

“It Changes Me from Nothing to Something”: Identifying Educative-Psychic Violence in a Public Diplomacy Program for Nonelite Youths

Jennice McCafferty-Wright
Missouri State University

Abstract:

Since 2004, the English Access Microscholarship Program, a U.S. public diplomacy initiative, has impacted at least 150,000 nonelite youths. U.S. Department of State employees created the program in response to suicide bombings committed by Moroccan youths at international sites in Casablanca. The program later expanded throughout the Middle East and then across the world, eventually operating in more than 85 countries for students aged 13-20. In this paper, I examine images promoted by the program associated with the mission for students to develop an “appreciation for U.S. culture and democratic values through cultural enhancement activities” using critical concepts such as *educative-psychic violence* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s description of education as a *cultural bomb*. Troubling content promoted by the program features students depicting themselves as lacking dignity and worth paired with portrayals of gaining dignity and worth through their participation in the program. Additionally, the program’s “cultural enhancement activities” intended to promote “appreciation for U.S. culture and democratic values” often occur in communities deeply impacted by the U.S.-led War on Terror and amid dramatic economic and military power differentials. Finally, my analysis encourages academic engagement with policy makers on the use of education within public diplomacy initiatives.

Key words: citizenship education, diplomacy, international education, youth programs, social studies

Corresponding author: jmwright@missouristate.edu

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“Access is Unlimited Joy”: Framing the Access Origin Story

In 2014, while learning about a civic education NGO in North Africa, I encountered the public, official Facebook page of a U.S. public diplomacy program, “English Access Microscholarship Program: Headquarters” (English Access Microscholarship Program, n.d.). The first image I noticed featured two girls in Pakistan, perhaps 13 or 14 years old. They stood together in blue and white school uniforms, holding printed coloring pages in their hands. One girl, in braids with pink barrettes, stared into the camera. She held a coloring page featuring children marching with a flag and a drum and with “Happy 4th July [sic]” across the bottom. Her classmate, taller and wearing a headscarf, clutched a coloring page with a large American flag held by a white boy and girl, drawn in a style reminiscent of a mid-century U.S. children’s book, complete with pinafore, bows, and a little dog. Thirty-seven people liked the photo, and some responded with praise for the students’ creativity and “excellent work.” Intrigued and unsettled by what I saw, especially in the context of the U.S. drone strikes that were happening in Pakistan at the time, I scrolled through pictures from other countries. One from the country of Georgia featured a poster declaring that “Access is Unlimited Joy.” These images raised questions about education in U.S. foreign policy and eventually led to policy studies in counterterrorism and a year of ethnographic research in Morocco. In this study, I identify examples of educative-psychic violence in content on the English Access Microscholarship Program’s (henceforth Access, English Access) official Facebook page, and I address implications for education in public diplomacy programs.

My identity and experiences shape my understanding and analysis of public diplomacy programs. I am a white woman who benefits from U.S. citizenship and research funding that allows me to use a powerful U.S. passport. I know many scholars who have received crucial support for research projects and professional development through various programs administered by the U.S. Department of State, including Fulbright, the International Leaders in Education Program, and the Teaching Excellence and Achievement Program. Although I critique elements of some public diplomacy programs, I support others. I have benefitted from federal education programs, and I continue to support work which helps educators teach for critical global understanding and intercultural cooperation.

Given the remarkable growth already experienced by the English Access Microscholarship Program in the past decade, I anticipate that it will continue to operate for decades more, impacting hundreds of thousands more youths. Acknowledging this trajectory, my specific concerns and critique are offered as a partial analysis of the program and for consideration by scholars, program leaders, and experts in public diplomacy and education. It should be noted

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that despite my critique of certain components of the program, I know that many participants value it and would not want it to end. Public diplomacy generally operates as a carrot, not a stick.

The Global North has long operated education programs throughout the Global South under a variety of frameworks including humanitarian response, development, peace education, and public diplomacy (Berman, 1979; Brock & Demirdjian, 2010; Danaher, 1984; Mazawi, 2010; Retamel & Aedo-Richmond, 1998; Schmidt, 2007; Smith & Vaux, 2003; Sobe, 2009). Decades of scholarly attention to education policies from the Global North for the Global South demonstrate shared concerns. For example, Berman (1979) found that U.S. foundations and corporations such as Ford, Rockefeller, and the Carnegie Corporation shaped South African education from 1945-1975 in ways that benefited U.S. corporate interests over those of host nations. Danaher (1984) found that during the Reagan administration, U.S. assistance in South Africa worked against counter-apartheid efforts and likely reinforced the white minority government in Pretoria despite the administration's "constructive management" policy being framed to do otherwise. Schmidt (2007) described differences in perception between Western policymakers and Sudanese participants implementing Western policies in an international development program. Within the context of the U.S.-led War on Terror, Mazawi's (2010) meta-analysis of education reforms in the Arab world identified the impact of policies intended to shift cultural values. For example, Iraqi curricula could not contain religious references because it was funded by USAID and therefore had to comply with the U.S. Constitution.

These previous studies point to divergent interests and power differentials between the Global North's education policies and the needs or desires of the Global South. For this study, at one end of the differential sits the United States, one of the most powerful governments in the world, and in some cases a government that has recently had or currently has a military presence as well as surveillance and policing networks in some of the countries where its education programs operate. At the other end of the power differential, we find nonelite students living in countries that are part of the War on Terror. In many cases, these students have or are continuing to experience U.S. occupation and military engagement. This is especially true for U.S.-centric civic and cultural education programs operating in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq where some students are internally displaced peoples whose lives have been profoundly disrupted by war. Notably, *all* students participating in the Access program who are 19 years old or younger at the date of this publication have lived their entire lives in the War on Terror.

People connected to Access's origin story eagerly tell it. Thus far, I've heard the Access story from retired public diplomacy workers, the program's first Moroccan teachers, and students from its first cohort. It is believed that in 2003, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Saad bin Laden, one of Osama

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bin Laden's sons, helped orchestrate an attack against foreign interests in Casablanca. From Sidi Moumen, an impoverished suburb of Casablanca, the cell recruited 14 male youths, 12 of whom killed themselves and 33 other people in coordinated suicide bombings. More than 100 other Moroccans were injured in the blasts that occurred at international sites such as a five-star hotel, a Spanish restaurant, and outside a Jewish community center.

Newspapers following the event documented mass demonstrations from citizens angry about terrorism and the socioeconomic conditions of Sidi Moumen (BBC News, 2003). Citizens of Casablanca responded to the attacks with demonstrations, while U.S. consulate staff responded by creating what would become the English Access Microscholarship Program (U.S. Department of State, 2014). The program's first cohort included 17 male youths from Sidi Moumen. Today, Access provides instruction for nonelite youths aged 13-20 and has operated in more than 85 countries. At least 150,000 youths have participated (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2019). This rapid expansion illustrates the capacity and desire for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs to incorporate education into global counterterrorism efforts.

Access includes in its mission that it will "help participants gain an appreciation for U.S. culture and democratic values through cultural enhancement activities" (U.S. Embassy in Morocco, 2010; English Access Microscholarship Program, n.d.). The Bureau of Counterterrorism highlighted the importance of civic education, such as teaching for democratic values, in its 2008 *Country Reports on Terrorism* when describing the United States' "increased focus on education in predominantly Muslim countries and those with significant Muslim populations.... with a specific emphasis on youth and on developing civic-mindedness in young people" (Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2009). The civic mission of English Access and its intent to teach an appreciation for U.S. culture situates this education program squarely within the United States' policies for public diplomacy and anti-terrorism.

The U.S. government strategically uses programs such as Access to "engage, inform, and influence foreign publics in order to increase understanding of American values, policies, and initiatives" (Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism [S/CT], 2005, p. 58). These programs fall within U.S. goals to endear participants toward market-based democracy and U.S. culture as part of what it calls a "war of ideas" (Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2008, p. 223). Additionally, U.S. public diplomacy's post-9/11 mission has an especially strong focus on reaching "foreign audiences with core policy messages on democracy, tolerance, and the universal values of liberty and freedom," goals that remain "at the center of US efforts to counter extremist rhetoric and disinformation coming from hostile groups" (S/CT, 2005, p. 58). This tactically positions the Access program's curriculum and mission to teach an appreciation for

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“U.S. culture and democratic values through cultural enhancement activities” to shift values in support of U.S. foreign policy objectives in the War on Terror.

Education as Psychic Violence

This study draws on critical theories and concepts to analyze content promoted by the Access program on their social media platform, and it examines problematic interpretations and implementations of the program’s mission through critical concepts such as *educative-psychic violence* and *education as a cultural bomb*.

I often see Nelson Mandela’s (2003) claim that “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” We cannot forget that such a weapon operates *for better or worse*, especially in the context of imperialism, colonization, industrialization, and late capitalism. For example, Franz Fanon (1963/2004) and Amilcar Cabral (1973/1994) observed that education operates as a weapon because it can be used to undermine the culture of colonized peoples, thus weakening resistance to foreign or exploiting powers and creating conditions for political and economic control. Scholars continue to frame education as a weapon (Loewen, 2009; McCafferty-Wright, 2017; von Feigenblatt, et al., 2010) because of its historic and contemporary use to systematically yield compliant and exploitable populations.

Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986/2003) described the ends and mechanisms of education operating as a weapon, explaining that “Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (p. 16). In colonial and imperial contexts, attempts to shift students’ self-definition in relationship to foreign powers occurs daily in classrooms through what wa Thiong’o names the “cultural bomb” (p. 3). Wa Thiong’o’s experiences with education as a cultural bomb included both physical and psychological violence. He writes that “...one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gĩkũyũ in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment – three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks – or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY” (p. 11). Wa Thiong’o’s experiences with weaponized education reverberate throughout the histories of colonized peoples from North America to Australia as a means of cultural assimilation, from forced boarding school enrollment to colonial language education policies.

Education as *psychic violence* is a concept grounded in Franz Fanon’s (1963/2004) work. Fanon, a doctor from Martinique who was stationed in Algeria during its nationalist movement, wrote

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of the psychological impact of the “depth and scope of the wounds inflicted on the colonized during a single day under a colonial regime” (p. 182). These psychological wounds came from a variety of abuses, from physical torture to attacks on the cultural values of colonized peoples.

Components of educative-psychic violence have been described by multiple critical scholars. Tunisian author Albert Memmi (1965/1991) writes that colonizing education robs students of their heritage, as “The memory which is assigned him is certainly not that of his own people. The history which is taught him is not his own.” Students are taught “reference to what he is not” so that what is known is divorced from reality and not fully understood (p. 105). “Values education” through subjects such as social studies can also shift how students define themselves in relationship to exploitative powers. Of this, Fanon (1963/2004) writes, “The supremacy of white values is stated with such violence.... In the colonial context the colonist only quits undermining the colonized once the latter have proclaimed loud and clear that white values reign supreme” (p. 8). Over time, master narratives and values are “inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed,” producing the “condition of moral and political passivity” described by Gramsci (1971, p. 203). This supports conditions ripe for political and economic exploitation.

Education scholars describing the harmful effects of racist curriculum and educative practices have adopted the term *educative-psychic violence*. King and Woodson (2017) write that “The ‘violence’ in educative-psychic violence does not refer to physical actions that injure, harm, or damage persons or property. Instead, it is a type of psychological violence, one that keeps students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds from developing a full sense of their racial, historical, and political identities” (p. 3). Leonardo and Porter (2010) use the term *educative-psychic violence* to describe the harmful effects of conversations about race that diminish or overlook racism. For Leonardo and Porter (2010), curriculum and instructional practices are understood to be educative-psychic violence when they:

- 1) make the values and practices that are often associated with European cultures the standard through which all other cultures are evaluated;
- 2) exclusively represent people of color in oppressed or subordinate positions;
- 3) suggest that all people of color think, behave, and act in the same ways, ignoring complexity and diversity; and
- 4) offer simplistic or superficial accounts of Non-White persons’ history that relegates them to exceptional representatives of the race and within certain fixed historical time periods.

King and Woodson (2017) draw on the work of Brown and Brown (2010) to suggest a fifth dimension based on literature in social studies education:

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- 5) include stories about history or society that make the exploitation and abuse of people of color seem accidental, or that fail to attribute this exploitation and abuse to individuals.

Returning to the work of anticolonial scholars and the dynamics of education as an apparatus of state in foreign affairs, I propose a sixth dimension derived from wa Thiong'o's (1986/2003) concept of the *cultural bomb*. Curriculum and instructional practices are educative-psychic violence when they:

- 6) shift how students define themselves in relationship to a more powerful and/or exploitative apparatus such as a nation state or corporation, so that they identify with it even if counter to their interests.

Education plays a key role in how students learn to identify with exploitative apparatuses. Historically, the imposition of language, culture, and values undermined local knowledge and power as colonized subjects were forced to “pawn some of their own intellectual possessions” and assimilate “the way the colonial bourgeoisie thinks” (Fanon, 1963/2004, p. 13). Though not identical to the colonial and imperial past, the face of colonizing and exploitative education persists in new forms and market powers. Neocolonialism, driven by market and government interests, has been a feature of the colonized world for decades (Sartre, 1964). This includes exploiting workers of previously colonized countries as cheap labor for the global bourgeoisie while simultaneously facilitating the spread of Western culture, corporations, and precarity among working classes (Standing, 2016).

Methods of Inquiry

Data

The units of analysis for this study are public images that depict learning activities. This content has been created and posted to the English Access Microscholarship Headquarters site by its staff. International students and teacher-participants interact with the site, which presently has 41,882 followers. This public digital gallery and feed is displayed in reverse chronology. Typical content includes class activities involving artwork and writing, community service activities, and celebrations.

Analytical Process

When analyzing the content, I use a methodological and analytical bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Kincheloe, et al., 2011) shaped by both the content and context of images on the page. Bricolage supports critical content analysis because through it, I can employ theoretical constructs that consider socio-politically and historically complex

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contexts and “methodological processes as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation.... involving construction and reconstruction, contextual diagnosis, negotiation, and readjustment” (Kincheloe, et al., 2011, p. 168).

I employ concepts from critical traditions as analytical tools. For example, concepts such as educative-psychic violence operate as anti-imperial critiques of education, while incorporating the critical historicity of international relations into my analysis illustrates the ends to which educative-psychic violence works. In this way, I use critical hermeneutical analysis “to understand the historical and social ways that power operates to shape meaning and its lived consequences” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 11). Thus, I draw connections between my data, the policies and cultures that produced it, and the children and educators connected to it, mindful that content on the Access social media site is both a product of and reproducer of power.

Throughout my analysis, I found it helpful to use a visual process described by Rose (2012): Consideration of the site of the imaging (Access programs and the countries in which each photo was produced), the site of the image (the contents of the images themselves), and the site of the audiencing (Facebook and the people who interact with it) with attention to the image as discourse in the context of differential power relations.

Sampling Reports to Establish Broad Themes

I began examining the page by reading several months of content to familiarize myself with the kinds of media featured. While sampling, I created a relational database built around features of the data such as multimedia content, URLs, dates, major themes, and the countries from which images originated. During the initial reading, I also identified broad themes such as *civic education* and *U.S. culture*, and I decided to further investigate the Access program through a larger, purposeful sample of content.

Reading and Analyzing a Purposeful Sample

A purposeful sample is built around a specific goal (Patton, 1990). After the initial sampling, my goal was to better understand how the page communicates examples of the program’s mission to teach an “appreciation for U.S. culture and democratic values” and the ways images are manufactured and curated to communicate relationships between the program and students. By looking at two complete years, I was able to identify patterns associated with repeated holidays and seasonal activities. Creating records for content by pasting images, their URLs, and preliminary notes into the database permitted me to sort files into broad categories such as *U.S.*

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holidays and *civic engagement*. While creating files in the database, I recorded dominant themes and adjusted my interpretation of the data using constant comparative analysis, a continuous and inductive method (Boeije, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). To maintain their contextual relationships, theory, images, and analysis were considered jointly as I regularly moved between examination of individual images and their relationship to the broader set of data.

Collecting and Analyzing Revelatory Cases

Finally, I identified and collected revelatory cases (Yin, 2004) of content containing components of educative-psychic violence. In order to maintain each image's contextual relationships, I examined and interpreted them critically and hermeneutically as individual cases, but also in relationship to others within the site, intercultural contexts, and in the context of U.S. foreign policy. The content that I found most problematic demonstrated educative-psychic violence at the level of individual worth or value and activities that obscure diversity and inequity in the United States. Below, I use data from Access's Facebook page as well as historical and sociocultural contexts to illustrate examples of how public diplomacy can produce educative-psychic violence.

Findings: Educative-Psychic Violence as Building Up, Tearing Down, and Rebuilding

When looking broadly at content, I identified themes related to demonstrations of abundant thankfulness to the Access program, a love for the United States and the English language, and student projections of having a successful future because of participating in the program. These images overwhelmingly communicate a *building up* of the United States, Access, and English through positive messages. The content was often related to U.S. culture with a focus on traditions and holidays while generally ignoring diversity and inequity in the United States. While much content focused on building up structures that fell largely outside of students' lives—a country, program, and language foreign to them—the most troubling content that I describe in this paper features students *tearing down* their own dignity and worth of who they were prior to participating in the program, paired with *rebuilding* their dignity and worth through their participation.

This building up, tearing down, and rebuilding reflects dimensions of educative-psychic violence presented by Leonardo and Porter (2010), King and Woodson (2017), and this paper. This process brings students into a position of defining themselves in relationship to a more powerful and/or exploitative apparatus, in this case a foreign nation state, so that they may identify with it. In a

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much more literal sense of *tearing down*, some content is connected to countries that have been physically damaged by U.S. bombings and/or through economic exploitation in global market systems. These themes of building up, tearing down, and rebuilding can be found throughout the following examples of how a public diplomacy program can produce educative-psychic violence through a deficit orientation to personal identity and through superficial studies of U.S. culture.

Devaluing Personal Identities and Shifting Relationships

Access communicates the mission of helping “participants gain an appreciation for U.S. culture and democratic values through cultural enhancement activities” (U.S. Embassy in Morocco, 2010; English Access Microscholarship Program, n.d.) by publishing photos and accounts of the “cultural enhancement activities” used to accomplish the curricular goals of the mission statement. Much of this content is related to community service, such as picking up rubbish in the community or painting school desks. However, some is more problematic and suggest educative-psychic violence at the level of individual worth or value. For example, the page’s content includes a poem written by a student in Bangladesh. The author self-identifies as a disadvantaged student from Bangladesh, a Muslim majority country. Bangladesh bears the brunt of global market exploitation, and the minimum wage for textile and garment workers, Bangladesh’s largest industrial sector, is equivalent to \$64.01 a month (National Wages and Poverty Commission, 2018). Despite these conditions, the student claims that because of Access, he will become successful. His praise for Access includes positioning himself from a deficit orientation, a reference to what he is not and what he lacks. He tears himself down through claims that he is “fruitless,” a “bottomless” container that cannot hold water, and “baseless.” However, he changes through his participation in Access. He will be successful because Access removes his “darkness,” gets him “developed,” and helps him overcome his “blindness.” Notably, these changes are not just because he participates in Access; this young author describes himself as “an Access.” In his poem, Access is his identity. He has “become an Access” and therefore has become whole.

Other content demonstrates that the poet’s sentiments are not an anomaly but that the program systematically encourages students to communicate their love for it. A series of images show students holding signs created on printer paper with the words “I [heart] the English Access Microscholarship Program because...” across the top. In one photo, a smiling girl from the Philippines holds a sign drawn with colorful markers and decorated with butterflies. It reads, “I [heart] the English Access Microscholarship Program because... It changes me from Nothing to Something.” *Nothing* and *Something* are written in a contrasting color to stand out from the rest of the statement. A smiling boy from the same class holds a different sign: “I [heart] the English

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Access Microscholarship Program because... It teaches us how to SPEAK with DIGNITY and it MOLDS us to be the BEST version of us,” with *DIGNITY* and *BEST* accented in a contrasting color. A boy in Argentina holds a similar sign: “I [heart] the English Access Microscholarship Program because... I learned to be a better person.” I cannot know what role students played in completing the prompt provided. If they did not write on the papers they held, someone else in the program, perhaps an adult, did. It is also possible that students copied words onto their paper. Regardless, a leader, likely a teacher, composed and took pictures and shared them with the program, where Access staff promoted them. Like the poem, these children’s signs communicate a deficit orientation about who they were before participating in the program. They were “nothing” and lacked “dignity.” Access made them “something” and made being the “best version” of themselves possible. In the process of building up Access, they have torn down their intrinsic dignity and worth as *something*.

Poignant examples of shifting students’ relationship to a more powerful and/or exploitative apparatus can be found not just in *how* the program operates, but also *where* and *for whom*. For example, an image from the Me Kong Delta in Vietnam shows a group of students and adults posing for a photo on a stage. Behind them, a large wooden sign depicts two red waving flags: one, the yellow-starred flag of Vietnam, is positioned slightly in front of the other, the yellow hammer and sickle flag of communist parties. Below the flags on this sign, the smiling students in red school uniforms hold a large seal of the U.S. Consulate General for Ho Chi Minh City. In this case, students learn to appreciate U.S. culture through “cultural enhancement activities” in a place where the United States engaged in a destructive war that included blanketing the country with 11-12 million gallons of Agent Orange, directly exposing up to 4.8 million people to its continuing, multigenerational health and environmental effects (Congressional Research Service, 2009). Access succeeds where war failed. In an example from more recent U.S. military presence, an image celebrates the Access graduation of 100 youths who were internally displaced persons in Iraq. These examples illustrate the dramatic power differential between the United States and displaced youths studying the culture of a country that invaded in 2003 and whose military presence continues.

Content that includes students grateful for Access removing their “darkness,” changing them “from nothing to something,” making them “the best version” of themselves, and teaching them to love a country that doesn’t necessarily love them back illustrates the potential for a public diplomacy program such as English Access to achieve its mission through educative-psychic violence by shifting how students define themselves in relationship to a more powerful and/or exploitative apparatus such as a foreign nation state, so that they identify with it. Additionally, pulling children into the neoliberal context of needing to be enough, to become *something*

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through English, re/colonizes them and brings them into a system of “accountability” and accounting for their personal value and worth to a neoliberal system (Ambrosio, 2013). This reverberation from colonizing education has been described by Memmi (1965/1991), who writes that for the colonized, “If he wants to obtain a job, make a place for himself, exist in the community and the world, he must first bow to the language of his masters” (p. 107); furthermore, “Everything in the colonized is deficient” (p. 117). Through the program’s social studies and English language instruction, the neocolonized receive extra help becoming complete, becoming “something,” and speaking “with dignity.”

Appreciation for U.S. Culture through Cultural Enhancement Activities

The notion that students and/or their culture need “enhancement,” that their value can be built up through activities about the United States, can be problematic in and of itself; however, many of the actual activities are also problematic. The U.S. culture delivered through “cultural enhancement activities” include celebrating U.S. holidays as well as consuming U.S. popular media such as songs and movies. Some of the most commonly published activities involve children around the world engaging in patriotic expressions such as waving U.S. flags, creating patriotic posters, and eating red, white, and blue cakes. For example, images from Pakistan include students holding homemade paper U.S. flags, a cake decorated as a U.S. flag, and posters in red, white, and blue reading, “LAND OF THE FREE BECAUSE OF THE BRAVE” and “HAPPY INDEPENDENCE DAY.” Through Access, these youths from Pakistan ironically celebrated the United States’ independence while the U.S. undermined their own country’s sovereignty with a unilateral drone war that has lasted more than a decade. Further, the Pakistani children were taught to celebrate U.S. bravery in a country where a study by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimates that between 172-207 children have been killed by U.S. drone strikes since 2004 (Serle & Purkiss, 2017). Striking parallel images can be found online of Pakistani youths not eating a cake with a U.S. flag but burning a U.S. flag, or youths shrouded for burial because of U.S. drone strikes.

A different holiday, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, holds promise for students to learn about justice, the right to participate in government, and other “democratic values” mentioned in the Access program’s mission statement. However, its thin treatment obscures Dr. King’s actual work toward economic, social, and political justice. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, students watched a video of his “I Have a Dream” speech and then drew pictures of their own dreams. One student’s poster shows that they will “improve upon my country.” However, other students dreamt of wealth and capitalism, drawing pictures of the “most expensive bag” written on top of a glitter-covered blue purse and a man standing in front of high rises in a business suit with U.S. dollar bills floating around him and “#rich_man” written in the corner.

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The 4th of July and Martin Luther King Jr. Day are not the only holidays celebrated by Access students. Other popular activities included on the page show carving pumpkins for Halloween and hosting potlucks for Thanksgiving. It is not possible to tell from the content which Thanksgiving narratives are taught, whether they are centered around the experiences of white settlers or whether they honor the experiences of indigenous peoples. However, Columbus Day is one troubling holiday activity that poignantly illustrates how “cultural enhancement activities” through the Access program can operate as a cultural bomb, distancing students from their own history. For example, in a picture from the Philippines, female students line up by twos in a corridor behind two smiling girls holding a large, decorated poster. The two girls in front are dressed in costumes reminiscent of Disney’s Pocahontas with fringed faux leather mini-skirts, tops, and arm bands. Some appear to wear face paint. The poster is decorated with ruffled trim and reads, “COLUMBUS (NATIVE AMERICAN) DAY.”

The indigenous peoples of the Philippines have a strong anticolonial history; in fact, they managed to kill Magellan as he barely set foot on their shores. However, through Access, these students in the Philippines were led to have a fun costume party for Columbus Day. The activity celebrates opposing identities, honoring a day for Columbus while also happily pretending to be the indigenous peoples who experienced genocide through the resulting colonization. Through this image, we cannot know the full context of how Columbus and colonization were approached by the teacher. However, not only were the English Access site teachers unaware of or uncaring of the tensions in this activity, but so were the U.S. Department of State’s staff when they featured the photo on the Access programs’ social media page.

Studying the heroes and holidays of another culture is hardly a new phenomenon in foreign language education. However, essentializing any culture, in this case “U.S. culture,” can result in narratives that obscure diversity, inequity, and exploitation in the United States (Gorski, 2009, 2016; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006; St. Denis, 2009). In this way, teaching an appreciation for U.S. culture as promoted through the Access program’s mission statement can operate as a cultural bomb by obscuring the experiences of exploited peoples in the United States while also endearing students of the Global South to a thin and inaccurate veneer of U.S. “culture” that hides violence, economic injustices, and intolerance.

In addition to getting students to celebrate a history that is not their own or may have values opposed to their own, the English Access Microscholarship Program encourages students to love a country that doesn’t necessarily love them back. For example, during this research period, the Trump administration cut refugee admissions from a maximum of 110,000 to 18,000. Additionally, the administration banned the citizens of seven countries from traveling to the

Corresponding author: jmwright@missouristate.edu

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United States: Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. The United States also banned refugees from Syria and placed tight restrictions on refugees from Muslim majority countries. The restrictions privileged Christians, effectively excluding Muslims. Even if Muslim Access students taught to love the United States do somehow manage to travel here, they face possible discrimination and hate crimes against immigrants and Muslims, from mosque burnings to verbal and physical assaults. In fact, some U.S. schools have even banned studying Arabic cultures and script because they are “un-American” (McCafferty-Wright, 2015). Teaching students to love a powerful country that not only does not love them back but has a history of harmful engagement with them places students in an abusive relationship created through educative-psychic violence.

Implications for Education in Public Diplomacy

The English Access Microscholarship Program has grown from 17 youths in Sidi Moumen to include at least 150,000 participants and has operated in more than 85 countries around the world. Since the beginning, its mission has been to endear nonelite youths to the United States, and its appearance in the Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism’s annual reports to Congress signals the program’s purpose to battle a war of ideas within the broader War on Terror (McCafferty-Wright, 2017). Helping participants “gain an appreciation for U.S. culture and democratic values” through “cultural enhancement activities” positions the English Access Microscholarship Program to shift how nonelite students define themselves in relationship to the United States through social studies and English language instruction.

Educative-psychic violence and the use of education as a cultural bomb through the celebrations of U.S. heroes and holidays are apparent. However, despite a rise in youth civic engagement throughout North Africa and the Middle East (Herrera, 2012, 2014), Access content does not emphasize the portion of the mission statement regarding teaching an appreciation for democratic values. This thin veneer of social studies narratives and lack of critical guidance on civic education and democratic values begs the question of whether this widespread program is poorly designed to accomplish its goals or whether the English Access Microscholarship Program is operating exactly as intended.

Through fieldwork in Access programs, I know there are many talented teachers making pedagogical decisions that honor and respect the dignity of their students and the values they bring to class with them. I can also attest that some Foreign Service Officers, guest speakers, NGOs, and TESOL specialists feel that their work with the English Access program is bringing the world “drop by drop” (as one Foreign Service Officer put it) closer to world peace. Additionally, students who participate in Access see it as a great honor and more fun and engaging than their

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traditional classrooms. However, the notion that we are only helping underprivileged youths through this program becomes so ingrained as common sense that we may fail to recognize cultural imperialism and educative-psychic violence attached to the programmatic goals of “appreciation for U.S. culture and democratic values.”

If public diplomacy policy makers and shapers do truly wish to create a more peaceful world through education, they can create programs with missions less primed to produce cultural bombs and educative-psychic violence. Some public diplomacy programs from the United States and Great Britain are already operating with missions rather different from teaching “an appreciation for U.S. culture and democratic values.” For example, the *Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms* program and the British Council’s *Connecting Classrooms* program teach for global understanding and intercultural cooperation, and in the process provide teachers and classrooms with opportunities to participate in meaningful, collaborative projects with students around the globe.

It is also possible for the English Access Microscholarship Program to shift its own mission toward intercultural cooperation and understanding, and in the process partner with U.S. schools to also meet an urgent need in the United States of teaching for global understanding. As we can see from the examples provided in this paper, reforming Access would require professional development in culturally sustaining education, moving away from a deficit orientation to students, their skills, and cultures. This would include moving from “cultural enhancement activities” and toward learning *through* students’ communities and cultures. Although some Access teachers already excel at honoring the cultures of their students and operate outside of or against the Access program’s mission statement, the content promoted by Access suggests that there is no guiding framework to steer staff away from supporting educative-psychic violence and toward culturally sustaining education.

This paper demonstrates that the mission and implementation of the English Access Microscholarship Program can result in education being used as a cultural bomb and educative-psychic violence. Whether intentionally or not, the program as it stands has produced and even celebrated some unacceptable outcomes. The will and capacity to rapidly and widely expand and operate the program through the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations, as well as regular reference to it in counterterrorism reports, suggests that the program will continue. This requires attention from education scholars and a willingness to engage with policymakers on the use of education within Access and other public diplomacy programs.

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Corresponding author: jmwright@missouristate.edu

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About the Author:

Jennice McCafferty-Wright is an Assistant Professor at Missouri State University where she teaches courses in social studies methods and theory.

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