

## Meritocracy Disguised as Equity: The Relationship between Teacher Professional Organizations and Teacher Ideology



Hope Kitts

University of Minnesota-Duluth Orcid ID: 0000-0003-1789-8980

**ABSTRACT:** The institution of public schooling in the United States exists in the popular imagination as a primary means of achieving social mobility. It is believed that schools provide students with unbiased opportunities to earn credentials that translate into real, economic benefits. This myth of equality of opportunity in the contexts of schooling, while idyllic, does more harm than good when it comes to addressing historical inequities and serving as a means for the realization of social justice. Through a window into a larger qualitative study with practicing secondary school teachers at a large, district high school in the southwest United States, I show how discourses of meritocracy at a micro level are reflected in the language of influential teacher professional organizations. I call on these organizations to examine how their use of language promotes meritocratic myths that homogenize diverse student populations and eclipse historical,

Generational inequities that persist to this day.

Mass, compulsory public schooling, more than any other institution in the United States, has significant potential to foster societal change or social conformity, depending on multiple factors related to policy, resource distribution, teaching and social context (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Feinberg & Soltis, 2009). For this reason, it is one of the most hotly contested public domains, historically and to the present day. School policy, curriculum, structure and purpose have been the subject of debate since the inception of the common school movement in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kaestle, 1983; Spring, 2018). Today, political battles on the subject of schooling are waged around issues of testing, curriculum, funding, governance structure and equity, to name a few. This is because schools and the experiences they offer, outside of familial influences, prove to be formative for people from the ages of five to 18, the legal age of majority at the boundary of adulthood in the United States context. The extent to which schools shape the attitudes, values, dispositions, knowledge and skills of the people who pass through them affects how society itself is formed and transformed.

From this perspective, teaching within the contexts of schooling is an important site for examining how dominant ideas circulate or are stifled. Teaching (as one aspect of schooling) is enacted at the interstices of institutional obligation and interpersonal relation. As described in this study, teachers-participants often felt pulled between their institutional roles and their relationships with students. For this reason, the teaching context contains enormous potential for the perpetuation or challenge of social norms and political relationships; and considering disparate educational outcomes, this challenge is requisite to social progress.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), in the United States, only 37 percent of fourth grade students scored at the “proficient or above” level in reading. The scores were even more dire for children of color, when in 2017 only 20 percent of AfricanAmerican/Black students and 23 percent of Hispanic students scored at “proficient or above” in reading, compared with 47 percent for White students (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017). These statistics indicate the unequal reality of schools, not the unequal distribution of ability. Questionable validity aside (Grodsky, Warren & Felts, 2008), these scores have real consequences for individuals and communities in terms of credentialing, funding, retention and promotion. While these tests are by no means objective measures of students’ abilities, assets, and understandings, the sheer discrepancy of scores—like the discrepancy of wealth between demographics—raises suspicion about the myths of equality of opportunity in the contexts of schooling.

While schools as vast social institutions dis/function at multiple, intersecting levels this study examines the extent to which power (social, political and interpersonal) may be interrogated at the level of teachers’ consciousness, as expressed through language. Scholarly work on how teachers contribute to social and cultural reproduction through unexamined practices such as labeling and ability-grouping are well-documented (Ireson & Hallam, 2009; Lleras & Rangel, 2009; Loveless, 1999; Rist, 2016), yet

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work on how practicing teachers understand, interpret, and relate to a critical pedagogy which challenges this reproduction remains inchoate.

To address this gap, I investigated how teacher study groups with critical text facilitated a confrontation of ideologies. As I show, White teachers distanced their practice from Freire's

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on the basis of meritocratic ideology informing so-called commonsense. I viewed the role of ideology in critical interpretation as one aspect of the broader issue of functionalist schooling in the United States, that is, schooling that functions to reproduce the dominant social structure, as opposed to challenge it (Feinberg & Soltis, 2009). Understanding how White teachers responded to critical pedagogical concepts has implications for the realization of schools as spaces of social change.

Furthermore, I assume that all positions are ideologically informed (including my own), whether consciously or not; and that uncovering ideological interests can illuminate hidden politics within a position, insofar as ideology and political positioning are interwoven. I also assume that the process of coming to ideological clarity is a means toward more conscious and informed decision-making as political actors engaged in daily life (Bartolome, 2007; Giroux, 2001; King, 1991). We all need to undertake ideological work constantly, because the nature of dominant ideology is to pass itself off as common knowledge, to try to be unseen, natural and assumed. As I show, in response to this study some teachers reproduced tropes of equality of opportunity, tropes major teacher professional organizations produce and circulate, to the detriment of social justice equity work. The study described here was approved by a university Institutional Review Board (IRB). There are no funding sources or conflicts of interest to declare.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this study I utilized a Critical Discourse Study (CDS) framework—also referred to as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)—to focus on issues of power and ideology (conscious and unconscious) embedded in language (Kress, 2011, van Dijk, 2001; Wodak, 2001). Scholars taking the CDS approach examine how power manifests at the level of language (Fairclough, 2010; Rogers, 2011; van Dijk, 1987), which makes it a suitable approach for this research insofar as I show how relations of power manifested ideologically through teachers' verbal interactions and written responses. As Fairclough (2001) writes:

Ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behavior, and the form of social behavior where we rely most on commonsense assumptions...Ideology is pervasively present in language (p. 2).

We shroud ideological commitments in language to the point that we are often not consciously aware of them (Althusser, 2014). Studying language in use (in this case speech) reveals relationships of power and dominance at multiple levels—from the smallest interaction at a micro level to macro levels related to institutional and government entities. Again, Fairclough (2010) writes, "For critical discourse analysis...the question of how discourse cumulatively contributes to the reproduction of macro structures is at the heart of the explanatory endeavor" (45). Halliday (1977) proposes that "by their everyday acts of meaning, people act out the social structure, affirming their own statuses and roles, and establishing and transmitting the shared systems of value and of knowledge" (p. 2). Illuminating social relations of power as revealed through critical analysis of language works to understand how entities shape individuals, but also how individuals shape institutional entities. Language, from this perspective, shapes and is shaped by individuals and abstracted institutional formations in relationship. To put it succinctly: "Discourse makes people, as well as people make discourse" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 41). This view of language, which I share, sees "language as social, as meaningful, and as always embedded in a social context and history. Language is not an isolated phenomenon; language is deeply social, intertwined with social processes and interaction" (Wodak, 1999, p.

186). CDS does not aim to uncover a truth apart from individuals or entities, however, but to illuminate social relations between individuals and entities. As Wodak (1999) found: Each communicative event allows numerous interpretations, linked to the positions of the readers', listeners', or viewers' respective contexts and levels of information. Interpretations that the researchers put forward also are laden with certain beliefs and knowledge. A "right" interpretation does not exist and a hermeneutic approach is necessary. Interpretations can be more or less plausible or adequate, but they cannot be "true." (p. 187)

CDS is guided primarily by critical social theory and questions (Fairclough, 2010), rather than a strict set of methods. There is no consistent CDS methodology, but rather a diverse and multidisciplinary field of inquiry guided by principles of humanization (Jäger, 2001), or as van Dijk (2001) would say, "discourse analysis with an attitude...biased and proud" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96).

### METHODS

To understand how ideology functioned in teachers' responses to critical pedagogy, I conducted teacher study groups on the whole of Paulo Freire's text: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

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I supplemented study groups with individual interviews and reflective journaling. Guided by Thompson's (1990) critical hermeneutical framework for ideological critique I located ideological symbolic constructions in teachers' discourse, which I then analyzed through examination of facework and the unsaid (Fairclough, 2010; Gee, 2011; Goffman, 1959)

To further understand the production of social inequities (social reproduction) at the intersections of schooling and consciousness, I designed this study to go beyond a descriptive representation of teachers' views of Freire's critical pedagogy. Specifically, as a discourse analysis, I analyzed the ideological dimension of teachers' interpretations as they encountered

Freire's critical pedagogy through a primary source text. As I discuss more fully, I paid particular attention to how teachers' statements functioned to create them as "kinds of persons" (Gee, 2011), which involved examining ideology embedded in the assumptions they left unsaid and how they used language to make comparisons and present their institutional teacher selves. Humans shape and transform language, and language has real effects on how we as people understand ourselves and others. Language is more than mere symbols; it is social action. Understanding how language can be damaging for students and detrimental to teaching for social progress drive the purpose of this study.

The data collection methods I employed included study groups utilizing a focus group approach, interviews and participant reflective writing at a single school site. Subsequently, in order to understand the ideological underpinnings of these teachers' views, I analyzed these data according to the tradition of ideological critique within the broader field of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (Blommaert & Verschueren, 2014; Bloome et al., 2008; Bloor & Bloor, 2018; Fairclough, 2010; Gee, 2011; Jäger, 2001; Ng, 2018; Thompson, 1990; van Dijk, 2001).

### RESULTS

In the following I present a small dialogic exchange between Roxanne and Pam. Their views on opportunity are illustrative of meritocratic ideology more broadly, and raise the question: What larger social structure(s) relevant to teachers' work perpetuate meritocratic ideology? My final question to the group and their responses unfolded as follows: **Hope:** I want to ask you to respond to a portion of Freire's text. It starts on the second paragraph of page 139. It's right in the middle of the second paragraph. And I'm going to read to the end of the page. So we're all together, it starts with "in order." (reads aloud) "In order to present for the consideration of the oppressed and subjugated a world of deceit designed to increase their alienation and passivity the oppressors develop a series of methods...It is accomplished by the oppressors, depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo, for example, the myth that the oppressive order is a free society." So I'm going to ask you, what do you think of these myths? (reads aloud) "The myth that all persons are free to work where they wish. If they don't like their boss, they can leave him and look for another job. The myth that this order respects human rights and is therefore worthy of esteem. The myth that anyone is who is industrious can become an entrepreneur. Worse yet, the myth that the street vendor is as much an entrepreneur as the owner of a large factory. The myth of the universal right of education when all of the Brazilian children who went to primary schools only a tiny fraction ever reach the university. The myth of the equality of all individuals when the question 'Do you know who you're talking to?' is still current among us." I'm going to stop there. So in terms of when you're communicating with your students, do these myths ever come into your conversation with them, or do you think these are myths? Or just what are your thoughts on this passage? (Freire, 1970, p. 139).

**Roxanne<sup>1</sup>:** Well, I actually noted that myself that I don't really agree with what he's saying on this, because you can—if you don't like the job where you're at, you can quit. You may not have any income, but you can quit and find another job. I was thinking of well, in the United States here, you can become an entrepreneur. I mean, you know, and of course, I mean, the little hot dog guy with the hot dog or the little cart, you know, selling the popsicles he's still just as much as an entrepreneur as the guy who is the big boss, Jeff Bezos, you know... And we do talk about students' ability to better themselves, you know, so I don't know. I didn't like his myth stuff.

**Pam:** But the myths, the myths take away hope. I'm sorry they take away your hope and those myths are draining on hope. And no, I can't go to Brazil and help all those kids. But where I am now, I can show my kids how to access opportunities regardless of poverty, regardless of the structure of their family. That's all I can do is show them how to take advantage of opportunities and how to access those opportunities. That way, when they become a career person, if they're going to do the pushcart, then it's a choice they made. But I can't change every single thing. Right? I mean, that's kind of my frustration with this. It's like, you know, people—myths were true at one point and some of that stuff. I feel like it's because they have some crappy teachers or those

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<sup>1</sup> All names of participants and sites are pseudonyms.

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people had some crappy teachers, right, that didn't give them access to, "Hey, this is really something you can do." But maybe it's because I do believe that every kid should go to college and that we shouldn't say, "Oh, this is career and college high school, career and college." What's my purpose of being a high school teacher if it's not to further them and then more education after school? You know, I don't understand the whole career. I think that's the myth. But I feel like you have to give them the opportunities and show them what lifelong learning can do for them. And is the hot dog vendor happy? And who are we to judge people, if that's the choice? And, you know, I feel like if you're comfortable where you are, you don't need to go outside of your boundaries and do things. Why am I going to be judging other people? Because I'm my own harshest critic. I assume everybody else is their own harshest critic, too, but that's my cultural bias, too

### DISCUSSION

Roxanne stated that she didn't agree with Freire characterizing meritocracy, a core tenet of political ideology in the United States, as a myth (19-20). After stating her disagreement, she went on to illustrate her point anecdotally through the second-person pronoun "you," which she used seven times in the course of three lines (20-23). The effect of this usage created a fictional person who was effectively someone and everyone: "If you don't like the job where you're at, you can quit" (20). As Nakayama and Krizek (1995) show, whiteness is often discursively constructed through universals in place of particulars, reflecting the tendency of White supremacist ideology to remain invisible and unmarked (Frankenberg, 2020). In contrast, when clarifying her statement later, Roxanne shifted her pronoun usage to the first person "I" (which she also used seven times), as in "If I was a guy out there pushing a cart." Though she shifted her pronoun usage from "you" to "I" Roxanne still employed the particular as the universal insofar as the scenario where she is pushing the cart was how she would feel about the situation in a different body ("a guy"). Roxanne, in stating that she would feel pride if she were a guy pushing a cart created the impression that anyone (regardless of social position or embodiment) could feel pride in this scenario. The question remained without being asked: Would Roxanne as Roxanne (as White, middle-class, female, professional) feel pride were her vocation pushcart vendor? In both cases (with the use of the pronoun *you* and with the pronoun *I*) Roxanne takes a position not based on her own embodiment or identity, but on a projected identity as generalized, unraced, universal. Discursively, Roxanne's position is disembodied, reminiscent of the "view from nowhere" (Nagel, 1989), a positionless position. Scholars examining whiteness have explicated how White people describe themselves in unraced, general, universal terms (Frankenberg, 2020; Wise, 2011), a pattern belonging to the broader discursive moves Yoon (2012) calls "whiteness at work" (p. 587). Roxanne is not alone in this construction, as can be seen when examining the presentation of self that teacher professional organizations construct.

Three major teacher professional organizations—the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)—all use generalized, unraced language, ironically when referring to students of color. This reflects the unification strategy Thomson (1990) identifies as ideological symbolic construction. All of these organizations take public stances opposing racism, yet not one names the oppressor or oppressed specifically. In its vision statement, for example, NCTE uses the language of "all students," "all learners," "diverse learners," and "every students' consciousness" (<https://ncte.org/about/>). NCSS similarly refers to ameliorating the legacy of White supremacy by envisioning "A world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action" (<https://www.socialstudies.org/about>). Not unlike the previous two, NCTM's all-inclusive phrasing includes "each and every" student three times in its short summary (<https://www.nctm.org/About/>). Oblique wording such as this, while seemingly addressing historical injustice, fails to name the disparity that exists today, where educational outcomes are still largely determined by zip code, which itself has been structured for generations by White supremacy (Haney-López, 2006; Massey & Denton, 1993). The meaning of Roxanne's statement "If you don't like the job where you're at, you can quit" (20) echoed the concept of free wage labor inherent to capitalist ideology, where labor power is an individual commodity that can be bought and sold (Dubofsky & McCartin, 2017). Although free wage labor conveys a sense of freedom on the part of the proletariat (worker), ignored is the fact that regardless of where a worker sells their labor, selling labor is the only commodity a worker possesses, which means workers do not have the option to not work. Additionally all labor is not valued equally. It is not as if a pushcart vendor can quit and sell their labor as an engineer. Although meritocratic ideology purports to ignore wealth and social class in favor of intelligence and effort, social stratification on the basis of wealth and class predominates in the earliest years of life, limiting the extent to which those at the bottom of the social hierarchy can move up. The effect of meritocratic ideology is the illusion of options. Roxanne indicated this when she said, "You may not have any income, but you can quit and find another job" (20-21). In a society where not having an income means not having necessities such as food, healthcare, transportation or housing, not having an income is not truly an option. In shifting topics from wage labor to entrepreneurship (22), Roxanne seemed to

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implicitly acknowledge the vicious cycle of wage labor, the implication of which was to convey that even if a worker cannot find another job (or move up from a low-paying job), in the context of the United States, they could still become a business owner. The conflation of wage labor with capital created a world where there are no limits, as well as no excuses for not attaining wealth and status.

Roxanne's statement "in the United States here" (21-22) positioned the U.S. as the center of business and capitalist values of hard-work and productivity. The implication was that other countries are not as supportive of business or entrepreneurship, and therefore also not as hardworking or efficient. The implication of identifying the U.S. with entrepreneurial spirit lauded the effort of primarily White individuals to attain the status of capitalist, and masked advantages gained through inherited wealth, elite education and social networks facilitated by residential and school segregation. The \$200,000 loan given to Jeff Bezos by his adopted father and former Exxon engineer to invest in Amazon and the conditions for this possibility are not credited as factors made possible through the oppression of the world's majority (Exxon's role in climate change, extreme wealth inequality and racial stratification). Bezos's position in life, like that of the hot dog vendor, is ascribed to his "ability to better himself" (25).

Roxanne equated the "little guy" with the "big boss" (40-42), as "just as much an entrepreneur" (41), where to be an entrepreneur is a good thing because it implies inner character defined by traits of determination, creativity, and intelligence. With "just as much" Roxanne implied a moral equivalence (41), meaning she saw them both as equally deserving of the title *entrepreneur*, as equally respectable. She also elevated the moral quality of the fictional hot-dog vendor when she spoke of having pride in that role (92-93). Like Roxanne's moral equivalence, Pam also expressed extreme aversion to being labelled as judgmental of those who "make the choice" to sell popsicles from a pushcart.

Teacher Discourse on the subject of poverty in these cases expressed an anxiety around the relationship between poverty and character. This anxiety revealed a contradiction inherent to meritocratic ideology: If everyone has the equal opportunity to pursue wealth, not attaining wealth at whatever level is attributed to a person's inherent character, intelligence and or ability. Roxanne and Pam expressed an uneasiness with the inherent moral judgement of innate ability that defines meritocratic ideology, and made discursive moves to distance themselves from this moral aspect. Roxanne did so by equating the hot dog vendor with Jeff Bezos (24). In Pam's case she distanced herself from the moral aspect of meritocracy with the use of the word "judge" (40). With this word Pam portrayed herself as non-judgmental while simultaneously implicitly positioning activists as the opposite, judgmental. Pam's reasoning resulted in justifying her nonintervention in issues of oppression on the basis that taking a stance would be patronizing. Pam furthered this logic when she offered the possibility that people "want to be oppressed," or "they're not really sure if they're happy" (Interview 2, December 16<sup>th</sup> 2020). Pam's defense for neutrality on oppression romanticized poverty, and ironically patronized the working class as potentially content in the face of extreme inequality.

Beyond Pam's articulation, this kind of thinking favorable to meritocratic ideology permeates discourse at the level of professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) that define "access" as the first component of the organization's vision, and mention "access" four times in all (<https://ncte.org/about/>). Their impact, as stated on their website, includes the effort to "widen possibilities for all students' access, power, agency, affiliation, and impact, across a lifetime" (<https://ncte.org/about/>). The language of access is not limited to NCTE, but extends to other influential professional organizations like the National School Board Association (NSBA), which works to "ensure each student everywhere has access" and defines equity as:

The promise of public education is for every child to succeed in school and life. To realize this promise, every child must be given resources, supports, and interventions based on his or her needs. The nation's school boards are uniquely positioned to fulfill this promise to all students, which is why NSBA is committed to educational equity for all children in public schools" (<https://www.nsba.org/About>).

The words "every" or "all" are used four times in this short excerpt, which asserts that public education functions as a social equalizer. How is saying "equity for all children" different from simply "equity for children?" Why is the word "all" necessary? The unsaid of this discourse is to negate exclusion, to imply that students of color and students not considered of color are alike represented. It functions to deny disenfranchisement (which has been endemic and historical) all the while never revealing who benefits and who suffers from educational inequity (Edbuild, 2019).

Likewise the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) (in which the local department of education specific to this study participates) maintains:

Diversity propels the coalition forward to see that *all* citizens receive an education that will equip them with the skills and knowledge to compete successfully in the world marketplace and to enhance the quality of their lives in a society changing with phenomenal speed. (<https://www.cgcs.org/domain/16>)

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The word “equip” echoes the language of “access,” the unsaid of which is that upward mobility is a problem of knowledge rather than materiality. A CGCS (2021) report examines the extent to which schools can “do a better job to overcome the effects of poverty,” the assumption of which is that students, teachers and administrators can and should bear the responsibility for thriving in spite of poverty (p. 8). This logic negates schools as places to challenge the conditions that make poverty possible, and instead positions them as successful to the extent that they produce results in the context of extreme inequality. The implication reflects the bootstraps mentality that since some schools are producing results in the context of poverty, all other schools can and should be able to do the same. Their failure to do so, consequently, rests on their own shortcomings, their lack of “torque” as CGCS puts it (p. 8).

Pam’s comment implied not only that students’ families constituted a barrier (28-29), but that opportunity is equally accessible to everyone and simply knowing how to access opportunity will mitigate any and all barriers to its realization. By this logic, failure to realize opportunity can be attributed to an individual deficit and a problem of knowledge, in which case those who lack the knowledge of accessing opportunity are ignorant and uneducated. Pam concluded that she was limited to presenting the means of accessing opportunities, after which students’ educational and life outcomes were the result of their personal choices (31). Logically, those who work in low-wage jobs, such as her example of vendors selling from a pushcart, have chosen this vocation (31). In this view, poverty stems solely from personal choice, not from systemic and generational barriers in education, law, healthcare, housing, the courts or any other institutional entity. Ideologically, this form of unification ignores the very real obstacles faced by people without the means or privilege to advance economically and in effect preserved the status quo where success is based on individual merit, i.e., those who are wealthy are deserving and those who are not equally undeserving. To check my interpretation of Pam’s view of opportunity I asked her: “In your view, do your students all have opportunities equal to other students their age?” Pam responded:

All students have the same opportunities, but they have different ways of fitting their puzzle together to turn the opportunity to reality. The opportunity is always there even though some people will need to work harder and put in more effort to open that door because people are not all born the same. (personal correspondence, April 12, 2021) Pam’s statement that all students have the same opportunities denied the structural and systemic barriers that impact opportunity, and placed the onus of so-called success on the individual who must “work harder and put in more effort” (47). McIntyre’s (1995) observation is relevant here, that: What becomes increasingly difficult [for White teachers] is understanding the chasm that exists between their antiracist ideals and their tendency to appropriate longstanding strategies for teaching that benefit the dominant group (e.g., treating all students equally, individualism, hard work, “loving” students. (p. 132)

Pam reinforced meritocratic ideology when she elaborated saying that individuals have to work harder because of their innate qualities, or not being “born the same” (48). Consider how the phrase “not born the same” is different from the phrase “not born in the same circumstances.” The latter recognizes that individuals face various inequities in life, but in this statement those inequities are the result of the environment, history and culture, as opposed to deficiencies of their innate intellectual and moral nature. In this meritocratic view, as stated above, individual ability and effort determine opportunity, and are unrelated to structural factors such as racism, White supremacy, colorism, classism or sexism.

This ideology is reflected and reproduced through powerful institutional entities like the College Board, which evolved out of the standardized testing used to sort military recruits during World War 1 (Fuess, 1967; Hampel, 2001). The College Board today upholds the ideology of meritocracy, to which for the most part schools at all levels still subscribe (Lemann, 2000). Of the College Board, Riccards (2010) says it is an “institution born in unashamed Eastern elitism and nourished on the dreams of creating a meritocracy” (p. 108). The belief that College Board tests, most notably the SAT, represent a true measurement of intelligence and ability have been critiqued for decades (Garrison, 2009; Sacks, 2000; Sadler, Sonnert, Tai, & Klopfenstein, 2010; Schudson, 1972), with some colleges and universities opting recently to scrap their requirement on admissions applications (Anderson, 2021). Beyond holding the keys to the gates, the College Board has had a complex relationship of involvement with the creation of learning standards— the paths to the gates—in the United States, beginning in 1900. This relationship was illustrated in the 2012 appointment of David Coleman, as President of the College Board, and former architect of the Common Core learning standards, the closest thing to a set of federal standards in literacy and numeracy (Caldwell, 2012). As of 2022 David Coleman was Chief Executive Officer at the College Board.

Ideologies of meritocracy are evident in Roxanne and Pam’s discourse, and reflected more broadly in teacher professional organizations at the institutional level. These meritocratic discourses, promulgated by professional organizations and repeated by practicing teachers, obscure structural inequities, ironically all in the name of whitewashed diversity efforts. Rather than confronting history and present-day inequities, meritocratic language becomes performative.

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## CONCLUSION

When asked to respond to the way Freire characterizes meritocratic principles as myths, Roxanne and Pam spoke to the primacy of choice in determining a person's life outcomes. Lauding choice in a vacuum, without consideration for context, history and inequity does not spring from these individual teachers alone, but rather is found reflected in broader educational discourses at the institutional level, such as the College Board, Council of the Great City Schools, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the National School Board Association (NSBA), the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The failure of these organizations to name historically disenfranchised groups, and instead hide behind generalities, represents performative social justice and reinforces teachers' tendencies toward colorblindness and generalizations of students as a whole.

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