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"All Lives Matter": How Districts Co-opt Equity Language and Maintain the Status Quo

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Abstract: The term "equity" is widely used by educational policy makers to describe myriad programs and practices aimed at closing the supposed racial achievement gap. Research about the way equity has been used in these policies typically explores how policy actors with low will and capacity frame and implement their reforms. Few studies, however, explore equity-oriented reforms initiated and supported by policy makers who claim to fervently support educational equity. The purpose of this critical policy analysis was to examine how the rhetoric used by equity-supportive policy actors may have reinforced neoliberal ideas and inadvertently maintained white innocence and color-blind racism. Examining the Community Schools policy in New York City schools, this study found that some equity initiatives are circumscribed by their focus on "*all* lives", which can unwittingly reinforce the status quo in schools.
Keywords: Educational policy; equity; neoliberalism; White innocence

"Todas las vidas importan": Cómo los distritos adoptan el lenguaje de la equidad y mantienen el status quo

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Resumen: El término "equidad" es ampliamente utilizado por los formuladores de políticas educativas para describir una miríada de programas y prácticas destinadas a cerrar la supuesta brecha de rendimiento racial. La investigación sobre la forma en que se ha utilizado la equidad en estas políticas normalmente explora cómo los actores políticos con poca voluntad y capacidad enmarcan e implementan sus reformas. Sin embargo, pocos estudios exploran reformas orientadas a la equidad iniciadas y respaldadas por los responsables políticos que afirman apoyar fervientemente la equidad educativa. El propósito de este análisis crítico de políticas fue examinar cómo la retórica utilizada por los actores políticos que apoyan la equidad puede haber reforzado las ideas neoliberales y haber mantenido inadvertidamente la inocencia blanca y el racismo daltónico. Al examinar la política de las Escuelas Comunitarias en las escuelas de la ciudad de Nueva York, este estudio encontró que algunas iniciativas de equidad están circunscritas por su enfoque en "todas las vidas", lo que sin saberlo puede reforzar el status quo en las escuelas.
Palabras-clave: Política educativa; equidad; neoliberalismo; Inocencia blanca

"Todas as vidas importam": Como os distritos cooptam a linguagem da equidade e mantêm o status quo

Resumo: O termo "equidade" é amplamente utilizado por formuladores de políticas educacionais para descrever uma miríade de programas e práticas destinadas a preencher a suposta lacuna de desempenho racial. A pesquisa sobre como a equidade tem sido usada nessas políticas normalmente explora como os atores políticos com baixa vontade e estrutura de capacidade e implementam suas reformas. Poucos estudos, no entanto, exploram reformas orientadas para a equidade iniciadas e apoiadas por formuladores de políticas que afirmam apoiar fervorosamente a equidade educacional. O objetivo desta análise política crítica foi examinar como a retórica usada por atores políticos que apóiam a equidade pode ter reforçado as ideias neoliberais e, inadvertidamente, mantido a inocência branca e o racismo daltônico. Examinando a política das Escolas Comunitárias nas escolas da cidade de Nova York, este estudo descobriu que algumas iniciativas de equidade são circunscritas por seu foco em "todas as vidas", o que pode inadvertidamente reforçar o status quo nas escolas.
Palavras-chave: Política educacional; equidade; neoliberalismo; Inocência branca

Introduction

One current popular trend in the United States is using political power and privilege to minimize and ignore public calls for attention to marginalized students in schools. Despite this trend, some large, diverse school districts across the country have created and tried to implement policies to address educational equity. These policies seek to do many things, including to close the achievement gap—typically defined as the gap in standardized test performance between White students and Latinx, Black, and immigrant students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In recent years, scholars have argued for a narrow focus on the achievement gap as a means to address equity; however, this neglects the complex but pertinent social factors shaping the experience of marginalized groups in schools, such as "the teacher quality gap…the employment opportunity gap…[and] the affordable housing gap" (Chambers, 2009; Irvine, 2010, p. xii). Though researchers who are critical of earlier references to the achievement gap clearly warn that myopic focus on achievement may be futile (Gutiérrez, 2008), many educational policies continue to prioritize closing the supposed achievement gap to ensure students can fulfill jobs in the future, and they neglect to meaningfully address the myriad obstacles to educational equity.

Another major concern for some equity-oriented policies is how policy makers define equity and discuss their equity plans. Scholars suggest all educational policies are socially constructed and may superficially address certain widely held concerns like educational equity while they recklessly swap out equity plans for more traditional goals such as college and career readiness for *all* students (Ching et al., 2018; Wolk, 2007). For example, in her study of policymaking in an urban school district, Trujillo (2012) found policies that were meant to provide equitable distribution of resources and opportunities and centered diverse learning strategies were constantly scaled back or unenforced. Her study was one example of how a district's "attempts to craft equity-oriented, ambitious instructional policies were eclipsed by normative schisms among central office leaders, teachers, and principals" (Trujillo, 2012, p. 550). This duplicitous bait-and-switch enables districts to continue business as usual as they implement market-style reforms and simultaneously embody the hokeyness of popular educational equity talk. In this study, I argue these policies preserve color-blind concepts of educational equity and uphold the accountability era's neoliberal style reforms in education, though in a more covert manner. I add that when policy makers fail to reference the harm done by systemic discrimination and neglect to detail the benefits expected for marginalized groups, they willfully maintain White innocence. White innocence is a theoretical framework most often used in legal scholarship. Guiterrez and Jarmillo (2006) explain White innocence is the inclination to excuse Whites from the responsibility or any "moral obligation… to acknowledge and challenge the underlying logic of the inhumanity and inequity that fuels racism and racist practices" (p. 183).

To understand the way these policy makers maintain White innocence in their pursuit of equity, it is essential to examine the language embedded within the policies and how it can resist or reinforce neoliberal status quos. I examine the New York City (NYC) Community Schools policy, one of NYC's most recent initiatives implemented in over 200 of NYC's district (versus charter) schools. The Community Schools initiative includes wraparound services like health clinics, after school programs, and social supports for students and families (New York City Department of Education, 2016). According to Dryfoos (1995), one of the most cited scholars on the topic of Community Schools, "community schools are those that have been intentionally transformed into neighborhood hubs and that are open all the time to children and their families" (p. 7). After the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was implemented in 2002, Dryfoos (2005) clarified that Community Schools, because of their emphasis on partnership, were positioned to lessen the pressure of NCLB

if they could share the responsibility to address fundamental non-academic needs of children with outside entities, like Community Based Organizations (CBOs). In other words, at their essence, Community Schools are purposed not simply for the growth of students and their communities. Rather, community schools are meant to provide help to aid students in their academic pursuits (Dryfoos, 1995, 2005; Valli et al., 2016).

The New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) claims, in the very first sentence of the Community Schools policy, "The New York City Department of Education views Community Schools as a central strategy for achieving an equitable educational system" (NYC DOE, 2016, p. 1). With such a direct proclamation, the NYC DOE has positioned this particular policy as a key aspect of their equity work and, as such, should be critically examined. In my exploration, I ask how, if at all, does the Community Schools policy perpetuate or resist neoliberalism related to equity? How, if at all, does the Community Schools policy discourse reinforce White innocence? I argue that *nouveau equity policies*, which I explain later, do little to challenge neoliberal status quos and instead further entrench White innocence and color-blind ideologies in education.

This paper seeks to contribute to the literature on equity talk in educational policy by critically examining how politicians and policy makers who claim to fervently support equity frame their policies for schools. New York City's mayor, Bill de Blasio, and the current NYC Schools Chancellor, Richard Carranza, have both publicly expressed their plans to pursue equity through policy and practice in NYC schools. They have each positioned educational equity as a top priority amidst backlash from wealthy, predominantly White, and some Asian families who have also felt marginalized by some policies (Zimmerman & Disare, 2018). At the time of this writing, the mayor and NYC Schools Chancellor were embroiled in a very public battle with the aforementioned constituents. It is not yet clear how the public battle may turn out and whether the mayor and chancellor will continue with their stated equity goals.

Review of Literature

I situate this study of NYC's Community Schools initiative among two specific areas of research. First, I provide a brief description of neoliberalism and explain how scholars have understood the influence neoliberalism has had on educational policies and why it may be difficult to avoid, even in equity centered initiatives. Then, because the Community Schools policy makes bold statements about revisioning the status quo related to educational equity, I position this study among research on White innocence to help further paint a picture of equity initiatives in large urban districts.

Neoliberalism in Education

Over the past two decades, scholars have thoroughly discussed how dominant neoliberal ideologies have shaped schools (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Horsford et al., 2018; Slater, 2015). They suggest that neoliberalism, a powerful ideology supporting free trade and unregulated markets, dictates how Americans feel about the role of testing and accountability in schools. For people living and sending their children to schools in the United States, one prevailing notion is that students should be prepared to compete in the workforce and that high stakes tests yield information for how students may fare in the real world (Hursh, 2013). These feelings did not derive from thin air. Rather, policy actors have strategically promoted these kinds of neoliberal ideals by framing economic problems as essentially education problems—or, in other words, the result of poor-quality schools (Baltodano, 2012; Slater, 2015). One example of this is the unfettered proliferation of choice systems in many large school systems in the United States. In New York City, for example, former

mayor, Michael Bloomberg, facilitated the development of hundreds of small high schools as part of a district wide reform effort. He articulated a clear message about the way competition among the schools would improve the overall performance of the entire system (Shiller, 2011). His efforts have had a resounding impact on the overall structure of NYC schools to this day.

On one hand, it may seem like a commonsense correlation: Better schools will create better workers. However, scholars suggest neoliberal ideals act in opposition to democratic citizenship and the humanistic goals of education (Hantzopoulos, 2016; Horsford et al., 2018). Sleeter (2008) also argues equity is directly impacted by neoliberalism as alignment with the ideology leaves even teacher preparation programs to focus almost solely on test preparation and the technical aspects of instruction at the expense of equity-centered preparation. It begs the question, what is the purpose of education? In the United States, schools are framed as a central part of the problem related to slow economic growth and the United States lagging behind other developed nations in major educational assessments (Harris et al., 2004). Advocates who see schools as tools for social efficiency argue that school should focus on improving academic performance for *all* children for the central purpose of international competitiveness.

One level of analysis becoming more prominent in scholarship on neoliberalism is how what I call *nouveau equity policies* can also reproduce and use the same tactics associated with neoliberal ideas. Much like the Community Schools policy in NYC, these policies use obvious equity language and are seemingly situated among meaningful equity initiatives that pay attention to the different experiences and outcomes for marginalized students. These educational policies, however, simultaneously reinforce the status quo as they ignore systemic oppression and discrimination directed at the youth and families in their schools. In this paper, I argue that these nouveau equity policies do little to advance equity; rather, they maintain White innocence and preserve color blindness.

White Innocence and the Preservation of Color-blind Racism

Scholars first used White innocence as a theoretical lens in their critique of the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (Gotanda, 2003; Ross, 1997). Some point to the compelling testimony of psychologist Kenneth B. Clark, who presented the Court with evidence that segregation caused serious psychological harm to children, especially Black children (Gotanda, 2003; Gutiérrez & Jaramillo, 2006). The Court saw Clark's findings as undeniable "modern" evidence that segregation "generates a feeling of inferiority…in a way unlikely to ever be undone" (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). Scholars argue that Judge Warren's opinion distances the Court from previous legal cases where he insinuates Whites decided the fate of segregated schools without adequate information (Ross, 1997). As such, the current new information was an aha moment and removed Whites from "any responsibility for whatever harms may have occurred in the past" (Gotanda, 2003, p. 672; Ross, 1997). This is the absolution of responsibility that is central to the White innocence frame.

Ross (1997) argues that White innocence also played a central role as the Court struck down interdistrict busing in the case of *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974). He claims that the Court's stance was that it would have imposed busing on innocent Whites had it allowed Detroit to continue its busing plan with suburban school systems. The courts during the time of Milliken did not acknowledge how the school system became racially identifiable *after* Detroit moved to desegregate its schools. As such, the responsibility for desegregation becomes a burden primarily for the Black students most impacted by it.

Ross (1997) also contends that a key element of White innocence is Black abstraction: the rhetorical portrayal of Blacks as subhuman rather than humans embedded in a complex and oppressive social context. From a contemporary perspective, when Black people, Latinx people,

Indigenous peoples and others of color are viewed outside of their lived experiences with discrimination and oppression, institutions are relieved of their responsibility to directly undo systems of privilege and oppression. Likewise, as policy makers create educational policies meant to address equity that embody an abstract frame, they further absolve institutions of the responsibility they hold in causing inequity and further entrench White innocence.

Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) argue that White innocence upholds color-blind racism, which seeks to preserve White privilege, subtly continue discriminatory practices, and ignore the persistence of racism. Bonilla-Silva (2018) states that color-blind racism has four central frames: *abstract liberalism*, which uses the ideas of political liberalism and economic liberalism to describe racial problems; *naturalization*, used to describe racial differences as natural and/or biological; *cultural racism*, which embodies a "blame the victim" stance in which individuals are wise enough to know biological explanations of inferiority are inaccurate; and *minimization of racism*, used to minimize the role of racism on the current lives of marginalized peoples. Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) add an additional frame called *disconnected power analysis*, which they argue allows Whites to understand progressive ideas related to race and racism, but simultaneously avoid "humanizing behaviors that could arguably threaten their perceived status and accomplishments" (p. 931). The maintenance of White innocence in educational policies implies social factors like racism play little to no role in the experiences of children of color in schools.

White innocence and color-blind racism are persistent yet unacknowledged ideologies in educational policies. They are especially unacknowledged within the pervasive neoliberal reforms championed by the market-based regimes leading large racially and ethnically diverse school districts across the nation. While these regimes sometimes claim an allegiance to equity-oriented reforms, it is no surprise when they systematically enact policies that are contradictory to their equity claims and color-blind at their core. It is surprising to find, however, equity policies created by very visible advocates for equity that continue to perpetuate color blindness and White innocence. Adopting the lens of White innocence along with a pointed look at neoliberalism will shed light on how nouveau equity policies in education use discursive strategies to win support for equity-oriented initiatives but fail to meaningfully dismantle oppressive systems and structures that hinder progress for marginalized groups.

Historical Context of Equity Initiatives in NYC Schools

The NYC school district is the largest in the country, with more than one million students and more than 1800 schools (NYC DOE, 2019). On the district website, the NYC DOE says they've incorporated "culturally responsive-sustaining education" (CR-SE) as a central aspect of their work. They define CR-SE as "a cultural view of learning and human development in which multiple forms of diversity (e.g., race, social class, gender, language, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, ability) are recognized, understood, and regarded as indispensable sources of knowledge for rigorous teaching and learning" ("Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education"). The district also states that they are committed to strategies that interrupt inequitable and oppressive policies and practices, as they simultaneously focus on high expectations for teaching and learning (NYC DOE, 2019).

Arguably, the NYC DOE has made radical steps to change how marginalized youth and families experience NYC schools. This has not always been the case, however. Historically, the district has struggled to achieve their stated goal of systemic equity. For example, in the 1960s, the African American Teacher Association (ATA) in NYC demanded local control of schools in the

Ocean Hill-Brownsville district in Brooklyn[1]. When they were finally given control, the ATA took swift measures to reassign or fire 13 teachers and six administrators, the majority of whom were White[2] (Podair, 1994).

Thirty-five years after ATA campaigned to take over the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district, a new ideology shaped educational policies in NYC. Billionaire businessman Michael Bloomberg was elected mayor, he received unprecedented authority from the state legislature to take over NYC schools, and vocally advocated for the creation of small schools and charter schools as a means to close the supposed achievement gap (O'Day et al., 2011). Like other neoliberal educational reformers, Bloomberg and his associates emphasized competition and choice as a mechanism for equity, which scholars have since argued is an ineffective stand-in for achieving equity goals (Kotok et al., 2017; Scott, 2008).

Since Bill de Blasio was elected mayor in 2014, the NYC DOE has, again, changed its direction and approach to educational equity. One of the mayor's central approaches has been to invest more resources to redress systemic inequality in major NYC institutions, like schools. So, in 2014, de Blasio announced a $52 million grant to fund the Community Schools Strategy (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2014a). According to de Blasio, the Community Schools Strategy is a "cornerstone" of NYC's plans to provide New Yorkers with the material resources as well as support services they need to do well in school (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2014a). The Mayor saw Community Schools as a plan that would "fundamentally transform" NYC schools "in a way that lifts up every child" (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2014a). In name, Community Schools have been in NYC since 1992, though the current iteration has become a systemwide, district-supported approach instead of just a few scattered, disconnected schools (Dryfoos et al., 2005). It is important to note that these schools are not called Community Schools because they enroll students from specific communities. Rather, they are identified as Community Schools (or full-service schools, full-service community schools, wraparound service schools, etc.) because they are intended to provide critical support services to community members who also decide what those services should look like.

The Community Schools initiative in NYC was mostly received as a positive approach to improving schools. The "about" tab of the Office of Community Schools website reads: "NYC defines Community Schools as an equity strategy to organize resources and share leadership so that academics, health, youth development, and family engagement are integrated into the fabric of schools" ("Our Community Mission"). In the 2014-2015 school year, 45 schools were selected to become Community Schools. The following year, the NYC DOE combined the Community Schools initiative with its new Renewal Schools school improvement plan, which added another 94 schools to the initiative. Renewal Schools experienced low graduation rates and persistently low test performance results (Johnston et al., 2017). According to the NYC DOE, Renewal Schools would be provided "what they need to succeed," which included additional fiscal resources, professional development for teachers, additional instructional time, and summer school for their students (Darville, 2014), in addition to the resources provided to other Community Schools.

The Community Schools initiative is one of the many ways the NYC has moved toward a more critical approach to equity. But, the city has not stopped there. In 2018, Chancellor Carranza argued for a stronger "Equity and Excellence" agenda (NYC DOE, 2018). The agenda was advanced in 2015 and focuses on several core elements, including, but not limited to, "3K and Pre-

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[1] At the time ATA was formed in 1964, NYC schools were more segregated than they were at the time of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954 (Lewis, 2015). To make a bad situation worse, only 9% of the staff in the NYC school system were African American and/or Latino (Kahlenberg, 2007).

[2] The teachers' union in NYC contested the expulsion of their teachers, who were not members of ATA. They battle eventually led to a teachers' strike.

Kindergarten for All; Advanced Placement for All; and the Single Shepherd program," which pairs all students in a South Bronx district and a district in Brownsville, Brooklyn with a counselor or social worker ("Equity and Excellence for All"). Carranza and de Blasio also tried to tackle the Specialized High School Admission Test (SHSAT), which students take to gain admission to the city's selective high schools. The SHSAT has been seen by some as an unnecessary sorting stick that discriminates against Black and Latinx students (Hechinger, 1971; NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 2012). In 2018, the mayor, supported by the chancellor, proposed eliminating the SHSAT as a single measure for admission to the schools (Harris, 2018). Another highly publicized effort to address system inequity came when Carranza implemented a districtwide professional development program focused on anti-racism and anti-bias training. Both the SHSAT proposal and the anti-bias training align with the district's desire to interrupt oppressive policies and practices. However, each proposal was seen as highly controversial and all were met with significant backlash from those who claimed "reverse racism" related to both the SHSAT and anti-bias training (Zimmerman, 2019). Carranza tried feverishly to resist the backlash from parents, but recently called himself a "realist," noting he would take a more moderate approach to equity and desegregation plans (Shapiro, 2019a).

Methods

Scholars have long critiqued the neutral tone and positivist approach to policy research (Ching et al., 2018; Diem et al., 2014; Milani & Winton, 2017; Nakagawa, 2000; Taylor, 1997). Because the topic of this paper calls for a methodology and analytic tool embedded with a critical lens to carefully examine policy rhetoric and how it constructs the context for the Community Schools initiative, I use qualitative case study methods with Horsford, Scott, and Anderson's (2018) critical policy analysis (CPA) framework as a guide. Horsford, Scott, and Anderson (2018) suggest a critical policy analysis may:

> 1) Challenge traditional notions of power, politics, and governance, 2) examine policy as discourse and political spectacle, 3) center the perspectives of the marginalized and oppressed, 4) interrogate the distribution of power and resources, and 5) hold those in power accountable for policy outcomes. (pp. 21-22)

While their framework reflects a holistic approach to CPA, their second point is central to my research questions.

Scholars have studied how policy makers frame the way a policy is understood, which includes what we expect of a policy and its potential to effect change (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013). Policies are not simply meant to formalize a new program or practice. They also communicate, both directly and indirectly, the problems (real or perceived) a policy was chosen to address, possibilities for solutions to these problems, and how one should interpret and react to the problems and the process of change. Some scholars refer to this as a "discursive strategy," or the intentional use and/or manipulation of language to generate a particular outcome (Anderson & Donchik, 2016; Reisigl & Wodak, 2015; Wright, 2012). One central reason Horsford, Scott, and Anderson (2018) suggest we view policy as discourse and socially constructed is because policies are not created to *respond* to a problem. Rather, existing "solutions" are chosen to address problems as they arise. Some scholars also refer to this as the "garbage can model," which argues that problems, solutions, and opportunities move in and out of a garbage can and when problems get attached to solutions, their linkage is fortuitous (Cohen et al., 1972; Kingdon & Thurber, 2002).

Horsford, Scott, and Anderson (2018) claim the feasibility of policy arguments is constructed through the process of political spectacle. The notion of political spectacle challenges the claim that

policy making involves rational decision-making and democratic participation. Rather, policy making is contextual and responsive to powerful actors and/or performances (Edelman, 1988; Wright, 2005). In this study, I explore how a policy window opened and the political stream changed when de Blasio was elected mayor of NYC. I argue his new appointment allowed for the use of particular discursive strategies, which combined familiar equity frames along with popular neoliberal rhetoric. The resulting policy was an unintended performance of White innocence, which may successfully maintain color blindness in the Community Schools initiative.

Site

The NYC school district is the largest in the country, with 1.1 million students. Latinx students account for 40.6% of students in NYC schools, while 25.5% are Black, 15.1% are White, and 16.2% are Asian (NYC DOE, 2019). General enrollment numbers, however, do not reflect that NYC schools are among the most racially segregated schools in the country (Shapiro, 2019b). Despite NYC's reputation as a progressive city notable for racial and ethnic diversity, some studies have shown certain districts in NYC are even more segregated now than in previous decades (The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, 2014).

The district is home to roughly 1800 schools, including 260 charter schools and 247 Community Schools across the five boroughs: Brooklyn, The Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island ("DOE Data at a Glance"). During the 2018-2019 school year, 20% of Community Schools were part of the district's Renewal Schools turnaround program, and roughly 9% were schools considered Rise schools. Rise schools were formerly part of the Renewal Schools program but showed enough progress in key areas to decrease high levels of scrutiny from city and state officials (Darville & Disare, 2017).

Data Collection & Analysis

Critical policy analysis calls for scholars to critically scrutinize the problem a policy was intended to solve, how a policy was constructed, by whom and to whom it was intended to benefit (Ching et al., 2018; Taylor, 1997). For this study, it was critical to understand how these policies were framed to the public so I made the decision to only include documents which were publicly available at this time.

I relied extensively on publicly available information, including press releases and speeches made by Mayor de Blasio; the executive director of the Office of Community Schools, Chris Caruso; Chancellors Fariña and Carranza; and other NYC DOE officials. These speeches and press releases delivered critical information about the central actors and discursive strategies used to outline the problem and proposed solutions. I searched local publications (like newspapers and online education news sources like Chalkbeat.org) for campaign speeches, the NYC official government website for press releases and transcripts of related speeches, as well as the NYC DOE website for official press releases and transcripts of speeches. I also relied on newspaper articles related specifically to how the initiative was developed and its major changes or controversies. In total, I examined 18 official policy documents that originated in the NYC DOE or city government. The remaining documents were external reports (n = 2; conducted by external evaluators hired by the NYC DOE) and newspaper articles (n = 11). Table 1 provides a sample of the documents and how they were categorized.

Table 1

Sample of Documents and Categories

Document Name	**Type of Document**	**Source**
Community Schools Policy	Official NYC DOE Policy	Department of Education
Community Schools Strategic Plan	Planning Document	Office of the Mayor
Community Schools Theory of Action Flow Chart	Planning Document	Department of Education
De Blasio Administration Announces $52 Million Investment to Launch Community Schools	Press Release	Office of the Mayor
Assessing the Short-term Impact of the New York City Renewal Schools Program	External Report	RAND Corporation
New York City Will Close or Merge 14 Schools From Renewal Program	Newspaper Article	New York Times
New York City Renewal School Program: Lessons in School Turnaround	Internal Report	Department of Education

Data analysis began with sorting all the documents collected. After sorting, I conducted an initial reading of all documents and began to develop a preliminary set of open-ended codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) based on Horsford, Scott, and Anderson's (2018) framework. I examined the particular use of words and phrases to determine how, if at all, neoliberal notions of competition and individualism were promoted and how, if at all, White innocence was maintained through color-blind notions of equity. For example, phrases like "lift every child" and "all New Yorkers" were coded as "non-specific indirect reference to equity."

During the second phase of coding, I reviewed the initial set of codes and then looked across the coded documents to ask these questions, which aided in interpretive analysis (Yanow, 2007):

1. What is the prevailing discourse around neoliberalism?
2. Who is doing the framing?
3. How, if at all, was White innocence reinforced or challenged?
4. Were notions of equity performative?

In this phase, I found evident patters that showed increased emphasis on career preparation and the propensity to discursively frame the initiative as an equity initiative amid evidence to suggest the actual foci were on academic performance. I also noticed patterns of silence related to the role of race, racism, and oppression in the NYC school system, which helped solidify the White innocence theme in the findings. Taken together, these coded documents, interpretive analysis of the coded documents, and the final themes that emerged from the data helped to create a holistic picture of the nature of neoliberalism and preservation of White innocence within the Community Schools initiative in NYC schools. Coding and analysis were conducted in Atlas.ti version 8.1.

Researcher Positionality

I write this brief researcher positionality statement aware of my privilege as an individual formally educated in elite spaces. However, I do not take my privilege and responsibility as a scholar lightly. My beliefs about the way the world works are inextricably linked to my identity as a Black cisgender heterosexual woman who grew up in poverty in NYC. I came to this work because of my own experiences with marginalization and because of how often voices like my own have been relegated to the periphery. I see my scholarship as activism, and I am influenced by scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009), Adrienne Dixson (2003), and Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2008; 2009) who envision schools as ripe spaces for critical thought and critical liberation. I pursue educational policy research, specifically, because of how pervasive it is in our lives and how much the field is dominated by positivist approaches. I believe a critical lens is a necessity in all kind of policy scholarship, but especially in educational policy where Black, Latinx, and Indigenous voices are growing though still minimized in many regards. I do this work humbly but with an unrelenting desire to see justice done in the names of all Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and People of Color globally.

Findings

Discursive Bait and Switch Tactics

The discursive bait and switch in the NYC Community Schools initiative was not totally evident in the beginning of the de Blasio administration. As he campaigned for mayor, de Blasio abandoned the message of previous city administrations when he championed a number of issues specifically related to the disparate experiences of low income and wealthy New Yorkers. His election seemed like a stark change from the conservative policies and practices implemented under the Bloomberg regime, and de Blasio pledged to make drastic changes across agencies like housing, health care, and schools (de Blasio, 2013) and Community Schools were a central part of his campaign. For example, when the Community Schools initiative was forming, Mayor de Blasio identified 40 individuals to join the initiative's advisory board. An examination of the individuals and organizations listed as part of the initial advisory board reveals that the district did stray from the previous administration's overreliance on involvement from the corporate world. Rather, Mayor de Blasio tapped organizations like Children's Aid Society, El Puente, Robin Hood Foundation, and other groups known for their service to youth and families (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2014b).

Despite early examples of his departure from the status quo, data in this study revealed the de Blasio administration wouldn't completely abandon the neoliberal ideas common in popular educational reforms. Instead, the neoliberal ideals were embedded within his plans for social and economic justice, which were also key platform concepts during his campaign. For example, de Blasio's mayoral campaign featured career and technical education (CTE) prominently. In his 71-page-long campaign document, de Blasio shared his plan to ensure CTE schools could respond to the needs of the job market. Specifically, schools would be asked to "provide the skills in line with projected job growth in the city" (de Blasio, 2013, p. 7). His line of thought aligns directly with neoliberal ideals as it allows market needs to drive what schools do. However, those neoliberal ideals were present alongside de Blasio's calls for universal Pre-K, increased opportunities for parent engagement, and disrupting the school closures that were common under the Bloomberg-Klein regime (de Blasio, 2013). This clear tension between neoliberal notions of schooling and the social justice aims of education shed light on how difficult it may have been to completely dismantle the relationship between the market notions of schools.

The district's complex relationship with market driven schools and its desire to frame the approach as equity centered continued even as the initiative became more defined[3]. For example, the district consistently stated the initiative would support "whole child" development, which they defined as a child's mental, physical, social, and emotional well-being (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2014a). Chris Caruso, the executive director of the Office of Community Schools, said he believed the initiative was an opportunity to meaningfully connect a student's home life to their life at school (NYC DOE, 2016). In 2017, when Caruso was questioned by a local news organization and asked if the Community Schools initiative was a turnaround strategy, he said, "This is an equity strategy. There are neighborhoods in this city where kids have access to far fewer resources, whether those are health care resources, learning experiences, relationship resources. And so community schools are a strategy to level that playing field" (Zimmerman, 2017). Here, Caruso carefully moves away from the focus on school turnaround, a strategy most closely connected to the accountability movement and neoliberal ideas. Instead, he uses language more closely associated with the whole child approach championed, in practice, by John Dewey's lab school and Jane Adams' Hull House (Benson et al, 2009). Conversely, he continued, "A long-term investment in [services] leads to higher rates of attendance, lower rates of chronic absenteeism, greater connectedness to school—and all those things lead to better academic performance" (Zimmerman, 2017). Although Caruso foregrounded equity as the driving force behind the initiative, he simultaneously used terms like "investment" and "performance", which implied a relationship between the monetized and/or competitive aspects of schooling. His statements further underscore the district's struggle to distance themselves from the neoliberal ideals dominant in educational policies today.

The district's inability to fully embrace their self-professed equity stance was most evident among the Renewal Schools. A central goal for the Renewal Schools was to raise test scores, especially because many of the schools could be closed if scores and graduation rates did not increase (Darville, 2014). The executive superintendent for Renewal Schools said, "We are laser-focused on schools like Automotive and are tracking their progress in real time. We are making sure the right tools, the right team of professionals and the right programs are in place at every Renewal School to put them on a path to success" (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2015). To prove their "laser focus" on Renewal Schools, the district invested an initial $150 million, added an hour of instructional time, hired additional leadership and instructional coaches, and implemented more rigorous curriculum (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2015). Because they were part of the Community Schools initiative, Renewal Schools also often received funding for health clinics, parent engagement, and instructional materials as deemed necessary. The stakes were so high at Renewal Schools that a subgroup of members within the local teachers' union staged a rally to expose what they claimed was a toxic culture within Renewal Schools ("Aimee Horowitz Rally," 2015). They claimed that test scores were often changed or destroyed, there was retribution toward teachers who complained, and attendance reports were manipulated. It was not the goal of this study to explore the veracity of these claims. However, the district's approach among the Renewal Schools was a blatant reminder that neoliberal ideals of schooling were a constant companion to the district's stated equity goals.

It should also be noted that the district made far fewer statements about improved academic performance in Renewal Schools once reports showed progress toward their goals was slow. In fact, Mayor de Blasio began to openly revisit the idea of closing schools that did not improve under the

[3] The DOE also created a new Office of Community Schools (OCS), which acted as a central body for the initiative. They provided technical assistance, helped create a Community Schools specific workplan, and examined the strength of the approach at all sites. OCS also coordinated the relationship between schools and their CBO partners.

plan, a practice used wantonly by the Bloomberg-Klein regime (Taylor, 2017). The district then discursively framed the initiative as more about improving the "whole child" and the material resources that would eventually lead to academic success for students. After an investment of more than $700 million to improve Renewal Schools, the city has indicated that they would phase the Renewal Schools program out (Shapiro, 2019c).

White Innocence and All Lives Matter: Co-opting Equity Language

Six months after he was inaugurated mayor of NYC, Bill de Blasio and Chancellor Fariña announced the Community Schools initiative. In an official press release, they described the initiative as key to changing the school system and "lifting up every child" (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2014a). The press release provided brief quotes from other stakeholders, including the president of the United Way, who said the plan, in part, would focus on "students living in poverty," and a parent leader, who said the initiative would "strengthen the entire community by focusing on the assets that already exist there" (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2014a). Compared to the mayor's remarks, the comments from the nonprofit and parent leaders suggest the initiative may attend to specific communities and the out-of-school social factors that shape a student's experience in schools. However, these comments were interspersed across the documents examined and mostly came from individuals only peripheral to implementation of the policy. In previous work, I've argued that when mayors control schools, they are likely to be the foremost authority on education policy (Lewis-Durham, 2015). Their public sentiments about an educational policy relay messages, directly and indirectly, about how a policy might be interpreted and acted upon in schools. As such, the constant focus on *all* students rather than students who are the most marginalized by historical and current forms of oppression warrants a deeper exploration.

Despite campaigning as the politician of choice for marginalized New Yorkers, analysis revealed de Blasio's consistent narrative maintained White innocence and colorblindness in the highly racialized context of NYC schools. In the data analyzed, de Blasio consistently positioned himself as the anti-Bloomberg and vowed to work for New Yorkers who felt they'd been left behind. In his first state of the city address, he said:

> Good jobs that pay decent wages are all too scarce. Access to the best health care seems, to many, to be a privilege that cannot be earned. To countless New Yorkers, affordable housing is an oxymoron. And a quality education—the most powerful tool we know for lifting one's life chances—has become a promise broken too many times to tally. (de Blasio, 2014)

It is clear from his address that de Blasio meant to crystalize his role as an advocate for marginalized New Yorkers. However, he never actually states *how* privilege was maintained nor does he specifically identify what groups experienced broken promises.

In the early part of his administration, de Blasio often spoke about the "broken" policies to place an emphasis on the outsize role unfair systems and structures had on marginalized New Yorkers. Over time, however, he and members of his administration began to discursively construct students and families as needy and unprepared for schooling rather than holding accountable the racist and oppressive policies upholding White innocence. In their initial announcement of the Community Schools initiative, Fariña stated:

> Community Schools serve a vital need for our students and families by providing academic enrichment in partnership with mental health and social services. This monumental expansion will partner schools with community-based organizations that bring a wealth of services to lift up students and parents and create a foundation

> for academic success, while supporting neighborhoods with high needs. (NYC Office of the Mayor, 2014a)

In this statement Fariña and others do little to explain why students and parents need to be lifted to begin with. This is evidence of abstraction as discussed in the literature on White innocence. Rather than view people as situated in their lived contexts they are viewed as needy and dependent on services to "lift" them up seemingly from the bottom of the social ladder. Fariña's comments also hint at an aha moment like those references in the literature on White innocence, as it implies, though doesn't state outright, "aha, all these children and family need is access to social services and all issues will be resolved." Her statement diverts attention from how institutional racism and oppression may have created what de Blasio referred to as the "tale of two cities" and the differential outcomes for marginalized students and their communities.

Over time the discursive framing of students and their communities persisted, but in more nuanced ways. For example, as de Blasio announced the district's $150 million investment in the Renewal School program, he discussed how previous educational administrations categorized some NYC schools as "good schools" and "bad schools" (Darville, 2014). He went on:

> Many of you know first-hand what those written-off schools looked like. They were resource poor. Teachers were hamstrung. The best teachers generally did not want to work in these schools. And parents were shut out. These schools—their teachers —parents—students—felt put down. Because they were put down—by Mayors, and even some school chancellors. (Darville, 2014)

Mayor de Blasio is likely referring to the NYC DOE's former practice of assigning letter grades to schools based primarily on students' performance on standardized tests. Klein and Bloomberg said they believed the letter grades would empower principals and educators with more information about how to improve their practice and school performance (Gootman, 2006; NYC DOE, 2006). However, schools that did not improve were given shorter windows to improve with less flexibility. Schools could be closed if they did not improve and principals of those schools were subject to removal (Gootman, 2006). In his statement, de Blasio describes this practice and others from the Bloomberg-Klein regime as "discouraging." He said, "My administration rejects these cruel divisions. Not only because they are morally wrong, but because their underlying assumptions are wrong" (Darville, 2014). In this statement, de Blasio implies he has some understanding that these policies unfairly targeted communities of color. In this same speech, however, de Blasio continues to discursively paint a picture that portrays some communities and families as incapable. Though he challenges the practices of past administrations, he does not describe how the Community Schools policy may interrupt the policies or practices that caused the divisions. Rather, he emphasizes how students and families will be remedied (Ching et al., 2018) without situating them in their lived contexts with oppression and discrimination. Not only does de Blasio's statements reflect further abstractions, they also mirror the disconnected power analysis, a tenant of color-blind racism. De Blasio shows he is aware, and maybe understands, the need for progressive actions. Yet, his emphasis on fixing people shows more willingness to maintain White innocence than to enact progressive plans to dismantle systemic oppression.

De Blasio's tendency to absolve dominant groups and institutions of their responsibility even showed itself in how the district planned to use their material resources for Community Schools. The district claimed it would place a lot of resources into social services for families. De Blasio said,

> …Our Schools Chancellor likes to say, "If a child is hungry, she cannot focus." That is why a Community School might have a food pantry for students' families. A

> parent who does not understand English may have trouble helping a child with homework. That is why a Community School might offer English language classes for parents. Children from every economic background come to school with their own particular challenges, including mental health needs. (Darville, 2014)

At first glance, it seems fair to focus more money on youth and important support services like food pantries and English language classes. It is not clear, however, how much time and/or resources were invested in dismantling the entrenched segregation experienced by students across NYC schools, or how much time and effort was spent deemphasizing the individualistic market goals of the neoliberal efforts connected to the initiative. These resources, all directed at youth and families, show there was little attention paid to the way racism and oppression were embedded in the structure of schools, from staffing to curriculum. Moreover, analysis showed, that by 2018 the district spent close to $200 million on the Community Schools initiative but more than half the money was actually spent on academics (Cramer, 2018).

Another important omission from policy documents is the mention of race and/or ethnicity ("NYC Department of Education Community Schools Policy", 2016). Despite the district's insistence that Community Schools is an equity strategy, the absence of any direct reference to marginalized groups by their race and/or ethnicity reflects the minimization of racism tenant of color-blind racism and suggests there is ambiguity about who the policy is meant to impact most and how it should impact them. The written policy fails to describe the conditions that caused inequity in the first place, is ambiguous about how systemic discrimination and oppression would be interrupted through the initiative, and does not situate any marginalized groups in their "real and rich social context" (Ross, 1997, p. 6). It can only be assumed that when the district says "lift every child" they are more closely aligned with the mantra "All Lives Matter" rather than the pointed and justice-oriented stance of the "Black Lives Matter" movement.

Discussion

Two major, although complex, findings emerged in answering the research questions, "How, if at all, does the Community Schools policy perpetuate or resist neoliberalism related to equity?" and "How, if at all, does the Community Schools policy discourse reinforce White innocence?" The first key finding illustrates that neoliberalism is difficult to completely eradicate even when key policy actors, like mayors, support this effort. Many scholars who are critical of neoliberal ideas in education argue for more focus on the humanistic goals of education and less focus on long standing traditions like testing and strict career preparation (Wolk, 2007, 2017). My analyses, however, suggests that even when districts provide a theoretical platform to shift their foci, they may be unable to entirely and confidently move away from the familiar goals associated with neoliberalism. Part of the reason it may be so difficult to break the hegemonic hold neoliberalism has on education is because it is not simply an ideology, but a pervasive and common strategy that does not currently have an accepted alternative. Scholars have already discussed the ordinariness of neoliberalism in schools (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Nygreen, 2016), but this study further underscores how familiar and normal neoliberal ideals have become, even for those who claim they'd like to avoid such practices. Connected to this point is constituents' reactions to significant change. As it was previously mentioned, changes in NYC schools that seemed to drastically redistribute power and privilege were met with pushback from some groups. The Community School initiative could have been faced with the same pushback if its redistributive elements were prioritized over the familiar neoliberal components.

This study also provides a new lens with which to analyze and critique neoliberalism and equity centered initiatives in schools. Educators and scholars who believe the elimination of neoliberal ideas requires the involvement of powerful allies who center equity should be critical of what that alliance looks like. The mayor of NYC, arguably an extremely powerful advocate, tried to intentionally build the Community Schools initiative around equity, even going as far to say it was a key aspect of the entire district's equity initiatives. Yet, throughout the policy documents examined for this study, there was an evident and formidable tension. On one hand, the district claimed they wanted to place more attention on equity and the services students would receive than on performance results. On the other hand, the district wanted to show the initiative would have an important academic value ("New York City Department of Education Community Schools Policy", 2016). These goals coexisted in a fraught relationship, one seeks to maintain the status quo and the other seeks flip the status quo on its head.

The second finding underlines the importance of recognizing race and the historic structures that created inequity and oppression through policies. It was clear through the analysis of the policy documents that the district believed the initiative would improve the overall culture of schools and provide the material resources they believed would increase equity. The district, however, failed to adequately acknowledge *how* the district became so inequitable to begin with. As mentioned in the literature the absolution of responsibility is a central aspect of White innocence (Ross, 1997). Instead, key policy actors avoided conversations about race (related to this initiative) and stuck to the central claim that the initiative had the power to lift *all* children. As Bonilla-Silva (2018) has argued, it is more palatable to espouse an "everyone rises" mentality since Whites, overall, still have a difficult time with the concept of equity where some deserve more than others. These findings reaffirm that since the primary goal of any regime is to advance policy agendas, they may take the path of least resistance. The Blasio regime was no exception to this rule. Policies that seek to provide redress for racial wrongs are often deemed controversial because they confront the privileges some groups have long grown accustomed to. Despite the best intentions of real social justice advocates, the power held by privileged groups may be too entrenched and too powerful to overcome easily. As such, these findings warrant further exploration into how the innocence of the privileged is maintained through color-blind education initiatives.

To be clear, this paper does not claim the kind of material resources provided to families by the NYC DOE were somehow unnecessary or ill-advised. The findings lend themselves to quite the opposite. Students and families were long overdue for an initiative like Community Schools where a tight partnership between the schools and community resources was established. In fact, one of the central positive aspects of the Community Schools initiative that was not explored for this study was the focus on partnerships and community engagement. What these findings clarify is how a district's claims about equity might be confounded by their alliance with neoliberal ideals and, even more critically, their propensity to maintain White innocence and color-blindness in their policies.

Future studies will need to attend to what equity policies, like Community Schools, look like in practice to get a better sense of how they play out for students and their communities in real time. As such, they will need to submit a Freedom of Information Law request to procure internal documents that may illuminate how the district communicated messages about the Community Schools initiative to school, district level staff, and community partners. They will also need to examine how communities can advocate for the kinds of sustainable change they desire, especially when key policy actors claim they support the change. Schools have always been a battleground for the pursuit of justice. So long as educational policy makers continue to use schools as tools of social and cultural reproduction, then it is here we must take up the cause for educational equity and do what is necessary to achieve true justice.

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