and potentially foster parent confidence in school-related decision making and leadership (Akintobi et al., 2020; CDC, 2020; REMS, 2022). In developing emergency response plans and communication strategies, school and district leaders may consider leveraging partnerships with trusted community voices (e.g., healthcare providers, religious leaders, parent-teacher organizations) and experts to communicate key messages and engage with diverse communities (Akintobi et al., 2020; REMS, 2022). Further research on best practices for establishing community-informed public health emergency communication strategies in educational settings is warranted. As new infectious diseases emerge and other school-related emergencies arise, intentional monitoring of and response to parental concerns remains important.

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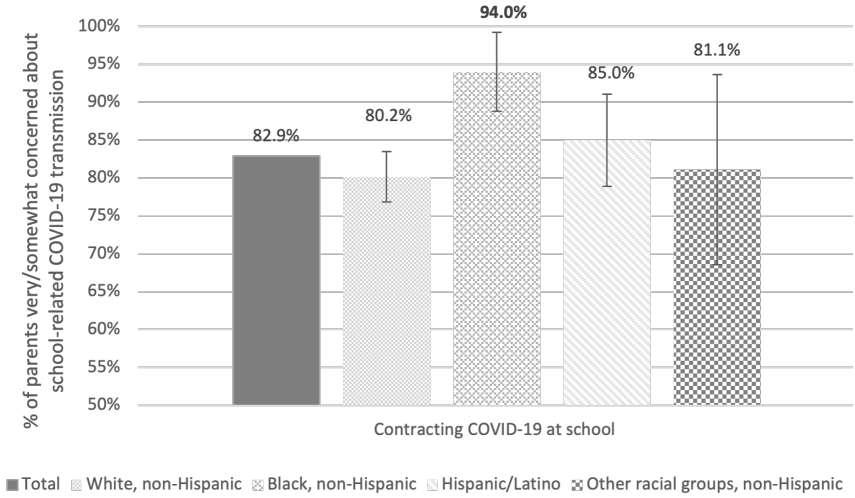
Figure 1. Parents' concerns* about their child(ren) attending school and cntracting COVID-19 by racial and ethnic group †



N = 916

*Respondents were asked about how concerned (very, somewhat, not very, or not at all) they were regarding: Contracting COVID-19 at School: "Your child attending school and as a result contracting COVID-19""

†Pairwise chi squared tests reveal significant differences in parental concerns about their child contracting COVID-19 at school between non-Hispanic Black parents compared with the reference group. Bolded value denotes a p-value < 0.05. Appendix B includes results of pairwise chi squared tests in table format.

§ Reference group

¶ Other racial groups, non-Hispanic includes participants who identified as Native American and Alaska Natives, Asians, multiracial, and other.

Supplement A: School-related COVID-19 concerns among parents of school-aged children: Survey items, *ENGINE Insights,* January 2021

Item	Response
During the previous (fall) school period, did any of your children in grades K-12...? ***[Select as many as apply]***	01. Attend school in-person full-time 02. Attend school at home (virtual learning) full-time 03. Attend school both in-person and at home (virtual learning)
Thinking about this school year, how concerned are you about the following right now? [Select one answer for each] • The quality of your children's education being negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic • The disruption to your daily routines if virtual (at-home) learning is necessary • Your child attending school and as a result contracting COVID-19	01. Very concerned 02. Somewhat concerned 03. Not very concerned 04. Not at all concerned
How much do you agree or disagree with the following? • *We have enough acces to internet services for my child(ren) to attend school virtually*	01. Strongly agree 02. Somewhat agree 03. Somewhat disagree 04. Strongly disagree

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of parents with school-aged children and their child(ren)-ENGINE Insights, United States, January 2021

Parent	*N (%)*	*Parent*	*N (%)*
Overall	916 (100.00)		
Sex			
Female	430 (50.6)	Male	486 (49.4)
Age			
18-34	301 (33.8)	35-64	601 (64.1)
65+	14 (2.2)		
Race/Ethnicity			
Black, non-Hispanic	83 (11.3)	White, non-Hispanic	655 (59.5)
Hispanic†	137 (23.2)	Other racial groups, non-Hispanic§	41 (6.0)
Education			
Less than high school	209 (29.6)	Some college or technical school	190 (22.9)
Bachelor's degree or higher	517 (47.5)		
Household Income			
Less than or equal to $34,999	193 (26.8)	$35,000 - $49,999	98 (12.0)
$50,000 - $74,999	132 (14.7)	$75,000 - $99,999	117 (11.9)
Greater or equal to $100,000	376 (34.6)		
U.S. Region¶			
Northeast	170 (16.8)	Midwest	175 (19.5)
South	349 (37.8)	West	222 (25.9)
Child			
Grade Level			
K-4th	287 (30.5)	5th - 8th	185 (20.2)
9th - 12th	159 (19.1)	Multiple grade categories**	285 (30.3)
Mode of School Attendance			
In-person only	227 (24.0)	Virtual only	411 (46.4)
Combined in-person and virtual	278 (29.6)		

*Unweighted N; weighted percentages (%),Statistical weighting was used during analysis to match the 2019 edition of the Current Population Survey proportions, so the sample represented the U.S. population by sex, age, region, race/ethnicity, and education.

†Parents were asked: Do you consider yourself to be of Hispanic/Spanish/Latino descent? [Yes, No]

§Other, non-Hispanic includes participants who identified as Native American or Alaska Native, Asian, multiracial, other.

¶States categorized into four U.S. census regions: Northeast: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont; Midwest: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin; South: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia; West: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming.

**Includes any combination of grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12.

Table 2. Prevalance of parent reported school learning mode for their child(ren) and school-related concerns about COVID-19 by race/ethnicity — ENGINE Insights, United States, 2021

	Total	White, non-Hispanic*		Black, non-Hispanic	
	N (%)**	N (%)	CI	N (%)	CI
School learning mode					
In-person only	227 (24.0)	179 (28.1)	24.3, 31.9	17 (22.2)	12.7, 31.6
Virtual only	411 (46.4)	264 (39.0)	35.0, 43.0	49 (58.7)	47.8, 69.5
Combined	278 (29.6)	212 (32.9)	29.0, 36.8	17 (19.2)	10.7, 27.6
School-related concerns¶					
Quality of education					
Very/somewhat concerned	748 (85.2)	556 (84.0)	80.9, 87.2	74 (89.6)	83.0, 96.2
Not very/not at all concerned	132 (14.8)	99 (15.9)	12.8, 19.1	9 (10.4)	3.8, 16.9
Disruption to daily routines due to virtual learning					
Very/somewhat concerned	652 (70.8)	464 (69.4)	65.5, 73.2	61 (72.8)	62.9, 82.6
Not very/not at all concerned	264 (29.2)	191 (30.6)	26.8, 34.5	22 (27.2)	17.4, 37.0
Internet access					
Not enough for virtual school	116 (12.4)	82 (11.8)	9.2, 14.4	12 (15.5)	7.3, 23.7
Enough for virtual school	800 (87.6)	573 (88.1)	85.6, 90.7	71 (84.5)	76.3, 92.7
School-related transmission					
Child contracting COVID-19 at school					
Very/somewhat concerned	758 (82.9)	531 (80.2)	76.8, 83.5	78 (94.0)	88.8, 99.2
Not very/not at all concerned	158 (17.1)	124 (19.8)	16.5, 23.2	5 (6.0)	0.8, 11.2

Abbreviations: CI = confidence interval; COVID-19 = coronavirus disease 2019.
*Reference group
†Other racial groups, non-Hispanic includes participants who identified as Native American and Alaska Natives, Asians, multiracial, and other.
§ Chi squared p-value denotes differences present between racial groups. Pairwise chi squared tests reveal significant differences in school learning mode between children of non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic parents compared with the reference group. Bolded values denote a p-value < 0.05. Appendix B includes results of pairwise chi squared tests in table format.

Hispanic/Latino		Other racial groups, non-Hispanic†		
N (%)	CI	N (%)	CI	Chi Squared§ p-value
				p=0.01
24 (16.2)	10.1, 22.2	7 (17.1)	5.0, 29.2	
74 (56.9)	48.5, 65.3	24 (56.6)	40.5, 72.7	
39 (26.9)	19.5, 34.3	10 (26.3)	11.7, 40.9	
				p=0.41
119 (87.5)	82.0, 93.0	35 (80.1)	66.0, 94.2	
18 (12.5)	7.0, 18.0	6 (19.9)	5.8, 34.1	
				p=0.62
101 (74.4)	67.0, 81.8	26 (67.0)	52.1, 81.8	
36 (25.6)	18.2, 33.0	15 (33.0)	18.2, 47.9	
				p=0.71
19 (13.2)	7.6, 18.9	3 (8.7)	0.0, 18.0	
118 (86.8)	81.1, 92.4	38 (91.3)	82.0, 100.0	
				p=0.03
116 (85.0)	78.9, 91.1	33 (81.1)	68.5, 93.6	
21 (15.0)	8.9, 21.1	8 (18.9)	6.3, 31.5	

Supplement B: Reported school learning mode and parental concerns about school-related COVID-19 by race/ethnicity – ENGINE Insights, United States, 2021

	Total	White, non-Hispanic*		Black, non-Hispanic		
	N (%)††	N (%)	CI	N (%)	CI	Chi squared p-value
School learning mode						0.003**
In-person only	227 (24.0)	179 (28.1)	24.3, 31.9	17 (22.2)	12.7, 31.6	
Virtual only	411 (46.4)	264 (39.0)	35.0, 43.0	49 (58.7)	47.8, 69.5	
Combined	278 (29.6)	212 (32.9)	29.0, 36.8	17 (19.2)	10.7, 27.6	
School-related concerns§						
Quality of education						0.188
Very/somewhat concerned	748 (85.2)	556 (84.0)	80.9, 87.2	74 (89.6)	83.0, 96.2	
Not very/not at all concerned	132 (14.8)	99 (15.9)	12.8, 19.1	9 (10.4)	3.8, 16.9	
Disruption to daily routines due to virtual learning						0.535
Very/somewhat concerned	652 (70.8)	464 (69.4)	65.5, 73.2	61 (72.8)	62.9, 82.6	
Not very/not at all concerned	264 (29.2)	191 (30.6)	26.8, 34.5	22 (27.2)	17.4, 37.0	
Internet access					0.359	
Not enough for virtual school	116 (12.4)	82 (11.8)	9.2, 14.4	12 (15.5)	7.3, 23.7	
Enough for virtual school	800 (87.6)	573 (88.1)	85.6, 90.7	71 (84.5)	76.3, 92.7	
School-related transmission¶						
Child contracting COVID-19 at school						0.003**
Very/somewhat concerned	758 (82.9)	531 (80.2)	76.8, 83.5	78 (94.0)	88.8, 99.2	
Not very/not at all concerned	158 (17.1)	124 (19.8)	16.5, 23.2	5 (6.0)	0.8, 11.2	

Abbreviations: CI = confidence interval; COVID-19 = coronavirus disease 2019
*Reference group
†Other racial groups, non-Hispanic includes participants who identified as Native American and Alaska Natives, Asians, multiracial, and other.
§Respondents were asked to report concerns related to: 1) Quality of Education: "The quality of your children's education being negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic;" 2) Disruption to daily routines: "The disruption to your daily routines if virtual (at-home) learning is necessary;" 3) Internet Access: "We have enough access to

Hispanic/Latino			Other racial groups, non-Hispanic†		
N (%)	CI	Chi squared p-value	N (%)	CI	Chi squared p-value
		0.0004**			0.104
24 (16.2)	10.1, 22.2		7 (17.1)	5.0, 29.2	
74 (56.9)	48.5, 65.3		24 (56.6)	40.5, 72.7	
39 (26.9)	19.5, 34.3		10 (26.3)	11.7, 40.9	
		0.314			0.560
119 (87.5)	82.0, 93.0		35 (80.1)	66.0, 94.2	
18 (12.5)	7.0, 18.0		6 (19.9)	5.8, 34.1	
		0.254			0.754
101 (74.4)	67.0, 81.8		26 (67.0)	52.1, 81.8	
36 (25.6)	18.2, 33.0		15 (33.0)	18.2, 47.9	
		0.650			0.570
19 (13.2)	7.6, 18.9		3 (8.7)	0.0, 18.0	
118 (86.8)	81.1, 92.4		38 (91.3)	82.0, 100.0	
		0.198			0.889
116 (85.0)	78.9, 91.1		33 (81.1)	68.5, 93.6	
21 (15.0)	8.9, 21.1		8 (18.9)	6.3, 31.5	

internet services for my child(ren) to attend school virtually"

¶Respondents were asked to report concerns related to: Contracting COVID-19 at School: "Your child attending school and as a result contracting COVID-19"

**Denotes a p-value < 0.05 based on pairwise chi squared test.

††Unweighted N; weighted percentages (%), Statistical weighting was used during analysis to match the 2019 edition of the Current Population Survey proportions, so the sample represented the U.S. population by sex, age, region, race/ethnicity, and education.

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