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**INTRODUCTION**  
HARD TRUTH AND GOOD CHEER

Derek Gottlieb  
University of Northern Colorado

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Given that *Philosophical Studies in Education* is tightly bound to the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society’s annual conference, featuring work presented in one year’s meeting and coming out just before the following year’s conference, perhaps it makes sense to frame this issue in light of the current year’s conference theme.

The hard truth with which the papers collected in this issue grapple is that the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in December of 2019 and had spread across the globe by March of 2020, may never be “over”—at least not in the sense in which such a condition was imaginable in the early days of “stay at home” orders.

Our organization—the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society—was no different from any others in its response. We cancelled the in-person meeting scheduled for September of 2020, several months before vaccines would become widely available. And despite going ahead with an in-person meeting in September of 2021—with testing and vaccine requirements in place—our numbers were understandably low in the immediate wake of that summer’s Delta-variant surge. In some cases, this reflected our members’ judicious withdrawal in the face of rising case numbers. In other cases, it reflected the difficulty of doing ordinary scholarly work alongside one’s shifting family and community obligations amid ongoing pandemic conditions. In still other cases, it reflected the financial shocks that institutions of higher education passed along to their faculty and students, reducing or eliminating funding for conference and travel, upping teaching loads, and so on.

The papers that appear in this volume examine or respond to the question of power and empowerment in education—but in a way that has clearly been informed by a realization that the pandemic’s disruptions will, to one extent or another and in one form or another, persist indefinitely into the future. The world and the hegemonic sociopolitical imaginary into which the pandemic initially erupted is gone for good. The papers collected in this volume explore the operations involved in passing from one order or dispensation into another, and they ask, “what now?”

Nowhere is the difference between the pandemic’s first year and its second more evident than in Aaron Schutz’s two presidential addresses. The cancellation of the 2020 meeting presented Schutz with the unprecedented opportunity to contribute consecutive addresses on the same theme, offered a

year apart. The first piece, “Brief Thoughts on Power Analysis in Education,”<sup>1</sup> examines some of the ways that power has been conceptualized in education over the past half-century. The second piece, appearing in this volume, is entitled “Core Components of the Theory of Building Local Power in the Tradition of Community Organizing,” but as readers will find, it is far less of an overview and far more action-oriented than its predecessor. The distinction is between surveying the conceptual past and experientially providing tools for organizing in the future. The three worries that Kathleen Knight Abowitz raises in her response to Schutz’s vision of popular organizing are also deeply informed by pandemic conditions, as well. As is typical and noteworthy of the contributions collected in this volume, Knight Abowitz and Schutz are debating the fit between political tools developed in one era and the contours of a new era into which we all feel ourselves moving.<sup>2</sup> Even in critical engagement, they are drawn together by the sense that something new is happening, that this something calls for a response, and that we must be careful in our selection of strategies from the past.

This sort of spirit—revisiting very fundamental issues around power and education in a way that is deeply and directly responsive to the upheavals of recent experience—saturates the papers featured in this issue. How can we work together toward common goals and with common understanding as students and educators, as employees and administrators, as equal citizens in a shared polity, while yet affirming and protecting a right to live according to one’s own lights, as the classical liberals had it?<sup>3</sup> And equally importantly, for the authors of these papers, how can we accomplish all this from where we are now, amid the breakdown of the neoliberal order and the uncertainty of what comes next?<sup>4</sup>

Emily Wenneborg and Susan Haarman seek to bring out the political potentialities of nominally apolitical or prepolitical practices. In Wenneborg’s contribution, she draws a link between the practices of Christian worship and a vital political pluralism. Against a veritable tide of recent scholarly attention to the links between certain evangelical theologies and a politics of domination and exclusion,<sup>5</sup> Wenneborg offers a welcome vision of Christian worship that

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Schutz, “Brief Thoughts on Power Analysis in Education,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 52 (2021): 9-14.

<sup>2</sup> Or, really, being helplessly propelled into, facing the wrong way, like Benjamin’s angel of history.

<sup>3</sup> I found this particular phrase in Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 40th Anniversary Edition (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 195.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing, 2020); Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Elizabeth Samet, *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021); Rick Perlstein,

“enable[s] Christians to live with, and even be hurt by, those who are deeply different from them, without seeking to secure their own safety or comfort but instead pursuing the good of those around them, trusting in God’s eventual restoration of all things.”<sup>6</sup> Haarman, meanwhile, turns to the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*—ironically the target of a 1980s moral-panic association with Satanism, as featured in season four of the Netflix series *Stranger Things*—to find a laboratory of deliberative processes and the development of Deweyan “civic and moral habits.” She ties these to a robust conception of Dewey’s “dramatic rehearsal” as educative endeavor, arguing that this “offers another tool for cultivating ethical and empathetic citizens who also have a strong sense of their own capacity.”<sup>7</sup>

Tim Barczak, Erin C. Scussel, and Deron Boyles are concerned, in their two pieces, with the connection among knowledge, reasoning, and power. But they come at this question from quite divergent perspectives. Scussel and Boyles are especially interested in the production of ignorance as a “strategic ploy”—what Robert Proctor calls “agnatology.”<sup>8</sup> The goal of such a strategy is to prevent or forestall collective action opposed by those attempting to produce ignorance. Such strategic ploys—particularly the sowing of doubt, which may induce something closer to “plausible deniability” than outright ignorance—have been well-documented by Hannah Arendt in particular.<sup>9</sup> In the face of increasingly solid evidence that masking reduces the transmission of COVID-19, partisans of the former president couched statements, recommendations, and mandates to this effect as personal attacks on President Trump, who continued to insist that all would be well, that the virus was not as big of a deal as scientists were claiming, and so on. Asking the public at large to take steps to slow transmission was tantamount to admitting that a catastrophe was occurring on his administration’s watch. And who had an interest in broadcasting such fact? Why, Trump’s political opponents! It is just difficult not to think of Arendt’s work on propaganda while reading Scussel and Boyles’s closing section on pandemic ignorance and education policies, and particularly in light of state-level bans on mask mandates in schools.<sup>10</sup> And looking forward, as Scussel and Boyles do, to

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*The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Emily Wenneborg, “Christian Worship as Formation for Pluralism,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 53 (2022): 35.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Haarman, “Dungeons & Dragons & Dewey: The Potential for Dramatic Rehearsal and Civic Outcomes in Tabletop Role-Playing Games,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 53 (2022): 66.

<sup>8</sup> Erin C. Scussel and Deron Boyles, “A Pandemic of Ignorance,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 53 (2022): 40.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest Books, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 353: “Totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and

the book-banning and the parental-rights movement that was merely nascent at the time of this piece’s writing, helps us to see that the production of ignorance within and with respect to schools will outlast the pandemic that gave it its initial foothold.

Barczak’s contribution, meanwhile, might encourage us to think of Proctor’s “agnatology” as a perversion of Harvey Siegel’s “critical thinking” and thus antithetical to (public) education’s democratic commitments. The production of ignorance, one might say, is a mis-turned version of critical thinking, rather than its simple opposite, because of what the two notions share. Notably, Siegel’s critical thinking aims at autonomy rather than heteronomy—or what Barczak labels “the capacity to think independently from influence.”<sup>11</sup> The basic second-person implication of agnatology, meanwhile, is precisely that you think what you think *because* you have already been unduly influenced, and the only way to *become* autonomous and free yourself is, not coincidentally, to think what *I* would like you to think instead. Both the ignorance-producers and someone like Siegel valorize *independence* in thinking. Barczak’s essay might be said to explore the limits of independence when it comes to rational action or discussion. The ignorance-producers encourage us to imagine our thought-liberty as under constant threat and in need of vigilant protection—we must always demonstrate to ourselves and to others that it is we, ourselves, independently, who have ascertained and made sense of the relevant facts. Barczak, by contrast, draws on Laden, Habermas, and Anderson to make the case that all reasoning, including critical thinking, is to some extent social and public. Attempting to purify one’s separateness of independence from others *in order to* achieve critical thought is unnecessarily—and harmfully—destructive.

Spencer Smith and Casey Briand, finally, consider the ways that teacher preparation programs and state policies might contribute to (and/or detract from) the professional empowerment of classroom teachers. Briand’s offering suggests that teacher preparation programs, and particularly those programs’ efforts to teach “educational philosophy,” have the counterintuitive effect of “alienating” teachers “from the philosophical foundations of their everyday classroom work.”<sup>12</sup> She associates this alienation with the tendency of teacher education to teach *about* the work and the philosophies of teaching, and she suggests teacher poetry as a “foundational and theoretical ‘tool’” that might help connect new teachers to ongoing conversations and empower them to counter “unhelpful educational discourse.”<sup>13</sup> While drawing on longstanding work on teachers’ practical knowledge or practical wisdom, which she traces to Phelan’s 2005

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are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations.”

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Barczak, “The Social Core of Critical Thinking,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 53 (2022): 91.

<sup>12</sup> Casey Briand, “Poetry in Pre-Service Teacher Education,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 53 (2022): 70.

<sup>13</sup> Briand, “Poetry in Pre-Service Teacher Education,” 70.

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article and which extends back at least to Shulman’s work in the late 1980s,<sup>14</sup> Briand makes a decidedly new and welcome claim, which I might try to summarize thusly: the practice of teacher poetry allows teachers to navigate and internalize their own experiential knowledge in a way that (*pace* Shulman and his generations of students in the pedagogical content knowledge movement) need not cash out in rules or maxims amenable to best-practices-ification.

Smith’s contribution to this volume is similarly concerned to resist the temptation to rationalize teacher practice in order to render it *manageable* from a policy perspective. And he is also, similarly to Briand, worried about the way that new teachers might internalize this self-conception—that is, to understand themselves as *managers*, and to understand their students (and their “learning outcomes”) as objects to be managed. A TFA alumnus himself, he sees Teach for America as a primary purveyor of this orientation toward teaching, which can have explosively harmful effects “in a racist, capitalist society” like our own.<sup>15</sup> Against such an orientation, he encourages us to think of educating others along lines proposed by Taylor and Dreyfus’s reading of Gadamer’s horizon-fusing. A parsimonious picture of our students or their interests in their own education not only limits (unjustly and abstemiously) what might count as a proper education, but it also strands teachers and policymakers in their own imaginative poverty, preventing them from encountering or taking seriously interests, desires, uses, and practices that fall outside their managerial conception of the situation. Horizon-fusing is an additive, enlarging process of interacting with others, and Smith’s account relates several instances of TFA recruits undergoing such a process with their students.

I will bring this introduction to a close by confessing how deeply I am cheered, once again, in going over the fantastic thinking being done in our community. I do not mind saying—writing this, as I am, one day after the release of NAEP data showing the pandemic’s test-score effects—that the work in this volume, and the work we will get to share at our annual conference in less than a month, stands in the starkest of contrasts to what passes for rigorous educational thought in media and policy circles. I am reminded, thanks to recent work in the history of philosophy, that “rigor” has often been defined according to how much of the world’s messiness can be excluded from consideration *a priori*.<sup>16</sup>

The educational-scholar handwringing over pandemic “learning loss,” when graphs of virtually *any* measure of human well-being—life expectancy, fertility rates, poverty rates, homelessness counts, and so on—look *identical*, testifies to a certain inability or unwillingness to countenance the possibility that

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<sup>14</sup> Lee Shulman, “Those Who Understand,” *Educational Research* 15, no. 2 (1986): 4–14.

<sup>15</sup> Spencer Smith, “Towards a Non-managerial, Non-helper Vision of Teaching,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 53 (2022): 82.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Strassfeld, *Inventing Philosophy’s Other* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

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our education system is (also) an *aspect* or a *region* of our common sociopolitical world, rather than (merely) either a *cause* or an *effect* of sociopolitical destiny. The not-even-veiled accusation that *schools failed* the pandemic test, thus “wiping out” two decades of test-score progress—as though more than a million US citizens had not prematurely died, and millions more had not experienced horrific grief, loss, and ongoing illness; as though hospitals, state and local governments, logistics organizations, airlines, relief agencies, and indeed every social system substantial enough to have a name had not themselves buckled under the weight of coping with illness and death on such a scale—is so viciously and thoughtlessly unserious that it approaches parody.

And that reminds me, because of course it does, of something Stanley Cavell once said, glossing Emerson on the scholar’s duty “to raise and cheer.” The “alternative is not to be ineffectual,” Cavell says, as though speaking directly to economists of education, “but to depress and cynicize and ironize, which in a democracy are political emotions. So that conformity is not a mere lack of community, but its parody, learning and teaching the wrong thing of and to one another. The price of liberty is our subjection to eternal vigilance. It is to withstand this consequence that the scholar cheers us.”<sup>17</sup>

So, thank you, contributors to the journal and fellow members of our organization, for your bountiful—and rigorous—good cheer.

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<sup>17</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), 125.

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**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**  
CORE COMPONENTS OF THE THEORY OF BUILDING LOCAL POWER  
IN THE TRADITION OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

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Educational theory has tended to avoid discussions of how the less powerful might come together to contest oppression. Yet strategies for collective action are learned practices, like any others. While there are no “rules” for social action, different traditions provide useful “rules of thumb.” This article lays out some core theoretical assumptions of one tradition of social struggle: the “neo-Alinsky” model within the broader tradition of local community organizing. These, of course, are ideals—the actual “sausage making” of social action often diverges quite significantly from them. I conclude by discussing possibilities and limitations for drawing on this theory in educational settings.

Different traditions of solidarity and collective action have emerged across history with divergent perspectives on how to build collective power.<sup>1</sup> The tradition of “community organizing” focuses on building local power, creating coherent organizations that speak for communities to powerful people who make decisions that affect them. Alternative traditions include civil resistance, popular education (e.g., Freire), and anarchism, among others.<sup>2</sup> These are traditions partly in a retrospective, analytical sense, since social action efforts have not necessarily seen themselves as participating in one or another discrete branch.

There is no single “theory” of community organizing, and different groups organize differently. Nonetheless, in the 1930s and 40s, Saul Alinsky drew a range of influences together into an extremely influential conceptualization, writing books like *Reveille for Radicals* (1946) and training many organizers.<sup>3</sup> While Alinsky’s vision of organizing was quite fluid, after he

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Schutz, *Empowerment: A Primer* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> For overviews related to these different strands, see, e.g., Erica Chenoweth, *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2021); Celina Su, *Streetwise for Book Smarts: Grassroots Organizing and Education Reform in the Bronx* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Dana M. Williams, “Contemporary Anarchist and Anarchistic Movements,” *Sociology Compass* 12, no. 6 (2018), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/soc4.12582>.

<sup>3</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946; repr., New York: Vintage, 2010). Much work remains to be done to understand the sources of Alinsky’s vision. He was not very forthcoming about where his ideas came from. Useful sources for understanding this include Sanford Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy* (New York: Vintage, 1992); Mike Miller, “Alinsky for The Left: The Politics of Community Organizing,” *Dissent* 57, no. 1 (2010): 43-49; Mike Miller, “Herb March:

died in 1972, his followers came up with a more standardized model that I will term “neo-Alinsky” organizing, which I focus on, here.<sup>4</sup> While neo-Alinsky organizing is only one of a range of ways to orient social action, it contains key insights, providing some foundational tools for thinking differently about education for effective empowerment.

Since organizing lacks many explicitly theoretical writings, I draw on reflective writings of organizers, organizing training materials, and on empirical and historical research about organizing.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note that people often come together without being trained in some “approach” to resist oppression. Student protest walkouts, for example, are a somewhat common occurrence.<sup>6</sup> People have always been creative in drawing on their experiences, the information available to them, and their cultural resources for developing ways to fight for change. The point is not that students, parents, and community members lack any knowledge or skills for collective action. Instead, when we do not provide people with lessons that others have learned from their long experience of social action, we leave people without ideas about strategies, ways to avoid common pitfalls, and more. Stories about effective organizing can also provide hope.

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A Legend Deserved,” *CounterPunch*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/02/16/herb-march-a-legend-deserved/>; Peter Szyuka, “Three Alinskys?” *Forum on Community Organizing*, <http://www.fo-co.info/organizing/literatur/szyuka/three-alinskys/>.

<sup>4</sup> Key sources for understanding the neo-Alinsky vision include Edward Chambers, *Roots for Radicals* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018); Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1990); Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller, eds., *People Power: The Alinsky Organizing Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Michael Gecan, *Going Public* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012); Lee Staples, *Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organizing* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016); Michael Jacoby Brown, *Building Powerful Community Organizations* (Arlington, VA: Long Haul, 2006); Aaron Schutz and Marie Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing* (New York: Palgrave, 2010); Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max, *Organizing for Social Change, 4th ed.*, (Chicago: The Forum Press, 2010); Chambers, *Roots to Power*; Rogers, *Cold Anger*; Schutz and Miller, *People Power*.

<sup>6</sup> A search for “student protest December 2021” brought up many student protests just this month. See also Richard Fabbro, “There is a National Student Movement Underway: Why Kids Across the Country are Walking Out,” *Salon*, Dec. 10, 2021, <https://www.salon.com/2021/12/10/there-is-a-national-student-movement-underway-why-kids-across-the-country-are-walking-out/>; or remember the student protests after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman High School: Vivian Yee and Alan Blinder, “National School Walkout: Thousands Protest Against Gun Violence Across the U.S.,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/us/school-walkout.html>. There is a long history of student activism in America. See, for example Interference Archive, Walkout: A Brief History of Student Organizing, [www.walkout.interferencearchive.org](http://www.walkout.interferencearchive.org).

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### WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING?

Community organizing creates organizations for people who belong to some coherent “locality” (like a neighborhood or a school or even a group on the internet). Because community organizing groups are networks of relationships, they are limited in how large they can be. When issues require work beyond the boundaries of, at most, a small city, multiple local organizations generally come together in coalition.<sup>7</sup> Community organizing groups generally emerge when many in a particular locality feel that they are being ill-treated by the powerful within and beyond it. After trying to engage with the powerful, if community concerns are not adequately addressed, organizing groups move to put pressure on the powerful. A key aim is to get the powerful to come to the “table” and negotiate with the organizing group in good faith. Actions to pressure the powerful may include collective protests, marches, boycotts, and the like, seeking to show the powerful that it is in their best interest to respond to an organization’s concerns.

Internally, community organizing groups are often quite diverse in their perspectives and experiences. They have a defined governance structure for major decisions, but issues and actions are often developed in a very fluid, collaborative, and often contentious manner. When groups emerge into the public realm to challenge the powerful, however, these differences are left behind and organizations stand behind agreed upon demands and a small group of individuals empowered to negotiate for the collective.

Within organizing groups, there are generally two key roles. Leaders come from the local community, have relationships with others in the represented group, and make decisions about what the group will act on and how it will act. Organizers, who may or may not come from the same locality, do the grunt work to keep the organization going day-to-day, advise leaders on effective strategies, and develop new leaders for the organization. Leaders govern; organizers staff and advise.

Organizing groups identify specific things that they want changed (“cut” issues) and then develop strategies for pressuring the powerful to make these changes. Organizers generally distinguish between “organizing” and “mobilizing.” In “mobilizing,” a group of people get together to protest something, but the group dissolves after they have won (or lost). “Organizing” develops durable organizations that exist over time and that continue to struggle against oppression, moving from issue to issue and making sure that there isn’t backsliding on earlier wins.

While less-informed writers on organizing tend to focus on “winning” and on organizing’s creative conflict tactics, this misses Alinsky’s emphasis on the importance of democracy. A central goal is to create democratic spaces where leaders can overcome their sense of disempowerment and work together to make concrete change. Alinsky worried that if we did not give people real options for

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Kleidman, “Community Organizing and Regionalism,” *City & Community* 3, no. 4 (2004): 403-421.

action, they would be lured by demagogues. In fact, he used conflict with the powerful as a tool to heal fractures in and across different communities. He believed that if groups understood that they needed each other to win, even groups they looked down on or found repugnant, the act of working together to make change would build common cause and respect. In our current politically divided moment, for example, he would have sought opportunities and issues that would have drawn groups together across lines of polarization—perhaps seeking ways for rural and urban groups to work together. This was both an ethical and a pragmatic commitment, since a key strategy of the powerful is to split the disempowered apart and reduce the chance they might build enough collective power to threaten the status quo. Supporting division is a long-term recipe for disempowerment.

A famous example of k-12 organizing came in the 1960s, when an organization of Latinx students at Los Angeles high schools worked against racism in school. This involved a multi-year effort to develop leadership and understand the challenges they were facing. In 1968, the students conducted a survey of Latinx students and sent a report to the school board about the concerns that emerged. The board ignored the survey, demonstrating it had no interest in listening to students and providing a justification for more aggressive action. As a result, the students organized a walkout in a number of different schools and eventually forced the district to address many of their demands. (At one point in a documentary about the walkout, a student says to the assembled students “They’re trying to split us up. But we won’t let them!”) Students in the organization kept working together in organizations in and across the schools after the protests ended to negotiate and ensure that the district actually did what it agreed to do.<sup>8</sup>

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRADITION

The story of the “theory” of community organizing generally starts in the academic literature with Alinsky because he put together the most influential conceptual overviews of organizing and trained many who later became organizers (and he was a white guy more likely to be listened to by other white guys). However, Alinsky’s vision itself drew on a range of streams of tradition and scholarship that he did not necessarily acknowledge. Furthermore, there are many historical writings about and examples of organizing efforts that preceded his formulation—many of which diverged significantly from his vision.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See this documentary: Hector Galan, *Taking Back the Schools* (PBS, 1996). In 2006 HBO made a movie about the walkouts directed by Edward James Olmos. See also Rosales F. Arturo, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> The long fight for civil rights in America provides good examples and includes the work of Ella Baker, Robert Moses, and thousands of unsung Black organizing heroes as well as allies. See, for example, Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Clayborn Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of*

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Alinsky's first organization was developed in parallel with a union organizing effort in the stockyards of the Back of the Yards in Chicago. The union effort was led by a non-party-line communist focused on the development of local democracy with experience in community action as well. Although opposed to doctrinaire communism, Alinsky's vision of organizing, with its clear "targets" and clear "issues," derived, in part, from what he learned from the union effort.<sup>10</sup> Alinsky also spent years as a graduate student in the University of Chicago sociology department working with some of the top sociologists in the nation and conducting fieldwork in Chicago gangs, and the theories of this "school" deeply informed his work.<sup>11</sup> Finally, he often referred to the "founding fathers" and other participants in the American revolution and the development of American democracy as key "ideological" forerunners. Of course, these sources, themselves, drew from their own sources, the "founding fathers" looking to the Iroquois Confederation and deeply tainted by their complicity (at a minimum) with slavery, and the white, male Chicago sociologists failing to acknowledge the extent they cribbed off of work by others like WEB DuBois and Jane Addams.<sup>12</sup> A voracious reader, it is not entirely clear what else Alinsky drew from. But he must have been influenced by the movements he saw around him in the 1930s and before, like the titanic battles between labor and capital, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the NAACP, communist-based community organizing efforts, efforts to organize the unemployed, and more. Nonetheless, while he did organize in Black communities in the 1960s, and while even critics generally acknowledge that he was no racist in any simple sense, his overall vision seems fundamentally grounded in a white male vision of the world—and the organizers Alinsky trained were all men and almost all white.

Work to trace the multiple sources of visions of community organizing that diverge from the neo-Alinsky one and to place Alinsky's vision in context are in their infancy. Nonetheless, looking across current discussions of organizing grounded in communities of color and women's organizing efforts, it is possible to identify some key initial differences from neo-Alinsky organizing described below. These include: (1) a focus on "deeper," more authentic community relationships—reflective of the "beloved community" described by SNCC activists and others; (2) an emphasis on political education, especially on learning particular ideologies that can help participants make a broader sense of

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*the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); John Edgerton, *Speak Now Against The Day: The Generation Before The Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Miller, "Herb March."

<sup>11</sup> See Szyuka, "Three Alinskys?," and Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*.

<sup>12</sup> See Barton Edens, The Iroquois Influence Thesis and the "Great Debate," History Thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2001; Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. DuBois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892–1918* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

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the long-term forces that help explain the workings of oppression; (3) an attention to trauma—both experienced by members of oppressed groups and by participants in social conflict—and healing from this trauma; (4) the creation of safe spaces for minoritized groups away from the “gaze” of members of groups that participate (however unknowingly) in oppression and lack the concrete, rich experience of group members; and (5) more attention to the long-term goals of struggle: a vision of what a “better” society and “better” community would look like.<sup>13</sup>

Despite its core commitment to democracy, the neo-Alinsky vision has tended to be fairly instrumental. Neo-Alinsky organizing groups historically have held to a largely non-ideological, pragmatic focus on common “issues” that can substantively improve the lives of members. While there has been some broader analysis of the social forces underlying oppression, ultimately the vision of these groups has usually been fairly short-term.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Alinsky tended to assume that strong community leaders existed that he simply needed to identify and develop, ignoring the work that was required to create and maintain such relationships (often seen by him and other male leaders of other efforts implicitly as “women’s” work).<sup>15</sup> And neo-Alinsky approaches to developing relationships (through the “one-on-one” process described, below) ultimately embody a somewhat instrumental perspective.<sup>16</sup>

As a result, the neo-Alinsky theory of organizing is useful and yet also limited. It provides only one vision, among others, to inform those trying to develop organizations to support local struggle.

#### POWER AND TARGETS<sup>17</sup>

When people are organized, they move in...to the central decision-making tables. [They] say, “This is what we want...We are people and damn it, you are going to listen to us...” They are admitted to the decision-making tables...on

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Alicia Garza, *The Purpose Of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart* (London, UK: One World, 2020); Charlene Carruthers, *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018); Eli Jimenez, Jessica Tokunaga, and Jessica Wolin, *A Scan of the Field of Healing-Centered Organizing* (Aspen Institute, 2019); Shaun Ginwright, “Peace Out to Revolution! Activism Among African American Youth, An Argument for Radical Healing,” *Young* 18, no. 1 (2010): 77-96.

<sup>14</sup> See Schutz and Miller, *People Power*, for examples of key documents and the thought and activities of organizers informing the development of the neo-Alinsky vision.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker, “Community Organizing or Organizing Community? Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment,” *Gender & Society* 12, no. 6 (1998): 729-756.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., there is a fairly strict conceptual separation made between “public” and “private” relationships, with “public” relationships within and beyond organizing groups framed explicitly as essentially instrumental and based on self-interest. Schutz and Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change*.

<sup>17</sup> This is described in more detail in Schutz and Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change*.

the basis of power... Once admitted,...they have a place in the debate and the discussion and the compromise.<sup>18</sup>

Steven Lukes argued that “power” is an “essentially contested” term with many different meanings depending on how it is used.<sup>19</sup> In the realm of empowerment practice, the most important conceptualizer of a coherent model of different kinds of power is probably the Power Cube developed by John Gaventa, along with a wide range of feminist visions.<sup>20</sup> While I examine these in detail elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> for the purposes of this paper the most useful model seems to be a simple one Alinsky provided for community organizing. He argued that power is made up of either “organized people” or “organized money.”<sup>22</sup> Powerful people have access to organized money and access to organized people, in part through control of different institutions. In contrast, the powerless mostly have only their bodies.

Alinsky believed that the powerful pay no substantive attention to those who cannot demonstrate that they hold substantive power, who cannot affect anything the powerful care about. As a result, those without power are not treated as legitimate dialogic partners.<sup>23</sup> Thus, demonstrating such power is a precursor to any real engagement. A simple example of this can be seen in a story about the Black pastor of my church, who discovered that there was a trash-filled play-park behind our building. He called the local alderperson to get it cleaned up and got no response. He then asked people in his next service to pull out their cell phones and gave them the alderperson’s phone number. Quite a few left messages for the alderperson about the park. The park was cleaned up the next week, and the alderperson called the pastor to talk. An argument didn’t make a difference; a demonstration that the pastor had influence over enough people to matter to a local politician did.

Neo-Alinsky organizing leaders don’t want to be “liked.” They want to be “respected.” Organizing groups generally start by asking nicely for a change. When they are rebuffed, they shift to actions that pressure the powerful to make the changes they want. The goal is to get to the “table” where decisions are made (as Alinsky noted in the epigraph, above) and engage in negotiations over change as a legitimate “power player.” And there is always a willingness to go “back into the streets” if an adequate agreement is not reachable. Thus, a core motto of community organizing groups: “no permanent enemies, no permanent friends.”

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<sup>18</sup> Audio file in possession of author.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> John Gaventa, “Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis,” *IDS Bulletin* 37, no. 6 (2006): 23-33; Starhawk, *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups* (New York: New Society Publishers, 2011); Amy Allen, “Feminist Perspectives on Power,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/>.

<sup>21</sup> Schutz, *Empowerment*.

<sup>22</sup> Schutz and Miller, *People Power*.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Gecan, *Going Public*.

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For this process to work, there must be an identifiable person or persons who can be “targeted” and who can make the change the organization wants. Institutions, under this vision, do not make “decisions.” The organization develops an understanding of the motivations (self-interests) that drive this person or persons, so that any actions target these motivations.

Note that, from the organizing perspective, conflict—not reasonable dialogue but clashes between organizing groups and the powerful—is a positive thing. Alinsky argued that the organizer dedicated to changing the life of a particular community must first “rub raw the resentments of the people of the community... He must search out controversy and issues, rather than avoid them.”<sup>24</sup>

Through such clashes, organizing groups demonstrate that they have power and must, therefore, be engaged with issues. These clashes also can draw more members to the organization from the community, give the organization a public presence, provide a training ground for leaders, and more. So, organizing groups actually seek out issues that will require them to fight. This affects the long-term power of an organization as well. When a community has an organization that develops a reputation for power from such conflicts, the powerful are less likely to take actions that affect the community without first checking with the organizing group.

This is fundamentally a relational view of influence over people in power. Leaders and organizers need to know what makes a particular power holder “tick,” understand their self-interests, and organizations’ campaigns to get this person to negotiate are in part efforts to create a different kind of relationship. As a result, organizing groups often don’t want to go too far in their pressure tactics. If a powerful person begins to hate an organizing group to the point where the person won’t work with the group even if this would hurt their own self-interests, for example, this makes getting the changes sought much more difficult. Ultimately, organizing has generally been reformist and not revolutionary—trying to get the system to work, not to destroy it or its leaders.

#### PEOPLE POWER AS A NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS AND THE ONE-ON-ONE PROCESS

Just as organizing groups succeed or fail based on the relationships they create with the powerful, groups are also held together internally by relationships. Alinsky argued that the kind of leaders he wanted were looked up to, known, and trusted by local people. Two local pastors described his approach:

[Alinsky’s] people came quietly into the community. They asked questions, had discussions, and discovered places and people that we who have lived in Woodlawn for years did not imagine existed. Some of us ministers found ourselves being

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<sup>24</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 116.

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escorted to meet pool hall proprietors, janitors, distracted looking women on relief, stern retired mailmen. These individuals, we were informed, were community leaders. It was hard to believe. Most of them had little education; they spoke peculiar English, and their areas of greatest knowledge had nothing to do with traditional organizations. How could such people be leaders, we asked Alinsky's men? Because each of them [Alinsky's] representatives explained, had a larger or smaller following, a greater or smaller number of people who listened to what they said, who usually did what these "leaders" suggested.<sup>25</sup>

While certainly there are still local leaders in any community, American communities have fragmented since the 1940s and 1950s. The emergence of the non-profit industrial complex has crowded out old mutual aid and ethnic and racial organizations, and churches are fading as institutions. Membership organizations have declined precipitously in the United States.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Alinsky's original approach tended to accept current leaders as opposed to seeking out potential new leaders.

Partly as a result, the neo-Alinsky organizers who took over after Alinsky's death, like Ed Chambers and Ernie Cortes, developed what they called the one-on-one process to help leaders build *new* networks of relationships. In essence, the one-on-one is a fairly simple process. Leaders go out into their community and meet individually with prospective members and have discussions with them to understand what motivates them. What do they care about? These discussions accomplish a few things. First, they allow leaders to create a relationship with a wide range of new people. After finishing a one-on-one, you have built a bit of trust and know someone well enough that you can call them up and ask them to do things. Second, by holding many one-on-ones, leaders and organizers learn what people in their community are concerned about.<sup>27</sup> Even though a relatively small group of leaders may make decisions, they are informed by their relationships with and knowledge about many others within the community.

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<sup>25</sup> Schutz and Miller, *People Power*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Good sources for the one-on-one process includes Brown, *Building Powerful Community Organizations*; Schutz and Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change*; Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*; "Building a Base for Community Organizing, With a Focus on One-on-one Meetings," *New York City Organizing Support Center* (2000), <http://www.econnet.eu/media/Listening%20and%20recruitment/One%20on%20One%20Packet%20-%20NYC%20Organizing%20Support%20Center.pdf>; Relational 1 to 1 Handout, [https://ntcumc.org/Relational\\_1\\_to\\_1\\_Handout.pdf](https://ntcumc.org/Relational_1_to_1_Handout.pdf). Michael Jacoby Brown gives an example on video of how to conduct a one-on-one here: <https://youtu.be/4CARmuVJuqo>.

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Organizers often talk about seeking to understand people’s “self-interests” through this process. Self-interest is not the same as selfishness, however. Useful participants in community organizing groups do not participate because they are out to get something for themselves, alone. As Michael Jacoby Brown says, “Self-interest includes our whole selves, our stories and memories and the relationships we have with close friends and family. It involves all that makes us tick and why.”<sup>28</sup> Another word for “self-interest” is passion. Organizers like to say that community organizing gives people an opportunity to “turn their private pain into public action.”

One-on-ones are personal but public—somewhat intimate, but with an explicitly stated motive to draw people into action. Importantly, one-on-ones have no core agenda except to understand another person’s experiences, passions and concerns. Long-time neo-Alinsky organizer Michael Gecan says of one-on-ones:

[Our culture doesn’t] take the time to “relate,” to connect publicly and formally but meaningfully with others ... We don’t take the time to meet one to one with others, to hear ... interests and dreams and fears, to understand *why* people do what they do ... When you develop the habit of individual meetings, you stop thinking of people as “the poor” or “the rich” or “the establishment” or even “the enemy.” You don’t size up another person to see if you can make a sale ... [We discover] the many facets of people who have come to think of themselves as invisible or voiceless not just because the powers that be fail to see them and hear them, but because those who claim to care about their concerns also fail to relate to them and with them. And they see more facets of you.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, as I noted earlier, there is still something somewhat instrumental about the one-on-one process. While drawn in some ways from women’s traditions of organizing, it has a middle-class, white male spin to it. Neo-Alinsky organizers are quite clear that one is not trying to make “friends” through this process.<sup>30</sup> This differs from the language used by organizers in other traditions, like strands of the Black radical tradition, or forms of feminist organizing, where there is often an effort to create deeper relational ties and community that goes beyond participation in a social action group.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Building Powerful Community Organizations*, 201.

<sup>29</sup> Gecan, *Going Public*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> On public vs. private, see Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*.

<sup>31</sup> Garza, *Purpose of Power*; Stall and Stoecker, “Community Organizing or Organizing Community;” for some recent research that seems to support this point at moments, see Hanrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

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This vision of power as emerging out of a network of relationships, linked to the commitment to vibrant democracy, informs a vision of leadership that rejects “strong” or “charismatic” leaders who rule over others. A strong organization is seen as one with a broad leadership team. “Presidents” of organizations and other officers are generally elected for only a year or so. Organizers and leaders are constantly seeking to find new leaders.<sup>32</sup>

### CORE CONCEPTS

There are many more components to community organizing “theory,” but I believe what has been said so far provides a context to think about how these ideas might (and might not) contribute to education.

First, a brief summary of the core concepts discussed above. Community organizing:

- Creates durable democratic organizations with a reputation for effective action.
- Seeks substantive changes that respond to the concerns of the community.
- Governs through leaders who have relationships with many others in the community.
- Demonstrates power through collective conflict that targets the self-interests of powerful people.
- Develops relationships of respect with the powerful and membership at the tables where decisions are made.
- Draws groups together across fractures in the community around common cause against the powerful.
- Is generally reformist instead of revolutionary in its goals.

### ETHICS?

If you have faith in the people, you should have faith that they will evolve a people’s program. If it is not a program to your liking, remember that it is to their liking. Let all apostles of planning never forget that what is most important in life is substance rather than structure. The substance of a democracy is its people and if that substance is good—if the people are healthy, interested, informed, participating, filled with faith in themselves and others—then the structure will inevitably reflect its substance.<sup>33</sup>

It has been said by those who are attacking Alinsky and Alinsky-based organizing that community organizing is unethical.<sup>34</sup> This is not entirely

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<sup>32</sup> In this way, his vision was similar to that of Ella Baker.

<sup>33</sup> Alinsky, *Reveille*, 80.

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, those on the Right tend to treat Alinsky as a bugaboo (the fact that Hillary Clinton wrote her undergraduate thesis on him—he offered her a job—and that Obama was an organizer in a neo-Alinsky organization does not help), while most of

inaccurate. As Alinsky noted in the epigraph, above, organizing requires a level of “faith” in the “people” in a community. Ultimately, an organizer’s only real option if they don’t agree with the direction of the group is to resign. And Alinsky did have this deep faith—something that would surprise those who would demonize him—and this faith was often rewarded.

At the same time, Alinsky leaned on his principles of organizing to help ensure that things would work out. For example, he often sought out communities with groups that did not like or respect each other and used the organizing process to get them to work together. At one point, for example, he attempted to deal with the incredible housing discrimination of the 1950s by creating an organization that brought Blacks and whites together. This effort didn’t work out, and his first organization ended up working to keep African Americans out. But he had many successes as well.<sup>35</sup>

However, there are some ethical principles implied in the overall vision. For example, an organizing program must be grounded in the motivations and concerns of the people in the community. It should not be foisted upon them by some isolated group. And there is a core commitment to democracy. In fact, democracy and the creation of community power through which people could effectively act on their concerns was as important to Alinsky as “winning” on issues. In fact, he believed that organizing was essential to the maintenance of American democracy more broadly, asserting that the “confidence [of the people in their own]...power...which comes out of a People’s Organization is actually the strongest barrier and safeguard against Fascism which a democracy can possess.”<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, this focus on conflict and “winning,” unoriented by some ethical commitments, is dangerous. How does one decide what is an ethical

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those on the Left have never heard of him. At the same time as the Right attacks Alinsky, however, they also sometimes draw on a somewhat distorted version of him (focusing on tactics and conflict, but as far as I can tell ignoring his vision of democracy) in their efforts, including the early “alt-right” rebellion of the Tea Party in the Republican party and a training program in Alinsky approaches put on by the Koch brothers. Ashley Parker and Maggie Haberman, “With Koch Brothers’ Academy, Conservatives Settle In for a Long War,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/07/us/politics/kochs-republican-conservative.html>; Dylan Matthews, “Who is Alinsky, and Why Does the Right Hate Him So Much?” *Vox*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2014/10/6/6829675/saul-alinsky-explain-obama-hillary-clinton-rodham-organizing>.

<sup>35</sup> The organizer Shel Trapp tells an interesting story about this in Schutz and Miller, *People Power*.

<sup>36</sup> Alinsky, *Reveille*, 216. The Deweyans among you would recognize Alinsky’s broader vision of democracy as a process and not a set of rules: “The critics in this case continue to think of democracy only in terms of its form and structure. It is easier to think of democracy in those terms; it is neat and orderly. The other kind of democracy, real democracy, is as disorderly as life itself—it does not hold to a form; it grows, expands, and changes to meet the needs of the people,” p. 216.

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“action” against a “target” and what is not? How does a group decide what kinds of issues are ethical to fight for and which are not? Ultimately, aside from its faith in the people, Alinsky-based organizing has few resources to respond to these questions.

As a result, many organizing groups come together around some set of common values to orient their actions. In one organizing training, for example, an experienced organizer wrote comments made by participants about an effective organizing group out in a big circle on the board. Then he drew a heart at the center and wrote “values” inside it. If you don’t know your values, he emphasized, you are going to get yourselves into a great deal of trouble and potentially cause harm.

### COMMUNITY ORGANIZING THEORY AND EDUCATION

It should be no surprise that organizing theory has faced challenges in integrating itself into educational settings. Teachers and administrators do not see classrooms or schools as places for conflict. If students feel oppressed, they often see the school, rightly or wrongly, as a key source of that oppression. Teaching students this vision would seem likely to lead to conflict with the school over issues that staff and administration would rather not have to address and that may get them fired. While there is an expanding literature on youth and parent organizing in education, these efforts almost always happen outside of the school, itself.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, I believe that it would be extremely helpful for educational professionals to have a broader understanding of some of the key tenets of organizing theory. There would be a range of potential benefits. First, perhaps those in schools could be more receptive to student, parent, and community action when it happens; more conscious that, in fact, as people with power they and those above them really are not open to student perspectives that differ from theirs and that it may actually be the case that they need to be “pushed” if they are going to actually engage substantively with the concerns of those their decisions affect. Second, it might help staff and administrators understand better the myriad constraints they are under and the extent to which they may be resistant not because students or parents are necessarily wrong, but because to actually do something to address legitimate concerns would be risky and endanger staff’s own positions—and that this may be part of the reason they need to be pushed (and that people above them need to be “pushed” as well for them to be able to act). Third, while it may not generally be possible to teach students robust skills for community organizing, school staff informed about these principles might be in a position to engage with students, especially after a

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<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Jerusha Conner and Sonia M. Rosen, eds. *Contemporary Youth Activism: Advancing Social Justice in The United States* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016); Ginwright, *Beyond Resistance!*; Mark Warren and Karen L. Mapp, *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Barbara Ferman, *Fight for America’s Schools: Grassroots Organizing in Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2017).

“blowout” has already started. Fourth, some of these techniques and principles could be very useful in schools. For example, a principal or teacher might conduct a few one-on-ones with parents every week, developing a depth of community knowledge, relationships, as well as the capacity to engage parents in different efforts. (A commenter noted the dangers of placing this kind of “power” in the hands of an agent of the institution, which is absolutely true, of course. A better approach would be to create a democratic organization.)

We live in a world where some hold power and most have little substantive influence or control over the institutions and individuals that affect their lives and communities. Schools do not teach about power in this way—how it works or how to generate it. My college-level organizing class is especially interesting to many students not only because many are learning knowledge they didn’t even know existed. Some have participated in collective action efforts, and some have some sense of what seemed to work and not work, and some have had some training about ways to act effectively, but most have little idea that there might be a “method” in the madness. Again, what I teach is not the “truth” about power (in fact, I am increasingly critical of the limitations of what I have been teaching), but organizing theory is a kind of intellectual “pry tool” that lifts the shades that hide the fact that there are, in fact, effective (if always risky) principles for acting to resist power.

Ultimately, failing to teach about how power works is disempowering. It makes us complicit with the oppressive forces that affect our students’ lives. It’s okay to teach them how terrible the world is, or how to work together on common projects, or how to read or do math, but not that there are approaches for building power to actually change some of the terrible things around them. It’s too risky for us, and we don’t trust them to act in the ways “we” want. Some of us would rather believe what, in our heart of hearts, we know is a fantasy: that people in power will respond substantively if our students just try to collaborate nicely with them.

My point is not that everyone in schools should turn around and start teaching something like community organizing. If you haven’t participated in organizing, and if you don’t really have a depth of knowledge about the complexities that underly these somewhat simple principles, you aren’t equipped to “teach” someone how to act (I am careful about how I teach myself, given my own limited experience and skills). But it is possible to introduce students to the fact that these ideas exist and to a few of the key strategies, as long as we are humble and honest about the limitations of any “answers” in the always unique contexts of any struggle. We can walk together through case studies of organizing efforts and talk about what seemed to work and what didn’t and why. We can learn from each other, and trust that those we are working with, in the end, are thoughtful enough and informed enough by their own individual experiences and cultural traditions and collective efforts to make the best decisions for them.

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And, of course, this brings us around again to Alinsky’s faith in “the people.”

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**RESPONSE TO PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**  
CRITICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR  
EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Kathleen Knight Abowitz  
Miami University

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Aaron Schutz's research on community organizing is uniquely important interdisciplinary scholarship in the field of philosophy of education. His body of work in this area has informed much of my own writing about education publics and democratic governance.<sup>1</sup> His scholarship has also helped to foster and guide the explosion of interest in community organizing in educational research and practice in recent years as a way to build more authentic community-based engagements with schools.<sup>2</sup>

Schutz has given careful study to Alinsky's work and legacy, particularly the applications of his work for education and community contexts. In "Power and Trust in the Public Realm: John Dewey, Saul Alinsky, and the Limits of Democratic Progressive Education," he argues that the progressive moment's emphasis on deliberative styles of participation and reform are rooted in the privileged experiences and assumptions of the white middle class.<sup>3</sup> Progressives in education thus "remained blind to [and often denigrated] the democratic aspects of working-class organizations, such as unions and community action groups, which found strength in solidarity."<sup>4</sup> Schutz argues that progressives must get attuned to the "often brutal lessons about power learned by those with less privilege. Until they do so, their approaches to democratic education will continue to have limited capacity to support social transformation and empowerment in the world *as it is*."<sup>5</sup> As one of the progressive philosophers implicated in such critiques, I have learned much from his work.

Schutz has published an introduction to community organizing book, an edited collection on the history of community organizing in the tradition of

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Knight Abowitz, with Steve Thompson, *Publics for Public Schools: Democracy, Legitimacy, and Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Aaron Schutz, "Home is a Prison in the Global City: The Tragic Failure of School-based Community Engagement Strategies," *Review of Educational Research* 76, no. 4 (2006): 691-743; Mark Warren, *Willful Defiance: The Movement to Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Schutz & Marie G. Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Schutz & Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change*, 491.

<sup>5</sup> Schutz & Sandy, 491.

Alinsky, and his most recent book, *Empowerment: A Primer*.<sup>6</sup> His address today is a very small snapshot of a decade-plus worth of scholarship, and frankly, does not do it justice, nor attempt to do so. Instead, Schutz has given us a talk featuring an experiential session on one of the formative building blocks of all organizing work: the one-on-one interview or conversation. It seems befitting to the ethos of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society — a scholarly society where positive relationships have fed our work for decades — that Schutz focuses us on this very fundamental ritual. One-on-ones are a key organizing practice that, when done well, provide a moral core to community organizing work.

Schutz's talk includes an important focus on ethical questions in organizing, and it is here that he addresses some of the prickly normative tensions within community organizing as a power-building strategy. I want to explore some of these normative tensions based on my reading of new works about contemporary politics and political culture to explore how a mid-twentieth century community organizing practice can hold up in present political conditions. My critical points fall into three general categories: (1) the anti-masker sniff test, related to epistemological claims in organizing work; (2) the problem of weak communities for community organizing work today; and (3) the potential longer-term toll of adversarial forms of politics on public education institutions in times of intense polarization.

#### THE ANTI-MASKER SNIFF TEST

Schutz notes that educators and educational leaders need to understand the world as it is, not as we'd like it to be. Along these same lines, I paid close attention to what Schutz says happens when organizers work with people to identify a problem that they want to work on in an organizing campaign. Schutz states that organizing gives people an opportunity to "turn their private pain into public action." One-on-ones are designed to help people connect their lived experiences with imagining and then executing the work of public action. Schutz suggests that one-on-ones provide the data for organizers and leaders to understand what their community cares about and drive the development of specific changes to fight for.

In the post-positivist lust for narrative and story, and in light of critical race theory's powerful political emphasis on counter-story telling as strategy, I want to tread carefully as I assert that the data obtained through one-on-ones must be subject to conditions of questioning and inquiry. This is not simply because belief in something fails to make that something true. It is also because in present political culture, people are often suffering forms of intellectual arrogance, and these conditions can radically impede our ability to collect and

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<sup>6</sup> Aaron Schutz, "Power and Trust in the Public Realm: John Dewey, Saul Alinsky, and the Limits of Democratic Progressive Education," *Educational Theory* 61, no. 4 (2011): 491-512; Aaron Schutz, & Mike Miller, eds., *People Power: Classic Texts in the Alinsky Organizing Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015); Aaron Schutz, *Empowerment: A Primer* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

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weigh evidence — alongside our own conditions and experiences — as we attempt to address problems of injustice. Intellectual arrogance is the “unwillingness to regard your own worldview as capable of improvement from the evidence and the experience of others.”<sup>7</sup>

A community organizer doing one-on-ones in my Southwest Ohio community in 2021 would have gathered many stories about the pain and anguish that wearing a mask to school was causing children. They would hear from parents who understand mask-wearing to be inflicting dangerous physical and mental health conditions on students. Organizers could have easily gathered stories about the passions that families have for their personal freedoms in a democracy and how those freedoms cannot be taken away by government schools. In these one-on-ones, they would not have to work very hard to inspire people to partake in political actions against schools who are attempting to take away their freedoms by mandating masking at school. These actions would be based on the stories and perspectives that these one-on-ones surfaced and which were then woven together by organizers and leaders. As deliberative theorist Carasson notes, “we are suckers for simplistic good versus evil narratives. We are naturally storytellers, and our favorite stories cast ‘our side’ as the heroes, and those that disagree with us as the villains. We use these stories to help organize all the facts.”<sup>8</sup>

So, my first question for Schutz is, “does your community organizing work pass the anti-masker sniff test?” That is, does the process of one-on-ones help people critically analyze, question, and better understand their own experiences in any way? Can it help citizens understand their passions, their points of view, with more information, knowledge, and context? Or, is the assumption here one of a naïve standpoint epistemology, in which the knower’s unique positionality creates knowledge-creation conditions that are somehow organic and pure, despite the polluted political culture in which we currently live? Lynch writes that in our current political environment in the US, our beliefs become blind convictions, and

in turn, both reflect and encourage intellectual arrogance. They do so, we’ve found, in four main ways. First, the ideologies of arrogance exploit the natural and perfectly normal human desire for status and shared identity; second, they encourage loyalty to the tribe at all costs; third, they are hierarchical and adopt a politics of ‘us over ‘them,;’ and fourth, they express a distorted and self-deceptive view of truth and its importance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Lynch, *Know-it-All Society: Truth and Arrogance in Political Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Martín Carasson, “Why Process Matters: Democracy and Human Nature,” *National Civic Review* 107, no. 1 (2018): 36.

<sup>9</sup> Lynch, *Know-it-All Society*, 100.

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Community organizing today will be executed in conditions of intellectual arrogance and tribal politics, and these political conditions apply across the political spectrum. In a world of “alternative facts,” organizers can gather all kinds of passions and perspectives through one-on-ones, but, without reflexive inquiry practices, these one-on-ones can build even more tribal politics as people find like-minded folks who share and thus inspire more confidence in their own viewpoints.

#### THE PROBLEM OF WEAK COMMUNITIES

Schutz explains organizing conceives of people power as a web of relationships and that one-on-ones are the human relational foundations upon which organizing work is (slowly) built. Relational ties and community bonds are weaker now than in Alinsky’s time. This makes the one-on-one even more important as an organizing fundamental, but also suggests how the one-on-one might today end up being a relatively weak tool for community building.

When Alinsky began his work in Chicago, he was working in neighborhoods that were segregated by race, ethnicity, and religion; the (Catholic) Church was a stronghold for many and a center of personal and family rituals; the ties of labor unions and ethnic associations were developing into strong sources for communal life. While the people he organized in the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council were from many different ethnic groups, he worked *with* the Archdiocese to summon their power — and, importantly, people’s trust in the Church — to build a political coalition. The pre-existing community ties in those neighborhoods created rich conditions for political organizing: community and church ties had created qualities of interdependence, mutual trust and aid that were moral resources for organizing work. There was, in effect, already feeling and interpersonal resources for a “we” to muster against the “they” of political power and that made organizing that much easier and more powerful.

Schutz understands that we have weaker bonds today; bonds of membership in both religious and labor associations, for example, are weaker as these institutions have both lessened in influence. Other forms of social bonds have grown in interest, such as online associations and social media interactions.<sup>10</sup> Online communities have their drawbacks, however, insofar as some social media platforms are built with the intent to create information pollution and also have the effect of expanding tribalism and its accompanying moral outrage through online expression.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, tribalism is both an argument for the strength of communities today and simultaneously a dangerous warning about what political communities can degenerate into. “Everything in American politics today entrenches tribalism: our winner-take-all elections, the

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<sup>10</sup> Alexandra Hudson, “Bowling Alone at Twenty,” *National Affairs* 52 (Fall), <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/bowling-alone-at-twenty>

<sup>11</sup> Lynch, *Know-it-All Society*.

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dehumanizing commentary on cable news and social media, the people we choose to talk to and live among.”<sup>12</sup>

Community organizing is easier, perhaps, with stronger communities already in existence, but are weaker communities a deal-breaker for political organizing today? Organizing people without strong communities already in place can mean that organizing is more arduous and challenging to make successful, as people lack established networks of trust, leadership, and collaboration and must develop these through the organizing process. Communities also give people practice and skills in practicing consideration and regard for others; it helps us create habits in society with others which force us to consider their welfare, rights, and standing as fellow community members. Membership in communities informs and expands our notion of self-interest, in other words, in important ways.

Community organizing relies on some of these qualities and skills that are wrapped up in community life. There is not any singular form of community life that helps facilitate the trust and interdependence required to make organizing successful, but, as Schutz notes, organizing’s power is boosted through the communal solidarity that motivates people to continue showing up at actions over time. The one-on-one will surely be only a baby step towards what’s required. So, while the one-on-one significantly brings the relational priorities of organizing to the fore for us, we should not let its warm and fuzzy tones lull us into substituting a conversation for a community. Any community is constituted by multiple conversations and lived practices sedimented over time, within shared material conditions, amidst celebrations and struggles. People without much experience or time spent in communities may have a harder time getting motivated for organizing around a shared self-interest with others.

#### ADVERSARIAL POLITICS AND DEMOCRATIC TRADE-OFFS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

My last point goes beyond Schutz’s presentation to consider the trade-offs and perhaps unintended consequences resulting from the enchantment with adversarial politics (including my own) in the present era of public education.<sup>13</sup> The over-abundance of adversarial politics at the expense of other forms makes me worry for the further decay of legitimacy of public education institutions.

We can think of three types of politics that shape governance in education, all important and useful to certain governance ends, and all subject to

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<sup>12</sup> George Packer, “A New Report offers insight into Tribalism in the Age of Trump,” *The New Yorker*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/a-new-report-offers-insights-into-tribalism-in-the-age-of-trump>.

<sup>13</sup> Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Dan Mamlok, “#NeverAgainMSD Student Activism: Lessons for Agonist Political Education in an Age of Democratic Crisis,” *Educational Theory* 70, no. 6 (2021): 731-748.

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misuse and corruption, too.<sup>14</sup> The first is adversarial and agonist politics, designed to center conflict and mobilize actors in a show of power against those holding power in institutions. Adversarial politics include community organizing models, as well as others, including mobilizing and activism. Adversarial politics is part of what Chantal Mouffe is pointing to when she stated, in 2018, that we are “in a populist moment.”<sup>15</sup>

The second is deliberative, designed to weigh diverse perspectives and viewpoints of people involved with a problem or institution and using those perspectives to come to political judgement and decision-making. Deliberative decision-making in education can take all kinds of forms and structures, and when well-designed and supported, can build new agreements and habits in local educational practice. The third type is administrative and expertise politics, in which experts and those working within institutions summon data, research, and, often, technical solutions to educational problems and challenges.

By far and away, most education politics is administrative and the realm of expertise. Because of this, and because of the structural oppressions still baked into the administrative structures and habits of education, we need correctives in the form of different political forms. Correctives can take the form of adversarial and deliberative politics. Adversarial political strategies can excel at pushing decision-makers to recognize and give way to alternative realities and perspectives of those marginalized in present schooling. Deliberative politics can nurture the community consensus-building required in living policy change, in fostering both the inquiry and the new understandings that can cause shifts in our present thinking, habits, and educational practices. This is why we need more writing and practice in the realm of adversarial and deliberative political work, and part of the reason why Schutz’s ongoing research in this arena is so important. Community organizing seeks to bring *communities* — not administrative expertise or external accountability priorities — back into central consideration by the educational experts and policymakers. This is critical work.

Yet I worry about how adversarial politics helps to erode public education institutional legitimacy, which itself is a public good that is in diminishing supply. Stitzlein defines legitimacy as when “The political legitimacy of a state or its institutions arises from citizens concluding that the state or its institutions are worthy of recognition and serve a justified role.”<sup>16</sup> Habermas helps her expand the point: “But inasmuch as the state assumes the guarantee to prevent social disintegration by way of binding decisions, the exercise of state power is tied to the claim of maintaining society in its

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<sup>14</sup> Martín Carasson, “Toward a More Perfect Union: An Introduction to the Deliberative Democracy Movement.” Presentation on March 11, 2011, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

<sup>15</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Stitzlein, “Addressing Educational Accountability and Political Legitimacy with Citizen Responsibility,” *Educational Theory* 65, no. 5 (2015): 574.

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normatively determined identity.”<sup>17</sup> Legitimacy is a necessary requirement for democratic institutions, otherwise their power to make law and policy cannot be considered authorized by the people, the *demos*.

This worry over legitimacy and democratic stability — from a scholar who has written favorably about both organizing and agonist citizenship education — will raise honest questions. It will no doubt sound suspiciously like a white middle class progressive who is uncomfortable with an age of adversary politics which challenges the status quo. Maybe that’s exactly all this objection amounts to. But let me make my case, and you can be the judge.

We exist in a politically polarized era. Robert Talisse, in *Overdoing Democracy: Why we Must Put Politics in its Place*, defines polarization as a condition where political officials and others are so deeply divided that there is no basis for compromise, coordination, or even productive communication. Polarization paralyzes democracy. But, in order to thrive, a democracy needs to get things done.<sup>18</sup>

Talisse further urges that we must distinguish between political polarization and belief polarization. He writes that “democracy’s trouble lies with the latter, partly because belief polarization is what renders political polarization toxic.”<sup>19</sup> Belief polarization “besets individuals who talk only or mainly to others who share their fundamental commitments.”<sup>20</sup> These conditions exacerbate our distance, physically, socially, and intellectually, from our opponents and make our own views more extreme over time. Talisse argues that belief polarizations “invokes a change in our beliefs; particularly it involves a change that renders us more extreme versions of ourselves.”<sup>21</sup>

Public schools run on what we hope is, most days, principled compromises among viewpoints, data, and political interests which are extremely diverse. The art and ability of parents, teachers, and policymakers to find meaningful (and not simply efficient) points of compromise on important issues is essential, but, for too many people on the right and left sides of adversarial politics, the word “compromise” is just another word for “capitulation.”<sup>22</sup> How, for example, can we imagine “compromise” on racial equity, disability rights, or individual liberties? The very idea seems morally repugnant, but practical wisdom seeks the specifics of how any of these ideals are achieved, imperfectly, in practice.

Schools must be places where parents, teachers, and leaders can regularly come to working agreements, as it were, regarding issues about which

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1979), 180.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in Its Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 93.

<sup>19</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 94.

<sup>20</sup> Talisse, 97.

<sup>21</sup> Talisse, 97.

<sup>22</sup> Talisse, 95.

people substantially disagree. Part of this agreement is found in social trust, where teachers and administrators are trusted to do their jobs, with proper oversight and accountability measures that are locally meaningful.<sup>23</sup> There is no doubt that adversarial politics are essential as part of the process through which problems impeding access or justice for some students are brought into light and pushed towards attention by those with power. These adversarial politics can weaken the legitimacy of public education when those in power fail to respond adequately or positively to the conditions or injustices which are the object of complaint. Many of us would say, yes, indeed, this is how adversarial politics can work to strengthen the responsiveness and therefore, in the long run, the legitimacy of public schools.

There are two flaws with this logic. One is that, in conditions of belief polarization and adversarial politics, there are multiple and opposing movements to educational policy at any point in time, such that responding fully to the demands of one means damaging legitimacy in the eyes of another. So, acting on the power demands of community organizing groups to change a school discipline policy might build legitimacy among some groups while damaging legitimacy among other groups who want a “tough love” approach in schools.

The second flaw in the logic that adversarial politics ought to improve and not erode the legitimacy of public schools has to do with the conditions created by the present “war on public education” that is not new, but has been gaining ground for two decades.<sup>24</sup> In Ohio, Arizona, and Florida, among other states, those elected to serve in democratic institutions like state government, and who are responsible to keep public education thriving, are aggressively working towards the weakening of this institution. Adversarial conditions for public education are found not just on the streets, but in state houses across the U.S. It is found in budget bills passed by legislatures that expand access to private school vouchers and weaken financial support for public schools over the long term. It is found in anti-CRT legislation that has become law in many states.<sup>25</sup> It is found in the recent Supreme Court decisions that will support mechanisms to provide state education funds to religious schools, weakening state support for the public system.<sup>26</sup> It is found in the “parents’ rights” movements and advocates

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<sup>23</sup> Derek Gottlieb, *A Democratic Theory of Educational Accountability: From Test-Based Assessment to Interpersonal Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Gerald Bracey, *The War Against America’s Public Schools: Privatizing Schools, Commercializing Education* (New York: Pearson, 2001); Kathleen Knight Abowitz, “The War on Public Education: Agonist Democracy and the Fight for Schools as Public Things,” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 25, no. 1 (2018): 1-15.

<sup>25</sup> World Population Review, “States that have banned Critical Race Theory 2022,” <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/states-that-have-banned-critical-race-theory>.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Joseph Stern, “John Roberts just bulldozed the wall separating church and state,” *Slate*, June 30, 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/06/supreme-court-espiroza-montana-religious-schools.html>.

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that have become mainstream actors in educational politics and governance at the local and state levels.<sup>27</sup>

Public education has any number of powerful enemies across the political spectrum, and some of these enemies have certainly been legitimately earned. Yet adversarial conditions will not allow educators to find meaningful compromises in their communities to advance educational goals and aspirations for that community's students. Adversarial politics and conditions are contributing to (and a sign of) the overall diminishment of political legitimacy of U.S. public schooling. This legitimacy is a key part of protecting the ability of education to exist, at least in some sense, independently of market forces and consumerist values, focused on student and community growth and flourishing, and as an important institution supporting the least powerful and most vulnerable of our students and families.

I close this response to Schutz's presidential address with the same appreciation and respect I used in its opening paragraphs. Community organizing has much to teach educators, students, and parents. Schutz shows how community organizing is being used to strengthen public schooling's responsiveness to marginalized communities in efforts to reform local public schools, noting its reformist rather than revolutionary aims in this work. But present conditions of political life in the United States raise a number of alarms regarding how and to what ends it will be put to use, including how much adversarial politics might be not the remedy for a stronger, more inclusive public education system, but ultimately, play a role in its demise. This would be a revolutionary, as opposed to reformist, use of community organizing, indeed.

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<sup>27</sup> Catherine Caruso, "The Parental rights movement is history repeating itself," *Dame*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.damemagazine.com/2022/03/09/the-parental-rights-movement-is-history-repeating-itself/>.

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## CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AS FORMATION FOR PLURALISM

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Education for pluralism — for living well with others in the midst of our deep, inescapable differences — is a significant concern for philosophy of education. In this paper, I draw the attention of philosophers of education to the resources for educating for pluralism that can be found in an altogether unexpected site: the liturgical practices of Christian worship.

Given the surprising and potentially controversial nature of this claim, a few clarifications are worth making at the outset. First, even within the Christian tradition, ‘worship’ can mean many things, from more narrow understandings that reduce it to singing praises to God, to much broader interpretations that extend the idea to include, for instance, an individual’s sense of and communion with God while alone in nature. For our purposes, I take ‘worship’ to refer specifically to the practices of a gathered community of Christians, particularly on Sundays, that are intentionally focused on God and dedicated to giving Him glory. In particular, in this paper I do not address the use of elements of worship in formal classrooms, whether Christian or otherwise. Various Christian thinkers have already explored some possibilities for using aspects of the worship liturgy in classroom teaching.<sup>1</sup> Much more good work can and should be done along this highly generative line of thought, but it is not the approach I take in this paper.

A second clarification: I focus exclusively on *Christian* worship, and especially Christian worship within one particular tradition of Christianity: Reformed Protestantism. It may be that other religious traditions offer their own possibilities for educating their adherents for pluralism; it may also be that education for pluralism can take place wholly apart from participation in anything like religious worship. I make no attempt here to argue for the *exclusivity* or even the *superiority* of Christian worship with respect to formation for pluralism, but only its *ability*.

Finally, yet most importantly, nothing I say in this paper should be taken to advocate an instrumental understanding of participation in Christian worship. As Reformed Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith explains, “even [formation] is a by-product of the fundamental aim of worship, which is praise and adoration of the triune God. The point of worship is not formation; rather, formation is an overflow effect of our encounter with the Redeemer in praise and

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Paul Gutacker, Elizabeth Travers Parker, Cody Strecker, and Nicholas Krause, “A symposium on teaching virtue: Interdisciplinary perspectives on pedagogy, liturgy, and moral formation,” *International Journal of Christianity & Education* 23, no. 2 (2019): 204–230.

prayer, adoration and communion.”<sup>2</sup> Smith elsewhere emphasizes that, “While we believe that it engenders formation, [Christian liturgy] is a normative good apart from its effectiveness precisely because it is the way we meet God, the practice by which the Spirit invites us into the triune life of the Godhead.”<sup>3</sup> Reformed Christian ethicist Matthew Kaemingk similarly insists, “we must be clear that worship is an end in and of itself. The glory of God is its own justification.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, Kaemingk further argues that making the formative power of worship more important than worship itself serves to undermine that formative potential: “if the worshipper is focused primarily on herself and the betterment of her moral nature, she will not be able to see or receive the moral nature of the One she is worshipping.”<sup>5</sup> It is right and good for Christians to engage in regular, intentional, gathered, embodied, Christ-centered worship regardless of its formative effects on their ability to live well in the midst of pluralism.

Yet Christian worship *is* formative, and it is formative in ways that directly relate to living well in the midst of pluralism. I consider each of these claims in turn.

### WORSHIP AS FORMATION

The argument that participation in Christian worship is formative rests on a more basic claim about formation, and one that is familiar to philosophers of education: our most powerful education comes not through formal instruction but through informal, regular participation in embodied practices, which shape our sense of self, our view of the world, and our understanding of the story in which we live. Sometimes we consciously and intentionally engage in such practices and the formation they entail, but more often we are formed by them unconsciously and unintentionally.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, some such practices carry more weight and impart more meaning than others; some are ‘thin’ and others are ‘thick.’ Smith refers to the thickest practices, the ones that have the greatest formative power, as ‘liturgies’ (a term he deliberately extends beyond the particular context of Christian worship): “More specifically, I want to distinguish liturgies as *rituals of ultimate concern*: rituals that are formative for identity, that inculcate particular visions of the good life, and do so in a way that means to trump other ritual formations.”<sup>7</sup> Importantly, Smith roots his claims regarding the formative power of liturgies in a particular philosophical anthropology that understands human beings as most fundamentally shaped by particular desires, heart affections, and loves. “The core claim of this book is that liturgies —

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<sup>2</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 150.

<sup>3</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 207.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 206.

<sup>5</sup> Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 206.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 80–81, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 86.

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whether ‘sacred’ or ‘secular’ — shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we *love*.<sup>8</sup> Liturgies form who we are by forming what we love.

Although liturgies can be found in all areas of life, Smith calls particular attention to the formative effects of distinctively Christian gathered worship, explaining how each element of Christian worship shapes those who regularly participate in it.<sup>9</sup> To give just a handful of examples, the Call to Worship at the beginning of the service shows congregants that their worship is a response to something larger than themselves;<sup>10</sup> in the Confession of Sin and the Assurance of Pardon, congregants practice receiving forgiveness for their own sin and forgiving the sins of others;<sup>11</sup> the Lord’s Supper brings the Christian story to life in vivid, tangible symbols and points beyond the limitations and imperfections of present-day worship to its fulfillment at Christ’s return;<sup>12</sup> and the Offering enacts an economics of gratitude in response to God’s many gifts, rather than one of consumption or competition.<sup>13</sup>

One particularly compelling site of formation in Christian worship is congregational singing of Psalms and hymns. Smith points out that singing involves our entire bodies and therefore shapes our heart desires more thoroughly than mere speaking ever could.<sup>14</sup> The Psalms in particular train those who sing them in a new language for talking to God and responding to the many joys and difficulties that life brings.<sup>15</sup> Kaemingk drives home the role of singing in worship as language training: “through years of singing, a worshipper stores up a rich spiritual and emotional vocabulary that will help her express praise in times of joy, confession in times of guilt, and lamentation in times of frustration.”<sup>16</sup>

The fact that congregants participate in “*years of singing*” (and worshipping more generally) is important here. The formative potential of Christian worship does not come to fruition overnight. As Kaemingk observes, “A worshipper’s response to falling skyscrapers and murdered countrymen will be determined much more by the three thousand songs he sang before the trauma than the three songs he sings after.”<sup>17</sup> In consequence, “the true power of worship lies in its ability to prepare worshippers for tragedies and crisis before they come.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, 159–207.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, 159–166.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 176–182.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 197–203.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, 203–205.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, 170–171.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, 171–173.

<sup>16</sup> Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 224. Both Smith and Kaemingk make substantial use of the work of Reformed Christian worship scholar John Witvliet.

<sup>17</sup> Kaemingk, 227.

While worship can be reactive, it works better when it is understood as preparatory.”<sup>18</sup> Smith makes a similar point about the slowness of formation through worship:

One of the most crucial things to appreciate about Christian formation is that it happens over time. It is not fostered by events or experiences; real formation cannot be affected by actions that are merely episodic. There must be a rhythm and regularity to formative practices in order for them to seep into our *kardia* [heart] and begin to be effectively inscribed into who we are, directing our passion to the kingdom of God and thus disposing us to action that reflects such a desire.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, this slow accretion of affective, embodied desires and heart orientations over time is one crucial way that a Christian education rooted in worship differs from a more cognitivist approach to Christian education that emphasizes developing and maintaining right beliefs. The latter approach, which emphasizes what Christians *think* over what they *do* and *love*, holds considerable sway among Christian educators in America today. As Smith says, “Before we articulate a worldview, we worship...given the sorts of animals we are, we pray *before* we believe, we worship before we know — or rather, we worship *in order* to know.”<sup>20</sup> Intellectual formulations of Christian faith, then, come about *in response to* Christian worship: “Live worship is the fount from which worldview springs, rather than being the expression or application of some cognitive set of beliefs already in place.”<sup>21</sup>

One way that formal, doctrinal, cognitive instruction supports the formative work of Christian worship is through what Smith calls *liturgical catechesis*, a term that connects worship with the Christian church’s historic practice of instructing children and new believers in the basics of the faith.

Indeed, we might think of the heart of discipleship and faith formation as liturgical catechesis whereby instruction in the faith is primarily focused on helping the people of God understand why we do what we do when we gather for worship...In short, liturgical catechesis will encourage reflection and worship precisely so we constitute worship *as* that “suite“ of disciplines that are habituations of the Spirit,

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<sup>18</sup> Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 226.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 226.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, 33–34.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, 136.

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into which we're invited in order to learn how to imagine the kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, Smith suggests that a *neglect* of liturgical catechesis may partly account for a *failure* to form a Christian character through worship.

In particular, the failure of catechesis often contributes to a compartmentalization that effectively nullifies the liturgical practices of worship, undercutting their counter-formative power. When we are never invited to understand why we do what we do when we worship, then the repertoire of practices is no longer worship but something else — an ethnic identifier, a superstitious hedge, a way to consolidate social capital, or whatever. Liturgical catechesis is an integral aspect of formative worship.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, as important as liturgical catechesis is, even this is not enough: the congregant's own attitude, whether of openness to change through worship or of simply 'going through the motions,' shapes and constrains the formative power of participation in Christian worship, even as congregants are themselves shaped by that participation. There is a tension here that Smith does not seek to resolve: "worship requires full, active, conscious participation even if it is also forming us in ways that elude our conscious awareness."<sup>24</sup> Overall, then, the mitigating influence of the congregant's own attitude and the frequent neglect of liturgical catechesis lead to a sobering result: "clearly, regular participation in the church's 'orthodox' liturgy is not enough to prevent such 'worshippers' from leaving the sanctuary to become (sometimes enthusiastic) participants in all sorts of unjust systems, structures, and behaviors."<sup>25</sup> Though Christian worship is powerful, it offers no guarantees.

Kaemingk, writing later than Smith and perhaps benefiting from the critiques raised in response to Smith's work, acknowledges the limitations on worship's formative potential even more diligently. He notes three ways that Christian worship can be impotent or even malformative rather than beneficial: through oversimplification, through sentimentality, or through lack of worshipper participation and understanding.<sup>26</sup> Yet, he maintains, the response to these shortcomings is not to abandon formation through Christian worship, but rather to more faithfully pursue Christian worship that involves full congregational participation (*and* catechesis) and reflects the genuine richness and complexity of Scripture and the Christian tradition. Kaemingk urges Christians to dive deeper into the resources of Christian worship, rather than giving up after only experiencing the shallows.

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<sup>22</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 187, 189, emphasis original.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 205.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 187.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 167–168.

<sup>26</sup> Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 233–235.

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 WORSHIP AS FORMATION FOR PLURALISM

Even granting the formative potential of Christian worship, the relevance of worship for *pluralism* might not be immediately obvious. After all, congregants gather as *Christians* to worship the *Christian* God, not any other, an exclusive practice that could seem to work against a commitment to pluralism. To address this, I draw on Christian legal scholar John Inazu’s framework of “confident pluralism,” which involves three aspirations: patience, tolerance, and humility. I use these aspirations to illuminate the connection between pluralism and Christian worship.<sup>27</sup>

First, the liturgical movements of Christian worship train congregants in *patience*, as their understanding of their present cultural moment is reoriented in light of Christ’s first and second coming. “It is in the formative worship of the church — rehearsing the biblical drama whose *telos* is the eschatology [that is, Christ’s return at the end of time] — that we learn both the norms of flourishing *and* how to wait.”<sup>28</sup> Again, the Psalms in particular provide a new language — one learned best through singing — with which to respond to specific moments of tragedy, hurt, injustice, or failure (whether personal or communal) in both lament and hope for reconciliation. Especially when understood in light of Jesus’ crucifixion, the Psalms offer an alternative vision of human moments in which God is not only present in our suffering, but suffers with us.<sup>29</sup> This alternative vision and new language enable Christians to live with, and even be hurt by, those who are deeply different from them, without seeking to secure their own safety or comfort but instead pursuing the good of those around them, trusting in God’s eventual restoration of all things.

Similarly, Christian worship’s Godward focus cultivates the *humility* that is indispensable for living well in the midst of deep pluralism. Kaemingk differentiates Christian humility from mere modesty:

Modesty is a nice word. But Christians have historically used heavier words to describe what they wrestle with during periods of self-examination. Christian descriptions of the self include weighty words like blind, broken, depraved, evil, weak, selfish, and feeble. The Christian virtue of humility goes beyond...modesty. Christian pluralists confess that they are

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<sup>27</sup> John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2016). In so doing, I am following Smith’s suggestion that we can begin to explore this connection by “align[ing] Inazu’s aspirational virtues (tolerance, humility, patience) with the rhythms and rituals of historic Christian worship and consider how/whether/why these emerge from the imaginary carried in liturgical practices.” Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 147–148.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 89, emphasis original.

<sup>29</sup> Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 231–233.

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not simply contingent — they are bent, broken, and deformed.<sup>30</sup>

Kaemingk finds the potential for cultivating humility especially concentrated in the specific kinds of prayer found in the liturgy of Christian worship: the prayer for illumination, offered before reading and preaching Scripture, which “trains worshippers in epistemic humility;” the prayer of confession of sin, which “trains them in moral humility;” and the intercessory prayer, in which they “practice taking on the hopes and fears, needs and feelings of others,” thereby being formed in “self-forgetfulness.”<sup>31</sup> In learning to see their ability to know, their moral uprightness, and their personal importance through *God’s* eyes, participants in Christian worship develop the humility that will enable them to live with those who are different from them without assuming that they alone are knowledgeable, that they alone are good, or that they alone matter. And this attitude grows not (only) through listening to a sermon or reading a treatise on humility, but through *acting out* a posture of humility in regular prayer in the company of others.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, Christian worship trains congregants in *tolerance*, not through relativizing or privatizing their deepest commitments, but through reminding them of their own strangeness to and alienation from God, and of His welcome of them. Smith connects this to the Passing of the Peace, a pause in the middle of the service for participants to greet one another. Smith interprets this moment of the liturgy in terms of both receptivity and hospitality: “In response to God’s gracious welcome, we practice hospitality in worship, which is practice for extending hospitality beyond it.”<sup>32</sup> At first glance, it might seem that those offering welcome and those being welcomed are so similar to one another that the question of pluralism is irrelevant. But in fact, many significant kinds of difference *do* manifest in Christian worship. In particular, one aspect of social difference that is all too often overlooked is that of *age*. I wholeheartedly echo Smith’s point that “there is something deeply formative about *intergenerational* worship that is crucial to the kind of people the church is called to be.”<sup>33</sup> Especially for young people, regularly participating in communal worship with parents and grandparents, babies, toddlers, and retirees, offers practice in welcoming (and being welcomed by) those who are different in immediately perceptible ways.

The implications of Christian worship for tolerance come to the fore in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Smith points out that this shared meal is both “a table prepared in the presence of *our* enemies” and “a table where *God* sits down with those who were once *his* enemies” — that is, Christians themselves.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kaemingk, 228.

<sup>31</sup> Kaemingk, 228–230.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 169–170.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, 225, emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, 201, emphasis added.

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“The Supper is a gracious communion with a forgiving God; but it is also a supper we eat *with one another*, and that too will require forgiveness.”<sup>35</sup> Most Christian traditions only offer participation in the Lord’s Supper to those who are themselves Christians. Even so, practicing forgiveness, reconciliation, and table fellowship with those who share the same faith prepares congregants to do so with those who are *not* Christians, as well. “As a school for learning to love our neighbor, and thus becoming reconciled, it is also a school for learning to love our enemies — the most scandalous element of renewed community in the kingdom come.”<sup>36</sup> Once again, this love and reconciliation is possible not because of an abstract commitment to tolerance, but rather because of a deep appreciation that Christians themselves are the recipients of God’s loving forgiveness, a truth enacted and experienced throughout the elements of Christian worship.

#### CONCLUSION: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Given the inherent exclusivity of Christian worship, it is surprising to discover that it holds such potential as a site for formation for pluralism. On the contrary, however, as each of the examples discussed here demonstrates, the very distinctiveness of Christian worship proves to be not a barrier to pluralism, but rather the foundation for it. This offers a pointed contrast to a liberal understanding of education for pluralism, which requires students to hold their commitments loosely in order to live well with others.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, formation through worship contradicts liberal understandings of freedom as autonomy. Smith sees this particularly clearly in the liturgical moment of the reading of God’s law, whether through the Ten Commandments or some other divine command in Scripture.

Embedded in this practice is an understanding of freedom that runs counter to almost every other cultural institution of which we, in Western democracies, are a part. The announcement of the law and the articulation of God’s will for our lives signals that our good is not something that we determine or choose for ourselves...Such a conception of autonomous freedom as freedom of choice — freedom to construct our own ends and to invent our own visions of the good life — chafes against the very notion of a law outside of ourselves.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 201.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, 203.

<sup>37</sup> Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For more on the difference between a liberal approach to education for pluralism and one rooted in Christian worship, see Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 215–219.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 175.

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Philosophers of education tend to see pluralism and autonomy-based liberalism as basically complementary, even when they recognize some tension between these values.<sup>39</sup> This analysis of Christian worship suggests, on the contrary, that repeatedly enacting a stance of submission to a higher law can in fact provide justifications for living well with others that cannot be found in liberalism's autonomy.

Worth comparing here is philosopher of education David Lewin's argument that "every movement of learning entails a kind of epistemological submission or affirmation that generally goes unnoticed and unthematized."<sup>40</sup> An interesting continuation of this paper's project would be to expand Lewin's discussion of submission in education to include *all* the kinds of humility with which Kaemingk identifies the prayers of the Christian liturgy: not just epistemic humility but moral humility and self-forgetfulness as well.<sup>41</sup> Is it as easy to apply these latter kinds of submission to a post-secular context? And if not, does that raise questions about post-secularism's ability to extend welcome to religious ways of life?

Finally, the formative potential of worship depends upon congregants' participation with their whole bodies, which works against the cognitivist orientation of both many Christians and many liberals.<sup>42</sup> As Kaemingk explains,

Employing the body is particularly uncomfortable for many Western Christians for the simple reason that their disembodied ideas about faith demand less than their embodied actions of faith. The anxious discomfort a Westerner feels when she commits her whole body to a liturgical act tells us something about that action's power and implications.<sup>43</sup>

Western liberals, and Christians shaped by life in the midst of Western liberalism, resist this embodied participation because it calls forth their whole selves. Yet it is precisely this whole-self involvement that makes Christian worship so effectively formative.

<sup>39</sup> For a particularly astute articulation of both the nature of pluralism and autonomy-based liberalism and the relationship between them, see Walter Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> David Lewin, *Educational Philosophy for a Post-secular Age* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2017), 87.

<sup>41</sup> Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 228–230.

<sup>42</sup> For further discussion of the cognitive focus of both Christian and secular understandings of religion, see Lewin, *Educational Philosophy for a Post-secular Age*, Chapter 3. Note however that, at least regarding the Christian religion, Lewin perhaps goes too far in *de-emphasizing* cognitive beliefs.

<sup>43</sup> Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 223–224.

In fact, some liberals are starting to rediscover the formative potential of regular, repeated, communal, whole-body activities. Kaemingk briefly considers the work of Jeffrey Stout, William Connolly, and Adam Seligman and Robert Weller regarding formation for pluralism through shared rituals, noting that “the Christian church has always known what liberals and pragmatists are just now discovering — the habits of the heart are shaped more by ritual and shared experience than by ideas and institutions.”<sup>44</sup> Even so, there is a crucial difference between the rituals of liberalism and the rituals of Christian worship, and that is the primary agent of change. Kaemingk explains that Stout “argues that the spirit of democracy will be self-actualized and self-nourished by the streams of solidarity located within the human spirit itself... We, the people, are responsible for nourishing ourselves.”<sup>45</sup> In contrast, the formative power of Christian worship works not *because* of human effort, but *in spite* of it — since all that humans do is always tainted by sin. “Thankfully,” Kaemingk explains, “...the primary agent in worship is not the pluralist — it is God. Through the Holy Spirit’s invasion into the sanctuary, the imperfect sermons, songs, and practices of disciples can become powerful avenues for spiritual and political nourishment.”<sup>46</sup> My purpose in raising this point here is not to argue that God is in fact present and active in Christian worship (which would take us well beyond the scope of this paper), but rather to highlight two deeply different understandings of how formation occurs. Those who accept one or the other of these two understandings will necessarily have widely divergent views on what kind of education is necessary for living well in the midst of pluralism.

Despite the contrast between Christian worship and liberal educational philosophy, Christian worship remains deeply significant for many members of our society — as do also worship practices in other religions. At the same time, religious worship provides a powerful example of informal, embodied formation, putting on display the longstanding adage of educational philosophy, ‘education is more than schooling.’ For these reasons, philosophers of education would do well to pay greater attention to the potential that religious worship has for both formation and malformation. By drawing attention to the possibilities of Christian worship for formation for living well in the midst of pluralism, I hope that this paper will open the door for further philosophy of education research on religious worship as a site of education.

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<sup>44</sup> Kaemingk, 202.

<sup>45</sup> Kaemingk, 236.

<sup>46</sup> Kaemingk, 236.

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## A PANDEMIC OF IGNORANCE: MANUFACTURED IGNORANCE AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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What is ignorance? One response is that ignorance is the absence of knowledge. But given that what constitutes knowledge is complex, what is *not* knowledge is arguably even more complex. When questions are asked about knowledge, we assert, questions should also be asked about ignorance. Nancy Tuana concurs. She writes that “we must also understand the practices that account for *not* knowing, that is, for our *lack* of knowledge about a phenomenon or, in some cases, an account of the practices that results in a group *unlearning* what was once a reality of knowledge. In other words, those who would strive to understand how we know, must also develop epistemologies of ignorance.”<sup>1</sup> While the study of ignorance is nothing new to philosophy—Socrates tells us that our lives are not worth living unless we are seeking knowledge; and his wisdom resides in his knowing that whatever he does not know, he does not suppose he knows—we explore the origin and production of ignorance in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. We do not suppose that we know all there is to know about the virus, but, in modernized Socratic fashion, we should be wiser for inquiring into whether the biological pandemic is also a pandemic of ignorance. Ultimately, we link the question of a pandemic of ignorance to state education laws and policies that arguably manufacture ignorance.

Socrates aside, there are significant gaps in the study of ignorance, and these gaps have only recently begun to be filled. The main gaps are (a) defining the constitutive features of ignorance; (b) examining the strategic implications of ignorance; and (c) the potential of ignorance as an instrument for epistemic inquiry in education policy. We address these gaps to explore and understand the implications of ignorance as it is manufactured. To do so, we rely on Robert Proctor’s outline of ignorance. For agnotology (the study of manufactured ignorance), Proctor offers three categories for the origin of ignorance: (1) ignorance as a native state; (2) ignorance as a lost realm; and (3) ignorance as constructed, i.e., a strategic ploy.<sup>2</sup> These categories are not exhaustive, but they provide an outline to understand the nuances of ignorance and help us to answer the question, “What is ignorance?”

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Tuana, “Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance,” in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford University Press, 2008), 108-145, 108.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Proctor, “Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study),” in *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance*, eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford University Press, 2008), 1-33, 3.

As we detail below, ignorance as a native state means that it is unavoidable; it is inherent to human being. Ignorance is produced by mere existence, and it is induced from experience. Ignorance as a lost realm is when there is an active decision: a selective choice to not know. Such ignorance is commonly understood as willful ignorance in which knowledge is strategically disregarded, refused, or avoided. Ignorance as a strategic ploy also involves deliberate choices, but it implies that there is an ongoing effort to construct ignorance and obstruct knowledge for political gain. As Proctor explains, ignorance as a strategic ploy is “one that easily lends itself to paranoia: namely, that certain people don’t want you to know certain things or will actively work to organize doubt or uncertainty or misinformation to help maintain your ignorance.”<sup>3</sup> Our purpose is not to create a sense of paranoia or lead to conspiracy theories regarding the intentions of any one person or institution. We use Proctor’s categories, however, to argue that ignorance was manufactured by the Donald J. Trump administration during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of intent. We identify the strategies, specifically the discourse, that was used by the Trump administration. After understanding potential tools of manufactured ignorance, we extend our point to argue there are illustrative cases of state education laws and policies that also manufacture ignorance.

Our exploration relies on news articles (including international sources), information sanctioned by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO), archived press releases and statements from the White House, as well as “tweets” collected from former President Donald J. Trump’s now suspended Twitter account. We explore whether the information from the CDC/WHO and the information from the Trump administration were consistent or divergent. If the information was consistent, what elements overlapped and converged? If the information was divergent, what elements deviated? Specifically, is there any evidence that ignorance was manufactured by the Trump administration during the pandemic? We begin with a more detailed explication of Proctor’s three categories of ignorance. We then provide evidence of convergence and divergence among and between the CDC/WHO and White House. We end by arguing that the biological pandemic was—and is—an agnotological pandemic, too, and that recent state education law and policy initiatives indicate the virality of manufacturing ignorance in schools.

#### IGNORANCE AS A NATIVE STATE

One of the origins of ignorance is as a native state of being: we are born with it. Evolutionarily, native ignorance is a space for potential knowledge. Stuart Firestein argues that ignorance is what fuels inquiry, and students must learn to embrace their ignorance. He claims that native ignorance is what “turns your crank, the very driving force of science, the exhilaration of the unknown.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Proctor, “Agnotology,” 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Firestein, *Ignorance: How it Drives Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

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On this view, knowledge relies on ignorance. There is, however, a discomfort that comes with accepting ignorance as something native to our existence. In a society where the “more dogmatic aspects of society or culture place more weight on getting the product right...orthodoxy and heresy” are ever-present risks.<sup>5</sup> Accepting native ignorance means accepting that knowledge is unfinished, uncertain, and infinite.

When considering the development of knowledge during the pandemic, especially at the outset, there was confusion and fear of what we did not know. We were collectively experiencing unavoidable and unpredictable native ignorance.<sup>6</sup> The virus was first reported to be detected in Wuhan, China on December 12, 2019, and it was identified as a novel virus on December 31, 2019, when doctors confirmed the virus was unlike any other coronavirus they had encountered. On January 6, 2020, *The South China Morning Post* published an article stating that “health experts warned the public on Monday not to drop their guard over the unidentified outbreak of viral pneumonia in central China,” and no human-to-human transmission had yet been detected.<sup>7</sup>

On January 8, 2020, a report in *The New York Times* claimed that there was a new virus in China.<sup>8</sup> January 9, 2020 was the date of the first confirmed human death. In the days that followed, the virus went from being a marginal story to, essentially, the only story. The virus was new, it was spreading in an unpredictable manner, and ignorance worldwide was native and unavoidable. Keller and Keller state that “we might uncover in ourselves a species of willful ignorance as well as a failure to love our appropriate ignorance of the unknown and unknowable, and we might see that these aspects of epistemologies of ignorance have been cultivated by both social norms and by our own fears of the unknown.”<sup>9</sup> Some of the problems that stem from a fear of uncertainty are noted in the next section, where we also clarify how selectively sharing information produces ignorance.

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory J. Keller and Deborah Biss Keller, “Socrates, Dialogue, and Us,” in *Epistemologies of Ignorance in Education*, eds. Erik Malewski and Nathalia Jaramillo (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2011), 87-104, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Devjani Roy and Richard Zeckhauser, “The Anatomy of Ignorance: Diagnosis from Literature,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, eds. Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey (New York: Routledge, 2015), 61-73, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Kinling Lo, “Public Warned Not to Drop Guard Over Mystery China Virus After Tests Rule Out Sars or Bird Flu,” *South China Morning Post*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3044909/public-warned-not-drop-their-guard-over-mystery-china-virus>.

<sup>8</sup> Sui-Lee Wee and Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “China Identifies New Virus Causing Pneumonia-like Illness,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/health/china-pneumonia-outbreak-virus.html?searchResultPosition=157>.

<sup>9</sup> Keller and Keller, “Socrates, Dialogue, and Us,” 90-91.

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 IGNORANCE AS A LOST REALM

January 21, 2020 was the day the first case of COVID-19 in the United States was publicly diagnosed and when it was confirmed that the virus could be transmitted from person to person. According to the CDC, transmission was confirmed because the patient who became ill had no history of travel to Wuhan but had shared a residence with a previously diagnosed patient who had traveled to Wuhan.<sup>10</sup> Following these disclosures, social media sites were increasingly used to share information about the coronavirus. The information that was shared, however, was not always accurate and was not always from reputable sources.<sup>11</sup> Shared misinformation on social media is an example of ignorance as a lost realm, which implies there is an active and selective choice, by an individual, to not know something.

Medical information, especially related to epidemics and pandemics, is particularly vulnerable to misinformation. Given the human proclivity for stability and comfort, one of the challenges of the virus outbreak was finding reliable and accurate information to keep people safe. While it may be logical to seek such reliable and accurate information, “absolute certainty in the realm of medicine and public health is rare [and] our public health programs will not be effective if absolute proof is required before we act; the best available evidence must be sufficient.”<sup>12</sup> In the absence of clear and convincing evidence, ignorance as a lost realm features prominently. In the case of the virus and increased social media posts involving misinformation, there is evidence that people decided that they would rather not confront the new knowledge about virus risks and would, instead, ignore the information they determined was too threatening to their way of life. For this paper, we document how former president Donald J. Trump reified ignorance as a lost realm as a ploy to his utilization of ignorance as a strategic ploy. Specifically, we use Trump’s Twitter data to compare with

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<sup>10</sup> Center for Disease Control, “First Travel-related Case of 2019 Novel Coronavirus Detected in United States,” *CDC Newsroom Press Release*, January 21, 2020, accessed September 17, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p0121-novel-coronavirus-travel-case.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Matteo Cinelli, Walter Quattrociochi, Alessandro Galeazzi, Carlo Michele Valensise, Emanuele Brugnoli, Ana Lucia Schmidt, Paola Zola, Fabiana Zollo, and Antonio Scala, “The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic,” *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 16598 (2020): 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5>.

<sup>12</sup> David Michaels, “Manufactured Uncertainty: Contested Science and the Protection of the Public’s Health and Environment,” in *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford University Press, 2008), 90-107, 91. See, also, Philip Walker, “The Library’s Role in Countering Infodemics,” *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 109, no. 1 (January 2021): 133-136, <https://doi.org/10.5195/jmls.2021.1044>. We think the US public generally holds a mistaken expectation of science. As John Dewey wrote in *Quest for Certainty*, the inductive nature of science does not mean perfect answers to questions, but fallibilist inquiry for the continual search for knowledge (qua knowing).

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medical health information from the CDC and WHO.<sup>13</sup> The agnotological implications of this comparison help clarify how ignorance functions.

The first tweet in which Trump mentions the virus was on January 27, 2020. He links the virus to China, stating that he has offered his help to Chinese President Xi, and that there are “very few cases reported in the USA, but strongly on watch.”<sup>14</sup> His tweet received 21,000 retweets and 114,000 likes.<sup>15</sup> On the same day as Trump’s tweet, WHO tweeted a question-and-answer thread that received 4,560 retweets and 4,817 likes.<sup>16</sup>

Trump also repeatedly called the coronavirus the “China Virus.” On January 3, 2021, he specifically targeted the CDC: “The number of cases and deaths of the China Virus is far exaggerated in the United States because of @CDCgov’s ridiculous method of determination compared to other countries, many of whom report, purposely, very inaccurately and low. ‘When in doubt,

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<sup>13</sup> We acknowledge that there are multiple and competing social media sites involved with the spread of misinformation. Cinelli, et al., argue that each social media platform has its “own peculiarities and depends on the group dynamics of individuals engaged with the topic” (*op. cit.*, p. 5). For more on the current research into the spread of misinformation and false news on social media platforms, see Aengus Bridgman, Eric Merkley, Oleg Zhilin, Peter John Loewen, Taylor Owen, and Derek Ruths, “Infodemic Pathways: Evaluating the Role That Traditional and Social Media Play in Cross-National Information Transfer, *Frontiers in Political Science* 3, no. 648646 (March 2021): 1-11. See, also, Arunima Krishna and Teresa L. Thompson, “Misinformation About Health: A Review of Health Communication and Misinformation Scholarship,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 65, no. 2 (2021): 316-332, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219878223>.

<sup>14</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “We are in very close communication with China concerning the virus. Very few cases reported in USA, but strongly on watch. We have offered China and President Xi any help that is necessary,” Twitter, January 27, 2020, 9:56 am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>. Donald J. Trump’s Twitter account @realDonaldTrump was permanently suspended on January 8, 2021, following the January 6, 2021 U.S. Capitol insurrection. The data we cite on number of retweets and likes is preserved, as of January 8, 2021, on the Trump Twitter Archive V2 at <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>15</sup> The number of comments is not available on the Trump Twitter Archive, however, and, even though the original Tweet has been deleted from the Twitter platform, the comments are still visible. For those who are not adept at how Twitter works, any interaction with the Tweet, whether it is a like, comment, or retweet, will amplify the content to anyone following the user who interacted. This means even people who comment to fact check or disavow the content are still amplifying the Tweet to their followers. This is cause for concern because even those who are trying to be vigilantes are contributing to the manufacturing of ignorance.

<sup>16</sup> Because the @WHO Twitter account has not been suspended, and Tweets can still have interaction, these numbers are subject to change. These numbers were obtained on September 13, 2021, at 5:40pm EST.

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call it Covid.’ Fake News!”<sup>17</sup> This tweet received 53,000 retweets and 210,000 likes. A tweet from @CDCgov with Covid-19 facts received 241 retweets and 429 likes.<sup>18</sup> The comparative differences in the number of retweets and likes suggests that ignorance as a lost realm has salience. Different from “echo chambers” or forms of confirmation bias, ignorance as a lost realm is characterized by *not* knowing. There is a selective choice—a conscious decision—to disregard knowing and replace it with not knowing.

Within ignorance as a lost realm, Trump extended the narrative definition to include obfuscation. He claimed that “The lockdowns in Democrat run states are absolutely ruining the lives of so many people – Far more than the damage that would be caused by the China Virus. Cases in California have risen despite the lockdown, yet Florida & others are open and doing well. Common sense please!”<sup>19</sup> This tweet was shared 83,000 times and liked by 359,000 users. The tweet conflates the ruination of human life with the ruination of human livelihoods and suggests that one political party knows better than another political party. Florida was not, in fact, “doing well,” as it added 10,607 new cases on December 24, 2020, compared to Michigan, a “Democrat run state,” that added 1,932 new cases on the same day.<sup>20</sup>

Each of these tweets illustrates at least two points: (1) ignorance as content; and (2) the rapid spread of misinformation. Twitter users willingly amplified Trump’s content on social media rather than reputable sources of data. In terms of ignorance as a lost realm, Twitter users demonstrated an active decision, a selective choice, to not know expert medical information. We argue that it is feasible to explain this phenomenon by using Proctor’s third category for agnotology.

<sup>17</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “The number of cases and deaths of the China Virus is far exaggerated in the United States because of @CDCgov’s ridiculous method of determination compared to other countries ...” Twitter, January 3, 2020, 8:14 am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>18</sup> @CDCgov Twitter account is currently still active. This point is important because the Tweet can still have interactions, such that the numbers we cite have already changed. We obtained our data on September 3, 2021, at 6:02pm EST.

<sup>19</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “The lockdowns in Democrat run states are absolutely ruining the lives of so many people – Far more than the damage that would be caused by the China Virus ...” Twitter, December 26, 2020, 2:02 pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>20</sup> As reported by CDC COVID Data Tracker [https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends\\_dailytrendscases](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends_dailytrendscases). Even when considering the population difference, the seven-day case rate per 100,000 in Florida was 349 compared to Michigan’s 177. Clearly, a snapshot of the data is not generalizable. We use the example only to illustrate the utilization of ignorance for political gain—and this gain is not limited to one political party.

### IGNORANCE AS A STRATEGIC PLOY

Ignorance that is produced as a strategic ploy is characterized by the bias or political agenda that is enforced by the manipulated information. Ignorance in this sense is not to be understood as a one-time, unwitting occurrence, but rather as an active part of a deliberate plan.

Donald Trump's agenda throughout the beginning of the pandemic (January-March 2020) was to identify the virus as a problem of, and one that was being handled by, China. His stratagem was to defer to Xi Jinping and re-state that the situation was being "handled well." Additionally, Trump was selective about the information he included about the virus. We suggest that his selectivity indicates a strategic ploy and one where he intentionally advanced ignorance. Consider three examples:

- January 22, 2020: Trump answered a question about having a plan to contain the coronavirus in the U.S., stating "We do have a plan, and we think it's going to be handled very well. We've already handled it very well. CDC has been terrific. Very great professionals. And we're in very good shape. And we think China is in very good shape also."<sup>21</sup>
- January 24, 2020: Trump tweeted, "China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!"<sup>22</sup>
- January 29, 2020: Trump tweeted, "Just received a briefing on the Coronavirus in China from all of our GREAT agencies, who are also working closely with China."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Donald J. Trump, transcript of "Remarks by President Trump and President Barzani of Kurdistan Regional Government Before Bilateral Meeting," January 22, 2020, 10:50am CET, Davos, Switzerland, Trump White House Archives, accessed September 13, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-barzani-kurdistan-regional-government-bilateral-meeting-davos-switzerland/>.

<sup>22</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) "China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well ..." Twitter, January 24, 2020, 4:18pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>23</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) "Just received a briefing on the Coronavirus in China from all our GREAT agencies, who are also working closely with China. We will continue to monitor the ongoing developments ..." Twitter, January 29, 2020, 7:06pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

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Given that the first confirmed case in the United States was on January 21, 2020, why, a week later, was Trump projecting the problem onto China? Was he demonstrating native ignorance? Was he signifying ignorance as a lost realm? Was he choosing to ignore medical information and transmit misleading information to the public? On January 31, 2020, WHO declared a global health emergency, but the information provided to the public by the White House continued to diverge from WHO declarations. Consider the following:

February 7, 2020, before a Marine One departure, Trump paused to speak to the press on the Front Lawn.

Q: Mr. President, a question about China.

The President: Yeah.

Q. Are you concerned that China is covering up the full extent of the coronavirus?

The President: No. China is working very hard. Late last night, I had a very good talk with President Xi, and we talked about – mostly about the coronavirus. They’re working really hard, and I think they are doing a very professional job. They’re in touch with the World -the World-World Organization. CDC also. We’re working together. But World Health is working with them. CDC is working with them. I had a great conversation last night with President Xi. It’s a tough situation. I think they’re doing a very good job.

Q: Are you concerned about its potential impact on the global economy?

The President: We think that China will do a very good job.<sup>24</sup>

We note that in these remarks Trump indicated that China was addressing the problem and that the rest of the world need not be concerned about global impact. Meanwhile, on February 2, 2020, global air travel had been restricted, and, on February 3, 2020, the Trump administration declared a public health emergency. On February 25, 2020, the CDC tweeted that US businesses should begin to prepare for community spread. Nancy Messonnier, director of the CDC’s National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, stated that “Ultimately, we expect we will see community spread in this country. It’s not so much a question of if this will happen anymore, but rather more a question of exactly when this will happen and how many people in the country will have

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<sup>24</sup> Donald J. Trump, transcript of “Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure,” February 7, 2020, 11:16am EST, South Lawn, Trump White House Archives, accessed September 13, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-marine-one-departure-011221/>.

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severe illness.”<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the Trump administration was consistent with their message that everything was okay and that there was no reason to worry. On February 28, 2020, during a reception for African American History Month at the White House, Trump called on Alex Azar, former Secretary of Health and Human Services, to make public remarks on the coronavirus.

President Trump: Alex Azar- and he’s working very hard on a thing called the virus. How’s it going? Do you have anything to report to us, Alex?

Secretary Azar: So, we just want to report to everybody that, thanks to the President’s historically aggressive containment efforts, we have really been able to keep the risk to Americans low right now, so that everyday Americans don’t need to be worried. But that can change and that’s why it’s important for all of us to prepare.<sup>26</sup>

On the same day as the reception, Trump tweeted that the number of virus cases in China was decreasing as 81,000 cases were reported globally, with 96 percent of those cases confirmed in China.<sup>27</sup> The consistent message from the White House was not to worry, the virus was contained, and that the imminent risk to the United States was low regardless of the CDC’s and Messonnier’s warning two days earlier.

At issue is a point noted in a March 7, 2020 *New York Times* article that explored whether the Trump administration was deliberately misleading the public: “From the beginning, the Trump administration’s attempts to forestall an outbreak of a virus now spreading rapidly across the globe was marked by a raging internal debate about how far to go in telling Americans the truth. Even as the government’s scientists and leading health experts raised the alarm early

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<sup>25</sup> Center for Disease Control, “Transcript for the CDC Telebriefing Update on COVID-19,” with Benjamin Haynes and Nancy Messonnier, *CDC Newsroom Press Briefing*, February 25, 2020, released on February 26, 2020, accessed September 17, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/t0225-cdc-telebriefing-covid-19.html>. We think it is important to note, too, that the CDC was not without problems. From questions of timing to consistency to accuracy, there are justifiable questions to raise about how the agency functioned. Indeed, the CDC might be an excellent case study for the tensions between scientific, and thus fallibilist knowledge, and the politics of public health institutions. For our purposes, however, the evidence of intentional.

<sup>26</sup> Donald J. Trump and Alex Azar, transcript of “Remarks by President Trump at a Reception for African American History Month,” February 27, 2020, 6:57pm EST, issued on February 28, 2020, East Room, Trump White House Archives, accessed September 13, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-reception-african-american-history-month/>.

<sup>27</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “Congratulations and thank you to our great Vice President & all of the many professionals doing such a fine job at CDC & other agencies on the Coronavirus situation ...” Twitter, February 27, 2020, 9:39pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

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and pushed for aggressive action, they faced resistance and doubt at the White House – especially from the president – about spooking financial markets and inciting panic.”<sup>28</sup> Was there a strategic agenda by the White House to manipulate and censor the information they were providing to the public? Consider this series of tweets from Trump in 2020:

- February 27, 2020: Anti-Trump Network @CNN doing whatever it can to stoke a national Coronavirus panic. The far left Network pretty much ignoring anyone who they interview who doesn't blame President Trump.<sup>29</sup>
- March 9, 2020: The Fake News Media and their partner, the Democrat Party, is doing everything within its semi-considerable power (it used to be greater!) to inflame the CoronaVirus situation, far beyond what the facts would warrant. Surgeon General, “The risk is low to the average American.”<sup>30</sup>
- March 9, 2020: So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!<sup>31</sup>
- March 18, 2021: I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the “borders” from China – against the

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<sup>28</sup> Michael D. Shear, Sheri Fink, and Noah Weiland, “Inside Trump Administration, Debate Raged Over What to Tell Public, *The New York Times*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/us/politics/trump-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “Anti-Trump Network @CNN doing whatever it can to stoke a national Coronavirus panic. The far left Network pretty much ignoring anyone who they interview who doesn't blame President Trump,” Twitter, February 27, 2020, 8:53pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>30</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “The Fake News Media and their partner, the Democrat Party, is doing everything within its semi-considerable power (it used to be greater!) to inflame the CoronaVirus situation ...” Twitter, March 9, 2020, 7:20am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>31</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases,” Twitter, March 9, 2020, 10:47am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

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wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false!<sup>32</sup>

It appears that Trump used his Twitter account to attack the media and Democrats in a strategic attempt to downplay the virus. Sowing doubt or downplaying something as serious as a pandemic is a calculated tactic to obscure uncomfortable truths. His claims, and the amplification of his claims by his supporters, suggests the manufacturing of ignorance as a strategic ploy.<sup>33</sup>

While presidential politics about the COVID-19 pandemic may seem distant from state and local education policy, we argue that manufacturing ignorance as a strategic ploy is a logical extension from the White House to state houses. Our claims above demonstrate certain tools of manufactured ignorance, such as creating diversions, deception, and doubt. We pivot, therefore, to show how manufacturing ignorance as a strategic ploy is evidenced in recent state education policy initiatives. While much more could be said about this shift, we recognize the limits of space in publishing and turn directly to illustrative cases of policy initiatives representing manufacturing ignorance. This investigation is only the beginning of a larger inquiry into the implications and practices of manufactured ignorance in schools and educational laws and policies. Our general point is that if schools were places for epistemic inquiry, ignorance would be mitigated. Unfortunately, schools are being forced into roles that reify ignorance rather than challenging it.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE PANDEMIC OF IGNORANCE IN EDUCATION POLICY

In this section, we will approach the issue of manufactured ignorance and education policy from two perspectives: (1) the potential influence of manufactured ignorance on the formation of state and local education policies, such as mask mandates in schools; and (2) education policies that have the potential to create ignorance through their implementation in schools. We begin by looking at how some schools followed evidence about using masks to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and how some states employed tactics of manufactured ignorance to doubt the evidence and ban mask mandates. This is followed by a

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<sup>32</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the ‘borders’ from China ...” Twitter, March 18, 2020, 7:46am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>33</sup> See, also, Christian Paz, “All the President’s Lies About the Coronavirus,” *The Atlantic*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/11/trumps-lies-about-coronavirus/608647/>; and Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

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look at recent education policies, such as bills that ban books, which upon implementation could potentially manufacture ignorance.<sup>34</sup>

According to EdWeek, as of March 29, 2022, five states have effectively passed laws that prevent school districts from implementing universal mask mandates. However, there were still 18 states that had universal mask mandates before the CDC guidelines changed in February of 2022.<sup>35</sup> Despite scientific evidence that advised the public to wear masks in crowded spaces, doubting science was evident in the first three months of the pandemic, which coincides with our previous timeline.<sup>36</sup> According to Tatiana Batova, who analyzed responses to CDC tweets about mask-wearing between January and April, there were several themes in which the general public indicated growing distrust and even anger towards the CDC recommendations.<sup>37</sup> The CDC initially did not recommend the average American should wear a mask. Granting native ignorance and epistemic fallibility, scientific knowledge is subject to change. This change is not random, however; it follows from scientific investigation and the rigors of scientific method. While scientific knowledge developed into the scientific community's acceptance that mask-wearing was an effective measure to lower risk of a COVID-19 infection, public doubt persisted. The doubt around the science of mask wearing encouraged policy disputes regarding mandates. There were instances in which parents stood outside schools and school board meetings protesting masks.<sup>38</sup> These protests eventually led some states, like Florida, to ban universal mask mandates. On July 30, 2021, Governor Ron DeSantis issued an executive order that banned schools from implementing a universal mandate for mask-wearing and threatened consequences for any

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<sup>34</sup> We recognize that the nature of our information for this analysis is time-stamped and therefore subject to change as policies inevitably update.

<sup>35</sup> Stacey Decker, "Which States Ban Mask Mandates in Schools, and Which Require Masks?" *Education Week*, August 20, 2021, last modified April 19, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/which-states-ban-mask-mandates-in-schools-and-which-require-masks/2021/08>.

<sup>36</sup> For more information on the science of the effectiveness of mask wearing see: Yuxin Wang, Zicheng Deng, and Donglu Shi, "How Effective is a Mask in Preventing COVID-19 Infection?" *Medical Devices and Sensors*, e10163. Published ahead of print, January 5, 2021, <http://doi.org/10.1002/mds3.10163>.

<sup>37</sup> Tatiana Batova, "To Wear or Not to Wear: A Commentary on Mistrust in Public Comments to CDC Tweets about Mask-Wearing during COVID-19," *International Journal of Business Communication* 59, no. 2 (2022): 287-308, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884211008584>.

<sup>38</sup> See the following examples from St. Johns County: <https://www.news4jax.com/news/local/2021/08/10/st-johns-county-parents-protest-call-for-mask-mandate-for-students-teachers/> and Manatee County: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/18/florida-parents-anger-schools-lack-mask-mandates>.

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district that violated the order.<sup>39</sup> The news release issued by Taryn Fenske, Director of Communications for DeSantis, stated: “Today, Governor Ron DeSantis issued Executive Order 21-175, in response to several Florida school boards considering or implementing mask mandates in their schools after the Biden Administration issued unscientific and inconsistent recommendations that school-aged children wear masks.”<sup>40</sup> The memo indicates that the order to ban mask mandates in schools was to counter President Joe Biden’s administration, which are taken directly from the CDC. After the executive order, some school districts chose to continue having mask mandates in place. State lawmakers have since made efforts to pull funding from those school districts that defied the executive order.<sup>41</sup> The manufactured ignorance about the nature of the pandemic and the effectiveness of mask wearing had a direct impact on state level education policies.

In the last couple of years there has been an increase in the number of policy proposals, nationwide, that are designed to control knowledge and censor educators in public schools. Policies range from restricting conversations about LGBTQIA issues, to banning books, to limiting topics related to racism and slavery. In October of 2021, Texas State Representative Matt Krause launched an “investigation” into 850 book titles. In his letter sent to Lily Laux, the deputy commissioner of school programs with the Texas Education Agency, Krause indicates he is initiating the investigation for the protection and welfare of Texas citizens.<sup>42</sup> The letter was also blind copied to an undisclosed number of superintendents from unidentified school districts.<sup>43</sup> The letter was not a binding contract or law, nor was there any potential consequence for not complying. Regardless, a number of districts around Texas began reviewing books and pulling them from their shelves. The Granbury Independent School District (GISD) selected 131 books to be reviewed by a committee to determine whether or not the books contained *inappropriate* content. Not long after the books were

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<sup>39</sup> Rich McKay, “Florida Governor Blocks School Mask Mandates, Says Parents Can Choose,” *Reuters*, July 31, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/florida-gov-desantis-issue-order-giving-parents-choice-mask-children-school-2021-07-30/>.

<sup>40</sup> Taryn Fenske, “Governor DeSantis Issues an Executive Order Ensuring Parents’ Freedom to Choose,” news release, July 30, 2021, <https://www.flgov.com/2021/07/30/governor-desantis-issues-an-executive-order-ensuring-parents-freedom-to-choose/>.

<sup>41</sup> Sarah Mervosh, “Florida Withholds Money from School Districts Over Mask Mandates,” *The New York Times*, last modified September 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/30/us/florida-schools-mask-mandates.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Matt Krause email to Texas Education Agency, Attn: Lily Laux, October 25, 2021, <https://static.texastribune.org/media/files/965725d7f01b8a25ca44b6fde2f5519b/krauseletter.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Brian Lopez, “Texas House Committee to Investigate School Districts’ Books on Race and Sexuality,” *The Texas Tribune*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/10/26/texas-school-books-race-sexuality/>.

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removed, 103 have been returned to the shelves.<sup>44</sup> GISD is not a unique school district, however, and we are seeing similar reactions to specific books in other states.

In January 2022, a Tennessee school board voted to remove the Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *Maus* from their eighth-grade curriculum. Lee Parkison, director of schools for McMinn County stated that “there is some rough, objectionable language in this book.” In a statement released by the McMinn County school board, they claim that the book was removed because “of its unnecessary use of profanity and nudity and its depiction of violence and suicide,” adding that the content was “too adult-oriented” and that the book does not reflect the values of the community it serves.<sup>45</sup>

These are just two examples of banning books, and neither were triggered by a state or federal policy. However, in Texas, Governor Greg Abbott has been vocal about his support for the “Parental Bill of Rights,” which would give parents the power to report materials they consider inappropriate—and seek repercussions for any educators who provide access to those materials. And, in the state of Georgia, the state where both authors of this paper reside, SB226 signed by Governor Kemp on April 28, 2022 requires school districts to adopt a complaint resolution process for parents and guardians to report classroom materials that are considered to be “harmful to minors.”<sup>46</sup> This bill is separate from two other bills signed by Kemp on the same day: (1) the divisive concepts bill, HB1084, which will place restrictions on diversity trainings and classroom topics that are considered to be divisive; and (2) the parents’ bill of rights, HB1178, which gives parents the authority to file complaints and obtain waivers for the purpose of directing the education of their own children.<sup>47</sup>

For ignorance to be manufactured there needs to be a human-made force, in which a person or institution takes deliberate action, to control knowledge. Having control over the dissemination of knowledge vests power with those who determine what knowledge is to be known or what knowledge is not to be known. In schools, the long-standing debates about what is included in curriculum (and what is left out) are centrally about controlling information

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<sup>44</sup> Reese Oxner, “ACLU Wants North Texas School to Apologize for Removing Over 100 Library Books,” *The Texas Tribune*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/02/28/granbury-isd-aclu-book-removal/>.

<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Gross, “School Board in Tennessee Bans Teaching of Holocaust Novel ‘Maus,’” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/maus-banned-holocaust-tennessee.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Sale or Distribution of Harmful Materials to Minors, S.B.226, 156<sup>th</sup> Georgia General Assembly, Session 2 (2022).

<sup>47</sup> Parents’ Bill of Rights, H.B.1178, 156<sup>th</sup> Georgia General Assembly, Session 2 (2022); and Education; Prevent Use of Curricula or Training Programs Which Encourage Certain Concepts, H.B. 1084, 156<sup>th</sup> Georgia General Assembly, Session 2 (2022).

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transfer.<sup>48</sup> Because of the way state standards are designed and how standardized tests influence school goals, classroom teachers have little say in what knowledge they teach. Most educators are contractually obligated to follow the prescribed curriculum to prepare their students for tests. Policies that mandate standards and tests, and/or dictate what knowledge is valued (and which knowledge is omitted), are therefore foundational to manufacturing ignorance.

An obvious implication is the role that schools play in producing, conveying, and critiquing knowledge. Scientific investigation in schools should not be limited to biology or chemistry classes, in other words. As an epistemic project, considering ignorance as part of US schooling might yield a more critical understanding of the role of inquiry—broadly conceived—as part of an expanded fallibilist epistemology for students and teachers.

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<sup>48</sup> See Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

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# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS & DEWEY: THE POTENTIAL FOR DRAMATIC REHEARSAL AND CIVIC OUTCOMES IN TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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Just over a year ago, over 257,000 people watched in real time as a group of six companions negotiated the difficult decision of what to do after a tragic loss.<sup>1</sup> The group engaged in emotional deliberation alongside logical analysis and even attempted some creative problem solving. At the end of a twenty-minute conversation and heated argument, the six had come to a tentative consensus, ultimately deciding to pursue the specific goals of one person on the potential that it might result in new ways forward. The event in question was an episode of *Critical Role*: a weekly web series that broadcasts seven voice actors as they play the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*.<sup>2</sup> The dynamics on display were some of the complex negotiations that tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) typically demand of their players in order to ensure that games move forward in a way that is effective and enjoyable. The viewers of the *Critical Role* live stream were not only watching individuals play a game, they were also witnessing an unintentional enacting of some of John Dewey's philosophical principles around educative deliberative process and its impact on the civic and moral habits of individuals. Players were practicing Deweyan dramatic rehearsal.

The efficacy of tabletop RPGs as an educational and therapeutic asset in schools has been extensively studied, with many middle and high schools employing these games as extracurricular activities because of their positive impact around identity formation, empathy, and social skills.<sup>3</sup> More recent iterations of tabletop RPGs are also being intentionally designed to encourage thoughtfulness, experimentation, and creative problem solving.<sup>4</sup> The designers of game playbooks detail cooperation, compromise, intentional direct action,

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<sup>1</sup> Over 1.7 million people have since viewed the episode.

<sup>2</sup> <https://critrole.com/faq/>. Of note, the group has also formed a 501c3 non-profit called the Critical Role Foundation where they use their platform and the social capital to raise money for a variety of other organizations and causes.

<sup>3</sup> Mike Cook, Matthew Gremo, and Ryan Morgan, "We're Just Playing: The Influence of a Modified Tabletop Role-Playing Game on ELA Students' In-class Reading," *Simulation & Gaming* 48, no. 2 (2017); Brent Ruben, "Simulations, Games, and Experience-Based Learning: The Quest for a New Paradigm for Teaching and Learning," *Simulation & Gaming* 30 (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010).

consensus building, and imagination as explicit goals and outcomes of playing tabletop role-playing games.<sup>5</sup> While not explicitly intended as such, the dynamics of games like *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* give players a chance to experience deliberation around something they are personally invested in within a low risk environment.

Because role-playing games or (RPGs) is a broader category referring to a variety of different games, I will take a moment to define the term. A role-playing game is a game in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting.<sup>6</sup> RPGs are delivered across a variety of platforms such as video games (games like *Final Fantasy*, or *Skyrim*), or Live Action Role Play games (otherwise known as LARPS) where individuals physically portray their character within a fictional setting represented by real world environments. This paper is focusing specifically and intentionally on another genre: tabletop RPGs.

The adjective of “tabletop” comes from the fact that these games intend for a group of people to gather together around a “table” and play together collaboratively and synchronously while sharing that space.<sup>7</sup> Aaron Hollander defines tabletop RPGs primarily as group storytelling, with each player responsible for the actions of a character of their own design.<sup>8</sup> Everyone responds to and with narrated action to the effects of their decisions through a flexible system of rules and probability mechanisms. Players take responsibility for acting out these roles within a narrative, either through literal acting or through a process of structured decision-making regarding character development. Actions taken within games succeed or fail according to a formal system of rules and guidelines. While they take any number of permutations, the game with the largest cultural footprint is *D&D*. However, *D&D* is only one game setting amongst a multitude — not all have a fantasy setting or focus on combat. Not all tabletop RPGs require a 20-sided die (or die at all) and there are as many settings and subject matter as there are genres of any other art form. Hollander says that tabletop RPGs are rooted in a focus on autotelic narrative experience. They produce unrehearsed and unrepeatable narratives through collaborative improvisational oral storytelling narratives that are distinguished by their participatory quality not only in the imaginative buy-in of the audience but in their very existence being generated primarily for the benefit of those taking part.<sup>9</sup>

While there are exceptions, most tabletop RPGS feature players playing in a group and dealing with shared circumstances and (potentially) moving

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<sup>5</sup> Playbooks is the term often used for guidebooks that detail game rules and settings; Brent Jans, “Creator One-on-One: Olivia Hill,” *The Rat Hole*, <https://therathole.ca/renaissance-gamer-01-21-20/> Retrieved 2020-02-23.

<sup>6</sup> Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Or a zoom call.

<sup>8</sup> Aaron Hollander, “Blessed Are the Legend-Makers: Experimentation as Edification in *Dungeons & Dragons*,” *Political Theology* (2021): 316.

<sup>9</sup> Hollander, “Blessed Are the Legend Makers,” 322.

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toward a shared goal. The presence of consensus, as indicated by the example I shared at the beginning of this paper, is usually highly contingent and continually re-established through ongoing dialogue. Players are forced to react to changing circumstances, a responsive world, and both the individual and social consequences of actions they take.<sup>10</sup> The choices they make, whether they yield success or failures, can continue to impact the player long after. Also, these consequences and repercussions are typically shared by the larger party and ripple to impact the relationships a character has to other players (often both on and off the table). Finally, tabletop RPGs typically have some form of game master (also known as dungeon master in *D&D*): an individual who is both organizer and participant. They are in charge of creating the details and challenges of a given adventure, while maintaining a realistic continuity of events. The game master has the power to control any element other than the player character's choices.

#### DEWEY'S DRAMATIC REHEARSAL

Much of the previous scholarship connecting Dewey's work to games and specifically role-playing games has been surface level, focusing on the basic idea that simulations can serve as a form of learning by doing.<sup>11</sup> I believe this misses the ways in which tabletop RPGs in particular provide opportunities for learning and the development and practice of dramatic rehearsal. Rather than an individual simply imagining how a situation would go in their head or making a no-stakes practice attempt in artificial circumstances (ala a simulation), Dewey's conception of dramatic rehearsal is a form of deliberation. Steven Fesmire calls it "a vicarious, anticipatory way of acting" that is formative as well as goal oriented.<sup>12</sup> It is a process that is imaginative, values driven, and dynamic — attempting to balance the necessary tension between emotion and rationality in decision making and moral action.

Philosophers Fesmire and William Caspary have explicated Dewey's conception of dramatic rehearsal as an aspect of deliberation, but Fesmire admits

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Carlson, "Beyond Bikini-Mail: Having Women at the Table," *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, no. 3 (2020). Retrieved from <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v7-issue-3/dd-beyond-bikini-mail-having-women-at-the-table/>.

<sup>11</sup> Samantha Clarke, Sylvester Arnab, Luca Morini, and Lauren Heywood, "Dungeons and Dragons as a Tool for Developing Student Self-reflection Skills," in *International Conference on Games and Learning Alliance* (Date): 101-109. Cham Springer & David I. Waddington, "Dewey and Video Games: From Education Through Occupations to Education through Simulations," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 1 (2015): 1-20. Of note, there is more done connecting video games to Dewey than connecting tabletop role playing games to Dewey.

<sup>12</sup> Steven A. Fesmire, *John Dewey and The Moral Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

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that Dewey's writings on it are opaque and somewhat disjointed.<sup>13</sup> One of the clearest descriptions by Dewey is found in his 1908 edition of *Ethics*.

Deliberation is actually an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of contact. We give way, in our mind, to some impulse; we try, in our mind, some plan. Following its career through various steps we find ourselves in imagination, in the presence of the consequences that would follow.<sup>14</sup>

More than just a logical consideration of options, the process incorporated affective responses, personal relationships, and imagination. Fesmire, Caspary, and Hildreth all claim that dramatic rehearsal extends beyond a reflection process to an essential tool of moral deliberation that leads to action.<sup>15</sup> Caspary distinguishes dramatic rehearsal through the helpful frames of a concern with characters, plot, non-utilitarian approaches, and openness to unexpected and emergent outcomes.<sup>16</sup> These four elements can serve as helpful guide posts to illustrate the ways in which Dewey's conception of dramatic rehearsal can play out in tabletop RPGs.

#### *Characters*

There is a high level of relationality in dramatic rehearsal. Dewey was clear that an individual would consider the impact of their choice on others in the process and said that attention must be paid to the "manifestation and interaction of personalities" and "the outwork of character."<sup>17</sup> The process is meant to include a consideration of all individuals involved and consider how they may react and respond as real people. Maurice Hamington said that dramatic rehearsal's very pragmatic emphasis on particularity, especially in how it manifested in others, is an essential element of the process.<sup>18</sup>

In tabletop RPGs, characters are the backbone of the experience. It is an intrinsically social game. You play with a party. Your relationships to one another may have just as much impact on the game play as any roll of the dice.

<sup>13</sup> Fesmire, *John Dewey and The Moral Imagination*; William R. Caspary, "Ethical Deliberation as Dramatic Rehearsal: John Dewey's Theory," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 2 (1991): 176.

<sup>14</sup> John Dewey, "1908 Ethics," *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1991), MW 5:293.

<sup>15</sup> Steven A. Fesmire, "Dramatic Rehearsal and the Moral Artist: A Deweyan Theory of Moral Understanding," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 31, no. 3 (1995): 568-597; Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy*; Rowdy Hildreth, "Reconstructing Dewey on Power," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 780-807.

<sup>16</sup> William Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 113.

<sup>17</sup> John Dewey, "1908 Ethics," MW 5:290.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Hamington, "Care Ethics, John Dewey's 'Dramatic Rehearsal,' and Moral Education," *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2010): 121.

Your actions have consequences and many of them are shared socially. The importance is summed up colorfully in the playbook of the game *Urban Shadows*, underneath a section head entitled “Why play?”

But why do this? Why go to all this trouble just to tell a story when you can turn on the television and find thousands of stories. Why do this much work? Because the characters are fucking awesome. Because no matter how awesome the characters might be individually, taking on the city’s forces and trying to make it —they’re even more awesome mixed up with each other.<sup>19</sup>

Experiences like RPGs demand that a player make decisions in collaboration with others while balancing their own motivating principles and desires against what can be achieved in a bounded world. As a result, RPGs not only provide opportunities to practice dramatic rehearsal, they also necessitate that players do this process within a group setting, with the social impact of their decisions both more apparent and often playing out in front of them in real time.

Beyond practical consequences, dramatic rehearsal asks us to look within and know ourselves through the process. There is a particular emphasis on paying attention to emotions that come up, with Dewey claiming they are a primary material for self-knowledge. He said, “This running commentary of likes and dislikes, attractions and disdains, joys and sorrows, reveals to any man who is intelligent enough to note them and to study their occasions his own character.”<sup>20</sup> Dramatic rehearsal and tabletop RPGs are both unlike simple simulations or thought experiments in that they ask the participant to fully engage with a potential course of action (i.e., fully inhabit a character), thinking about how their motivations and emotional reactions would influence their decisions.<sup>21</sup> While many tabletop RPGs have probability mechanics (such as rolling a die) that influence consequences of decisions, the primary driver of these games is the personal investment of the player, reflecting Dewey’s belief that “Deliberation is not then to be identified with calculation, or a quasi-mathematical reckoning of profit and loss.”<sup>22</sup>

When players role-play their character, Bowman believes they are experimenting with notions of selfhood and becoming more cognizant of the ways in which they take on various roles in everyday life outside of the game.<sup>23</sup> Bowman is building off the work of sociologist Erving Goffman’s *The*

<sup>19</sup> Mark Diaz Truman and Andrew Medeiros, *Urban Shadows: Political Urban Fantasy Powered by the Apocalypse* (Albuquerque, NM: Magpie Games, 2015), 22.

<sup>20</sup> John Dewey, “The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 14, 1899-1924: Human Nature and Conduct 1922.” eds Jo Ann Boydston, (2008)140

<sup>21</sup> Bowman, *Functions of Role-playing Games*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (New York: Irvington, 1960), 134.

<sup>23</sup> Bowman, *Functions of Role-playing Games*, 47.

*Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which highlighted that every person is enacting a variety of roles throughout their daily life that structure their social interactions and support social cohesion. People move back and forth through these roles as settings and expectations shift, even as they also remain themselves. Role-play within games allows a person to intentionally take on a different role or traits, and, as a result, become more aware of the ways in which they unconsciously do so in normal life. Players cultivate a differing theory of mind and may intentionally try to think as though they were someone else. This both expands a player's imagination and builds skills around critical problem solving, as they may become more aware of their own bias in thinking or gaps in knowledge.

Within RPGs, players have the opportunity to see how their own emotions are impacted by engaging in situations and perspectives that are different than their own. This can encourage an increase in the capacity for empathy within players.<sup>24</sup> Peggy Schaller says this is because players “walk in someone else's shoes for a while, thinking their thoughts, living their lives, and at the same time never losing meaningful connection to real life.”<sup>25</sup> Mikko Meriläinen conducted a study on 161 individuals who play role-playing games to determine if they self-reported a growth in what Roslyn Arnold calls empathic intelligence — or the ability to use different approaches to intelligence and sensitivity to improve one's relationship with others.<sup>26</sup> Arnold believed that empathic intelligence was grown through use of imagination and that experience with narratives helped create thoughtful speculation. Tabletop RPGs naturally expose others to narratives that challenge them to see things from another perspective. Meriläinen's study found that the majority of players reported that the experience of gaming strengthened their imagination and that they had experiences of intense emotional introspection either during a game or after.<sup>27</sup> Over half of the respondents directly credited the experiences of role-playing games to an increase in their empathy skills.<sup>28</sup>

Intentional empathy and reflective practices are not just found in the content of the game, but in the material that structure them as well. Within *D&D*, the basic rules also include a section that encourages players to think beyond binary notions of sex and gender when constructing characters, while also

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<sup>24</sup> Anissa Rivers, Ian E. Wickramasekera, Ronald J. Pekala, and Jennifer A. Rivers, “Empathic Features and Absorption in Fantasy Role-Playing,” *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 58, no. 3 (2016): 286-294.

<sup>25</sup> Peggy Schaller, “Can (role-) playing the French revolution en Français also teach the eighteenth century?,” *Digital Defoe: Studies in Defoe & His Contemporaries* 4, no. 1 (2012): 41.

<sup>26</sup> Mikko Meriläinen, “The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing Hobby on Personal Development—A Survey Report,” *The International Journal of Role-Playing* 3 (2012): 50; Meriläinen's study identified role-playing games more generally to include video games and LARP.

<sup>27</sup> Meriläinen, “The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing,” 58.

<sup>28</sup> Meriläinen, 62.

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encouraging them to think about how societal notions might negatively or positively impact them.<sup>29</sup> The playbook of *Kids on Brooms*, which takes place in a collaboratively created Harry Potteresque wizarding school, includes text that asks players to think about “Systems of Power Within Your World” and consider the impact of issues like racism, sexism, and ableism, how they show up and how they might impact the characters.<sup>30</sup> Of note, it appears on page seven, well before any information about individual character creation or play.

### *Plot*

The language of plot describes the ways in which dramatic rehearsal involves and considers time. Hamington refers to it as “extending temporal horizons” because the process is concerned with both immediate and long-term impacts beyond just the initial decision. Also, because of ruminations, dramatic rehearsal is likely to take longer than other ethical deliberations. Hamington points out that, “Moral rules or consequential calculations, although often lacking, are rubrics that can cut short the time necessary to engage in full moral deliberation.”<sup>31</sup> Dramatic rehearsal is invested in the myriad ways a potential action can unfold. As a result, the process takes time and is more complex but also yields great potential for growth.

Tabletop RPGs are autotelic, with the experience of playing, not the outcome, as the goal of play. While success in smaller encounters is enjoyable, most players will not say that landing a hit in *D&D* or succeeding a skill check in *Call of Cthulu* is the highlight of the experience. Many of these games are played in campaign format, meaning that an individual might play the same character and with the same group for months (or years), experiencing sweeping narratives. As a result, their actions will yield consequence after consequence, the impacts of which are felt on an individual and social level. Aggressive players often reap the whirlwind of their violent choices, and ones that take a reconciliatory tactic may find that small acts of kindness yield large dividends. Because of the ongoing nature of the narratives, progressing the growth of the character or “leveling up” actually substitutes for a final win condition in most

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<sup>29</sup> Wizards of the Coast, *Basic Rules for Dungeons and Dragons: 5th Edition*, 2014. Retrieved from <https://media.wizards.com/downloads/dnd/DnDBasicRules.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Gilmour, et al, *Kids on Brooms* (San Diego, CA: Renegade Game Studios, 2020), 7. In addition to asking players to think about impact, the book also complicates both the decision to include or not include these structures. “This would be a good time to decide whether your game features ‘fantasy oppression’ such as racism against fae or legal restrictions on magic. These forms of oppression may seem safer to work with than real-life power dynamics, but sometimes they’re even riskier. Precisely because they feel safer, they can encourage individuals to exaggerate prejudiced behavior. They may also lead to misery tourists, players who like pretending they’re marginalized people to enjoy the illusion of challenge and adversity on a temporary, low-stakes basis. Fantasy can be a fun, safe space to explore some of these concepts, but keep the safety measures in mind in case they get exploitative.”

<sup>31</sup> Maurice Hamington, “Care Ethics, John Dewey’s ‘Dramatic Rehearsal,’ and Moral Education,” *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2010): 122.

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games. Growth and change, the great Deweyan watchwords, become the larger goal as characters face their own demons, find purpose, and fail as much as they succeed.

Dramatic rehearsal does not assume that decision makers have a complete understanding of every possible course of action, alternative, risk, and consequence of the decisions that they are facing. It is through these considerations in the deliberative process that value preferences are surfaced, making value formation an integral and emergent part of the decision making. Dewey called it an “ends in view” approach, in which habits are both approaches and potential moral manifestations. Similarly, in RPGs, outside the game narrative, the process of play with others reinforces habits as well. Hollander highlighted the fact that within the world of *D&D*, compassion and teamwork are not required, let alone explicitly encouraged. Deceit is actually functionally rewarded and stealing a horse from a peasant takes far less time than earning the gold to buy it. But the playing of the game itself requires empathy, collaboration, and patience in negotiating complex dynamics with others.

#### *Non-utilitarian*

Dramatic rehearsal also takes an intentionally non-utilitarian approach, focusing not on assessing the cost benefit trade-off of a situation, but engaging in a creative problem-solving process the purpose of which John McVea called “the construction of the good.”<sup>32</sup> Broader and more generalized ethical principles have a role in dramatic rehearsal, but they are one deliberative factor amongst others. Additionally, both Fesmire and Caspary claim that, because of dramatic rehearsal’s orientation in the pragmatist tradition, any value claims need to be understood as corrigible. When participating in dramatic rehearsal, one’s habitual beliefs are challenged as alternative means of action are imagined in vivid, emotion-laden detail, and strategies are contextualized by the reality of the lives that will be affected. The corrigibility of those same habits and beliefs means that just as an individual is impacted by the process of dramatic rehearsal, so too may their understanding of guiding ethical principles. Far from courting moral chaos, Dewey clarifies that it is not a choice between throwing away previous rules or sticking obstinately to them. Instead, it is a matter of looking at one’s habits and expanding or revising them. Dewey said, “The problem is one of continuous, vital re-adaptation.”<sup>33</sup>

The development of critical ethical reasoning through role-playing games via the mechanism of choice was studied by David Simkins and Constance Steinkuehler, who posit that players will consciously view the choices they are making as having moral impact when the decisions are significant and effect change; are impacted by social context; and result in a level of mirroring

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<sup>32</sup> John McVea, “Constructing Good Decisions in Ethically Charged Situations: The Role of Dramatic Rehearsal,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 70, no. 4 (2007): 380.

<sup>33</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct; an Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1922), 396.

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from the game.<sup>34</sup> It may seem strange that games which contain extensive structuring and rules would be a place of moral contingency and experimentation, but the preferences and agency of those playing takes primacy. Hollander says, “The extent to which constraints are actually nuanced or resisted in the course of a narrative is dependent ultimately on the choices made by specific tables. The power of the narrative is always greater than the power of the system.” A study by Alex Atmore showed that players develop complex relationships with the rules associated with the games and often adjust their view of how valuable rules are depending upon setting and experience levels of players.<sup>35</sup> A player would simultaneously talk about the importance of structure and frameworks and in the same breath emphasize that if the individuals playing the game were not enjoying themselves, the rules should be revised.

#### *Emergent outcomes*

Finally, the process of dramatic rehearsal acknowledges emergent outcomes in the deliberation process. McVea, a business ethicist, recommends the process of dramatic rehearsal for complex decisions because it recognizes that alternative ways of proceeding and major risk are often endogenous and thereby need creative consideration. Dewey and other pragmatists believed that ethical problems are typically solved through moral progress rather than moral illumination, so the emergence of additional ways of proceeding in a given situation becomes an essential aspect of dramatic rehearsal. Caspary says, “Ethical conflicts can be settled by creative choices that harmonize competing interests instead of simply picking the most pressing or weighty interest forgoing others.”<sup>36</sup>

The paper has primarily focused on player choice in tabletop RPGs as something that occurs within a bounded reality and yields consequences. I have not yet emphasized the element of co-creation inherent in those same choices. While style of play and level of influence can vary from game to game, game masters (GMs) are as impacted by their players’ decisions as players are by theirs. Because of the mechanics of chance and emergent outcomes of choice, GMs have to be responsive to game action and practice some level of improvisation to run a game. Although many use sourcebooks with guidelines and extensive material around suggested encounters, ultimately the result of

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<sup>34</sup> David Simkins and Constance Steinkuehler, “Critical Ethical Reasoning and Role-Play,” *Games and Culture* 3, no. 3-4 (2008): 350; The ways in which elements of the game respond to a character’s choices (i.e., potential course of action is no longer viable to the player or an NPC expressing intense disgust at a character’s actions and refusing to work with them).

<sup>35</sup> Alex Atmore, “Just Rol[l/e] With It: the Sense-Making Practices of a Tabletop Roleplaying Game Community,” *Proceedings of RAILS - Research Applications, Information and Library Studies*, School of Information Management, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, (6-8 December, 2016). Retrieved from <http://informationr.net/ir/22-4/rails/rails1613.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy*, 129.

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gameplay is uncertain — and both GM and players are negotiating and being impacted by that uncertainty. Tresca says that a game master has to be able to serve both the role of world builder, adjudicator, and supportive narrator, requiring skills around both creative authority, collaboration, and the discernment when to know when to use each.<sup>37</sup> Some tabletop RPGs refer to the game master as the “Storyteller,” emphasizing a focus on narrative continuity and not rule imposition.<sup>38</sup>

As a GM, I have employed a principle of co-creation with my players I call “nothing is wasted.” Anything my players say becomes fodder for later sessions. That off-handed comment a player made about being a water ski champion? That is canon now, and I may push the narrative so that they will likely have the opportunity to test that skill later. This approach ensures that players have an understanding that their actions and choices have meaning and influence. My players are creating aspects of the world alongside me, and, although I may have structured a general narrative in a specific way, refusing to follow emergent outcomes actually threatens the narratives coherence and believability.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE AND APPROACH

If these games are a site to cultivate the practice of dramatic rehearsal and deliberation, what does this mean for us as educators? First and foremost, it is an invitation to recognize that these games hold tremendous power as educational tools and to avoid conflating them with case studies or simple simulations. The educational and therapeutic benefits of tabletop RPGs are well documented, with Bowman classifying the benefits into the three categories of cognitive, behavioral, and affective gains.<sup>39</sup> Tabletop RPGs have been integrated into classrooms as a learning tool to present case studies,<sup>40</sup> teach literature,<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-playing Games* (City, State: McFarland, 2014), 68.

<sup>38</sup> Justin Achilli, *Vampire: The Masquerade Revised Edition* (White Wolf Game Studio, 1998), 40.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Educational Live Action Role-playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review,” in *Wyrd Con Companion Book*, ed. Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2014), 112-131.

<sup>40</sup> David Simkins, “Playing with Ethics: Experiencing New Ways of Being in RPGs,” in *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play*, IGI Global, (2010), 69-84.

<sup>41</sup> Mike P Cook, Matthew Gremo, and Ryan Morgan, “Playing Around with Literature: Tabletop Role-Playing Games in Middle Grades ELA,” *Voices from the Middle* 25, no. 2 (2017): 62—69.

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history,<sup>42</sup> narrative theory,<sup>43</sup> coding,<sup>44</sup> power and privilege,<sup>45</sup> heritage enactment and preservation,<sup>46</sup> and library programming.<sup>47</sup> They have been recommended to aid with social skills,<sup>48</sup> depression,<sup>49</sup> chronic pain,<sup>50</sup> and ameliorating mental health during COVID-19.<sup>51</sup> They saw a huge uptick over the pandemic as people discovered that it was a safe way to spend time with friends. But, as of yet, there is little work being done around how to leverage this tool for civic or deliberative outcomes.

Many of these games are being intentionally designed by creators to encourage thoughtfulness, experimentation, and creative problem solving. The designers of these playbooks are addressing issues of consent, trigger warnings, conflict negotiations, and self-advocacy. More and more, newer games specifically include anti-fascist statements within their playbooks, holding that creative engagement is antithetical to authoritarian principles.<sup>52</sup> Game designers

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<sup>42</sup> William J. White, “The Right to Dream of the Middle Ages: Simulating the Medieval in Tabletop RPGs,” in *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 2013), 69-84.

<sup>43</sup> Jennifer Ann Grouling Cover, “Tabletop Role-Playing Games: Perspectives from Narrative, Game, and Rhetorical Theory,” Masters thesis (North Carolina State University, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Konstantinos Ntokos, “CodePlay: A Tabletop Role-Playing Game System used in Teaching Game Programming Using Content Gamification,” *The Computer Games Journal* (2020): 1-16.

<sup>45</sup> Antero Garcia, “Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games,” *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 24, no. 3 (2017): 232-246.

<sup>46</sup> Michal Mochocki, *Role-Play as a Heritage Practice: Historical LARP, Tabletop RPG and Reenactment* (Routledge, 2021).

<sup>47</sup> Steven Torres-Roman and Cason E. Snow, *Dragons in the Stacks: A Teen Librarian’s Guide to Tabletop Role-Playing*, ABC-CLIO, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Stéphane Daniau, “The Transformative Potential of Role-Playing Games—: From Play Skills to Human Skills,” *Simulation & Gaming* 47, no. 4 (2016): 423-444.

<sup>49</sup> Aaron Segal, “Depression RPG: Weaving Teaching and Knowledge into Gameplay,” PhD diss., (Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Ann Marie Roepke, Sara R. Jaffee, Olivia M. Riffle, Jane McGonigal, Rose Broome, and Bez Maxwell, “Randomized controlled trial of SuperBetter, a smartphone-based/internet-based self-help tool to reduce depressive symptoms,” *Games for Health Journal* 4, no. 3 (2015): 235-246.

<sup>51</sup> Jane McGonigal, “5 Science-Backed Benefits of Playing Tabletop RPGs During (and After) COVID-19,” (May 15th 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.popmythology.com/tabletop-rpg-dnd-benefits-science-coronavirus-crisis/>.

<sup>52</sup> The most commonly used statement is the one initially written by Olivia Hill, who admitted that, in practice, this was unenforceable on a broader scale but said “If someone who is fascist picks it up, there’s nothing stopping them any more than there’s anything stopping them from ignoring any other rule. But I think it’s important that anti-fascist art be explicit in its messaging so as to guarantee it’s not unintentionally seen as a safe place for fascists,” Brent Jans, “Creator One-on-One: Olivia Hill,” *The Rat Hole*, <https://therathole.ca/renaissance-gamer-01-21-20/>. Retrieved 2020-02-23.

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have already recognized the potential of these games as important moral and civic educative spaces as they create opportunities in which people interrogate their values and potentially build essential skills for citizenship. As educators, we need to engage them with the same level of seriousness, or we risk leaving a powerful educative tool unused.

Recognizing the potential of tabletop RPGs to familiarize and develop the skills and habits of dramatic rehearsal in individuals opens up broader opportunities for democratic education and moral formation. Especially as the nation grapples with deeper levels of polarization, the dramatic rehearsal cultivated in RPGs offers another tool for cultivating ethical and empathetic citizens who also have a strong sense of their own capacity. According to Fesmire, not only is dramatic rehearsal an essential tool of moral deliberation, it also leads to action.<sup>53</sup> These games encourage and demand tremendous agency, even within a bounded world. The formative potential of tabletop role-playing is not merely a matter of imagining virtuous things. Hollander specifically calls the experience of collaborative imagination through playing tabletop RPGs edifying — transformational and educative — and believes that complex in-game encounters and moral dilemmas allow players to clarify and act on political commitments.<sup>54</sup> Civically committed educators should encourage players to extend this action beyond the game by making intentional and explicit connections and taking seriously the impact of play on individuals.

#### IMPORTANCE OF INTENTIONAL USE

As with any educational tool, these games have capacity for great good when approached intentionally and also great capacity for harm if not used well. While these games have the capacity for moral formation, empathy, and relationships building, the participatory and discursive elements also have the ability to encourage the replication of experiences of misogyny, racism, oppression, and discrimination, especially when not well moderated.<sup>55</sup> Empathy can also remain at surface levels without good reflection on the part of the player or at the behest of the game master. Players may incorrectly assume that just because they play someone of a certain identity, they now have a better understanding of that standpoint.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps due to their origin as wargames, many tabletop RPGs have violence as a main, if not primary mechanic. Players in a party may work together collaboratively, but it is often to kill or overpower someone or something else. The participatory narrative of games also has the ability to allow for justification of actions, with players claiming that they were

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<sup>53</sup> Fesmire, “Dramatic Rehearsal and the Moral Artist, 568-597.

<sup>54</sup> Hollander, “Blessed Are the Legend-Makers,” 326.

<sup>55</sup> William J. White, “Playing House in a World of Night: Discursive Trajectories of Masculinity in a Tabletop Role-Playing Game,” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 2 (2010): 18-31; Aaron Trammell, “Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies* (Routledge, 2018), 440-447.

<sup>56</sup> Adam Jerrett, Peter Howell, and Neil Dansey, “Developing an Empathy Spectrum for Games,” *Games and Culture* 16, no. 6 (September 2021): 635—59.

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following the emotional immersion of the moment or actively pushing the narrative towards a justification of the violence.<sup>57</sup> Game designer James Mendez Hodes links some of this “bad group” versus “civilized group” mentality to racial categories in *D&D*. Races in the game refer not to human ethnogroups, but to broader categories of species such as dwarf, elf, orc, human, etc. Especially in earlier editions of *D&D*, there was a strong language of biological determinism, with races being linked to certain types of behaviors or moral attitudes. This language and the mechanics connected to it have been revised over the years.

Mechanics and poor design may be partially to blame for the focus on violence according to Jacob Ericsson. He believes that the turn to violence is often because violence is a less challenging course of action as opposed to finding a non-violent or creative approach. He highlights that in *D&D*, a non-violent approach could utilize any number of checks or pathways of actions, whereas attacking is always one action.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, there was rarely a negative consequence for a missed hit (just the absence of damage being done), while a poor skill check could lead to a player being in a worse situation than when they began. For Ericsson, a reliance on violence was as much a result of poor game design as it was of ethics.

In contrast, there is a growing number of games, both independent and mainstream, that decenter violence. Many use a rule system that originated in a game called *ApocalypseWorld*.<sup>59</sup> In most of these games, the mechanics nearly guarantee that if a player chooses to attack, they themselves will also undergo damage — and players have a very low damage threshold. At the same time, this system provides players with a host of other potential actions to take in lieu of continually engaging in battle that will likely kill them quickly. An astute player chooses violence sparingly. Other games, such as Avery Adler’s *The Quiet Year*, actually move the emphasis from an individual making decisions for themselves to players planning a community together and needing to make difficult decisions, where no outcome is clearly positive or negative. In an interview for the podcast *Imaginary Worlds*, Avery described the game as asking what happens when you realize that the community you live in has approached problems poorly.

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<sup>57</sup> Chad Mahood and Michael Hanus, “Role-playing Video Games and Emotion: How Transportation into the Narrative Mediates the Relationship Between Immoral actions and feelings of guilt,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 6, no. 1 (2017): 61.

<sup>58</sup> Jacob Eriksson, “Violence or Challenge?: Determining Factors for Conflict Resolution in RPGs,” Masters Thesis University of Skövde, School of Informatics (2016).

<sup>59</sup> These games are referred to as Powered By the Apocalypse. The system only requires two six-sided dice and the game master typically does not roll at all and instead responds to player actions and rolls. Combat is one of many other optional ways of interacting with other characters.

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The Quiet Year kind of asks you to sit with...how do you relate to community when we've made, you know, 40 weeks' worth of potentially subpar choices... Like how do you live with community when only 75% of your needs are getting met? And that's something that comes up in a few other games as well. That question of like, when things aren't perfect, how do you keep trying to push forward together?<sup>60</sup>

This gameplay is asking players to do some of the same essential imaginative rehearsal needed to balance the difficult requirements of democratic life when assets are finite and community needs are diverse.

As it was in many other areas of society, 2021 was described as a cultural reckoning for tabletop role-playing games around race in the wake of the uprising in response to George Floyd's murder and the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>61</sup> BIPOC players and game designers have begun to push for more inclusion in game design, narrative, and play. The challenge also extended to white players. Hodes, in a blog entry entitled, "May I Play A Character From Another Race?", encourages white players to play characters from other racial and ethnic identities if they understand it must be done with care, intentionality, and with a commitment to educate oneself about the culture they are approaching. Hodes also advocates for players to take these risks because it helps decenter whiteness in tabletop gaming and allows more space for BIPOC players to not feel pressured to play their own identity to assure representation at the table.<sup>62</sup>

The very valid concerns around how tabletop RPGs can actually encourage anti-democratic habits in players present an even stronger argument for civic educators to engage tabletop RPGs as educational tools. From GMing intentionally to creative game designs, civic educators can contribute to and utilize the skyrocketing popularity of tabletop RPGs for essential civic outcomes. Cultivated experiences of dramatic rehearsal are critical in forming deliberative, participatory citizens. These skills support the creation of engaged, committed, and imaginative discourse — the same sort of discourse which serves as the primary driver of many tabletop RPGs. As a result, these games become places of potential educative formation around moral and social commitments. As

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<sup>60</sup> Avery Adler, "Rerolling Role-Playing Games," *Imaginary Worlds Podcast*, episode 185. Retrieved from <https://www.imaginaryworldspodcast.org/episodes/rerolling-role-playing-games>.

<sup>61</sup> Charlie Hall, "Tabletop Gaming in 2021 Will Be Defined By These Last 12 Months Of Chaos," (8 January 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.polygon.com/2021/1/8/22178462/board-games-rpgs-2021-magic-dungeons-dragons-pandemic-black-lives-matter>.

<sup>62</sup> James Mendez Hodes, "May I Play A Character From Another Race?" (14 February 2019). Retrieved from <https://jamesmendezhodes.com/blog/2019/2/14/may-i-play-a-character-from-another-race>.

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players learn to utilize the raw skills around conflict resolution and negotiating competing needs while moving toward a common goal, the lines between play and preparation for political life blur.

Although they are primarily meant to be games played for the autotelic reward of creating and experiencing a shared narrative, tabletop RPGs contain rich formative potential around democratic civic behavior and identity. Even though many games have not stepped fully out of the shadow of their wargaming progenitors and still rely on violent action as driving elements, game mechanics and game play is still rooted in collaborative storytelling and co-creative world building alongside other players and a game master. The activity — especially when done with others — demands high levels of imagination, participatory commitments, self-reflection, creative problem solving and collaboration from players. As they work toward a common goal, players are also negotiating competing needs of their party members and building and rebuilding consensus for actions. This sounds remarkably like being an active democratic citizen.

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POETRY IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION:  
A BRIDGE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

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The educational climate in the United States today is often heavily compartmentalized. The work that goes on in primary and secondary classrooms all across the country often seems, in practice, isolated from the work of educational policymakers and the work of educational scholars and theorists. Within colleges of education, pre-service teachers often find themselves in the middle of what they perceive to be a “theoretical” or “philosophical” and “practical” divide.<sup>1</sup> Pre-service teachers may perceive themselves to be learning *about* the foundations or philosophy of education, but they are unlikely to view *themselves*, within their teacher roles, as authoritative philosophers of education. This perceived philosophical and practical divide alienates pre-service and in-service teachers from the philosophical foundations of their everyday classroom work.

This alienation is a problem because it may prevent practitioners from fully entering and contributing to all of the various discourses and conversations about education. Teachers should be connected to, not alienated from, the philosophical underpinnings of their work. Teachers who understand themselves to be philosophers of education, and who see their work as both practical *and* philosophical in nature, may be empowered with an additional foundational and theoretical “tool” to use both in joining educational conversations and challenging unhelpful educational discourse.

Creative writing, especially the literary form of poetry, is one overlooked and under-researched space where pre-service and in-service teachers can connect to the philosophical foundations of their work, unite the realms of theory and practice, and come to view themselves as philosophers of education with the authority to participate in and guide a diverse variety of educational conversations in their schools and communities. In this essay, I will argue that consistently and deeply reading poetry about education or written by other practitioners, which I will refer to as “teacher poetry,” should be an important component of philosophy of education courses within pre-service

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Richardson, “The role of attitudes and beliefs in learning to teach,” in *Handbook of Research in Teacher Education*, eds. J. Sikula, T. J. Buttery, & E. Guyton (New York: Macmillan, 1996): 102-119; Graham. P. McDonough, “Teaching Practitioners about Theory and Practice: A Proposal to Recover Aristotle in Teacher Education,” *Journal of Thought* 47, no. 4 (2012): 7-22.; Oliver. McGarr, et. al., “Exploring the theory-practice gap in initial teacher education: moving beyond questions of relevance to issues of power and authority,” *Journal of Education for Teaching* 43, no. 1 (2017): 48-60.

teacher preparation programs, as teacher poetry has the potential to serve as a two-way connecting “bridge” between philosophy and practice.

#### TEACHERS AS KNOWERS, PHILOSOPHERS, AND POETS

Teachers possess a lot of knowledge. Some of their knowledge may come from formal pre-service studies in a teacher preparation program, where new teachers generally explore topics such as classroom management, child and adolescent development, motivation, and language acquisition.<sup>2</sup> Other knowledge is gained through professional development experiences, where in-service teachers may attend workshops on topics ranging from the best methods for teaching state standards to the appropriate ways to respond to a child with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In many of these educational spaces, pre-service and in-service teachers are presented with what is considered the accepted educational knowledge base: an organization of subject matter knowledge, theories, and teaching strategies and practices that has been codified using the standard methods, frameworks, and languages of university-based researchers. This conception of teacher knowledge as being “knowledge-for-practice” created and validated by university-based experts or educational policymakers reduces teachers to users of knowledge and has historically driven many of the most-widespread initiatives for teacher learning.<sup>3</sup> Some pre-service teachers have reported a belief that educational researchers are overall more knowledgeable about education than practitioners, suggesting that the prevalence of the knowledge-for-practice model has had real consequences on how new teachers view themselves as knowers.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from engaging with universities and other institutions, teachers also gain knowledge through their own teaching experiences. The experience of teaching itself, working with students, learning about and alongside them, and sharing time and space with them, leads to the development of practical knowledge, or “knowledge-in-practice.”<sup>5</sup> This type of knowledge, the often deeply embodied and relational knowledge teachers gain from the act of teaching, however, is not necessarily recognized or valued by the dominant educational institutions unless and until they themselves have approved and

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Neumann, “Social Foundations and Multicultural Education Course Requirements in Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States,” *Educational Foundations* 24, no. 3 (2010): 3-17.

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Cochran-Smith & Susan Lytle, “Relationships of Knowledge and Practice: Teacher Learning in Communities,” *Review of Research in Education* 24 (1999): 249-305.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Merk, & Tom Rosman, “Smart but Evil? Student-Teachers’ Perception of Educational Researchers’ Epistemic Trustworthiness,” *AERA Open*, (July 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Anne M. Phelan, “A Fall from (Someone Else’s) Certainty: Recovering Practical Wisdom in Teacher Education,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 28, no. 3 (2005): 339–58.

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codified it into the teacher knowledge-based for dissemination throughout the profession.

While the value of teachers' practical knowledge is increasingly being recognized within teacher preparation programs and school administrations, educational accountability measures, which are generally determined by policymakers at the state and federal levels, still impose a top-down organization onto teachers and confer great responsibility onto them without recognizing their distinct knowledge and authority as professionals.<sup>6</sup> This creates a situation in which, within schools, academic spaces — even those that deal specifically with issues of education — and the general public discourse, practicing teachers are often still not recognized as specialized, authoritative creators of meaningful knowledge.

Research suggests that teachers often view themselves, to some degree, as experts in terms of content matter and pedagogical and didactical skills.<sup>7</sup> In order for teachers to be even more empowered to participate in diverse conversations about education and challenge unhelpful policies, practices, and mindsets, however, teachers should also understand and experience themselves as authoritative philosophers of education. To be a “philosopher” denotes a specific relationship with knowledge and with oneself as a knower — a philosopher doesn't just passively know, but actively seeks truth and lives life in a place of seeking. A philosopher is a lover of wisdom, a wonderer, and a questioner.

While there has been some discourse about the relationship between philosophers and educators and whether or not they do or should interact with one another,<sup>8</sup> some scholars have suggested that teachers themselves, by virtue of the work they do in the classroom, *are* philosophers of education. Sam Rocha has noted, for example, that in John Dewey's democratic approach to philosophy, it is possible to see anyone with a philosophical disposition — that is, anyone who is “open-minded and sensitive to new perception, and who has concentration and responsibility in connecting them” — as a philosopher.<sup>9</sup> Rocha notes that, while a critic might claim that having a “philosophical disposition” does not equate to being a philosopher, in Dewey's view,

<sup>6</sup> Richard Ingersoll, “Power, Accountability, and the Teacher Quality Problem,” in *Assessing Teacher Quality: Understanding Teacher Effects on Instruction and Achievement*, ed. S. Kelly (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011): 97-109.

<sup>7</sup> Douwe Beijaard, et. al., “Teachers' perceptions of professional identity: An exploratory study from a personal knowledge perspective,” *Teaching and teacher education* 16, no. 7 (2000): 749-764.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey Siegel, “On the Obligations of the Professional Philosopher of Education,” *Journal of Thought* 18, no. 2, (1983): 31-37; Peter F. Carbone, Jr., “The Teacher as Philosopher,” *The Educational Forum* 55, no. 4 (1991): 319-331; Morwenna Griffiths, “Why teachers and philosophers need each other: Philosophy and educational research,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 27, no. 2 (1997): 191.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Samuel D. Rocha, “Who Gets to Be a Philosopher? Dewey, Democracy & Philosophical Identity,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 66.

philosophy constitutes thinking that “has become conscious of itself” and has “generalized its place, function, and value in experience.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, according to Dewey, philosophy is thought that bears a certain awareness, attitude, or disposition.<sup>11</sup> Rocha points out that it would be difficult to find anyone who does not carry this disposition and that it’s not clear who could make that determination anyway, as “who can point to someone who goes through her life without the ordinary need to wonder, to be curious and open to new things?”<sup>12</sup>

If anyone expressing a philosophical disposition can be considered a philosopher, then it is clear that teachers, too, can be philosophers, and perhaps the work of teaching itself is what prompts practitioners to wonder, be curious, and open to new things. Engaging with poetry can encourage pre-service teachers to tune into their wonders, question what they previously assumed to be true, and begin building new knowledge about what it means to teach. Although “poetry” and “philosophy” are sometimes placed in opposition to one another, poetry can be an important jumping-off point into philosophical concepts and ideas and may serve as a bridge between what many pre-service teachers perceive to be the disparate worlds of philosophy and practice.

The so-called “ancient quarrel” between philosophy and poetry begins with Plato, who argued that poetry was mimetic, led its readers to focus on pieces rather than on wholes, misappropriated language, which was primarily the tool of the philosopher, and had the dangerous capacity to corrupt even the most balanced individuals.<sup>13</sup> Plato did not believe that poetry could make people wise, but he did allow for the possibility that it could point us in the direction of wisdom, and provide a starting point for philosophical inquiry.<sup>14</sup> The type of poetry that Plato wanted to allow in his ideal Republic was poetry that points beyond itself, that does not conceive of itself as a complete truth, but as an open question, a space for consideration and thought.<sup>15</sup>

The “ancient quarrel,” it seems, has somewhat settled into a more peaceful state of co-existence, with poetry being perceived and defended by many scholars as philosophically useful. Following Plato’s criticisms, Aristotle defended poetry, recognizing the ethical value that poetry can offer within its proper limitations, and noting that poetry isn’t purely imitation, but also involves imaginative interpretation, and that poetry can reach toward universal truth.<sup>16</sup> Later philosophers such as Heidegger have further explored this relationship, arguing that poetry has the potential to “uncover” what philosophy can conceal.

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<sup>10</sup> Rocha, “Who Gets to be a Philosopher?,” 68

<sup>11</sup> Rocha, 68

<sup>12</sup> Rocha, 68

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Barfield, *The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Barfield, *Ancient Quarrel*, 19

<sup>15</sup> Barfield, 24

<sup>16</sup> Barfield, 41

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Although Heidegger asserts that, to a degree, all art is poetry, he also notes that “the linguistic work, the poem in the narrower sense, has a privileged position in the domain of the arts.”<sup>17</sup> As philosophers, Heidegger claims, we often lose sight of the nature of truth, focusing on our need to “get it right” instead of our potential to uncover and reveal the world and its being.<sup>18</sup> Philosophy, our attempt to understand and shape language, can’t always lead to truth on its own because it really is language that shapes *us*. Therefore, “if we are going to move forward with a true philosophical response to the command, ‘know thyself,’ we will have to return to language, most purely spoken in poetry.”<sup>19</sup>

Maxine Greene further explored the relationship between education and the arts, advocating for schooling that centers the arts as a critical component of the curriculum. Engaging with the arts, Greene argued, moves people towards critical awareness, a sense of moral agency, and a conscious engagement with the world — a sense of “wide awakesness.”<sup>20</sup> In terms of poetry, Greene notes that, “what sinks below the surface, what is half-recalled, may be more likely to be recovered through engagement with a poem than through an inquiry into the facts.”<sup>21</sup> Overall, the common ground between philosophy and poetry is rooted in the idea that “the exercise of both poetic and philosophical gifts constitutes a feeling after and a reaching for patterns, connections, meaning.”<sup>22</sup>

Teacher preparation programs are often presented to pre-service teachers as being an “inquiry into the facts,” a dive into best practices and evidence-based methods that have been “proven” to produce their desired results. Much of this curriculum arises from the pressure put on these programs at the state and federal levels to prove that they are producing high-quality teachers. Today, “teacher education institutions are being asked to deliver on an increasingly narrow set of objectives, or standards, with substantial amounts of time having to be spent on delivering that part of the curriculum that is being measured and reported.”<sup>23</sup> As a result, teacher education often focuses on sets of skills and competencies that emphasize the importance of what teachers are *doing* rather than what they are *thinking*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013): 71.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Rogers, “Poetic Uncovering in Heidegger,” *Aporia* 12, no. 2 (2002): 1-7.; Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Barfield, *Ancient Quarrel*, 253

<sup>20</sup> Maxine Greene, “Toward Wide-Awakesness: An Argument for the Arts and Humanities in Education,” *Teachers College Record* 79, no. 1 (1977): 119-125.

<sup>21</sup> Maxine Greene, “The Poet, The City, and The Curriculum,” (2008), Maxinegreene.org.

<sup>22</sup> Barfield, *Ancient Quarrel*, 41

<sup>23</sup> Tony Townsend, “Searching high and searching low, searching east and searching west: Looking for trust in teacher education,” *Journal of Education for Teaching* 37 (2011): 497.

<sup>24</sup> M.A. Flores, “Teacher Education Curriculum,” in *International handbook of teacher education*, eds. Loughran, J., & In Hamilton, M. L. 1 (2016): 194.

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In such high-stakes environments, what pre-service teachers learn in the philosophy of education course can seem distant and disconnected from the lived world of the classroom. New teachers may enter the classroom viewing themselves as users of knowledge but not as philosophers or wonderers. Poetry has been recognized, specifically, as a way to “know” teaching, as “engagement with poetry can move scholars and practitioners closer towards integrating their intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic understandings of what it means to be a teacher.”<sup>25</sup> In order to empower pre-service teachers to feel confident in joining a variety of professional conversations, including conversations surrounding the aims and foundations of education, teacher educators must be willing to explore new and meaningful pathways, such as poetry, to help pre-service teachers connect philosophy to the lived experiences of their practice.

#### EXAMPLES OF TEACHER POETRY

Poetry, as the linguistic work that Heidegger privileges, can fulfil an important pedagogical role within teacher education that traditional philosophical writing cannot always fulfil. In our daily lives, and often in our philosophical work, we view language as a tool of verbal exchange, agreement and disagreement, and, overall, communication with one another. Heidegger claims that language also names beings and brings them into the world. He calls this “projective saying,” what occurs when we are pulled to respond to the world with our language, when we throw ourselves out into the open and engage with the beings we are calling into existence, and in which we prepare the sayable and bring the unsayable into being. According to Heidegger, poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is.<sup>26</sup> The philosophical texts we often read with pre-service teachers primarily use language to communicate ideas to the reader. Sometimes, however, perhaps what pre-service teachers who are growing as philosophers need the most is the space to uncover what is unsayable about the everyday work of teaching.

As both Heidegger and Greene suggest, poetry carries with it an important potential for uncovering, retrieving, and awakening to that which may otherwise have remained obscured or concealed. Many examples of “teacher poetry” — poetry written about the teaching experience, usually by practitioners themselves — combat the philosophical alienation teachers face and unite the theoretical and practical components of teaching by exploring the teaching experience as a holistic whole, with its philosophical and practical components intact and intertwined. Engaging with these richly complex and unified pictures of teaching is one way for pre-service teachers to dredge up and call to the surface their own wonders and curiosities and to begin developing an understanding of their everyday teaching work, roles, beings, and selves as responding to the

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<sup>25</sup> Aaron Zimmerman, et. al., “Knowing Teaching Poetically,” *LEARNING Landscapes* 12, no. 1 (2019): 203–315.

<sup>26</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 71.

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questions and problems they might encounter in their philosophy of education class.

As an example of teacher poetry, take the poem “A Rebel Song” published anonymously in a 1924 edition of *The English Journal*.<sup>27</sup> The author writes,

The straight and ever narrow way,  
Paved with a well-wrought lesson plan,  
Points to a brilliant future day,  
When methods win and aims succeed.  
But oh! the joy to break our bonds  
And ramble in some winding path,  
Where eager youth at last responds  
And shy hopes brave a softened light.

Within teacher preparation programs, the definition of learning — something that is inherently measurable, something that can be delineated and planned before it happens — is generally assumed to be known and may not often be questioned. The speaker in this poem begins by considering a common understanding of learning that’s accepted and prevalent: the vision of learning as “the straight and ever narrow way” that can be found through following a “well-wrought lesson plan” created in advance. The speaker challenges that understanding of learning, however, and instead expresses a longing to “ramble in some winding path,” embracing the learning that arises through shared experiences with her students, where they at last will be inspired to respond and engage. The poem poses a question that we often put before pre-service teachers in philosophy of education classes — what *is* learning?

In exploring this question with pre-service teachers, we might turn to the Platonic idea of leaning as remembering: the process of re-discovering the knowledge that already rests inside of us. We might consider Locke’s conception of the “blank slate:” humans as empty minds that are ready to be written upon by a person’s environment. We might turn to the pragmatist’s vision of learning as a social, experiential, and inevitable endeavor. For pre-service teachers, however, these ideas and their accompanying texts may seem to live purely in the realm of the theoretical, far away and disconnected from the actual goings-on of the primary or secondary classroom. Through the lens of a teacher’s own classroom experiences and her lived and unspoken daily longings, the poem “A Rebel Song” uncovers some of the depth behind the everyday classroom challenge of wrangling the complexity of learning into our own schedules, our own spaces, on our own times. The poem bridges philosophy and practice by presenting a holistic picture of teaching in which the question *what is learning* has a real outcome, a real impact, on the experiences of the teacher and her students.

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<sup>27</sup> “A Rebel Song,” *The English Journal* 13, no. 9 (1924): 674.

“Raising their Hands,” a poem by Julia Lisella, complements “A Rebel Song” by elaborating on a similar theme of challenging common notions of learning.<sup>28</sup> In this poem, the speaker explores the dreams she has about her students and the way they insist upon raising their hands in her classroom. The speaker says, “Put your hands down, I tell them. / Shout. Explode. Scream it. / Instead they look at me and smile / the way they would at foreigners who don’t speak the language. / That’s how they’ve trained me.” In this poem, the speaker discusses her discomfort with the patterns of schooling her and her students have become accustomed to and explores her yearning for something else: a more fluid classroom dynamic, less structured and perhaps more democratic learning, and a genuine conversation.

The poem remains ambiguous, however, regarding what the speaker actually does about her discomfort. In that ambiguity, it invites the readers into their wonder. Why do we assume that hand-raising must be a part of classroom activity? What could schooling look like if students *didn’t* raise their hands? Why does schooling train us to understand learning in particular and narrow ways, and who benefits from that? This poem also viscerally uncovers the feelings of discomfort that can arise from our roles as teachers, the difficult-to-describe and somewhat isolating sense of being separated from our students behind the entrenched expectations of schooling, which can sometimes seem impassible. With its close first-person narration and the speaker’s invitation into the world of her dreams, “Raising Their Hands” encourages readers to encounter and consider this discomfort and its origins in an intensely personal way that traditional philosophical writing may not be best suited for.

Another example of teacher poetry that does unifying work is Dante Di Stefano’s poem “Prompts (For High School Teachers Who Write Poetry).”<sup>29</sup> In this poem, Di Stefano writes, “Write about walking into the building / as a new teacher. Write yourself hopeful. / Write a row of empty desks. Write the face / of a student you’ve almost forgotten; / he’s worn a Derek Jeter jersey all year.”

The speaker reflects on teaching Othello to this student when he came to class early for help each October morning. Then, the speaker asks, “Write about reading his obituary five years after he graduated. Write / a poem containing the words ‘common;’ / ‘core,’ ‘differentiate,’ and ‘overdose.’” The speaker ends the poem by inviting the reader to “Write how all this added up to a life.”

The idea of considering how teaching “adds up to a life” recalls the discussion of the ethical life of the teacher and asks the reader to consider what teaching is *about*, what this profession asks of its practitioners, what practitioners receive in return, and, as Chris Higgins puts it, why the practice of teaching is

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<sup>28</sup> Julia Lisella, “Raising Their Hands,” in *Learning by Heart: Contemporary American Poetry about School*, eds. M. Anderson & D. Hassler (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999): 33.

<sup>29</sup> Dane Di Stefano, “Prompts (For High School Teachers Who Write Poetry),” (2019), Poets.org.

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worth putting at the center of one's life.<sup>30</sup> Di Stefano guides the reader into this conversation through a nuanced depiction of his own classroom experiences, rich with details about his students Zuly and Nely, sisters from Guatemala still learning English, and all the other students who cursed him out and slammed his door and who screamed "you are not my father." This poem asks the reader to consider what a "life" entails, and what a life of teaching entails, inviting pre-service teachers into a richly ethical conversation by connecting it to a real teacher's lived reflections and ultimately presenting a unifying picture of the complexity of the profession.

Any of these poems could fit into the curriculum of a philosophy of education class, either as texts presented independently to introduce questions or problems and call pre-service teachers' wonder to the surface or paired with more traditional texts to provide an alternative way to explore philosophical ideas. Importantly, teacher poetry provides pre-service teachers with a starting space to jump into philosophical ideas and also to uncover what Greene termed, "what sinks below the surface," the joys and discomforts and fears about teaching that seem unsayable, but that can be reached through the flexible medium of poetic language. Through consistently integrating teacher poetry into philosophy of education classes, teacher educators can provide pre-service teachers with multiple pathways toward understanding complex ideas and can present them with pictures of teaching that are unified, with philosophical and practical problems inextricably intertwined. This may lead to pre-service teachers beginning to develop a sense of themselves in their teacher roles not just as users of knowledge but as philosophers of education.

### CONCLUSIONS

Heidegger's interest in "unconcealing" rather than just finding a single correct or most true answer aligns with many of the goals teacher educators often have for pre-service teachers studying the philosophy of education. We generally do not aim to indoctrinate our students into any one particular school of thought. We don't aim to teach them that to be good teachers, they must only follow the educational approaches of A.S. Neill or Maria Montessori.<sup>31</sup> Instead, we want them to think flexibly, critically, and responsively. We want them to reflect on their biases and their relationship to the world they live in. We want them to develop a wonder-ful and curious disposition toward themselves, their world, and the work of teaching. Just as Heidegger suggests that there is not only one singular pathway towards truth, we want our pre-service teachers to understand that teaching itself is an open question, a never-ending conversation. We want to empower them to feel confident in participating fully in that conversation, including discussions about the foundations and aims of education.

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<sup>30</sup> Chris Higgins, *The good life of teaching: An ethics of professional practice* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011): 9.

<sup>31</sup> Colin Bakker, et. al., "The Inadequacies of Assigning 'My Philosophy of Education' Statements in Teacher Education Courses," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 26 (2020): 14.

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If these are truly our goals, then we should provide pre-service teachers with many different ways of thinking about education and seeking truths about teaching. While philosophy of education and teaching practice are not really things that can be separated, they are often presented to pre-service teachers as two totally different realms. Traditional philosophical texts encourage readers to seek truth by engaging in thought that is clear, critical, and consistent, but that some pre-service teachers may struggle to connect to their lived experiences. Teacher poetry serves as a two-way connecting bridge, an overlapping middle ground between philosophy and practice, because it also aims to uncover truth about teaching, but does so through applying the uniquely world-building power of flexible, poetic language directly to the lived experiences of teachers in the classroom.

In the high-stakes educational environment pre-service teachers enter today, teacher educators should be willing to explore different avenues to help pre-service teachers grow into their identity as authoritative knowers, wonderers, and philosophers of education. We should expand beyond traditional philosophical texts and consider new ways to engage pre-service teachers in exploring the problems and questions in philosophy of education. In this essay, I have argued that the literary form of poetry is a philosophically useful tool to “bridge” the perceived gap between philosophy of education and educational practice. Teachers who perceive themselves to be philosophers of education may be more comfortable pushing back, from a theoretical standpoint, against unhelpful or harmful educational practices, and may be more confident in participating in all facets of the vast and continuing conversation that is teaching.

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# TOWARDS A NON-MANAGERIAL, NON-HELPER VISION OF TEACHING: DOCUMENTING A FUSION OF HORIZONS FOR STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

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America has a demographic mismatch in its schools. As noted elsewhere, a majority of the teachers in public primary and secondary schools are white,<sup>1</sup> while increasingly more of their students belong to communities of color.<sup>2</sup> Because of the history of racism in this country, this demographic mismatch creates issues of power. A picture of a white teacher in front of a classroom of exclusively Black and Brown students draws on oppressive and disempowering histories of segregation and even slavery. This picture becomes especially troubling when teachers position themselves as having access to rational standardized knowledge that they are trying to help their Black and Brown students know.

Teacher educators have been investigating ways to rob the demographic mismatch of this disempowering history. How can white preservice teachers be prepared to do meaningful work with communities of color? Joyce Elaine King and Gloria Ladson-Billings observe the need for “a theory of emancipatory teacher education.”<sup>3</sup> This emancipatory teacher education would surely involve a training in culturally responsive pedagogy in which teachers prepare culturally relevant curricula for students.<sup>4</sup> However, scholars have been skeptical of the ability of white teachers to become fully culturally relevant.<sup>5</sup> Aaron Schutz worries when teachers with privilege in relation to their students seek to “help”

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<sup>1</sup> “Spotlight A: Characteristics of Public School Teachers by Race/Ethnicity” in “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups,” *National Center for Education Statistics*, last updated February 2019, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/spotlight\\_a.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/spotlight_a.asp).

<sup>2</sup> Table 203.5 “Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2018” in *National Center for Education Statistics, 2018 Digest of Education Statistics*, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18\\_203.50.asp?current=yes](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_203.50.asp?current=yes).

<sup>3</sup> Joyce Elaine King & Gloria Ladson-Billings, “The Teacher Education Challenge in Elite University Settings: Developing the Critical Perspectives for Teaching in a Democratic and Multicultural Society,” *The European Journal of Intercultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 27.

<sup>4</sup> Geneva Gay, “Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 53, no. 2 (2002): 106-116.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Schutz, “Home Is a Prison in the Global City: The Tragic Failure of School-Based Community Engagement Strategies,” *Review of Educational Research* 76, no. 4 (2006): 691-743.

their students, they necessarily formulate their students as having deficit knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

If this is true, then what are we to make of programs like Teach For America (TFA) that attempt to deal with problems stemming from the above demographic mismatch in education by paradoxically recruiting mostly white graduates from elite universities to teach in under-resourced communities? Does the willingness of these recruits to “help” communities of color necessarily make them oppressive in the way Schutz identifies? In this paper, I theorize an answer to this question as well as necessary components of the theory of emancipatory teacher education. Using interview data from a study of teachers trained by TFA, I argue training in culturally relevant teaching does little to prepare teachers to succeed in culturally diverse classrooms unless it includes some engagement with the cultural Other. I pair these data with the work of Herbert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor who argue encounter with the Other can be a Gadamerian “fusion of horizons.” I will demonstrate how this fusion of horizons allows teachers to escape Schutz’s worries and move closer to embodying culturally responsive teaching.

#### POSITIONALITY AND METHODOLOGY

Before getting to this argument, though, it is necessary to establish how I came to this work and explain why the qualitative interviews are a crucial part of the investigation done here. As a white 2013 TFA corps member myself, I was left feeling unprepared for the work I was expected to do as a ninth-grade algebra teacher in Detroit, teaching exclusively Black and Latinx students. Despite reading critical race theorists like Derrick Bell and feminist pedagogues like bell hooks, I had never had the requisite fusion of horizons that would have given me a focus on the goals my students had for themselves. While this experience was the start of the questions with which I engage in this essay, I recognized its incompleteness in theorizing about the experience of other TFA corps members. I did semi-structured interviews with educators who were trained by TFA to supplement my experience and intuitions.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows, I will be using these interviews combined with scholarship to investigate and complicate three main theses: (1) TFA positions teachers as managers even when they try to include culturally responsive teaching materials in their training; (2) TFA recruits those who want to be helpers; and (3) teaching of culturally diverse students depends on reaching a fusion of horizons in addition to pedagogical knowledge and skills.

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<sup>6</sup> Aaron Schutz. “Teaching Freedom? Postmodern Perspectives,” *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 2 (2000): 215-251.

<sup>7</sup> These interviews received IRB Exemption. All names of participants are changed.

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TEACH FOR AMERICA AND TEACHER AS MANAGER EVEN WITH  
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

As TFA-founder Wendy Kopp was putting together her plan for TFA, David Berliner was proposing to think of teachers as kinds of managers.<sup>8</sup> The image of teachers as managers did not develop in a vacuum. Policymakers were critiquing traditional teacher preparation programs in the 1990s over hysteria around *A Nation at Risk* in which a Department of Education commission declared that all school achievement was declining. E. D. Hirsch testified in front of a 1998 US Congressional Hearing on Teaching Preparation Initiatives, arguing that teacher preparation programs in colleges of education were partly to blame for low student achievement.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Hirsch listed the skills and dispositions teacher preparation programs were not giving their students: “clear focus, definite standards, diligent practice, and continual monitoring through tests and other means:”<sup>10</sup> decidedly managerial characteristics.

Wendy Kopp’s plan flipped Berliner’s proposal on its head to achieve the kind of work practices Hirsch and policymakers were looking for from teachers. Instead of teachers as managers, she proposed managers as teachers: elite college students who were planning to enter careers in investment banks or consulting firms had the right kind of work ethic to be successful as teachers in districts with teacher shortages if there was a venerable and quick path to filling those shortages.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it made sense to begin using texts like *Teaching as Leadership* when training new recruits who had been recruited for their leadership qualities and accomplishments.<sup>12</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that texts like *Teaching as Leadership* necessarily contribute to imaginings of students as lacking and requiring help to be remade with the kind of skills, knowledges, and even motivations which will allow them to flourish beyond the classroom.<sup>13</sup> In a racist, capitalist society, the necessary motivations for success beyond the classroom means those motivations that will allow students to compete economically for high-paying

<sup>8</sup> Wendy Kopp, “An Argument and Plan for the Creation of the Teacher Corps,” Senior Thesis (Princeton University, 1989); David C. Berliner, “If the Metaphor Fits, Why Not Wear It? The Teacher as Executive,” *Theory Into Practice* 29, no. 2 (1990): 85-93.

<sup>9</sup> E. D. Hirsch, speaking on Teacher Preparation Initiatives, on February 24, 1998, to the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth, and Families of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, 105<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2nd sess., 9.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED443184.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 230.

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Kopp, *One Day. All Children. . . The Unlikely Triumph of Teach For America and What I Learned Along the Way* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 4-5; Kopp, “An Argument.”

<sup>12</sup> Steven Farr, *Teaching as Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Spencer J. Smith, “The Color of Mind Discourse as Educational Debt,” *Educational Theory* 71, no. 2 (2021): 267-287. DOI: 10.1111/edth.12475.

jobs in a capitalist market and achieve financial empowerment. Teaching objectives organized in this way frequently move to displace and replace the goals of students.

This displacement can be seen in Herter's study Schutz uses to theorize oppressive helpers. Herter studies a group of white, middle-class college students in a class called "Theater and Social Change," who were facilitating a night class for African American working class students that fulfilled an English requirement.<sup>14</sup> Herter observes that the college students were wrapped up in using the texts, theories, and abstractions they were studying for their college course and thus missed some of the goals students had for themselves in the course.<sup>15</sup> Schutz notes the problem of trying to apply theory like dialogic instruction whole sale onto a specific context.<sup>16</sup> This application problem means some teachers may enact liberatory practices in a managerial way from either lack of training or because of the demands of their specific contexts.

Similarly, my participants often encountered problems in their teaching placements that the theories they were learning did not give them a handle to successfully solve. For instance, multiple white participants told me about navigating conversations about the N-word with their predominantly Black students. While one participant, Zoe, worked with a veteran teacher trained by TFA to scaffold a conversation with high school students about using the N-word when reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she was critical of TFA for not giving her practice at navigating issues that would arise from racial difference in her specific context. However, while Zoe was critical of TFA's teaching of the theory, she ultimately felt like the support she received from TFA after her training enabled her to enact the theory that she learned.

Conversely, another teacher experienced problems with his handling of the use of the N-word in his classroom. As an individual being newly inducted into anti-racist ways of thinking, he knew the N-word was not an appropriate word for school settings. But since he had no relevant experiences before his time with TFA to suggest how to handle the use of the N-word otherwise, he adopted a managerial, helper approach to his students. He conceptualized their use of the N-word as a deficiency that would hold them back educationally. He asked his Black principal how to instruct his students not to use the word, and his principal told him the way she cut down on students saying it is by saying it herself. She suggested he might try something similar, so he did. His actions resulted in a small classroom controversy causing angry parent phone calls to the school. In this situation, the high school teacher was trying to be helpful, so he was surprised at how his actions were interpreted oppressively.

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<sup>14</sup> Robert J. Herter, "Conflicting Interests: Critical Theory Inside Out," in *Literacy and Democracy: Teacher Research and Composition Studies in Pursuit of Habitable Spaces*, eds. Cathy Fleischer & David Schaafama (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1998), 157.

<sup>15</sup> Herber, "Conflicting Interests," 172.

<sup>16</sup> Schutz, "Teaching Freedom?," 242.

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These examples of classroom issues around the N-word show TFA's trouble with fully preparing white teachers to be prepared to enact culturally responsive praxis even if these teachers theoretically understand what is expected of them. However, another participant, Erin, noted a complete disconnect between the culturally relevant teaching theory her TFA training provided her with and her specific teaching context.<sup>17</sup> Although her training included thinking about how to do managerial things like utilize student test data to support student learning outcomes, the training in culturally relevant teaching was the most prominent part of her training. She was particularly taken by practices of building relationships with students and communities, committing to these practices as part of an antiracist praxis. However, she felt constrained in her ability to enact this praxis by the policies of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter where she was hired: "I don't think I learned to be an anti-racist teacher when I was policing Black students... consistently and being taught to do so." This teacher clearly was expected to do managerial teaching practices even while TFA preached something different to her in their training.

While most of the examples in this section demonstrate perceived discrepancies between the theory of TFA and its practices, I want to end the section with a participant, Padma, who felt supported in her rejection of managerial, helping teaching practices. As an early childhood teacher, Padma often gave advice to parents about the schools in which they should enroll their students. In one instance, a Black mother wanted to know if she should keep her student in the system the early childhood program would lead into, which was a No-Excuses school like KIPP, in which behavior is policed radically to support high academic expectations. Padma said, "I could see this future playing out where he would have been penalized potentially ... put into that prison school-to-prison pipeline for being himself and we had identified that in pre-K. So ... don't go down this road." Padma's goals for her student had been altered by interaction with him, and she saw other tracks beyond a racist, capitalist system would allow him to be more successful.

When I questioned this current TFA staff member about how this advice might conflict with some of TFA's teachings as in *Teaching as Leadership*, Padma corrected me very quickly, saying TFA hasn't used *Teaching as Leadership* in their training materials for a while and their new training in culturally relevant practices gave her the knowledge and skills to be able to recognize what could potentially be a disastrous educational future for her student. Moving to training involving more culturally relevant practices allowed TFA to re-inscribe the cultural context of particular students as important to make sense of the discrete separable skills of managerial teaching. This re-contextualization is promising because philosophers like Derek Gottlieb have

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant teaching are not synonymous, though Gay uses Ladson-Billings's conception of "culturally relevant teaching" in her development of a culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002).

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argued focusing on discrete “highly-effective” teaching moves risks obfuscating the role context plays when determining good teaching practice.<sup>18</sup>

#### DOES TEACH FOR AMERICA RECRUIT THOSE WHO WANT TO HELP?

TFA intentionally positions its teachers as helpers in the Schutzian sense. This positioning happens through TFA’s articulation of the problem they are trying to solve. The goal of TFA is “to raise achievement levels in low-income schools.”<sup>19</sup> This goal is concerned with the gaps in school achievement that exist between low-income, and frequently Black and Brown, students compared with their higher-income and frequently white peers.<sup>20</sup> It has been documented how this goal, paired with TFA’s recruitment efforts at elite predominantly white universities, has contributed to what Teju Cole has referred to as the “white savior industrial complex,” in which white Do-Gooders, or helpers in Schutz’s language, work in Black and Brown spaces.<sup>21</sup>

In Schutz and Herter, it seems to be a necessary part of oppressive helping for the helpers to conceive of what they are doing as helping. Consequently, maybe this oppressive helping feeds into the white savior industrial complex. This conception means a deficit model for students,<sup>22</sup> casting any knowledge or skills or goals students might already have as lacking. It is useful to interrogate the data from the interviews to see if teachers trained by TFA were active recruits in TFA’s white savior industrial complex.

Some of my participants did join TFA to do good and be helpers. One white teacher, Brooke, joined TFA after receiving a degree in education because she felt called to work in a high need area because of her experience growing up in a middle-class school district with parents who did not have college degrees. Brooke wondered how things might have been different for her had she not been surrounded by other families and educators who assumed college was the destination of the majority of her high school classmates. She wanted to be that encouraging adult for other students.

Ultimately, to be an encouraging teacher for her students, though, Brooke felt like she had to go beyond TFA. While TFA stressed what Brooke called militarized behavior management in the classroom, she received a different model from her partner teacher who was an experienced educator. With her partner teacher, Brooke learned to treat her students like students. She noted that her colleagues, many of them TFA corps members, didn’t understand what was happening in her classroom. Her students were some of the happiest, most

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<sup>18</sup> Derek Gottlieb, “Beyond a Rule-Following Model of Skillful Practice in Teacher Development,” *Educational Theory* 62, no. 5 (2012): 504.

<sup>19</sup> Kopp, *One Day...*, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Kopp, 174.

<sup>21</sup> Colette M. Cann, “What School Movies and TFA Teach Us About Who Should Teach Urban Youth: Dominant Narratives as Public Pedagogy,” *Urban Education* 5, no. 3 (2015): 288-315; Teju Cole, “The White Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Schutz, “Teaching Freedom?”, 242-243.

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high-achieving students in her school while the students in militarized behavior management classrooms were often mad and angry.

Brooke serves as a counterexample to the idea that all white TFA recruits seeking to “help” students of color necessarily become conscious parts of the white savior industrial complex. Brooke was motivated to help her majority minority students, but she distanced herself and her praxis from the white savior industrial complex. She said, “There is a big responsibility placed on you if you are a white woman teaching Black students or Black and Brown students certain topics because you are sitting in a role of privilege disseminating information and you want to make sure... you’re not playing the white savior role.” Other white participants similarly articulated differences between their work and their perception of the white savior, or they worried about whether their work would be perceived that way. However, the industrial part of the white savior industrial complex suggests it is a power that goes far beyond the individual.

Unlike Brooke, most of my white participants did not join TFA to do good. Rather, it was something they came to as a way either to quickly and cheaply relocate or as a cheap way to enter the teaching profession. In these cases, perhaps these individuals become the whiteness for TFA’s white savior industrial complex. It does look like TFA allows recent white college graduates to quickly enter a professional world, but many of the educators of color I interviewed noted the same draw to TFA. For instance, Veronica, a Mexican American, studied to become a teacher and chose to do TFA to quickly earn a job and the ability to move outside of the metropolitan area she grew up in.

Even this example, though, is part of the white savior industrial complex. Cann writes, “The White savior industrial complex proposes band-aid solutions in the form of White saviors, ignoring the deeper entrenched forms of institutional racism.”<sup>23</sup> Even if its teacher-recruits aren’t always white, TFA still represents a band-aid solution to educational inequity. TFA offers these “quick fixes” of supposedly new and talented teachers instead of thinking about the conditions that create an economic environment in which so many people of color as well as white people feel like TFA is the most convenient economic option even when these people have studied education in the traditional way. And this band-aid is a gamble because TFA has no control over whether the teachers they train will actually become successful teachers of minoritized students because, as I will argue in the next section, success depends upon the fusion of horizons.

Before turning to that argument, though, it is worth revisiting the thesis tested in this section: “TFA recruits those who want to be helpers.” Following a simplified Schutz and Herter, conceiving of teaching as helping is oppressive. The evidence from cited research and the interviews suggest a more complicated idea. Some TFA teachers, like Brooke, certainly join TFA in order to do good in the world, but the image of helper in TFA’s teacher training is often insufficient

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<sup>23</sup> Cann, “What School Movies and TFA Teach,” 291.

to care for TFA teachers' particular students. Brooke, Padma, and Erin all went beyond TFA's explicit training in varying degrees to best serve their students. Perhaps one can say helping becomes oppressive in the teaching and learning relationship when the teacher assumes the goals of her students. This kind of helping becomes paternalistic. Brooke, Padma, and Erin resisted paternalistic visions of teaching to better appreciate the context of their students. Just as a managerial vision of teaching de-contextualizes teaching so too does a paternalistically helper vision of teaching. If a teacher assumes her praxis is helping just by virtue of being a teacher, then she closes off any input from students detailing how they can be served. In other words, she might miss the different learning needs of Padma's student and therefore fail to best serve him. Padma's dealing with her student is a good example of what Charles Taylor calls a fusion of horizons.

### FUSION OF HORIZONS

Many of the examples given above involved moments shared with cultural Others that created a fusion of horizons. Instead of trying to control students with their managerial rules, educators I interviewed often used encounter with their students to shape their teaching. Zoe sought out additional training and preparation when trying to negotiate culturally sensitive conversations about the N-word with her Black students with whom she recognized she did not share culture. Despite (or maybe because of?) having significant training in teaching and education, Brooke recognized the value of the body of knowledge of her partner teacher who had lived in the community of their school her whole life. Even Padma went beyond her training when encountering the needs of a particular Black student.

It is useful to consider these moments as examples of what Herbert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor following Gadamer call a fusion of horizons.<sup>24</sup> Horizons are like languages, and, just as two interlocutors find a unique language as they come to understand each other, so too might their horizons for understanding change. A fusion of horizons happens not by some rule but by engaged interlocution with the Other.<sup>25</sup> In his Gadamerian discussion of how cultures come to understand each other, Taylor describes the fusion of horizons: "The 'horizons' here are at first distinct; they are the way that each has of understanding the human condition in their nonidentity. The 'fusion' comes about when one (or both) undergo a shift; the horizon is extended to make room for the object that before did not fit within it."<sup>26</sup> Taylor writes this fusion changes

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<sup>24</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), 289. *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 304., cited in Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, "Fusing Horizons," in *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 110, DOI: 10.4159/9780674287136.

<sup>25</sup> Dreyfus and Taylor, "Fusing Horizons," 111.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, "Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes," in *Law's Hermeneutics: Other Investigations*, eds. Simone Glanert & Fabien Girard (London: Routledge, 2017), 34-47, DOI: 10.4324/9781315648651.

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the languages both of the knower and the known, or the teacher and the student. When encountered with the learning needs of a particular Black student, Padma’s language of educational understanding must be extended to include this particular student’s needs. This extension allows her to make a non-standard recommendation to the student’s mother in an effort to empower him.

Or consider white TFA recruit Cecily whose life goals changed because of engaged interlocution with her Black and Latinx students. Cecily noted that her students would frequently “blow up for seemingly no reason.” These blow-ups motivated Cecily to find ways to help her students beyond the academic curriculum, so she talked to her school’s social worker who told her that many of her students had experienced intense levels of trauma even beyond racism and classism in their communities, even though race and class were added traumas too in a racist and classist society. These conversations motivated Cecily to go back to school to become a social worker so she could be better prepared to help students manage their trauma.

As these examples show, a fusion of horizons allows an educator to see the goals of her students as just as consequential as the goals she has for them. In some cases, this means redefining the educational pathways recommended for them. In others, it means using different methodologies and techniques to support students in their own learning. But always it demands the teacher to perceive her students not as objects to be managed but as unique, particular humans. A fusion of horizons solves Schutz’s issue of oppressive helpers. If the college students in Herter’s study had been able to experience a fusion of horizons with their high school theater students, then they would have supported their high school students in achieving what they wanted for themselves.

#### CONCLUSION: FUSION OF HORIZONS AS MORE THAN REFLECTION ON IDENTITY

To conclude, we might consider how teacher preparation programs might encourage fusion of horizons in their teacher candidates to move individuals from being oppressive helpers to culturally responsive supporters. Many of the TFA-trained educators I interviewed spoke with me about the identity work they did in their TFA training. Several educators of color told me how TFA was the first educational space where they were encouraged to think consciously of their racial and cultural identities. This work is necessary in preparing educators capable of fusions of horizon. Indeed, in describing the necessary conditions for a fusion of horizons, Dreyfus and Taylor propose the slogan: “no understanding the other without a changed understanding of self.”<sup>27</sup>

Linda Darling-Hammond relates four understandings teachers need in order to learn to teach for social justice—(a) “understanding self in relation to others,” (b) “understanding social contexts,” (c) “understanding students,” and

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<sup>27</sup> Dreyfus and Taylor, “Fusing Horizons,” 125.

(d) “understanding and transforming schools and classrooms.”<sup>28</sup> Like they note the importance of (a), Dreyfus and Taylor also note the importance of (b)-(d). As teacher candidates come to understand the horizons of their future students through study and experience, they are better able to understand “what is distorting [their] understanding ...”<sup>29</sup> To encourage a fusion of horizons, teacher preparation programs ought to prioritize allowing teacher candidates to work within minoritized or culturally diverse communities, while providing them language to understand the horizons in those communities.

If teacher preparation programs support their teacher candidates in developing a fusion of horizons, they necessarily encourage the adoption of teacher identities outside of the oppressive helper or manager. Even though TFA may be part of the white savior industrial complex that creates oppressive helpers and managers, the reflective identity work in its training prepares its recruits to experience a fusion of horizons with their students. This fusion of horizons may result in protesting the methods of TFA and embracing the student and community goals for education. If reflective identity work can have this effect on TFA-trained teachers, then what more can this work paired with understanding of horizons produce? When educators are open to alternative goals for their students’ learning, they more fully recognize their students’ humanity and can encourage student empowerment beyond the demands of success in a racist, capitalist market.

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<sup>28</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, “Educating a Profession for Equitable Practice,” in *Learning to Teach for Social Justice*, eds. Linda Darling-Hammond, Jennifer French, & Silvia Paloma Garcia-Lopez (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 201-212.

<sup>29</sup> Dreyfus and Taylor, “Fusing Horizons,” 110.

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# THE SOCIAL CORE OF CRITICAL THINKING: EDUCATING TOWARD AN EMPOWERED DEMOCRACY

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The ability to think critically is a defining characteristic of humanity,<sup>1</sup> setting humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. To perceive future consequences of an action, idea, or decision and then adjust these actions, ideas, and decisions accordingly is an integral part of existing as conscious beings in the world. Moreover, critical thinking is an essential part of living together with others and sustaining liberal democratic practices which gradually move towards a more equitable and just world. While consensus abounds around the existence of critical thinking as a human capability, an exact definition is rather elusive and veritable. Nonetheless, some considerable agreement can be found in the understanding that critical thinking entails, among other things, respect for evidence, reflective skepticism, and open-mindedness among other attitudes and dispositions cultivated during education.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will discuss the role of critical thinking in education. As a point of departure, I will examine Harvey Siegel's robust conception and belief that critical thinking is central to the educational project and flourishing human individuals. Siegel's framework provides a foundational and nuanced understanding of critical thinking upon which I will discuss Anthony Laden's belief that reasoning is a social project. Ultimately, I will argue that a complete, robust understanding of critical thinking involves the recognition of these theories as compatible with one another other.

Concerning critical thinking in education, Siegel states, "what is advocated is that education should have as a fundamental aim the fostering in students of (1) the ability to reason well, that is, to construct and properly evaluate the various reasons which have been or can be offered in support or criticism of candidate beliefs, judgments, and actions; and (2) the disposition or inclination to be guided by reasons so evaluated, that is, actually to believe,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use the terms 'critical thinking,' 'rationality,' and 'reasoning' interchangeably. While these terms are certainly not perfectly synonymous, the definitions discussed share considerable similarities that we can reasonably see them as interrelated and pointing towards the same skill and disposition.

<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, "The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. Volume 6: 1910-1911, Essays, How We Think," in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, eds. Jo Ann Boydston and Larry Hickman (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corp., 2003), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843000>; John E. McPeck, *Critical Thinking and Education* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

judge, and act in accordance with the results of such reasoned evaluations.”<sup>3</sup> Siegel’s overall definition of critical thinking and his claim to its centrality to education provide a clear picture for the importance of this particular educational good and its necessity. Tony Laden offers an additional frame of reference, noting that “reasoning is fundamentally something we do together.”<sup>4</sup> While not strictly at odds with each other, these perspectives could see mutual benefit by being brought into conversation with one another. In doing so, I will first review Siegel’s conception of critical thinking and the social epistemologist critique that Siegel’s conception is too dismissive of the social aspects of living and thinking. With this critique in mind, I will argue that when we understand Siegel’s definition of critical thinking with the integrated backdrop of Laden’s social picture of reasoning, the already spurious social epistemological critique is further counteracted. I will conclude by noting some important ways that critical thinking as a social endeavor, and not one done in isolation, is important for education in democratic societies.

#### EDUCATION’S FOUNDATION IN CRITICAL THINKING

Harvey Siegel’s conception of critical thinking parallels the concept of rationality wherein the capability to ‘reason well’ encompasses the dispositions and inclinations to be guided by ‘good’ reasons.<sup>5</sup> Siegel contends that the primary goal of education ought to be the cultivation of this skill of good, reasoned critical thinking. Viewed in this light, education is the initiation into the space of reasons which rational, critical thinking individuals inhabit with other similarly reasonable critical thinkers. Siegel states that “to regard the cultivation of reason as a fundamental educational aim or ideal is to hold that the fostering in students of the ability to reason well and the disposition to be guided by reasons is of central educational importance.”<sup>6</sup>

Siegel’s support for critical thinking as a foundational goal of education is predicated on four tenets. (1) Education that fosters critical thinking is consistent with the recognition of humans as rational and autonomous beings. That is, as autonomous, self-contained beings, humans have the natural ability to think for themselves and to utilize their own mental capacities to make judgements. The only way education respects this autonomy of rational individuals is by cultivating the capacity to think independently from influence, in turn creating an autonomous, rather than heteronomous, thinker. We might also take this to mean that when critical thinking is not cultivated, the inherent worth of students is negated. (2) To the extent that education is preparation for

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<sup>3</sup> Harvey Siegel, “Cultivating Reason,” in *Education’s Epistemology: Rationality, Diversity, and Critical Thinking* (2017), 4, accessed through *Oxford Scholarship Online*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190682675.001.0001>.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony S. Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 16.

<sup>5</sup> I find this claim to be convincing evidence that ‘critical thinking’ is at least somewhat synonymous with ‘reasoning,’ and it serves as support for the continued use of the terms interchangeably. Siegel, “Cultivating Reason,” 4.

<sup>6</sup> Siegel, 4.

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adulthood and adulthood is the realization of ‘self-sufficiency and self-direction,’ critical thinking is crucial in preparing students for this transition. (3) Critical thinking is central to the disciplines which comprise the educational tradition. Education is composed of sub-disciplines such as math, science, art, etc., all of which require critical thinking and rationality as a prerequisite for taking part in such activities.<sup>7</sup> And lastly, (4) critical thinking is a crucial component of democracy. To the extent that we desire a democratically functioning society, we must cultivate habits of critical thinking in citizens. In Siegel’s words, “for democracy can flourish just to the extent that its citizenry is sufficiently critical.”<sup>8</sup>

While numerous strong and valid critiques of Siegel’s position have been levied against him, this paper accepts the premises which Siegel lays forth. Nonetheless, I argue that Siegel’s definition can be improved by a modest addition and posit a fifth tenet: critical thinking is a continual, social process.

#### CRITICAL THINKING AND EPISTEMIC INDEPENDENCE

The justification for the proposal of this additional tenet can be found in the social epistemological critique of Siegel’s conception of critical thinking. Siegel characterizes this critique as follows:

Critiques of individualism are many and varied; most relevant here are those which challenge the idea that students—and believers generally—are rightly thought to be able to “drive their own epistemic engines” and determine by themselves, from among candidate beliefs, which are worthy of embrace. Such epistemic individualism is challenged by advocates of what has come to be called social epistemology: the systematic study of the ways in which knowledge is irredeemably social, in large part because knowers are dependent on others for their knowledge. Because epistemic agents are epistemically dependent on others, epistemic individualism, it is argued, is a *chimera*.<sup>9</sup>

The social epistemologist argues that critical thinking, insofar as it is said to be an individual project, is not possible because reasons emerge not from within ourselves but from the world around us. Further, attempting to discern our own reasons for belief in every instance is a futile endeavor; the world is simply too complex to do this. Relying on the testimonies of others and their

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<sup>7</sup> One might posit that just because these are traditionally the educational disciplines does not mean that they ought to be. However, we might press this assertion for other disciplines which compose education and then one must justify why these disciplines do not entail critical thinking, a task not easily undertaken and outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Siegel, “Cultivating Reason,” 7.

<sup>9</sup> Siegel, 11, emphasis added.

epistemological expertise is fundamental for flourishing in this increasingly complex world.

Siegel addresses this critique by noting that (a) the fact that we are at times epistemically dependent (i.e., we must rely on testimony of experts) does not abnegate the ability for us to be epistemically independent, and this is because (b) we must always determine what good reasons for belief are for ourselves. In responding to John Hardwig's claim that "rationality sometimes consists in refusing to think for oneself,"<sup>10</sup> Siegel concedes that there are times where it is reasonable for individuals to rely on the testimony of others for belief. However, he does not concede that this is sufficient proof that we are always, if ever, epistemically dependent. Siegel claims that regardless of where reasons originate, we are left to our own devices to conclude what is a good reason independently of others, stating,

Rationality requires rather that, on occasion we *value* expert opinion more highly than our own lay opinion. Even on such occasions, moreover, we must do plenty of thinking to be rationally justified in holding that the occasion in question is one in which we are epistemically dependent, and that the expert upon whom we propose to be dependent is a legitimate authority, and the opinion offered appropriately expert and authoritative. There is no abdication of individual cognitive responsibility here.<sup>11</sup>

Siegel further argues that "[to determine] when we are in fact epistemically dependent and when not — when we should uncritically accept expert testimony and when we should endeavor to think for ourselves — itself requires critical thinking and the exercise of independent judgment."<sup>12</sup>

Siegel has a point, but so do the social epistemologists: we must determine for ourselves what reasons bear objective weight for shaping our beliefs, but these reasons are rarely ever generated solipsistically. This tension is what brings about the proposed fifth tenet of critical thinking. In addressing this tension between epistemic dependence and independence, I will suggest adopting Anthony Laden's social picture of reasoning as a way to more fully incorporate epistemic dependence into Siegel's conception of critical thinking and one that better encompasses what we truly mean when we evoke the practice of reasoning.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Harvey Siegel, "Rationality and Epistemic Dependence," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 20, no. 1 (1988): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.1988.tb00487.x>.

<sup>11</sup> Siegel, "Rationality and Epistemic Dependence," 4.

<sup>12</sup> Siegel, "Cultivating Reason," 13.

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## LADEN AND THE SOCIAL PROCESS OF REASONING

Before proceeding to Laden's project, we should be clear on Siegel's position. To be sure, Siegel does not so much dismiss the social epistemologist claim that reasons are derived from the outside world, only the claim that epistemic independence is "a chimera." His reasons for dismissing this claim on epistemic independence are, to my mind, hard to oppose. Certainly, we all make our own decisions to some extent. For instance, I have made the decision to write this paper on this topic. Regardless of where this idea originated, I still made the ultimate decision to write on critical thinking and not some other subject. This decision was and is fully mine. However, it is pertinent and enlightening to recognize the way in which the decision was influenced by social factors.<sup>13</sup> Although our *final* decision is epistemically independent, critical thinking cannot be adequately defined by sole reference to our momentary decision point.

We might further consider the implications and repercussions of the claim that critical thinking is always epistemically dependent upon the democratic project.<sup>14</sup> As Siegel claims, critical thinking is part and parcel to the success of democracy. What also ought to be understood is that democracy is *necessarily* a social endeavor and one that does not begin when we enter the voting booth and end when we leave it; democracy is an ongoing social process. If critical thinking is rightly conceived as an activity which parallels and is necessary for democracy, it then *must* be perpetual and social. Democracy, viewed as an independent endeavor, changes the fabric upon which our institutions are founded and the notion of cooperation which is essential to its flourishing. In viewing the practice of critical thinking as integral to the success of democracy, we can reasonably see that Siegel acknowledges some components of epistemic dependence within his view of critical thinking, albeit a recognition that does not take the forefront.

Anthony Laden's picture of social reasoning creates a framework for properly conceiving of critical thinking and its ongoing social nature and brings epistemic dependence into a more commensurable position with Siegel's work. In his book *Reasoning: A Social Picture*,<sup>15</sup> Laden paints an alternative social picture of reasoning. He juxtaposes his social view against the classical picture of reasoning which holds that "reasoning is an activity of rational or logical calculation and determination, a norm-governed engagement with forms or

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<sup>13</sup> Here it is important to clarify that the claim that critical thinking is not epistemically independent is not a claim that autonomy is unachievable; this topic sits outside of this paper's scope. Indeed, it can be said that we act as autonomous individuals by nature of the way in which decisions are made at the final moment within ourselves. The act of decision making is part of what makes us autonomous.

<sup>14</sup> Here I do not mean to suggest that Siegel makes this claim but find exploring this line of reasoning to be fruitful for thinking through the complexity of critical thinking and reasoning.

<sup>15</sup> Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*.

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structures or according to principles of reason.”<sup>16</sup> So conceived, Laden claims, this picture of reasoning is constricting and does not adequately capture what it is to inhabit the space of reasons. Laden urges us to consider reasoning as “(1) an *activity or practice* that is (2) *social*, and (3) *ongoing* and largely consists of (4) the *issuing of invitations* (5) to take what we say as *speaking for our interlocutors as well*.”<sup>17</sup>

According to the standard picture of reasoning, critical thinking and reasoning cannot be wholly understood as a singular moment in time away from social inputs. Understanding them as such would cast aside the influences we have surely received leading up to a decision and ultimately the inherently social nature of living together. Instead, critical thinking should be seen as a *process*, in accordance with Laden’s social picture of reasoning, which involves discerning reasons from the world to reach a conclusion which ultimately culminates in a decision. Here, I will focus on Laden’s claims that reasoning is (2) a social process and that reasoning is (3) ongoing.

In the following sections, I will detail why critical thinking is rightly thought to be a continual social process due to the case that (A) sufficient reasons cannot be generated independent from social influence and (B) reasons cannot be sufficiently and properly adjudicated without communicative practice.

#### A. *The emergence of reasons*

To contend that critical thinking as a process is epistemically independent is to contend that it can be wholly performed without social influence. This must extend throughout the *entire* process, from the emergence of our reasons to our decision point. However, it is ludicrous to claim that one can reason well enough to classify the act as critical thinking if they have not interacted with the world. The reasons which generate justifiable arguments for belief only exist to the extent that they reference meaning constructed through the act of living with others. The meaning which our reasons reference is a social phenomenon built out of structured interaction.<sup>18</sup> However, we need not go so far as to interrogate the emergence of meaning to demonstrate our point that sufficient reasons come from interaction.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, Siegel does not dismiss the fact that reasons come from the world outside ourselves; instead, he suggests that critical thinking can be captured in a singular moment which only involves the weighing of these reasons against each other within ourselves. Said differently, critical thinking might be understood as a skill we possess alone rather than an activity in which we necessarily have to participate with others.

Here, consider what we are doing when we are *supposedly* reasoning alone. We are engaging in a conversation with a generalized other concerning

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<sup>16</sup> Laden, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Laden, 10. Emphasis added

<sup>18</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, ed. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> This is the core of the social epistemologist critique.

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reasons that are not entirely our own. Habermas explicates this point in the development of the critical “self,” while building the foundation for his theory of communicative action. Referencing Mead, Habermas shows that we must internalize the reasonable responses of others to develop meaning out of otherwise meaningless symbols.<sup>20</sup> Habermas elaborates saying:

Reasons are no more a private possession than is language itself; in cases of controversy, whether reasons are good or bad can be determined only in the forum of a rule-governed exchange of arguments. Therefore, the practice of argumentation, which requires the participants to adopt a reflexive attitude towards validity claims that have become problematic, is the key to a complex form of rationality in which those different forms of rationality mentioned come together and merge.<sup>21</sup>

Again, we need not go so far as to show that meaning can only be created socially, simply that to have good reasons to reason well, we must take the perspective of the other. That is, all our thoughts must be mediated through a prism of another’s point of view in order to be considered critical because criticality emerges from a ‘practice of argumentation,’ which is a public endeavor. Even if we are not directly engaged with someone in conversation, the act of weighing reasons that a reasonable other might consider requires that we have some previous exposure to that other. When we understand critical thinking as an ongoing process of gathering, consolidating, and weighing reasons, we start to create a fuller picture, which relies on and requires other people.

#### *B. Social Reasoning and Communication*

Claiming that reasoning is social is synonymous with claiming it cannot be done alone. Laden supports this claim in various ways. Namely, in keeping with Kant’s requirement that reasons must remain open to criticism, he notes that to remain open to criticism a reason must be offered up for acceptance into a space of reasons and validation by others. Thus, for an act to qualify as reason, it must perpetually remain open to criticism. Once reason closes itself off from criticism, it is no longer reasonable.<sup>22</sup>

Again, it is certainly the case that at the final moment of decision, criticisms are considered internally by oneself. But much like in the case of reasons, this does not mean that the origin of criticism was in the self, nor that the reasoned arguments being weighed against each other are generated absent of social influence. Take, again, the aforementioned deliberative process done alone. As stated, if we do this well, we do so in reference to a generalized other.

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<sup>20</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 11–15.

<sup>21</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *Philosophical Introductions: Five Approaches to Communicative Reason* (Medford, Ore: Polity Press, 2018), 88.

<sup>22</sup> Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, 15.

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We consider how we might be viewed or what might be said of us, how X will improve society, how it will affect our own standing in the world, etc. When we make a choice between an array of possible actions, critical thinking requires that one must think through the consequences of their actions based upon all reasonable alternatives. We ought then to be thinking of sufficiently broad and diverse actions and consequences. The only adequate way to do so is by engaging in a conversation with a generalized other.

However, it is often the case that we are *not* acting alone when reasoning. Laden expands upon this notion in his conception of social reasoning saying, “[w]hen ... I try to speak for you in the sense that I do when reasoning, I call for your response, not only to what I have said, but to my invitation to take it as something you would say as well.”<sup>23</sup> For ideas, values, virtues, norms, social mores, etc. to be legitimated in the world, they must survive criticism levied through social deliberation. If a thought does not go through this legitimation process, it is simply that: a thought, not a reason that has withstood criticism. Because sufficient criticism cannot be a solipsistic endeavor and must be perpetual, critical thinking must also be considered social and ongoing.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

When we rightly conceive of critical thinking as an ongoing social process, we create ripples in the way we conceive of education. Education prepares us to participate in a complex and diverse world, and this preparation must account for the fact that participating in the world means interacting with others whose experiences vary greatly from our own. Communication and critical thinking engaged across diverse lifeworlds becomes paramount for flourishing as a human. Being initiated into the space of reasons is being initiated into a communicative and participatory space with others.<sup>24</sup> In this way, critical thinking, done together as a society, facilitates moral progress and legitimates democratic processes.

Part of living involves learning of and contributing to the development of social and moral norms. We do not enter the world with *a priori* knowledge and acceptance of the current moral state. Moreover, moral consensus is not a static achievement but changes as we better understand the consequences of our actions and what is considered reasonable by society. Anderson shows that “[m]oral norms, like social norms and conventions, are largely sustained through shared expectations of conditional conformity, backed up by expectations of sanction.”<sup>25</sup> Conformity and sanctions do not just arise on their own, they are developed through interaction with others and reference to communal life. Moral norms can change as conflict arises when assumed moral principles become obsolete, when consequences from an existing moral principle become

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<sup>23</sup> Laden, 19–20.

<sup>24</sup> Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, “Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery,” *The Lindley Lecture. The University of Kansas, February 11, 2014* (2014), 3.

unsatisfactory, or if the legitimacy of the moral norm or principle is brought into question.<sup>26</sup> In these such cases we must engage with one another as a community in the process of social reasoning and critical thinking to adjudicate and legitimate the moral principles of society.

This legitimation project is an integral component of living together. Through legitimation, moral and social norms are created, tested, and ossified. To the extent that we live in a public with competing notions of the good, the legitimation of social norms becomes a political project. In this political project, society constructs the basic structure of itself through reference to what can be universally agreed upon as sound principles for living a good life amenable to all. This process parallels the legitimation of scientific knowledge upon which norms and mores are founded. Knowledge is not solely founded upon rigorous method but must be socially substantiated through collective validation. Knowledge only emerges through interaction and consensus within the community.<sup>27</sup> Just as the legitimation of scientific knowledge requires the communication and collaboration of the scientific community, legitimation of social norms requires citizens to work together to build an agreed upon set of rules which can exist without reference to standing dogmatic belief.<sup>28</sup> This process is *per se* participatory. We cannot agree on a social norm without cooperation and communication among each other.

Ultimately, the construction and legitimation of moral and social norms is part and parcel to the democratic project. It is based upon the ability to communicate and think together towards a more perfect world. By its very nature, democracy is a collective endeavor in which citizens under a common national demonym *encounter* one another and work together to build the structure of their world. Democracy cannot be an individual endeavor, nor can it be a momentary act. And to the extent that a stable democracy relies on a reasoning and critical thinking public — recall Siegel’s claim above that critical thinking is a crucial component of democracy— these tasks cannot be individual endeavors or momentary acts either. It involves building meaning, reasoning, and learning with others in a shared space to function and sustain. Only once those in a society can reason together within the space of reasons will democracy function properly.

## CONCLUSION

Critical thinking properly construed involves the recognition that we can think critically only insofar as we sufficiently engage with others in the space of reasons. The implications of this fact on education are broad. It means we must orient children to be collaborative and communicative thinkers if we are to

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<sup>26</sup> Anderson, “Social Movements.”

<sup>27</sup> Helen Longino, “Introduction: Good Science , Bad Science,” in *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton University Press, 1990), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvx5wbfz.4%0AJSTOR>.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Clayton, “Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing,” in *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing* (2006): 1–224, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199268940.001.0001>.

adequately prepare them to take part in the democratic project. As we continually refine and improve our educational initiatives to support critical thinking and social reasoning in students, it is incumbent upon all educators to create environments and processes which support these skills and dispositions. One way the education community has worked to support socially oriented critical thinking is through Philosophy for Children (P4C) initiatives and practices. P4C engages children with one another philosophically to reach their own conclusions about the world rather than pre-ordained answers. This aim rests upon the notion that philosophy, reason, and critical thinking are participatory spaces in which we encounter another purposefully and thoughtfully. P4C practices prepare students to participate in the construction and legitimation of society. However, this cannot be the only space where students are taught to take part in social reasoning. Many STEM subjects focus upon an individual's capability to problem solve alone, but it is just as important for students to understand these fields as participatory spaces in recognition of the social construction of knowledge, rather than as solipsistic endeavors. The social aspect of critical thinking must permeate throughout the educational experience.

My point in this paper is not to argue against Siegel's claim of the centrality of critical thinking in education. In fact, I am largely sympathetic to this project and claim as detailed by Siegel. Instead, I hope to have emphasized the importance of the social aspect of critical thinking which is underplayed within Siegel's work and is brought to clearer light with the proposed fifth tenet that critical thinking is a continual, social process. That one might disagree with this claim and this paper solidifies the notion that we cannot properly engage in critical thinking on our own. We must do so together.

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