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"WE MIGHT WELL HAVE VIEWED IT AS AN
ACT OF WAR": THE NORMALIZATION OF
EXCLUSION IN THE DISCOURSE OF
AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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AS AN ACT OF WAR":
THE NORMALIZATION OF EXCLUSION IN THE
DISCOURSE OF AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

by

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B.A., English, Rutgers College, 1994
M.A., English, William Paterson University, 2001

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the dominant ideology/discourse of educational reform through a critical discourse analysis of federal education reform documents with the goal of defining the discourse that naturalizes the exclusion of students of color and working class students from educational opportunity. The focus of the research is modern educational reform (1983 – present), which began with *A Nation at Risk*, the Reagan-era report within which the fear and blame aspects of modern reform discourse are created. Also within *A Nation at Risk* can be seen the advent of standardized testing discourse as we know it today.

First, I clarify the political and discursive context of *A Nation at Risk* by examining four major Ronald Reagan speeches, and I identify the IDFs common to all four speeches to define the discourse of Reaganism as a whole. Then, I perform a CDA of the *Nation at Risk* report to determine how the report functions within the larger political agenda and discursive style of the Reagan administration. I thus define the IDFs of reform discourse

as created by *A Nation at Risk*. I then trace the discourse created by *A Nation at Risk* through all federal educational reform legislation from 1983 to present. Most federal educational reform legislation takes the form of reauthorizations of *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, the most recent of which is the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016*. Each reauthorization increasingly illustrates the tenacity of the discourse created by *A Nation at Risk* and demonstrates that the 1983 report shifted the focus of *ESEA* from the creation of equity in public schooling to an openly oppressive political agenda aimed at othering and excluding the very demographics that *ESEA* was designed to protect.

Finally, I explore the implications of the study. I comment on how knowledge of the *IDFs* of reform discourse can inform the creation of a critical counter-discourse that can explicitly challenge the oppressive function of schooling. I also place reform discourse in the context of the modern crisis of mass incarceration, which began in the Reagan era, and comment on the connection between those two phenomena.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I. Background to the Study: An Historical Perspective of American Ideas about Education and Schooling

American educational institutions prior to the American Revolution served a far different function than modern public schooling. The three basic types of education included basic literacy and numeracy instruction (taught in the home, in church, or through apprenticeships), and colleges and academies, which both taught a classical curriculum beyond the elementary level but to two different social groups. Both colleges and academies offered the rough equivalent of a high school education today, and both were affiliated with churches. The three types of schools did not form a sequence, and basic literacy – however it was gained – was usually the only admission requirement for colleges and academies, along with being male. Although colleges and academies provided a degree, the degree did not lead to a vocation, and most students dropped out prior to earning it (McNeil, 1988). The only professions for which a college degree was necessary were the ministry and school teaching – even medicine and law were taught through apprenticeship. At this time there was near ethnic homogeneity in America, although social status did determine one's access to formal education to some extent, as there were fees associated with attendance at colleges and academies (Collins, 1979).

In the more secular climate that followed the American Revolution, local townships, influenced by the Jeffersonian ideal of universal education for citizenship, began creating free public elementary schools that were not tied to churches. Thomas

Jefferson believed that education – specifically as a means of obtaining literacy and self-government - should be free and accessible to all American citizens in order to resist tyranny and create a robust and functional democracy (Gilreath, 1999). Clearly, as the definition of a citizen in the late eighteenth century included neither women nor people of color, the term “universal” applied only to white men; the revolutionary part of Jefferson’s vision was that white men *regardless of socioeconomic status* should have access to whatever degree of education they desired. The purpose of public education in the Jeffersonian sense did not include obtaining a credential, such as a diploma, that was not considered to be a prerequisite for adult life, or preparing to enter the workforce, as training for work still took the form of apprenticeship and not schooling in literacy or history (McNeil, 1988). Rather, Jefferson espoused education as a path to enlightenment and a necessary component of democracy.

Jefferson’s role as a slave-owner is often treated as an unfortunate footnote in the story of the origin of American public education, but it is central to the legacy and present function of our public schools. American slave-owners widely believed that slaves were more docile when they were kept ignorant, and they lived in fear that their slaves would rise up against them if they were to become literate. This fear led to legislation that made it a crime to teach a slave to read, and such legislation was widespread in Southern states. Literacy became synonymous with freedom in early American ideology: literacy was a path to intellectual freedom for whites, and when applied to blacks, that freedom meant the end of American slavery, and therefore of the American economic status quo. It was entirely essential for Jefferson to rationalize the

idea that “universal” education meant education for all whites, and he did so repeatedly throughout his life by writing of the innate physical and intellectual inferiority of black people (Oakes, 1999). Thus, at its onset, the American ideal of public education was entirely dependent upon the perpetuation of white supremacy.

Jefferson’s writings regarding Native Americans are similarly disturbing: although he was fascinated by Native people and believed Native *individuals* to be in some ways equal to whites, he considered Native *culture* as a whole to be savagery and called for the extermination of any Native people who resisted the expansion of the frontier (Deloria, 1998; Grinde, 1999). To my knowledge, there was no practical discussion of the inclusion of Native people in “universal” education, even as a method of assimilation. Despite Jefferson’s open admiration and academic study of Native American people, he was clear that there was no room for Native American culture in the American future. Jeffersonian “universal” education, then, was also predicated upon the assumption of cultural extermination.¹

Amidst a massive influx of ethnic aliens, which began with Irish Catholics in the 1830s, the cause of public education began to be adopted by groups of upper-class, Protestant professionals who argued of the need to preserve a traditional moral culture. Public schooling began to be used as a way to assimilate waves of immigrant working-

¹ The eventual creation of Indian boarding schools, which had the overt purpose of assimilating Native people into white culture, fulfilled Jefferson’s vision of the extermination of Native culture, often through means so brutal that the schools were agents of genocide, accompanied by on-campus cemeteries (Adams, 1995; Child, 2000; Dejong, 2007; Lomawaima, 1995; Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Spring, 2004; Trafzer & Keller, 2006).

class youth into Anglo Protestant culture. This led to the development of “reform schools” as a way to control “criminal” immigrant youth, which led to the development of compulsory attendance laws. After the Civil War, as tensions continued to build between Anglo Protestants and increasing numbers of immigrants, compulsory attendance laws became commonplace, and schooling as a mechanism of assimilation and control was on the rise (Collins, 1979).

The advent of elementary compulsory attendance laws was quickly followed by the creation of secondary education, or high schools, which served the primary purpose of socialization. High schools offered a liberal arts curriculum that was similar to that available in colleges, and both high schools and colleges drew from the same age range. The idea of grade levels and yearly promotion from one grade to the next did not take hold until the 1870s, and this structure necessitated standardization of instruction as well as unification of large schools to take the place of the one-room schoolhouse. With larger schools, compulsory attendance, yearly promotion, and standardization of curriculum came school principals and superintendents; the bureaucratization of public education, which characterizes American public schools today, was firmly in place by the turn of the century (Collins, 1979; McNeil, 1988). School administrators and eventually locally-elected school boards provided an avenue for the politically powerful to have a great deal of influence over public education. As this shift happened, high schools and colleges became distinct from one another, and the elementary/secondary/post-secondary sequence, along with placement based upon age, began to emerge (Collins, 1979).

As early Industrialists became influential in politics – and therefore on school boards – public schools began to take on the role of the training and sorting mechanism that fed into American industry (McNeil, 1988). It is significant that American taxpayer dollars began to cover the costs of factory training for the benefit of private enterprise – the purpose of schooling shifted further as it became a vital tool for capitalism. Schools became overt agents of social control, replacing home culture with dominant American values and sorting students into strata that mirrored their eventual roles in the hierarchy of industry. Students were invariably tracked into the same strata as their parents, reproducing social status rather than offering a ladder to higher levels of opportunity.

II. Key Terms: Education, Schooling, White Supremacy, and Educational Reform

These developments – bureaucratization, politicization, and appropriation for capitalist aims – ineffably altered the overall structure and function of public education, making Jeffersonian “education for emancipation” a near impossibility. This is an idea to which I will return later in my argument. At this point, I would like to suggest that if the term “education” can be applied to the idea of learning for emancipation, then the term “schooling” can be applied to the reproduction of social class, the indoctrination into dominant American values and capitalist ideology, and the assimilation into white middle-class culture, which were and, I will argue, continue to be the primary functions of our public schools.

I would like to quickly note that the preceding section was not meant to be an exhaustive history of American public schooling. Much of the generalizations contained

within apply to white males; if we were to follow the history of schooling from the perspective of Black and other non-white people, or from the perspective of women or queer folks, a much more complex history would take shape, one that is larger than the scope of this short historical overview. However, as my own theoretical framework is a critical one, race and class are in fact central to my examination of the oppressive aspects of public schooling, points to which I will return often throughout this study.

Additionally, although I do not often directly approach the systems of oppression of patriarchy and hetero-normalcy within my work, implicit within the social phenomenon of white supremacy is an overwhelmingly patriarchal and homophobic ideology (Daniels, 1997). Additionally, white supremacy intersects with capitalism in ways that I will discuss more fully throughout this study. Thus, when I use the term “white supremacy” or “whiteness” to refer to dominant, naturalized ideology, I am including patriarchy, homophobia, and class-based oppression as necessary aspects of that dominance.

I would also like to specify the definition of “educational reform,” and be clear that there have been and continue to be successful student-centered, classroom-level reform efforts that aim to undo dominant power paradigms and liberate students in a Freirian sense (Freire, 1970; Heckman, 1996; Noguera & Wing, 2006). This type of reform happens when teachers accurately assess the academic needs of a small group of students, and, with the full support of administrators and parents, and informed by a critical lens and current research, create changes on the classroom level that explicitly work to resist the oppressive function of public schooling.

As this study proves, the dominant form of educational reform, however, is rarely informed by the needs of students and schools, the professional views of educators, prominent educational research, or a genuine, critical approach to “closing achievement gaps,” however often its proponents claim to support those aims. Rather, educational reform is created by pieces of sweeping federal legislation, each of which characterizes a new era of the “reform frenzy” that actually works in *opposition* to educators who intend to truly deliver education for emancipation. These reforms are usually informed by the assumption that public education as a whole to be failing miserably, and this “failure” is usually blamed for America’s alleged increasing inability to compete in a global economy. Generally, reform legislation devalues and disempowers teachers, furthers a political agenda, restricts opportunity, labels and sorts students, and attempts to transform public education into a private enterprise, along with “accountability” models that measure teaching and learning as if these ineffable processes were a profit-driven business venture.

The modern era of educational reform is characterized by an increasing effort to standardize nearly every aspect of American schooling. I find what I call the “reform discourse” that characterizes this type of legislation evident as early as the 1928 document “The Problem of Indian Administration,” commonly called the Meriam report, after its primary author (Meriam et al., 1928). The hard push toward standardization, however, began with the 1983 Reagan-era report entitled *A Nation at Risk*, and the discourse created by *A Nation at Risk* governed every subsequent federal effort to reform education. I argue that American public schools serve largely the same purpose

today as they did in early American history. Rather than working to undo oppressive aspects of schooling, dominant educational reform efforts serve only to perpetuate the status quo and undo progress toward equity, and they do this largely through their discourse/ideology regarding standardization, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

Thus, when I use the term “educational reform,” I am referring to the top-down, politicized, bureaucratized and profit-driven reform efforts that are enacted through federal legislation, listed above. I use the term “reform discourse” to refer to the dominant discourse that is perpetuated through the text of the legislation itself, normally characterized by an emphasis on standardization.

III. Statement of the Problem: How Educational Reform Reproduces Inequity

The School as an Ideological State Apparatus

The primary way in that federal educational reform serves to reproduce inequity is its failure to recognize that the bureaucracy of public schooling is *designed* to resist change and to preserve the status quo. The purpose of a bureaucracy is to make official an existing power paradigm, and to institutionalize the ideology that makes it possible for a dominant group to stay in power (Weber, 1999). Consider the primacy of Standard English. How was it decided that the home dialect of middle-class Whites would be used as the only academic measure of literacy, giving those already in power a very clear advantage and vastly underestimating the ability levels of groups with different home languages and dialects? Clearly, whites were the group in power when American public schools were conceived and developed, when literacy tests were developed,

when grammar texts were written, when IQ tests were developed...our entire concept of literacy within schooling is a manifestation of white supremacy. Yet if a teacher or even a school were to recognize a keen academic mind in a speaker of Pidgin, they would be unable to confer a credential unless that person had mastered Standard English. Despite any level of literacy in a home dialect, and any level of mastery of high-level academic skills, that person would be considered illiterate within the bureaucracy of schooling.

This is because a single person – a teacher – or even a small group of people – a school – is utterly powerless within the larger structure of a bureaucracy. The bureaucracy reifies a dominant ideology and validates existing power paradigms so that it is not clear that there is a group of individuals working to preserve their own power – it seems to be simply common sense that all literacy should be measured within a single dialect of a single language. There is no person or group of people who needs to work to uphold a dominant ideology; the bureaucracy, an ideological machine devoid of humanity, does it for them (Weber, 1999). Essentially, the apparatus of schooling has taught us all to agree to recognize literacy only in one dialect of one language, and we all do so because it just seems like common sense. We cannot imagine another reality.

Louis Althusser argues that the educational system as a whole is an Ideological State Apparatus, an entity that exists to reproduce power through reifying dominant ideology and transforming individuals from self-conscious agents to subjects of ideology (1971). Marxist theory holds that the entirety of the class struggle revolves around which class can wield state power to advance its own interests. State power is seized

through violence – either physical or non-physical – and that violence is enacted through the State Apparatus: government, military, police, courts, prisons, etc. Althusser expands upon this idea by distinguishing between the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), which is Marx’s State Apparatus as described above, and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which are a number of institutions that reproduce the power structures created by the RSA. The RSA functions primarily through violence, while the ISAs function primarily through ideology. Although ISAs are separate institutions – such as schools, churches, media outlets, and political parties – they are unified by the ideology of the ruling class, which I argue is white supremacy. It is not possible for the dominant class to hold power over a long period of time without the hegemonic ideological conditions maintained by the ISAs (Althusser, 1971). So, while the violence of the RSA manifests in, for example, the increasing role of police in schools which serve primarily students of color, the conditions for that violence are maintained within the ISA of schooling through the continual alienation of students of color from educational opportunity, and this alienation is reproduced through the discourse of educational reform.

In order for any true educational reform to take place, and to create equity where there is now inequity, teachers and schools would need to have the freedom to act authentically and individually to meet the needs of students rather than act as subjects of a dominant ideology within an ISA. As I will discuss, however, the discourse of educational reform actually devalues and derides the agency of teachers, students, and families, and, with each passing decade, increases the power of the bureaucracy of

schooling, making true reform a near impossibility. Federal reform calls for more standardization, more oversight, more gate-keeping tests, and more and more faith in bureaucratized approaches that do not involve any individual making any informed decision. Rather, vital determinations – such as whether or not a student has earned a high school diploma – are left to processes that occur *entirely outside* of the school, entirely outside of the influence of the teacher or the student. The influence of critical educators then becomes ineffectual outside of the realm of a single classroom or small school, and critical voices are easily exiled from dominant discourse.

Michel Foucault's ideas about surveillance and power are also foundational to understanding how bureaucracy reproduces dominant power paradigms. He argues that oppressive power does not exist above the social body, but rather within it, and that surveillance and punishment do not come from a central locus of power. Rather, oppression happens within a "machine that no one owns," because power has become completely dissociated from individual agency (Foucault, 1980). In this case, the machine is the bureaucracy of public education. I will revisit these ideas in Chapter 3. For now, I want to make it clear that educational reform in the way that I defined it in Section II is a manifestation of the oppressive power structure that began as overt white supremacy in the time of Jefferson, and has been distributed and made nearly invisible through bureaucracy, which has a reproductive function that is, as Max Weber describes it, "unshatterable" (1999). The oppressive function of educational reform is multiplied by Americans' inability to consider it critically, a phenomenon I will explain below.

Our Psychological Dependence upon Standardization

The American Eugenics Movement, centered in California, was a social policy of racial purification through the sterilization or murder of anyone who did not fit a Nordic stereotype. It began in the late 1800s and lasted throughout the end of World War II. Justified by the Supreme Court and strengthened through state and federal laws, it was legalized racial genocide and a very popular American idea. Hundreds of thousands of non-white Americans were either sterilized or “euthanized” in an effort to exterminate non-white America. It was so efficient and had such strong scientific and popular support that Hitler used American eugenics as a model for Nazi social policy, killing millions of people using American ideas about who was worthy to live and who was not. The aptitude test, or the IQ test, was developed by American eugenicists in their attempt to prove the “feeble-mindedness” of those they sought to destroy, and to lend scientific authenticity to white supremacy (Black, 2003; Wray, 2006).

A descendent of the very IQ test used in the Eugenics movement is still in use in schools today, and standardized tests are so widely recognized to be biased toward middle-class white males that even some non-critical educators are aware of their fallibility. They are a handy tool within large institutions that churn huge numbers of students through without applying authentic, individualized assessment, and standardized assessments that assign a grade level equivalency to reading and math abilities have long been used by teachers and schools to get a snapshot of overall student achievement and the general effectiveness of their instruction. Even critical educators will admit that these tests do have their uses despite their flaws.

However, within modern reform discourse, standardized tests are considered to be so infallible that they are now used to make determinations that have life-changing effects on individual people. They can be used to deny a student a diploma, to retain a 3rd grader and thus nearly guarantee that student's alienation from opportunity, to deny funding to a school or district, to fire a teacher and grant a raise to another teacher, and to determine a student's access to higher education, to the exclusion of all other data and all other measurement tools. Even though we continue to see staggering discrepancies in the performance of students of color and working class students on these tests, and the outcomes of the tests continually marginalize and demoralize these communities and the teachers who serve them, the reform discourse that valorizes standardized testing marches on, becoming more and more overwhelming with each passing year. As I write, students and parents are openly protesting the use of standardized testing, teachers are quitting the profession in droves, leaving schools vastly understaffed, and resources are being drained from vital educational programs and funneled into for-profit standardized test publishing companies that are enjoying multi-billion dollar profits (Simon, 2015). Yet reform discourse continues to ignore the social and economic crisis that results from our use of these tests. Our dependence upon these tests is becoming so ingrained in the ways that we think about schooling that the American collective consciousness now seems to consider testing and education to be the same thing.

The specifics of how modern educational reform uses testing defy logic. Standardized testing, by its very nature, creates a hierarchy of achievement in which

some demographic groups will inevitably fail. Within this ideology of testing, we cannot prove that anyone is succeeding unless we prove that someone else is failing, and although failure is entirely inevitable within this model, schools and teachers are demonized when the failure is quantified. I am interested in why Americans seem to be so preoccupied with quantifying which demographic groups are “failing” academically. I am also interested in why it is easier for most Americans to accept that entire demographic groups are inherently flawed than it is for them to accept that the practice of standardized testing is inherently flawed, despite decades of research that proves the inefficacy and bias of standardized testing (Chipman, Marshall, & Scott, 1991; Jensen, 1980; Loewen, Rosser, Katzman, & Women's, 1988; United States Congress, 1989; Valdes, Figueroa, & National Commission of Testing and Public Policy, 1994). Teachers and educational researchers offer data-driven methods which have already successfully addressed achievement gaps and have nothing to do with standardized testing, yet this research is also perennially ignored. Why is this absurd process of substituting ranking and sorting for meaningful reform so *normalized* that most Americans believe that someday it will succeed in closing achievement gaps, even though it has never worked before (Sarason, 1990)? In broader terms, why is it that within education, the dominant ideology stands in direct opposition to those who are experts in the field? I argue that this substitution of standardization for true reform fills a deep psychological need of the American people, a need that is so powerful that it makes our approach to reform entirely irrational.

The oppressive and reproductive functions of schooling that I will explore in the next chapter – the use of white cultural capital as currency, class-based social reproduction, the Standard-English-based definition of literacy, the legitimization of abstract knowledge, and our Eurocentric literary canon and overall curriculum content – along with the way that bureaucracy functions to institutionalize dominant ideology, create a system of oppression that is so overwhelming that we cannot conceive of any way to dismantle it. Indeed, institutionalized racism, classism, and sexism are so embedded in every social institution, not just within schooling, that white supremacy dominates nearly every aspect of American society. However nice it may feel to imagine that we are capable of a post-racial society, the fact is that racism is likely permanent (Bell, 1992). This is an extremely uncomfortable thought, one that causes such anxiety that when an individual becomes aware of the enormity of the structure and function of white supremacy, one often rebels against that realization and retreats back into the delusion that America is a fair place where hard work will be equally rewarded. And, despite the irrationality of this thought, an important part of that delusion is the belief that education is the key to opportunity, and that schools have the power to *undo* the inequity that is created and maintained by every other aspect of American society, which is an irrational idea in itself (Sarason, 1990).

Psychologist Erich Fromm (1941) observes that when faced with the unbearable doubt that comes along with positive freedom, or a true understanding of the world around us free from dominant ideology, we compulsively engage in a quest for certainty that supersedes reason and eradicates the complex nature of our world, reducing

everything to a simple problem that can be solved with blind faith, usually found within political or religious doctrine. In place of individual action and responsibility, people create a “magic helper,” the personification of power and protection from which people expect to receive all they need in life. Fromm’s primary example of the “magic helper” is that of an all-powerful God. We conceive of schools to be the “magic helper” that will undo inequity, and when inequity persists, schools are considered to be failing. I argue that within reform discourse, standardization becomes a “magic helper,” an all-powerful solution that allows us to reduce not only overall societal inequity but also inequity within schooling to a simple problem with a simple answer. It does not matter that this is irrational, and it does not matter how much research in the field completely contradicts the effectiveness of standardization. We need this to be true, because if it is not, we then need to recognize the reality of white supremacy, something that comes with such a great admission of personal complicity and recognition of privilege, or with such despair, that most people are incapable of making that leap. It is so difficult to recognize the enormity of racial oppression that Franz Fanon theorizes that some white people develop a psychic split, or a kind of psychosis, which they use to continue to see themselves as good people even as they participate in systems of oppression (1967).

Reform ideology calls allows us to utterly ignore the complexities of inequity, and never asks us to answer real questions about why children get “left behind.” It allows people to pretend that a level playing field exists for all students, teachers, and schools, and that all teachers need to eradicate the savage inequalities that exist for our schools and our students is a bit of accountability and competitive spirit.

Legislators do have the freedom to fully explore how education functions to systematically exclude and oppress students, but they escape from the unbearable doubt that freedom offers, not only because it is difficult to grapple with the institutional oppression of American education (which, of course, it is), but because true freedom of consciousness would require them to examine their own privilege, their own whiteness, and their own role in alienation and oppression. They take shelter under an ideology that proves to them again and again, with each administration of a standardized test, that there are some people – overwhelmingly people of color – who are simply not smart enough to pass the test, or who simply do not take the opportunity that they are offered to not fall behind. What a comfort this data is to the dominant group, which spends an unbelievable amount of energy upholding the belief that they have earned what they have without enjoying any degree of privilege, and that opportunity is equally available to all who work for it.

In short, the reason that educational reform reproduces inequity is because that is exactly what it is designed to do. Within a larger structure of white supremacy, it is essential that the institution of schooling serves to reify meritocracy and preserve the function of each ideological component of the dominant discourse that preserves the status quo. Educational reform serves to maintain the status quo by substituting critical discourse and research-based, effective reform with the dominant discourse of standardization. It is this ideology/discourse that this study deconstructs. The methodology of critical discourse analysis calls for the identification of ideological/discursive formations (IDFs) that arise through careful examination of text.

In this study, the texts in question are the federal documents that govern educational reform.

IV. Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to examine the dominant ideology/discourse of educational reform through a critical discourse analysis of federal education reform documents with the goal of defining the discourse that naturalizes the exclusion of students of color and working class students from educational opportunity. The focus of the research is modern educational reform (1983 – present), which began with *A Nation at Risk*, the Reagan-era report within which the fear and blame aspects of modern reform discourse are created (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Also within *A Nation at Risk* can be seen the advent of standardized testing discourse as we know it today.

First, I clarify the political and discursive context of *A Nation at Risk* by examining four major Ronald Reagan speeches, and I identify the IDFs common to all four speeches to define the discourse of Reaganism as a whole. Then, I perform a CDA of the *Nation at Risk* report to determine how the report functions within the larger political agenda and discursive style of the Reagan administration. I thus define the IDFs of reform discourse as created by *A Nation at Risk*. I then trace the discourse created by *A Nation at Risk* through all federal educational reform legislation from 1983 to present. Most federal educational reform legislation takes the form of reauthorizations of *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, the most recent of which is the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016*. Each reauthorization increasingly illustrates the tenacity of the

discourse created by *A Nation at Risk* and demonstrates that the 1983 report shifted the focus of *ESEA* from the creation of equity in public schooling to an openly oppressive political agenda aimed at othering and excluding the very demographics that *ESEA* was designed to protect. This exclusion has disastrous effects, particularly on poor communities of color, whose members are not only alienated from opportunity but also criminalized as a result of their experiences in public schools.

After defining and deconstructing dominant reform discourse, I explore the implications of the study. I suggest how teachers, schools, students, and families can use this information to make less invisible the dominant discourse of reform, and to inform a reform discourse that is based on emancipation rather than oppression. James Fraser (1997) comments on the need for a progressive reform discourse that is not defined by its critique of mainstream discourse. He cites Giroux and McLaren's assertion that leftist educators fail to move beyond the language of critique and therefore do not develop a truly new language to adopt when discussing reform. I hope to contribute to the development of this progressive new discourse with this study. I place reform discourse in the context of the modern crisis of mass incarceration, which also began in the Reagan era, and comment on the connection between those two phenomena.

V. Research Questions

Overarching Question: How do dominant IDFs govern American ideas about educational reform?

RQ1: How do specific IDFs manifest in the text of the key federal documents that govern the modern era of educational reform (1983 – present)?

RQ2: How do these IDFs work to reproduce existing paradigms of power and privilege, excluding and alienating students of color and working class students?

RQ3: What are the implications for this study for constructing a counter-discourse/ideology of educational reform that would serve to emancipate and empower, rather than exclude and alienate, students of color and working class students?

VI. Limitations of the Study

The most obvious limitation of this study is my decision to narrow my study to just federal-level documents: these documents affect schooling through state-level legislation that serves to clarify federal law and implement the practices it mandates, so an examination of the local legislation which directly affects my practice as an educator would have more clearly defined the social action that results from discourse. However, because I consider all state-level legislation to be the progeny of these federal documents, I chose to examine the broader discourse that affects classrooms nationwide rather than making my study specific to one state.

VII. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a brief history of American public schools, particularly how they functioned to emancipate of white males while working to control and assimilate minority populations. I have reviewed some of the theoretical assumptions of my study, including how the public school functions as an Ideological State Apparatus to maintain dominant power structures, and how standardization serves as a magic helper in the minds of American people and replaces any attempt at real reform. I have also stated the purpose of this study and outlined the questions that guide it.

Chapter 2 will review relevant literature in this field, particularly regarding how schools serve to reproduce inequity. It will also review existing analyses of the *Nation at Risk* report, which I argue created the reform discourse which still dominates educational reform law today. Also in Chapter 2, I will review the theoretical framework which guides this study, including Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Critical Whiteness Studies. Chapter 3 will explain my chosen methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis, as well as my methods of textual analysis and data collection. It is difficult to fully understand the function of the *Nation at Risk* document without understanding the political climate from which it arose. Thus, Chapter 4 will be an analysis of the discourse of Ronald Reagan through a detailed analysis of four major Reagan speeches, and an articulation of how *Nation at Risk* served to further the larger political agenda illustrated in those speeches. Chapter 5 will be the analysis of the *Nation at Risk* document itself, while Chapter 6 will follow the discourse created in *Nation at Risk* through every major

federal educational reform effort from 1983 to present. In Chapter 7, I will comment on the larger implications of this study, including how reform discourse contributes to the mass incarceration crisis currently plaguing communities of color, and I will suggest ways to resist reform discourse by creating a critical counter-discourse of emancipation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I: How Schools Reproduce Inequity

Cultural Capital and Cultural Reproduction

The idea that schooling serves as an agent of social reproduction is one that is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu argues that capitalist classes reproduce themselves by producing in their members a set of dispositions that make them uniquely suited to inherit the power and privilege enjoyed by their class (1977a). Relatively free from economic necessity, he argues, members of a privileged class have the opportunity to amass "cultural wealth" in the form of the dispositions and knowledge that one they gain from activities that represent "high culture," such as learning to play the piano, visiting a museum, attending concerts, and reading books. These activities that constitute "legitimate" culture foster within the members of what he calls the "higher position," a set of dispositions which are identical to those that are valued within schools. Schooling, he argues, can only benefit people to the extent to which they already possess familiarity with the cultural dispositions necessary for academic achievement, because these dispositions are not explicitly taught in schools. He refers to higher levels of education as a code that can only be mastered only by those with the necessary cultural capital, and since the code remains indecipherable to the lower classes, cultural and social reproduction become a cycle that is very difficult to break.

A key point here is that schools and other social institutions appear to be neutral and egalitarian throughout this process. Schooling demands a set of academic

dispositions equally from everyone without recognizing that not everyone has equal access to the cultural capital that leads to those dispositions. This naturally leads to the alienation of many working-class people and people of color, who naturally react to this alienation and exclusion by developing a negative disposition toward schooling, which then doubles the effects of cultural reproduction. People who have alternate ways of thinking, learning, speaking, doing, and knowing are effectively weeded out of academic opportunity through passive, symbolic violence, while those whose dispositions match those valued by schools are rewarded (Bennet & LeCompte, 1990; Madigan, 2002; Sorokin, 1959). Throughout this selection process, schools retain the appearance of being democratic and objective institutions that offer opportunity equally to those with talent or merit, contributing to the myth of meritocracy which reifies the idea that in America, everyone who works hard will achieve. Clearly, since “legitimate culture” within dominant ideology constitutes that of white, straight, middle-class males, that group naturally thinks, learns, speaks, and behaves using the cultural capital granted to them through birth and not through “hard work,” which creates a level of privilege in public schooling invisible to those in power, and thus very difficult to deconstruct.

Schooling as Class-Based Social Reproduction

The idea of cultural capital and schooling as cultural reproduction is a foundational assumption in the articulation of how schools work to reproduce capitalist classes. Bowles and Gintis (1976), both Marxist economists, examine the relationship between the internal structure of schooling and the external structure of the capitalist workforce, and find that schools function to mimic and feed into the workforce with

pre-selected classes of individuals, including an exploitable working class. A “hidden curriculum” teaches students much more than academic content; it teaches them where they fit into the capitalist hierarchy, and prepares them for jobs similar to those held by their parents, making economic mobility difficult to attain (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Jean Anyon (1980) provided a landmark ethnographic study in which she examined the pedagogy within the classrooms of a range of public schools that she categorized according to the income level of the families in the district. She found that the hidden curriculum of the schools of affluent children taught them to be self-directed problem-solvers, making them well-suited for white-collar professions, and that working class children learned only to follow instructions and obey orders, preparing them only for jobs on a factory floor. Indeed, there are also structures within individual schools that serve as a microcosm of the larger social hierarchy. Academic tracking functions in much the same way as the schools that Anyon categorized in her study: to transmit a hidden curriculum that prepares students for a certain rung on the academic ladder. Research shows that once a student is tracked, it is very difficult to move among the tracks, just as difficult as social and economic mobility are on a larger scale (Gamoran, 1992; Hallinan, 1994; Oakes, 1985).

There is also a body of work that examines the near impossibility of students from under-funded city schools to escape the limitations brought upon them from sheer deprivation of quality education, which is another aspect of how schools function as agents of social reproduction (Kozol, 1991). Policy and procedure within urban

schooling serve an important role in social reproduction as well, with everything from school funding formulas to inner-city access to transportation and other resources obstructing inner city youth from academic achievement (Anyon, 2005).

The ethnographic studies of Paul Willis (1977) and Jay MacLeod (2009) examine how the phenomenon of social reproduction manifests in the attitudes of working class youth. Willis found that working class youth embodied a resistance to academia and opposition to authority that made them feel free and independent of the embrace of academic expectations and the academic culture that they perceived were imprisoning their middle-class peers. They developed a counterculture that valued manual labor, machismo, street wisdom, and disobedience, all of which made them feel liberated. Of course, this counterculture, which was denigrated and therefore implicitly encouraged by school officials, prepared them for a lifetime of subservience as factory workers; even as they felt they were working against the system, they were indeed hegemonically conforming to it.

MacLeod (2009) examines the attitudes of white working-class students, residents of a housing project, who along with their parents reject academic culture and rebel against academic and middle-class expectations. Black students from the same housing project conversely embrace academic expectations and see academic achievement as a tool for social mobility. Neither embracing nor rejecting academic culture proved to be an effective strategy, however, in that neither group was able to escape the housing projects even years after high school. MacLeod suggests that the

reproductive function of schooling is so powerful as to overcome any disposition of non-white students.

Family-school relationships are another important aspect of how schools can reproduce social structures. A common refrain among educators and non-educators alike is that the reason that students fail is that “their families don’t value education.” Valuing education, however, does little to enable families to prepare children to succeed in school when the parents have already been excluded from academic opportunity (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Families have varying degrees of the cultural capital that enable them to participate in the schooling of children, from complying with teacher requests for participation in school activities to being able to help children with academic skills outside of the school day. Indeed, children of parents who have obtained high academic achievement have a much better chance of succeeding in school due to their academic education expanding outside of the school day and into the home. It is problematic, however, to assume that a parent’s inability to provide academic cultural capital represents an *unwillingness* to do so. This leads to an ideology in which certain cultures are considered to be defective, and this cultural deficit model can prevent teachers from changing their own worldview to a more critical one, since they assume that the blame for student failure lies not with their own (often subconscious) complicity with a white supremacist system of schooling, but with the culture of the student and her family, which then continues to leave the oppressive function of schooling unexamined and invisible.

The Definitions of Academic Language and Literacy

The definitions of language and literacy as provided by scholars in the field of language development tend to differ sharply from schools' own definitions. The literature in the field of language, literacy, and language development explores the definition of language as a whole, how people use language, how language is structured, and how people acquire language proficiency (Daniels, 1994; Fromkin & Rodman, 1983; Laitin, 2000; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Linguistically, no language or dialect is inherently superior to any other, and optimal communication is possible when one is fluent in whatever language or dialect is shared by a particular group (Stubbs, 1976). However, literacy and language proficiency within schools are defined in a narrow, truncated fashion that eliminates much of what we know about language and language acquisition; within schools, fluency in written Standard English is the single benchmark by which all literacy is measured. The contradiction that exists between the scientific and academic definitions of literacy provides a deep understanding of how schools are structured to alienate and exclude working class students and students of color.

The history of Indian boarding schools in America tells us much about our apparent need to equate proficiency in language to proficiency in English. In the mid- to late-1800s, it was common practice for children in Indian boarding schools to be berated, beaten and starved as punishment for using a language other than English (Adams, 1995; Child, 2000; Dejong, 2007; Lomawaima, 1995; Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Spring, 2004; Szasz, 1999; Trafzer & Keller, 2006). Indian boarding schools served as a foundation for the ideology regarding how American public schools handled students of

color, and the consideration of Standard English as the only valid form of communication is an important part of that foundation, one with far-reaching implications.

It is not my objective to argue that mastery of Standard English is not an important aspect of education, especially if we see education as preparation for participation in the American economy. It is important to understand, however, the difference between arguing that Standard English is an essential dialect to master, and arguing that Standard English is the *only* valid language form, and that the mastery of Standard English is *the* definition of literacy. In American classrooms, bilingualism and multilingualism are considered to be liabilities rather than assets, despite research that suggests that bi- and multilingual children develop language competencies at an early age that their monolingual peers do not develop until much later in life, including certain language competencies that can develop only as the result of being fluent in two or more languages (Grosjean, 1985).

This deficit model of language, in which a bilingual child is seen as a problem to be solved, is an example of *linguicism*, a specific form of racism affecting groups for whom a dominant language is not a first language (Skutnab-Kangas, 1995). Linguicism manifests on a cultural level, when dominant groups see minority languages as less valid than a dominant language, and on an institutional level, when educational efforts are all geared toward learning the dominant language. This monolingual, “English-only” ideology has devastating effects that span the colonization of a single consciousness to the colonization of the globe (Diamond, 1993; Lu, 1998). It is clear that coming from a

home in which Standard English is the dominant language is a form of cultural capital that is naturally available to some but not to others.

While the literature on bilingual and multilingual learners usually addresses “voluntary” minorities, such as Spanish-speakers who immigrated to the US under their own volition, there is also an important body of literature that explores the effects of Standard-English dominance on those who speak non-Standard dialects of English, many of whom are black involuntary minorities: African-Americans (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Referred to throughout the literature as Black Vernacular English, African American English, and Ebonics, the dialect of English spoken by many black Americans is normally treated as grammatically and syntactically incorrect within American classrooms. Of course, as is the case for speakers of any other dialect, speakers of Ebonics must master the lexicon, grammar, and syntax of the dialect consistently in order to clearly communicate with peers, and the clarity of that communication is evidence of literacy within that dialect. However, when these speakers display a strong command of the grammar of Ebonics at school, either verbally or in written form, the message they receive is that their grammar is error-ridden. The result of this message causes confusion among younger students, who by the time they get to high school are utterly alienated from academic environments by learning that they are unable to communicate effectively at all. As a specialist in dropout recovery, I can confirm that the dropout population disproportionately includes students who do not speak Standard English as a first language.

When educators refer to Ebonics as “inappropriate for the classroom,” they are implicitly labeling Black American culture as a whole, and indeed Black people, as defective (Delpit, 2002). Schooling as a whole, through the use of daily microaggressions as well as larger conventions such as standardized testing, sorts speakers of Ebonics into a category of non-intellectuals, incapable of academic achievement, rather than a group of people who speak dialectical English (Hillard, 1997; Shuaib, 2002; Smith, 2002; Wynne, 2002). The same can be true for speakers of other English dialects, such as Appalachian whites (Gates, 2002). Another approach would be to fully recognize Ebonics and other non–standard dialects as legitimate dialects of English, teach students to have pride in their mastery of them, and teach them Standard English as a dialect to be mastered for other purposes (Baker, 2002; Dowdy, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2002; Smitherman, 1987). Not only would this effectively teach mastery of Standard English, it would also work to undo the colonized consciousness of all students who have been excluded, denigrated, and labeled due to language differences. Instead, however, these differences are used as sorting mechanisms within the social reproduction machine of schooling, making it more likely that students of color and working class students – many of whom speak a language or dialect other than Standard English – are excluded from opportunity.

American Ideas about the Legitimacy of Abstract Knowledge

The substitution of the overall skill of literacy with literacy in Standard English is only one way in which American schools reward those students who possess the cultural capital of the dominant group. The very nature of the “classical curriculum” – that is,

the study of history, literature, and other so-called liberal arts subjects – reflects an emphasis on subject matter that was historically only available to members of the upper class. As I discussed in Chapter 1, early American colleges and high schools served the primary purpose of socialization, while vocational training, if necessary, happened outside of the sphere of educational institutions. American ideas about the classical curriculum were derived from the English BA degree, which served no practical purpose (Collins, 1979). As schooling transformed into a credentialing system, wherein completion of one grade led to another, completion of high school led to admission to college, and completion of college led to a professional occupation, the content of the high school education continued to emphasize abstract knowledge with value that could be traced directly back to Anglo, upper-class roots. Thus, concrete knowledge and manual training, which can be directly translated into employment, tend to be regarded in the American collective consciousness as non-academic pursuits. This means that the cultural knowledge of working class people cannot be translated into cultural currency within schooling, and the abstract credentialing system serves to further reify the cultural capital of the dominant class as “legitimate” knowledge.

The white, middle-class epistemology is also translated into currency within our schools. Delores Delgado Bernal (2006) explores the ways in which Chicana students must continually negotiate space within the American classroom to exercise their own learning styles, which means embracing their bilingualism, biculturalism, and commitment to community and spirituality within a learning environment that is hostile to those values. American schooling expects students to absorb knowledge

independently, usually through listening to a lecture, regurgitating rote knowledge, and experiencing learning as a means to the end of financial gain; this Anglo-centric approach alienates those for whom learning is a communal process with a spiritual component, as it is for many Chicanas. This struggle follows Chicanas throughout all levels of schooling, necessitating resistance to white male epistemologies within the graduate school experience and also as faculty in academic institutions (Banuelas, 2006; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

The American Literary Canon and Curriculum Content

Of course, literary “classics” as deemed by academia in general are almost invariably those of White authors, and this phenomenon remains so unexamined that the canon included in the Common Core State Standards Initiative remains 80% white-authored. Teachers of literature tend to see “the canon” as a body of work that has naturally and neutrally evolved, without recognizing that the works included in the standard canon are considered to be “classics” because, like all other knowledge that is legitimized by schools, they reflect the cultural traditions and beliefs of the dominant group. Michael Apple (1990) suggests that we need to consider teaching to be an entirely political act. If that is the case, unless teachers and schools explicitly teach work of white authors to be raced rather than neutral, an approach explored to great effect by the critical work of Toni Morrison (1992), and continue to tokenize works of authors of color, as in the dominant discourse of “multiculturalism,” our presentation of the classic literary canon becomes another way to perpetuate white supremacy (Frankenburg, 1993).

The same can be said for what are deemed to be classic works of music and art, as well as the exclusion of the contributions of non-white people and women to mathematics and science; I focus on the literary canon and our teaching of literature because reform discourse, with its focus on literacy, explicitly influences it. The ways in which American public schools revise history to valorize our openly racist and sexist “founding fathers,” minimize the extent to which our country was founded upon slavery and genocide, ignore the egregiously oppressive nature of federal law, criminalize resistance to white supremacy, and blame oppressed groups for their own oppression are so overwhelmingly numerous as to completely exceed the scope of this study, but they contribute to the oppressive function of public schools incalculably (Loewen, 1995). It can easily be argued that the American public school system in its entirety, from the territory of a classroom to an identity that is based on academic achievement, is the property of whites (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Soja, 1996; Tatum, 2003; Wells & Crain, 1997).

II: Turning a Critical Gaze on Educational Inequity

What does it mean to be “critical”?

In Chapter 1, I touched on Erich Fromm’s concept of “positive freedom,” or an understanding of the world that is free from dominant ideology. C. Wright Mills (1959) defines the quality of mind necessary to perceive reality accurately, or to stay free of false consciousness in the way Fromm describes, as the “sociological imagination.” One who possesses the sociological imagination is aware of the function of larger social structures, and is able to see links between social issues, institutions, history, politics,

psychology, and most important, the functions of power, authority, and coercion. Mills defines the basic problem of power as who is involved and who is *not* involved in making decisions which affect social arrangements.

Conversely, people who do not possess the sociological imagination are engaged in escaping this complexity. They deem science to be a mechanism driven by empirical data and free from creative inquiry and ethos, which are foundational to the true pursuit of social science. Even those who consider themselves to be social scientists can lack the sociological imagination and therefore rely on the formulation of a “grand theory,” which is a simplistic and inaccurate summation of social structures, lacking any consideration of the concepts of power, authority, manipulation or coercion. A grand theory is a universal scheme by which one can allegedly understand the entirety of social structures. Grand theories cannot clearly state problems because they obscure reality by substituting complexity with symbols of legitimation, or ruling ideas that create a normative structure apparently outside of the agency of those who may be exercising authority to protect their own privilege. Grand theories lead us to assume that all power is legitimated, and they cannot effectively formulate the idea of conflict (C.W. Mills, 1959).

Rather, grand theorists employ “abstracted empiricism.” They choose facts that they deem to be the most real, distill those facts into variables, use the scientific method to hypothesize about a relationship between those variables, collect empirical data, and write up their findings. They create scattered “facts” that are not related to each other and not situated within social structures. They are non-comparative,

ahistorical, non-pluralistic, dogmatic, and generalist. They often see social structures as ideal ways to reinforce morality, with morals defined as large ideas connected to patriotism and nationalism, and the alleged breakdown of morality and equilibrium, rather than social inequity, as the markers of a broken social system (Durkheim, 1961; Parsons, 1959). They also tend to be popular, and their work, because it resembles that of hard scientists, tends to be regarded as fact (C.W. Mills, 1959).

In regard to schooling, this grand theorist disposition results in a functionalist perspective, that holds that schools naturally maintain equilibrium within society. Functionalists argue that there is an achievement competition within schooling which is won by those who are moral or intelligent, that people are differentiated into social roles based on talent or merit, and that the process is entirely just and fair. The role of the teacher is to oversee this achievement competition, and students who lose the competition should believe that they deserve to lose and submit to their roles rather than upsetting social equilibrium and questioning the fairness of the system (Alexander, 1987; Parsons, 1959). Clearly, functionalism works to the direct disadvantage of marginalized groups. It naturalizes their disadvantage, and characterizes any resistance to oppression as both an infringement on the rights of others and a deviant scheme to upset equilibrium (R. Harris, 1979).

Those with sociological imagination, on the other hand, likely reject functionalism and see group conflict and a struggle for power as central to all social phenomena. These conflict theorists tend to operate within a general theoretical framework of Marxism: while functionalists believe that perfecting social institutions

will create equilibrium and eradicate conflict, conflict theorists believe that institutions work to instill a false consciousness of meritocracy against which oppressed classes will eventually rebel (Hurn, 2002). Many of the theorists I have cited so far, including Max Weber, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Randall Collins, and Pierre Bourdieu, can be considered to be conflict theorists. They believe that the role of institutions is to legitimize an unequal social order and conceal inequality. To a conflict theorist, schooling serves to confer status unequally to different groups, and ensure the reproduction of social classes (Collins, 1971; Weber, 1946).

I will close this section with a general assertion that in order for one to be critical, one must possess what C.W. Mills calls the “sociological imagination,” and understand that grand theories and abstract empiricism inaccurately simplify the pursuit of social science. One must also believe that a functionalist understanding of social institutions serves to mask their true purpose, which is to reproduce economic, cultural, and social inequities. One must see that group conflict and an unequal distribution of power are at the core of all social phenomena, and be critical of any approach which assumes otherwise.

Pierre Bourdieu uses the term “doxa” to refer to ideas that are so naturalized that they are taken for granted, and the idea that education is an achievement competition that is won by merit is how he defines doxa within schooling (Bourdieu, 1977b). Within reform discourse, the idea that standardized testing accurately measures academic ability and potential is another example of doxa. Therefore, in order to be critical, one must also be able to see which ideas are doxic, or which ideas

are naturalized to the point of being taken for granted and therefore remain unexamined and undiscussed. A critical person examines and challenges them. In short, being critical provides us with a defense against excessive rationality (Freire, 1998).

An even deeper level of critical inquiry occurs within the study of ideology, which is the bedrock of critical theory, and the topic of the next section.

Critical Theory and the Nature of Ideology

A central aspect of my theoretical framework lies within critical theory, a school of thought which is used as the foundation of the analysis of history, politics, education, or any other social endeavor when the objective of the research is to liberate people from oppressive ideology. Critical theory has its origin within the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, founded in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany. Generally considered to have a neo-Marxist foundation, the foundational thinkers in the critical theory movement include Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm. They worked with ideas developed by Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Sigmund Freud, but differed from Marxists in that rather than subscribing to single theoretical approach, they examined the present reality as historically situated from the perspective of all social sciences. The goal of critical theory was not to just examine or understand society, but to change it by freeing people from ideological enslavement. Later phases of critical theory included the work of Jurgen Habermas, a student of the founders of the Frankfurt School, along with Antonio Gramsci, Leo Lowenthal, Louis

Althusser, and Michel Foucault, among others. Generally, critical theorists assume that reason can overcome ideological domination and yield truth (Budd, 2008; Jay, 1973).

Since the concept of ideology is so central to the framework of critical theory, it is important for a critical scholar to understand its complexity rather than to accept a limited definition of it. The literature on the nature of ideology is vast and contradictory (Eagleton, 1991). A simple definition of ideology is that of a cluster of beliefs held by social groups, instilled in part by socio-cultural factors, which are enacted through discourse (van Dijk, 1998). Some hold that ideology is inherently oppressive, similar to the Marxist idea of “false consciousness,” and that it creates political domination through discourse. Other views allow for positive ideology, which can be used to deconstruct and negate political and social domination (Burbules, 1995; Leonardo & Allen, 2008; Marx & Engels, 1969). To a critical theorist, ideology cannot be neutral, and the appearance of a non-ideological view is actually a marker of a naturalized and therefore dominant ideology (Fairclough, 1995). I would like to take a moment to review some of the literature regarding ideology from a few of the major critical theorists.

I will begin with the work of Max Horkheimer (1982), a central figure in critical theory. He argues that because of a lack of critical consciousness, people become vulnerable to a definition of “truth” which is an ideological rather than scientific construct, and is controlled by political and institutional force. There is no separating an idea from the social construct from which it arose, so when ideas are contextualized, the story of the surrounding social totality is retold within a Eurocentric positionality that

minimizes conflict and oppression. People have a tendency to conceptualize society as moving forward because of progress in pure science and reason which exists outside of a social structure that may control how we legitimize ideas; this leads to general assumption that society is fundamentally not oppressive. Our faith in this allegedly neutral scientific/social progress leads to complacency and a non-critical epistemology. Therefore, our entire understanding of “truth” is simply an extension of dominant ideology. This relates to my discussion in Chapter 1 about how school curricula create historical “truths” that perpetuate white supremacy. This understanding of the extent to which a dominant ideology creates beliefs that most people feel to be politically neutral is central to any critical understanding of the function of ideology.

Theodor Adorno (1982) contextualizes Horkheimer’s ideas into a discussion of subject, or the world of ideas, versus object, or the world of things. According to Adorno, people believe in a “transcendental subject,” or a subject that creates the world around it on its own, free from social constructs and therefore free from ideology. He argues that the object and not the subject is the primary force of cognition, with the object being a social phenomenon such as capitalism or patriarchy. The object and subject are dialectical, so that no idea can exist outside of the ideology from which it was gained. Therefore, becoming fully conscious is the process of understanding the various ways in which we as subjects are created by objects. Adorno also comments that the industry of culture works against this enlightenment by creating forms of ideology-laden entertainment that make the masses politically compliant rather than creating art that critically interprets society (1989).

Herbert Marcuse (1989) explored how affluent society, a class made up largely of intellectuals, is actually imprisoned by the ideology which maintains their affluence. Since the basic needs of affluent people are already met, they are more likely to conform to ideology that maintains the status quo, meaning that the conditions that maintain their material wealth unconsciously manipulate them into denying themselves intellectual freedom. Marcuse called on the intellectual class to become a class of revolutionaries. He wrote of the need to create a “new man” who, within affluent society, would work to dismantle and disrupt dominant ideology in order to liberate himself from it and change society as a whole. This is a noteworthy idea, especially within a field inspired by Marxism, which focuses on the ways in which ideology denies freedom to the lower classes and marginalized people. In my work, it is an idea easily applied to teachers as the intellectual class.

A related idea is Leo Lowenthal’s (1989) exploration of how we approach and interpret works of literature. He argued that literary studies were too often superficial examinations of text, engaged in an analysis of dialogue between characters. He called for an approach to literature that reveals the ideological, unconscious forces that produce the text. This is similar to my discussion of the classic literary canon in the preceding section. I suggested that it is necessary for teachers to undertake the teaching of literature as a political act, and explore the works of white authors as raced rather than neutral. Any other approach would leave those ideological forces, and therefore the social conditions from which literature came, unexamined. Essentially, Lowenthal called for a critical hermeneutics of literary analysis.

I will further explore foundational Critical Theory, specifically Critical Hermeneutics and Critical Discourse Analysis, in Chapter 3, and continue now with how critical theory was later applied to critical studies of race and whiteness.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory, or CRT, is the application of critical theory to the intersection of race and law. Derrick Bell, a professor at the NYU School of Law until his death in 2011, is generally considered to be the founder of CRT, and began applying critical theory to race and law while teaching at Harvard in the mid-1970s. Other early scholars in the CRT movement include Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams. The first CRT conference was held in 1989, although writings relevant to the field reach as far back as those of W.E.B Du Bois in 1920. CRT considers liberal movements like the Civil Rights Movement to be too focused on overt racist acts and incremental progress; CRT examines the large underlying social structures and institutions that perpetuate racism on a scale so large that it is often invisible to most people. It builds on feminist theory in that it examines the relationship between power and social roles. The majority of my discussion in the preceding section regarding the ways in which schools naturally function to alienate students of color is an application of CRT to educational theory. Like critical theory before it, CRT focuses not only on examining and understanding society, but also on changing it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT is generally considered to have six major theoretical tenets, but I will discuss only those that are most relevant to this study: ²

1 – Endemic Racism

In an 1897 address before the American Negro Academy, Du Bois opened by explaining that no matter how idealistic one may be about the existence of a single human brotherhood, racial difference is a real, permanent construct which must be considered in any examination of the human condition (Du Bois, 1996). This sentiment is echoed in the first tenet of CRT, which states that race is endemic and permanent, deeply embedded in our social fabric and affecting us in ways that are so normal and naturalized that they are often invisible, especially to people who hold racial privilege (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Our dominant ideology tends to entirely dismiss race as a factor and assume that all inequity is the result of class differences. This argument represents the ideology of colorblindness, or the notion that racial difference does not exist or does not matter. The concept of colorblindness became dominant particularly after the Civil Rights Era. Although it seems to arise out of a benevolent effort toward equality, it is highly problematic, and like many liberal ideas, works to inhibit critical consciousness. In 1935, Du Bois problematized the idea of racially integrated schools by arguing that black students would suffer un-nameable discrimination at the hands of “colorblind” white

² The “six tenets” to which I refer are not necessarily items on a fixed list to which race scholars refer by number, nor are the major theoretical arguments of CRT limited to six. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I number these six basic tenets in the order in which they appear in Delgado & Stefancic’s landmark work *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, which I cite often throughout this discussion.

teachers, and would end up believing themselves to be inferior to white students. This argument was proven to some degree by Antwi Akom (2003) in his study of the positive, achievement-oriented self-concept of black students in a Philadelphia school which was 98% black. I used the rather awkward term “un-nameable” to describe the discrimination that people of color experience within colorblind ideology because when people of color voice their experiences with racism, they are often met with great resistance from those who claim that racism does not exist or that they “don’t see color.” In this way, colorblindness works to silence people of color, who are so often told they are “playing the race card” that they may eventually stop trying to call attention to the inequities which affect them. I will discuss the ways that colorblindness functions within reform discourse throughout this study.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that just as Jim Crow racism was the ideological basis for the overt racial oppression of the pre-Civil Rights era, “colorblind racism” is the ideological foundation for the covert racism that maintains white supremacy now. He outlines four central frames for colorblind racism:

“Abstract liberalism” is a frame in which white people can apply liberal ideas, such as equal opportunity or choice, to racial matters without a practical discussion about the reality of, for example, a social structure that would actually allow people of color to exercise choice. It allows people to sound as if they aim to eradicate inequity without actually ever addressing the root of the inequity themselves, and places all responsibility for the work on an abstract someone else. “Naturalization” is a frame in which racial oppression can be explained as a natural – and therefore non-addressable –

phenomenon. “Cultural racism” is related to the cultural deficit ideology that I discussed in Section 1. A statement like “black families don’t value education” might be used to make one appear as if one is not racist toward the black student who comes from an unfortunate situation, but rather one understands how difficult things must be in such a culture. “Minimization of racism” simply suggests that racism is not much of a factor anymore (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

A related idea is that of “laissez-faire racism,” or actions that whites take to block implementation of progressive policy change out of an unspoken fear that improving conditions for people of color will result in a loss of tangible privilege for whites (Bobo & Smith, 1998).

Although my discussion of discourse will appear in Chapter 3, I am mentioning an idea relevant to discourse now because of its applicability to this tenet of CRT. Teun A. van Dijk (1992) identifies specific aspects of the discourse which denies racism, including disclaimers, mitigation, euphemism, blaming the victim, and positive self-presentation in negative discourse about minority groups, including anti-racists. He also argues that only anti-racists see everyday racism (as opposed to overt acts of white supremacy) as racism, and that they are therefore labeled as being radical or “loony” (1992). It follows from here that if an apparently neutral or non-ideological view represents a dominant ideology, then an apparently radical view represents a “positive” ideology that is working to negate political and social power structures. I will suggest elements of a positive ideology as applied to educational reform in Chapter 7.

2 – Race as a Sociopolitical Construction

Also in the 1897 American Negro Academy address, Du Bois offers a definition of race which suggests that biology is a minimal component of racial difference. He defines race as a group of people with a common history who strive together toward conceived ideals (Du Bois, 1996). This idea of race as a sociopolitical rather than biological construction is related to the third tenet of CRT, which holds that races are not objective, inherent, or fixed; rather, they are categories that society invents, manipulates, and retires as needed to create dominance and privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

A good example of this phenomenon is the construction of the “Hispanic” race. Mexican people are largely a mix of descendants of native Mexicans – people who are phenotypically dark-skinned and shorter in stature – and descendants of European Spanish conquerors. During the Mexican-American War and the US conquest of Northern Mexico, the prevailing thought, especially among Southern leaders, was that New Mexico would become a slave state. As such, “*Nuevomexicano*” people were considered to be savage and incapable of self-government, like all other Native Americans. After the Treaty of Guadalupe and the annexation of Northern Mexico, leaders became fearful that if New Mexico did not attain statehood, it was at risk of being invaded and lost. During the decades of New Mexico’s struggle for statehood, it became clear that dark-skinned Mexican people were not welcome as citizens of the United States, and statehood became possible only when the discourse which described *Nuevomexicano* people in official federal documents no longer included Native people and only included European people of Spanish descent (Gomez, 2007; Nieto-Philips,

2000, 2004). The *Nuevomexicano* people had not changed, but the racial category that described them had flexible boundaries that were moved at the convenience of those in power.

Nuevomexicano eventually disappeared as a racial category and was replaced by “Spanish-American”. The related racial category of “Hispanic” is very clearly a sociopolitical construction, as the number of phenotypes and countries of origin of so-called Hispanic people are so numerous that they cannot possibly be grouped under one biological umbrella. Currently, “Hispanic” people in many New Mexico towns who see themselves as Spanish descendants celebrate Juan de Oñate as their founder with parades and statues, while other “Hispanic” people who identify with their Native American roots see Oñate as a brutal conqueror and murderer (Trujillo, 2009). Some “Hispanic” people choose to honor their Native roots by referring to themselves as “Chicano/a,” a group with a common understanding of their history as well as common genetics. The self-identification as “Chicano/a” signals an awareness of and resistance to the function of white supremacy, and thus is not recognized as an “official” category. Chicano/a people are considered “Hispanic” under the gaze of dominant ideology, thus undermining their political stance (Castillo, 1995).

It is important to remember this concept when considering the discourse of Ronald Reagan, which I explore in Chapter 4. Reaganism and conservative discourse in general construct race in ways that serve them politically, using ideological “truth” rather than any kind of biological or phenotypical characterization to create scapegoats out of people of color.

3 - Differential Racialization

This concept refers to the ways in which different races are characterized in response to shifting needs in the labor market (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Dominant ideologies can racialize groups of people in different ways depending on social or economic need. For example, when a large labor force was needed to build our railroads and Chinese people were brought in as indentured labor, Chinese people as a whole became known as the “Yellow Menace”; Americans needed to devalue the entire race in order to justify our inhumane subjugation of them. Japanese internment camps, built when Japanese-American citizens were forced from their homes and imprisoned on American soil, were useful when we needed to criminalize Japanese people to reinforce the dominant ideology that justified our continued participation in WWII. Now, however, Chinese and Japanese people are considered to be hard-working and intelligent, a “model minority” race (Wu, 2002; Zia, 2000).³ During and immediately after American slavery, African-American people were depicted as simple-minded and happy-go-lucky, glad to serve white people. When slaves and subjugated freed slaves began rebelling against their imprisonment, however, black people were depicted as menacing and dangerous, a construct that justified increasingly violent subjugation in order to preserve the American slavery-dependent economy (Daniels, 1997).

This concept is also essential to fully understanding how Reaganism criminalized black Americans in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, and created an anti-black

³ I will further discuss the function of the “model minority myth” in an upcoming section.

ideology that has justified not only the exclusion of poor people of color from educational opportunity within reform discourse, but also the modern crisis of mass incarceration. Chapters 4, 5, and 7 rely heavily on the concept of differential racialization.

4 - Anti-Essentialism and Intersectionality

This tenet of CRT further complicates the idea of race. No person has a single identity that can be stated within a word such as “white” or a phrase such as “Asian-American”. One can be a lesbian working-class Jew or a conservative Republican Muslim. Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping (which is to say, intersecting) identities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This becomes important because a focus on race can overlook other forms of exclusion and oppression, and without a multidimensional framework, an analysis can actually replicate the very systems of oppression it seeks to combat. Reform discourse serves to oppress both poor people and people of color, as I will discuss throughout the study, and poor people of color are most heavily impacted.

5 - Counter-Storytelling

Finally, the notion of “counter-storytelling” is the sixth major tenet of CRT. This is the idea that racial minorities have a presumed competence to speak about race and racism, because their personal narratives serve as a rewriting of history and a reframing of social issues that their white counterparts are likely unable to produce (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These counter-narratives work in direct opposition to the denial/minimization of racism which is inherent to colorblind ideology and that normally silences or marginalizes the voices of people of color. Majoritarian stories, or the

“master narratives,” obscure white privilege and cause it to appear natural and ordinary. They make assumptions about what is universal, foster a belief that social structures are neutral and apolitical, promote the myth of meritocracy, serve to “other” people of color, blame people of color for their own subordination, denigrate the cultures of people of color, and reframe resistance to white supremacy as deviance (Bell, 1987; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Love, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Most important, majoritarian stories are not considered to be stories – they are considered to be fact. They dominate the public school curriculum and they are considered to be historical truth, rather than history told from a white perspective.

A relevant example is the majoritarian story of the academic “achievement gap.” Americans generally believe that people of color do not perform as well academically as whites. This master narrative makes several erroneous assumptions: it assumes that the institution of schooling is neutral and offers all students equal opportunity, that standardized tests and other measurement tools that provide the achievement gap data are not racially biased, and that the data from the measurement tools are collected, interpreted, and reported objectively and neutrally. The achievement gap master narrative, therefore, perpetuates the myth of meritocracy and suggests that people of color are either not trying hard enough in school, or are not capable of doing as well as white students, rather than suggesting that the institution of schooling itself causes the gap to exist. Interestingly, Asian-American students often outperform white students on such measurements, but the discrepancy in the achievement of those two groups is not characterized as a gap: in the master narrative, white students are the paragon

against which all students are measured. A counter-story from the perspective of a person of color who becomes alienated from educational opportunity through biased testing practices would provide a perspective to counter the achievement gap master narrative (Love, 2004).

Writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, and James Baldwin have all contributed to a body of literature in which black writers explore what it means to be white (Roediger, 1998). These stories present whiteness and white identity in ways that are often very surprising to white people, as whites often have views of themselves and their peers that are highly distorted by dominant ideology and by whites' tendency to see themselves as having raceless identities. Critical Whiteness Studies explores this phenomenon.

Critical Whiteness Studies and the Structure/Function of White Supremacy

Many of the scholars I have cited so far are Critical Whiteness scholars, particularly W.E.B Du Bois, Richard Delgado, Toni Morrison, Jessie Daniels, Ruth Frankenburg, Philip Deloria, James Loewen, Matt Wray, Ricky Lee Allen, Zeus Leonardo, and David Roediger. Aspects of whiteness theory intersect and overlap with the other critical theories I have reviewed. A focus of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) is the social construction of whiteness as property, or currency that can be exchanged for white privilege. Central scholars in the field, in addition to those listed above, include Charles W. Mills, Cheryl Harris, and Tim Wise.

The Boundary Work of White Identity Formation

CWS scholars contend that the “white race” is a fairly recent invention: a polity which creates solidarity among a globally-dominant group that can redraw the boundaries of whiteness to include or exclude certain groups as needed to justify the unearned power and privilege of its members (Allen, 2008; C. Mills, 1997; Wray, 2006). On a global scale, white identity was founded on the concept of a “civilized” white self and the “uncivilized” person of color (Allen, 2001). I have already discussed how the notion of the “savage Indian” was used to justify genocide and cultural extermination, even as our founding fathers expressed admiration for the “noble” Native American culture (Deloria, 1998). Whites used a similar justification for their enslavement of Africans, arguing of the intellectual and moral inferiority of African people. The same justifications have been used on nearly every continent to justify the oppression, enslavement, and genocide of people of color.

This phenomenon, as well as the term “people of color,” may seem to support the idea that race is in fact a category based on pigmentation and not a sociopolitical construction. In Latin America, for example, Iberian colonizers believed that they could improve the inferior genetics of Africans and Indians by mating with them and “whitening” their stock (Mignolo, 2005; Skidmore, 1990). Doing so has resulted in a mixed racial group within which many members still value Aryan features and try to

“marry whiter” to improve the status of their line.⁴ It is also clear that lighter-skinned African-Americans enjoy far more privilege than do their darker-skinned peers (C. Harris, 1995; Horton & Sykes, 2004). Although pigmentocracy exists and is certainly related to the construction of race, it is only the most visible aspect of racialization, and serves as a decoy to obscure the sociopolitical aspects of race formation.

For example, I have already discussed the shifting racialization of some Asian groups, who transformed from a “yellow” threat to the foundation of democracy to a “model minority,” a race which allegedly, by participating in the American meritocracy, is now able to reap the rewards of generations of hard work. The “model minority” status, however, is in itself a tool of white supremacy and the meritocracy myth that perpetuates white supremacy. If there exists a group whose members are phenotypically different from Europeans but who have risen in status in the US, all other groups can be blamed for their own failure to do the same (Wu, 2002; Zia, 2000). Vietnamese and Laotian people, however, are not given the “model minority” or “honorary white” status, and according to their socioeconomic status are presently at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy in the United States, in a racial category that

⁴ The result of this mixture, the *mestizaje*, was once imagined to be a “cosmic race,” a fifth race which combined the perceived four major races of the world (Vasconcelos, 1979). The *mestiza* identity is an important area of study which is too complex for the scope of this study but which warrants at least a cursory mention here. Linda Alcoff (1995) describes the continued effort of Latin American women to “whiten” their children as an internalized aspect of the “genocide-by-rape” ideology, and part of a hegemonic “mixed-race pathology” that results from a fragmented sense of self and absence of identity. Some feminist scholars, most notably Gloria Anzaldúa (1997), call for the creation of a positive mixed-race feminine identity, an idea with important pedagogical implications (Bejarano, 2005; Delgado Bernal D. , 2006). This body of work, an essential contribution to the study of race and feminism, is known as Chicana feminism or *Xicanisma*, the study of a unique and powerful epistemology (Castillo, 1995).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls “Collective Black” (2004). If “yellow” skin or Asian phenotype were the only determinant of race/status, this would not be the case.

Other ethnic groups have also been able to attain whiteness as boundaries were redrawn to include them, including Irish and Italian people; they are among groups with the privilege to identify themselves as a distinct ethnic group, but they no longer have a subordinate ethnic identity imposed upon them by whites (Tuan, 1998). Before the Civil War, the Irish were considered to be an inferior caste, a “dark race” which was originally African, savage, ape-like, and decidedly not white. Irish and free blacks lived together in American urban slums in the 1830s and had a shared culture to a certain degree. American abolitionism was supported in Ireland as a related cause to British colonialism, and as colonized people, the Irish were not necessarily supporters of white supremacy. In America, however, despite the commonalities and shared history between the two groups, poor Irish-Americans became violently opposed to abolition and separated themselves from the anti-abolitionist views of their homeland, and self-identified as US citizens by physically attacking blacks, supporting slavery, voting for proslavery Democrats, and opposing the Chinese indentured class (Roediger, 1999).

By being complicit in the oppression of people of color, Irish-Americans won the status of whiteness and were able to collect the “wages of whiteness” as a working, rather than indentured, class (Roediger, 1999). This is exactly how white supremacy functions. It creates a racial hierarchy and rewards those who are complicit in oppression by redrawing the boundaries of whiteness to include them. Simplifying the idea of racism to a binary of black and white obscures the complex racial hierarchy that

is necessary to perpetuate white supremacy. In doing so, this Manichean thinking becomes yet another tool of the boundary work of whiteness.⁵

Whiteness as Property

Manichaeism, or dualism, is the ideology at the very center of the idea of whiteness as property, as Cheryl Harris (1995) argues in her eponymous landmark essay. She outlines the process by which in the early ideology of the United States, the binary of free/slave became synonymous with the binary of white/black. Although all Africans were not slaves, she argues, all slaves were not white. Whiteness then became *the* attribute of free human beings. In same way that slavery marked people of color as property, in that they could be used as a stand-in for currency and that black women's bodies were seen as the production mechanism for more property, it also constructed whiteness as a currency which "bought" the guarantee of being considered human beings rather than chattel. In this way, whiteness/property also became synonymous with legal and human rights (C. Harris, 1995), providing the strongest possible incentive for human beings to arrange the entirety of their social structures to creating and preserving white identity. It has become nearly folkloric to assign racism to simple ignorance, an assumption that makes invisible the very purposeful, if unconscious, ways in which people participate in white supremacy in order to retain basic human rights that are certainly denied to people of color.

⁵ Providing an historical context for the development of white identity, Edward Said (1979) argues that the European identity as a whole was developed as a binary to the Orient, and that this Occident/Orient binary creates a Western identity inextricable from the process of othering.

Whiteness as the Absence of Race

The human body, a biological entity, itself becomes synonymous with a social condition; since differences in bodies are naturalized concepts, the social conditions that those differences create then become reified as natural phenomena as well (Fanon, 1967; Lopez, 2003; Shilling, 1993). This leads to what Margaret Radin calls a “phantom objectivity” that constructs whiteness as an objective fact, and which conceals the fundamental function of whiteness through an apparent rationality (qtd. in C. Harris, 1995). This is related to another central concern of CWS scholars: that most white people consider themselves to be raceless, and that only people of color are understood to have race. This assumption works in important ways to perpetuate white supremacy. It allows whites to more easily adopt a colorblind positionality, because if they are “raceless,” then it holds that everyone else is as well. It makes the idea of white privilege impossible, because how can whites possibly benefit from white privilege if they are not “white,” but simply human? It allows them to assume the neutrality of white epistemologies and white histories. It allows them to deny that anyone is marginalized, because they are denying that there is a center to be marginalized from (Frankenburg, 1993; Soja, 1996). It allows them to passively accept all of the benefits of a white identity without ever recognizing that those benefits exist. It allows whites to adopt a decidedly non-critical epistemology, which is essential for the reproduction of oppressive ideologies like the one that governs reform discourse. Within the ideology of white supremacy, one either works against it or supports it – there is no middle ground

– and whites’ denial of their whiteness and the privilege it grants is one of the most insidious functions of white supremacy (Wise, 2009).

The “Problem” of Poor Whites

An important effect of this reified, naturalized division between whites and blacks is that poor whites almost never recognize that they share a common cause with blacks, as least as far as economic mobility is concerned. Earlier, I discussed the history of the American eugenics movement wherein the IQ test was developed in order to quantify the “feeble-mindedness” of certain poor whites, which was then used to justify a movement to euthanize or sterilize them. The precursor to the “feeble-mindedness” construction was an ideological move similar to the characterization of Irish-Americans as bestial: “white trash” were pushed to the very outer boundary of whiteness through a connection with blackness. In the early 1900s, state-supported medical doctors diagnosed Southern poor whites with a “lazy sickness” which, they claimed, was an infectious disease spread by the hookworm, a parasite they said traveled to the US in the bodies of African slaves. The whole problem with poor whites was that they were infected by blackness. Allegedly, after treatment, the pollution of blackness disappeared, and poor whites were able to take their place as respectable, hard-working white people. The fact that hookworm infection was real does not diminish the significance of its ideological connection to blackness, which was based on a falsehood. In the early stages of the invention of white identity, white professionals did everything they could to bring poor whites back within the bounds of whiteness, because any

evidence that white people could live in socioeconomic conditions similar to blacks was a threat to the foundation of white supremacy (Wray, 2006).

Of course, eugenics was unsuccessful, and poor whites still exist. The fact of poor whites is used as a constant refutation to the central principle of CRT, which states that race and racism are permanent structures and that white supremacy is the central guiding ideology of all social inequity. If that is true, then how do we explain that poor whites also suffer from low SES and low academic achievement? Ricky Lee Allen (2008) argues that the “What about poor white people?” semantic move provides an understanding of the internal political organization of the white race. The discourse of whiteness constructs poor whites as a group that does not have privilege, and also as a group that is more racist than other whites, thus creating an internal racial hierarchy that Allen argues is necessary for the white race to exist. Distorting the poor white identity as a racist one is a construction of a white “other” that allows non-poor whites to appear non-racist, and in turn, poor whites accept the role of the extreme racist in order to retain some degree of white privilege. This describes what Allen calls the *hegemonic white alliance* that exists between poor and non-poor whites in order to hold the white race together and keep white supremacy in place (Allen, 2008). The structure and function of hegemony is the subject of the final section of this chapter.

Hegemony

Critical theorist Antonio Gramsci is credited as the first theorist to expand the Marxist concept of hegemony into a general theory of society (Leonardo, 2003a).

Gramsci argues that ideological domination is perpetuated through a constant process

of compliance and resistance, requiring active consent on the part of the oppressed, rather than being a fixed phenomenon of outright domination (Giroux, 1983). He argues that a group of “organic intellectuals,” under the command of the State, function as “leadership” to subordinated masses through moral and intellectual persuasion. Eventually, the subordinated masses consent to their subordination and give the leadership power, but even after power is granted, the “hegemonic bloc” must constantly struggle over the production and control of meaning (Gramsci, 1971). If the ruling class fails in a political undertaking that their representatives have specified, the masses change from passive to active, and a “revolution” results (Gramsci, 1971).

In his analysis of the function of hegemony in schooling, Michael Apple (1990) explores the ways in which teachers, the intellectuals of Gramsci’s model, are often unaware of the ideological domination inherent to schooling, and thus work to naturalize and neutralize the dominant ideology, which is a necessary component of ideological hegemony. Along with Zeus Leonardo (2003a), Apple argues for the necessity of a “positive hegemony,” in which teachers espouse a political position that de-neutralizes dominant ideology and lead their students in questioning naturalized beliefs and interrupting the reproductive functions of schooling (1990). I will discuss the application of this idea in Chapter 7.

Within whiteness, however, hegemony is normally characterized as an oppressive rather than liberatory phenomenon (Allen, 2002). The reason that white supremacy persists is because many people of color *consent* to dominant ideology, either by believing in the myth of meritocracy and working to achieve within it without

adopting a critical consciousness, or by opposing it using behaviors that worsen their situation and perpetuate a culture-deficit ideology. This culture deficit is essential to the function of reform discourse, as I will discuss throughout this study. Within the ideology of whiteness, people of color are considered to be “good” only insofar as their “coloredness” can be ignored, and the ability of whites to ignore it is dependent upon the ability of the person of color to adopt a white disposition (Frankenburg, 1993; van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). In order to gain status in a society ruled by white supremacy, therefore, people of color must, to some extent, engage in a hegemonic relationship with whites.

III. Analyses of *A Nation at Risk*

The *Nation at Risk* report has been the subject of countless studies since its publication in 1983. Unfortunately, most scholars do not treat the report critically, and rather focus on a “Are we still at risk?” approach rather than questioning the claims made in the report (Gordon, 2004; Hayes, 2003). There are also many policy analysts and historians, most notably Maris Vinovskis (2009), who study the impact that *A Nation at Risk* had on educational policy as a whole, but not from a critical perspective.

Most of the criticism of the report questions its interpretation of standardized tests scores, and challenges the basic assumption of the report: that public schools were failing, and that that failure was responsible for America’s alleged failure to compete in a global economy. David Berliner and Bruce Biddle (1995) entirely deconstruct this argument in their book *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools*, proving that *A Nation at Risk* provided a completely flawed

interpretation of standardized test scores. Berliner and Biddle also argue that *A Nation at Risk* served several political purposes, including scapegoating educators to achieve political gain. These arguments will become central to this study in Chapter 5.

In 1991, a group of scientists at Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico published an analysis of the claims made in *A Nation at Risk*. Commonly known as *The Sandia Report*, this document debunks every single claim made in *A Nation at Risk* regarding allegedly declining standardized test scores among America's students (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993). The scientists re-interpret the test scores examined in *Nation at Risk* to determine that changing demographics among test-takers, and not declining achievement, were responsible for the shifts we saw in test scores at that time, and that statistically, those shifts could not even be described as declines. I draw extensively from this report in Chapter 5.

To my knowledge, another critical discourse analysis of *A Nation at Risk* does not exist, or at least has not been made widely available. I have not encountered any studies that aim to isolate the IDFs shared between Reaganism and *A Nation at Risk*, or connect the discursive elements of *A Nation at Risk* to the discursive elements in federal educational reform law in order to define the IDFs of reform discourse. Therefore, I think that this study may be a new approach to the analysis of educational reform.

IV. Summary

This concludes the review of the literature that forms the theoretical framework I use as I explicate how dominant IDFs govern American ideas about education reform. The work cited here is a fairly full explication of how schooling serves to alienate and

exclude working-class students and students of color, as well as a review of existing criticism of *A Nation at Risk*. My analysis of the reform documents uncovers the ways in which reform discourse, particularly the discourse of standardization, serves to naturalize rather than to interrupt these systems of oppression, even as it claims to do otherwise. The next chapter will review Critical Discourse Analysis, the methodology I use to examine the federal reform documents.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I. Research Design

The purpose of this study is to examine the dominant ideology/discourse of educational reform through a critical discourse analysis of federal education reform documents with the goal of defining the discourse that naturalizes the exclusion of students of color and working class students from educational opportunity. The focus of the research is modern educational reform (1983 – present), which began with *A Nation at Risk*, the Reagan-era report within which the fear and blame aspects of modern reform discourse are created (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Also within *A Nation at Risk* can be seen the advent of standardized testing discourse as we know it today.

First, I clarify the political and discursive context of *A Nation at Risk* by examining four major Ronald Reagan speeches, and I identify the IDFs common to all four speeches to define the discourse of Reaganism as a whole. Then, I perform a CDA of the *Nation at Risk* report to determine how the report functions within the larger political agenda and discursive style of the Reagan administration. I thus define the IDFs of reform discourse as created by *A Nation at Risk*. I then trace the discourse created by *A Nation at Risk* through all federal educational reform legislation from 1983 to present. Most federal educational reform legislation takes the form of reauthorizations of *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, the most recent of which is the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016*. Each reauthorization increasingly illustrates the tenacity of the discourse created by *A Nation at Risk* and demonstrates that the 1983 report shifted the

focus of *ESEA* from the creation of equity in public schooling to an openly oppressive political agenda aimed at othering and excluding the very demographics that *ESEA* was designed to protect.

Finally, I explore the implications of the study. I comment on how knowledge of the *IDFs* of reform discourse can inform the creation of a critical counter-discourse that can explicitly challenge the oppressive function of schooling. I also place reform discourse in the context of the modern crisis of mass incarceration, which also began in the Reagan era, and comment on the connection between those two phenomena.

II. Role of the Researcher

As a white woman, I strive to stay constantly aware of the privilege that benefits me daily. Like most white people, I was not raised with an awareness of my privilege, and I became increasingly aware of it through academic study and constant checking of my assumptions. I strive to adopt the positionality of an anti-racist white educator and academic. I do not purport to have an understanding of the lived experiences of people of color, and do not see myself as a person qualified to speak on behalf of people of color. I undertake this research as an insider to whites. I have been involved in countless conversations with white educators who have made comments to me about students of color and their families that I am certain they would not have made to a person of color. I have seen white supremacist discourse at work every day of my career as an educator, which began in 1994. I feel that I speak with that authority, and not with any claim that I have an insider understanding of people of color. With my working-class background and my identity as a first-generation college student,

however, I can speak as an insider to that group, and I also understand institutional exclusion and societal oppression from the standpoint of a woman.

As an educator, I specialize in drop-out recovery, which means that I closely examine every aspect of education to identify where and how students become alienated from the process of schooling and excluded from academic and social opportunity. In 2004, I co-founded a charter high school focused on drop-out recovery, and still work as one of the school's directors. Our school continues to be a transformative force in our community, with a strong reputation, consistently long waiting list, and impressive academic outcomes. When viewed through the standardized system that our state uses to measure school, teacher, and student success, we appear to be a failing school, and we constantly need to justify our existence to outside entities. Thus I feel that I can speak as an authority not only on the ways in which schools can be reformed to successfully serve marginalized students, but also on the ways in which the ISA of schooling inhibits such reform.

III: Defining a Theoretical Methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse is widely defined to be the intersection between language and social practice. Consequently, a study of discourse does not focus solely on components of language, like the study of linguistics does. Instead, the construction of meaning is central to the study of discourse (Cook, 2008). Early scholars in the study of discourse include Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin. The more contemporary work of sociologist James Gee is often cited in discussions of discourse and the methodology of discourse analysis. Michel Foucault is a central

scholar of critical discourse analysis, and Norman Fairclough applies Foucauldian analysis in his creation of a specific methodology of CDA. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, cognitive scientists who have published extensively on language and on the philosophy of language, provide an important perspective on how metaphor functions within language and cognition. The methodology of critical hermeneutics, as defined by Jurgen Habermas, and as informed by the work of Sigmund Freud, is also an important aspect of the critical study of discourse. This section will discuss the study of discourse as informed by the central scholars of the field along with the methodology of critical discourse analysis.

The Nature of Discourse

Much of the literature on discourse involves a determination of the fundamental unit of discourse, or an element of meaning as created through language. Lev Vygotsky (1986) argues that word and phrase meanings are malleable, not concrete, and come to represent a bit of human consciousness rather than a fixed idea. He identifies word meanings as “cells,” the most elementary form of the intersection between thought and word. A change in the meaning of a word signals a change in the way in which reality is generalized and reflected in a word. As he is a psychologist, his work is often used in the study of the language development in children. Although important, a limitation of this idea is that it focuses on cell meaning for an individual, rather than meaning on a larger social scale.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) does expand the study of discourse to a social scale. He defines a *speech genre* as a way of speaking that is commonly understood by those who

share a particular world view, history, or culture, and an *utterance* as a unit of a speech genre. The formation of an utterance, he argues, is not based upon the fixed definition of words, but rather on the previous utterances in that speech genre, and is actually primarily a *response* to preceding utterances of a given sphere. Bakhtin argues that in order for the intended meaning of an utterance to be clear, the speaker and the listener (or writer and reader, or shower and viewer, etc.) must both be members of the speech genre from which the utterance arose. This common understanding allows at times for an utterance as small as a single word to represent the entirety of a speech genre. Although not critical in itself, this thought is important in studying how discourse reproduces itself from one text to another, which is part of my approach to reform documents. I argue that the whiteness discourse in reform documents begins in the 1928 Meriam report, and the standardization discourse (which is an extension of whiteness discourse) begins in the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report. With those documents forming our overall definition of what a report on education looks and sounds and feels like, and what reform directives look and sound and feel like, it follows that all other majoritarian reform documents would have to be a response to them in order to be recognized as part of the speech genre of educational reform. Thus, reform discourse necessarily reproduces itself from one text to the next, independent of any conscious intent to reproduce it, and each text is a conflation and an extension of all of its predecessors.

James Gee expands this idea a bit further: he refers to Discourse (with a capital D) as a complete “identity kit” which guides ways of being in the world: words, acts,

values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities (1989). These Discourses also encompass print and other forms of text. He argues that no one can participate in a Discourse without being fully fluent in it, that no Discourse is neutral or objective, and that Dominant Discourses are never liberatory.⁶ Rather, Dominant Discourses serve as gates to ensure that only the “right” people get into the “right” places in society, because they are laden with dominant ideology. Therefore, participation in a gate-keeping Dominant Discourse by women and people of color requires them to be actively complicit in ideology that oppresses them. Participation in a nondominant Discourse is then necessary to “reconstitute” an authentic identity (Gee, 1989). This idea illustrates how hegemony is necessary for a dominant discourse/ideology to remain dominant, and I contend that a hegemonic relationship between educators and the State characterizes reform discourse. The Dominant Discourse is also resistant to criticism, since criticizing a Discourse marks one as being outside of the Discourse, and the Discourse itself decides what kind of criticism is acceptable (Gee, 1989). Anyone who is placed outside of the Discourse by criticizing it remains unheard and unheeded, as is the case with all educators and researchers who criticize reform discourse. Thus, reform documents, in

⁶ Gee argues that it is not possible to engage in a Discourse in a “less than fully fluent manner,” and that those who do not have full group membership are marked as “pretenders” when trying to use the Discourse which is controlled by that group. This interpretation of fluency is problematic. It assumes that Discourses are static, and it does not allow for the possibility of varying levels of fluency. It also does not engage the question of whether or not full “fluency” involves recognition of the unconscious ideological elements of discourse. Overall, it inaccurately simplifies and essentializes the nature of discourse. For the purposes of this argument, Gee’s theory is useful in that it recognizes that access to a dominant culture is necessary to gain literacy in a dominant Discourse.

order to be considered as such, do not recognize or respond to the research or knowledge that challenges them.

In his research on literacy, Gee argues that the act of reading requires acquisition of the Discourse that produced the text, so that someone who does not have access to a Discourse cannot effectively read a text from that Discourse. This form of literacy is as important as being able to use phonics to decode word sounds (Gee, 2001b). This idea is helpful in understanding how the text of a standardized test can remain indecipherable to someone who does not possess white, middle-class cultural capital, regardless of their phonemic-level literacy. The fact that standardized tests are now commonly being used to retain 3rd graders who “cannot read proficiently” is nothing short of tragic, as these tests do not measure the ability to read/decode, but rather they measure fluency in a dominant discourse. The contextual use of the word “buoy” on the 3rd grade PARCC exam is incomprehensible to a child who has never seen water let alone navigated a boat, which is the case for many Native Americans on reservations in the Southwest, yet it ostensibly measures the reading ability of the child, the instructional ability of the teacher, and the overall quality of the school.⁷ Since reform discourse

⁷ The word “buoy” truly does appear in the 3rd grade PARCC exam, which is the standardized test that New Mexico and 11 other states have adopted to measure competency in Common Core State Standards. The 3rd grade NMSBA (New Mexico Standards Based Assessment) exam, also used to measure reading ability, asked 3rd graders to “draw a boat where it is supposed to be.” Children who drew a boat being hauled on a trailer, which is the only place many New Mexican children have ever seen a boat, received no credit for their answer, even though they had mastered the act of *reading* the word “boat.” Therefore, something as simple as geographical proximity to water affects children’s alleged ability to “read proficiently.” Since the content of these tests is never released to educators or to the public, the only source that I can cite as to the content of these exams is my fellow educators, who have looked over the shoulders of their students while testing to try to get a sense of the content of the tests. Incidentally,

never questions the validity of standardized tests, we can then conclude that the meanings of “reading” and “reading ability” within reform discourse are entirely different than they are within the practice of education: while teachers and students consider the act of reading to be decoding phonemes, assigning normative meaning to words, and deriving larger meaning from combinations of words, reform discourse considers “reading” to be answering standardized test questions, and “reading ability” or “literacy” to be the degree of fluency a child has in the dominant discourse which produced the questions.

Essentially, within reform discourse, the act of answering test questions becomes a metaphorical representation of the act of reading. I argue that this reduction and simplification of complex processes through metaphorical representation characterizes all of reform discourse. Using the methodology of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), I can explore how reform discourse essentializes, for example, the complex process of education to the simple process of standardization and standardized testing through metaphorical systematicity, which is a discursive move with overwhelming implications for students of color and working class students.

Critical Hermeneutics

This metaphorical substitution of “standardized testing” for “education” that I discuss above can be considered as a struggle about *meaning* or *interpretation*. While an

doing so places them in violation of NMPED’s policies regarding test security and puts their licensure and livelihoods at risk.

oppressed group may interpret the term “education” to represent a liberatory process, within a white middle-class belief and value system, the term “education” may represent a competitive sorting process that rewards the most deserving with the most economic opportunity. This is certainly the case within reform discourse.

All communication, according to critical theorists, is entirely distorted by ideology, rife with repressed meanings that go unexamined until it is analyzed from a critical perspective (Habermas, 1989b). Using this premise, Jurgen Habermas reconstructed critical theory to encompass discourse, and articulated critical hermeneutics as a methodological approach to interpreting text and other symbolic expressions. Essential to critical hermeneutics is an analysis of how the act of interpretation is grounded in social power and domination (Kogler, 2008). Text is produced by those who have power to assign meaning to words, and these meanings are informed by an unconscious intent to preserve existing power structures. Those in power discount the ways in which the texts they produce are laden with the beliefs and values of the dominant group, and they tend to see the text they produce as politically and socially neutral. In this way, critical hermeneutics is a form of Freudian psychoanalysis, in which we identify meanings that remain inaccessible to the author of a text (Habermas, 1989a).

In the case of reform discourse, this allows the text to purport to create equity – for example, to “close achievement gaps” – while it in fact others subjugated groups and reproduces power. It also allows ISAs and their agents to ignore the power dynamics inherent in their ideas and texts and allow power to remain unexamined. Reform

documents are rarely connected to authors who are assigned responsibility for the texts they create, especially in the case of educational standards.

Critical Discourse Analysis

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Michel Foucault departs from the examination of discourse as I have described it so far. While other scholars are concerned about what a unit of discourse means, Foucault is interested in what makes it meaningful. While critical hermeneutics calls for an interpretation of the meaning of a statement, Foucault is concerned with the conscious mind in the present moment, and what shapes us to make a “statement” – Foucault’s term for a basic unit of discourse - in that moment, not with the statement itself. He is not anthropological, not political, and does not mention dominant or competing discourses. He focuses completely on discursive practices and as such is associated with post-structuralism and anti-humanism (Potter, 2008).

Foucault discusses “large groups of statements with which we are so familiar” that all are seemingly related to a topic, which is what other theorists might call a discrete discourse. He identifies moments within which the unity of the discourse is interrupted by what he calls a “system of dispersion”:

One is confronted with concepts that differ in structure and in the rules governing their use, which ignore or exclude one another, and which cannot enter the unity of a logical architecture, [and] rather various strategic possibilities that permit the activation of incompatible themes, or again, the establishment of the same theme in different groups of statement, [it] would

describe *systems of dispersion*. [W]henever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation, [and] those conditions to which the elements of this division are subjected we shall call the *rules of formation*. The rules of formation are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division. (Foucault, 1972, pp. 37-38)

As I consider Foucault while reading the text of reform documents, these systems of dispersion are apparent. The lack of a “unity of a logical architecture” presents itself as a discursive dissonance, or a splinter in the mind that uncovers for a moment the normally invisible, dominant ideology that veils the true function of the text.⁸ In these moments, a discursive formation arises, as well as the rules of formation that condition it, and those rules are those that govern the dominant ideology/discourse that requires that schooling remain a structure of social reproduction rather than agent of liberation: the ideology/discourse of whiteness.

⁸ This is a reference to the film *The Matrix*, which is based on the post-structuralist philosopher Jean O. Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*. As the protagonist begins to wake from a false world and glimpse a grim reality, or “the desert of the real,” while experiencing the world as his authentic self, his mentor identifies moments of awakening as splinters in his mind. Ricky Lee Allen (2002) has commented on the film as an allegory for becoming free of whiteness ideology, and race scholar Cornel West appears in a sequel to the film.

Since Foucault is often interpreted to be apolitical, referring to the “rules of formation” as a dominant ideology is in some ways contradictory to his work, as is using “ideology/discourse” as a compound noun. This is where the work of Norman Fairclough becomes important. Fairclough is the major scholar in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA, which is largely based on the work of Foucault. CDA extends Foucauldian analysis to an examination of the power dynamics inherent to language, particularly with how discourse creates a dominant subject that has power over a dominated object (Potter, 2008).

Fairclough’s method calls for a three-faceted approach to CDA: an analysis of the text, an analysis of the discursive action of the text (i.e. how the text creates a dominant discourse), and an analysis of the social actions that result from the dominant discourse. These three phenomena do not necessarily exist on separate planes: for example, a textual analysis involves how the text contributes to both discursive *and* social actions. Since ideology is enacted through discourse, Fairclough considers ideology and discourse to have an iterative relationship, and to be indistinguishable from each other. Thus, he coins the use of “ideology/discourse” as a compound noun, and renames the Foucauldian “discursive formation” an “ideological/discursive formation,” or IDF. He contends IDFs serve to create institutional objects that are dominated within the ideology/discourse and within the resulting social practice. A characteristic of a dominant IDF is its capacity to naturalize ideologies so that they appear to be “common sense.” He uses the term “opaque” to describe a “common sense” ideology/discourse that serves to perpetuate asymmetrical relations of power and to disguise the

persistence of oppression and hegemony. The goal of CDA is to de-naturalize IDFs by showing how social structures determine properties of discourse, and how discourse in turn determines social structures (Fairclough, 1995). In my work, I use the terms “ideology/discourse,” “IDF,” “opaque,” and “denaturalize” within the context of Fairclough’s work, although I extend the use of those terms to IDFs that I identify through analytical means that do not necessarily have a precedent in Fairclough’s published method of textual analysis.

Fairclough’s textual analysis often uncovers “discursive ambivalence,” a type of “genre-mixing,” or the presence of two or more speech genres within a discourse,⁹ and is concerned with the question of how those genres are hierarchized. A genre may draw on various discourses, and a discourse may be drawn upon in various genres. This discursive ambivalence creates opacity. An example of this is the statement that I made earlier regarding the differences in the meaning of the term “reading” between reform discourse and classroom discourse. In Fairclough’s terms, a reference to “reading” in reform discourse as the actual act of reading mixes the dominant discourse of reform and the secondary discourse of the classroom. In my analysis, I use the terms “discursive ambivalence” and “subject/object hierarchy” as I work to denaturalize them.

The genre-mixing example above results in opacity that obscures the resulting hegemonic relationship between the State and educators. Fairclough comments about

⁹ The term “speech genre” is a direct reference to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work I discussed in Chapter 2.

how discourse can naturalize practices which symbolize ideological representations of social relationships. The more dominant a representation of social relationship, he argues, the more naturalized it appears (Fairclough, 1995). This State/educator relationship can be explored through Erich Fromm's model of the sadomasochist relationship as humans' primary escape from freedom, or escape from dominant ideology and the anxiety that it can cause (1941). The sadist authority of the federal government uses reform discourse to punish, humiliate, and control educators, who then adopt a masochistic tendency which makes them psychologically dependent upon the sadistic nature of the perceived authority. The masochist does not believe in his/her ability to act independently and relies upon the sadist partner to quell feelings of powerlessness. I believe that many teachers adopt this masochistic role and actively submit to subordination by those who enforce reform, thus leaving reform discourse unquestioned and providing an ideological scapegoat, rather than adopting an authentic identity by embracing positive freedom.

While CDA focuses mainly on a macro-level analysis of discourse, the closely related field of Critical Linguistics (CL) examines language using a micro-level analysis more commonly found in linguistic methodologies that do not have a critical, socio-linguistic component. The work of Roger Fowler and Gunther Kress (1979) is concerned with how grammar and syntax code a text to represent a worldview that determines (and is determined by) a relationship between the source and the addressee of the text that is based on an unequal distribution of power. This phenomenon is similar to the determination of a discursive sadomasochism that I define above, but is uncovered

through a close examination of the linguistic form that characterizes text, such as choice of predicate, personal pronouns, naming conventions, and syntactic transformations which, when taken as a whole, construct a coherent discourse. The presence of a linguistic structure that supports the unequal distribution of power inherent in reform discourse is a component of my analysis.

Having provided this broad description of the theory involved in the methodology of CDA, I will turn now to some specific methods I use in my analysis of the chosen texts of the study.

IV. Methods of Textual Analysis/Data Collection

In this study, I apply Critical Discourse Analysis to several texts that work together to create reform discourse. Those texts are listed here:

Ronald Reagan's speeches:

- *Address before a joint session of the congress on the program for economic recovery* (1981)
- *Remarks to members of the National Press Club on arms reduction and nuclear weapons* (1981 "Zero Option" address)
- *Remarks at the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida* (1983 "Evil Empire" address)
- *Address to the nation on defense and national security* (1983 "Star Wars" address)

Educational reform documents:

- *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*
- *The Bilingual Education Act of 1968* (ESEA Amendment)
- *The Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (1975)
- *The Education Amendments Act* (1978 ESEA Reauthorization)
- *The Education Consolidation and Improvement Act* (1981 ESEA reauthorization)
- *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983)
- *The Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Act* (1988 ESEA reauthorization)

- *'A Jeffersonian compact'; The Statement by the President and Governors* (1989 Charlottesville Summit statement of purpose)
- *America 2000: An Educational Strategy* (1991)
- *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (1994)
- Brochure describing *The Improving America's Schools Act* (1994 ESEA reauthorization)
- Executive summary of *The No Child Left Behind Act* (2001 ESEA reauthorization)
- *The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (2009)
- Press release announcing the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2009)
- *The Every Student Succeeds Act* (2016 ESEA Reauthorization)

CDA is a problem-oriented approach, characterized by an eclectic mix of methods and a constant movement back and forth between theory and data (Wodak, 2006). For this reason, it is difficult to describe a series of discrete methods that are used for pure data collection, and another series of discrete methods used to analyze the data, as is often the case in qualitative and quantitative studies. My study involves a concurrent discussion of data, analysis, methods, and findings, which I attempt to describe in the following statements.

Consider the foundational, pervasive IDFs to which I refer in Chapter 2 (i.e., colorblindness, linguicism, and meritocracy) that characterize white supremacist discourse, the dominant ideology that is reified by reform discourse. Identify employment of these foundational IDFs in the chosen texts to determine how they function to naturalize dominant ideology within reform discourse.

Identify such elements as discursive ambivalence and subject-object hierarchy as indicators of dominant discourse, and thereby uncover the most commonly-used IDFs of reform discourse, some of which I have already described in the previous

section of Chapter 3 (i.e. hegemonic relationship between educators and State, metaphorical simplification of complex phenomena).

Identify instances in which meaning-making of words, phrases, and data represents a master narrative and/or minimizes or ridicules the potential for counter-narrative.

Identify instances in which reform discourse reveals an intention contradictory to the stated intentions of the author(s), indicating the presence of unconscious distortions of meaning.

Conduct an analysis of the linguistic form of the chosen texts to determine elements of language which are common to reform documents, and uncover how these elements contribute to the formation of power differentials in reform discourse.

V. Contextual Theoretical Setting: Codifying the “Reform Contract”

Social contract theory posits that a tacit, unspoken “contract” exists between the individual/society and the government/state, in that the individual consents to behave in a certain way in return for group membership and protection of one’s rights on the part of authority. Essentially, the “social contract” describes how a society functions and defines societal norms, moral psychology, and acceptable behaviors. Rousseau famously used the social contract as a model by which to explore how an unjust, exploitative society maintains its power. He argued that a society that creates large divisions between the rich and the poor persists because the terms of the social contract are naturalized to the point that they overcome, obscure, or misdirect whatever feelings of injustice may arise in the populace. Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual*

Contract examines the “male covenant”, which perpetuates patriarchy within an allegedly gender-neutral society and that naturalizes the normative logic that allows sexual oppression to persist (C. Mills, 1997).

Charles W. Mills, inspired by Pateman, applied social contract theory to race and racial domination in order to create a realistic examination of Western political theory which accounts for, rather than ignores, race. *The Racial Contract* rests on three claims: that white supremacy exists on a global scale, that white supremacy is a political system, and that white supremacy can be theorized as a contract between white signatories. Signatories are often not consciously aware of the contract that they have signed, and they often perpetuate oppressive systems while they think they are working against them, as is the case with colorblind ideology (C. Mills, 1997).

Critical scholars do not need to “prove” the existence of white supremacy or white privilege. What we do is uncover the specific ways in which it functions and suggest ways to resist it. We do not do this because we think that an eventual victory over white supremacy is possible. In the words of Derrick Bell (1992),

The obligation to try and improve the lot of blacks and other victims of white injustice (including whites) does not end because final victory over racism is unlikely, even impossible. The essence of a life fulfilled – a succession of actions undertaken in righteous causes – is a victory in itself. (p. 7)

My hope is that this study can be considered one of those actions.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, I do not think that the dominant discourse/ideology of educational reform will ever significantly change, because it is fulfilling the exact

function it is meant to fulfill. It is the part of our Racial Contract that governs schooling, the part that educators and students are expected to sign. It does not need conscious signatories. It codifies and specifies the methods by which schooling will continue to protect the privilege of middle-class whites, but by the use of discursive acrobatics, presents these methods as if they are in the best interest of students and teachers. My aim is to make explicit how white supremacy governs reform discourse, in the same way that Carole Pateman and Charles W. Mills made explicit how patriarchy and white supremacy govern our overall social norms. I have the luxury of the majoritarian narrative appearing in print, published by the federal government – I am able to codify that narrative, to analyze that discourse. I hope I have made clear that a dominant discourse does not require conscious authoring – I do not suggest that the supporters of standardization as a method of reform must consciously and purposefully perpetuate white supremacy in order for reform documents to serve the ideological/discursive function that they do. I offer this analysis not as a way to change the master narrative, but to inform a counter-narrative which can be utilized in what Henry Giroux (1983) calls “pockets of resistance”: the classrooms of critical educators.

VI. Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the study, including listed the documents that I chose to include. I have expanded the discussion of Critical Theory that I began in Chapter 2 to include its application to discourse analysis. I have also attempted to clarify the methods I used for collection of data, even though those methods are abstract and do not lend themselves easily to quantification. I have tried to

contextualize the study as a codification of the “reform contract,” in the sense of Pateman’s sexual contract and Mills’ racial contract.

Since Critical Discourse Analysis is a contextual, political, and historical approach to text, it was necessary to explore the political climate of the *Nation at Risk* era in order to do a complete analysis. I did not expect that historical analysis to turn into a full chapter on the discourse of Reagan discourse, but as I began my research, I realized that such a chapter was necessary. It is impossible to remove *A Nation at Risk* from Reagan’s larger agenda of massive increases in defense spending and massive cuts to social programs, including education. It is also impossible to remove Reagan’s stance on educational reform from his overtly anti-black political agenda. In analyzing four of Reagan’s major speeches about budget and defense priorities, I isolated the IDFs that I would eventually identify as the IDFs of reform discourse, and found that *A Nation at Risk* was much more about furthering Reagan’s political agenda than it was about education. I will explore those IDFs in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Analysis of the Political Discourse of Ronald Reagan

It is of utmost importance to understand that ideology/discourse regarding education and educational reform is synecdochic of political ideology/discourse as a whole. It is not possible to accurately examine the *Nation at Risk* report without a full understanding of the political context from which it arose. This chapter will contain an analysis of the overall discourse of the Reagan administration as it appears in four important addresses, as well as the political agenda which shaped that discourse.

I. The Formation of Ronald Reagan's Ideological/Discursive Posture

Ronald Reagan's first policy address was delivered in February of 1981, about a month into his first term as President, and it introduced a political agenda and ideological/discursive posture that characterized his administration for years to come. The address, which introduced his four-point Program for Economic Recovery, contains several IDFs that become central to a critical analysis of *A Nation at Risk*.

The Father Figure IDF

Reagan's first address begins by painting a picture of America that is so grim that it seems to be purposely inciting fear and panic (Reagan, 1981a). He opens by asking congress to "share in restoring the promise" that is offered by America, "the last, best hope of man on Earth." His opening suggests that his agenda is not only essential to America, but to all of humankind. The characterization of America as man's "last, best hope" connotes a world on the edge of extinction, as if humankind has exhausted all other options for survival and is now at risk of squandering its very last option. He comments on the "punishing inflation which has for the first time in 60 years held to

double-digit figures for two years in a row,” eight million unemployed Americans “who want to be productive” but whose lives are dominated by “despair,” a sixty-seven percent increase in personal taxes for the average family, and a national deficit approaching one trillion dollars, a figure that he claims is “incomprehensible” to him. He claims that the rate of increase in American productivity “is among the lowest of all major industrialized nations.” He states that “unless we act forcefully – and now – the economy will get worse. Can we, who man the ship of state, deny it is somewhat out of control?” Clearly, the implication is that this dystopian American ship of state is on the verge of collapse because of naiveté of the former men at the helm.

He never goes as far as directly blaming President Carter or the Democratic Party for the imminent collapse of America, but he postures himself as a father figure who has arrived to take control of the country out of the hands of the foolish and misguided. He says that “there has been no breakdown of the human, technological, and natural resources upon which the economy is built,” and that he has “confidence in a system that has never failed us, but which we have failed.” He warns that “we can no longer procrastinate and hope that things will get better. They will not.” The clear message here is that America has been guided by inaction and childish hope and has lost its status as a world superpower, and that it requires a firm guiding hand to bring it back to its original promise.

A key aspect of this message is the idea that the “system” did not fail, but that the American people did. He implies that American citizens themselves have created the economic conditions under which they suffer, as if the “system” is a benevolent

constant upward-pointing vector, and the behavior of Americans is the variable upon which the success of the economy rests. He shames his listeners, who then may more easily accept the austere budget cut proposals later in the speech as a kind of necessary consequence of their failure. This IDF of the father figure functions by inciting fear and shame, quelling it with a plan that promises prosperity, and suggesting that opposition to the plan is nothing more than childish naiveté.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff argues that the difference between conservatives and liberals, particularly in regard to how each group defines morality, can be understood through each group's perception of the ideal nuclear family (1996). Conservative thinkers see the ideal nuclear family as being led by the "strict father," while the ideal nuclear family for liberal thinkers is led by the "nurturant parent." The "strict father" teaches "children" that evil is everywhere, and self-reliance and self-discipline are necessary to resist the temptation of evil and build a strong moral character. This system requires that the father use tough love to reward self-reliance and punish laziness. The challenges in our lives, therefore, are tests which serve to sort the deserving from the undeserving. Although Lakoff's argument is somewhat simplistic, in that it does not account for how oppressive ideologies contribute to the cognitive development of these family ideals, his description of the "strict father" is relevant when considering the discourse of Ronald Reagan, particularly the ways in which Reagan focuses on the difference between the deserving and the undeserving.

The Benevolent Frame

This same policy address sets precedent for a rhetorical structure which appears again and again in later Reagan addresses. Just before Reagan employs the father figure IDF which I describe above, he frames the address with a sentiment that makes him appear empathetic to the struggles of working-class Americans:

Almost eight million Americans are out of work. These are people who want to be productive. But as the months go by, despair dominates their lives. The threats of layoff and unemployment hang over other millions, and all who work are frustrated by their inability to keep up with inflation.

This benevolent opening gives way to the scolding tone of the father figure, which lasts for eight short paragraphs and ends with Reagan saying:

I'm asking you to join me in reducing direct Federal spending by \$41.4 billion in the fiscal year 1982, and this goes along with another \$7.7 billion in user fees and off-budget savings for a total of \$49.1 billion. And this will still allow an increase of \$40.8 billion over 1981 spending.

He turns back to benevolence for three more paragraphs, the highlights of which are included here:

Now I know that exaggerated and inaccurate stories about these cuts have disturbed many people, particularly those dependent on grant and benefit programs for their basic needs. Some of you have heard from constituents, I know, afraid that social security checks, for example, were going to be taken away from them. We will continue to fulfill the obligations that spring from our

national conscience. Those who, through no fault of their own, must depend on the rest of us – the poverty-stricken, the elderly, all those with true need – can rest assured that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts. Medicare will not be cut, nor will supplemental income for the blind, the aged, and the disabled. And funding will continue for veterans' pensions. School breakfasts and lunches for the children of low-income families will continue, as will nutrition...there will be no cut in Project Head Start...all in all, nearly \$216 billion worth of programs providing help for tens of millions of Americans will be fully funded.

These two stated goals – reducing federal spending by \$49.1 billion and leaving social safety net programs untouched – leave listeners with the obvious question of where the budget cuts will occur. A Congressional Budget Office analysis of these budget revisions, published one month after the delivery of this address, concluded that “almost all” of the proposed budget reductions would happen within the thirty percent of the overall budget that “consists mainly of programs in the fields of education, employment and training, food, nutrition, health, social services, energy, and transportation” (United States Congressional Budget Office, 1981). We receive the answer to this question in the very next sentence of the address: “But government will not continue to subsidize individuals or particular business interests where real need cannot be demonstrated.” Reagan does close the address with a return to the benevolent frame, but not before he creates a scapegoat which was central to the discourse of his three presidential campaigns as well as to his two terms as President.

The Lazy Scapegoat of Color IDF

Throughout Ronald Reagan's 1976 presidential campaign, many of his stump speeches relied upon the idea that welfare was a broken system, rife with fraud and siphoning tax dollars from hard-working Americans to fund extravagant lifestyles for those who would rather bilk the welfare system than earn money honestly. In numerous stump speeches, he told an incredulous story about one such fraudster:

In Chicago, they found a woman who holds the record. She used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent, deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year.¹⁰

This woman, who was dubbed "the welfare queen" in an article in the Chicago Tribune, became Reagan's symbol of everything that was wrong with the welfare system (Levin, 2013). Reagan conjured her again and again throughout his campaign, and in a few instances he stated that she was from the South Side of Chicago, which was widely known as a "ghetto" that contained many housing projects inhabited by poor African-Americans. The story became more embellished with every retelling, and soon the figure of the black, jewel-clad woman driving her Cadillac to the liquor store to buy booze with food stamps became folkloric. The real-life "welfare queen," Linda Taylor, was eventually convicted for using four aliases and scamming the government out of a

¹⁰ Although this quote is attributed in Ronald Reagan in countless articles, and a recorded soundbyte exists of Reagan making this speech in January of 1976 (Levin, 2013), I am unable to find a transcript of the speech to cite. Apparently it was transcribed in an article in the *Washington Star*, a publication that is now defunct (Blake, 2012).

total of \$8,000, a far cry from Reagan's characterization. Welfare fraud, however, was only a footnote in the woman's list of crimes, which included kidnapping, baby trafficking, and homicide (Levin, 2013). Although these facts came to light in 1977, the "welfare queen" myth endured, unhindered by reality.

The lazy scapegoat of color is such a useful trope that current leaders of the Republican Party invoke it continually. During the 2012 presidential campaign, Rick Santorum said that he did not want to "make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money," Mitt Romney repeatedly accused President Obama of wanting to turn America into an "entitlement society," and Newt Gingrich called President Obama "the food stamp president" (Blake, 2012). Also during his campaign, Reagan referred to "strapping young bucks," which is a derogatory Southern term for young black men, who used their food stamps to buy T-bone steaks (Dumas, 2013). This idea has been recycled this year, when a New York Republican proposed a bill which would prohibit people from using food stamps to buy "luxury food items, particularly high-end steaks and lobster," and similar bills exist in Missouri and Maine, while one passed into law in Kansas (Holley, 2016).¹¹

According to a US Department of Agriculture report, over 40% of households that participated in the food stamp program in 2013 had a head of household who was White, while 25% had a head of household who was African-American or Black.

¹¹ Just very recently, I saw an anti-Hillary Clinton political ad which featured her face next to a liquor store sign that proclaimed "we accept food stamps," and the words "say no to Hillary." Apparently the association between the Democratic Party and welfare fraud is so ingrained that the ad did not need any reference to fact in order to be effective.

Additionally, about 45% of these households contained children, 20% contained disabled non-elderly people, over 17% contained elderly people and 31% contained members who were employed (United States Department of Agriculture, 2015). Based on this information, a more apt description of the typical welfare recipient might be white family containing children, elderly family members, or family members who work low-wage jobs¹². The stereotype of the lazy black person on welfare did not arise from fact, however. It is essential for the Republican Party, which works for the interests of wealthy Americans but courts the votes of white working-class Americans, to create a scapegoat that the white, working-class American can blame for economic woes.

According to a landmark study on the larger sociological effects of the “welfare queen” myth as propagated by Ronald Reagan, from the mid-1970s onwards, Americans’ narrative script of the welfare recipient became that of a black woman, and this cultural bias made it possible for Ronald Reagan to form a successful coalition between the interests of big business and disaffected white working-class voters (Gilliam, 1999).

Gilliam notes that Great Society social reforms of the post-WWII era, which were the beginning of the modern welfare system, were greeted with support from both sides of aisle, and conservative attacks on the “welfare state” did not begin until the time of the Civil Rights gains of the mid-60s and early 70s. It can easily be argued that any political reference to welfare fraud is inherently racially charged.

¹² As noted in this same report, fiscal year analysis files were not developed for any year prior to 1989, and data regarding race and ethnicity is not considered to be reliable prior to the year 2007, so I am not able to supply characteristics of food stamp recipients during the Reagan era.

This is an important idea to keep in mind while returning to the Reagan policy address on economic recovery. As I stated above, the address changes tone when Reagan warns that “government will not continue to subsidize individuals or particular business interests where real need cannot be demonstrated.” Later he states that:

The Food Stamp program will be restored to its original purpose, to assist those without resources to purchase sufficient nutritional food. We will, however, save \$1.8 billion in fiscal year 1982 by removing from eligibility those who are not in real need or who are abusing the program. We will tighten welfare and give more attention to outside sources of income when determining the amount of welfare that an individual is allowed. This, plus strong and effective work requirements, will save \$520 million in the next year.

The suggestion here is that welfare fraud was endemic enough to cost taxpayers about two billion dollars each year. Later in the address he characterizes fraud as an “unrelenting national scandal.” The comment about work requirements suggests that people were choosing to receive welfare rather than work, even though Reagan mentions eight million unemployed Americans in the third paragraph of the address whom he did not accuse of welfare dependence. Within the benevolent frame, he characterizes the unemployed as “people who want to work,” but the characterization changes within this section of the address. He does not mention that part of the unemployment epidemic was the fact that the Baby Boomer generation was growing up and looking for employment, and that about two and a half times the number of Americans entered the labor force between 1965 and 1980 than had between 1950 and

1965. He leaves his listeners with the idea that two groups of unemployed people exist: those who want to work, and those who do not. His discourse established the racial identification of those two groups before he was even elected.

Opacity through Discursive Ambivalence

The benevolent frame is a type of macro-level discursive ambivalence, a technique which creates an opaque discourse that masks dominant ideology. As I reviewed in Chapter 3, Norman Fairclough defines discursive ambivalence as the simultaneous presence of more than one discourse, and the question of how those discourses are hierarchized. Reagan begins by stating that social programs were “exempt from any cuts,” and then spends the entire middle section of the address explaining which social programs were being cut. Reagan employs ambivalence in other areas of the address as well, but does so from one sentence to the next, rather than from one section to the next. For example, when talking about federal subsidies for the arts, he says:

Historically, the American people have supported by voluntary contributions more artistic and cultural activities than all the other countries in the world put together. I wholeheartedly support this approach and believe that Americans will continue their generosity. Therefore, I’m proposing a savings of \$85 million in the federal subsidies now going to the arts and humanities.

This statement initially comes across as support for the arts, and does not mention that his proposed “savings” would actually cut the National Endowment for the Arts by half, which would have been the first decrease in the NEA since its inception in 1966

(National Endowment for the Arts, 2016). The fact that a decimation of NEA appropriations is presented as Reagan's support for the arts is a clear example of discursive ambivalence, and the opaque and therefore dominant discourse that emerges is one that justifies sacrificing, not supporting, art.

Reagan's discussion of education funding is deceptive as well. It is purposely misleading, and does not accurately summarize how schools are funded:

Now, already some have protested that there must be no reduction in aid to schools. Well, let me point out that Federal aid to education amounts to only 8 percent of the total educational funding, and for this 8 percent, the Federal Government has insisted on a tremendously disproportionate share of control over our schools. Whatever reductions we've proposed in that 8 percent will amount to very little in the total cost of education. They will, however, restore more authority to States and local school districts.

Contrary to the cursory treatment given to education funding in this address – a mere three sentences – the impact of the Reagan budget on education would in fact be devastating. Federal aid to elementary and secondary education was established under Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which was an essential aspect of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty and which allocated additional funds to schools that served children of low-income families. "Whatever reductions we've proposed in that 8 percent" turned out to be a full 28% decrease (United States Congressional Budget Office, 1981), which would disproportionately affect children of low-income families. To gloss over the scale of the decrease and to omit who it would

affect masks the very real impact of this budget revision, which would scale back funding for essential remediation programs intended to create more equity in public schooling by subsidizing schools with a much lower tax base than those in higher-income areas. The final sentence draws listeners' attention to the more traditional Republican platform of smaller federal government and states' rights, which serves as a distraction from the reality of this proposal. The opaque, dominant discourse of devaluing education is partially obscured by the distraction of the secondary "states' rights" discourse.

This type of discursive ambivalence continues throughout most of the address. The space program is essential, but only certain NASA programs are important. Medicaid, listed under his initial list of programs that would be "exempt from any cuts," would have a cap on federal contributions, in exchange for more flexibility in how states manage it. The Economic Development Administration will be terminated, because there is no convincing evidence that it is been effective in creating new jobs...except for the kinds of jobs that are not really productive. He has "no intention of dismantling the regulatory process," but government regulation is so burdensome that he is creating a cabinet-level Task Force on Regulatory Relief. These contradictions appear in nearly every paragraph of the address.

The umbrella form of discursive ambivalence is that Reagan attempts to characterize all of his varied budget cuts as those which determine "true need" among recipients of government assistance and "importance" among government research, funding priorities, and regulations, all under the guise of creating a smaller federal

government. The fact that “true need” and “importance” are decided on a federal level, however, represents an *increase* in federal-level regulation and prioritizing. Toward the beginning of the address, Reagan mentions that despite the \$49.1 billion in budget cuts, he still plans on a \$40 billion increase in government spending. The explanation of that spending increase occurs almost in the exact middle of the address, and reveals a new federal priority of staggering economic proportions.

Fear of the Un-American Other

In 1945, at the beginning of the Atomic Age, the world’s understanding of the concept of war changed. It became very difficult for people to imagine the conventional wartime strategy of attack and counter-attack after witnessing the power of a weapon which would make any military attack provoke an entirely devastating response. Common sense held that any country with the means to create a nuclear weapon could not logically use it without risking annihilation. This reality led to a set of general assumptions regarding war, which included the ideas that the purpose of military power was essentially to deter a military attack, and that deterrence could be sustained only when there was a rough equivalence of nuclear power among powers capable of producing nuclear weapons (Goodnight, 1986). These powers were America and its NATO allies, and the Soviet Union.

After the proxy wars, revolutions, and crises which generally came to an end with the Vietnam War, the Cold War entered a period of *détente*, wherein the superpowers worked together toward the goal of armament control. The SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) of 1969 led to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, but

the SALT II arms control treaty failed to pass the US Senate in 1979. NATO then announced a plan to deploy the Pershing II and Cruise missile installations in Western Europe, which would allow NATO to send unmanned land-based missiles directly into the Soviet Union. This was the situation that Ronald Reagan inherited upon his inauguration in January of 1981. Rhetorician G. Thomas Goodnight (1986) argues that the rhetorical posture of the Reagan administration subverted the deterrence-driven discourse of the post-WWII era and replaced it with a traditional war discourse consistent with the pre-nuclear age, and that this rhetorical posture began with the address on economic recovery which has been the focus of this section of my study.

After announcing his proposed budget cuts to education, food stamps, synthetic fuel research, school lunches for low-income children, NASA, and the postal service, among others, Reagan announces that the only department with a budget increase would be the Department of Defense:

I believe that my duty as President requires that I recommend increases in defense spending over the coming years. I know that you're all aware – but I think it bears saying again – that since 1970 the Soviet Union has invested \$300 billion more in its military forces than we have. As a result of its massive military buildup, the Soviets have made a significant numerical advantage in strategic nuclear delivery systems, tactical aircraft, submarines, artillery, and anti-aircraft defense. To allow this imbalance to continue is a threat to our national security...We remain committed to the goal of arms limitation through negotiation. I hope we can persuade our adversaries to come realistic balances

and verifiable agreements. But, as we negotiate, our security must be fully protected by a balanced and realistic defense program.

Although it does not seem possible to advocate for disarmament and increased armament at the same time, this is a specific form of discursive ambivalence that characterizes many of Ronald Reagan's addresses regarding national defense. This is a topic to which I will return. At this point it is important to note how Reagan uses fear as a tool when announcing his defense priorities. He paints a picture of an insurmountable Soviet army, growing exponentially and posing a greater and greater threat to American lives. In this speech, his very first policy address, he characterizes the United States and the Soviet Union as enemies, despite the years of careful talks and negotiations among world leaders which strove to dismantle such inflammatory posturing. The Reagan administration built upon this discourse in address after address, eventually characterizing the Soviet Union as being un-American, as opposed to American values, as another culture could possibly be. Just as the welfare queen became symbolic of all that was fraudulent, the USSR became symbolic of all that was un-American. He did not ask his listeners to think critically or pluralistically. He asked them to polarize themselves and their thinking, with people of color and the Soviet Union representing all that was evil, and the proverbial hard-working (read: white) American and the American military representing the "last, best hope of man of Earth." As I discussed in Chapter 2, it is this type of Manichean thinking that is essential to the perpetuation of white supremacist ideology.

Toward the end of the address, Reagan turns back to the benevolent frame, noting “together we can embark on this road,” “we’re in control here,” and “there’s nothing wrong with America that we can’t fix.” He promises that his budget is “evenhanded, that only the programs for the truly deserving remain untouched.” He claims that his \$41.4 billion cuts will happen “without harm to the government’s legitimate purposes or to our responsibility to all who need our benevolence.” He ends, however, and leaves his audience, with a sense of apocalyptic fear:

I would direct a question to those who have indicated already an unwillingness to accept such a plan: Have they an alternative which offers a greater chance of balancing the budget, reducing and eliminating inflation, stimulating the creation of jobs, and reducing the tax burden? And, if they haven't, are they suggesting we can continue on the present course without coming to a day of reckoning? If we don't do this, inflation and the growing tax burden will put an end to everything we believe in and our dreams for the future.

It should be alarming that a person in such power would be willing to characterize those who disagree with him as those who would bring about a “day of reckoning” that “will put an end to everything we believe in and our dreams for the future.” Indeed, his suggestion here is that those who disagree with him should be filed under the category of “evil,” along with the welfare queen and the Soviet Union. His discursive formation of the un-American other is purposely manipulative, and as suggested by how often it appears in later addresses, extremely effective.

II. Ronald Reagan and the US Department of Education

The United States Department of Education did not begin operations until May 4th of 1980, just a few months before Reagan took office. President Carter formed the Department when he signed the Department of Education Organization Act in October of 1979, which combined offices from several federal agencies (United States Department of Education, 2010), and thus fulfilled a campaign promise to the National Education Association (Hechinger, 1982). One of the most consistent aspects of Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign was his pledge to dismantle the Department of Education immediately upon taking office, calling it "President Carter's new bureaucratic boondoggle" (Dowd, Brew, & Constable, 1983). When Reagan appointed the very first U.S. Secretary of Education, lifelong educator T.H. Bell, he did so on the condition that Bell would work to immediately dismantle the Department of Education (Hechinger, 1982). Reagan and Bell were unable to complete this mission because of opposition from a Democratic House of Representatives (de Rugy & Gryphon, 2004). Reagan did not abandon the idea, though, and renewed this pledge in his January 1982 State of the Union address, stating that his upcoming budget plan would "realize major savings by dismantling the Department of Education" (Reagan, 1982).

With this in mind, I would like to trace a brief chronology of the events following President Reagan's address on the Program for Economic Recovery, which is the focus of the previous section, because it helps to illustrate the political climate when *A Nation at Risk* was published. Five days after the speech, on February 23rd of 1981, Leonid Brezhnev convened the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Brezhnev then proposed “a moratorium right now on the deployment in Europe of new medium-range missiles by NATO countries and the USSR,” in effect offering to continue to deterrence efforts which were undermined by the discourse of Reagan’s address (Goodnight, 1986). This proposal was met with great support throughout Europe, causing demonstrations in at least three major European cities urging Reagan to agree. President Reagan did not immediately respond to Brezhnev’s proposal, and the assassination attempt occurred less than one month later. During his recovery, he continued to be silent about Brezhnev’s proposal, and the country’s attention then turned to the Air Traffic Controller strike in August of 1981. It was around this time, on August 26th, 1981, that T. H. Bell formed the National Commission on Excellence in Education, the committee which produced the *Nation at Risk* report. Deterred from dismantling the Department of Education, Bell purportedly formed the Commission to “examine the quality of education in the United States and to make a report to the Nation and to [Bell] within 18 months of its first meeting” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

In mid-October of 1981, returning to the unresolved issue of Brezhnev’s proposed moratorium, a reporter asked President Reagan if there could be a limited exchange of nuclear weapons in Europe or if any exchange would inevitably grow into a war directly involving the United States and the Soviet Union. Reagan responded, “I don’t honestly know” (Gwertzman, 1981). He went on to criticize Soviet leaders, saying that even though he thought it was possible to exchange weapons fire without “pushing the button,” Soviet military doctrine held that “a nuclear war is possible and they

believe it is winnable.” Brezhnev responded incredulously, insisting that “only he who has decided to commit suicide can start a nuclear war in the hope of emerging a victor from it” and offering to sign an agreement with the United States not to be the first to use nuclear weapons. Reagan declined this offer, as he had numerous times in the past, insisting that the Soviet Union’s superiority in conventional arms in Europe made it necessary for the United States to retain the threat of nuclear retaliation (Gwertzman, 1981). Despite later attempts to clarify his alarming statements, Reagan had thrown his administration into disarray and destroyed his credibility on a global scale (Goodnight, 1986). Europeans saw him as being much more willing to engage in hostility than his predecessors, and the location of the missiles made it possible for him to do so without ever endangering anyone on American soil. It was politically imperative for him to return to the discourse of deterrence, and to do so while continuing with his agenda to increase defense spending and justify future missile deployments.

These are the conditions under which Reagan delivered the next address that is key to this study, which is known as the “Zero Option” address.

III. Zero Option

The Zero Option address, officially titled “Remarks to Members of the National Press Club on Arms Reduction and Nuclear Weapons,” was the very first internationally televised, live presidential speech (Reagan, 1981b). It occurred on November 18th, 1981, about eight months after the assassination attempt, one month after the bungled “I don’t honestly know” response, and two weeks before the START talks in Geneva, during which representatives from the US and the USSR would meet to negotiate for the

reduction of intermediate range nuclear missiles. (These talks would not bear fruit until the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987.) Whatever President Reagan proposed in this speech would be the foundation for the position of the United States in the Geneva negotiations, yet he still needed to justify his plan to massively increase defense spending and to deploy new American missiles.

The address begins with the benevolent frame. Reagan tells the story of a “personal, handwritten letter to Soviet President Brezhnev” that he wrote while he was in his hospital bed recovering from the assassination attempt. He reads a few paragraphs from the letter, in which he asks Brezhnev to recall a time when they met ten years previously, when Brezhnev and President Nixon had “concluded a series of meetings that had brought hope to all the world.” Below are highlights from his reading of the personal letter to Brezhnev:

Mr. President: When we met, I asked if you were aware that the hopes and aspirations of millions of people throughout the world were dependent on the decisions that would be reached in those meetings. You took my hand in both of yours and assured me that you were aware of that and that you were dedicated with all your heart and soul and mind to fulfilling those hopes and dreams...The people of the world still share that hope...They want to raise their families in peace without harming anyone or suffering harm themselves ...Is it possible that we have permitted ideology, political and economic philosophies, and governmental policies to keep us from considering the very real, everyday problems of our peoples? Will the average Soviet family be better off or even

aware that the Soviet Union has imposed a government of its own choice on the people of Afghanistan?

By using this letter as the opening to this address, Reagan postures himself as a measured, experienced leader who needs to remind Brezhnev of a promise he had made a decade ago. When he asks if it is “possible that we have permitted ideology” to distract from the promise of fulfilling the “hopes and dreams” of the people, and then follows that with a reference to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, it is clear that he uses “we” in the same way that a parent would use “we” when saying “we don’t throw our food at the dinner table.” It is condescending, and it invokes the father figure IDF. It also suggests that the Soviets are solely responsible for interrupting efforts at peace, as if Reagan had not ignored Brezhnev’s numerous proposals for arms control agreements, and had not proposed a budget that dramatically cut funding for social programs that *were* helping American people fulfill “hopes and dreams.” The hypocrisy is stunning.

Reagan goes on to read another section of the letter, which recalls World War II and comments on an alleged military restraint on the part of America:

When World War II ended, the United States had the only undamaged industrial power in the world. Our military might was at its peak, and we alone had the ultimate weapon, the nuclear weapon, with the unquestioned ability to deliver it anywhere in the world. If we had sought world domination then, who could have opposed us? But the United States followed a different course, one unique in all the history of mankind. We used our power and wealth to rebuild the war-

ravished economies of the world, including those of the nations who had been our enemies. May I say, there is absolutely no substance to charges that the United States is guilty of imperialism or attempts to impose its will on other countries, by use of force.

To paint the United States as an entirely benevolent force innocent of imperialism, is, of course, historical amnesia at its very worst. The point here is that Reagan suggests that he was somehow involved with or even responsible for this alleged benevolence of four decades ago. He then announces the purpose of the speech, which is to “speak today to this audience and the people of the world about America's program for peace and the coming negotiations...to present our program for preserving peace in Europe and our wider program for arms control,” as if his proposal is simply a continuation of the American peace efforts following World War II. Before revealing the specifics of the plan, he invokes the father figure IDF again:

Twice in my lifetime, I have seen the peoples of Europe plunged into the tragedy of war...And twice in my lifetime, young Americans have bled their lives into the soil of those battlefields not to enrich or enlarge our domain, but to restore the peace and independence of our friends and Allies. All of us who lived through those troubled times share a common resolve that they must never come again...But today, a new generation is emerging on both sides of the Atlantic. Its members were not present at the creation of the North Atlantic Alliance. Many of them don't fully understand its roots in defending freedom and rebuilding a war-torn continent. Some young people question why we need weapons,

particularly nuclear weapons, to deter war and to assure peaceful development. They fear that the accumulation of weapons itself may lead to conflagration. Some even propose unilateral disarmament. I understand their concerns. Their questions deserve to be answered. But we have an obligation to answer their questions on the basis of judgment and reason and experience. Our policies have resulted in the longest European peace in this century. Wouldn't a rash departure from these policies, as some now suggest, endanger that peace?

In this section, the repetition of “twice in my lifetime” clearly works to suggest that Reagan speaks with the authority of someone with vast experience, as opposed to the “young people” who question the wisdom of nuclear proliferation. In saying that “their questions deserve to be answered...on the basis of judgment and reason,” Reagan suggests that questioning his proposal to increase American armament is a reaction based on irrational, emotional, and uninformed petulance, like that of a child who is simply in need of guidance. And finally, he invokes fear by suggesting that opposing his plan, which is based on his lifetime of experience, would actually endanger America. The benevolence followed by the father figure IDF is exactly how the first half of the address regarding economic recovery is structured, and the similarities do not end there.

The second section of this address reveals the specifics of Reagan’s peace and arms control programs. Reagan explains that a balance of power is essential to maintaining peace, and spends quite a while listing all of the ways in which “the momentum of the continuing Soviet military buildup” is “eroding that balance on which

our security depends.” G. Thomas Goodnight (1986) provides an in-depth analysis of the negative comparisons employed throughout this section of the speech. For example, Reagan claims that the Soviet Union spends more than the United States on military power, but he does not consider total overall expenditures between NATO alliances. He claims that the Soviets have 40,000 more tanks than the US, without mentioning NATO’s anti-tank weapons. He notes that the US reduced nuclear warheads in Europe by one thousand, but does not mention that these were replaced by more efficient weapons. He does not mention submarine or air forces, even though the US and its allies overpowered Soviet forces in those areas. He never mentions the ways in which the NATO allies had any advantage at all, though they were considerable. This is very similar to how Reagan characterizes the “waste” and “fraud” of federal social programs in the address on economic recovery, without ever balancing that discussion with the ways in which those programs succeed. *He creates a measurement system that can only connote American failure.* This is an extremely important point to remember when we begin looking more closely at reform discourse.

Also important to note during this second section is Reagan’s implication that the United States is guilty of neglect, which is an aspect of the father figure IDF that we saw in the speech on economic recovery. In that speech, he said that he had “confidence in a system that has never failed us, but which we have failed,” blaming American people for somehow “failing” the American economy. In this speech, he uses the same kind of discursive sadism:

During the past 6 years while the United States deployed no new intermediate-range missiles and withdrew 1,000 nuclear warheads from Europe, the Soviet Union deployed 750 warheads on mobile, accurate ballistic missiles. They now have 1,100 warheads on the SS - 20s, SS - 4s and 5s. And the United States has no comparable missiles. Indeed, the United States dismantled the last such missile in Europe over 15 years ago.

Just like in the economic recovery speech, Reagan begins by presenting himself as a benevolent, wise, and compassionate leader, incites fear and shame in his listeners, quells that fear and shame with a plan that promises prosperity, and then suggests that opposing his plan is either childish or un-American, or both. Also in both speeches, he creates fear of an un-American other by appealing to his listeners' sense of national pride and explaining how the enemy is a threat to American values, and then uses negative comparisons to create a measurement system that can only connote American loss to the un-American other.

Reagan also employs nearly constant discursive ambivalence. In the first speech, he speaks about not cutting social programs while explaining where the cuts will be made. In the Zero Option address, he proposes a plan for peace and arms reduction as he explains the ways in that the United States must commit to massive increases in military spending and weapons production. Toward the end of the speech, he announces what the "zero option" is. He offers to "forego entirely deployment of new American missiles in Europe if the Soviet Union is prepared to respond on equal footing." Although Brezhnev had already made that offer, Reagan makes it as if it is a

grand gesture. The phrase “equal footing,” however, is hardly a specific enough negotiation point to bring to the Geneva talks, and it reserves ground for Reagan to determine later what it actually means, making the proposal somewhat meaningless.

He also closes both speeches in a similar way. In the economic recovery address, he returned to the benevolent frame by saying that we have “strayed from first principles” and “we must alter our course,” then extends an olive branch with the closing line “let us act together.” In the Zero Option address, he closes with this:

Addressing the United Nations 20 years ago, another American President described the goal that we still pursue today. He said, “If we all can persevere, if we can look beyond our shores and ambitions, then surely the age will dawn in which the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.” He didn't live to see that goal achieved. I invite all nations to join with America today in the quest for such a world.

Although he never attributes this quote to President Kennedy, invoking him is certainly an olive branch to those who probably oppose Reagan most strongly. Reagan suggests that agreeing with him would somehow do justice to the memory of President Kennedy, and thus claims the legacy of a man who was the standard-bearer for the “no nukes” generation. He manipulates his listeners into believing that in the battle of good vs. evil, he is leading the side of good.

IV. Evil Empire

The absolutism of the good vs. evil binary is a discursive tool that forces Reagan's listeners to feel as if everything falls into one of those two categories, as if the listeners

themselves must make a choice between *being* good or *being* evil by choosing to support a particular political ideology, and as if a spectrum or plurality of ideas and identities is not possible. This absolutism is at the heart of the “Evil Empire” address, which G. Thomas Goodnight describes as “one of the most curious addresses in modern American history” (1986). Ronald Reagan is generally known to be the person who forged the strong partnership between Christian evangelicals and the Republican Party that still endures today, and this partnership seems to have begun with the “Evil Empire” address, which was officially titled “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals,” and marked the first time an American president had ever addressed that group (Reagan, 1983a).

Recall that in March of 1981, the National Commission for Excellence in Education set out to examine the quality of education in America and submit a report of their findings within eighteen months. The passage of those eighteen months placed the Reagan administration near the beginning of Reagan’s re-election campaign, the spring of 1983. The trajectory of the next two speeches we will examine seems to have been planned to culminate with the release of the *Nation at Risk* report. The “Evil Empire” address took place on March 8th, 1983, the “Star Wars” address was delivered on March 23rd, 1983, and the *Nation at Risk* report was published in April of 1983.

Reagan begins the “Evil Empire” address by “extending a personal debt of gratitude” to the audience for praying for him during his recovery, follows with a joke about politicians at the gates of heaven, and then quickly turns to the main message of the address, which is that “freedom prospers only where the blessings of God are avidly

sought and humbly accepted.” The foundation of the evangelical movement is the belief that salvation can only be found through being “born again” by accepting Jesus Christ as a personal savior, by submitting to the authority of the Bible, and by spreading the Christian message. Reagan tells a group of evangelicals, who believe that *only* Christianity is a true faith, that freedom *only* exists among the faithful. This is an extremely significant and alarming statement. It conflates the idea of freedom – which is the bedrock American value – with Christianity, and suggests that everyone, or every nation, in the world that does not identify with Christianity cannot possibly be free. It also suggests that American people who are not Christian are not truly American. Although conflation of fundamental religious doctrine and nationalism is hardly a new idea, it is one that is associated with tyrannical leadership, and should be surprising coming from an American president.

He goes a step further here, after quoting the founding fathers discussing the importance of a belief in God:

And finally, that shrewdest of all observers of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, put it eloquently after he had gone on a search for the secret of America's greatness and genius -- and he said: “Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the greatness and the genius of America...America is good. And if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”

It is a simple equation. Religious righteousness is goodness, and is directly responsible for the greatness of America. Here Reagan begins to invoke the fear of the un-American other IDF:

I want you to know that this administration is motivated by a political philosophy that sees the greatness of America in you, her people, and in your families, churches, neighborhoods, communities -- the institutions that foster and nourish values like concern for others and respect for the rule of law under God. Now, I don't have to tell you that this puts us in opposition to, or at least out of step with, a prevailing attitude of many who have turned to a modern-day secularism, discarding the tried and time-tested values upon which our very civilization is based. No matter how well intentioned, their value system is radically different from that of most Americans...they've taken upon themselves the job of superintending us by government rule and regulation. Sometimes their voices are louder than ours, but they are not yet a majority. An example of that vocal superiority is evident in a controversy now going on in Washington. And since I'm involved, I've been waiting to hear from the parents of young America. How far are they willing to go in giving to government their prerogatives as parents?

He then goes on to discuss the plague of birth control, promiscuity, and abortion for a full one-third of the address, receiving several standing ovations during that section.

The message is getting even more alarming here. Those who do not believe in Christ – those who “have turned to a modern-day secularism” – also believe in big government. They are liberal Democrats. They oppose Reagan, and they oppose Christians, and they

therefore oppose America's greatness. The un-American other is present in America, in those who politically oppose Ronald Reagan, and if they remain unchecked, they will bring about the downfall of America. This is a biblical story about the fall from Eden, with secular Americans who support big government playing the role of the snake.

With this foundation, he then enlarges his biblical story to include other nations as well, noting that "one recent survey by a Washington-based research council concluded that Americans were far more religious than the people of other nations...America has kept alight the torch of freedom, not just for ourselves but for millions of others around the world." He then reveals the crux of his message:

And this brings me to my final point today. During my first press conference as President, in answer to a direct question, I pointed out that, as good Marxist-Leninists, the Soviet leaders have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is that which will further their cause, which is world revolution...I intend to do everything I can to persuade them of our peaceful intent, to remind them that it was the West that refused to use its nuclear monopoly in the forties and fifties for territorial gain and which now proposes 50-percent cut in strategic ballistic missiles and the elimination of an entire class of land-based, intermediate-range nuclear missiles...we will never give away our freedom. We will never abandon our belief in God. And we will never stop searching for a genuine peace. But we can assure none of these things America stands for through the so-called nuclear freeze solutions proposed by some...the reality is that we must find peace through strength.

In other words, the Soviets are immoral, America has a belief in God which urges us to continually search for peace, and nuclear disarmament will never bring peace, so a nuclear freeze is anti-God and anti-American. This is an entirely shocking leap of logic. While listening to a recording of this address, the sudden inclusion of military language such as “strategic ballistic missiles” is jarring. The entire address focused on biblical stories and messages of morality until this point, and within one sentence, it becomes a political address about Reagan’s defense budget and armament priorities, and aligns nuclear missile development with a belief in God. I could not help but think of the iconic videos of Osama bin Laden praising his God while lovingly stroking an assault weapon.

Reagan uses the word “evil” eight times within this address. The first four times are in a section about American civil rights, which I will address in an upcoming section. The second four times are as follows, with my emphasis added:

Yes, let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness -- pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that...they are the focus of **evil** in the modern world...it was C. S. Lewis who, in his unforgettable “Screwtape Letters,” wrote: “The greatest **evil** is not done now in those sordid ‘dens of crime’ that Dickens loved to paint...”...so, I urge you to speak out against those who would place the United States in a position of military and moral inferiority...I urge you to beware the temptation of pride -- the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an **evil** empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and

thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and **evil**...I ask you to resist the attempts of those who would have you withhold your support for our efforts, this administration's efforts, to keep America strong and free, while we negotiate real and verifiable reductions in the world's nuclear arsenals and one day, with God's help, their total elimination.

The Screwtape Letters is a Christian allegorical novel about temptation and resistance. Reagan identifies "temptation" in this section as an urge to "declare yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault," to "withhold your support for our efforts, this administration's efforts, to keep America strong and free." So, to be evil is to consider all aspects of a complicated issue. To be evil is to not subscribe to absolutism. To be evil is to oppose Reagan. And, since the Soviets are an "evil empire," opposing Reagan makes you no better than a Soviet: un-American.

This address contains the benevolent frame structure, the father figure IDF, the discursive ambivalence (arms proliferation is peaceful), and the fear of the un-American other, the same IDFs we have seen in the first two addresses examined in this study. The emphasis on absolutism and morality, and the conflation of American exceptionalism with moral righteousness with support for nuclear armament, although hinted at in other addresses, are the focus here. Reagan emotionally manipulates his listeners into supporting his political agenda, appropriating their faith in God and country to his own purposes. Considering he is one of the most popular American presidents in our history, and that he won the 1984 election by a wider margin of

electoral votes than any president before or since¹³, this was apparently a very effective discursive style. It is this level of psychological and emotional manipulation, which I would argue is sadistic in nature, that we will see when we examine *A Nation at Risk*.

V. Star Wars

About two weeks after Evil Empire, Reagan delivered the “Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security,” also known as the Star Wars address (Reagan, 1983b). It is considered to be the most enduring and effective speech of his political career, because it successfully supported a full 10% increase in the defense budget (this was in addition to the increases already made under Reagan budgets), and began a controversy about a matter that was considered to be an unassailable fact: that defending a country from nuclear missiles was an impossibility (Goodnight, 1986).

The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which was likely the topic over which President Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev met in Reagan’s letter quoted in the Zero Option speech, was a formal agreement to restrain development of defense weapons and maintain a state of mutual vulnerability with the goal of maintaining peace. In the Star Wars address, Reagan proposes the Strategic Defense Initiative, a ballistic missile defense system which entirely opposed the global principles of deterrence. Yuri Andropov, the Soviet leader who succeeded Brezhnev in 1982, said this four days after the Star Wars speech:

¹³ Reagan won the 1984 presidential election with 525 electoral votes and 58.8% of the popular vote. His opponent, Walter Mondale, carried only his home state of Minnesota and its 13 electoral votes.

The present Administration is continuing to tread an extremely dangerous path. The issues of war and peace must not be treated so flippantly. Let there be no mistake about this in Washington. Engaging in this is not just irresponsible, it is insane. One should come to realize that the U.S. leaders are trying today to turn the European countries into their nuclear hostages. Washington's actions are putting the entire world in jeopardy (Excerpts from the interview with Andropov, 1983).

These sentiments were echoed throughout Europe, where Reagan policies were often met with demonstrations of protest. With this kind of international response to the SDI proposal, it is difficult not to wonder how Reagan could have possibly garnered support for it at home.

Predictably, the address opens with the benevolent frame. Reagan informs the audience that he has “reached a decision which offers a new hope for our children in the 21st century” which involves “the most basic duty that any President and any people share, the duty to protect and strengthen the peace.” He explains that his most recent budget contains “America’s ability to prevent the greatest of human tragedies and preserve our free way of life.” He then references the Zero Option address when he says that “our efforts to rebuild America’s defenses and strengthen the peace began two years ago when we requested a major increase in the defense program,” claims that his proposed increases were cut by half, and that “further deep cuts cannot be made without seriously endangering the security of the Nation.” He says that his proposal will be part of a “careful, long term plan to make America strong again after too many years

of neglect and mistakes.” These statements signal the entrance of the father figure IDF, which he uses throughout the middle section of the address.

He suggests that his listeners do not have the cognitive capacity to understand a “simple truth” about the defense debate:

I know that in the last few weeks you've been bombarded with numbers and percentages. Some say we need only a 5-percent increase in defense spending. The so-called alternate budget backed by liberals in the House of Representatives would lower the figure to 2 to 3 percent, cutting our defense spending by \$163 billion over the next 5 years. The trouble with all these numbers is that they tell us little about the kind of defense program America needs or the benefits and security and freedom that our defense effort buys for us. It isn't done by deciding to spend a certain number of dollars. Those loud voices that are occasionally heard charging that the Government is trying to solve a security problem by throwing money at it are nothing more than noise based on ignorance.

Again, Reagan postures himself as the older and wiser leader among feckless liberals, who cannot comprehend America's defense needs, and the populace, who are overwhelmed when trying to understand numbers. By reducing the argument of his opponents to “noise based on ignorance,” he invites his listeners to show that they are not ignorant by siding with him. He also condescendingly implies that he does not expect his listeners to understand such matters, and he excuses them for it, much like a parent would excuse a child for not understanding a concept beyond their years.

Reagan then uses negative comparison to present what Goodnight describes as a “highly partisan justification for defense spending,” by listing Soviet military advantages without mentioning any of the advantages of the United States, which were considerable, particularly after the defense budget increases of the two years prior (1986). He also continues to stoke the fear of his listeners with constant warnings that the American military is “increasingly obsolete” compared to the “massive arsenal” of the Soviets. The discursive ambivalence happens on two fronts in this speech. The first is that he convinces his listeners that the Soviets continue to outpace Americans in weapons development, even though he is arguing that yet another increase in defense spending is necessary. As he mocks the weakness of American military preparedness, he seems to forget that he has been at the helm for two years, and does not answer the unspoken question of why, if two increased defense budgets have done nothing to improve our preparedness, another one would work. He also follows his script of talking about armament and disarmament simultaneously. He says that “a freeze now would make us less, not more, secure,” and four paragraphs later, talks about how he is working on “negotiations with the goal of achieving deep reductions in the strategic and intermediate nuclear arsenals of both sides.” He uses the word “peace” eighteen times in an address which seeks to increase military spending.

He also follows his tried and true script of appealing to his listeners’ sense of nationalism, often referring to America’s greatness, and insisting that “you will find a whole new attitude toward serving our country” because “it is once again an honor to wear the uniform” of the military. He continues to stoke the fear of the un-American

other by his constant insistence that a freeze will not work because the Soviets are untrustworthy and would never hold up their end of such an agreement. He ends by returning to the benevolent frame, insisting that his proposal “is consistent with our obligations of the ABM treaty” and calling upon “the scientific community of our country...to turn their great talents now to the cause of mankind and world peace.” In short, this address contains all of the IDFs which are consistent with all of the addresses we have examined so far: the benevolent frame, the father figure, discursive ambivalence, fear of the un-American other, nationalism, and manipulation.

Reagan’s cuts to education and social services, which made his defense budget increases possible, had a catastrophic effect on people of color and working class people. The official Democratic response to the Star Wars address noted that his defense budget necessitated cutting child nutrition programs by 33 percent and education programs by 30 percent (Democratic response to Reagan, 1983). I am therefore equipped to argue that he had no commitment whatsoever to creating socioeconomic equity. I will also argue that he in fact adopted an openly anti-black political posture. I would like to provide some historical context for Reagan’s treatment of race, which will inform the analysis of *A Nation at Risk*.

VI. Race and the Republican Party

Earlier, while discussing Reagan’s welfare queen IDF, I mentioned that prior to the mid-1970s, the term “welfare” did not conjure the image of a black woman in the American imagination. This is because the modern form of welfare came about as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, an unprecedented expansion of the government

role in the national economy which lifted America out of the Great Depression. The New Deal included numerous programs to increase the power of labor unions and provide aid – or welfare – to those suffering most, which included Southern rural whites, most of whom were living in abject poverty. FDR and the New Deal are widely considered to have characterized the current form of Democratic liberalism, and had strong support throughout the South.

Remember also that the Republican party was formed by anti-slavery abolitionists, and was thus clearly reviled in the South. In fact, in the history of the Republican party, a Republican did not win a single Southern state (with the exception of Florida, which was a swing state) until 1964. Before then, both civil rights and segregation had bi-partisan support. Chief Justice Earl Warren, who wrote the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision which legally ended segregation in 1954, was Republican, and it was Republican President Eisenhower and Vice-President Nixon who sent troops to the South to protect black students as they integrated into white schools in 1957. As late as 1962, a poll revealed that the public saw Democrats and Republicans as having equal commitments to civil rights (Lopez, 2014).

Barry Goldwater, a U.S. Senator from Arizona, was a small-government Republican who opposed the Democratic Party's efforts to tax and redistribute wealth, but who voted *for* civil rights legislation in 1957 and 1960. In 1961, Goldwater determined that the key to a successful presidential campaign would be to appeal to the racist sentiments of Southern whites to win Southern electoral votes. Conservative journalist Robert Novak, after attending an RNC meeting in 1963, reported that "a good

many, perhaps a majority of the party's leadership, envision substantial political gold to be mined in the racial crisis by becoming in fact, though not in name, the White Man's Party" (qtd in Lopez, 2014).

At the same time, nightly television broadcasts of the brutal beatings of Southern civil rights protestors were appalling Northern voters, and in response, President Kennedy drafted the Civil Rights Act, which was eventually passed in 1964 with equal support from both political parties, against strong resistance from Southern Democrats. Goldwater voted against it, and delivered stump speech after stump speech in favor of "states' rights" and "freedom of association," which were coded references to segregation. "States' rights" referred to state governments having the right to be complicit in racial oppression without interference from federal civil rights laws, and "freedom of association" referred to the right of businesses to refuse to serve black customers. This discursive strategy of talking about race without talking about race become known as the "Southern Strategy" (Lopez, 2014). This discursive strategy was directly responsible for helping a Republican win the South for the first time in the history of the party, although Goldwater lost the election.

Especially surprising about Goldwater's victory is that he was able to win that region even while campaigning against the New Deal. He called it a government fraud which was stealing from businesses, and he was booed by rural Southerners who thanked FDR and the New Deal for whatever measure of financial security they were able to enjoy. Running against liberalism meant attacking welfare, which at that time was considered to be legitimate and necessary among whites. Goldwater's opposition

to welfare led to a landslide victory for Democrat Lyndon Johnson, but a surprising victory for Goldwater in the South. Poor Southern whites were so seduced by Goldwater's opposition to civil rights that they voted against their own economic interests, which is a phenomenon that continues to endure today.

In 1968, George Wallace, who had *also* previously been a supporter of civil rights, ran as an Independent against Republican Richard Nixon and Northern Democrat Hubert Humphrey. He had won the governorship of Alabama after two failed bids by abandoning his support of civil rights and adopting downright hateful racist discourse, frequently using the n-word in public and openly supporting segregation with no coded language. In his first presidential bid in 1963, he had minimal support while Goldwater won the South, and thus Wallace learned that openly racist discourse would not win him any support on a national level, because although racists lived in every state, they could not admit their own racism by supporting the Wallace ticket. So, he also began to adopt the Southern Strategy, using the codes "states' rights," "running your own schools," and "law and order" rather than openly opposing integration. He carried that strategy with him to the 1968 presidential election, won the entire South (but only the South), and lost the general to Richard Nixon.

In 1972, when Nixon was running for re-election and Wallace was again running as an Independent, Wallace continued to garner significant support throughout the South, polling much higher than Nixon or Humphrey, and had support throughout the North as well. Although Northern constituents were uncomfortable with the television broadcasts of the brutal Southern attacks on civil rights protestors, that hardly means

they were racial progressives. The phenomenon of white flight had begun in the North, with parents moving their children out of schools where black children were being bused in to enforce integration. One month before the election, Nixon publicly denounced “forced busing,” which became the code in the Northern states for opposing integration. He also campaigned on “law and order,” which was code for quelling civil rights protests where the protesters were being characterized as criminals. Nixon’s Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, liberal Republican George Romney, had taken up suburban integration as his mission. Nixon suddenly fired him and spoke in opposition to forced integration as a government overreach. Nixon won the 1972 election in a landslide, with 67% of the white vote (Lopez, 2014). By this time, with three election cycles that proved the effectiveness of coded racial discourse, the Republican party had entirely re-invented itself as the party of white people. The term “states’ rights” had also been redefined as a widely used and clearly understood code for the protection of white supremacy.

Fast forward a bit to 1980, when Ronald Reagan, who had delivered a televised address while campaigning for Barry Goldwater in 1964 warning against the dangers of the “welfare state,” began his campaign for president against incumbent Jimmy Carter (Reagan, 1964). Reagan chose as the site of his first campaign address the Neshoba County Fair near Philadelphia, Mississippi, which was the site of the murder of three civil rights workers in 1964. In that speech, which has become popularly known as the “states’ rights speech,” Reagan announced:

I believe in state's rights; I believe in people doing as much as they can for themselves at the community level and at the private level. And I believe that we've distorted the balance of our government today by giving powers that were never intended in the constitution to that federal establishment. And if I do get the job I'm looking for, I'm going to devote myself to trying to reorder those priorities and to restore to the states and local communities those functions which properly belong there (*Transcript of Ronald Reagan's 1980 Neshoba County Fair speech, 2007*).

The Address on the Program Economic Recovery, Reagan's first policy address and the first speech we examined, mentioned restoring rights to states eight times. He campaigned on the "welfare queen" IDF. I am not arguing that Ronald Reagan was *consciously* racist, but I can easily argue, as many other scholars have, that his political agenda, was overwhelmingly anti-black. In his address to the Evangelicals, he noted that "there is no room for racism, anti-Semitism, or other forms of ethnic and racial hatred in this country," and referred to racism as "evil" (Reagan, 1983a). However, this token remark is drowned out by his deafening silence in regard to racial inequity, illustrated by the fact that he did nothing to support ending apartheid in South Africa during his two terms as President. Reagan's obvious adoption of the Southern Strategy political discourse foreshadowed eight years of constant discursive and legislative attacks on people of color, not the least of which was his racially-motivated War on Drugs, which we will examine in Chapter 7. These attacks extended to the working

class, to women, and to all other groups underserved and oppressed within public schools.

VII. Summary

In this chapter, I used four key Reagan addresses, along with excerpts from minor ones, to establish not only the political context of *A Nation at Risk*, but also the manipulative and racist discourse of Reaganism. The IDFs that are present in all of these addresses are those which continue to govern modern conservative discourse. Their presence in *Nation at Risk* situates that document as an extension of Reaganism and as a political, ideological, and discursive tool, not as a report about the state of America's public schools. With that established, we will take a close look at *A Nation at Risk* in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: A Nation at Risk

As I analyze the *Nation at Risk* report, I will not be discussing any motivation or bias on the part of any author. Although not given a byline, the report is recognized to have been primarily authored by James J. Harvey, who was a member of the Commission which produced it (Ansary, 2007). As I discussed in Chapter 3, the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis is focused on the IDFs that arise in text as markers of the dominant ideology that govern the text. The dominant ideology/discourse exists in an iterative relationship with the oppressive social structure which created and is created by the text. James J. Harvey himself, or the other people on the Commission, are not relevant to this analysis.

Toni Morrison's analysis of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a manifestation of whiteness ideology is not concerned with the personal beliefs or biases of Mark Twain (1992). It focuses on the text as a product of the dominant ideology of whiteness. The approach to text outside of any consideration of individual authorship is the same approach that I used in the previous chapter while analyzing the discourse of Ronald Reagan. None of the addresses analyzed in that chapter are attributed to any single author, as is quite common with addresses produced by presidential speechwriters. I also did not comment on any human motivation or bias on the part of Ronald Reagan himself. Rather, I treat Reagan the political figure as more of an institution, or as an ISA. He exists in those texts as an amalgam of the political agenda of the overall Reagan administration, as the governing discourse of the Republican party as a whole, as the ideology/discourse of white supremacy, as the cult of personality

responsible for his massive appeal to voters, as a representation of cultural norms at the time...analyzing those texts as simply words produced by a person would be antithetical to the goal of CDA, which is to de-naturalize IDs by showing how social structures determine properties of discourse, and how discourse in turn determines social structures (Fairclough, 1995).

The *Nation at Risk* report is an extension of the larger discourse of the Reagan administration, which determined government as a social structure. It serves to transfer that discourse to the social structure of schooling. As the first text produced by the newly-formed Department of Education, it shaped the dominant discourse that then produced every subsequent federal text regarding educational reform, which in turn determined the nature of the social structure of schooling. Its influence on the current everyday reality of schools, teachers, students, and families cannot be overstated.

I. The Benevolent Frame: Colorblindness

The report entitled *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative of Educational Reform* was originally published on April 26th, 1983 as a 65-page, soft-cover booklet (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). After the cover, the Table of Contents, and prefacing information such as the Letter of Transmittal which addresses the report to Secretary Bell and a list of the members of the National Committee on Excellence in Education, there appears an epigraph. It is the following text presented in white text on a dark field, in large enough print for the text to cover the entirety of the page:

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the

utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgement needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.

True to the form of Reagan's established pattern of discourse, the report contains a benevolent frame, represented in this epigraph as the promise of equal opportunity in America. This is the first of only two times in the entire report that race, class, or socioeconomic status are mentioned at all. The second time is a repeat appearance of the first sentence of the epigraph in the same section of the report, but prefaced with the phrase "Part of what is at risk is the promise first made on this continent."

The epigraph marks the first appearance of the IDF of colorblindness, an IDF which is present in every sentence of the report through the *absence* of any consideration of race. The insistence that all "are entitled to a fair chance" without any discussion of whether or not that fair chance actually exists epitomizes the idea of "abstract liberalism," one of the four frames of colorblind racism articulated by Eduardo Bonilla Silva (2006). This is a frame in which white people can apply liberal ideas, such as equal opportunity or choice, to racial matters without a practical discussion about the reality of, for example, a social structure that would actually allow people of color to exercise choice. It allows people to sound as if they aim to eradicate inequity without actually ever addressing the root of the inequity themselves, and places all responsibility for the work on an abstract someone else. In the next sentence, the responsibility for doing that work falls absurdly falls on *children*.

The subject phrase of the second sentence of the epigraph is “children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided.” We can assume that the competent guides are parents, and given the subject of the report, teachers and other educators. The predicate phrase is “hope to attain the mature and informed judgement” needed to “manage their own lives.” This is a singularly strange sentiment to be applied to children. When one thinks of the dreams of children, it seems unlikely to expect that anywhere among those dreams is the “hope to attain mature and informed judgement.” This idea utterly erases the essence of childhood itself, pretending that children are simply small versions of adults, rather than developing beings with the primary needs of love, play, protection, friendship, discovery-based learning, and nurturing, among others. By extension, it erases these concepts of love, play, and discovery from education. It implies that the goals of schooling should be reduced to teaching children to “manage their own lives,” as if success in navigating bureaucracy naturally supersedes any consideration of developing humanity. The essence of humanity itself is absent in this epigraph, and absent throughout the entirety of the report.

The epigraph also reduces the goal of schooling to securing “gainful employment,” an idea which when applied to children reduces education to no more than an achievement ideology based on a Protestant work ethic. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the connection between schooling and the labor force works in opposition to the Jeffersonian idea of education for emancipation. Used here, it evokes the constant refrain of Ronald Reagan’s discourse, that people who refuse to “manage their own lives” are a drain on government resources and are to blame for an epidemic of welfare

fraud and government waste which directly affects hard-working Americans and halts “the progress of society itself.” I have already established that within the racially-coded discourse of the Republican party, those who refuse to “manage their own lives” are people of color, as evident within the welfare queen IDF and the Southern Strategy discourse, and those who cannot get ahead because of the drain caused by people of color are hard-working white Americans. Within this two-sentence epigraph, it is immediately established that reform discourse insists that equal opportunity exists for everyone within the colorblind, benevolent meritocracy of America, and many people of color simply refuse to seize it. The report thus quickly shifts from the benevolent frame to the father figure IDF, which uses the lazy scapegoat of color IDF to avoid taking any responsibility whatsoever for educational and economic inequity. This happens within two sentences, and without a critical lens, it is invisible.

The second time this sentiment appears, the second of two times the words “race,” “class,” or “socioeconomic status” appear in the report, refers to the “promise first made on this continent” being “at risk.” Pretending that the original promise of America had anything to do with equal opportunity is clearly a master narrative produced by white supremacy. The centrality of slavery to the founding of America is irrefutable. The restriction of voting privileges to land-holding white males is irrefutable. The government-sanctioned genocide of Native Americans as a necessary and morally justifiable aspect of colonization of the New World is irrefutable. White supremacy and patriarchy are the foundation of the “promise first made on this continent.” The absence of that reality, and the enduring effects of it, within the

discourse of this report situate it as white supremacist propaganda. None of its findings or recommendations should be considered outside of that frame.

Another aspect of reform discourse that is established within the two sentences of the epigraph is the subject-object hierarchy that characterizes the report. As I discussed in Chapter 3, Norman Fairclough contends that IDFs serve to create institutional objects that are dominated within the ideology/discourse and within the resulting social practice. *A Nation at Risk* situates students and educators as institutional objects dominated within reform discourse and within the social structure of schooling. However, the epigraph uses “children” in a subject role, as if they are empowered with agency. Of the many instances of discursive ambivalence in this report, one of the most intriguing is the shifting between government/state/schooling and students/teachers/families from subject to object and back again within the discourse. This is an idea to which I will return.

II. The Father Figure and Fear of the Un-American Other IDFs

In Chapter 4 I defined the father figure IDF as one which functions by inciting fear and shame, quelling it with a plan that promises prosperity, and suggesting that opposition to the plan is nothing more than childish naiveté. The first paragraph of the report, on the page following the epigraph, reads as follows:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds

American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

The scolding tone of the father figure is in full form here, and the description of a failing “American prosperity, security, and civility” brings to mind the four Reagan addresses examined in Chapter 4, which all present an America on the verge of collapse. The IDFs of nationalism and American exceptionalism are also present here, as they were in other Reagan addresses, presented within a frame of nostalgia which recalls a greater America of another time. Of course, this IDF of nostalgia is an enduring tool in the discourse of the Republican party, which often calls for a return to the greatness that America once was as a coded appeal to a pre-Civil Rights America. This exact discourse – painting a bleak dystopian American landscape and contrasting it with a past era of American greatness (and whiteness) – characterized Donald Trump’s address at the 2016 Republican National Convention. It endures because it is effective.

The flaw in that logic – not that logic matters within dominant political ideology – is that the once-great America is a fiction. The passage above refers to “our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, and science” as if the Great Depression and World War II has not had devastating and lasting effects on the

American economy. The argument that the crisis of “others matching and surpassing our educational attainments” was “unimaginable a generation ago” is a plain untruth. International standardized test rankings began in 1964, when the United States ranked 11th out of the twelve participating countries. Since that time, the US has never been first in such rankings (Berliner, Glenn, & Associates, 2014), which is a fact that the *Nation at Risk* report reveals in the “Indicators of the Risk” section. As far as technological innovation, America had just lost the space race to Russia a generation before. America “being overtaken by competitors” was a fiction used throughout Reagan’s career to justify increased defense spending, and makes a strong appearance here as well.

This fear of the un-American other which threatens America’s prosperity appears in full form in the second paragraph of the report:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

Presenting “mediocre educational performance” as analogous to an “act of war” is an awkward, nonsensical discursive leap. If it were received as logical upon the release of the report, it is only because the American people were so indoctrinated to the Reagan

discourse of fear as it was used in every address regarding the economy, foreign relations, and military defense that it was normalized by then. In this case, the war metaphor leads readers to the conclusion that those responsible for “mediocre educational performance,” in their declaration of war, are as un-American as the Soviets themselves. “Mediocre” students and their teachers, therefore, are no longer fully American in this discourse.

Slovenian psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek defines conservative ideology as a response to the social instability that is inherent to capitalism. When social tension and class struggle arise, conservative ideology becomes appealing to people because it reasserts a traditional hierarchical society characterized by order, efficiency, and an absence of class antagonism. The problem is that social and economic instability are aspects of the function of capitalism, so conservative ideology pretends that this instability is the result of a foreign intruder. In other words, the ideological narrative explains how things went wrong in a society not as a result of the instability inherent in a development of a society, but as a result of the intruder, or the Other. Excise the Other from society, and society will stabilize. The ideology creates both internal and external others, both pitted against an understood “we” (Fiennes & Žižek, 2014). In *A Nation at Risk*, we can see the development of the internal other, which is the student of color dragging American public schools into a mire of mediocrity. The external other, the Soviet, is also present with this mention of “disarmament.”

The phrase “we have allowed this to happen to ourselves” evokes the shaming aspect of the father figure IDF, suggesting that Americans – particularly when led by

Democrats – are entirely incapable of self-government, just as it did in every other address we have examined. The reference to Sputnik here, incongruously one of three references to a 1957 Soviet satellite in a 1983 report on American education, while it was ignored the paragraph before when the discourse relied on nationalism, recalls all of the fear of the un-American other in the form of the Soviets that Reagan had been instilling in his listeners for years. And of course, the specter of “unilateral educational disarmament” is simply a continuation of Reagan’s anti-deterrence discourse which was used in address after address to try to gain support for his increases in defense spending. That it appears here gives us insight into the true purpose of this document.

The irony here is that Reagan’s unprecedented cuts in social programs, including education, are the only acts that would be analogous to an “act of war” on the American people. It is rich that the report argues that “we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible,” since the dismantling was achieved by Reagan himself. Even the verb “dismantle” is the one that Reagan used when referencing his plan for the Department of Education on the campaign trail. When placed in the context of the larger Reagan discourse, which called for constant cuts to education and a complete dismantling of the Department of Education, the presence of a sudden life-or-death concern for this “tide of mediocrity” in education is a discursive ambivalence which lends opacity to the emerging dominant discourse of education reform.

As I reviewed in Chapter 4, Reagan appointed T.H. Bell with the explicit directive to dismantle the Department of Education. They faced opposition from a Democratic

congress, and then immediately formed the commission which produced this report. To think that the commission would produce a document that looks upon public education optimistically is entirely illogical. If one were to consider Reagan's budget priorities and his stance on public education and then predict the contents of this report, a prediction that the report would present public education as an unmitigated disaster would be entirely reasonable and entirely accurate.

The IDFs that I uncovered in the previous chapter are all revealed by the second paragraph of the *Nation at Risk* report: the benevolent frame, the father figure, the lazy scapegoat of color, fear of the un-American other, discursive ambivalence, and nationalism. The absolutism and use of negative comparison are developed in upcoming sections of the report, as we will explore. It should be clear at this point that the *Nation at Risk* report had far less to do with public education than it did with hammering home the Reagan political agenda. It was simply another opportunity to stoke fear that would distract Americans from critical thinking and send them searching for the refuge of absolutism and the comfort of Fromm's magic helper. Until this point in the Reagan discourse, the magic helper took the form of increased weaponry and blind faith in Reagan himself. This report, in its transference of Reagan-era ideology/discourse to education reform, creates a new magic helper: standardization.

III. "Indicators of the Risk": Manipulation, Negative Comparison, and Dog-Whistle Racism

The introductory section of the report goes on to further develop the fear of the un-American other IDF. It claims that "the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently

than the Americans” and “the South Koreans recently built the world’s most efficient steel mill.” It argues that

knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce and are today spreading throughout the world as vigorously as miracle drugs, synthetic fertilizers, and blue jeans did earlier.

Comparing intelligence to blue jeans is another completely fantastic discursive leap. This passage presents intelligence itself as something uniquely American, as a product, and as a limited resource. It suggests that Americans should be afraid of other countries having it as well, as if there is only a certain amount of intelligence in the world and we need to make sure to keep most of it to ourselves. Clearly employing white supremacist discourse, this passage evokes fear of losing privilege to people of color.

After piquing this fear, the report then lists thirteen “Indicators of the Risk,” which are ostensibly the reasons that we need to be so alarmed about “educational mediocrity” that we need to think about it in terms of war. Eleven of those thirteen indicators are based on standardized test results. They include that “American students were never first or second” on “international competitions of student achievement,” that “23 million Americans are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests,” that “average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched,” that SAT scores “demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980,” and that a decline in science achievement is evident on “national assessments of science in 1967, 1973, and 1977.” There is much to

be gleaned from these thirteen indicators of risk regarding the ideology/discourse of this report.

International Test Score Rankings

The foundation of the entire *Nation at Risk* report is that the security and economic prosperity of the United States is threatened, and that the foremost indicator of this risk is the performance of American students on international standardized tests. Since the release of the report, numerous researchers and statisticians have investigated and debunked this claim. Tom Loveless, Senior Fellow at the Brown Center on Education Policy, examined the international academic achievement rankings that result from PISA, or the Program for International Assessment (Loveless, 2011). He found that international rankings based on the average nationwide performance of students are based on numbers that are so close that there is “no statistical significance” to the differences.

Loveless also determined that policy makers often arrive at “dubious conclusions of causality” based on the assessment results. One such causality myth is the connection between test scores and economic prosperity, which upon analysis, is a complete falsehood. The United States, the dominant economic force on the globe, has never outranked other countries in international comparisons of test scores. In 1964 the US was ranked 11th out of 12 countries participating in the first major international study of student achievement in math, but that low ranking predicted nothing about future economic growth among those twelve countries (Loveless, 2011). Around the time of the *Nation at Risk* report, the US sent emissaries to Japan, whose economy was

booming, to try to discover what they were doing to arrive at higher average test scores than the US. They discovered a remarkably high suicide rate among young people who were subjected to intense academic pressure, and also saw evidence which predicted Japan's eventual economic decline (Glass, 2012). British economist S.J. Prais argues "that the United States, the world's top economic performing country, was found to have school attainments that are only middling casts fundamental doubts about the value and approach of these [international assessments]" (qtd in Bracey, 2011).

Even if the link between international test score rankings and economic prosperity were not bogus, claiming that "American students have never been first or second" is another falsehood. International test results reflect the average performance of all students participating in the tests. The United States leads the world in the number of high scorers on international tests and always has, but also has many more students scoring at the lowest levels. This is likely because the child poverty rate in the United States is among the highest of all developed nations. It has recently become fashionable to compare the achievement of American students to those in Finland, where the child poverty rate is less than 5%. In US schools where the child poverty rates are less than 10%, our average scores on international achievement tests are first in the world. Students who attend schools with fewer than 25% of students living in poverty still have average test scores that are among the highest in the world (Berliner, Glenn, & Associates, 2014).

To say that "American students have never been first or second" accomplishes three feats of discursive opacity. It uses "American students" as the subject of the

sentence, suggesting again that *students* choose mediocrity over excellence, another instance of the subject/object hierarchy switch. It ignores what those test results tell us about poverty in the US as compared to other nations, and thus continues the blindness to structural and economic inequity displayed throughout the report. It also interprets the rankings inaccurately, since tens of thousands of “American students” do actually rank first, although the US average does not. These rankings are interpreted and presented in a manner consistent with Reagan discourse, which is to set up a measurement system which can only connote American failure. This presentation, which not only ignores the considerable academic achievements of American students but also implies that students, teachers, and schools are to blame for a false “tide of mediocrity,” is insidious in its level of dishonesty and manipulation.

Also inherent in this interpretation of international test score rankings is the blind faith that reform discourse places in standardized testing. Even a cursory examination of the nature of these international tests reveals factors which immediately invalidate the rankings. The TIMSS test, used in international math and science rankings, uses the metric system. The United States is the only industrialized nation of any size not to adopt the metric system, so participants are at a clear disadvantage. In the 1970s, four nations, including the United States, decided that students would not be able to use calculators on international assessments, while the students of other nations did use them. That should have invalidated all of the results from that period. Additionally, the TIMSS is administered to students in their “next to last year of high school,” which corresponds to different ages and therefore different levels of cognitive

development in different countries (Berliner, Glenn, & Associates, 2014), another variable that should invalidate the results.

Language translation is also makes international testing an invalid measure for ranking academic achievement, particularly in reading (Glass, 2012). International tests are translated into dozens of languages, and the translation makes the tests incomparable to each other, in part because a synonym for a given word in the original test question has varying levels of frequency, and therefore difficulty, within the lexicon of the other languages. Ignoring the fallibility of standardized testing is an aspect of reform discourse that began with *A Nation at Risk*, which is a point to which I will return.

SAT Scores

The measure of the alleged “virtually unbroken decline” in SAT scores begins in 1963, just before the Civil Rights Act, and ends in 1980. It is not a round fifteen or twenty years. It is yet *another* clear assertion that the alarming “rising tide in mediocrity” correlates exactly with the increase in opportunity for people of color. In 1991, a group of scientists at Sandia National Laboratory in New Mexico produced an analysis of the claims made in *Nation at Risk*. The stated purpose of the study was for those scientists to “provide a foundation for Sandia's future activities in education” and to address “future workforce requirements, the changing student demographics, and the education goals proposed by President Bush” (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993). In their analysis of this claim regarding SAT scores, they found that although there was a 5% decline in SAT scores over that period of time, “this decline in average

scores [did] not mean that today's high school students [were] not as capable as their counterparts in the 1960s.”

Rather, the scores of white and Asian students remained relatively stable over that period, scores in minority subgroups actually increased, and the “logical explanation for a decline in the combined average score [was] that the demographics of the students taking the exam [had] changed” (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993). While the median class rank of those who took the SAT in 1971 was the 79th percentile, or top 21% of their graduation class, by 1989 the median class rank was the 73rd percentile, an increase which could only be achieved if by 1989, the top 42% of the graduating class was taking the exam. Although *Nation at Risk* stops measuring in 1980, these trends were steady throughout the period of 1963 to 1989, meaning that they would have been evident at the time *Nation at Risk* was published. Similarly, the number of students from low-income families, from families who spoke a language other than English, and from minority groups steadily increased over that period of time. Although scores from those groups also steadily increased, the addition of those populations in average test scores easily explains the 5% average decline (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993).

Anyone interested in increasing educational equity would interpret this trend as a positive indication of expanded opportunity rather than a dire warning about a “rising tide of mediocrity.” The way these statistics are presented in *A Nation at Risk* is consistent with how Reagan presented weaponry and defense statistics in every address we examined in Chapter 4, when he would bemoan, for example, that Soviets had

produced 40,000 more tanks than the US without mentioning NATO's anti-tank weapons. This rhetorical technique of negative comparison remains consistent throughout all of the "indicators of risk" listed in the report. *The Sandia Report* took on all of the test-based claims in *Nation at Risk* and found that none of them were true. After analyzing assessments in science as well as basic reading and math skills, they reported that "national data on student performance do not indicate significant declines in any area," and in all cases, the data proved an increase in overall scores among subgroups and an increase in educational opportunity to students of color and working-class students (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993).

The Use of Standardized Test Scores in Reform Discourse

Even if the presentation of the data used as risk indicators were not purposely misleading and outright manipulative, the fact that almost all data was based on standardized test scores is in itself noteworthy. Prior to *A Nation at Risk*, federal documents regarding educational reform regularly reported structural inequities as indicators of risk, and took a decidedly humanitarian approach to reform. The 1928 federal report regarding Indian Boarding Schools had the stated purpose to "compare the [Indian boarding school] activities as at present conducted with the work of other agencies" and to ensure that Indian schools used methods comparable to those used for whites. Although highly problematic in other ways, the report also stressed that "the Indian educational enterprise is peculiarly in need of the kind of approach that [is] less concerned with a conventional school system and more with the understanding of human beings" (Merriam, et al., 1928). Similarly, the 1954 *Brown* decision concluded

that “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (*Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, Opinion, 1954).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty and the most far-reaching federal education legislation ever passed, is about as far as a departure from the discourse of *A Nation at Risk* as possible. Its opening section recognizes international interdependence, arguing that “the state of the Union depends, in large measure, upon the state of the world,” and that “our own freedom and growth have never been the final goal of the American dream” (United States Congress, 1965). This is a far cry from the discourse of competition and exceptionalism in *A Nation at Risk*. ESEA specifically targets educational inequity that results from income disparity, and aims “to open for all Americans the opportunities now enjoyed by most Americans” by allocating additional funds to schools which serve low-income students. The students, teachers, and schools are not blamed for the disparity in achievement between low-income students and their middle-class counterparts.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 recognized that “the special education needs of eight million handicapped children are not being fully met” and that “it is in the national interest that the Federal Government assist State and local efforts to provide programs to meet the educational needs of handicapped children in order to assure equal protection of the law” (United States Congress, 1975). All of these federal documents overtly recognized structural inequalities which adversely affected

minority populations, and sought to address them. *A Nation at Risk* does not even recognize the *existence* of inequity. Throughout the entire *Nation at Risk* report, the word “risk” appears twelve times, not counting its use in section headings and titles, and there are thirteen more occurrences of fear-evoking words like “danger” and “war.” The word “equity” appears only once.

None of the previous federal documents regarding education or education reform had anything at all to do with blaming students, teachers, or schools for complacency, mediocrity, or failure. Those qualities now inherent to reform discourse began with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*: the use of standardized test data to the exclusion of all other data to measure the success of public schooling, the shaming and blaming of public schools, students and teachers for alleged failure, the complete disregard for the enduring presence of structural inequities, the shift in goal from equal opportunity to international economic competition, and the use of fear to create urgency around the implementation of draconian educational reforms, as well as other aspects that we will examine in upcoming sections. This shift in reform discourse under the Reagan administration is as clear and as alarming as Reagan’s abandonment of deterrence-based post-World War II military discourse and his adoption of the conventional, strong-arm military discourse of the pre-nuclear era.

IV. Findings and Recommendations

The findings of the commission comprise a surprisingly small section of the report. Divided into four sections – content, expectations, time, and teaching – the Findings section adds up to only 6.5 pages of the original printed report. The

introductory section, which is made up of the indicators of risk and several sections of highly partisan, fear-inducing interpretation of those indicators, is a full 13 pages. That introductory section transitions to the Findings section with the statement that “the citizen is dismayed at a steady 15-year decline in industrial productivity, as one great American industry after another falls to world competition.” This use of the Father Figure and Fear of the Un-American Other IDFs primes readers to consider the findings and recommendations within the context of fear, just as in every Reagan address we have examined, thus adopting an irrational and reactionary rather than objective and proactive disposition.

In Chapter 3, I discussed Erich Fromm’s analysis of the sadomasochistic relationship as humans’ primary escape from ideological freedom and the anxiety that freedom causes. Within Reaganism, the Reagan administration – in this case, through the *Nation at Risk* report - adopts the disposition of the sadist authority through the Father Figure and Fear of the Un-American Other IDFs. Readers then adopt a masochistic tendency which makes them psychologically dependent upon the sadistic nature of the perceived authority. The masochist does not believe in his/her ability to act independently and relies upon the sadist partner to quell feelings of powerlessness. Sadomasochistic Reagan discourse has prepared this audience to submit to whatever reforms the report deems necessary, and to distrust those who would oppose them.

Findings Regarding Content

This very short section lists three findings regarding high school curriculum. The findings “examined patterns of courses high school students took” between 1964 and

1981. Again, the measurement begins with an overt reference to the Civil Rights Act. The first finding concludes that “secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose.” It complains that we suffer from a “cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses,” and that “the proportion of students taking a general program of study has increased from 12 percent in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979.” The “general program of study,” it is suggested, should not be the main course, while advanced academic courses should be, as evident in the second finding regarding content:

This curricular smorgasbord, combined with extensive student choice, explains a great deal about where we find ourselves today. We offer intermediate algebra, but only 31 percent of our recent high school graduates complete it; we offer French I, but only 13 percent complete it; and we offer geography, but only 16 percent complete it. Calculus is available in schools enrolling about 60 percent of all students, but only 6 percent of all students complete it.

The use of the pronoun “we” is curious in this passage. “We” is used consistently throughout the report, referring to the commission itself, in phrases such as “we conclude,” “we define,” “we mean,” “we believe,” always as the subject of sentences which clarify the goals or sentiments of the members of the committee. In this case, the use of “we” implies that the committee members themselves are offering French I and intermediate algebra, and being rebuffed by unwilling students exercising “extensive student choice.” The lack of a clear subject here is a marker of an opaque ideology.

There is no discussion of exactly where these courses are being offered, and whether or not they are offered to students of color and working-class students in equal proportion to their white, middle-class counterparts. As I discussed in Chapter 2, structural inequities restrict many students from taking advanced academic courses, either because they are not offered at all in some lower-income schools, or because students of color and working-class students are disproportionately placed in academic tracks which restrict higher-level academic study. Rather, the report suggests, the benevolent “we” offers these courses, and students choose not to take them. It is truly absurd that the well-researched and well-documented disparities affecting the ability of students of color and working-class students to access educational opportunity are ignored within this finding, and the fault for not accessing higher-level academic skills is placed on the students themselves. In the first finding regarding the general program of study, the report states that “students have migrated from vocational and college preparatory programs to ‘general track’ courses in large numbers.” The *students* are the subject of that sentence, as if this “migration” is somehow their choice. This is the subject/object switch that I mentioned earlier, which creates opacity and thus obscures the true function of this discourse.

The third and final finding regarding content is an acontextual statistic presented as if it, in itself, is an indicator of the alleged failure of public schooling:

Twenty-five percent of the credits earned by general track high school students are in physical and health education, work experience outside the school,

remedial English and mathematics, and personal service and development courses, such as training for adulthood and marriage.

This statement is a trick of smoke-and-mirrors which proves nothing at all. It does not compare that 25% to any other figure in order to prove an increase in the prevalence of such courses, nor did the finding before regarding students completing higher-level academic courses. Even if it did, it assumes that readers will find such courses indicative of a problem. Within the New Basics, the curriculum described in the Recommendations section as a solution to this “problem,” there would be ample space in a student’s schedule for 25% of the courses to be non-academic. So even upon a cursory examination, this finding does not indicate a problem at all. It does, however, *create* problems.

This finding, by listing the presence of those courses of study as a problem in themselves, devalues courses of study which would be important to working-class students, such as earning work experience outside of the school. It devalues the skills of athletes, with the mention of physical education as non-essential. It devalues remedial instruction in English and math, which would be essential to disabled students, students of color and immigrant students who may not speak Standard English as a first language, and working-class students whose parents may not have the ability or the time to teach these skills at home. Although the phrase “personal service and development courses” is descriptive of nothing specific at all, the finding provides as an example of that “training for adulthood,” a concept that was cited as essential for children to master in the epigraph of the report. We can infer, then, that the commission expects students to

learn such skills outside of school, which is exactly how cultural capital operates to create privilege and perpetuate disadvantage.

Also problematic is the lack of acknowledgement that schools were serving a changing demographic. Just as in the misleading presentation of SAT scores, the increase in courses such as remedial English and math and work experience do not necessarily represent a sudden decrease in the academic achievement level of American students. *The Sandia Report* reveals that between the years of 1976 and 1986, the number of minority students attending public schools increased from 24% to 30% (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993). Increasing levels of immigration over the same time period resulted in many more American students who spoke English as a second language. While most post-World War II immigrants were European, by 1980, only one in five immigrants were European, and most were Latin American and Asian, possessing phenotypical traits, and in the case of Asian people, linguistic traits that would make assimilation more difficult.

Additionally, from 1960 to 1988, the number of children reared in homes where both parents worked more than doubled (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993). In 1975, federal law called for more inclusion of disabled students in public schooling, who in some cases required a non-academic course of study. Such rapidly changing demographics had profound effects upon public schooling, and rather than focusing on the positive changes that schools had made to become more inclusive and accommodating, *A Nation at Risk* creates false indicators of failure and interprets a more inclusive curriculum as a signal of academic decline.

Recommendations Regarding Content

The recommendations section of the report is also divided into the four sections of content, expectations, time and teaching, and takes up 7.5 pages of the original printed report, only about half the number of pages dedicated to dire interpretations of the indicators of risk. “Recommendation A: Content” begins the push toward standardization that still characterizes educational reform today. It calls for a standardized curriculum called The Five New Basics:

We recommend that State and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics by taking the following curriculum during their 4 years of high school: (a) 4 years of English; (b) 3 years of mathematics; (c) 3 years of science; (d) 3 years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science. For the college-bound, 2 years of foreign language in high school are strongly recommended in addition to those taken earlier.

Immediately noteworthy is that the New Basics, with the exception of the half-year of computer science, includes only academic, abstract courses of study which American public schools adopted from the British upper-class, as I discussed in Chapter 2. There is no mention of vocational courses of study, which represent the cultural knowledge of many working-class students. This ensures that the knowledge working-class students bring to the classroom is not applicable to graduation requirements, while the knowledge of most middle-class whites would be applicable. While this New Basics curriculum might prepare one for college, it certainly does not prepare one to

immediately enter the workforce, which is a reality for many working-class high school graduates. While the *Nation at Risk* report uses the word “college” fifty-nine times, the word “career” is only used three times, and “vocational” appears five times. The cultural capital of the college-bound middle-class is thus valorized in this report.

There is also no mention of art, music, physical education, or any other course of study which represents epistemologies outside of abstract academic knowledge emphasized in the New Basics. Throughout the entire report, the word “music” does not appear at all, “art” appears once, “culture” appears five times, and “history” appears seven times. “Language” appears sixteen times, “math” or “mathematics” appears twenty-five times, and “science” or “scientific” appears fifty-one times. It is very clear that certain ways of knowing are acknowledged in this report, and others are devalued. Additionally, the “2 years of foreign language” for “the college-bound” makes the obvious assumption that those students who speak English as a second language, and are thus already fluent in a “foreign” language, are not college-bound. There is a very strong orientation toward whiteness inherent in this recommended curriculum.

I can attest that in New Mexico, the current graduation requirements mirror the New Basics almost exactly, and among the most valuable tools that we use in my drop-out recovery high school are individualized curriculum, remedial instruction in basic skills, and explicit instruction in the cultural knowledge that students are expected to already have in high school. I cannot prove that the lack of instruction in these areas directly caused our students to drop out of high school, but I can prove correlation between the lack of these skills in these areas and the decision to drop out.

Findings Regarding Standards and Expectations

In this section, the commission begins by defining “expectations in terms of the level of knowledge, abilities, and skills school and college graduates should possess.” A bulleted list of expectations follows:

- by grades, which reflect the degree to which students demonstrate their mastery of subject matter;
- through high school and college graduation requirements, which tell students which subjects are most important;
- by the presence or absence of rigorous examinations requiring students to demonstrate their mastery of content and skill before receiving a diploma or a degree;
- by college admissions requirements, which reinforce high school standards; and
- by the difficulty of the subject matter students confront in their texts and assigned readings

Every item in this list of expectations reveals bias toward white, male, middle-class epistemologies. In my drop-out recovery high school, every student enters with a transcript full of failing grades. Our students have invariably experienced traumas in their lives which caused them to drop out of high school in the first place, including homelessness, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, malnutrition, and substance abuse. Many became parents at a young age. Many are disabled and did not get the services they needed in traditional public schools. We consider it a victory that they are able to return to school at all. We provide comprehensive social work services,

and we expect that the first few weeks of enrollment with us will be spent meeting housing, health, and transportation needs, and helping the student feel comfortable in an academic environment.

It is entirely unreasonable to expect academic performance in the form of passing grades, meeting college entrance requirements, taking rigorous examinations, and mastering difficult subject matter before all other non-academic needs are met. Only those with privilege can assume that college entrance requirements clearly communicate to students what to think about during high school when so many American students can think only about where their next meal is coming from, and whether or not they will have shelter that night. Since we already know how high test scores are in areas with low poverty rates, the report implies that those who are not scoring well – those living in poverty – simply need to “value education” more. This list of expectations displays a worldview distorted by privilege, and this distortion is a characteristic of whiteness ideology.

These expectations represent the same sterilized view of human growth that was presented in the epigraph. Schools should and often do expect many other things in the academic environment, including respect for oneself and others, effective communication skills, strong character, a developing set of ethics and morals, media literacy, the development of artistic, musical, and athletic skills, the development of skills essential to the workplace, community service, civic-mindedness, a respect for differences in race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, and many more. All of these qualities are essential to the development of good citizens, community members, family

members, and employees, and they require explicit instruction. If a school limited its expectations to those listed in *A Nation at Risk*, it would produce an army of automatons who are completely lacking in empathy and who see the human experience as nothing more than winning a competition...by themselves. In other words, schools would produce more and more people capable of the manipulative and oppressive discourse characterized by this report.

Innovation and creativity also appear nowhere in those expectations, even though scientific achievement and economic prosperity are dependent upon those qualities. The two Swiss-based organizations that rank nations on global competitiveness, the Institute for Management Development and the World Economic Forum, both rank the United States as number one and have for many years. The twelve “pillars of competitiveness” listed by the WEF include innovation, which is the only one of the twelve that does not display diminishing returns over time. Students in Singapore have perennially higher average scores on international tests than the US, but the US scores much higher on measures of innovation than Singapore. When asked why high-achieving students in Singapore do not tend to contribute to innovation later in life, Singapore’s Minister of Education noted that creativity, ambition, and a willingness to challenge existing knowledge were lacking in Singapore’s students, areas where American students excel (Bracey, 2011). Not only do the expectations recommended in *Nation at Risk* not include these characteristics, which cannot be measured by standardized tests or grades, but teaching students to excel on standardized tests and

grades actually *inhibits* the development of creativity and willingness to challenge existing knowledge.

The commission then goes on to list the “notable deficiencies” they found, which include that “the amount of homework for high school seniors has decreased (two-thirds report less than 1 hour a night) and grades have risen as average student achievement has been declining.” This finding, like most of the findings in the report, creates an alleged deficiency by way of interpretation. It is not clear why the commission chose to note the amount of homework for seniors only. That the amount of homework has “decreased” for this group is a statement unsupported by data. The reference to average student achievement declining, presumably according to standardized test scores, is a fallacy we have already examined. The implied correlation between time spent on homework and student achievement is unsupported by data. The claim that “grades have risen” is unsupported by data, and the placement of that claim within a finding about decreasing time spent on homework implies that an increase in grades is directly related to decreased expectations rather than to increased achievement. This is an invented correlation, and its presence here serves only to mislead and manipulate.

It is as if the commission asked itself, “How can we present proof that expectations are decreasing?” and then manipulated available data to do so. The job of researchers is not to manipulate data to present a finding that supports an ideological “truth.” Another finding states that “‘minimum competency’ examinations (now required in 37 States) fall short of what is needed, as the ‘minimum’ tends to become

the ‘maximum,’ thus lowering educational standards for all.” Again, this is data which is created to prove the ideological “truth” that standards are not high enough in public schools. The allegation that these tests “fall short of what is needed” says nothing at all about them. It defies logic that anyone has ever considered this report to represent valid educational research.

Grand theorists, however, which I discussed in Chapter 2 as the type of researchers who work against a critical consciousness, *do* manipulate data to present a finding that is an ideological “truth.” A “grand theory,” which is a simplistic and inaccurate summation of social structures, lacking any consideration of the concepts of power, authority, manipulation or coercion. It is a universal scheme by which one can allegedly understand the entirety of social structures. Grand theories cannot clearly state problems because they obscure reality by substituting complexity with symbols of legitimation, or ruling ideas that create a normative structure apparently outside of the agency of those who may be exercising authority to protect their own privilege. Grand theories lead us to assume that all power is legitimated, and they cannot effectively formulate the idea of conflict (C. W. Mills, 1959). The “findings” presented in this report, the “risk” that they allegedly represent, and the suggestion this the alleged risk can be remedied with the magic helper of standardization, epitomize the “science” that grand theorists produce. This report exists to mask the reality of social inequity with racially-coded pseudoscience and thus justify the anti-humanitarian political agenda of the Reagan administration.

The next finding complains that “one-fifth of all 4-year public colleges in the United States must accept every high school graduate within the State regardless of program followed or grades,” which is allegedly dangerous because high school students then learn that “they can expect to attend college even if they do not follow a demanding course of study in high school or perform well.” The adoption of such admissions procedures can serve to expand opportunity to first-generation college students, and the availability of college to students who do not “perform well” can serve to mitigate the effects of racial discrimination, poverty, and other social inequities on educational opportunity. This finding illustrates how whiteness ideology works to instill the belief that increased opportunity for other groups is an infringement on the rights of the dominant group. It suggests that higher education and economic opportunity should only be available to those people who “perform well” in a certain “program of study.” This is the moment when the discourse of the report begins to use standardization as a way to legitimize exclusion from opportunity. This notion of gatekeeping is central to the discourse of standardization.

The next finding claims that “about 23 percent of our more selective colleges and universities reported that their general level of selectivity declined during the 1970s, and 29 percent reported reducing the number of specific high school courses required for admission.” Again, the report interprets inclusivity as a problem. Expanding opportunity does nothing to diminish the achievement of those who would have been admitted to college under stricter admissions criteria. This ideology is analogous to the one used to oppose marriage equality, which is that granting the right

of marriage to same-sex couples in some way diminishes the marriages of heterosexual couples. This ideology has been used to legitimize oppression since the founding of the United States. This ideology is essential to the perpetuation of white supremacy. This ideology, that expanding access to an asset diminishes the inherent value of that asset, is essential to the boundary formation of white privilege and whiteness as property, and it found a home in reform discourse beginning with *A Nation at Risk*.

Recommendations Regarding Standards and Expectations

The first recommendation in this section states that “grades should be indicators of academic achievement so they can be relied on as evidence of a student's readiness for further study.” Just as the finding regarding grades vs. homework time was convoluted and invented, this finding invents the implication that grades are not already an indicator of academic achievement. This recommendation is so vague as to be entirely useless, and serves to perpetuate the ideological truth of decreased expectations more than it serves to provide any actionable goal for students, teachers, or schools.

The next two recommendations are that “four-year colleges and universities should raise their admissions requirements” to include “levels of achievement on standardized achievement tests in each of the five Basics” and that “standardized tests of achievement (not to be confused with aptitude tests) should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from high school to college or work.” It becomes very clear here that the purpose of standardization has nothing to do with addressing the alleged risk of this “tide of

mediocrity” sweeping American schools. It has everything to do with gatekeeping opportunity. We know that the data regarding decreased academic performance among America’s students was entirely false, as proven by numerous independent, bipartisan studies, and that falling average test scores were an indicator of increased inclusivity in public schooling. Mediocrity was not the problem. Inclusivity was the problem. Too many students of color and working class students were accessing academic achievement that was previously only available to middle-class whites. The solution proposed by the report is to close those gates of opportunity using standardized assessments which measure, by the admission of the report itself, not aptitude, but access to white middle-class cultural capital.

The report goes on to specify that “the tests should be administered as part of a nationwide (but not Federal) system of State and local standardized tests.” This inane distinction between “nationwide” and “Federal” is an ambivalence that recurs in the Obama-era Common Core State Standards Initiative, which I will discuss in Chapter 6. That concludes the “Recommendations Regarding Standards and Expectations” section of the report. Colleges should not be inclusive, and they should use standardized testing as the tool of exclusion. Standardized testing, used by American eugenicists and the Nazis to justify genocide, and used by white supremacists to restrict voting rights, is the recommendation of this report.

Findings Regarding Time

This section of the report does much to illustrate the tendency of reform discourse to oversimplify the interpretation of data in order to prove ideological truths,

in the style of grand theorists. It states that “compared to other nations, American students spend much less time on school work,” without defining the alleged discrepancy in time, which could have been two minutes a day or two hours a day, or defining what qualifies as “school work” in this interpretation. It also fails to consider any factors that may make it necessary for American students to focus on things other than school work, such as working for supplemental income rather than studying. It also claims that “schools are not doing enough to help students develop either the study skills required to use time well or the willingness to spend more time on school work.” This “finding,” like many others in the study, is too vague to be meaningful, and the word “enough” is indicative of nothing actionable. This statement also reminds readers about the alleged laziness of American students in its baseless accusation that they are not willing to study, another instance of the subject/object hierarchy switch.

The next finding claims that “in England and other industrialized countries, it is not unusual for academic high school students to spend 8 hours a day at school, 220 days per year,” while in the US the “the typical school day lasts 6 hours and the school year is 180 days.” This claim does not define what “not unusual” means, and also does not consider that keeping school buildings open and teachers on salary for a longer school year requires increasing school budgets considerably, rather than adopting the austere budget cuts of the Reagan administration. It also claims that “in many schools, the time spent learning how to cook and drive counts as much toward a high school diploma as the time spent studying mathematics, English, chemistry, U.S. history, or biology,” which is yet another instance of the report devaluing non-academic knowledge

and making assumptions about the resources that students can access outside of the school day.

The report then mentions, but does not cite, a “California study” which “found that because of poor management of classroom time, some elementary students received only one-fifth of the instruction others received in reading comprehension.” This irresponsible oversimplification of an entire study into one sentence clearly serves to perpetuate an ideological truth that teachers are unqualified, in this case because of a lack of classroom management skill. It also assumes causation between two possibly unrelated variables, and does not acknowledge the necessity of differentiated instruction, which would require some students to have more or less instruction in reading comprehension skill based on ability level. It also assumes that one state-wide study proves a nationwide trend, which is plainly unscientific.

The report then goes on to allege that “in most schools, the teaching of study skills is haphazard and unplanned,” which results in “many students” entering college “without disciplined and systematic study habits.” Study habits and time management skills are a common deficit among students adjusting to the culture of college, which is much more unstructured than high school and requires an entirely different set of academic habits. Since the teaching of time management and study skills are not included in the magic helper curriculum of the New Basics, and any instruction on topics that fall outside of the New Basics is considered to be folly within the discourse of this report, a contradiction arises here which reveals, for a moment, the discursive ambivalence which characterizes dominant discourse.

Recommendations Regarding Time

The recommendations in this section support the overall directive that “significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics.” They include that high school students “should be assigned far more homework than is now the case,” that “instruction in effective study and work skills, which are essential if school and independent time is to be used efficiently, should be introduced in the early grades,” and that school districts should “strongly consider 7-hour school days” as well as a 220-day school year. I have discussed the flaws inherent in these arguments in the preceding section.

The recommendations also focus quite a bit on discipline. The commission recommends that “the time available for learning should be expanded through better classroom management” and that schools should focus on developing “firm and fair codes of student conduct that are enforced consistently” as well as “attendance policies with clear incentives and sanctions.” The report also urges school districts to consider “alternative classrooms, programs, and schools to meet the needs of continually disruptive students,” and argues that “placement and grouping of students, as well as promotion and graduation policies, should be guided by the academic progress of students and their instructional needs, rather than by rigid adherence to age.” The allegations here are that teachers lack classroom management skills, and that students require enforcement of sanctions in order to learn, allegations which ignore the real factors which interrupt instructional quality, such as the fact that overwhelming class

sizes due to continually shrinking school budgets create environments that are not conducive to learning.

Rather than helping teachers to create learning environments that meet the needs of all learners, the suggestion is to *remove* “continually disruptive students” from opportunity by *creating new schools to house them*. The discourse here is not even veiled. Students who do not conform to the behaviors and values expected in classrooms do not deserve the opportunity to participate in learning with their peers. This is the ideology of the pre-Civil War “reform schools” which served to control “criminal” immigrant youth, a model which resembles prison much more closely than it does schooling. The *Nation at Risk* report openly supports school segregation. Research clearly shows that students of color are deemed to be inherently more violent and disruptive than their white peers (Gilliam et al., 2016), and are punished much more harshly than their white peers for the same infractions (United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Creating separate schools for “disruptive students” would be a sure return to racially segregated schools, and in most places where such schools were created, that was the eventual result (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

This set of recommendations also includes increased support for teachers in order to “add time for teaching and learning.” It recommends that “the burden on teachers for maintaining discipline should be reduced” and that “administrative burdens on the teacher and related intrusions into the school day should be reduced to add time for teaching and learning.” There is also a directive that “additional time should be

found to meet the special needs of slow learners, the gifted, and others who need more instructional diversity than can be accommodated during a conventional school day or school year.” I believe that most teachers would agree with the merit of these recommendations, although I am not certain how teachers would learn how to meet the needs of all learners if their teacher prep programs included more courses in math and science than they did in pedagogy.

It is also interesting that the recommendations begin to touch on the administrative burdens which affect teachers’ ability to focus on instruction, but the report never, not even once, examines the overall structure of the school system, the effectiveness of administrators, the nature of educational bureaucracy, the effectiveness of school budgets, or any single other factor that may affect teachers’ ability to do their jobs. Rather, the report seems to suggest that teachers and students exist within a vacuum which is characterized by their own laziness, poor work ethic, and lack of qualification.

Findings Regarding Teaching

The findings regarding teaching opens with the assertion that “too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students.” It does not say how many. It does not provide data. It provides an opinion, or at best a generalization. It also provides an opening that immediately shames teachers and devalues the profession of teaching, which was a calculated choice.

The next finding complains that “the teacher preparation curriculum is weighted heavily with courses in "educational methods" at the expense of courses in subjects to be taught.” This finding does provide some data to support the conclusion: “a survey of 1,350 institutions training teachers indicated that 41 percent of the time of elementary school teacher candidates is spent in education courses, which reduces the amount of time available for subject matter courses.” This is an absurd statement. Of course elementary school teachers are spending time studying education. They teach children. An elementary school teacher does not need to have taken advanced mathematics courses in order to teach arithmetic. An elementary school teacher would, however, need to have extensive training in identifying and differentiating instruction for learning disabilities and gifted students, teaching content to speakers of other languages, identifying and addressing behavioral disorders in ways which contribute to learning rather than detracting from it, creating classroom environments that are inclusive of all learning styles, understanding and applying educational research, planning and delivering effective lessons, and many other skills that strong teachers need to simultaneously practice during every moment of the day in order to be effective. The commission apparently considers it a problem that teachers study teaching. Clearly, the profession of teaching is entirely misunderstood and utterly devalued within the discourse of this report.

The findings include commentary about teacher shortages as well. It states that “despite widespread publicity about an overpopulation of teachers, severe shortages of certain kinds of teachers exist: in the fields of mathematics, science, and foreign

languages; and among specialists in education for gifted and talented, language minority, and handicapped students.” It warns that “the shortage of teachers in mathematics and science is particularly severe,” and that “half of the newly employed mathematics, science, and English teachers are not qualified to teach these subjects.” The report does not list one single positive attribute about America’s teaching force, and serves only to demoralize and devalue teachers.

It also notes, “the average salary after 12 years of teaching is only \$17,000 per year, and many teachers are required to supplement their income with part-time and summer employment.” Teacher salaries continue to be a problem in America. I would argue that the devaluing of the teaching profession and the myth of failing public schools are at the heart of that problem. After all, if teachers are so unqualified, and public schools fail so spectacularly, then why would we pay teachers well? This is analogous to the introduction of the report, which blamed Americans for the dismantling of the educational system that brought on the tide of mediocrity without recognizing that the Reagan administration itself gutted education funding nationwide. For at least the second time, *A Nation at Risk* bemoans a problem that it helps to create.

Recommendations Regarding Teaching

The first recommendation in this section proposes that “persons preparing to teach should be required to meet high educational standards, to demonstrate an aptitude for teaching, and to demonstrate competence in an academic discipline,” which, of course, suggests that teacher candidates do not already meet high standards. This first recommendation contributes to the aspect of reform discourse that devalues

teachers. Another recommendation suggests that people with degrees in math and science “immediately begin teaching in these fields” since “a number of our leading science centers have the capacity to begin educating and retraining teachers immediately.” Clearly, this recommendation, which confuses expertise in math and science with expertise in pedagogy, devalues teachers.

The remaining five recommendations, however, are the second section of the report, along with the recommendations regarding granting teachers more time for teaching, which I think are somewhat on point. The second recommendation involves increased teacher salaries tied to an evaluation system based on peer review. Obama-era reforms tie teacher salaries to students’ standardized test scores, which is an entirely disastrous effort that has driven scores of teachers out of the profession. The peer-review evaluation system can, in my experience, improve teacher capacity. The other recommendations include an 11-month contract to provide time for more professional development, career ladders with increased opportunity for master teachers, grants and loans to attract students to teaching, and involving master teachers in designing teacher prep and teacher mentoring programs. I view these to be effective reform strategies and I have witnessed their success first-hand. I suppose the fact that T.H. Bell was a lifelong educator shines through in this section of the report.

V. Conclusion: The IDFs of Reform Discourse

From 1979 to 1983, the child poverty rate climbed from 16% to 22%, and the rate for children under 6 rose from 18% to 25% (Corcoran & Chaudry, 1997). *A Nation at Risk* mentions nothing about the devastating effects of childhood poverty on

educational outcomes. It also fails to acknowledge the overwhelming presence of systemic racism woven within every stitch of all American social institutions, including schooling. Unlike federal education legislation that preceded it, it does not even recognize the presence of social inequity, let alone attempt to mitigate it through legislation requiring equal opportunity and increased funding for underserved populations.

Instead, true to the nature of Reagan discourse, *A Nation at Risk* uses a colorblind meritocracy as a Benevolent Frame to disarm readers and invalidate questions of equity before they even arise. It uses the scolding tone of the Father Figure to shame readers and ridicule opposing views. It uses the Fear of the Un-American Other to scare readers, inhibit critical thought, promote absolutism, and encourage unthinking, reactive, nationalistic responses. It uses Nostalgia to create a Lazy Scapegoat of Color, which others people of color and perpetuates white supremacist ideology. It uses manipulative tactics such as negative comparison to skew data.

A Nation at Risk oversimplifies and misleads, ignoring all scientific principles in its methods. It substitutes simplicity for complexity in its misguided, racist, and classist directive to use the magic helpers of standardization and standardized testing to measure and “fix” complex social and economic phenomena. It creates causation and correlation where there is none. It uses disparate “facts” like students not studying French and teachers not taking enough physics classes to prove deeply flawed and problematic conclusions, such as American students and teachers being at fault for America’s alleged failure in the global economy. It advocates for school segregation and

argues against increased inclusivity in both K-12 and post-secondary environments. It deprofessionalizes teaching and devalues the cultural capital of students of color and working class students.

A Nation at Risk is as much of a departure from the reform legislation of the 60s and 70s as Reagan war discourse was from the deterrence-based discourse that preceded it. And just as Reagan's war discourse was created to scare America into supporting his political agenda of decreased social spending and increased military spending, his educational discourse supported his agenda to defund and dismantle public education, while it stoked the anti-Russia, nationalist sentiments that were integral to his support. *A Nation at Risk* is simply not what it purports to be.

Chapters 4 and 5 have focused on identifying the IDFs that govern American ideas about educational reform through first analyzing the larger discourse of Reaganism, and then identifying how the IDFs of Reaganism appear in *A Nation at Risk*, situating the document as a political and ideological tool rather than a report about American public schools. In Chapter 6, I will answer the first and second research questions, which ask how the reform discourse created by *A Nation at Risk* continues to govern American ideas about education and educational reform, and how the IDFs of reform discourse work to reproduce existing paradigms of power and privilege. Finally, in Chapter 7, I will answer the third research question regarding the implications for this study in constructing a counter-discourse/ideology of educational reform that would serve to emancipate and empower, rather than exclude and alienate, students of color and working class students.

Chapter 6: The Enduring Legacy of *A Nation at Risk*

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was passed as part of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. The most far-reaching federal legislation affecting public schooling in our nation's history, it was intended to ensure equal opportunity in public schooling through making federal grant money available to school districts for things such as instructional materials, supplementary educational services, and educational research and training. Perhaps the most significant provision of the law fell under Title 1, which granted additional funding to schools serving low-income students (United States Congress, 1965).

The analysis of United States federal educational reform law essentially involves the examination of *ESEA* reauthorizations. *ESEA* governs the ways in which the federal government supplements local funding to school districts, as it was originally intended, but throughout the decades of reauthorization, *ESEA* began to place conditions upon that federal funding. In turn, these conditions created a reality in which the ideology and political agenda of the administration overseeing the reauthorization directly affected the structure and function of public schooling itself.

Examining the discourse of federal educational reform efforts from 1983 to present reveals the continued presence of every IDF that characterizes *A Nation at Risk*. To summarize, the IDFs of reform discourse created by *A Nation at Risk*, along with their discursive and social manifestations, are listed in the following table:

IDF	Manifestations of IDF
Benevolent Frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief in colorblind meritocracy • Refusal to acknowledge social inequity • Culture deficit worldview • <i>School choice</i>
Father Figure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sadomasochism • Blaming and shaming • Demonizing/berating/dismissing opposing views
Nostalgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valorizing white power • Understating or ignoring benefits of social progress • Fictional glorious past • Nationalism
Fear of the Un-American Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • America on the verge of academic and economic collapse • Loss of privilege to people of color • Focus on competition • Absolutism: one is either American or not • Liberalism as un-American
Lazy Scapegoat of Color	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accusing people of color of not using the opportunities they have been afforded in a meritocracy • Demonizing people of color in accusations of fraud and waste • Referencing 1960s as the beginning of the end of American prosperity • <i>Labeling “failing schools”</i>
Standardization as Magic Helper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventing homogeny • Excluding non-white, non-middle-class epistemologies • Ignoring fallibility of standardized testing • Assuming synchronous cognitive development in children • Ignoring human aspects of teaching and learning, including natural differences in humans • Flawed and simplistic data interpretation • Exiling expert views of educators • Gatekeeping of opportunity through standardized testing • Deprofessionalization of teaching/teachers
Subject/object heirarchy switch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placing all responsibility – and therefore all blame – for alleged decreases in academic achievement on students and teachers • Pretending that schools are the cause rather than a symptom of larger social inequity • “Accountability”
Discursive ambivalence, while not an IDF, is a marker of opaque ideology and thus should also be considered as a characteristic of reform discourse	

In the following analysis, I will be examining reform discourse as it appears in several government publications, including legislation, press releases, speeches, executive summaries, and brochures. I will identify where the IDFs appear, and comment on the social function of the discourse they create, particularly how the discourse serves to alienate and exclude working class students and students of color.

I. The First Fifteen Years of ESEA Implementation: 1965 - 1980

Early amendments and reauthorizations served to expand the funding available under *ESEA*. A 1968 amendment to the law, the *Bilingual Education Act*, created Title VII of the *ESEA*, which increased federal support for students learning English. Like the original *ESEA*, the *Bilingual Education Act* represented an acknowledgement that treating all students equally would not create equity (Petrzela, 2010). It reflected a belief that in order to create equity, students with higher needs required additional services, and those services required increased funding¹⁴. In the early 1970s, it was found that Title 1 funding was not always being used for children in poverty, so early reauthorizations included language that ensured that the funds were used in pull-out sessions with poverty-afflicted children rather than for the school as a whole. These pull-outs were then deemed to interrupt services for these children rather than enhance them, so the next reauthorization, President Carter's *Education Amendments Act of 1978*, provided funding for school-wide programs for schools with more than 75% of

¹⁴ As I reviewed in Chapter 5, this notion of equity rather than equality also influenced the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975*, which was not legislatively related to *ESEA*.

students living in poverty (Klein, 2015). It becomes clear that the first fifteen years of *ESEA* reauthorization included changes that grappled with how to most effectively channel federal funding to students who needed it most.

II. The Reagan Years: Modern Reform Discourse is Created and Reified, Educators Exiled

Beginning in the Reagan era, however, reauthorizations of *ESEA* began to move in quite a different direction. Remember that the Department of Education was created in 1980, and the Reagan administration was unable fulfill the campaign promise of dismantling it. By 1984, the GOP dropped the dismantling of the DOE from its official platform (de Rugy & Gryphon, 2004). This was perhaps because Democrats had held an uninterrupted majority in the House of Representatives from 1955 to 1995, and Republicans simply did not have the political leverage necessary to fulfill such a promise¹⁵. However, consistent with Reagan's promise of reducing federal regulation, the 1981 reauthorization of *ESEA*, *The Education Consolidation and Improvement Act*, significantly simplified and shortened the law, and transferred much of the oversight of federal funds to state governments (Klein, 2015). Then *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, which along with the discourse of the administration as a whole, ideologically justified the Reagan administration's drastic cuts to federal education funding, as I reviewed in Chapter 4.

¹⁵ Ironically, the unexpected popularity of *A Nation at Risk* may have also undermined that effort, since the American imagination became so fixated on "failing" public schools and the need for federal-level reform.

A Nation at Risk, and therefore the idea that American education was in crisis, seemed to capture the attention of Americans in a way that few other government publications had. The report drew considerable criticism from scholars who recognized the flawed data interpretation and conclusively negative view of American public schools. Despite this criticism, however, over a half-million copies of the report were distributed, and in the first four months following its publication, more than 700 articles in 45 different newspapers mentioned the report (Vinovskis, 1999). Gallup polls revealed that most Americans rated public schools favorably in the late 1970s, but the economic recession of the early 80s seemed to shake the public's faith in public schooling. Policymakers and the public seemed to accept the idea that our national economic crisis in the early 80s was directly related to poor public schooling. Perhaps because of the discourse of *A Nation at Risk*, which presented an overly simplified analysis of the relationship between schooling and international economic competition, Americans ignored the complexity of this relationship. By the mid-1980s, policymakers and constituents alike had embarked upon a national crusade to reform America's allegedly failing public schools.

Gallup polls revealed that in the early- to mid-1980s, Americans remained confident in the quality of the schools that their own children attended, but blamed "inner-city" schools, particularly in the South, for the lack of a qualified American labor force (Vinovskis, 1999). This sentiment is a clear manifestation of Reagan's Lazy Scapegoat of Color IDF. It is entirely aligned with the discourse of *A Nation at Risk*, which, as I discussed in Chapter 5, blames students of color for allegedly choosing non-

academic courses of study and for allegedly performing poorly on international standardized tests.

A Nation at Risk was not immediately followed by federal policy directives demanding specific types of reform, but most states did enact some type of reform in the 1980s that put into action many of the report's recommendations. Southern governors led the way for such reforms, since Southern states tended to lag behind the rest of the nation in educational spending and academic outcomes, and because Southern governors wanted to attract businesses to their state by changing the perception that they could not provide a qualified labor force. These reforms included new academic standards and graduation requirements, increased standardized testing, and higher pay for teachers (Vinovskis, 1999).

At this point, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the ACT, and the SAT were the only standardized tests available to measure academic achievement. In 1984, Secretary of Education T. H. Bell, eager to push for more state-level educational reform, published an annual "Wall Chart" which ranked individual states based upon the ACT and SAT scores of its inhabitants. Although many recognized the complete invalidity of such a comparison, given factors as basic as the fact that ACT and SAT scores only represented college-bound students, Secretary Bell vehemently defended it, saying that it "helped validate state-by-state comparisons as a means of holding state and local school systems accountable for education" [qtd. in Vinovskis, 1999]. Thus, the same man who commissioned *A Nation at Risk* followed its publication with a public endeavor that created many of the assumptions we see in modern reform

discourse today. With his adamant defense of the Wall Chart, he drastically oversimplified the process of educational reform, suggested that academic achievement and educational reform are competitions, inaccurately interpreted the meaning of standardized test scores, invited people to ignore very basic science regarding sampling in quantitative comparisons, ignored the variables such as poverty in regard to academic achievement, and introduced the notion of “accountability,” or holding educators responsible for complex social phenomena that were entirely outside of the control of educators, who had no voice in the reforms being imposed upon them.

Due in part to Secretary Bell’s highly publicized press conferences each time it was updated, the Wall Chart became extremely popular among the press and the American people in general (Vinovskis, 1999). It continued to be published for six years by Secretary Bell and his successors. American people who were fearful that public schools were failing and in need of complete reform were asking for some kind of indicator of our progress toward that goal, and Bell filled that need with a very simple, and entirely inaccurate, measure. Before it became an assumption in federal legislation that standardized test scores were an accurate measure of the success of educational reform, it became an assumption to the press and to the public. This idea became reified as “common sense,” one of the most telling indicators of dominant ideology. It is worth noting how quickly the false correlation between standardized test scores and educational reform took hold after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* – a year, two at most. A public in the grip of a fear-based discourse rushes toward simplified, absolutist, and therefore inaccurate conclusions to quell its collective anxiety, particularly if the

presence of a scapegoat baits the hook. The Benevolent Frame (belief in a colorblind meritocracy), Father Figure (berating opposing views), Standardization as Magic Helper (inventing homogeneity, simplifying complex phenomena, ignoring fallibility of standardized testing, exiling expert views of educators), and Subject/Object Hierarchy Switch (pretending that schools are the cause rather than a symptom of larger social inequity) IDFs were all reified through the popularity of the Wall Chart.

Given the widespread public demand to examine (and wildly misinterpret) standardized test scores, state governors found themselves in need of tests that ostensibly measured the achievement of all children, not just the college-bound. In 1986, Lamar Alexander, governor of Tennessee and chair of the National Governors' Association, headed a committee to study the NAEP. They published a report, commonly known as the *Alexander-James Report*, which announced the need for state-level NAEP data to be used to compare the scores of children from one state to another, and even from one school district to another. National Academy of Education president Robert Glaser published a commentary on the report, which warned that "simple comparisons [of state-level NAEP scores] are ripe for abuse and are unlikely to inform meaningful school improvement efforts" (qtd. in Ryan & Shepard, 2008). Nevertheless, the *Alexander-James Report* became a key document in the next reauthorization of *ESEA*, as the Standardization as Magic Helper IDF allows those who perpetuate reform discourse to exile the views of educators from educational reform.

The 1988 *Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Act*, Reagan's next *ESEA* reauthorization and the first reauthorization after the publication of

A Nation at Risk, mandated that states develop “trial” state-level reading and mathematics assessments on a “voluntary” basis, and that development of these state-level NAEP assessments were to be overseen by the new National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). *Hawkins-Stafford* also called on individual states to identify “appropriate achievement goals for each age and grade in each subject area to be tested” (United States Library of Congress, 1988). Consequently, the NAGB changed the way that NAEP results were reported, calling for the identification of proficiency levels that describe what individual students *should* be able to do, rather than average scores that described what students *were* able to do. These proficiency levels were created by state-level groups of educators and lay people, were judgmental in nature, varied widely from one grade to the next and one content area to the next, and departed dramatically from normative standards of grade-level proficiency expectations (Ryan & Shepard, 2008). This description can also be accurately applied to the development of the Common Core State Standards and the tests used to allegedly assess progress toward those standards, which I will discuss in an upcoming section. These proficiency levels wildly simplified the reality of cognitive development, employing the Standardization as Magic Helper IDF.

Congress was divided about the state-level NAEP mandate, and expressed their concern in the conference report that accompanied *Hawkins-Stafford*. The report stated that “the purpose of the expansion of NAEP is to provide policy makers with more and better state level information about the educational performance of their school children,” and that “the goal [was] not to provide a scorecard by which to rank

state educational systems.” They also mandated that the assessment data would “not to be used to compare, rank or evaluate local schools or school districts” (United States House of Representatives, 1988). This was a mandate that would be entirely reversed in future *ESEA* reauthorizations, most notably *No Child Left Behind*. Nevertheless, with the creation of grade-level proficiency expectations and state-level standardized testing, *Hawkins-Stafford* marks the entrance of standardization into federal educational reform law.

Furthermore, *Hawkins-Stafford* mandated that the effectiveness of each participating school’s Title 1 programs was to be “assessed annually, with program improvement plans to be developed by the LEA [local education authority] for each school that does not make substantial progress toward raising the achievement of participants” (United States Library of Congress, 1988). In practice, this meant that school districts needed to annually analyze the standardized test scores of children participating in Title 1 programs, looking for consistent improvement in scores as an indicator of the effectiveness of the program, and develop improvement plans if scores did not increase. This appears to be the first time that the availability of federal education funding became connected to standardized test scores. Although funds were not withdrawn from schools that did not show increasing standardized test scores, the assumption that ineffective instruction is linked to low test scores, and that effective instruction is linked to high test scores, is implicit in this reauthorization (Standardization as Magic Helper IDF). Also implicit is the idea that increased school funding is enough to undo the devastating effects of poverty on academic outcomes

(Benevolent Frame IDF, belief in colorblind meritocracy), and that addressing poverty through avenues outside of the school is not a necessary aspect of educational reform (Subject/Object Hierarchy Switch IDF).

Hawkins-Stafford entirely shifted the differentiated, equity-focused discourse of *ESEA* toward a discourse of standardization. By this time, there seemed to be no question among reformers that standardized test scores were an accurate reflection of the academic achievement of students and the effectiveness of schools and educational reform. This “common sense” use of test scores was reified by federal law within five years of the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, despite considerable opposition from educators, educational researchers, and the United States Congress. This seems to be the moment when the voices of educators were exiled from reform discourse.

Laypeople demanded a ranking system which simplified educational reform to a process that they could easily understand (testing and punishing equals reforming), and an accountability system that eased the anxiety created by *A Nation at Risk* by turning educators and students into scapegoats for America’s failing economy. It is no wonder that this discourse took hold so quickly. Politicians could now easily run on educational reform without ever really talking about education.

III. George H.W. Bush and the National Goals, Standards-Based Reform Takes Hold

And that is exactly what George H.W. Bush did. Education reform was not a central issue in the 1980 or 1984 presidential elections, other than Reagan’s promise to dismantle the DOE. In fact, the last time that education played a major political role was in 1957, following America’s loss to Russia in the space race (Vinovskis, 1999), a fact that

makes *A Nation at Risk's* three references to Sputnik even more noteworthy. However, throughout his 1988 presidential campaign, George H.W. Bush repeated many times in speeches and in debates that he wanted to be known as the “education president” (George H.W. Bush: Campaigns and elections, n.d.). Specifically, his platform included increased funding for Head Start and increased parent choice in what schools their children could attend. Running on education was a politically expedient move, with the nation so fixated on the recently-created issue of “failing” American schools, and likely contributed considerably to the success of his campaign.

It is important to note the emergence of the “school choice” code in President Bush’s campaign. Ostensibly, the notion of school choice, or parent choice, serves to provide families with avenues to remove their children from “failing” schools and move them to more effective schools. *Hawkins-Stafford* mandated that states identify schools that were failing based on lack of improvement in standardized test scores among poverty-stricken students. The Gallup polls in the early 80s confirmed that the public believed that “inner-city” schools were failing. All standardized test data from the 1960s forward created the notion of achievement gaps between white students and students of color. It is clear that as reform discourse developed, “failing” schools were those that served either working class students or students of color, because those were the schools with low average test scores. Schools that failed to cooperate with integration efforts were not labeled as “failing.” Schools that failed to properly accommodate for students with special needs were not labeled as “failing.” Schools that failed to curb incidents of racial discrimination were not labeled as “failing.” Schools that had a poor

track record of graduates of color or poor graduates being admitted to universities were not labeled as “failing.” Schools with inadequate facilities were not labeled as “failing.” Thus, the term “failing” school came to signify a school with few middle-class white students. Surely, since in 1988 the only schools for which states needed to track test scores were the ones with 75% or more students living in poverty, schools serving the middle-class were not even included in the “failing school” metric.

So at this point in time, there emerged a system that would begin to label schools that did not serve mostly middle-class whites, and at the same time, there emerged a discussion about “school choice,” or granting parents the option of moving their children out of those schools if they were districted into them. Although some would argue that the notion of school choice is egalitarian, as it offers poor students and students of color the chance to move into allegedly higher performing schools, it is no coincidence that it began as and has remained a plank in the education platform of the “white man’s party.” “School choice” became the next incarnation of “states’ rights,” the coded term for segregation, and it is one that endures in the present day. As I write, President-elect Trump has named as his Secretary of Education a billionaire with no education experience who is a strong supporter of so-called “school choice.” It is difficult to dismiss the connection between school choice and white supremacy within that scenario. I will return to the ideological function of school choice in an upcoming section. For now, I posit that the identification of “failing schools” falls under the manifestations of the Lazy Scapegoat of Color IDF, and “school choice” falls under the manifestations of the Benevolent Frame IDF.

ESEA was not up for reauthorization during Bush's one-term presidency.

However, President Bush had an incalculable effect on the next reauthorization, which would be in 1994, through his creation of the Charlottesville Summit of 1989, a two-day, bipartisan gathering of 49 of the 50 state governors in Charlottesville, Virginia. Although President Bush's education platform did not include increased standardization, the purpose of the summit was to develop a set of goals to guide national educational reform, and it is recognized as being a milestone in the move toward standardization in education. The National Governors' Association, led by Lamar Alexander, had long advocated for clear goals to guide educational reform, and had published their recommendations in the 1986 report entitled *Time for Results* (Vinovskis, 1999). The report was widely publicized, and it supported the idea of publishing state-level standardized test results. It also popularized the idea of national educational goals, which had not been a political priority in the past and was not part of President Bush's platform, and helped to characterize state governors as the leaders of nationwide educational reform.

In the months preceding the summit, the Department of Education gave the task of planning the summit to its Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), which was directed by Milt Goldbert, former director of the NCEE, the commission that had published *A Nation at Risk*. The OERI published a memo that listed seven proposed national educational goals to be reviewed at the summit (Vinovskis, 1999). The leaders of the summit included Southern governors who had already enacted state-level educational reform, including Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas, chair of the Democratic

Governors' Association, and Governor Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, co-author of the *Alexander-James Report*. Teachers, however, were not among the attendees of the Charlottesville Summit. Thus, the goals for the summit were proposed by the director of the panel that published *A Nation at Risk*, the participants and leaders of the summit were governors who were politically motivated to further their existing reforms that were directly related to the very popular *A Nation at Risk*, and educators did not even have a seat at the table.

In a joint communique from President Bush and the nation's governors that announced the purpose of the summit, there appears the following declaration:

Education has always been important, but never this important because the stakes have changed: Our competitors for opportunity are also working to educate their people. As they continue to improve, they make the future a moving target. We believe that the time has come, for the first time in U.S. history, to establish clear, national performance goals, goals that will make us internationally competitive ('A Jeffersonian Compact', 1989).

What a singularly strange sentiment, to imply that nations other than America had not been working to "educate their people" until just recently. That sentence employs quite a few of the IDFs of reform discourse. Nostalgia is invoked with the implication that there was a time when other countries did not educate their citizens, thus affording America a natural superiority academically and economically. Fear of the Un-American Other is clearly employed here, since these other nations, in "educating their people," have allegedly made America's future into "a moving target." Standardization as a

Magic Helper appears in the second sentence, with the assertion that creating “performance goals” will somehow magically make America once again “internationally competitive.” The alleged failure of American students in comparison to other nations popularized by *A Nation at Risk*, although proved categorically untrue by all responsible statistical interpretations, is simply assumed as an ideological truth. It is clear that the participants in the Charlottesville Summit were entirely fluent in the reform discourse created by *A Nation at Risk*.

The goals agreed upon at the summit, announced in President Bush’s State of the Union address in January, 1990, were as follows:

By the year 2000, every child must start school ready to learn. The United States must increase the high school graduation rate to no less than 90 percent. And we are going to make sure our schools’ diplomas mean something. In critical subjects—at the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades—we must assess our students’ performance. By the year 2000, U.S. students must be first in the world in math and science achievement. Every American adult must be a skilled, literate worker and citizen. Every school must offer the kind of disciplined environment that makes it possible for our kids to learn. And every school in America must be drug-free (Bush, 1990).

Thus, with the Charlottesville Summit, mandated benchmark standardized testing entered the discussion on educational reform. Note that nowhere within those goals is any mention of poverty, a factor proven to have a scientific correlation to test scores, and the problem that was historically the focus of *ESEA*. The summit resulted in

legislation entitled *America 2000: An Education Strategy*, which included the official adoption of the national goals for education that resulted from the Charlottesville Summit, the establishment of national academic standards, and the establishment of school choice (United States Department of Education, 1991). Although the strategy did not pass Congress, it created momentum toward increased federal involvement in education, particularly in regard to mandated standardized testing, and further reified the oppressive aspects of reform discourse.

IV. The Clinton Years: Reform Discourse Becomes Bipartisan and Standards-Based

Given his prominent role at the Charlottesville Summit and his *Nation at Risk*-inspired reforms in Arkansas, it is not surprising that President Clinton's first stab at federal educational reform, in March of 1994, was the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. Its stated purpose was to "provide a national framework for educational reform," and it was clearly a descendent of the failed *America 2000* legislation (United States Congress, 1993).

The law stated that by the year 2000:

- All children in America will start school ready to learn.
- The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
- All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, the arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be

prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our nation's modern economy.

- United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
- Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.
- The nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.
- Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children (United States Congress, 1993).

These goals are strikingly similar to those articulated by President Bush, possibly revealing an attempt on Clinton's part to characterize himself as bipartisan, at least in area of education reform. A CDA of the goals results in some noteworthy conclusions.

In most cases, the goals cite benchmarks that are likely impossible to reach.

Absolutist language such as "all children in America will start school ready to learn," "all

students” will demonstrate competency on standardized tests, “every adult American will be literate,” and “every school...will be free of drugs,” and that all of things would be happen within less than six years, implies that educational reform is a simple, quick, all-or-nothing proposition (Standardization as Magic Helper). The legislation was accompanied by a \$105 million appropriation, made available to schools through a competitive grant process of “school improvement plans.” Since the funds were only available to certain schools and certain students, but the language included goals for all students and all schools, discursive ambivalence and therefore opacity is revealed in the discourse of this legislation.

The statistical impossibility of these goals is revealing as well. Setting goals that are impossible for all schools or all students to reach guarantees failure, in the same way that setting proficiency cut scores on standardized test guarantees that some schools and students will fail. Therefore, the goals create a scapegoat-in-waiting, in that schools that received the grant money and could not reach the statistically impossible goals were then “proof” that investment in education is ineffective, and that public schools are broken beyond repair. In this way and many others, *Goals 2000* heavily influenced *No Child Left Behind*, which I will discuss in an upcoming section.

The goals also emphasize the false notion that schools alone can magically address the inequity caused by the entirety of the American social structure (Subject/Object Hierarchy Switch). How is it possible that by having K-12 schools – which in nearly every state can only serve people younger than 22 years old - apply for federal grants in return for school improvement plans, the entire *adult* population of

America would become literate within six years? This impossibility situates this law as a symbolic, jingoistic public relations document rather than any serious attempt at educational reform. Further, the last goal implies that parents alone are responsible for the academic outcomes of their children, and therefore furthers the notion of culture deficit, which ignores all sources of social inequity and instead simply blames certain parents for not valuing education (Benevolent Frame).

The 90 percent graduation rate is the only goal that does not represent a statistical impossibility. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.-a), the high school dropout rate in 1994 ranged from 5.3% to 11.5%, depending upon the metric used. 5.3% is already within the range of the 90 percent goal, and 11.5% is very close, making the 90 percent goal seem questionable simply because it was possible, unlike all the others. Further, by all metrics, the high school dropout rate in 1994 was markedly lower than that measure in previous censuses, but the existence of a graduation rate goal suggests that schools were not already improving in that area. However, the dropout rate in 1994 for families in poverty was 21%, and for Hispanic students was 30% (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a). Poverty and systemic racism, then, were correlated with dropout rates, a fact which is not addressed anywhere in the legislation.

The Benevolent Frame, which supports belief in a colorblind meritocracy, therefore characterizes the discourse of *Goals 2000*. The Father Figure IDF is present within the threatening tone of the verb “will” within the demands of the goals. The Standardization as Magic Helper IDF makes a strong appearance here, with the assertion

that using benchmark standardized testing (the reliability and validity of which was and still is mythological) would somehow make Americans ready to “complete in a global economy.” Fear of the un-American Other is present in the assertion that the United States would rank “first in the world” in science and mathematics, which were the two academic areas emphasized in the *Nation at Risk* report. Since research showed no correlation between international standardized test scores and global economic competitiveness, this goal appears *only* as an employment of the fear- and competition-based discourse of *A Nation at Risk*. Citing mediocre progress toward the goals, Congress rescinded the funding for *Goals 2000* in 2001, and the law was not reauthorized.

In response to Bill Clinton’s victory in the 1992 presidential election, Republican house members Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey wrote *Contract with America*, a document which listed a series of actions that the Republican party promised to take if they regained a congressional majority, which they had not had since 1955. It extensively quoted Ronald Reagan’s 1985 State of the Union address, and with sections entitled “The Fiscal Responsibility Act,” which would allegedly crack down on waste, fraud, and abuse of government programs, “The Personal Responsibility Act,” which would allegedly decrease teen pregnancy by prohibiting teen mothers from accessing welfare, the “Taking Back our Streets Act,” which would cut money from social programs and use that money to build prisons, and the “National Security Restoration Act,” which would use social program cuts to increase military spending, it represented a clear return to Reagan ideology (United States House of Representatives, 1994).

Contract with America was published in September of 1994, Republicans were successful in gaining control of the house in 1995, and in 1996, the official Republican platform again included a promise to dismantle the DOE, “end federal meddling” in schools, and “promote family choice at all levels of learning” (de Rugy & Gryphon, 2004).

It was within this political landscape that the Clinton-era reauthorization of ESEA took place. The *Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA)* was signed into law on October 20th, 1994, about seven months after *Goals 2000*, about one month after the publication of *Contract with America*, and about three weeks before the midterm elections. It is not unreasonable to assume that the Clinton administration would have sought to employ and expand upon reform discourse within *IASA*, if only to be able to cite it as an example of bipartisan cooperation, since he was the first Democrat at the helm since *A Nation at Risk*. It is also not unreasonable to assume that Clinton would adopt increased “accountability” measures for this reason, which would serve to feed the Republican obsession with blaming public schooling for all social and economic ills. If nothing else, there is no question that it would have been unwise for Clinton to rock the ideological boat three weeks before midterms.

A twelve-page brochure was distributed to explain Clinton’s *ESEA* reauthorization to the public (United States Department of Education, 1994). The brochure accurately reflects the ways in which *IASA* turned *ESEA* into a standards-based, outcome-based funding formula, which is the most important contribution of this law to reform discourse. The first section of the brochure, entitled “High standards for all

students,” stated that all students, regardless of disability or English language proficiency, and including migrant students, would be “expected to achieve the same standards that are expected of all children.”

Standards-based education reform ideology assumes that creating high standards means that children will meet them, it assumes that mastery of academic standards can be accurately measured on standardized tests, and it also (absurdly) assumes that all children experience synchronous cognitive development in all areas of cognition. It does not recognize that differences in race, class, gender, geography, ability, learning style, personality, career aspirations, personal interest, how well children slept the night before, and every other factor for which teachers are expected to *differentiate* in their instruction will have inevitable impacts on standardized test scores. Expecting all children to meet the same academic standards is as impossible as many of the goals articulated in *Goals 2000*. This concept defies all logic.

Consider the ways in which humans conceptualize the capabilities of adults. If we need advice, we call someone who is a “good listener” because we know that naturally, not everyone listens well. We recognize that some people are artistic or musical and some are not. We talk about how we are either left-brained or right-brained, and how that effects what we do well. We recognize that some people are “history buffs,” and others are “math people.” We know that if something breaks, we need to call someone who is “handy,” because not everyone is. When we see a blind person, we do not expect that person to think or function in the same way as sighted people. When we encounter someone who is learning English, we do not expect that

person to comprehend English as well as native speakers. If we need a doctor, we call a doctor. If we need a plumber, we call a plumber. We think about adults in an entirely differentiated manner. However, standards-based reform discourse holds that before the age of eighteen, all people are magically exactly the same. Much like the discourse of *A Nation at Risk*, which asserted that the hope to “attain mature and informed judgement” was an ideal childhood dream, standards-based reform discourse erases all that is naturally *human* from the process of teaching and learning (Standardization as Magic Helper).

The brochure also announced that “the *IASA* calls for strategies to hold school districts and schools accountable for improved student achievement.” The strategies included “the use of state assessments that measure students' progress toward new state standards,” which were rightly characterized as “fundamental changes” in *ESEA*. Each state, in return for federal funding, was required to develop “high academic standards” and the tests used to measure them. States unwilling to take these steps could apply for an *ESEA* “waiver,” which sounded like a flexibility measure but was really an avenue for the federal government to withhold funding from states that did not adopt the new standards and tests. The legislation did not describe what the standards or the tests should look like, and there was no relevant research cited to guide states in this effort. This led to a rush to develop both standards and tests, and a complete lack of quality control.

Much like the “proficiency levels” described in *Hawkins-Stafford*, which forced educators to evaluate students based on judgmental, vague descriptions of what

someone thought students *should* be able to do at a certain grade level, these standards and tests were created by whomever got a seat on whatever committee was charged with creating them, not necessarily by educators. And of course, given what we know about who has a voice and who does not have a voice in legislative decisions, we can very safely assume that the standards set for children during this period were based on what white, middle-class folks deemed important for all children to know¹⁶. The state standards and assessments that were created during this time largely stayed in place, with some revisions through state rule, until states adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2008. Since the CCSS only cover English Language Arts and Mathematics, the standards developed under *IASA* for other content areas still stand today in many states, including New Mexico.

I would like to depart from this historical overview for a moment to discuss my views regarding standards-based learning and assessing. I will use a concrete example. This year, the English teachers at my school decided that they needed to begin addressing media literacy more effectively. Particularly, they wanted to address how advertisements manipulate the way we think about gender identity. As a Professional Learning Community (PLC), they wrote a standard that described this goal, and devised a plan to address it. They created lesson plans to use to introduce gender roles and stereotypes and the ways in which they can be oppressive, and to engage students in

¹⁶ Proving this assumption falls outside of the scope of this study. I can only provide anecdotal evidence based upon my professional experience with the standards in both New Jersey and New Mexico. However, a critical analysis of the standards that were developed in response to *IASA* would be a relevant and instructive study.

exploring how dominant ideas about gender already control the way they think about themselves and others. They created guided practice activities in which they led students through the process of looking at magazine advertisements and finding not only how gender roles were portrayed in the ads, but also thinking about why it would be profitable for a corporation to send that particular message about gender. Then they devised a project wherein students, working either alone or with a partner, found an advertisement, conducted their own analysis, and presented their findings to the class. The teachers agreed to gather the results of the project, aggregate the data, and share it at the next PLC meeting so they could measure the effectiveness of their approach.

Most educators would agree that these teachers engaged in sound pedagogy. They also engaged in standards-based education reform and standards-based assessment. The reform happened because they recognized a learning need among their students and reformed their approach in order to address it. The assessment was standards-based and they used the data to inform and improve their practice. This is how this process is supposed to work. The standard was not created by someone who knew the students, and neither was the assessment. The assessment utilized a wide range of critical thinking and academic skill, and did not include multiple-choice questions. If one of the students completing the project had special needs, teachers were available to accommodate. However, the assessment was still standards-based because it measured how well all students could use the skills and knowledge the teachers intended to teach. The assessment was not given in a timed, sterilized, artificial environment wherein students could not use resources and could not work

collaboratively, which is exactly what they would be expected to do in the “real world.” No outside entity used the assessment results to measure the effectiveness of the instruction or of the school as a whole. There certainly was not the threat of funding for the school being withheld if the students did not perform as well as the teachers expected. This is how real reform happens.

IASA, however, *did* threaten to withhold federal funding from schools that did not show “adequate” growth in standardized test scores from one year to the next. Districts were required to measure increases in standardized test scores and create improvement plans for the schools that fell short of the expected growth. These tests were not created by teachers who needed to measure student progress toward mastering a skill, and who needed to use the results to inform their daily practice or identify which students needed some remediation or reteaching. They did not measure student ability to research, collaborate, ask effective questions, communicate verbally, or consider multiple viewpoints.

The assessments developed in response to *IASA* were standardized, multiple-choice tests, written by people who had never met the students taking them, given in sterilized environments that did not resemble anything that we recognize as a best practice in a learning environment. But still, after all of these years, that is exactly what high-stakes testing looks like. Still, after all these years, we refuse to recognize that standards and assessments created by white, middle-class people will produce passing scores mostly for white, middle-class students. And still, after all of these years, we collectively believe that scores on those tests accurately represent the quality of the

work that teachers and students do, because dominant, politically-motivated ideology in the form of federal legislation told us to. The Standardization as Magic Helper IDF calls for reformers to completely ignore the research-based best practices employed by the teachers at my school, and instead adopt standard-setting and assessment practices that have no foundation in sound pedagogy.

Remember that the push toward state-level testing data began a decade before *IASA*, when T.H. Bell created his Wall Chart which allegedly measured state progress toward effective reform by comparing state test scores. Remember also that there was significant opposition from educators and legislators alike who were aware of the danger of that unscientific, unreliable approach to measuring the effectiveness of reform. Congress published a companion piece to *Hawkins-Stafford* in 1988 *prohibiting the government from doing exactly what Clinton mandated in 1994: evaluating schools based on the results of the tests*. It is not difficult to deduce that comparing the performance of the children in one state on one assessment to the performance of children in another state on an entirely different assessment results in no usable conclusions.

Bill Clinton, however, ignored all of this when he signed *IASA*. He had signed on to *Nation at Risk*-inspired reforms in Arkansas while he was the governor there. He played a key role in the Charlottesville Summit, earning him strong relationships with governors and lawmakers across the aisle. He was also facing significant opposition from a Gingrich-led constituency that was bloodthirsty for a scapegoat to punish in their law-and-order worldview. *IASA* took Reagan-era reforms and made them more

draconian and less research-based. This legislation had nothing to do with what was best for children or for schools. It had nothing to do with sound educational policy or practice. It had everything to do with what was best for Bill Clinton, and it thus opened the door for the legislation which many consider to be the beginning of the end of public schooling: *No Child Left Behind*.

V. The Bush Years: Testing Replaces Teaching in the Push Toward Privatization

When George W. Bush succeeded Bill Clinton and Republicans held a majority in Congress in 2001, it was the conservative Republican Liberty Caucus but not the Republican Party as a whole which again renewed the promise to abolish the DOE. Perhaps there was maneuvering within the party to present President Bush's educational reform efforts as being moderate and bipartisan as compared to the Liberty Caucus's call to abolish the DOE. Rather than pursue the recommendation of the Liberty Caucus directly, President Bush signed the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*, a reauthorization of *ESEA* which many educators interpreted as an effort to entirely dismantle public education by "proving" that it was broken beyond repair.

The executive summary of the 670-page law, a four-page document that serves the same public-relations purpose as the *IASA* brochure, reveals the ideology/discourse that governs *NCLB*. It begins with an italicized epigraph: "These reforms express my deep belief in our public schools and their mission to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America. President George W. Bush, January 2001" (United States Department of Education, 2002). The document thus begins with the Benevolent Frame of colorblindness.

The first full paragraph of the document, which continues to employ IDFs inherent to reform discourse, is as follows:

Three days after taking office in January 2001 as the 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush announced No Child Left Behind, his framework for bipartisan education reform that he described as “the cornerstone of my Administration.” President Bush emphasized his deep belief in our public schools, but an even greater concern that “too many of our neediest children are being left behind,” despite the nearly \$200 billion in Federal spending since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The President called for bipartisan solutions based on accountability, choice, and flexibility in Federal education programs.

Opening the document with the phrase “three days after taking office” is meant to suggest that education is at the very top of Bush’s administrative agenda, as does the phrase “cornerstone of my Administration.” What is truly revealed here, however, with the admission that *NCLB* was devised so quickly and without any careful study, is that the Bush education agenda has little to do with the reality of public schooling. No study was needed, because Bush was dropping into and continuing a monologue that had been taken up by each of his predecessors since Reagan, which was never based on accurate data in the first place. At this point, Americans apparently did not need any data at all to tell them what they thought they already knew.

The next sentence states that President Bush has a “deep belief in our public schools, but an even greater concern” that some students are failing “despite the nearly

\$200 billion in Federal spending” since *ESEA* in 1965. Discursive ambivalence is present here, with the assertion that the President simultaneously believes in public schools and believes that funding public schools is futile. Also, stating that “some of our neediest children are being left behind” without citing any data to support that statement signals that the discourse relies on an ideological “truth” rather than fact. The discourse is therefore deeply opaque.

The similarity to Reagan discourse is profound in this sentence. The technique of negative comparison is used here, with the suggestion that since some students are being “left behind” that *ESEA* as a whole was a failure. There is no mention of the tremendous gains made in equality for disabled students and English language learners since the advent of *ESEA*, or the undeniable fact that more students of color were accessing higher education than any other time in our history. Just as Reagan had complained that Soviets had produced 40,000 more tanks than the US without mentioning NATO’s anti-tank weapons, Bush complains that *ESEA* was leaving children behind without mentioning that, for example, many disabled students did not even have an opportunity to participate in public schooling – or standardized testing – prior to *ESEA*.

Citing the \$200 billion figure and connecting it to the year 1965 is noteworthy as well. Throughout *A Nation at Risk*, the years 1964 and 1965 were used continually to imply that the inclusion that resulted from Civil Rights legislation caused a degradation of America’s overall academic – and therefore economic – standing. Continually throughout Reagan’s public addresses, he cited numbers in the billions to illustrate out-

of-control government waste and fraud. The same discursive feat is accomplished here. When read with transparency rather than opacity, this sentence reads, “We’ve spent \$200 billion on people of color since they demanded it of us in 1965, and they’ve done nothing but waste it.” This is clear manifestation of the Lazy Scapegoat of Color IDF.

In previous sections, I commented on the usefulness of the “failing school” and “school choice” IDFs. A “failing school” is one that serves students other than middle-class white students, and “school choice” is the coded term for re-segregation, giving whites the opportunity to remove their children from diverse environments. The last sentence of that first paragraph states that Bush called for “bipartisan solutions based on accountability, choice, and flexibility in Federal education programs.” He was not looking for solutions to the factors that caused educational inequity, such as poverty and systemic racism. “Accountability,” a manifestation of the Subject/Object Hierarchy Switch IDF, translates to identifying and punishing schools that served working class students and students of color, which is exactly how this legislation functioned. The terms “failing school,” “schools that fail,” and “low-performing schools,” all of which invoke the Lazy Scapegoat of Color IDF, appear twelve times in the first page of the document. This discourse is at odds with President Bush’s alleged “deep belief in our public schools.”

The second paragraph begins with this sentence: “Less than a year later, despite the unprecedented challenges of engineering an economic recovery while leading the Nation in the war on terrorism following the events of September 11, President Bush secured passage of the landmark *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.” The Father Figure

IDF, which appeared in the second sentence of the document that described Bush's "greater concern," dominates the second paragraph. This quick shift from the Benevolent Frame to the Father Figure is also consistent with *A Nation at Risk* and Reagan discourse as a whole. In this sentence, Bush appears quite Reagan-esque, rescuing the country from the folly of a tax-and-spend liberal while drastically increasing military spending to keep us safe from foreign enemies (Father Figure and Fear of Un-American Other IDFs), and remaining acutely aware of the alleged disaster that was public education at the same time.

The "increased accountability" aspect of *No Child Left Behind* is described in the following paragraph:

The NCLB Act will strengthen Title I accountability by requiring States to implement statewide accountability systems covering all public schools and students. These systems must be based on challenging State standards in reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades 3-8, and annual statewide progress objectives ensuring that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years. Assessment results and State progress objectives must be broken out by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to ensure that no group is left behind. School districts and schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals will, over time, be subject to improvement, corrective action, and restructuring measures aimed at getting them back on course to meet State

standards. Schools that meet or exceed AYP objectives or close achievement gaps will be eligible for State Academic Achievement Awards.

States were already required to adopt “challenging State standards in reading and mathematics” under *IASA*, but the mandate to add annual tests in grades 3-8 was new, and it was also unfunded. This meant that states were again thrown into a frenzy of test-making, at the cost of the state-level education budgets. The disaggregation by subgroup also added significant time and administrative cost to the process of assessment, also funded by state-level education budgets. This means that *NCLB* directly removed resources from classrooms and funneled them into federal compliance efforts, which is strongly at odds with the Republican platform of a smaller federal government and decreases in federal regulation.

Again, nowhere within this discussion of accountability is the fact that the demographics by which the data had to be reported represented the *reasons* that achievement gaps exist in standardized test scores. We all already know who is not going to do well on standardized tests that are designed by and for white, middle-class epistemologies. Rather than calling into question the validity of the tests, which again were not subject to any sort of quality control process during their rushed development, schools were mandated to report which groups were not doing well on them. I would bet that nearly every American, if asked which schools were “failing” and which students were “failing,” would be able to identify them correctly, but very few would understand that those identifications arise out of an ideology which is designed to alienate students of color and working class students and to reproduce the privilege of

middle-class whites. The data produced by *NCLB* mandates simply served to reify the dominant ideology/discourse, and to solidify the Lazy Scapegoat of Color IDF. It had nothing at all to do with creating equity and expanding opportunity, which were the original purposes of *ESEA*.

States were directed to set their own “proficiency goals,” and data from one year to next had to show that individual schools were making AYP toward those goals. Schools that did not make AYP were then subject to very serious “restructuring” consequences, including a corporate takeover of the school. The problem is that it became statistically impossible to make AYP, even in schools that served privileged students. If 99% of a school’s students met the state’s proficiency benchmarks on the assessments, the school would be labeled as a failing school if that percentage did not increase to 100% the following year. The law expected infinite, and therefore unreachable, growth toward proficiency. Another problem with proficiency goals is that they did nothing to measure growth under the cut score. If a student’s or group’s or school’s test scores increased dramatically from year to the next, but still did not reach the proficiency goal, the student or group or school was still labeled as failing.

I can attest to how the law affected my school, a publicly-funded, drop-out recovery charter high school. In the first two years of *NCLB*, we were labeled as a failing school, as we knew we would be. 100% of our students historically performed significantly below grade level, lived in poverty, and had already been excluded from traditional school environments. Since the first year of proficiency ratings under *NCLB* were calculated using test scores from the previous year, our students’ previous test

scores traveled with them to our school, and were used to calculate the failing status of our school. At that point we were legally required to let our students know that our school was failing, and offer to transport them, at our cost, to a school of their choice. Particularly ironic about this directive was the fact that our students were already attending a school of their choice, and were experiencing academic success and significant skill gains for the first time in their lives. Despite their academic, social, and emotional growth, and the many barriers they had to overcome in order to re-engage in school, and the confidence they were just beginning to feel in their own potential, and the safety they were just beginning to feel in an academic environment, they were labeled as failures, and that label was *published in the local newspaper*.

In the third year of our failure, as we continued to foster miraculous transformations among the drop-out population in our community, win local awards, and inspire literal tears of inspiration among visitors who observed us during accreditation audits, we were directed to hire a private corporation to provide after-school “tutoring” to our students. This company provided tutors who were far less effective than our teachers, were predominantly white, and were completely unfamiliar with the mission and pedagogy of our school. Our students did not choose to attend those tutoring sessions, but according to law, we needed to pay a full 20% of our Title 1 allotment to the private tutoring company annually, whether students used the services or not.

In our fourth year, we were notified that we needed to employ “turnaround principles” as “corrective action,” which involved either replacing the entire staff of our

school, or throwing out our entire curriculum and buying reading and math remediation computer programs to replace it. It was unclear, particularly during a severe teacher shortage, with whom we were supposed to replace our staff of incredibly high-qualified and committed teachers whom we had spent years recruiting and training, or with what we should replace our research-based, individualized, highly-effective curriculum, but that was the directive. When we did not do either of those things, there were no repercussions, and I assume this is because it was absolutely impossible for any state or federal agency to enforce this extreme “corrective action” on many public schools in the country simultaneously. Our miserable failure, however, continued to be reported annually in the local paper and on the website of the state public education department.

Since our school was designed to provide intensive remediation in basic skills, we did not change our methodology, which was already resulting in impressive academic gains among our students, even though they were far from reaching the “proficiency” mark of the state. In other schools, however, students were pulled from courses in art, music, vocational education, and other areas not required for graduation, and placed into additional reading and math classes. Since students were denied access to the classes in which they succeeded, and further drilled in areas in which they struggled, we witnessed a marked decrease in self-concept among our incoming students who had recently dropped out of school.

In the fifth year of not making AYP, our school was officially in the last stage of remediation that involved a “State takeover” and “placement under private management.” By this time, *NCLB* had been so discredited that there was not even any

discussion of this possibility in our conversation with our state department of public education. However, the true purpose behind NCLB becomes clear here. Since reaching AYP for five years in a row was a statistical improbability, and the consequence in the fifth year was a takeover by a corporation, it is completely obvious that the overall purpose of NCLB was to dismantle public education and turn it over to the free market, just as the Republican Liberty Caucus had demanded in 2001. *NCLB* was eventually regarded as an unmitigated legislative failure by both major parties, placing demands upon schools that were statistically impossible to meet and corrective measures that were impossible to implement.

In the meantime, however, the legislation was successful in alienating and excluding working class students and students of color from public schooling. The laser-focus on math and reading remediation at the expense of all other types of learning completely invalidated the cultural capital of many working class students who were removed from vocational courses. The “failing” label applied to schools in communities of color demoralized the students and teachers there. Most importantly, the frenzy of standardized test-based reform had caused most states, including New Mexico, to impose an “exit exam,” a standardized test that students had to pass in order to graduate from high school. White, middle-class students in New Mexico usually passed this test in the 10th grade and never had to think about it again. Students who were not able to pass the test had to retake it twice a year, and if they were still unable to pass it, they were awarded a Certificate of Completion instead of a diploma upon completing

high school. The Certificate of Completion was not valid for entry into college and not valid for employment.

So, many students of color and working class students who were able to overcome all barriers to successful completion of their course requirements were denied a diploma based upon the results of a single test that was designed to exclude them, relegating them to low socioeconomic status likely for the rest of their lives, and how hard they worked in school did nothing to mitigate that reality. There is no question that federal educational reform legislation served to reproduce the privilege of the dominant group which already had the cultural capital that enabled them to pass the standardized tests before the tests were even created, and perpetuate the creation of an exploitable working class of those students for whom no amount of hard work would provide a fair chance.

VI. Obama and Duncan: We Lose All Hope of Education for Emancipation

Although *ESEA* was eligible for reauthorization during Bush's second term, legislation never made it to the floor, presumably because of the administration's preoccupation with the wars it had begun. Public schools continued to be sorted and ranked, and continued to spend astronomical amounts of money on standardized test administration and compliance and reporting demands, but the "corrective action" threats were never carried out. Nonetheless, teachers and students continued to be demoralized and exhausted by truly outrageous standardized test schedules, which replaced most instructional time with test-related activities. Teachers left the profession or retired in greater-than-usual numbers. We were hopeful about the

election of Barack Obama in 2008, thinking that nothing could be worse than *NCLB*. We were wrong.

The first important development under the Obama administration was his appointment of Arne Duncan, former superintendent of Chicago's public schools, as Secretary of Education. Duncan is a strong supporter of charter schools, and had opened more than seventy charter schools in Chicago during his reign (Duncan, 2009). Despite my strong support for publicly-funded charter schools which serve populations that cannot be served in traditional environments, I am critical of the charter school movement in general. Unlike New Mexico, many states' charter school laws do not prohibit public dollars from funding private, for-profit charter schools. Thus, the charter school movement in general is indicative of privatization of public education. Like all cases where public services are managed by the free market, such as the case of private prisons, profit, and not quality service, is the objective of the system as a whole. This profit-seeking objective invariably leads to abuse of funds.

In many states, a non-educator with no qualifications can use public education funds to open a "school" in a substandard facility, hire non-certified "teachers," escape the governance of equity measures such as special education and non-discrimination laws, deliver a curriculum which may or may not be related to fact, and issue certifications and diplomas that may or may not be accepted by employers and post-secondary education institutions. They often prey on low-income families looking for an escape from dysfunctional and underfunded public schools, accept funding to serve the students, provide minimal services, and skim as much profit as possible. Because the

charter school movement is usually championed by conservatives who decry federal regulation, implementation of charter schools is left up to individual states, and most states do a poor job ensuring that charter schools meet even the most basic standards of quality. On the other hand, charter schools also sometimes provide a very high-quality, college-prep education and access to cutting-edge technology, essentially making an elite, private school experience available to consumers of public education. When this does happen, however, rigorous entrance requirements ensure that the school is not equally available to everyone, resulting in legalized school segregation. Charter schools are part of the “school choice” argument, and *NCLB* mandated that failing schools eventually be transformed into privately-run charter schools. For these reasons, charter schools are usually very strongly opposed by proponents of public education. Obama’s appointment of charter-advocate Arne Duncan was therefore a surprise to many educators, and it foreshadowed the administration’s support of harmful education policy.

In February of 2009, during Obama’s second month in office, he signed the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act*, which included \$4.35 billion in competitive grant money available to public schools (United States Congress, 2009). The grant, called *Race to the Top*¹⁷, awarded money to schools which implemented “Innovation and Improvement” efforts including evaluating teachers based upon the standardized

¹⁷ The name *Race to the Top* employs Reagan’s emphasis on global economic competition, and his transfer of the idea of competition into the arena of education.

test scores of their students, adopting “common standards,” and expanding availability of charter schools. Desperate for public school funding, states began competing for the grant and thus voluntarily engaging in dramatic public school reforms that enacted standards-based, test-based reform discourse to the point of absurdity. The term *Race to the Top* brings to mind crabs crawling over each other to reach the top of a barrel, which is not an inappropriate analogy to how the grant functioned in reality. And of course, as within all reform discourse that likens education and educational reform to a competition, we are left with the reality of who loses after we have figured out who has won.

In June of 2009, about a month before the conditions of the *Race to the Top* grant applications were announced, the National Governors Association issued a press release announcing their intention to develop academic standards for English Language Arts and Mathematics, an effort they dubbed the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative. The press release opens as follows:

In the twenty-six years since the release of *A Nation at Risk*, states have made great strides in increasing the academic rigor of education standards. Yet, America's children still remain behind other nations in terms of academic achievement and preparedness to succeed.

Recall that in Chapter 5 I cited a 2014 study which concluded that in US schools where the child poverty rates are less than 10%, our average scores on international achievement tests are first in the world, and students who attend schools with fewer than 25% of students living in poverty still have average test scores that are among the

highest in the world (Berliner, Glenn, & Associates, 2014). Despite the fact that the United States is still the only country in the world to have rejected the metric system, which is used as the basis of the TIMSS mathematics test, the US average scores on the 2007 TIMSS mathematics test were still among the highest in the world, even without controlling for poverty rates (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-b).

The 2007 results also show differences in hundreds of points between the United States and the lowest-scoring countries on both the fourth- and eighth-grade math score rankings, and less than one hundred points between the United States and the top scorer on each of those lists. I am not a statistician, yet it is fairly easy for me to see that interpreting those test results as being indicative of national failure is simply inaccurate, not to mention irresponsible. Yet The National Center for Children in Poverty currently estimates that 21% of American children live in poverty, which is exactly the same percentage that Corcoran and Chaudry (1997) calculated for 1983, and those very real statistics are mentioned nowhere in the CCSS press release, just as the crisis of poverty was ignored in the *Nation at Risk* report.

I do not have to work very hard to characterize CCSS as simply an extension of *Nation at Risk* discourse. The correlation proves itself in the first sentence of the document. That sentence restates the flawed and unscientific interpretation of international standardized test scores, which is a manifestation of the Standardization as Magic Helper IDF. It focuses on disparities between the United States and other nations (Fear of the un-American Other IDF) while ignoring disparities of class and race within the US, inventing homogeneity (Benevolent Frame IDF). It also invokes the

Reagan-esque Father Figure IDF with its scolding tone, and of course by mentioning the fear-inducing Reagan-era report by name.

Even if we assume that American public education is failing, as the opening sentence suggests, and that therefore all of the reforms that have taken place in those “twenty-six years since *A Nation at Risk*” have failed, then how is it logical to suggest that continuing on the same course of reform is going to improve the situation? This level of discursive ambivalence continues throughout the document. For example, even though it announces a set of academic standards developed at the federal level and meant for nationwide adoption, the words “state” and “states” appear 40 times in a one-page document, as the discourse insists that these federal standards are a “state-led process.” The term “state-led process” is opaque in itself. “States” were not leading the process. People were leading the process. The lack of a clear subject throughout the entirety of the document is purposely misleading, contributes to discursive opacity, and serves to make federal educational regulation under a Democratic administration more palatable to “states’ rights” conservatives.

The second paragraph of the CCSS press release continues to display baffling contradictions, describing the standards as “internationally benchmarked” and “aligned with college and work expectations.” For the standards to be “internationally benchmarked,” they would have had to be based on the standards of other, higher-performing educational systems in other nations. However, according to Sandy Stotsky, a member of the Common Core Validation Committee, international benchmarking was not at all part of their validation process (Stergios, 2013). Claiming that the standards

are aligned with “college and work expectations” suggests that preparing for college is the same as preparing for any workplace, which simply is not the case, and supplanting the skills necessary for blue-collar vocations with the abstract knowledge necessary for a liberal arts education, which is exactly what the standards do, further alienates working class students from the educational process and further rewards the cultural capital of middle-class whites. I will discuss this, as well as the standards themselves, in Chapter 7.

The third paragraph of the release goes on to describe the standards as key to “maintaining America’s competitive edge,” even though the first paragraph claims that America does not have a competitive edge. It then claims that the standards “have the potential to bring about a real and meaningful transformation of our education system,” employing the Standardization as Magic Helper IDF rather than heeding any relevant educational research regarding what actually *does* work to transform education. The discourse of the CCSS Initiative is recycled educational reform propaganda and nothing more. It also claims that states can “voluntarily” adopt the standards, but with much-needed federal grant money contingent upon their adoption, it was hardly a voluntary process.

After states adopted the standards, they were forced to choose between two testing “consortia” which were working to build assessments to measure the standards, both run by for-profit testing companies. The New Mexico Legislature recently moved six million dollars from above the line to below the line annual education spending, giving districts no say in how it is spent, and earmarked it for payment to the Pearson-

owned PARCC testing consortium. Hanna Skandera, New Mexico's Secretary of Education, is the chair of the PARCC governing board. The lines between public education and corporate interest have become blurred beyond recognition as a result of Obama-era reforms.

The effect of the teacher evaluation system mandated by the *Race to the Top* grant is just as disastrous – if not more so – than the CCSS. It mandated that states evaluate teachers according to a “Value Added Model”, or VAM, which allegedly calculates growth in standardized test scores from one year the next, mitigates for outside factors such as poverty, and determines how much value a teacher has added to each students’ academic progress, and therefore how effective a teacher is overall. This became particularly interesting when states began using the CCSS assessments, and needed to calculate growth models between two entirely different tests. The outcry from educators was immediate and overwhelming, and was echoed in a 2014 white paper published by the American Statistical Association which stated that “teachers account for about 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores, and...ranking teachers by their VAM scores can have unintended consequences that reduce quality” (American Statistical Association, 2014). However, since reform discourse invites us to exile the views of educators and educational researchers by using the Standardization as Magic Helper IDF, VAM evaluation models have continued, unhindered by reality.

I could go into great detail about the spectacular trainwreck of VAM implementation in New Mexico that led teachers to burn their evaluation reports on the steps of the state capitol before quitting the profession, but for sake of brevity, I will try

to illustrate it using only one anecdote. When I attended a state meeting regarding the new teacher evaluation system, where (former) PED Chief Statistician Pete Goldschmidt was in attendance, I asked, “When will you release the formula that you are using to evaluate our teachers?” The state director of teacher evaluation answered, “I don’t think it’s even written down anywhere. It’s in Pete’s head.” That “formula” is still in use today, it is still unavailable to the people whose livelihoods depend upon it, and its use has correlated with a record teacher shortage in New Mexico that is reflected in statistics nationwide.

A recent Learning Policy Institute study reports that teacher shortages across the United States have reached “crisis” levels (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Teachers are retiring at record rates, enrollment in teacher preparation programs has declined by 35% since 2009, and America’s classrooms lacked about 60,000 teachers in 2015. This leads to larger class sizes and much higher pupil-teacher ratios, as well as many more uncertified people working as teachers. The report also states that the number of uncertified, unqualified people working in classrooms is four times higher in “high-minority” schools than in “low-minority” schools. It is obvious that in a climate where teacher evaluations and in many cases teacher salary are dependent upon student test scores, the dwindling number of certified teachers will migrate to the schools where test scores are higher, and away from schools where students are in the greatest need of quality teachers. Therefore, the primary effect of the Obama-era teacher evaluation system has been to *further* deprive working class students and students of color of educational opportunity by depriving them of certified teachers.

In 2011, President Obama began granting states waivers from the requirements of *NCLB* based on state adoption of the *Race to the Top* “Innovation and Improvement” measures, which in effect made federal education funding entirely dependent upon adopting Common Core State Standards, adopting VAM teacher evaluation, and expanding charter school availability. When he finally was able to reauthorize *ESEA* in 2015, it came in the form of *The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, which did not change any of the *NCLB* standardized testing requirements and thus further reified all aspects of reform discourse (United States Congress, 2015). In fact, the bill was sponsored by Lamar Alexander, of the Reagan-era *Alexander-James Report* and the Bush, Sr.-era Charlottesville summit, and the press release announcing the *ESSA* calls *NCLB* “a significant step forward for our nation’s children” (United States Department of Education, 2015). Essentially, the only aspects of *NCLB* that were remedied by *ESSA* were the “corrective action” measures, which were impossible to implement anyway.

ESSA begins with an epigraph from President Obama, which states that “every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will,” an ode to colorblind meritocracy that is nearly identical to every epigraph on every federal document we have examined since *A Nation at Risk* (United States Congress, 2015). It is truly as if all federal reform documents have a single author, and under the lens of CDA, they do. They are authored by the dominant ideology/discourse of educational reform.

VII. Summary

In this chapter, I first provided a brief overview of the spirit of educational reform law prior to the Reagan era, and characterized the discourse of those laws to be one focused on equity and compassion. Then, I analyzed documents related to every major federal educational reform effort after *A Nation at Risk* created modern reform discourse, and traced a dramatic shift in the way that discourse – and therefore the American collective consciousness – treats America’s public schools. Although reform discourse arose out of a conservative revolution, it became bipartisan as it was eagerly adopted by every president since Ronald Reagan. Reform discourse as a whole is racially coded, manipulative, sadistic, absolutist, and guided by nothing that is actually true about teaching and learning. Its simplistic nature and its usefulness in creating a scapegoat for economic struggles make it an extremely valuable political tool, and therefore a highly opaque and oppressive ideological phenomenon.

In the concluding chapter, I will theorize further implications for this study, including arguing that reform discourse is the educational component of the legislation which created our current crisis of mass incarceration of poor people of color. I will also answer my final research question regarding the formation of a counter-discourse of that would serve to emancipate and empower, rather than exclude and alienate, students of color and working class students.

Chapter 7: The War on Education

Although this study has focused on Republican political discourse via the Reagan administration, it is not my intention to argue that the Democratic approach to educational reform was any better, or even any different, than that of Republicans in the decades following *A Nation at Risk*. Indeed, as I have argued, Presidents Clinton and Obama seem to have eagerly adopted reform discourse as created by *A Nation at Risk*, and their *ESEA* reauthorizations are just as harmful to public education as those of their Republican counterparts, if not more so. Interpreting reform discourse to be partisan is ill-advised, as education is the only major issue on which the two major parties seem to enjoy some common ground. The discourse created by *A Nation at Risk* endures partly because it makes it possible for politicians to achieve several convenient discursive feats.

Reform discourse allows politicians to use the “our public schools are failing” myth to distract voters from complex and opaque institutional inequities which lead to enduring socioeconomic inequity. It allows them to pretend that America’s competitiveness in the global economy is reliant upon public schooling, rather than the incredibly complex factors which affect global macroeconomics. It therefore allows them to substitute misguided efforts at educational reform for efforts to address the real roots of socioeconomic and global economic disparities. And, since actual educational reform is in itself an extremely complex undertaking, it allows them to substitute increased standardization for real educational reform, while investing no

resources in further studying the claims made by *A Nation at Risk*. Essentially, it allowed them to never *really* think about education at all, yet still use it as a scapegoat for nearly every factor affecting the everyday quality of life of American people.

It seems to me that once established, the reform discourse of *A Nation at Risk* was much too useful for any politician, Republican or Democrat, to pass up. Clearly, however, it is not only political expediency which explains the endurance of reform discourse. It is also the fact that reform discourse is an important tool in protecting the privilege of dominant groups. It reproduces whiteness ideology in ways that have become so normalized in the decades since 1983 that they are largely invisible. Whether or not those who adopt reform discourse are consciously working to reproduce dominant power paradigms is not relevant to this argument, and in fact, as I reviewed in Chapter 2, race scholars contend that most signatories to the racial contract are unconscious signatories. That does not make reform discourse less harmful. Indeed, it makes it even more dangerous because it creates conditions wherein dominant groups can oppress the poor and people of color while professing to help them.

I. Educational Policy as White Supremacy

In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Michelle Alexander argues that the War on Drugs, which Ronald President Reagan declared in 1982, is a carefully planned and successful effort to re-create, following the gains made during the Civil Rights era, a permanent undercaste of black and brown people. She reports that in the past thirty years, since the advent of the War

of Drugs, the United States penal population increased from 300,000 to over two million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of that increase. The US now has, by far, the highest rate of incarceration in the world, even surpassing the repressive regimes of Russia, China, and Iran. The United States also enjoys the designation of incarcerating a higher percentage of its minority population than any other country in the world, and now imprisons more of its black citizens than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. It is estimated that in Washington, DC, three out of four young black men will serve time in prison, and in the poorest neighborhoods, nearly all young black men will be incarcerated (Alexander, 2010).

Predictably, the demographics of those arrested on drug charges since the advent of the War on Drugs do not correlate at all with the demographics of those actually committing drug crimes. Alexander reports that even though white men are statistically more likely than black men to engage in drug crime, black men are incarcerated at a rate twenty to fifty times higher than whites, depending on the state. Once convicted of a drug crime, these young black men become a new type of citizen, one against which openly discriminatory practices are suddenly legal. They lose their right to vote. They lose their right to apply for public housing assistance. They become unemployable, as the title of “felon” becomes inextricable from their identities. They have, Alexander argues, scarcely more rights than a black man living in Alabama did at the height of Jim Crow. Alexander thus characterizes the War on Drugs as a racialized system of control that is the current incarnation of American slavery.

In Chapter 4, I traced a brief history of Ronald Reagan's anti-black agenda: he campaigned for segregationist Barry Goldwater, he adopted the racist Southern Strategy discourse, he announced his candidacy at the site of the murders of civil rights workers with a the "states' rights" speech, he created of the welfare queen IDF to justify enormous budget cuts that disproportionately affected people of color, and he did nothing to aid in the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa during his two terms as president. His War on Drugs, particularly as it is characterized by Michelle Alexander, is yet another manifestation of his racist agenda, as is his approach to educational reform.

Although the War on Drugs is generally considered to be a response to the crisis of crack cocaine use in black communities, the truth is that crack cocaine did not appear until 1985, while the drug war was declared in 1982, when drug use was actually in decline. When crack did appear, the Reagan administration hired staff to publicize images of black "crack whores" and "crack babies," which helped to escalate publicity and therefore funding for the War on Drugs. Just as Reagan's ideological machine created a war on drugs when there was no drug crisis, it also created a war on public education when there was no public schooling crisis. The later appearance of crack cocaine lends legitimacy to the drug war, but there was no such lucky coincidence in public schools, so he used *A Nation at Risk* to manufacture the crisis and to justify his war on schools, students of color, and working class students.

My argument throughout this study has been that reform discourse purposefully and systematically excludes people of color and working class people from opportunity through its emphasis on standardization. I do not think it is unreasonable to argue that

reform discourse justifies educational policy which is the public schooling counterpart of a large-scale legislative effort to re-enslave people of color. In the same way that the War on Drugs purported to help people of color while incarcerating them, reform discourse purports to help people of color by “closing achievement gaps,” “raising standards,” and leaving no children behind while it is actually pushing them further toward the margins of opportunity. Schools and educational opportunity were the sole property of whites at the founding of our country. After slavery ended, the Reconstruction era gave rise to public schools in the South that offered blacks and poor whites their first chance at learning to read and write. This led to a white backlash – or whitelash – in the form of Southern Redemption and school segregation. The Civil Rights Era gained back some lost freedoms. Since then, integration of schools has been all but undone through decades of educational policy which reassert schooling as the property of whites.

Standardized testing, a direct descendant of the American Eugenics movement, provides justification for denying students of color and working class students high school diplomas and access to higher education. Academic standards, as I will discuss in more detail the next section, reassert white supremacist ideology. Teacher evaluation systems based on standardized test scores drive teachers out of high-minority districts and leave students of color and working class students with uncertified and unqualified teachers. The identification of “failing schools,” asserted currently through school grading legislation, stigmatizes schools in communities of color and decreases property values, directly affecting the wealth of families of color. The increasing presence of

police in schools, a practice that is encouraged by federal grants, has the undeniable effect of criminalizing students of color and feeding the school-to-prison pipeline (Harvard Law Review, 2015; Na & Gottfredson, 2011). All of this is accomplished through educational policy that is governed by reform discourse, which explicitly works to reproduce dominant power paradigms and reclaim educational opportunity as the property of whites. In the same way that Reagan's trickle-down economics contributed to an enormous and racialized wealth gap, *A Nation at Risk* contributed to a practice of trickle-down opportunity, where education for emancipation is only available to those at the top.

My third and final research question concerns the implications for this study for constructing a counter-discourse/ideology of educational reform that would serve to emancipate and empower, rather than exclude and alienate, students of color and working class students. As I have argued, federal educational reform policy has become a tool of white supremacy, and has created an ideology in which schooling is seen as an equalizing force which will solve social inequity, rather than an aspect of the inequity itself. Therefore, true educational reform will not happen at the federal or state level. It must take the form of consciousness-raising on the part of students, teachers, administrators, and policy-makers who recognize the oppressive aspects of schooling and work explicitly to deconstruct them. Becoming well-versed in the IDFs of educational reform that I have revealed in this study allows people to recognize institutionalized oppression as it manifests in schooling. In the upcoming section, I will offer ideas for teachers and policy-makers to use this knowledge in resistance.

II. How to Resist

Classroom-Level Resistance: Setting New Standards

Arriving at a counterdiscourse/ideology of educational reform that would serve to emancipate and empower, rather than exclude and alienate, students of color and working class students involves first uncovering the opaque and oppressive aspect of reform discourse, and then creating a discourse that works in open opposition to them. A CDA of the Common Core State Standards, which now govern English Language Arts and Mathematics instruction in most states, readily reveals those oppressive aspects. A powerful way to work against them would be for critical educators to develop their own sets of instructional standards that work to deconstruct, rather than reify, white supremacist ideology. In this section, we will take a look at the text of the CCSS for English Language Arts, and take some steps toward rewriting them using a critical lens.

An analysis of the text of the standards reveals that, as Norman Fairclough argues, what is absent in the discourse is just as important as what is present. The Language section of the standards is divided into three major sections, the first of which is “Conventions of Standard English.” The first College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard reads: “Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English when writing or speaking.” As I argued earlier, it is difficult to argue with the importance of a strong command of Standard English, since fluency in the dominant dialect of the dominant language of a society is necessary for social and economic mobility. The oppressive aspect of this standard becomes clear when we consider what is absent from the its governing discourse.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the “opaque ideology” behind an emphasis on Standard English fluency is the assumption that Standard English is the *only* valid form of communication. This ideology others and devalues other dialects of English, such as Black Vernacular English, as if they are somehow invalid or incorrect. In reality, any dialect and any language is a valid form of communication, regardless of the degree to which it differs from the dominant dialect of the dominant language. When teachers admonish a student for her use of non-Standard English, they are attacking an integral part of that student’s identity, family, and culture, and suggesting that the student’s language – *and in essence the student herself* – is inappropriate for the classroom. The exclusion of non-standard dialects also creates the social effect of precluding many students of color from using their authentic voice in academic writing and speaking, and preventing true connection with the acts of writing and speaking in an academic environment. Thus the discursive action of this emphasis on mastery of Standard English leads to the social action of once again rewarding the cultural capital of white middle-class and elite students, and potentially punishing and alienating other students for not being fluent in a language other than the one used in their homes and families. Standard English is one way to communicate, and arguably the most effective way to communicate in most college and career settings, but it is certainly not the only “correct” way.

The essential question to ask, then, is how can an educational standard like this be rephrased to minimize the presence of oppressive ideology? Or, how can we work to create a discursive shift in the text of educational standards? Interestingly, there seems

to be a potential forum for this shift built into the existing structure of the Common Core Standards. The second major category of the Language standards, after “Conventions of Standard English,” is “Knowledge of Language,” and it contains only one Anchor Standard. It reads: “apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.” Within this standard is an implicit acknowledgement that language functions differently in different contexts, and although the academic and professional contexts may call for Standard English, there are other contexts that may not. We could teach students that primary among the “effective choices” they make when using language is choosing the appropriate dialect for each setting, and being fluent in each dialect they use.

However, that is not how this anchor standard functions. The accompanying Grades 9-10 Common Core Standard suggests reaching the goal of understanding how language functions in different contexts by following style manuals such as the MLA handbook, and the Grades 11-12 standard directs students to “vary syntax for effect, consulting references (e.g. Tufte’s *Artful Sentences*) for guidance as needed.” Students “effective choices for meaning and style” seem to be limited to the rule books for Standard English. There is not even a recognition within the text of the standards that other ways of speaking and writing even exist, despite the wide range of American literature that is written in non-standard English dialects, openly challenging the dominance of Standard English.

What would happen if the first Common Core Anchor Standard for Language read, “Demonstrate command of various languages and/or dialects in their appropriate settings, including command of Standard English in an academic setting?” What if the third one read, “Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, including how non-standard dialects serve an important function in challenging dominant power paradigms?” That shift in text would cause a shift in discourse, which could affect the way we think about and use language in our schools and in society-at-large. It would play a role in disrupting the discourse of social reproduction, rather than in perpetuating it. It seems that the “Common Core Standards: Language” should be called “Common Core Standards: Standard English,” as they do not explore language in any depth at all. A true study of language would include critical discourse analysis, would prompt students to become aware of how they are shaped by the ideology hidden in discourse, and would help to create a counter-discourse that allows students and teachers to truly transform.

Another problematic aspect of the way these standards treat the overall idea of language is that in their emphasis on Standard English, they implicitly support the oppressive “English-only” ideology that minimizes the importance of learning languages other than English. International students often learn many languages, and most students in countries who speak languages other than English learn English as early as the primary grades. Ironically, this multilingualism is a huge asset to students preparing for work in a global economy, and one that American students sorely lack. The English-only ideology also serves to silence and shame immigrant students of color who are

learning English, and prevents them from being authentically “benchmarked” in an academic environment unless they very quickly learn English, regardless of their academic proficiency in their home languages. Again, the standards prove to be a measure not of academic competency, but of cultural capital.

The Common Core Standards for Reading Literature are divided into four main categories: Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, and Range of Reading/Level of Text. The first three deal primarily with literary analysis, while the fourth includes a single standard about reading a range of literature independently and proficiently. It is interesting to note that, throughout the standards for grades 9-10 and grades 11-12 (a total of twenty-seven standards), there are only four standards that mention specific works of literature or specific authors, and three of those four mention Shakespeare. The other one mentions W. H. Auden, a white American poet. There is one standard about analyzing “cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature,” and one that directs analysis of “eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature.” In fact, throughout the entire set of Reading Literature standards, the only standard that even indirectly refers to reading works of literature by authors of color is the one about “world literature.” So, even with the decades-long push toward creating a “multicultural” approach to literature, the Common Core Standards still do not overtly recognize the importance of including non-white voices in the literary canon.

I can imagine that the argument might be that to single out authors of color within the standards would be to suggest that they are not already part of the overall canon implied by the standards, which would be a violation of colorblind ideology. This logic implies that works of literature by authors of color already have equal status to those of white authors in the academic canon, and that they are already regularly taught alongside works by white authors, as suggested by the discourse of multicultural education. If this is so, then the fact that Shakespeare is mentioned three times within the standards might be defended by the idea that he is considered to be the “father” of English language literature and thus deserves to be presented as the foundation of the Common Core approach to literary analysis.

One issue with this traditional discourse of the teaching of literature as it appears in these standards is that the work of Shakespeare is extremely racially problematic, and seldom taught that way. The character of Othello, for example, one of five black characters that appear in Shakespearean drama, is driven mad by sexual jealousy and murders his white wife. A thoughtful reading of this play could teach us much about whiteness ideology in Shakespearean times, and can easily be used in a critical approach to teaching literature. However, if Shakespeare was primarily regarded within dominant discourse as being racially problematic, I do not think he would have appeared there at all. Indeed, these standards, like all dominant approaches to teaching literature, regard white authors as being raceless, and non-white authors as being raced. Shakespeare, therefore, is racially neutral ground within this discourse; it is

whiteness ideology that conditions us to regard whites as raceless, and whiteness ideology that rules these Common Core Standards for Reading Literature.

Colorblind ideology also appears upon analyzing the appendix to Standard 10, the Range of Reading standard. The suggested reading list accompanying the standards is intended to illustrate appropriate “complexity, quality, and range” for each grade level. According to the introduction to the list, the works “offer profound insight into the human condition and serve as models for students’ own thinking and writing.” The list also includes “Informational Texts,” which are nonfiction texts covered in the Reading Informational Texts standards, which we have not yet discussed. The introduction notes that “these texts should be chosen from among seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare.”

Of the twenty works of literature suggested, five are by authors of color: three of those are African American (Mildred Taylor, Zora Neale Hurston, and Lorraine Hansbury), one is Asian American (Laurence Yep), and one, Jhumpa Lahiri, is Indian American. The others are the predictable “celebrated” American authors: Alcott, Twain, Frost, Poe, Steinbeck, Bradbury, Keats, Bronte, Dickinson, Fitzgerald, etc., and one is Shakespeare. Of the eighteen information works suggested, six are by authors of color: four of those are African American (Frederick Douglass, Ann Petry, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Richard Wright), one is Jewish-American (Elie Wiesel), and one is Rudolfo Anaya, who is considered to be the father of Chicano literature. The others are mostly American presidents and politicians. All in all, eighty percent of the literary works and

sixty-seven percent of the informational works listed are by white writers. Some may consider this to be representative of a multicultural canon.

The problem is that having a multicultural canon is not enough. When the works of authors of color are presented as the multicultural additions to the traditional canon, their voices are tokenized and marginalized, seen as providing the “other” perspective, the view that is other-than-white, or other-than-normal. A transformative approach to teaching literature would concentrate heavily on authors of color, flipping the percentages above, so that white authors would comprise twenty rather than eighty percent of the canon. The traditional, white canon would be analyzed as representations of the white perspective, and used as tools in deconstructing white discourse, in the same way that works of authors of color are now used to represent the raced perspective. The works of authors of color could be read as representations of voices of resistance against the whiteness ideology presented in the white canon.

Returning to the text of the standards, we must ask again, how could they be rephrased to create a discursive shift in educational discourse? Let us consider the standard that reads, “Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.” What would happen if the second part of that standard read, “...including how the works of a white and a non-white author present contrary racial perspectives?” Or better yet, “...including how the work of an author of color presents a voice of resistance to the whiteness ideology presented in a work of a white author?” Let us also consider the standard that reads,

“Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.” A critical educator could revise that standard to read, “Analyze American literature as a reflection of American national identity, and use works of literature from outside the United States to present a viewpoint that challenges potentially oppressive American values.” Regarding informational texts, what if there were a standard that read, “Analyze a speech given by a non-white speaker, and consider how the content was shifted from its original intent to be more acceptable to a white audience?” One of the Informational Text standards reads:

Delineate and evaluate the meaning of seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and legal reasoning (e.g. in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g. *The Federalist*, presidential addresses).

What if that standard were to read, “...including how U. S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents were used to protect white privilege and oppress non-white Americans?”

If this seems extreme, it is only because we are so conditioned to think about educational discourse in the context of whiteness ideology that anything outside of it – in other words, anything that places race and race relations at the center of the discourse rather than pretending they do not exist – sounds radical. Again, the discursive action throughout these standards is one of social reproduction: protect the

primacy of white language and literature, measure students according to their mastery of white cultural capital, and alienate the languages and literatures that challenge white discourse. Reform discourse leads to the social action of preserving the status quo, and thus a counter-discourse is bound to seem completely outside of the realm of our experience, as those hypothetical standards I suggest above might seem.

I think that this study points to the importance of viewing educational standards through a critical lens, and suggests the possibility that creating a set of standards that disrupts the process of social reproduction may be an important tool in creating a counter-discourse to the one that is dominant in educational thought. If teachers and schools chose to subscribe to this critical set of standards, it would provide them a guide for anti-racist, truly progressive education, but more importantly it would give them a common discourse through which they could communicate their shared objectives. It would be an effective way to normalize the discourse of racial reality, and provide a real-world outlet for the very important educational research available in that field, but often unavailable to teachers in their everyday practice. Instead of the “research and evidence” being hidden behind a “common sense” oppressive ideology, the research could be front and center in a critical standards discourse, bringing progressive teachers and progressive researchers together in affecting social change through discourse.

School-Level Resistance: Re-examining Local Policy Through a Critical Lens

All of the political advantages to adopting reform discourse that I mentioned above also apply to state-level and local-level politicians. The more eager governors, school board members, and superintendents are to adopt the reform-through-

punishment aspects of reform discourse, the more easily they can claim to be “tough on education,” committed to fixing a failing system. New Mexico governor Susana Martinez continually announces how school grades and teacher evaluations improve each year of her administration, although she cannot provide any proof that these metrics are not completely fabricated and artificially inflated to create the illusion of improved educational outcomes.

Under *ESSA*, the current reauthorization of *ESEA*, high schools are required to test high school students “not less than once” in science in grades 6-9 and in grades 10-12, which means that two science tests would be required in a 9-12 high school. Additionally, under *ESSA* high schools must test mathematics and language arts “not less than once” in grades 10-12. This means that under federal law, four standardized tests are required of all students in grades 9-12. None of them are mandated to be used as “exit exams,” or as a requirement for graduating from high school.

New Mexico law adds three short-cycle assessments per year to all students in grades 9 and 10. This brings the total number of mandated tests in grades 9-12 to ten. It also specifies that in order to graduate from high school, students must “demonstrate competency” in all five primary academic content areas (reading, math, science, social studies, writing) on “a standards-based assessment or assessments or portfolio of standards-based indicators.” Therefore, if we assume that the federally-mandated assessments can be used to fulfill graduation requirements in science, math and reading, and we ignore for the moment the portfolio option of reaching graduation requirements, we would then need to add two more standardized assessments for

writing and social studies, bringing us to a total of twelve legally-mandated standardized tests.

The New Mexico Public Education department, run by a non-elected Secretary of Education who also chairs the board of the for-profit corporation that publishes the PARCC exam, has issued further standardized testing mandates that are not supported by law. They require all students in grades 9-11 to take yearly PARCC exams in reading and math. If we assume that one of those grades covers the federal mandate for reading and math, that means we would need to add tests for the two other grades in each content area, or four more tests. This brings our total number of mandated tests in high school to sixteen, although the last four are not mandated by law.

If students do not pass the eleventh-grade tests required for graduation in any of the five content areas, PED mandated that they take them again in 12th grade before they are able to use a portfolio of classroom artifacts granted under state law to demonstrate competency for the purposes of graduation. Therefore, a NM high school student who struggles with standardized tests would then need to take twenty-one standardized tests at minimum before being granted the option to create a classwork portfolio, even though state law does not support retesting of students before they can use the classwork portfolio. Twelve of those twenty-one tests are legally mandated, and the others are “mandated” through PED procedures that have no statutory authority.

Additionally, the PED requires the use of End-of-Course exams to be used as part of the state’s teacher-evaluation system. The exams are written by committees of people assembled by the PED, they are not tested for reliability or validity, they are not

made available to the teachers whose evaluation scores depend of them, and they are given in every course that students take in grades 3-11. In New Mexico, students generally take six courses each of their four years in high school, or twenty-four courses total¹⁸. This brings the number of mandated tests in high school to 40 for all students, and 45 for those who do not pass their 11th grade tests.

The classwork portfolio that students are allegedly able to use to meet graduation requirements can, by law, include classroom artifacts. However, the PED published a manual guiding the use of the classwork “portfolio,” and defined the portfolio artifacts as nothing more than further standardized testing, such as the SAT and the ACT, and additional versions of the state-created End-of-Course exams. Therefore, a student who finally takes all 45 standardized tests required to reach the eligibility to use a classwork portfolio would then, in a district that chooses to blindly follow the PED definition of the portfolio, take an additional five standardized tests at the very least. In New Mexico, therefore, local politicians have increased the number of mandated tests from four to forty for students who pass them all, and fifty and beyond for those who do not. This is an increase of at least 900%.

David Gillborn, a British scholar who examines British education policy through a critical race lens, argues that unless policy is examined critically, it will perform “ideological work” to legitimate and extend racial inequity (2005). He suggests that in

¹⁸ Although the law mandating End-of-Course exams has been on the books since 1986, those exams were always teacher-created prior to the mandates of Hanna Skandera, were never a state-level standardized test, did not result in scores that were catalogued by an agency outside of the classroom, and were never used to evaluate teachers.

order to reveal how policy works to this end, we should use these three guiding questions: 1) Who or what is driving education policy? 2) Who wins and who loses as a result of education policy priorities? and 3) What are the effects of the policy? (Gillborn, 2005). Applying these questions to the dramatic increase in standardized testing mandates in New Mexico is important. It is clear that students and teachers do not win as a result of increased standardized testing, and the effects of this increase lead to greater exclusion from opportunity for those who do not pass the tests, as they are unable to earn a diploma. Yet local school administrators do not seem to question testing policies, and seem to pride themselves on how enthusiastically they adopt reform discourse.

At my school, the only tests that I administer are the legally-mandated tests. I navigated through all federal and state law, consulted with an attorney, and wrote testing policy which keeps us in compliance with legal testing mandates but does not include any PED-mandated test. I follow the letter of the law for the classwork portfolio graduation option, and offer students the opportunity to create the portfolio as they progress through their high school classes. They take the mandated tests, but they are never told that they will not graduate if they do not pass. High-stakes testing is simply not part of the culture of our school, and this is accomplished while still staying entirely in compliance with the law. I can say with certainty that in New Mexico, local-level policy makers *choose* the extent to which their schools adopt the culture which results from reform discourse, because I have chosen not to do so at all, and the result is a

school which successfully re-engages students who have been alienated and excluded by other schools.

One of the reasons that the waiting list for my school is so long is that many students reach their senior year of high school in traditional environments, pass all of their classes, and find it absolutely impossible to graduate due to standardized testing requirements. They drop out during their senior year, feeling hopeless about the possibility of graduating. They hear about my school, usually by word-of-mouth, and come to us with very few credits remaining to earn a diploma. They take those courses with us, and graduate using the classwork portfolio option that is designated as their right under the law. Each one of these dropouts was *created* by their former schools' willingness to adopt reform discourse.

Since law and mandates regarding testing are so difficult to navigate and have such devastating effects on students, families, and teachers, and since parents are routinely bullied by school administrators when they try to opt their children out of testing, I created a document which explains exactly which tests are legally mandated and which are not, and how a student can legally qualify for the classwork portfolio option, and made the document publicly available. It is essentially a layperson's interpretation of the testing policy I created for our school. The document appears on the home page of the New Mexico Opt-Out resistance movement, and is widely circulated among parents and educators alike. I was contacted by the parents of a Native American honor student who were informed that their daughter would not graduate from high school because she had missed the final re-take of the standardized

science assessment by one point. She had a 3.0 GPA and had already been accepted to college. I coached her parents through various meetings with the school board, the superintendent, and the district testing coordinator, and the family needed to resort to threatening to sue the district based on the legalities that I had outlined in my public document.

Two days before graduation, the family was informed that the student would be “allowed” to graduate despite the missing point on the science test. By that time, the student was receiving medical treatment for depression, anxiety, and insomnia. This crisis was manufactured by the local policy-makers in that district, and was created not from law but from ideology. The final question the parents asked at a board meeting was, “I am fighting for my daughter’s right to graduate from high school. What are you fighting for?” No one was able to answer. They were agents of discourse, not acting authentically, certainly not acting in the best interests of students. All local-level administrators, policy-makers, and school board members have a choice to act authentically and become free of the ideology/discourse that governs standardization and standardized testing. They *must* make the choice to do exactly that.

III. Conclusion

In January of 2017, the World Economic Forum released its annual report on economic inclusiveness. The report compares 109 countries according to the social inclusivity of economic growth. It determines that the United States, “despite being a global economic and innovation powerhouse, ranks only 23rd” out of 30 “advanced economies” on the Inclusive Development Index (World Economic Forum, 2017). It

notes that the United States ranks “among the three advanced economies with the highest levels of poverty and income inequality.” The Inclusive Development Index (IDI) is based on a framework of seven “pillars,” the first of which is “Education and Skills.” The Education and Skills pillar is then divided into three subsets: Access, Quality, and Equity.

The United States ranks 12th out of 30 countries on the Access measure. Digging deeper into this data reveals that although some access measures, such as the male/female ratio in schooling, rank the US very high (the United States ranks 1st on this measure), there are other measures which point to areas of concern. For example, the “Gross secondary enrollment” measure, which accounts for the percentage of our population of secondary age that is enrolled in secondary education, ranks the United States 29th out of 30 countries. The “Gross preprimary enrollment” is 29th out of 29. So despite the United States’ “Quality” ranking of 14th out of 30 countries, it becomes clear that not all Americans have the opportunity to benefit from that quality. Also under the “Quality” metric is a ranking for “Ease of finding skilled employees,” which refers to how easily employers can find people with the skills required to fill their vacancies. The US ranks 5th out of 30 countries on this measure. This rating calls into question the widely-held assumption that our public schools are churning out unemployable graduates, as reform discourse would have us believe.

The “Equity” measures represent what should be our area of greatest concern, with the United States ranking 22nd out of 30 countries on educational equity. The Equity measure includes a ranking for “social inclusion,” or the variation of

socioeconomic status between schools. The US ranks 25th of 29 countries in this area. We rank higher – 13th out of 30 – on the “resilient students” measure. This measure represents an adjustment of PISA scores which accounts for socioeconomic status. In other words, a student is classified as “resilient” if she lives within the bottom quartile of economic, social, and cultural status in the country of assessment, yet performs in the top quarter of students from all countries after accounting for socioeconomic status. This information has never, to my knowledge, accompanied the release of PISA test score rankings which US media outlets are eager to report as evidence of the alleged failure of American public schools.

As the report states in its narrative, the United States does continue to be an economic powerhouse on the world stage. Rankings of Gross Domestic Product by all world organizations – the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United Nations – all consistently place the United States easily in the number one slot. The US continues to be by far one of the richest countries on the planet, and continues to have an alarmingly high rate of poverty. Despite this, reform discourse continues to create panic regarding the complete falsehood that children in the United States are becoming dumber because of a failed public education system, and that our international economic competitiveness is at risk as a result.

Nowhere within reform discourse is there recognition of anything true regarding American public schools: that our children who do not live in poverty rank first in the world on international standardized tests, that childhood poverty levels in America are a national crisis, that poor children and children of color simply do not have access the

same educational opportunity as do their white, middle-class peers, and that federal educational reform based on standardization has dramatically exacerbated this inequity. These are facts that are consistently obscured in a culture that prioritizes ideological “truth” over reality, a culture so immersed in dominant ideology that a sizable percentage of the electorate voted for an openly racist, misogynist, and bankrupt reality television host to be president.

This culture of ideological truth accepts all of the false claims made in *A Nation at Risk*. Americans generally believe that our public schools are failing, that our students cannot compete on international standardized tests, and that our economic woes are the result of the laziness and apathy of educators and students. There is not enough criticism of *A Nation at Risk* and the reform discourse that it created. Educators and scholars are not united around a counter-discourse of educational reform. Academia in general, as I reviewed in Chapter 2, is much more concerned with publishing studies regarding whether or not we are still “at risk,” and not concerned enough about why the myth of failing public schools was created, and why it persists.

At the time of writing, we are beginning to get a sense of what federal educational reform will look like under the Trump administration. His Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, is a billionaire Republican donor with zero experience in education who displayed ignorance of the most basic knowledge regarding education and educational reform during her confirmation hearing. A few minutes after DeVos’ controversial confirmation, Republican senator Greg Massie introduced a bill to abolish the Department of Education, moving to fulfill the 1980 campaign promise of Ronald

Reagan. It is a fact that the highest levels of our government are now infiltrated by avowed white supremacists. It is also a fact that they maneuvered immediately to abolish federal educational oversight, and “return control of education to the states,” which has long been code for resegregation. It would be exceedingly naïve not to see the connection between an overtly white supremacist agenda and federal educational reform policy in this instance.

The Trump administration differs from previous administrations in that it is not interested in veiling its oppressive agenda or in using coded discourse. I question for how long the racist agenda of this administration will continue to use “school choice” as its calling card, and whether or not the word “segregation” will once again be used openly in political discourse. Until that time, educators who are part of the quickly-growing anti-Trump resistance movement will need to become well versed in counter-discourse if they are to transform their classrooms and schools in “pockets of resistance” (Giroux, 1983). It is my sincere hope that this study contributes to a new way of thinking about schooling and educational reform, one that serves to openly resist reform discourse and thereby emancipate and empower, rather than alienate and exclude, students of color and working class students. If legislators continue to escalate this war they have declared against education, educators will need weapons with which to fight for their students, and to fight for American democracy itself.

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