

# “The Great Equalizer”:

The positioning of children in federal education policy  
in the United States

**Emily Plank**

Supervisor: Daniel Gustafsson

Examiner: Judith Lind

**ABSTRACT**

The United States subscribes to the narrative that education is a social equalizer, and prioritizes an educational system in which all children are afforded an equal opportunity to achieve success. A commitment to this belief is evidenced through policy attempts to enact this equality narrative: eliminating gaps in achievement between children from different social groups (race, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, and ability level) is the stated objective of federal education policy legislation. This research aims to interrogate the ways in which children are positioned through this narrative by examining the problematization of ‘achievement’ in Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). It is guided by two research questions: how is the concept of ‘achievement’ presented and used in federal education policy, and how does this problematization position children and childhood with respect to their role in education? To investigate these questions, this research employs a policy analysis guided by Carol Bacchi’s (2009) “What’s the Problem Represented to Be?” (WPR) approach. This methodology emphasizes a contextualized analysis, which explores policy through its historical and theoretical context. In light of the strong neoliberal commitments evident in the United States since the 1980s, a frame of neoliberalism is thus essential to this analysis. This research argues that the problematization of achievement advances a scientific and standardized concept of ‘achievement’ that positions children as de-situated. This positioning effectively positions children as singularly culpable for their own failure, without acknowledging the role of the child’s context.

Keywords: neoliberalism, achievement, policy, equality, education

**FOREWORD**

This research represents many months and years of thinking about the intersections of childhood, education, and narratives of equality in the United States. For me, this experience of researching and writing is at once some of the most difficult and also the most rewarding academic work I have undertaken. I am proud of the finished product and am eager to extend this research in the coming years.

I am grateful for the opportunity to study at Linköping University in the excellent Department of Thematic Studies, Childhood Studies. The coursework over the past year has been challenging and inspiring, and I am privileged to learn and grow as a scholar among such a fabulous peer cohort under the instruction of superb professors. I am particularly in-

debted to the feedback and support of my thesis supervisor, Daniel Gustafsson, who helped me refine my ideas and think critically about how I was analyzing the material. His expertise was invaluable in seeing this project through from start to finish. Thank you.

This project would not exist if not for the support of my family. To my mom, a life-long educator working in the public schools in the United States, thank you for the many conversations about education policy and for the constant encouragement throughout my work. To my three wonderful children, thank you for your love and patience over this past year of my studies. To my incredible husband, I could not ask for a better life partner to walk alongside me through this program. Thank you for sharing in my own education with enthusiasm and excitement. You support me in everything I do, and I am overwhelmed with gratitude. I love you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>METHOD</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Text selection</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Data analysis</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Limitations</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO US FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Summary of Title I</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Questions 1 and 2: What is the ‘problem’ represented to be in Title I of ESSA? What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Academic standards: achievement as a function of rigor and uniformity .....	<b>17</b>
Assessments: achievement as a function of standardization and objectivity .....	<b>20</b>
School accountability systems: achievement as a scientific formula.....	<b>24</b>
Schoolwide programs: achievement as a function of socioeconomic status .....	<b>26</b>
<b>Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS &amp; CONCLUDING DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>APPENDIX: TABLE POLICY DATES AND REAUTHORIZATIONS</b> .....	<b>38</b>

## INTRODUCTION

The United States operates with a narrative that education is an equalizing force, capable of eradicating inequality (Sturges, 2014: 3). The roots of this narrative trace back to the “founding father” of US public education, Horace Mann. Mann served as Massachusetts State Secretary of Education in 1837, the first such legislative position in the United States (Goldstein, 2015: 26–27). He spread his vision of a universal and free “common school” where classroom teaching prioritized the “development of intelligence” along with “the highest morals and values of the common culture” (Cooney et al, 1993: 91). “Education,” Mann famously said, “...beyond all other divides of human origin, is a great equalizer of conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery” (qtd in Growe & Montgomery, 2003: 23). Early education reformers, contemporaries of Mann, “tended to see schools as secular churches: community centers where any child could be improved—even religiously ‘saved’—through education” (Goldstein, 2015: 30). Americans have held fast to this notion that education is “The Great Equalizer”, capable of eradicating poverty and improving society since the inception of a public school system in the nineteenth century. Throughout the intervening decades, however, ideas about how best to enact this equalizing force have swung pendulously from beliefs about equalizing *access* to present-day notions of *achievement* as the primary measure of effectiveness.

Rhetoric about the equalizing power of education sprinkles the pages of American history as politicians sought to craft a public school system that would actualize this national narrative. In October 1960, presidential candidates John Kennedy and Richard Nixon debated their position on educational policy. Nixon rooted his beliefs about education in the narrative of equality, saying, “the equality of opportunity for employment and education is not just for the benefit of the minority groups, it's for the benefit of the nation so that we can get the scientists and the engineers and all the rest that we need” (“The Third Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate,” 1960). President George W. Bush claimed in 2002 that America faced “no greater challenge than to make sure that every child...regardless of where they live, how they're raised, the income level of their family, every child receive a first-class education” (G. W. Bush, 2002). President Barack Obama, newly elected in 2008, delivered a speech on education in which he argued that American education promised that “no matter what we look like or where we come from or who our parents are, each of us should have the opportunity to fulfill our God-given potential. Each of us should have the chance to achieve the American dream” (Obama, 2008). Secretary of State Arne Duncan spoke in the wake of police violence in February 2015, saying, “Education is — and must continue to be — the great equalizer that

overcomes differences in background, culture and privilege” (Duncan, 2015). Rhetoric of modern politicians echoes educational reformers throughout history, recalling the narratives of the socially transformative power of education. But while the rhetoric may call upon the same narrative, the mechanisms through which that narrative is enacted and the ends to which it is employed are strikingly different than when Mann first cast his vision for the equalizing power of public schools.

Nearly two-centuries after Mann assumed office as the Secretary of Education, and fifty years after the first federal public education bill was passed, the question remains to what extent that vision has been actualized, and indeed, to what extent such actualization is even possible. Today, the federal government involves itself with public education through one primary federal education bill, most recently reauthorized as the “Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA, 2015). This policy serves as the frontline of legislative action toward the equalizing potential of education, and will be the focus of the analysis in this research. However, despite decades of federal dollars spent on education, Spring argues that modern-day education reform has failed to bring about equality; in fact, the ways in which education policy enacts “equality” has ultimately generated a system that reproduces racial and socioeconomic inequality (Spring, 2016b: 144). The advantaged preserve their position, and the disadvantaged remain so. This paper will argue that an ideological turn toward neoliberalism since the 1980s is at the heart of this policy conundrum, as such a neoliberal spin exonerates government of the responsibility to remedy a broken system and instead positions individuals—children, teachers, and parents—as solely accountable for failure. Consequently, despite rhetoric of equality, a neoliberally engineered system is incapable of enacting a system of education that will serve as the “Great Equalizer”.

## **RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS**

This paper explores the problematization of ‘achievement’ in federal education policy, and explores the ways in which such a problematization positions children. Furthermore, by placing this analysis into historical and theoretical context, this paper explores interactions between the positioning of children in federal education policy and the idea of American education as “The Great Equalizer” and the ways in which such a narrative positions children by examining federal education policy and the problematization of “achievement”. Inherent in this narrative is an idea postulated by Richard de Lone (1979) and referenced in an editorial by Jens Qvortrup (2004). In this editorial, Qvortrup argues about the ways in which society positions children as “waiting”. As part of his argument, he references de Lone’s discussion

of the position of children living in poverty and economic narratives of mobility in the United States. Qvortrup summarizes de Lone:

[Child poverty] is seen as a disgrace in the USA, but never sought to be resolved in terms of changing the economic structure so as to come closer to an economic equality. Instead, characteristic of a capitalistic market system, the solution sought has historically been to *improve children* while expecting or cherishing the hope that the next generation, improved by education, will have a higher market value and thus be more able to compete for resources. ... [Children] keep being the avowed instrument of change without getting a chance themselves, as children, to benefit from their being improved (2004, pp. 268–269, italics original).

De Lone's work argues for a departure from conventional American policy-making. He believes that if

Americans wish to reap the equality of opportunity that is so honored a goal of our society, we must address an issue that has, ironically, been obscured by our focus on equality of opportunity; we must attempt to create great equality of social condition directly, not indirectly through children. ... [American liberalism shapes] the way Americans think about children and their development. ... [M]any aspects of children's policy have been more an effort to *use* children to resolve deep-seated tensions and contradictions in adult society than a genuine effort to improve children themselves (1979: 25, italics original).

At the time of de Lone's writing, "neoliberalism" was finding a voice through Ronald Reagan (elected president in 1980). In subsequent decades, the American liberalism that de Lone decries was supplanted by neoliberalism. The arguments presented by de Lone and developed by Qvortrup are compelling, and motivate the present research inquiry: Are children positioned as the "instruments for change" without being imagined as the beneficiaries of such change *as children*? "The dream [of equality] is deferred," argues de Lone, "and achieving it becomes the job of children" (1979: 73). The claim is striking, and this research aims to explore how this claim translates itself in present-day policy.

This research is further motivated by a review of poverty statistics in the United States. In 2016 (the most recent year for which data is available), 18 percent of children (13.3 million) under age 18 were living in poverty. Under age six, 19.5 percent (4.6 million) were living in poverty. These numbers compare with 11.6 percent of people ages 18 to 64, and 9.3 percent of people older than 65 years of age. Reviewing statistics since 1960, children under age 18 have always represented the largest group living in poverty, often outpacing the other groups by two times other rates (Semega et al, 2017: 14). I reference these numbers only to

suggest that children *in the present* seem to suffer more acutely than any other group from income inequality. Does the United States position education as a solution to this problem *in the present* or does it contribute to the idea that equality for children is only realized in the future?

This project takes as its point of departure the notion that policymaking in the United States has been shaped by liberal and neoliberal economic discourses that embrace a trickle-down approach toward social change. “Under the assumption that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’, or of ‘trickle down’, a neoliberal theory holds that the elimination of poverty ... can best be secured through free markets and free trade” (Harvey, 2005: 65). The narrative of education as an equalizing force is implicated in this worldview, since investing in children through education is understood as an instrument for social transformation (Spring, 2016a: 7). If it is true that public education in the United States is conceptualized through a neoliberal lens, might children be thus positioned in a way that evidences de Lone and Qvortrup’s assertions?

This work interrogates into federal education policy, and is guided by two research questions. The first takes its cue from the historical development of federal education policy that witness a change in priority over the fifty years of its implementation. This history will be explored in more detail below, but for now it is important to note that as originally drafted, Title I was designed as a solution to poverty. Over time, policymakers wanted proof that the allocated funds were working, but found it difficult to measure the effectiveness of a policy that aimed to reduce poverty by giving money to schools. In the 1980s, there was a shift: schools would be accountable to the federal government for the proper use of funds, which they would demonstrate by documenting student achievement. ‘Achievement’ became the telltale indicator of effectiveness—the higher the achievement, the more that federal intervention was said to ‘work’. The goal of improving achievement and reducing gaps in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students became the focus of federal education policy. As such, the first research question that this paper aims to explore is:

1. How is the concept ‘achievement’ problematized in US federal educational policy and how is it used in ESSA?

The second research question develops in response to the arguments presented above by de Lone and Qvortup:

2. How does the problematization of ‘achievement’ position children and childhood?

This research is motivated by a desire to see how problematizations inherent in ESSA fit within narratives of education as an “equalizing force”. This research claims neither to exhaustively or authoritatively investigate this positioning; rather, this research makes a contribution to a piece of the puzzle about the positioning of children within American federal education policy.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Extensive work has been done in recent years documenting the rise of neoliberalism and its effect on education. Sturges’ edited volume, *Neoliberalizing Education Reform: America’s Quest for Profitable Market-Colonies and the Undoing of Public Good* (2014) is particularly salient for its thorough documentation of the far-reaching implications of this theoretical turn in education. This volume argues that neoliberalism has had a disastrous impact on the concept of public education as a common good (Sturges, 2014: 5). The collection aims to unmask the neoliberal agenda that purports to concern itself with equality, while systemically undermining social structures through which equality could be enacted. Beyond Sturges, many other scholars have contributed to the growing body of research into neoliberalism and education (see in particular, Lauen, 2008; Leyva, 2009; Connell, 2012, 2013, 2014; and Eastman et al, 2017). While studies of the relationship between neoliberalism and education policy are extensive, and many address US educational policy reform specifically, very few studies concern ESSA. This absence of research about neoliberalism and ESSA reveals a methodological preference for policy analysis that explores the *impact* of policy on the *practice* of education, as is the case with the studies highlighted above. ESSA was signed into law in December of 2015, with a two to three year transition period. Implementation is only now taking full effect. As a consequence, studying the impact of ESSA has not yet been possible. One exception in this relative absence of research is research by Egalite et al (2017) that aims to explore the trend toward decentralization reflected in ESSA. Through an analysis of documents and rhetoric around policy legislation, they posit that the decentralizing move will potentially bring an increase in inequality.

My research approaches policy differently than the studies mentioned above. Instead of inquiring about the *impact* of policy on practice, this paper explores the *positioning* of children within policy. As such, it is not oriented toward policy implementation, effectiveness, or enactment; rather, the purpose of this research is to investigate ways in which the policy in and of itself positions children through the problem representations of achievement constructed therein. The above studies all provide helpful theoretical frames to consider the various ways in which neoliberalism appears in education policy, but this research takes an

important epistemological turn. This research is informed by those frames, and by situating the analysis of ESSA in the context of the neoliberalization of education, aims to offer a perspective on the way in which education policy positions children and childhood. As such, it offers a unique child studies perspective to policy analysis and sociological research in education.

Clegg's important study, "Time future—the dominant discourse of higher education", also contributes to the present research. Her work is situated in postsecondary schooling in the UK, and thus departs in practical ways from this present study of children and public education in the United States. However, her exploration of the neoliberal discourse of investment in the future and its orientation toward a future of limitless possibilities (Clegg, 2010: 347) are highly relevant to this study's inquiry into the ways in which ESSA, situated in a neoliberal context, positions children. This research builds on her concepts of futurism and neoliberalism to advance an understanding of the ways in which children are positioned in US federal education policy.

The narrative of education as an equalizer is also a subject that has been well researched, but much of that research focuses on the historical development of this narrative or explores its validity: Is it possible for education to function as a social equalizer? Has public education ever filled that role? Wilkinson and Pickett argue compellingly in their book *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* that "reducing inequality is the best way of improving the quality of the social environment" (2010: 29). This argument is fundamental when considering the problematizations present in ESSA, because while education policy appears to align with this argument, a careful analysis of the meaning of "equality" in education policy will reveal that this is not the case. Rather than operating with an "equality/inequality" dichotomy (as is assumed in Wilkinson and Pickett's work), ESSA applies an "equality/difference" dichotomy (Bacchi, 2009: 184). Therefore, attempts to enact equality through education policy are actually attempts to alleviate *difference* rather than *inequality*. The distinction is vital, and the contributions of Wilkinson and Pickett provide a counter lens to consider the embedded problematization in ESSA.

## **METHOD**

I will employ a policy analysis based on Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) approach, a choice that is motivated by two considerations. First, WPR makes explicit the implicit assumptions that shape governance (Bacchi, 2009: x). This research is motivated by a desire to understand the positioning of children within the problematization of 'achievement', and to situate that positioning in a political era of neoliberalism. Second,

ESSA makes heavy use of the concept of ‘evidenced based strategies’ (Aldeman, 2017: 101). Some argue that the appeal to these strategies shows increasing belief in the power of science and scientific methodology to “improve quality” (St. Pierre, 2006: 241). It is critical to remember, however, that ESSA is a construction, and the relationship that it constructs between ‘evidence based strategies’ and ‘achievement’ must be scrutinized. Bacchi writes, “WPR takes a particular turn within social construction theory. It makes the case that, among the many competing constructions of a ‘problem’ that are possible, governments play a privileged role because their understandings ‘stick’.... They exist *in the real*.” (2009: 33). Thus, using WPR to analyze ESSA provides a potent counter-lens to unpack the interaction between notions of achievement and the way in which constructions of achievement appear, through their appeal to scientific methodology, to exist “in the real.” Such illumination will help develop a notion of how enacting achievement through ESSA contributes to the positioning of children within dominant educational narratives in the United States.

### **Text selection**

The task of selecting a text is an act of interpretation, and has the potential to powerfully shape research (Bacchi, 2009: 54; Bletsas, 2012: 48). Empirical data for this research comes from the Every Student Succeeds Act (“ESSA”, 2015). ESSA is the most recent reauthorization of federal education policy that has been in effect in the United States since 1965. Every 5-10 years, federal education policy is revisited, updated, and reauthorized. Often, updated reauthorizations are given new names that seem to suggest new policies, when in fact, they are simply new versions of old bills. ESSA is a continuation of the same federal policy that was originally passed in 1965. As such, changes to the policy over time provide important insight that is relevant to this analysis. While other versions of federal education policy may be considered for context, ESSA is the only document that will be presented for analysis. The changing names (and associated acronyms) can be cumbersome, so I have included a small reference timeline as an appendix.

ESSA was selected because it is the most recent reauthorization of federal education policy, and therefore, is the most relevant for considering the contemporary positioning of children. In choosing federal education policy to interrogate the positioning of children within the educational system, I risk obscuring the fact that states retain a great deal of flexibility and governing power over education (to be discussed in more detail below); each state has unique laws that both implement federal education policy, and legislate over matters on which federal policy remains silent. Despite this risk, ESSA remains uniquely capable of

providing a nationwide snapshot of the tone set for education. Caution is necessary: federal policy resides largely at the macro legislative level of education, and care will be given to insure that this research analysis does not make insupportable claims about the micro school climate. Additionally, this analysis will only utilize Title I (p. 1814-1913) of ESSA. This decision is motivated by Title I's unique standing as the "centerpiece" of federal education policy since 1965 (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009: 2), as well as its stated purpose of providing a fair and equal education to all children and closing the achievement gap. In addition, Title I specifically addresses the achievement gap and equitable access, and is therefore resides within the scope of this research project and its questions. That said, while restricting this project to Title I provides focus, it occasionally invites questions that cannot be exhaustively answered with such a restriction.

Use of the Title I document was challenging, and a few explanations of the format of the bill are important to understand the citations I have included in the analysis. As published by the United States Congress, ESSA follows standard pagination rules for all congressional bills. All bills passed during a single yearlong session of congress are published in a single volume with running pagination (this explains why Title I begins on page 1814). Most challenging for this project is the fact that the version of ESSA published in the congressional volume often references sections of older bills without actually re-publishing the text. For example, one section that I found especially interesting was § 1116, "Parent and Family Engagement" (ESSA, 2015: 1868). Unfortunately, the majority of the text was omitted from the published version of ESSA, and read as follows:

Section 1116, as redesignated by section 1000(2) is amended—(1) in the section heading, by striking 'Parental Involvement' and inserting, 'Parent and Family engagement'; (2) in subsection (a)—(A) in paragraph (1)—(i) by inserting 'conducts of outreach to all parents and family members and' after 'only if such agency'; and (ii) by inserting "and family members after 'and procedures for the involvement of parents'" (2015: 1868).

Analysis of these sections of ESSA was impossible without consulting older versions of the bill for comparison. However, a version of Title I was published separately from ESSA by the United States Department of Education. This publication, while not the official version published in the congressional volume, prints the entire text, color coded to indicate which portions of the text have been omitted, revised, or are new. The drawback to this version of the bill is that the pagination varies from the published congressional document, and is difficult to cite. Therefore, as much as possible, only the official published congressional document will be cited. When it was necessary to use the version from the United States Depart-

ment of Education, the citations will appear different: (Title I, 2015: § 1116 p. 1). Despite the different citations, all quotes from both documents come from the same policy and do not indicate analysis of different material.

### **Data analysis**

My data analysis will first be situated within a historical and theoretical context. WPR emphasizes a contextual understanding of policy creation (Bacchi, 1999: 40–41), and it is essential to a complex understanding of the ways in which problem representations in ESSA position children. Relevant to this project are the development of the idea of education as an equalizing force within neoliberal discourse, the growth of neoliberalism in the United States, and policy developments in education. Situating this research in its context provides a frame for understanding how children are positioned in federal education policy. As such, a brief section about the historical and theoretical roots of federal education policy will be offered below, immediately before the analysis of the policy text. Without this context, connecting Title I to children's position in the narrative of education in the United States would be difficult.

The policy analysis will involve application of three of Bacchi's six WPR questions. Question one examines policy documents to discover what problem representations exist therein; with respect to this project, I will be examining the way Title I problematizes 'achievement'. Question two looks for motivating assumptions in the problem representation; this project will explore the assumptions that are said to lead to achievement, and the ways in which those assumptions position children. Finally, question four reinforces a stance of reflexivity, provoking the researcher to scrutinize the problem representation for the ways in which it silence or obscures other ways of understanding achievement (2009: 2–6, 12–14). I have omitted question three, which considers the historical evolution of the problem representation; question five, which examines the impact of the problem representation on populations being governed; and question six, which looks for the ways in which the problem representation is perpetuated and explores ways in which reproduction of the problem representation might be interrupted. I have elected to omit these questions in order to limit the scope of this project. Questions one, two and four form a cohesive unit and reside largely within the policy; the remaining questions are more outward- and action-oriented, and may be interesting questions to consider in further research. Questions one, two, and four will be applied and reapplied throughout the project (2009: 21). For this reason, the analysis will consider ques-

tions one and two together in a single section divided by theme. Question four, as a point of reflection, will be considered last.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note what WPR does not do. WPR does not “elicit the assumptions or beliefs *held by policy makers*.... [T]he task is to identify the assumptions and/or presuppositions that lodge within problem representations” (Bacchi, 2009: 5, italics original). Additionally, while WPR interrogates the problem representations that shape governance, such an analysis does not imply that problems don’t really exist. Bacchi argues that, “the emphasis is *not* on the nature of those conditions but rather on the shape of the implied ‘problems’ in specific proposals” (2009: 31). This caveat is critical. A WPR analysis intends to pull apart the assumptions on which a particular problem representation is created and highlight the constructed nature of problems that appear to exist “in the real”. Such an analysis, however, risks implying that the problems it seeks to deconstruct don’t create challenges for societies. To be clear, equitable access to education is vitally important, and this research does not intend to claim that this is not so. The focus of this work, instead, is the ways in which ESSA imagines the solutions to this inequality, and what those imagined solutions imply for children.

Finally, Bacchi notes that “since we are all located within practices and problematizations that shape us to an extent, it is difficult to stand back and study their operation” (2012: 4) Employing a policy analysis such as WPR requires that the position of the researcher vis-à-vis the policy is carefully reflected. With respect to this study, my status as a public-school educated American, trained as a public school teacher in the United States during a contentious reauthorization of federal education policy requires reflection to insure that my analysis is not biased by my perspective (Bryman, 2016: 141). On the one hand, my “insider” status made this work possible; without some background of the ways in which education policy functions within the United States, the task of understanding how ESSA fits within the larger context of the public education system and its dominant narratives would have been much more difficult. On the other hand, I must work critically to reflect on whether or not the conclusions I draw from the policy are substantiated by the text rather than supporting a presumption that I bring as a result of my personal background. Reflexivity is imperative; the fourth WPR question is built to support reflexivity, and can assist in confronting researcher bias (Bacchi, 2009: 13). In addition, working on this project with a supervisor who is not an “insider” in the American education system helps to ensure that my analysis is supported by the policy document and does not reflect my preconceptions.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO US FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY**

The United States, as a federation, divides all governing responsibilities between federal, state, and local authorities. In practice, for example, this means that everyone in the United States uses the same currency and benefits from a national postal service, but state laws may vary with respect to legal voting ages or how old a child must be to get a driver's license. Public education is under the purview of state and local governments, and as a consequence, the federal government was virtually silent in the governance of public education until the 1950s. At that time, a shifting social climate—categorized by national concern for public school quality in the context of the Space Race, increasing outcry against persistent segregation in public schools in the American south, and rising awareness of the effects of poverty and the true limitations of social mobility (Jennings, 2015: 21–23)—opened the door for federal involvement in public education.

Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency after the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, and he put into motion a series of initiatives collectively known as the “Great Society Programs.” Johnson was an ambitious politician who followed in the footsteps of his political hero, Franklin Roosevelt; Johnson imagined his Great Society programs to be an extension of Roosevelt's post-Depression era “New Deal” (Darman, 2015: 14). Together, the New Deal and the Great Society programs can be thought of as bookends that hold together one of the most liberal periods of American political history, a time in which “no problem was beyond the capabilities of rational, competent government” (2015: xxii). One of three priorities articulated under Johnson's Great Society package was the reform of education, which he saw as a critical part of alleviating poverty in America: “Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty” (Johnson, 1964). In 1965, the first sweeping federal education bill, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), was passed.

America was in the middle of a historical period that lasted from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s. As Franklin Roosevelt led the country out of the Great Depression, he moved away from the unregulated *laissez-faire* market approach of classical liberalism toward a Keynesian belief a powerful, regulatory government was necessary to “curb harms caused by an unregulated market” (Hawkesworth, 2009: 171). This theoretical turn was reflected in the ways in which the federal government involved itself in education (Steger & Roy, 2010: 7). ESEA imagined a reality whereby equitably funded public schools would act as a social leveler; the economic stimulus from the federal government would help to compensate for funding disparities formerly perpetuated through decentralized public schools.

At the heart of ESEA is Title I, a section of the bill that specifically allocated funds to schools serving a high number of low-income children and families (McGuinn, 2017: 16). Original drafts of Title I provided money to schools based on the percentage of students living below the poverty level. Some congressional representatives argued against that model, stating that families living in large urban cities might have annual incomes above the national poverty line and still be poor due to a higher cost of living (Jennings, 2015: 25). As a way of addressing geographic economic diversity and the relative effects of poverty, congress settled on a formula that would account for both census poverty data and families receiving welfare (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009: 3). The funding formula in Title I remains an important part of the policy, and it continues to reflect the complexity of equitably identifying children in need on the basis of socioeconomic level.

When Title I was adopted in 1965, the language of the bill reflected the political ideology of the time: more resources in the hands of competent professionals (teachers and school administrators) would translate to school improvement (and thereby social improvement) for low-income students (Jennings, 2015: 27). Such transformation was necessary if education was to fill its role as the “Great Equalizer” of society (Grove & Montgomery, 2003: 23).

Title I codified ideas about schools’ power to remedy economic and social inequality. The program’s underlying ideas about teaching and learning built on the assumption that palpable educational resources such as better books and equipment would readily translate into better education” (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009: 7).

Importantly, and also problematically, the law allocated financial resources without commenting on the structure of schooling. Curriculum, assessments, and teacher training were left in state control. Toeing the line of the division of power between federal and local authority was, and remains, a critical element of debates surrounding federal involvement in public schools. Lacking a systematized national infrastructure, however, Title I struggled to either effect change or measure its impact on education (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009: 7). Such a lack of regulation would not typically be associated with a Keynesian ideology; yet, placed in its proper historical context, ESEA represents the first move toward federal involvement in state run public schools. That such a move did not come with a significant increase in federal regulation of public schools does not make it ideologically incompatible with contemporaneous ideological increases in federal regulation. At the same time, lacking any further regulatory power over practice in public schools arguably undermined Title I’s ability to affect change (2009: 27).

ESEA did not link the allocation of funds to improved student achievement, but researchers began to postulate that if Title I was working, then the improved achievement of low-income children was a reasonable expectation. Research in the two decades that followed the passage of ESEA failed to demonstrate any improvement in student achievement, thereby challenging the assumption that with more money, schools could make the differences necessary for education to be a social equalizer (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009: 46). Then, in 1982, a landmark report titled *A Nation at Risk* was published that induced a massive moral panic about the poor state of American public schools and the inability of federal policy to enact change (McGuinn, 2017: 14). Over time, the belief about how best to improve education shifted. Simple funding increases to improve children's equitable access to high quality education was not enough; schools must be made accountable for showing that they were using the funds effectively, and that the funds were making a difference (Egalite et al, 2017: 761). Reauthorizations of ESEA during the 1980s and 1990s reveal an attempt to correct the failures of Title I. The professional trust formerly invested in teachers and school administrators was supplanted with a culture of accountability, which maintained that the schools were not doing a good enough job managing the money they were getting. The link between achievement on the one side, and accountability and quality on the other has been present in reauthorizations of Title I since the 1980s.

Reauthorizations also evidenced a broader political trend during the 1980s toward neoliberalism. In the United States, Ronald Regan is most closely associated with this ideological turn, with his fierce commitment to cutting taxes, deregulating industries like telecommunications and banking, and privatizing publicly held land (Steger & Roy, 2010: 26, 31, 34). Regan's policy initiatives were part of global movement toward the belief that the work of improving society is best actualized through an economic and political lens of unrestrained free-markets (Harvey, 2005: 2). "Neoliberalism," claims Connell, "is a missionary faith", liberating markets and creating new ones "where they did not exist before" (2014: 23). Services that had once been considered public goods were privatized in a neoliberal system. Cornerstone neoliberal concepts such as choice, competition, and deregulation were moved beyond private enterprise and applied to the public sector in effort to improve outcomes. Education is emblematic of this shift. Elements of the public education system have been privatized: a drastic increase in standardized tests, developed and scored by private companies, represent a privatization of previously publicly governed space (Tienken, 2013: 308); parents of school-aged children are wooed as consumers of an educational "product" and offered choices about how best to *perform* the concept of school (Eastman et al, 2017: 66); private schools are sub-

sidized with public funds (Connell, 2014: 24); and children are understood as an “investment” in the future market economy (Clegg, 2010: 346).

The impact of neoliberalism on education is hard to overstate. The turn toward neoliberalism in education tracks closely with the rise of the culture of accountability, first actualized through the ESEA reauthorization known as the “Improving America’s Schools Act” (IASA, 1994). But while IASA took several steps away from the original ESEA legislation, the biggest change in ESEA occurred when it was reauthorized as “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB, 2002) (Barone, 2017: 61). Under NCLB, states were required to develop and adopt curricular standards for learning, and use those standards to create end-of-the-year assessments. The results of those assessments were made public and disaggregated by student subgroup, including socioeconomic status, race, gender, disability, language proficiency, and immigrant status. Schools were then required to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) toward improving the achievement of the students in those subgroups from year to year; failure of schools to meet their AYP resulted in federal intervention and ultimately a federal government takeover of those failed schools. Parents of children in such ‘failing’ schools were offered the choice to attend different schools. Additionally, schools were required to achieve 100% proficiency among their student populations by 2014 (McGuinn, 2017: 26).

NCLB was highly praised upon its inception for making schools accountable for improving their instruction, but the praise very quickly turned to criticism. The goals were seen as unrealistic, and public schools seemed destined to fail. The timelines for improvement were inflexible, and the federal government had assumed too much control out of the hands of state and local governments. Education, and reform for NCLB was part of Barack Obama’s campaign promises in the months before his election in 2008, but once he assumed office, partisan politics held education reform in legislative gridlock. Congress was unable to pass a reauthorization until December 2015 when ESSA was finally signed into law. ESSA was the first reauthorization of federal education policy since NCLB, and demonstrated a return to local control and increased flexibility while maintaining the strong commitment to closing the achievement gap and the use of assessments as a driving tool for measuring effectiveness (Barone, 2017: 59). The contentious years leading to the eventual passage of ESSA reflected contemporaneous political battles and shifting theoretical trends, and yet all the while, American education maintained its mythic position as “The Great Equalizer” (Rhode et al, 2012).

## ANALYSIS

### Summary of Title I

ESSA is a policy document that consists of nine chapters, known as titles. The first chapter, Title I, is comprised of five parts (A-B) that allocates money to improve academic achievement and support schools who serve large populations of low-income children. Part A allocates the largest amount of Title I funds (95 percent, \$15,012,317,605 in 2017) directly to schools in order to improve achievement (2015: 1815). Funds allocated under Part A support improvement projects in underperforming schools. Such underperforming schools represent the lowest performing 5 percent of schools in the state, schools that fail to graduate a sizable population of secondary students, and schools with high percentages of failing students concentrated in particular demographic subgroups. The second category of schools identified for funding through Part A is schools who serve high populations of children from low-income families.

The remaining funds are allocated in Parts B-E. Part B reserves 2 percent to fund assessment development and administration, as well as a competitive opportunity for states to design and pilot “innovative assessments” (2015, 1885). Money under Part C (2 percent) are allocated specifically to assist migratory children<sup>1</sup> in overcoming the “educational disruption, cultural and language barriers, social isolation, various health-related problems, and other factors that inhibit the ability of such children to succeed in school” (Title I, 2015: § 1301 p 1). Funds in Part D (0.5 percent) are targeted for schools that serve children involved in programs for delinquency or neglect: children in correctional facilities, children who have been placed in institutions as a result of neglect, or children participating in day programs serving these populations. This allocation specifically funds efforts to support the child’s transition out of institutional care, efforts on the part of schools to prevent children from returning to institutional care, programs that help prevent children from dropping out of school, and services that would bridge the gap between school and employment for children in these categories (2015: 1900). Part E reserves a very small amount (0.004 percent) of Title I’s budget for administrative costs not covered in the first four parts (2015: 1906).

---

<sup>1</sup> Migratory children are defined as children engaged in some capacity in temporary, seasonal agricultural or fishing work. These may be children who are working themselves, or children who are moving with working parents. Frequent moves within a 36-month period are used as the criteria to identify such children (Title I, 2015:§ 1309 p. 12).

One important element of Title I is a state or school “report card” (ESSA, 2015: 1846). Instituted with the NCLB revision, report cards are the mechanism through which information about student achievement is made transparent to the public. They must include detailed information about the performance of all public schools, including student achievement data; high school graduation rates; school “climate” indicators like statistics on bullying and student suspension rates; statistics about how many children are enrolled in preschool programs or accelerated learning programs; measures of teacher quality disaggregated by teachers serving in high- or low-income schools; the number of students taking alternative assessments because of “significant cognitive disabilities”; and the number of students pursuing postsecondary education (ESSA, 2015, pp. 1848–1849). These report cards will factor into various aspects of the analysis below.

**Questions 1 and 2: What is the ‘problem’ represented to be in Title I of ESSA? What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?**

Title I is primarily a mechanism by which the federal government funds local schools. Therefore, the funding sections of the document will provide a point of entry into considering the problematizations that exist therein (Bacchi, 2009: 4). Part A of Title I, as the largest funding source in the policy, will be examined most in depth. The dominant problem represented in Title I of ESSA is under-achievement concentrated in certain sub-groups of children. The stated purpose of the title is to “provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close achievement gaps” (2015: 1814). This problematization assumes that the existence of gaps in achievement between subgroups of children represent a problem that can be solved by improving the schools that are said to be failing. The corollary of this assumption is that closing gaps constitutes successful federal intervention into public schools, and represents a system in which all children experience an equal opportunity to achieve.

Two categories of schools receive Title I funds. The first category of schools receiving funds under Title I are based on performance: the bottom 5 percent of schools in every state is allocated funds to improve the achievement of their students. The second category of schools receiving funding under Title I is based on the socioeconomic status of the student population: schools are allocated funds based on socioeconomic factors that account for the percentage of students from low income families as well as schools located in area with a high concentration of poverty. ESSA stipulates the conditions under which low-performing schools will receive funds. In order to become eligible for federal money, states must adopt academic standards, regularly assess their student population, and develop state accountabil-

ity systems. These three areas of academic standards, assessments, and statewide accountability programs, representative of the main conditions by which states satisfy federal eligibility requirements, will be interrogated systematically to reveal problematizations embedded within. Additionally, schools made eligible by the low-income status of their student population are eligible for “schoolwide program” funds (ESSA, 2015: 1862). These schoolwide programs will be interrogated at the end of the analysis for problematizations of achievement constructed therein.

*Academic standards: achievement as a function of rigor and uniformity*

As a consequence of the separation of governing power in the United States, federal education law does not legislate *what* is taught in schools. Decisions about curriculum are left for individual states to decide. Historically, this created a challenge for policymakers seeking to measure the effectiveness of Title I funds. Without a national curriculum, student progress has been historically difficult to measure (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009: 85). Ever since the 1994 reauthorization of ESEA, federal policy has tried to fix this problem by requiring states to develop academic standards and correlated assessments. The assumption was that the data from those assessments would ‘prove’ the effectiveness of Title I funds by showing a change in student performance before and after federal intervention, especially in populations targeted for improvement through Title I funds. ESSA continues in the same trajectory by mandating the state adoption of academic standards and assessments, described in Title I under the heading, “Challenging Academic Standards and Academic Assessments” (ESSA, 2015: 1823). This section of the analysis will focus on the mandate to adopt state standards and two aspects of this policy mandate that are implicated in the problematization of achievement: rigor and uniformity.

Academic standards must be “challenging” which suggests that achievement gaps are understood as a problem of insufficient rigor. The “challenging state academic standards” are defined as a blend of “challenging academic standards and aligned achievement standards” (2015: 1823-1824). This language used is cumbersome, but essentially means that “challenging state academic standards” must be both rigorous and performance-oriented. Standards are defined as “challenging” if they align with “entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the system of public higher education in the State and relevant State career and technical education standards” (2015: 1824). The adjective “challenging” and the emphasis on alignment with postsecondary education problematizes achievement as a function of rigor. Linking elementary and secondary education standards to postsecondary education can be

understood as one way through which Title I holds states accountable for rigorous standards without actually legislating the content of those standards. It can also be understood as a mechanism by which Title I imagines children as future adults, and prioritizes the mobility of those future adults when conceptualizing the education of children in the present. Assumed in this language is the notion that without a federal mandate to make standards rigorous, states might adopt less rigorous standards. Anecdotally, this assumption is supported by reports of states “dumbing down” the curriculum in order to inflate the appearance of progress toward improving student outcomes in an era of high-stakes accountability under NCLB (Ravitch, 2010: 108; Standing, 2011: 72). Also assumed in this language is the notion that entrance requirements for postsecondary education constitute a level of rigor appropriate for children in elementary and secondary school.

In addition to the emphasis on “challenging” standards, Title I requires that states apply the “same standards” to “all public schools and public school students in the State,” and expect the “same knowledge, skills and levels of achievement” of “all public school students in the state” (2015: 1824). This emphasis on sameness positions achievement gaps as a function of a lack of uniformity; gaps in achievement are thus understood to stem from curriculum that is not the same for all students. In part, this language reflects a historical unease with segregated instruction. In the early years of Title I, pullout programs that focused on remedial instruction were the primary method for assisting under-achieving students. Over time, these types of programs lost popularity, in part because of the racial makeup of the students participating in these programs (most were black) and in part because researchers believed that children in remedial programs lost the academic rigor of regular instruction and would be unprepared to be mainstreamed later in their academic careers (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009, p. 108). In light of the historical origins of Title I, it is perhaps unsurprising to find such an emphasis on sameness.

Title I affords one exception to the mandate of sameness for the “challenging state academic standards.” States are allowed to adopt “alternative academic achievement standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities”<sup>2</sup> (2015: 1824). Several criteria are mandated for these alternative standards, including that they “are aligned with the challenging state standards” and “promote access to the general education curriculum” (2015: 1824). Title I therefore recognizes that there are cases in which some children may not be able to achieve the same academic standards as other children, but it does so while upholding a commitment to aligning alternative standards with general education standards, thus main-

---

<sup>2</sup> “The most significant cognitive disabilities” is a phrase defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, §1401 (3)(A)(B) (ESSA, 2015:1828).

taining as much commonality as possible. Requiring that the alternative standards be aligned with general education standards demonstrates a commitment to the idea of equal opportunity: children should not be blocked from the opportunity to learn the same rigorous academic standards simply because of disability. But this equal treatment belies a specific understanding of the concept of “equality” which effectively prevents certain populations of children from receiving special treatment (Bacchi, 2009, 182). Children in public schools represent a full range of ability levels, and requiring all children to demonstrate achievement of the same standards potentially diminishes the unique needs of children with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Title I reflects a belief in the role of schools to protect children with disabilities from discrimination on the basis of their ability level: all children *should* be afforded the opportunity to encounter a general education curriculum on par with their peers. The flip side to this commitment, however, is a policy that does not allow for differentiation in instruction, thereby preventing children with very different learning needs from accessing an alternative curriculum. The public schools where I taught had special education classes for children with severe disabilities. These children worked on an entirely different curriculum: some were developing self-care competencies like dressing or toileting; others were learning life skills like the ability to manage money or order food at a restaurant; still others were learning to communicate through adaptive technologies. The language of standards in Title I positions *all* children as ‘capable’ of achieving the same objectively defined standards. Capability, in this sense, is understood as uniformity. This also suggests that professionals—teachers, health care providers, and school administrators—do not have the capacity to design a child’s educational curriculum to suit that child’s ability level. The emphasis on sameness in Title I implies that without federal intervention, schools would prevent children with severe cognitive disabilities from “challenging” curriculum. Title I makes clear the belief that all children—regardless of ability level—should be afforded the same opportunities to learn, but it does so without much flexibility for children with very different learning needs.

This attention to sameness belies an assumption that eliminating the achievement gap depends on all children having access to the same academic content. Bacchi argues that rather than the dichotomy of “equality/*inequality*” serving as a paradigm for discussions of equality, “the widely accepted dichotomy framing the issue of equality is equality/*difference*” (2009: 184, italics original). This section of Title I suggests this dichotomy of equality/*difference*. Achievement gaps are positioned as a problem of rigor and sameness; children who have severe learning needs that might complicate their ability to achieve the same rigorous standards as other children are afforded some flexibility, but it is a level of flexibility that continues to

minimize difference. Spring argues that federal education policy advances an idea of equality as “teaching all students the same curriculum based on uniform standards” (2016b: 146). From a close analysis of the “challenging state academic standards” in ESSA, it Spring’s argument appears is supported. Embedded in this problematization of achievement is the idea that *all* children *can* and *should* be taught the same content. This problematization effectively positions children as capable, while narrowly conceptualizing capability by the rubric of state defined content standards.

Achievement problematized as a function of rigor and sameness, positions children in two ways. First, this problematization establishes categories by which children categorically ‘achieve’ or ‘fail to achieve’. These categories appear ‘true’, outside of context, and thus, children are positioned as responsible for failing to meet the standards set by the state. Title I mandates that states adopt curricular standards in “mathematics, reading or language arts<sup>3</sup>, and science” (2015: 1824) which positions selective subject areas as the benchmark for achievement. States are not required to adopt content standards in other subject areas, positioning the achievement of children in fine arts, history, or foreign languages, for example, as less important as achievement in the mandated subject areas. This positions some children, with natural passions or talents for the subject areas identified in Title I with an advantage over children who are drawn to other subjects. Additionally, children with disabilities like dyslexia would presumably have a more difficult time demonstrating achievement according to Title I.

Second, this problematization positions children as future adults. Achievement is constructed as something that can be leveraged to postsecondary work, and it is with an eye toward these future aptitudes that achievement is defined. Achievement is positioned relative to its future value, and as such, is not constructed with meaning for present-day children *as* children. Achievement, as constructed in ESSA, is important because of the future doors it will open. Children are positioned in line with a Piagetian concept of maturation, described by James and James as a positioning whereby children are seen as “social objects” always “‘en route’—in the process of becoming adults rather than being children” (2012: 40).

*Assessments: achievement as a function of standardization and objectivity*

In order to measure student progress toward meeting the academic standards, states are required to adopt and implement “high quality academic assessments in mathematics, reading

---

<sup>3</sup> The subject of language arts is the study of English grammar, literature, spelling, comprehension, etc. The subject of language arts does not include studies of foreign languages.

or language arts, and science” (ESSA, 2015: 1823). These assessments are employed as a tool to measure progress toward closing gaps in achievement. Analyzing assessments as a measuring tool helps interrogate the meaning of “achievement” constructed in Title I. Assessments contribute to a problematization of achievement as a function of standardization and of objectivity.

Similarly to Title I’s description of academic content standards, the language used to define the state’s use of assessments demonstrates a commitment to sameness: “the *same* academic assessments” must be used to “measure the achievement of *all*...students in the state”, and must “be administered to *all* public elementary school and secondary school students” (ESSA, 2015: 1825, italics added). This suggests a belief that ‘true’ measures of ‘true’ achievement depend on every child taking the same test. The ability of states to measure the effectiveness of the macro system of education is positioned as a function of standardization at the micro level of the individual school and child. As with the state academic standards, children with “the most significant cognitive disabilities” are afforded an exception, and are assessed through the use of “alternative assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities” (2015: 1828). These standards must promote “the involvement and progress of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in the general education curriculum” (2015: 1829). Title I advances the goal of including children with disabilities in “general” education settings thereby advancing the notion of ‘normal’ achievement and ‘*non-normal*’ achievement. This can be seen as an attempt to prevent children with disabilities from discrimination on the basis of their ability level, but it also demonstrates a belief in a singular notion of what constitutes ‘achievement’. “Alternative content standards” and “alternative assessments” represent a deviation from ‘ideal’ achievement. Therefore, achievement is problematized as a singular, standardized unit by which every child will be measured.

Title I imposes testing quotas, which may be understood as an accountability measure. Title I limits the number of children who can be assessed using alternative assessments: “for each subject, the total number of students assessed in each subject using the alternative assessments does not exceed 1 percent of the total number of all students in the state who are assessed in each subject” (2015: 1828). Schools are also required to test 95 percent of students, and 95 percent of students in each demographic subcategory (to be discussed in more detail below) (2015: 1837). Implementation of these quotas reflects historical difficulties with testing as a measure of achievement. NCLB (passed in 2002, and valid until ESSA was passed in 2015) required schools to demonstrate high levels of academic achievement among their student populations. The federal government threatened punitive action against schools that failed to show progress. Many reports arose during the NCLB years of testing fraud:

teachers and administrators cheated on standardized tests to inflate the achievement results of their students. One such fraudulent practice employed by school officials was to prevent low-performing students from taking standardized tests by encouraging them to stay home on test day or suspending them from school (Ravitch, 2010: 155–160). The testing quotas in ESSA reflect concerns for testing abuse, yet they also contribute to the problematization of achievement as measurable in standardized and uniform ways: insufficient numbers of assessed children would presumably mask ‘real’ measures of achievement.

Interestingly, Title I allows parents the choice to opt their children out of assessments (2015: 1857). This provision advances two ideas. First, while assessments measure achievement of academic standards, they are not a central feature of what it means to ‘do’ school. Second, successfully meeting testing quotas is a prerequisite to receiving Title I funds. Parents—positioned with the agency to choose for their children to skip assessments—hold a degree of power over whether or not schools will receive funding. A special education teacher in California reported to me recently (M Hanley 2018, personal communication, 8 May) that in her class of ten children with disabilities, two of the parents opted-out of state testing. This teacher even tried to persuade more of the parents of children in her class to do the same. Her belief is that the testing is a waste of time and inappropriate for her students, and so she wanted to help parents exercise their right to have their children removed from testing. She is the only special education teacher in the school, and while I don’t have data on if the children in her class *all* qualify as children with the “most significant cognitive disabilities”, nor do I have data on how many of the remaining students in the school fall into this subcategory, it’s not hard to see how a small number of parents deciding to “opt-out” would jeopardize a school’s ability to apply for Title 1 funds.

Assessments in Title I contribute to the problematization of achievement as an objective measure of progress. One requirement of assessment design is that assessments must “objectively measure achievement” and “not evaluate or assess personal or family beliefs and attitudes” (2015: 1826). This positions achievement as an objectively measurable unit, captured through objectively written tests. Achievement is problematized outside of the child’s social context. Properly written assessments are believed to capture the ‘actual’ achievement of children. This concept of achievement ignores data that suggest that assessments are constructed within a social context and can never be bias-free (Ravitch, 2010: 152–153; Spring, 2016a: 255). Title I continues, requiring that assessments “be used for purposes for which such assessments are valid and reliable” (2015: 1826). The language of “validity” and “reliability” construct an image of assessments that are scientifically engineered, impervious to cultural or social influences. This problematization assumes that well-written assessments can

accurately capture the *reality* of student achievement. Assumed in this problematization is that it is possible to measure the achievement of *all* children in an objective way.

The problematization of achievement as an objective measure of progress is complicated by a provision further on in Title I. States retain the freedom to decide how or if individual children's results on state assessments will impact their school grades or grade level promotion (2015: 1852). Since there is no national mandate, some states have implemented laws whereby state assessments impact grade-level promotion (Álvarez, 2017). In other states, however, students have almost no stake in their results on these tests. The belief in assessments as an objective measure of student achievement rests on the assumption that children value the assessments and take them seriously, which isn't necessarily realistic. This problematization ignores or dismisses children's agenic potential. O'Day argues that one of the challenges to policy reform revolves around agency: "the school is the unit of intervention, yet the individual is the unit of action" (2008: 27). In my experience as a math teacher in public schools in the United States, student assessment results had little felt impact on the children's experience of school. Results held some weight over which math class a child could take the following year, but otherwise, students (and many teachers, parents, school officials, and others) believed the tests were inconsequential. Some of my students found the tests boring while others found them stressful; some worked hard while others joked about making patterns out of the multiple choice answers on the answer sheets and finishing in ten minutes a test that should have taken two hours.

Herein lies one of the unforeseen implications of the assumption that assessments are an objective snapshot of achievement: children's agenic potential profoundly impacts the entire system. Title I fails to account for measures of achievement that would hold meaning for children, thereby positioning children as bystanders to the process. And yet, children are still the ones whose are responsible for demonstrating achievement through standardized testing, and some can (and do) use this power to actively protest a system that they feel is unjust (Brundin, 2014; Green, 2016). Others, like my students, simply showed up and invested in the testing process to varying degrees of seriousness. Regardless of the *practice* of testing, the agency of children is not treated as a significant variable in ESSA. One shift in ESSA from its predecessor is that now, schools are now offered the flexibility to adopt nationally recognized assessments such as college entrance exams as their own state-written assessments (2015: 1831). This appears to reflect a small way in which children have influenced policy, or at the very least, it reflects the awareness of policy-makers that children also have a stake in the experience of their education. "High school students aiming for college might be more inclined to try hard on a college-entrance exam, while they often don't see the point in doing their best

on state tests with no personal consequences” (Gewertz, 2016). Policy makers wishing to build in assurances that assessment results are an accurate reflection of student achievement may have responded by allowing schools to use a test that carries meaning for college-bound children, and while this doesn’t guarantee that such exams will carry meaning for *all* children, it appears to acknowledge a small way in which policy makers recognize the agency of children.

*School accountability systems: achievement as a scientific formula*

In order to reduce the achievement gap, Title I channels funds to the lowest-performing schools and students. Title I mandates the use of a “State Accountability System” to identify schools most in need of funds (2015: 1834). The federal government predicates the distribution of Title I funds on the use of these accountability systems, and provides guidelines on what each state must include in the development of its system, but upholds a commitment to decentralized education by allowing states to create their own. States use assessment data from schools—generated, monitored, and reported through the accountability systems—to rank each school’s performance thereby identifying under-performing schools. The bottom-performing 5 percent of schools and any secondary schools in which one third or more of the student population fails to graduate are automatically identified for “comprehensive support and improvement” (2015: 1837). State accountability systems in Title I contribute to the problematization of achievement as a matter of implementing the right scientific formula.

The lowest performing schools are eligible for “comprehensive support and improvement” funds, which must be used to “improve student outcomes” through implementation of “evidence based strategies” that target identified “resource inequities” (2015: 1838). Title I is not more specific at this point in the policy about how these funds are to be used. The appeal to “evidence based strategies” reinforces achievement as scientific. The process of “improving outcomes” is positioned as matter of enacting the right kinds of strategies, strategies that would otherwise be unavailable as a consequence of funding restrictions. Identifying poorly performing schools through the accountability systems as a way to target federal aid reinforces the idea that lack of funding is the reason that these schools are failing to help students meet academic standards. Allocating money to under-achieving schools is thus understood as necessary to improving achievement. The challenge of improving achievement and closing gaps is constructed as formulaic: allocating more funding leads to improve outcomes. This assumption simplifies the process of learning, and renders those children who inhabit spaces

of ‘under-performance’ as constants in a scientific equation. “Improvement” is positioned as an inevitable result of increased funding.

This problematization relies on two assumptions. First, lack of funding or implementation of strategies that are not “evidence based” is positioned as barrier to achievement in the most poorly performing schools in the state. Federal funding is essential to improvement, thus legitimizing the bureaucratic hurdles over which teachers, school administrators, and states are required to jump in order to secure funding. Second, this problematization assumes that federal increases in funding, when paired with “evidence based” instructional strategies are sufficiently potent to overcome achievement barriers. These assumptions minimize the complex web of factors that influence a child’s ability, motivation, and capacity to achieve. These indicators suggest that achievement is associated with equity, since *lack* of achievement prompts the distribution of federal funds to fix “resource inequities” (2015: 1838).

In addition to “comprehensive support and improvement” (ESSA, 2015: 1838) for the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, “targeted support and improvement” (2015: 1840) is allocated for schools in which underperforming students are concentrated in specific demographic subcategories. In order to identify which schools have high concentrations of underperforming students in particular subgroups, Title I mandates that each state’s accountability system must disaggregate school achievement data by four student subgroups, including “economically disadvantaged students; students from major racial and ethnic groups; children with disabilities; and English learners” (2015: 1834). The federal mandate to report student results in a disaggregated way suggests the belief that *un*-disaggregated data might hide inequities in student achievement. If school performance was not disaggregated, the high achievement of some children may mask the low achievement of others. Therefore, disaggregation is positioned as an equalizing measure, making visible the ‘true’ achievement of students in these four subgroups.

Gaps in achievement among children in these four demographic groups are positioned as a *funding* problem. Embedded within this problematization is the assumption that equalizing funds would equalize achievement between children within subcategories. This problematization can be understood in different ways. On the one hand, this suggests awareness by the state that children experience life unequally, that children from low-income families, for example, do not have the same opportunities as children from middle- or upper-income families. Their parents level of education, language abilities, and the resources available at home constitute an unfair disadvantage for some students. That unequal achievement concentrated in different demographic subcategories would trigger a funding intervention can be seen as an act of compensation from the state for the inequitable background of a child’s family mem-

bership. On the other hand, the fact that Title I assumes that funding interventions can compensate for family background suggests a belief that the challenges presented by membership in different social categories *can* be overcome through funding interventions. ‘Achievement’ is a matter of individual opportunity. This problematization leaves uninterrogated the possibility that ‘achievement’ is a cultural construction, and that some children, because of their social membership, construct ‘achievement’ differently. Consequently, funding schools where the gaps exist won’t effectively address inequality.

The use of disaggregated student data in Title I within the problematization of achievement, on the surface level, appears to recognize the different ways different children *do* school. However, the ways in which this disaggregated data is employed appears to position children conversely, as de-situated objects rather than agents acting from a context of experience. The notion that funding could overcome structural barriers to achievement simplifies the complex system of meaning making from which children operate. It perpetuates a construction of childhood that remains *dis*-located from the society in which children are embedded. Through a properly engineered educational system, all students—irrespective of their membership in various subcategories—are said to have equal *capacity* for achievement as an effect of equalized funding. This positions children as equal benefactors of possibility and potential, and renders them uniquely culpable for their own failure.

*Schoolwide programs: achievement as a function of socioeconomic status*

One final consideration in the problematization of achievement is the way in which such a problem representation conflates poverty and achievement. Title I directs funds towards two goals: closing the achievement gap, and providing all children equitable access to high-quality schools. Funds distributed through comprehensive and targeted support plans to the lowest performing schools address the first goal, and the improvement plans that such schools are required to submit reflect a commitment to the purpose of the funds. But a closer look at the ways in which Title I aims to address the second goal illuminates an assumption about the connection between poverty and achievement. Schools serving a high population of low-income children can receive Title I funds for “Schoolwide Programs” (2015: 1862). Schools are eligible for schoolwide Title I funds if “a school serves in an eligible school attendance area<sup>4</sup> in which not less than 40 percent of the children are from low-income families, or not

---

<sup>4</sup> “Eligible school attendance areas” are thus defined by concentrations of poverty. Children are said to be from low-income families if they meet one of the following four criteria: (1) “the number of children aged 5 through 17 counted in the most recent census data”, (2) “the number of children eligible for a free or reduced price lunch<sup>4</sup>,” (3) “the number of children in families receiving assistance under the State program funded [un-

less than 40 percent of the children enrolled in the school are from such families” (2015:1862). The funds received for overall school improvement can be used “in order to upgrade the entire educational program of a school” (2015: 1862). Such funds are designed to be used for overall school improvement and don’t have to be tied to specific low-performing children. When interrogated against the services these schoolwide programs are said to fund, one final problematization of achievement comes into focus: achievement is situated in Title I as a problem of socioeconomic status.

Schools qualify for schoolwide funding simply as a function of the income level of the student population. This suggests a belief in the role of the state to intervene in areas where children are the victims of poverty. Schools located in geographic areas with high concentrations of low-income families, or schools that serve high populations of low-income children are positioned with unique needs that are served by state intervention. And yet, as Title I explains the types of programs that will be funded through schoolwide programs, a second belief is evidenced. Schools receiving Title I funds for schoolwide programs are required to submit plans to describe how funds will be allocated. Title I requires recipients of schoolwide funds to describe how the school will “use methods and instructional strategies that *strengthen the academic program* in the school, *increase the amount and quality of learning time*, and help provide an *enriched* and *accelerated* curriculum” (2015: 1864, italics mine). This suggests a belief that children in low-income schools need to increase the number of hours they spend *doing* school. That those hours should be “enriched”, “accelerated”, or of higher “quality” suggests the belief that children in low-income schools don’t already have access to those things. The assumption underlying this problematization is that the achievement of children from low-income families or in low-income schools necessarily suffers as a result of their socioeconomic status.

As a result of this problematization, children are distanced from the process of ‘achievement’. Simply by virtue of a child’s home address, or the socioeconomic level of a child’s parents, some children will *experience* school as if they were failing to achieve. They are positioned as ‘failing to achieve’ without having a chance to prove their capacity. While few would argue against giving more money to schools in high poverty areas, the fact that such money appears to assume the low achievement from a group of students who have not proven otherwise constitutes a kind of preemptory judgment. Children of low-income fami-

---

der the] ... Social Security Act”, or (4) children whose family income entitles them to “medical assistance under the Medicaid Program.” (Title I, 2015:§ 1113 p. 2). The use of these different measures of poverty is important, because family income is calculated differently for different federal aid programs. Consequently, children might be living in families whose income qualifies them to receive medical assistance, but their income is slightly above the national poverty line. Such children would “count” as low-income children under Title I.

lies (or children who are not from low-income families, but just happen to attend schools in which a high percentage of low-income children are served) are positioned as uniquely in need of federal policy that, while claiming to provide equal opportunities, may effectively construct a notion of achievement that does the opposite.

***Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?***

This analysis has explored the ways in which a concept of “achievement” is constructed in Title I of ESSA, and the ways in which such a construction positions children and childhood. The overarching problem representation in Title I is the presence of a gap in achievement between subcategories of children. Specifically, this achievement gap is problematized as a function of unequal distribution of resources; lack of choice; a market-centered concept of investment in the future; and finally, a belief that low-income children are uniquely in danger of non- or under-achievement. Neoliberal theory serves as a useful frame to further explore this problem representation. The fourth WPR question serves at this point in the analysis to interrogate the problem representations articulated in questions one and two above in order to scrutinize the analysis for silences that remain unexplored.

First, this problem representation leaves unscrutinized the categories that are presented as fact in Title I. Bacchi argues that “people categories” are themselves constructs; presenting them as “fact” undermines their constructed nature. She further explains that the purpose of a WPR analysis “is not to accept these categories as given but to see how they function to give particular meanings to problem representations” (2009: 9). Title I, as a policy document intended to equalize opportunity between advantaged and disadvantaged children relies on the category of “low-income” to structure the policy. Low-income families in the United States are defined as families with incomes approximately twice the federal poverty threshold (Koball & Jiang, 2018: 2). Actual cost of living varies dramatically from state to state, and the felt-impacts of relative poverty potentially impact more children than are technically counted in “low-income” statistics (2018: 2). Situating the category of “low income” exclusively within the measured numbers of census data, however, blinds policy to the experience of poverty, and how that experience shapes achievement. Horgan’s study on the school experiences of children in poverty is illustrative. She demonstrates that children from low-income families define the purpose of school and the meaning of achievement differently than children from advantaged family backgrounds; consequently, they *perform* school differently (2009: 367, 373). Capturing the variation in the *meaning* attributed to achievement is

fundamental to understanding an achievement gap, but such an understanding is limited in the way Title I situates low-income as purely a function of economic disadvantage. Simply leveling access to resources across a socioeconomic gap fails to account for the differences in the ways various sub-categories of children *do* school.

Second, this problematization obscures the multiple perspectives within subcategories of children. Despite the insistence on choice and individual treatment advanced in Title I, the one-size-fits-all approach renders subgroups of children as homogenous units with the same needs and systems for making meaning. The problematization of achievement articulated above fails to interrogate this basic operational premise. Small et al advocate for the use of “frames” in conceptualizing how people make sense of the world around them. They point out that frames allow researchers to preserve heterogeneity in their approach toward poverty research, rejecting idea that low-income communities share “a single, cohesive ghetto culture”; instead, “[f]rames define horizons of possibilities, individual life projects, or what is thinkable” (2010: 15). Such a tool would help problematize the use of student subgroups to define progress toward reducing the achievement gap. While disaggregation by subgroup may help to make inequity visible, dependency on these classifications should be held in tension with the way in which this disaggregation tends to simplify the diverse needs of children *within* those subcategories.

Third, this problematization silences the theoretical framework that underpins the positioning of transparency and school choice. The mindset that parents are motivated to choose a school setting based on a rational decision when considering available information is rooted in the “rational choice theory” (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014: 488). Such a theoretical position, however, is contested through studies that document parents who choose more poorly performing schools in order to place their children in demographically or socioeconomically similar communities, as well as parents who make “counterintuitive” school choices to enroll their children in “worse” schools in order to act on political commitments (2014: 489–490). Cucchiara and Horvat argue that using a lens of “interpretive consumption research”, which understands consumption as an act of identity construction, helps understand motivating factors behind parental choice (2014: 490). Such a lens maintains the connection between choice and neoliberalism, and further articulates the interaction between parents as consumers of education and the factors that motivate the exercise of choice.

Furthermore, what is silenced in the problem representation of achievement in Title I is that inequitable access is heavily constrained by forces outside of federal education policy. Some argue that a national commitment to local control over education, which is a strong theme in Title I, is largely to blame for inequitable access to resources that might perpetuate

an achievement gap; public schools are still—in large part—funded by local property taxes, creating a funding gap that cannot be overcome through Title I funds (Darling-Hammond, 2009: 29; Jennings, 2015: 60; Spring, 2016a: 80). Additionally, Title I funds account for a very small percentage of overall spending on education. In total, federal spending accounts for slightly more than 7 percent of the total spending on education and Title I accounts for 3 percent (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009: 37). Title I allocates \$14 billion annually to state governments, but divided among all the qualifying schools, this ultimately accounts for between \$500 and \$600 extra per student per year; added to an average per-pupil expenditure of \$12,400 annually, these Title I funds represent a tiny percent increase in spending (Dynarski & Kainz, 2015). While schools aren't likely to decline extra federal money, this money is unlikely to effect much change. This tension between local and federal control is present in Title I, but the nature of that tension in the construction of an achievement gap remains obscured without properly situating Title I in the context of school funding. Attempts in Title I to equalize access are outpaced by the meager investment of federal funds into local schools.

## **CONCLUSIONS & CONCLUDING DISCUSSION**

In this research project, I have explored federal education policy in the United States for the way in which the problematization of “achievement” positions children and childhood. I have analyzed this positioning through the historical commitment to the narrative of education as an equalizing force, as well as through the contemporary political commitment to neoliberalism. Federal education policy in the United States aims to solve the problem of gaps in achievement concentrated in subgroups of children. In aiming to solve the problem of these gaps in achievement, Title I problematizes achievement in several distinct ways that result in a positioning of children and childhood. The aim of this thesis has been to interrogate that positioning.

Title I constructs a notion of ‘achievement’ as an objective, standardized unit that appears to exist as a ‘truth’ by which children are measured. The solutions to a gap in achievement are positioned as formulaic and scientific. Children of low-income families are presumed to suffer more from poor achievement as a function of their socioeconomic status. These problematizations contribute to a position of children as de-situated; any barriers to achievement that might point to complex structural inequality are imagined as technical barriers, overcome through effective engineering of the school experience. Children are therefore positioned as individually responsible for their own success or failure, irrespective of race, ability level, English proficiency status, or socioeconomic status. Achievement is important for children as future adults rather than holding value for children *as* children. Educa-

tion is seen as an investment in human capital, and children are positioned with respect to their future participation in the market economy. Poverty and achievement are conflated and children of low-income families are automatically positioned as at-risk for low-achievement simply by virtue of their socioeconomic status. Children do still retain a small measure of agency; they wield the pencils of standardized tests, and thereby maintain some power in an otherwise disempowering system.

The narrative of education as an equalizing force is deeply entrenched in the American psyche, and further research into the ways in which children are positioned through this narrative would be important for the field of childhood studies. Future studies might explore the experience of schooling as told by children or adults to explore the ways in which children make meaning of education; they might offer an analysis of newspaper editorials written contemporaneously with the passage of new federal education policies to interrogate public opinion about the function of school; or they might explore teacher preparation courses and the ways in which education is conceptualized in the classroom. This study, while not an exhaustive examination of the positioning of children within educational narratives, offers an important contribution to the ways in which policy contributes to the role that children play in enacting equality.

Importantly, viewing education through a child studies lens maintains at the forefront a commitment to the notion that childhood is a construction (James & Prout, 2015: 7). Ideas about children and education penned into law through federal education policy are simply *ideas*. They can be reimagined through a changing belief in the value of children as learners *in the present*, valuable because they are human beings, not because they will someday be market participants. Neoliberalism has become hegemonic, and alternative ways of conceptualizing the future “are displaced by the broad acceptance of what is presented as the neoliberal ‘reality’” (Angus, 2015: 397). But the childhood studies paradigm gives hope: notions of “achievement” and the way these notions position children and childhood are all constructions. They can be unmade and reformed into a future that places different commitments at the center. Such remaking requires imagination and reflexivity. Breaking free from the neoliberal hold on education is a mighty goal, but such a goal is not impossible.

**REFERENCES**

- Aldeman C (2017) The case against ESSA: A very limited law. In F M Hess and M Eden (eds) *The Every Student Succeeds Act: What it means for schools, systems, and states* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 91-105.
- Álvarez B (2017) Mandatory retention laws are failing students. *National Education Association* May 22. <http://neatoday.org/2017/05/22/student-retention-laws/>. Accessed May 2, 2018.
- Angus L (2015) School choice: Neoliberal education policy and imagined futures. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36(3): 395–413.
- Bacchi C (1999) *Women, Policy and Politics: The Construction of Policy Problems* London: Sage.
- Bacchi C (2009) *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to be?* Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education.
- Bacchi C (2012) Why study problematizations?: Making politics visible. *Open Journal of Political Science* 2(1): 1–8.
- Barone C (2017) What ESSA says: continuities and departures. In F M Hess and M Eden (eds.) *The Every Student Succeeds Act: What it means for schools, systems, and states* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 59-73.
- Bletsas A (2012) Spaces between: Elaborating the theoretical underpinnings of the “WPR” approach. In A Bletsas and C Beasley (eds.) *Engaging with Carol Bacchi: Strategic interventions and exchanges* Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 37-51.
- Brundin J (2014) Thousands of students protest Colorado standardized tests. *Chicago Public Radio News* November 13. <http://www.cpr.org/news/story/thousands-students-protest-colorado-standardized-tests>. Accessed May 17, 2018,
- Bryman A (2016) *Social Research Methods* (5th edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bush G W (2002) President signs landmark No Child Left Behind education bill, President's remarks. *George Bush White House Archives* January 8. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020108-1.html>. Accessed May 16, 2018.
- Clegg S (2010) Time future - the dominant discourse of higher education. *Time and Society* 19(3): 345–364.
- Cohen D K and Moffitt S L (2009) *The Ordeal of Equality: Did federal regulation fix the schools?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Connell R (2012) Just education. *Journal of Education Policy* 27(5): 681–683.

- Connell R (2013) The neoliberal cascade and education: An essay on the market agenda and its consequences. *Critical Studies in Education* (2): 99–112.
- Connell, R (2014). Understanding neoliberalism. In S Braedley and M Luxton (eds) *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*. Montreal: MQUP.
- Cooney W, Cross C, and Trunk B. (1993) *From Plato to Piaget: The greatest educational theorists from across the centuries and around the world*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Cucchiara M B and Horvat E M (2014) Choosing selves: The salience of parental identity in the school choice process. *Journal of Education Policy* 29(4): 486–509.
- Darder A (2014) Pointing the way toward a more socially just world. In K M Sturges (ed) *Neoliberalizing educational reform: America's quest for profitable market-colonies and the undoing of public good*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Darling-Hammond L (2009) *Flat World and Education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Darman J (2015) *Landslide: LBJ and Ronald Reagan at the Dawn of a New America*. New York: Random House Trade.
- de Lone R H (1979) *Small Futures: Children, inequality, and the limits of liberal reform*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Duncan A (2011) *Improving Human Capital in a Competitive World — Education reform in the U.S.* Presented at the World Bank Human Development Network Forum. March 3. <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/improving-human-capital-competitive-world-%E2%80%94-education-reform-us>. Accessed May 16, 2018.
- Duncan A (2015) In Ferguson — and All of Our Communities — Education Can Be the Great Equalizer. *Obama White House Archives* February 10. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/02/10/ferguson-and-all-our-communities-education-can-be-great-equalizer> Accessed May 16, 2018
- Dynarski M and Kainz K (2015). Why federal spending on disadvantaged students (Title I) doesn't work. *Economic Studies at Brookings* 1(7). <https://www.brookings.edu/research/why-federal-spending-on-disadvantaged-students-title-i-doesnt-work/>. Accessed May 19, 2018
- Eastman N, Anderson M and Boyles D (2017) Choices or rights? Charter schools and the politics of choice-based education policy reform. *Studies in Philosophy & Education*, 36(1): 61–81.

- Egalite A J, Fusarelli L D and Fusarelli B C (2017) Will decentralization affect educational inequity? The Every Student Succeeds Act. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 53(5): 757–781.
- Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) Pub. L. No. 95, § 1000-1601, 129 Stat. 1802 United States Congress 392, December 15. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/landing.jhtml>
- Gewertz C (2016) Will states swap standards-based tests for SAT, ACT? *Education Week*. January 6 Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/01/06/will-states-swap-standards-based-tests-for-sat.html> Accessed May 12, 2018
- Gillies D (2011) State education as high-yield investment: Human capital theory in European policy discourse. *Journal of Pedagogy* 2(2): 224–245.
- Goldstein D (2015) *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Green E (2016) Baltimore student activists plan walkout to protest standardized testing. *Baltimore Sun*. April 4  
<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/education/blog/bal-baltimore-student-activist-group-plans-friday-walkout-in-protest-of-testing-20160414-story.html>. Accessed May 17, 2018.
- Growe R and Montgomery S (2003) Educational equity in America: Is education the great equalizer? *Professional Educator* 25(2): 23–29.
- Hartman A (2017) Culture wars and the humanities in the age of neoliberalism. *Raritan*, 36(4): 128–140.
- Harvey D (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hawkesworth M (2009) Neoliberalism and the micropolitics of domination in the United States. In L Macdonald and A Ruckert (eds) *Post-Neoliberalism in the Americas* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 167–183.
- Henig J R, Houston D M and Lyon M A (2017) From NCLB to ESSA: Lessons learned or politics reaffirmed? In F M Hess and M Eden (eds) *The Every Student Succeeds Act: What it means for schools, systems, and states*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 29-42.
- Horgan G (2009) “That child is smart because he’s rich”: The impact of poverty on young children’s experiences of school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 13(4), 359–376.
- Hursh D and Martina C (2016) The end of public schools? Or a new beginning? *Educational Forum* 80(2): 189–207.

- Improving America's Schools Act (1994) Pub. L. No. 382, § 1001-1604, 108 Stat. 3518  
United States Congress, October 20.
- James A and James A (2012) *Key Concepts in Childhood Studies* (2nd ed) Los Angeles: Sage Publications Ltd.
- James A, Jenks C, and Prout A (1998) *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- James A and Prout A (eds) (2015) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. London: Routledge.
- Jennings J (2015) *Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools: The politics of education reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Johnson L B (1964) The Great Society, transcript. *History for the Relaxed Historian* May 22. [http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/the\\_great\\_society.htm](http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/the_great_society.htm). Accessed May 18, 2018.
- Koball H and Jiang Y (2018) *Basic facts about low-income children: Children under 18 years, 2016*. National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. New York. [http://nccp.org/publications/pub\\_1194.html](http://nccp.org/publications/pub_1194.html). Accessed May 12, 2018.
- Lauen D L (2008) False promises: The school choice provisions in NCLB. In A R Sadovnik, J A O'Day, G W Bohrnstedt and K M Borman (eds) *No Child Left Behind and the Reduction of the Achievement Gap: Sociological Perspectives on Federal Educational Policy*. New York: Routledge, 203-226.
- Leyva R (2009) No Child Left Behind: A neoliberal repackaging of Social Darwinism. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 7(1): 364–381.
- Martin L L and Varner K J (2017) Race, residential segregation, and the death of democracy: education and myth of postracialism. *Democracy and Education* 25(1).
- McGuinn P (2017) From ESEA to NCLB: The growth of the federal role and the shift to accountability. In F M Hess and M Eden (eds) *The Every Student Succeeds Act: What it means for schools, systems, and states* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 13–28.
- No Child Left Behind (2002) Pub. L. No. 107, § 101-1908, 115 Stat. 1439 United States Congress. January 8
- Obama B (2008) Full text of Obama's education speech. *The Denver Post*. May 28 <https://www.denverpost.com/2008/05/28/full-text-of-obamas-education-speech/>. Accessed May 13, 2018.
- O'Day J A (2008) NCLB and the complexity of school improvement. In A R Sadovnik, J A O'Day, G W Bohrnstedt and K M Borman (eds) *No Child Left Behind and the*

- Reduction of the Achievement Gap: Sociological Perspectives on Federal Educational Policy*. New York: Routledge, 25–52.
- Qvortrup J (2004) Editorial: The waiting child. *Childhood* 11(3): 267–273.
- Ravitch D (2010) *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books.
- Reay D (2006) The zombie stalking English schools: Social class and educational inequality. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 54(3), 288–307.
- Rhode D, Cooke K and Ojha H (2012) The Decline of the “Great Equalizer” *The Atlantic*. December 19 <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/12/the-decline-of-the-great-equalizer/266455/>. Accessed April 5, 2018.
- Semega J L, Fontenot K R and Kollar M A (2017) *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2016: Current Population Reports* U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Reports No. P60-259. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Small M L, Harding, D J and Lamont M (2010) Reconsidering Culture and Poverty. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629(1): 6–27.
- Spring J (2016a) *American Education* (17th edition) New York: Routledge.
- Spring J (2016b) *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A brief history of the education of dominated cultures in the United States* (8th edition) New York: Routledge.
- St. Pierre E (2006) Scientifically based research in education: Epistemology and ethics *Adult Education Quarterly* 56(4): 239–266.
- Standing G (2011) *The Precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Stegers M B and Roy R K (2010) *Neoliberalism: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sturges K M (2014) Educational reform in the age of neoliberalism: A call for focused, empirically-supported, collective response. In K M Sturges (ed) *Neoliberalizing Educational Reform: America’s quest for profitable market-colonies and the undoing of public good* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 1–19.
- Sulkowski M L (2017) Unauthorized immigrant students in the United States: The current state of affairs and the role of public education. *CYSR Children and Youth Services Review* 77: 62–68.
- The Third Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate (1960) *Commission on Presidential Debates* October 13 <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-13-1960-debate-transcript>. Accessed May 16, 2018.

Tienken C H (2013) Neoliberalism, social Darwinism, and consumerism masquerading as school reform. *Interchange* 43(4): 295–316.

Title I (2015) Pub. L. No. 95, § 1000-1601, 129 Stat. 1802 United States Congress 392.  
[www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/legislation/title-i.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/legislation/title-i.pdf)

Wilkinson R G and Pickett K (2010) *The Spirit Level: Why greater equality makes societies stronger*. London: Penguin Books.

**APPENDIX: TABLE OF POLICY DATES AND REAUTHORIZATIONS**

The first federal education policy was passed in 1965, known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. That bill has been in effect since 1965, and is reauthorized every few years. Prior to 1994, many amendments were enacted that changed the policy, its scope, and its implementation, but the name stayed the same. The United States only operates with one primary federal education policy; each policy listed below represents an updated version of its predecessor rather than an entirely new policy document. Title I is a chapter in each version of the federal education policy.

- 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)
- 1994 Improving America's Schools Act (IASA)
- 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
- 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)