

ABSTRACT

JORDAN, JASON THOMAS. A General Qualitative Study of the Ethical Considerations on Neoliberal Policies for Public School Principals: Principals' Resistance Against Neoliberal Policies. (Under the direction of Dr. Lisa Bass).

The discourses and practices of neoliberalism have been at work on and in schools in the United States for decades. As the U.S. educational system is increasingly influenced by neoliberal policies, many teachers and educational leaders have found themselves in precarious professional situations, forced to navigate between damaging neoliberal agendas while upholding their moral and ethical obligations to always put the interests of their students first. The purpose of the study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, negotiate professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies. This study relied on data collected through in-depth interviews in order to examine eight Principals' perceptions and experiences with resistance against policies associated with neoliberalism such as high stakes testing, performance pay, school choice, and teacher evaluations. Results from this study indicated five themes of criticism corresponded with the ethics of critique, including (a) identified concerns, (b) standardized testing, (c) school choice, (d) performance pay, and (e) achievement gaps. Five themes aligned with the ethics of profession, including (a) teacher evaluations, (b) attitudes toward school grades, (c) attitudes toward standardized test results, (d) resistance, and (e) accountability. A final theme to emerge, which did not directly relate to the ethics of critique or profession, but was certainly integral to this study, was *lack of action*. This study also provides several practical and theoretical implications, recommendations for practice, and a discussion of how this study advanced theory.

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A General Qualitative Study of the Ethical Considerations on Neoliberal
Policies for Public School Principals: Principals'
Resistance Against Neoliberal Policies

by
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving wife, Julia, my children, Chloe and William, and my grandparents, Billy and Sandra Williams.

BIOGRAPHY

Jason Thomas Jordan was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina. After graduating from South View High School, he received his B.M. in Music Education from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a M.M. in Music Performance from Appalachian State University.

Jason began his career in Cumberland County Schools as the Director of Bands at Terry Sanford High School for 7 years. He later participated in the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program and earned his M.S.A. in School Administration from Fayetteville State University. His public school teaching experience, coupled with his degree, led him to pursue a doctorate at NC State University.

Jason resides in Fayetteville, with his wife, Julia, and children, Chloe and William. He enjoys being outdoors, reading, and spending time with family.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism is a dominant ideology that has become a hot topic in political and academic debates (Thorsen, 2009). As Chomsky (1999) explained, *neoliberalism* often describes the spread of capitalism and consumerism, as well as the destruction of the welfare state. *Neoliberalism*, or “new liberalism,” suggests the replacement of traditional liberalism with this new form of liberalism in which power and wealth are increasingly in the hands of large corporations and the global elite (Thorsen, 2009). Those critical of neoliberalism often argue that it has replaced the Keynesian economics that dominated the first few decades after World War II (Palley, 2005).

Neoliberal policies are associated with an economic, rational, managerial, and quantitative rhetoric that inserts science and statistical measurement into the discourse of state and federal governments, including educational departments and policies. Consequently, neoliberalism’s permeation into U.S. educational policy has led to the development and adoption of high-stakes testing and teacher evaluation, which educational institutions rely on to make financial requests, report progress, and justify the use of funds through quantitative “evidence.” In educational settings, such tests are given to students to evaluate their understanding of concepts that have been pre-determined as relevant and important knowledge by governments or private firms tasked with determining what constitutes important knowledge (Down & Smyth, 2012).

Recent educational reform related to the push toward a neoliberal agenda has resulted in an increase in top-down, high-stakes, accountability measures (Lipman, 2015). In addition, an escalation occurred alongside the systemic collection and storage of disaggregated test data, which emphasized the decades-long intractable gap between the academic performance of

Asian/White and Black/Latino children (Horsford, 2017). These policies, in combination with outdated and punitive funding formulas, have continued to drive educational segregation (Du Bois, 1935; Horsford, 2011, 2017; Horsford & Grosland, 2013; Noguera, 2008) and the privatization of education (Klees, 2017), both of which represent profound disservices to many children in the U.S. public school system.

As the U.S. educational system is increasingly influenced by neoliberal policies, many teachers and educational leaders have found themselves in precarious professional situations, forced to navigate between damaging neoliberal agendas while upholding their moral and ethical obligations to always put the interests of their students first. While research indicates that education professionals have a strong sense of moral and ethical duty to their students, and a desire for educational reform (Keefe-Perry, 2016), little is known about principals' perceptions and experiences with these policies – or how they resist policies that conflict with their personal moral imperatives. Effective resistance to entrenched power always comes with risk. The current study employed a general qualitative design to explore how public school principals resist neoliberal policies in education. This chapter provides an introduction to the study, beginning with a discussion of the background of the problem. The problem statement, study purpose, research question, and framework are detailed. The study's nature, key terms, significance, assumptions, and limitations are also addressed.

Background and Context

Standardized test results are used as a benchmark to determine teacher competence; teachers and schools are held accountable and school funding is cut if test results are deemed unacceptable. The process of using high-stakes testing to make funding decisions fosters job insecurity and precludes the autonomy teachers need to effectively teach (Lundström, 2015). As

Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda (2016) explained, many of America's educational leaders "...are equally frustrated by the pressures of high-stakes testing, loss of curricular influence, labor struggles, changes in state standards, teacher evaluation systems, and many other educational issues" (p. 165) – most of which are rooted in neoliberalism. While it is common for educators to express their dissatisfaction toward the current educational system to co-workers, such latent dissent does little to change the system (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016). Although the process of standardized testing appears in some ways to be "scientific" and therefore a way of revealing what is "true" about teachers and students, it is neither. The ability to measure a thing or perform statistical analysis on a set of results does not reveal truths about the effectiveness of a teacher, the ability of students to learn and grow, or the educational value of the concepts being taught and tested (Kamin, as cited in Eysenck & Kamin, 1986).

In order to act in ways that resist neoliberal educational policies, educators must fully recognize the subjective nature of truth and its relationship to power —material power and derivative political power (Foucault, 2013; Samier, 2008). Most importantly a truth constructed in the absence of an ethical pulse is invalid under our governance model. In addition, such truths have the power to erode and reduce the self-knowledge and personal identity of those forced to operate under and enforce policies, mandates, and mission statements based on a neoliberal agenda (Edling & Frelin, 2013; Lundström, 2015).

Effective resistance to neoliberal educational policies will require a willingness on the part of educators and leaders to push back against the national and global economic engines of capitalism. Ironically, it will also require them to uphold the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) – the ethical framework created by the same government that enforces a neoliberal educational agenda

in direct opposition with those ethical standards. Perhaps, ethical leadership – truly ethical leadership that is bold enough to resist the neoliberal agenda – is the antidote to failures of the current educational system.

Educational leaders will need to challenge the normative discourse of neoliberalism. Using the ethics of critique and profession, educational leaders must embrace and enforce a socially-just definition of education that is transformative and fosters equality. In recent years, great changes have occurred in the ways American’s express dissent. Among educators and educational leaders, “speaking out against problematic educational policies and practices, as well as offering up innovative suggestions for improvement, can ensure that those policies and practices work in the best interests of children, educators, and democracy” (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016, p. 166). Without dissent and change, neoliberal language may continue to frame the problems that impede efforts to close achievement gaps and produce more equal outcomes for all students.

Problem Statement

The problem of this study centered on the disservice of neoliberal educational policies to students, schools, teachers, and education as a whole. As the power of local elected officials and teachers’ unions has been systematically stripped, educational leaders stand greater risks for pushing back against neoliberal educational policies. Yet, research indicates that education professionals have a strong sense of moral and ethical duty to their students, and desire educational reform (Keefe-Perry, 2016).

While plenty of research exists on the potential detriments of neoliberal educational policies (Brickner, 2017; Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016; Wilkins, 2015), and some researchers have examined the dissent behaviors that teachers have leveraged to push back against policies

they believe hurt their students (Özdemir, 2011), little is known about how educational leaders may dissent against such policies. Thus, the aim of the current study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, exercised professional resistance to neoliberal educational policies. Findings from this study addressed an important gap in the literature and shine a light on the strategies that principals use to push back against educational policies that do not align with their personal ethics. Educators and educational leaders are essential players in educational reform against the neoliberalism; thus, understanding if and how principals resist these policies may be helpful in advancing the cause against the neoliberal policies that have permeated U.S. schools.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, negotiated professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies. The study followed a general qualitative design to examine participants' perceptions and experiences with resistance against such policies. Findings addressed a gap in the literature and produced preliminary data on the perceptions of principals regarding their willingness to engage in resistance against neoliberalism.

Research Question

The following essential question guided this study: Based on the perceptions and experiences of public school principals, how do the ethics of critique and profession guide decisions regarding neoliberal educational policies?

Conceptual Framework

The framework for the study was based on two ethical constructs: the ethics of critique and the ethics of profession. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) explained that while the ethics of

critique is designed to raise questions concerning the unfair treatment of diverse groups in society, the ethics of profession is designed to question inequities fostered by educational policies, and how they affect the evolving needs of students. Together, these two ethical perspectives support the best interests of children and foster resistance to neoliberal educational policies that benefit some and disadvantage others. Each of these ethical perspectives is discussed below in context of the current research.

Ethics of Critique

The ethics of critique is based on critical theory, which focuses on social class and inequalities. A major argument of critical theorists is that schools reproduce the inequities present in society (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Educators who work from a critical theory perspective seek to give voice to the silenced.

The ethics of critique is a perspective that involves the questioning of policies and laws, recognizing inequities based on class, race, and gender (Norberg & Johansson, 2007). Giroux (2012) defined this ethic as one informed by passion and principle, and which helps individuals understand and recognize freedom and authoritarianism while using knowledge to take constructive action. According to Norberg and Johansson (2007), educational leaders taking this ethical standpoint may ask who creates educational policies and standards, and who benefits from their enforcement. Further, educational leaders who employ the ethics critique may question where power is delegated under educational policies, and whose voices are silenced by them. As Norberg and Johansson (2007) explained, “Ethics of critique lead school leaders to question whether all children, regardless of class, race, and gender, have the same opportunity to grow, learn, and achieve” (p. 281). The ethics of critique emphasizes the ways individuals’ internal values affect their behaviors.

When schools disproportionately benefit some social groups and fail others, through the inequitable distribution of resources and application of rules (Freire, 1970; Furman, 2004; Giroux, 2010), school administrators are forced to confront moral issues through the ethics of critique. This ethical perspective challenges the status quo by involving social discourse, which provides a voice to the marginalized and exposes social inequities (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). From the ethics of critique, school administrators may become aware of social inequities propagated by educational policies and work on pursuing measures to correct such inequities (Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). The ethics of critique forces school administrators to rethink, redefine, and reframe concepts such as privilege, power, culture, and social injustice.

Ethics of Profession

According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005), the core of the ethics of profession is employing thoughtful, ethical decisions that emphasize the needs and interests of students. Sladek (2017) explained that educational leaders “must be equipped to take individual responsibility for thinking through defensible positions on difficult ethical questions” (p. 19). According to the ethics of profession, the best interests of the students should be the main drivers of professional decisions in educational settings. As Sladek (2017) reasoned, the ethics of profession is steeped in leaders’ moral obligations to make decisions that benefit students, which may mean pushing back against a neoliberal agenda.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) noted that the ethics of profession often refers to codes, rules, and principles that align with traditional concepts of justice, but also accounts for other paradigms such as professional judgment and decision-making. Shapiro and Stefkovich called for school leaders to consider professional codes, personal ethical principles, and professional

standards to create a dynamic model that places the interests of students at the forefront of the education profession (Begley & Stefkovich, 2007; Stefkovich, 2006; Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004).

Among educational leaders, the overarching goal of the ethics of profession pertains to leaders' decision-making processes, particularly for school principals in how they make ethical decisions in their work. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) explained, "In this era, schools have been asked to shoulder many of the responsibilities of society. This trend does not look as if it will cease and it probably will grow. With this trend come more paradoxes and dilemmas" (p. 23). This trend in educational policies includes the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), high-stakes testing, and school reform. The ethics of profession expects:

Leaders to formulate and examine their own professional codes of ethics in light of individual personal codes of ethics, as well as standards set forth by the profession, and then calls on them to place students at the center of the ethical decision-making process. (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 23).

Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) ethics of profession encourages administrators to ask questions within the critique paradigm, while moving beyond those questions to ask what is in the best interests of the students, especially in highly diverse populations (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Shapiro and Stefovich's ethics of critique and profession provided a valuable lens through which to explore if and how principals exercised professional resist against neoliberal educational policies.

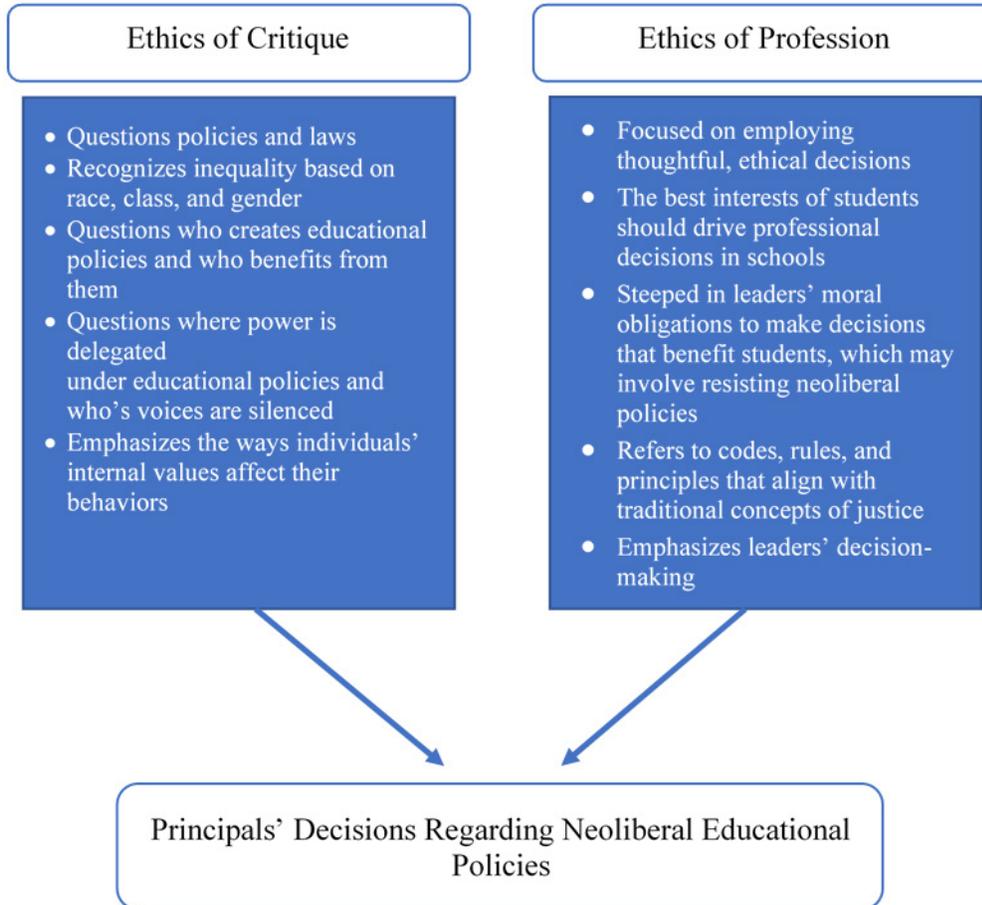


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Nature of the Study

The nature of the study is qualitative and it followed a general qualitative design. A qualitative method was selected because the aim of the study is to explore participants' perceptions and experiences regarding neoliberal educational policies. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research is appropriate for exploring phenomena and the meanings that people assign to them. Through qualitative investigation, researchers can consider a number of dimensions that may influence informants' experiences of phenomena (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

A qualitative method of study is also appropriate when trying to understand the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2005). Cooper and Schindler (2003) referred to in-depth

conversational interviewing as an appropriate approach in exploratory investigation in qualitative research. Creswell (2005) and Cooper and Schindler confirmed the appropriateness of using semi-structured interviews in a qualitative study to allow the generation of responses from the participants rather than using more structured formats. In contrast to qualitative research methods, quantitative methods are focused on the examination of relationships between variables. Quantitative research is positivist, with a focus on uncovering objective truths (Sale, Lohfeld, & Brazil, 2002). Quantitative data collection methods often include fixed-response surveys and randomization (Sale et al., 2002). Because the aim of this study was not to quantitatively assess relationships between variables or test for causation, a quantitative method was not selected.

A number of qualitative designs were considered for this project, including case study, narrative analysis, phenomenology, and a general qualitative design. Case study is particularly useful when researchers wish to examine phenomena via multiple data sources. (Yin, 2009). Using multiple data sources allows researchers to perform triangulation and examine phenomena holistically, through multiple lenses. Because interviews were the only source of data examined in the current research, a case study design was not selected.

Narrative analysis was also reviewed as a potential design. According to Corbin and Strauss (2007), narrative analysis is employed to explore individuals' experiences of phenomena in specific contexts. Narrative analysis is designed to explore the chronological experiences of events or circumstances. Researchers use participants' personal accounts of these histories and experiences to craft narratives that shed new light on study phenomena. The aim of the current research was not to craft a narrative based on personal stories, but to explore the specific

resistance behaviors that principals employ, based on their perceptions and experiences; thus, narrative analysis was not selected.

A phenomenological design was also considered. According to Tracy (2013), phenomenology is useful for examining individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon. Phenomenological researchers use interviews to uncover respondents' thoughts, feelings, and emotions to better understand the details surrounding phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology embraces the subjectivity of individuals' experiences; thus, it does not aim to objectively define experiences, but to examine them from the perceptions of those who have firsthand experience with them. Although the aim of this research was to explore resistance, based on respondents' personal perceptions and experiences, a phenomenological design was not quite aligned with this research.

Upon careful consideration, the researcher selected a general qualitative design for the project. This design allowed the researcher to examine participants' perceptions and lived experiences with resistance against neoliberal policies. According to Merriam (1988), general qualitative research allows researchers to understand phenomena, processes, or perspectives of individuals involved with a phenomenon. A generic approach to qualitative research allowed the researcher to explore the study phenomenon without design constraints. The target population consisted of 82 public school principals who currently lead public schools in a single school district located in North Carolina. This school district was selected because of its diverse student population and the researcher's access to the sample. A criterion-based purposive sampling strategy was used to locate eight principals to participate in the current research. Data were collected via semistructured interviews that lasted approximately 1 hour. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Role of the Researcher

It is important to acknowledge the researcher's role in this investigation, along with personal experiences and background that may have an unavoidable influence on the interpretation of study data. The researcher is a career educator with over 15 years in public education and a vested interest in helping all students be successful. His core belief is that public education is a cornerstone of American democracy, that educators and leaders have an obligation to shape education, and that principals must create visions and goals for schools. Firsthand, the researcher has observed the dangers and harms that neoliberal educational policies can have on students. The researcher's experience as an administrator informed and assisted him during this investigation. Because he served as a current administrator in the study site district, he was familiar with the culture of the district. His experience helped him accurately capture and interpret interview data.

Significance of Study

There is a crisis in public education in the United States and the world today. Neoliberalism has been disassembling the public education system since the early 1980s. While neoliberal education policy lacks a social ethic, teachers and educational leaders do not; they are aware of the problems with the existing educational system and many desire to challenge it. However, little is known about how educational leaders may resist educational policies that do not align with their systems of ethics and moral obligations to the best interests of their students. If educational leaders did resist current policies, the resistance would likely be both powerful and risky. Thus, this study was significant in that it addressed a gap in the literature and provided preliminary data on how principals resist neoliberal educational policies they believe are harmful to students.

Assumptions

A number of assumptions are inherent to the research. First, it was assumed that the struggle against neoliberalism in education is a struggle for the control of discourse—of what is considered “truth” about education in the United States. Because neoliberalism pervades all social institutions, its effects on the educational system cannot be addressed separate from the damage manifest in the larger society. It was also assumed that resistance to neoliberal policy is futile unless those resisting are willing to take risks. Risk-taking is more palatable in environments where others are supportive and willing to take risks, especially leaders. People are also more likely to take risks via resistance when the cause aligns with their personal values, and resisting affirms their personal ethics and self-identity. It was assumed that leaders are more likely to resist policies when the resistance behavior is ethically-motivated, and when they have support from their superiors (in the case of the current research, superintendents and educational policymakers). Finally, the researcher assumed that all participants possessed the experience required to answer interview questions, and that they responded open and honestly.

Delimitations

Several delimiting factors existed in this study, including the geographic location of participants, sample size, the theoretical framework, and the study design. Another important delimitation was the researcher’s focus on principals, rather than other educational leaders, policymakers, or teachers. The study was also limited by sample of eight principals located in a single school district in North Carolina. Principals from other geographic locations, or those who work at private or charter schools, may have completely different experiences with resistance. Similarly, the support of superiors and co-workers may influence one’s willingness to engage in professional resistance; thus, principals from other school districts who work under

other superintendents, may exercise resistance to a lesser or greater extent, depending on superintendent support.

Key Terms

Dissent. As Kassing (2002) explained, dissent is a type of employee voice “that involves the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices and policies” (p. 189).

Neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a system of government characterized by the “removal of the locus of power from the knowledge of practicing professionals to auditors, policy-makers, and statisticians” (Davies, 2003, p. 91).

Neoliberal education reform. Neoliberal education reform is that which reflects the neoliberal agenda of privatization, choice, accountability, resistance to public spending, and hostility toward unions (Brickner, 2017). According to Brickner (2017), the three main pillars of neoliberal education reform include choice, competition, and accountability. Because neoliberal education reform values competition, a great emphasis is placed on performance evaluations for teachers and students. Accordingly, this type of educational reform has fostered a massive increase in standardized testing (to measure student and teacher performance) and shifted policy-making and power toward gubernatorial offices and away from elected school board officials (Brickner, 2017).

Professional dissent. Also referred to as organizational dissent, professional dissent is a basic indicator of democracy and usually has two parts, including (a) disagreement with organizational practices and (b) articulation of those disagreements (Ozdemir, 2011). Kassing (2002) defined organizational dissent as a “particular form of employee voice that involves the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices and

policies” (p. 189). Factors that may trigger professional dissent include poor treatment of employees, organizational changes, role responsibilities, ethics, lack of resources, performance evaluations, and the desire to prevent harm (Ozdemir, 2011). Dissent can also result from managerial decisions that are unethical or illegal (Dagh, 2017). Professional dissent may be expressed in a number of ways, such as whistle-blowing, articulating dissent, latent dissent, or displaced dissent (Ozdemir, 2011).

Summary

Neoliberal educational policies have left a profound mark on the U.S. educational system, to the disservice of many students, teachers, educational leaders, and schools. The neoliberal agenda fosters competition and is heavily focused on determining which policies and characteristics allow schools to come out on top. Educational leaders and teachers who wish to push back against the neoliberal agenda and foster valuable educational reform, stand punitive risks. Educational leaders are often forced to find balance between their personal ethics and the policies they are tasked with obeying and enforcing, even if those policies fail to align with their professional and personal morals and ethics. While research exists on the potential detriments of neoliberal educational policies (Brickner, 2017; Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016; Wilkins, 2015), little is known about how educational leaders may resist such policies. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, exercised professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies.

This chapter provided an introduction to the project, including a background to the study, and details regarding the problem, purpose, research question, and framework. The nature of the study was briefly described and will be detailed more fully in Chapter 3. Study significance, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations were also discussed. The following chapter contains

a review and synthesis of the existing research related to educational policy, educational leadership, and neoliberalism.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose this study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, resisted neoliberal educational policies. While plenty of research exists on the potential detriments of neoliberal educational policies (Brickner, 2017; Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016; Wilkins, 2015), and some researchers have examined the resistance behaviors that teachers have leveraged to push back against policies they believe hurt their students (Özdemir, 2011), little is known about how educational leaders may resistance against such policies. This chapter helps to contextualize the current investigation via an in-depth review of the existing research related to neoliberalism, educational policy, and educator resistance.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberal policies are associated with an economic, rational, managerial, and quantitative rhetoric that inserts science and statistical measurement into the discourse of state and federal governments. Consequently, institutions will make requests, report progress, and justify their use of funds through mathematical language that analyzes the effectiveness of teaching and learning through the tabulated results of standardized tests. In educational settings, such tests are given to students to evaluate their understanding of concepts that have been pre-determined as relevant and important knowledge by governments or private firms tasked with determining what constitutes important knowledge (Down & Smyth, 2012).

Neoliberalism arose in the 1970s in response to the perceived excess reach of governmental regulation and market intervention during the post-World War II (WWII) period. Market regulation during this period was informed by Keynesian economic theory, in which the government was responsible for market stabilization and protecting citizens from the negative

effects of market fluctuations (Kotz, 2015). During this period, public and private sectors worked together. The state was responsible for the provision and oversight of public goods, including transportation infrastructure, power, telecommunications, sanitation, water, and public education. Public goods and services were viewed as beneficial to individuals and contributed to increasing business profitability (Kotz, 2015). The government's role during the post-WWII era included environmental oversight and stewardship, the reduction of income inequalities, and market stabilization and regulation (Kotz, 2015).

The OPEC oil embargo of 1973 plunged Western economies into crisis. For the first time since WWII, inflation rose and persisted in concert with rising unemployment rates and prices (Centeno & Cohen, 2012). During the 1970s, growth rates in Western economies fell as unemployment rates rose to post-war record levels. The rise of inflation coincident with the rise in unemployment was inconsistent with Keynesian theory, which predicted an inverse relationship between inflation and unemployment (Centeno & Cohen, 2012).

Financial insecurity and a number of other issues related to the social and political climate of the late 1970s led to increasing discontent with government and perceptions that the Keynesian economic model was unstable and unsustainable. This discontent fostered in a paradigm shift toward neoliberalism (Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Kotz, 2015). Neoliberalism promotes individual freedom and choice, tasking individuals with responsibility for their own well-being. Neoliberalists believe that markets operate best when unencumbered by regulation; that free markets foster individual choice, which propels the economy (Kotz, 2015). The state is seen as a threat to the free market and a drain on the liberties and property of hard-working individuals (Kotz, 2015).

Despite rhetoric of the benefits of neoliberalism, there is certainly a dark side. Chomsky (1999) argued that the consequences of neoliberal policies are consistently destructive wherever they are implemented across the globe. Neoliberalist policies have created significant rises in social and economic inequalities— leaving people of the poorest nations struggling to survive against crushing poverty. Throughout the world, the environment is under assault as resources are pillaged to meet the demands of profit-driven multi-nationals (Chomsky, 1999). It is also through neoliberalism that an unregulated global economy fluctuates wildly, generating economic insecurity and market instability (Kotz, 2015).

Through the climate generated by neoliberal policies, income inequality has spiked to unprecedented levels. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that income levels among the top 0.1% of Americans increased by 76.2% between 2002 and 2012 (Saez, as cited in Berkman, Kawachi & Glymour, 2014). In contrast, income levels for the bottom 90% of Americans dropped by 10.7% during this same period. U.S. income disparities are higher than ever (Saez, as cited in Berkman et al., 2014). Meanwhile, the relentless drive of the elite toward privatization, capitalization, and control of public resources, public spaces, and public discourse continues (Abendroth & Porfilio, 2015).

Federal Intervention in Education

The United States is unique in that the educational system was not originally under control of the federal government (Bogotch, 2014). Because the U.S. Constitution does not address the administration of education, the establishment and implementation of educational policy was left to individual states, as stipulated under article 10. Thus, the federal government had limited power over public education (Policy-ED.gov, 2018). States acted in conjunction with local school districts to set policies for K-12 schools. In terms of educational policy, state

and local authorities remained unchallenged by the federal government until Arkansas Governor, Orval Fabus, refused to comply with the 1954 Supreme Court Decision in *Brown v Board of Education*, which called for racial desegregation in public schools (Jeynes, 2007). Governor Fabus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to block a small group of Black students from entering Little Rock High School, where they had been enrolled in the fall of 1957.

On September 24, 1957 President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed executive order 10730, which placed the Arkansas Guard under Federal control (Frye, 2007). The world watched as nine Black children made history when they crossed the threshold of Little Rock High School under the protection of 1000 elite paratroopers from the 327th Airborne Battle Group of the 101st Airborne Division (Frye, 2007). Eisenhower's response to the situation marked one of the finest moments in American history; however, it also opened the door for subsequent legislation designed to increase federal control over educational policy (Bogotch, 2014; Jeynes, 2007). Following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Federal government was faced with the reality that 200 years of state and local control over educational policy had failed to produce an educational system that provided equal opportunity for all students (Bogotch, 2014).

Increasing Federal Power

The Department of Education (DOE) was elevated to a Cabinet-level agency in 1980 (Federal Role in Education, 2018). Although the majority of K-12 funding (98% during the 2012-2013 school year) comes from non-federal sources, federal funding through the DOE helps offset costs associated with educating the United State's 50 million students (across 98,000 public and 32,000 private elementary and secondary schools) throughout the nation's 18,000 school districts (Federal Role in Education, 2018). According to Carpenter and Brewer (2012), the federal government began to view education as an answer to the growing problem of

U.S. generational poverty during the 1970s and 1980s. The idea that education was the best means for eliminating poverty was politically expedient; it was a much more universally palatable approach to the problem than solutions that involved wealth redistribution (Carpenter & Brewer, 2012).

At the beginning of the 21st Century, the federal government adopted a number of top-down, hierarchal policies involving accountability measures. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT), and Common Core Curricula were all designed to facilitate the goal of providing equal education to all students (Bogotch, 2014). In 2001, educational reform measures were marked by President George W. Bush's revision and reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which was civil rights legislation signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965. At that time, the ESEA had been reauthorized every 5 years since its enactment (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 - Social Welfare History Project, 2017). The original law addressed the need for quality and equality in elementary and secondary education, and was part of Johnson's *War on Poverty*. The ESEA, which emphasized high standards and accountability, was a federal commitment to providing all U.S. children with equal access to high quality primary and secondary education. (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 - Social Welfare History Project, 2017).

The Bush reauthorization of ESEA, entitled The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, greatly expanded the role of the federal government in education, especially in terms of oversight. Requirements of NCLB included holding schools accountable for student achievement based on the disaggregation of test result data, to identify achievement differences between subgroups of students along racial, ethnic, economic, special needs, and language proficiency strata (Fusarelli, 2004). The academic literature reflects a long and contentious

debate among scientists, psychologists, and educators regarding the validity of associating racial gaps with heritable intelligence (Burt, 1951, 1958; Eysenck & Kamin, 1986; Herrnstein & Murray, 2010). Such arguments have been largely dismissed by the academic community as meritless racism and eugenics (Bodmer & Cavalli-Sforz 1970; The Rushton-Suzuki debate on race, 1989; American Psychological Association, as cited in Eysenck & Kamin, 1986).

Because the federal government experienced limited success implementing the centralized policies established by President Bush and expanded by President Obama, it eventually returned policymaking authority to state and local governments (McGuinn, 2016). However, the federal government has retained control over accountability systems tied to federal funding of schools through the DOE (Bogotch, 2014; Carpenter & Brewer, 2012). The federal incursion into educational administration, which escalated during desegregation efforts of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the reform period of the 1980s, culminated in the Obama Administration's use of unilateral executive branch action to overcome congressional gridlock on educational policy reform. Although it was driven by the failure of NCLB to significantly achievement close gaps (Delpit, 2012; Horsford, 2017; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Payne, 2008), President Obama's approach to educational reform through Executive Branch action was viewed by many in Congress as overreach (McGuinn, 2016). Members of Congress from both sides of the aisle accused the administration of legislating education from the executive branch—pointing out that doing so was in violation of the separation of powers (McGuinn, 2016).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Eight years after NCLB expired in 2007, the Obama Administration's executive approach to reform eventually gave way to a bipartisan bill reauthorizing ESEA in the form of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; McGuinn, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The

ESSA rolled back some of the explicit federal power wielded by the Bush and Obama Administrations. At the same time, ESSA sanctioned the expansion of states' roles in educational reform over that of local governments, which were traditionally at the forefront of administering U.S. educational policy (Jacobsen & Saultz, 2011; McGuinn, 2016).

Regardless of any dampening of federal power created by ESSA, the period between 2001 and 2018 witnessed the reframing of educational policy and discourse (Jacobsen & Saultz, 2011). Education is no longer considered a public good; debate as to whether education is indeed a public good or whether it is a private commodity continues. The eventual outcome of this ongoing debate may have significant tangible, intangible, and unintended consequences for the well-being of Americans and society. The debate continues to fracture the political concert of U.S. citizens along one of our country's foundational tenants—that America is a classless society operating as a meritocracy (Scheer, 2011; Stiglitz & Doyle, 2011).

Racial Achievement Gap

During the 8 years between the expiration of the NCLB and the enactment of the ESSA, there was an increase in top-down, high-stakes, accountability measures (Lipman, 2015). In addition, an escalation occurred in the systemic collection and storage of disaggregated test data, which emphasized the decades-long intractable gap between the performance for Asians/Whites and Blacks/Latino children (Horsford, 2017). These policies, in combination with outdated and punitive funding formulas, have continued to drive educational segregation while normalizing a destructive deficit narrative of Black intellectual inferiority (Du Bois, 1935; Horsford, 2011, 2017; Horsford & Grosland, 2013; Noguera, 2008).

The persistence of achievement gaps that identified discrepancies attributed to race, coupled with a colorblind paradigm that fails to acknowledge systemic institutional racism,

provided an environment ripe for the further promotion of neoliberal market solutions to close those gaps. These *solutions* included privatization that manifested in the rapid proliferation of charter schools, mostly in poor and minority communities (Horsford, 2017; Lipman, 2015). In addition, there has been an acceleration of experimental (i.e., untested) educational reform interventions in poor communities driven by venture philanthropy (La Times Editorial Board, 2016; Saltman, 2009).

The less tangible results of neoliberal educational policy presents in the relentless violence perpetrated on children (regardless of intent) that results from normalizing the false idea that “race” is biological (Sussman, 2014), asserting that America has moved beyond racism (no more excuses) (Reed & Lewis, 2009), and from the underlying discourse of deficit often applied to minority and poor children to explain the results of ability measures correlated to the initial false premise of race (Dumas, 2015; Zirkel & Pollack, 2016). Indeed, rerouting the flow of public tax dollars from the public education model to the private or public-private models requires narratives of deficit to describe poor, minority, and marginalized students (Dumas, 2015; Scott, 2011). The transfer of wealth from the public to the private domain through educational funding mechanisms also requires celebrating the false narrative of America as a classless meritocracy (Horsford, 2017; Isenberg, 2016). The effectiveness of this discourse has made it possible for public money marked for education to be funnelled into the private bank accounts of the elite and their corporations and organizations.

The idea of the racial achievement gap also made possible President Donald J. Trump’s proclamation that “Education is the civil rights issue of our time (Rice, 2017). Trump uttered this phrase of his predecessors in an address to the joint sessions of Congress on February 28, 2017; he went on to encourage lawmakers to *continue* pushing for bills funding school choice for

disadvantaged youth, largely in the form of private charter schools in impoverished neighbourhoods (Rice, 2017).

Achievement gap justifications of neoliberal educational practices can also force educational researchers to compare culturally diverse students with White students without “compelling, nuanced, and illustrative pictures of the reasons undergirding and behind the causes of disparities and differences that exist between and among groups (Milner, 2013).” Instead of focusing on opportunity for students that involve teacher quality, curriculum, school funding, and the digital divide, the neoliberal agenda focuses on outcomes instead of the process for student achievement (Milner 2013). This is how deficit dialogue employs a spurious correlation regarding differences in the biologically non-existent variable of race with the highly questionable achievement variable (based on arbitrary measures) to exploit the intractable poverty present in geographical pockets throughout the United States, where the country’s most financially vulnerable children and their families live and work.

Privatized Education

Using race to conflate and mask class issues in the United States allows organizations involved in *rescuing* Black children to seek the buy-in of liberal Whites and civil rights groups as well as Black families desperate for better schools (Allen, 2017; Stoval, 2015). It allows “do-gooder” philanthropic organizations to use a racialized, deficit discourse to drive flawed educational agendas that are extremely profitable for them. The country’s rising poverty level is suppressed by rhetoric that propagates fixing what is allegedly *wrong* with Black children. This sleight of hand discourse allows Americans to avoid the ethical conundrum of considering solutions to inequality and injustice that involve redistribution, and to begin imagining how that might look under a capitalist social model.

Indeed, the privatization of education is very profitable. Klees (2017) pointed out that privatized education has become a \$50 to \$100 billion dollar enterprise, globally. The combined net worth of the public and private education industry is over \$4 trillion (Klees, 2017). Around the world, educating even the world's poorest is viewed as a significant business opportunity. Private education corporations refer to this market as *bottom billions* (Klees, 2017). In spite of the presentation of education as a civil rights issue by Presidents Trump, Obama, and Bush, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) remains firm in their support of public over private schools, calling repeatedly for a moratorium on charter schools (Camera, 2017).

Conceptualizing Neoliberalism in Education

As Wilkins (2015) explained, preoccupation with the “effectiveness” of educational systems across the globe has ushered in a dominant neoliberal paradigm “focused almost entirely on seeing improving educational outcomes in terms of competition in the global knowledge economy” (p. 1). While proponents of neoliberalism often argue that such reforms foster efficiency, competition, and social progress (Giddens, 2000), others posit that such performative systems inhibit the practice of teaching, which is innately driven by values of equality and social justice (Wilkins, 2015). The preoccupation with performance in educational systems has largely centered on teacher performance, gauged by students’ standardized test scores. Research indicates that teacher quality is, in fact, essential to high student performance (Adnot, Dee, Katz, & Wyckoff, 2016; Gershenson, 2014). Thus, educational policy has largely turned toward attracting high quality teachers, measuring their progress, and holding them accountable for student performance.

Croft, Roberts, and Stenhouse (2016) succinctly summarized the current state of neoliberal educational policy:

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RT3), and now Common Core embody over a decade of federal and state education reform purportedly designed to address inequities for global majority and low-income students. However, these policies have in fact expanded inequities and exacerbated a discourse of failure regarding teachers, public schools, and teacher preparation programs. Consequently, public confidence in teachers, teacher preparation programs, and student performance is at an all-time low. (p. 70)

According to Ball (2003) and Apple (2004), the discourse of neoliberal educational reform emphasizes the use of datasets such as the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) to compare student performance across country borders and make educational reform decisions (Grek & Ozga, 2010). The neoliberal agenda, which fosters competition, is heavily focused on determining which policies and characteristics allow schools to come out on top. As Wilkins (2015) explained, the strategies adopted in neoliberal educational reforms favor marketization, diversification of provision, and performative deregulation.

Schools across the world have been subjected to what has been described as a “relentless assault” for the last three decades by the unconstrained neoliberal project, designed to make them fully consolidated subsidiaries of the economy (Smyth, as cited in Samier, 2016). Regardless of the ill effects of the neoliberal agenda on various student subgroups, its negative effects on the institution of public education, and the insult it continues to inflict on the integrity and identities of countless teachers (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Carpenter & Brewer, 2012; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010), its legitimacy has been defended on the premise of necessity. There is an

assumption that in order to protect our national interests in an increasingly competitive global economy, neoliberalism is the only solution (Queiroz, 2016).

Neoliberalism posits a personal ethic, whereby individuals must take responsibility for their own actions, which are typically motivated by self-interests. Under neoliberalism, each person's actions are ethically tempered through cost-benefit analysis to ensure they invest and make choices to maximize their personal happiness and well-being (Astroulakis, 2014). As a result, an individual's ethical condition becomes dynamic rather than static. Individuals may have moral or ethical feelings about considering the good of society in decision-making, but they will conflict with neoliberal values that assert personal responsibility to self and an unfettered market are the best mechanisms for increasing prosperity for all (Astroulakis, 2014). Further, each person must shoulder the entire blame for failing their responsibility to self—even if the failure results from less advantageous personal choices that take the needs of others into consideration.

The ideal of neoliberalism is one of personal entrepreneurship. Neoliberalism is not a collective social enterprise; thus, social ethic is absent, unnecessary, and considered irrational (Hamann, 2009; Juska & Woolfson, 2016). Individual failure is a result of poor decision-making. Following failure, the individual has the opportunity to regroup, work toward self-improvement, and try their luck in the free market again. Consideration is never given to circumstances beyond individuals' control, which may affect their chances for success (Astroulakis, 2014; Hamann, 2009). Differences in socio-economic background, race, gender, culture, location, and family are not factors (Hamann, 2009).

Meanwhile, the rising number of students abandoning education throughout the world as a result of neoliberal educational policy will be tabulated and categorized as collateral damage

(Smyth & Hattam et al., 2000, 2004). In areas where the wealth gap is higher, the number of dropouts increases, particularly among young men (Kearney & Levine, 2016). No matter how their ranks have grown, dropouts are considered an acceptable loss in the neoliberal narrative (Smyth, as cited in Samier, 2016). It is the lack of social ethic and the use of cost-benefit analysis (both hallmarks of neoliberal ideology) that allow personal loss, pain, and loss of productive potential for society on this scale to be unabashedly presented to the public as *acceptable*.

Declaring that the increasing dropout rate, which is primarily on the rise within specific socio-economic, racial, and ethnic demographics, is unacceptable, challenging neoliberal educational policies and narratives as unsound and anti-democratic, and providing sound, practical alternatives that foster the hopes and aspirations of students are all imperatives for addressing the neoliberal agenda that Smyth (as cited in Samier, 2016) identified as the most pressing moral problem educators have faced in the last 200 years:

The moral worth of the very notion of educational leadership will be tested around whether it continues to remain implicated in and complicit in reproducing a toxic and sadistic ideology, or whether it has the courage to stand up and speak back to it with an articulate alternative. (p. 147)

Smyth called on principals to assume the role of activists, participating in open, as well as passive resistance to neoliberal policies that negatively affect public school systems in the United States and around the world.

Effects of Neoliberal Policies on Educators

Neoliberal policies have resulted in worldwide denigration to the teaching profession. Teachers have been systematically disrespected, denied voice, had their views and work

besmirched, and watched their profession be stripped of skill, forcing them to operate as little more than technicians (Smyth, 2011). In addition, educators are under constant surveillance and subject to endless accountability schemes (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Li, 2012; Lundström, 2015). Consequently, many of today's educators work in environments that are stressful, demoralizing, and threatening to their professional identities. Despite this, the literature indicates that educators are motivated by a strong social justice ethic and continue to describe their profession as a vocation (Keefe-Perry, 2016).

Although research indicates that most educators want to provide all students with opportunities to reach their highest potential in nurturing and supportive environments (Edling & Frelin, 2013; Joseph, 2016; Madeloni, 2014), a gap remains regarding how educational leaders might exercise resistance against neoliberal policies they believe are harmful to their students. Dissent is an essential part of democracy, and it must not be confused with disloyalty (May & Hammond, 2010). Despite the essentialness of dissent for correcting wrongs or injustices in systems, it is heavily frowned upon in the U.S. educational system. Interestingly, many U.S. schools leverage learning communities and encourage transformational leadership, which critics argue actually protect the neoliberal educational system from dissent. For example, Courtney and Gunter (2015) posited that transformational leadership in U.S. public schools is most often characterized by authoritarian leadership that excises individuals who dissent against the status quo.

In the educational system, when teachers and leaders are speaking from their professional positions – expressing resistance or criticism of the educational system – they are afforded no First Amendment protections and may be punished by their employers (May & Hammond, 2010). This places educational leaders in precarious situations, forcing them to attempt balance

between their personal ethics and the policies they are tasked with obeying and enforcing. As Brickner (2017) explained, the neoliberal paradigm has also fostered backlash against teachers' unions, designed to protect educators who resist. Legislative changes have created barriers to unionism while restricting labor protections and collective bargaining rights. In fact, as Brickner (2017) explained, the weakening of teachers' unions has been a major objective of the neoliberal education agenda.

How We Got Here

The United States public educational system has undergone a critical period of radical restructuring driven by the changing political climate. This restructuring has resulted in the shift from post-WWII redistributive Keynesian economics to the market-driven neoliberal economic policies that dominate today. The Keynesian model focused on social cohesiveness and viewed education as a public good. However, current neoliberal economic policies focus on individual responsibility and entrepreneurship; there is no explicit social ethic involved. The rise of the neoliberal paradigm has allowed market competition for public education funds. Subsequently, a strategy for the privatization of public education has developed in which private businesses and other profit-driven organizations repeatedly exploit crisis scenarios to obtain greater political power and increased access to public education money (Klein, 2017; Slater, 2015).

The Disaster Narrative

At the end of the 20th century, neoliberal reform schemes targeted the U.S. public school system using both natural (Hurricane Katrina) and manufactured (Financial collapse of the Detroit Public School System following the 2008 bank failures) crises to rapidly expand the privatization of public schools (Klein, 2017; Slater, 2015). The neoliberal education agenda pushed disaster narratives designed to stifle open discourse and subvert democratic processes

that would normally be engaged, post-crisis; this prevented the development of solutions and measures to prevent such disastrous recurrences in the future. The neoliberal disaster narrative is the same one used by the investment banks to demand bail-outs to escape the consequences of poor decisions while retaining control of the financial sector (White, 2017).

The disaster narrative rests on the following 4 main premises;

1. There is no time during *such a crisis* to follow the normal democratic channels involving the assessment of response and future prevention (reform) options which include input from the communities affected by these crises
2. The private sector is the *only* place to turn for resolving the problem; the solution *must be rapid* and only the private sector (because it is unencumbered by government protocols which include excessive *regulation and oversight*) is equipped to bring the *urgently* needed relief
3. TINA; there is no need for considering other narratives or options because There Is No Alternative
4. The points listed above should be obvious—it's just *common sense* (Klees, 2017).

Neoliberal theory asserts that the private sector is best equipped to handle crises—and therefore corporations, private non-profit organizations (NPO)s, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) all have an obligation to serve the public by bringing their efficiency and managerial skills to bear in times of emergency. However, the neoliberal agenda is not beneficent; rather, it is profit-driven and political (Abendroth & Porfilio, 2015). From its inception, neoliberalism has embraced and promoted the crisis narrative to funnel public money to private entities to further the neoliberal agenda—including control of policy reform (Klein, 2017 Slater, 2015). Those who oppose neoliberal policies assert they are used to manufacture

and exploit crises, as explained by Friedman (as cited in Slater, 2015), an architect of neoliberalism:

Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (p. 3)

Although neoliberal reformists present themselves as having philanthropic motives, Slater (2015) asserted their underlying agenda is profit and power; they simply rely on prejudice and revanchist state politics to tap into deep-seated and pervasive issues of race and class in U.S. society. Racism persists in the U.S. education system and serves to label and bin students through the disaggregation of standardized test scores along racial and ethnic strata (Fusarelli, 2004). Such disaggregation is unjust and unethical—it serves to ration resources and maintain the status quo in the larger society by reinforcing racism and classism while asserting that the former no longer exists in America today— and that the latter never did (Klees, 2017).

Neoliberalism: Privatization and Venture Philanthropy

When President Obama first took office, many educators had hope he would pivot education policy from NCLB back toward a model of public good that embraced the concept of equity —increasing educational resources to improve conditions and provide support programs in impoverished public schools, particularly in urban areas (Lipman, 2015; Ravitch, 2014). However, he chose to support the neoliberal changes instituted by the Bush Administration (Lipman, 2015; Ravitch, 2014; Saltman, 2009). President Obama used the financial collapse of 2008 to provide federal relief for education, providing conditional funds to states and school districts (Horsford, 2017; Lipman, 2015; McGuinn, 2016).

Under Mayor Richard M. Daley and Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Public School system was the incubator for many of the market-driven neoliberal educational reform policies responsible for restructuring the U.S. public education system (Lipman, 2015). President Obama's support of the neoliberal model of education was apparent immediately; rather than choosing his campaign's chief education spokesperson, Linda Darling-Hammond (a public school advocate out of Stanford University), he appointed Arne Duncan as his Secretary of Education, who favored "tough love" disciplinary measures, market-driven management, and maximizing efficiency through high-stakes accountability schemes (Affledt, 2011; Horsford, 2017; Lipman, 2015; McGuinn, 2016; Ravitch, 2014). Immediately upon receiving the appointment, Duncan flew to Detroit (Guyette, 2015) and announced that the federal government would provide relief (through RTTT grants) to public schools if the Detroit School System would relinquish control to Mayor Dave Bing, adopt the Chicago business model for school reform, close failing schools, and expand the number of privately-owned and operated charter schools (AP Education czar: Detroit is ground zero, 2009; Lipman, 2015). These requirements became the basic conditions that states and cities had to meet to successfully compete for federal assistance through RTTT, School Improvement Grants (SIG), and Investing in Innovation (I3) (McGuinn, 2016).

Funding for these competitive grants was provided through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, which was enacted by Congress to ameliorate the devastation facing America's cities and states after the financial collapse of 2008 (McGuinn, 2016). Although, President Obama was unable to obtain sufficient bipartisan support for the reauthorization of ESEA at the time, he was able to access educational funds through ARRA which had left \$4.35 billion under education earmarked for the loosely defined purpose of *state*

incentive grants (McGuinn, 2016). This money was under the control of the executive branch to be distributed at the discretion of the Secretary of Education.

Historically, federal education grants were distributed to states on an as-needed basis. For example, states were allocated a portion of the money based on the number of students who were eligible for free or reduced lunches, had special needs, were categorized as English Language Learners (ELL), or some weighted combination of these or other indicators of financial need (McGinn, 2016; Mead, 2010). For the first time, educational funding would be based instead on inter-state competition. The rules for applying for RTTT funding were drafted by Secretary Duncan with the assistance of consultants from the Broad Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and other representatives who advocated for high-stakes testing and an increase in the number of charter schools (McGuinn, 2016; Ravitch, 2014). These unelected, unappointed, individuals were present while the rules that would govern the distribution of public educational funding were drafted.

The RTTT initiative shuttled public funds to innumerable private interests through what appears to be a public-private mycelium. It is beyond the scope of this work to trace the many NGOs, corporations, non-profits, and venture philanthropic organizations connected to the public purse through this mycelium or how they garnered private profit from public education funds in each case. Philanthropy should not be confused with charity when prefaced by the word venture. Venture philanthropy, like venture capital investment is a profit-driven enterprise which goes beyond the individual, corporation, or organization receiving a tax benefit; rather, like any other venture capital enterprise venture philanthropists operate under the expectation of maximum return on their investment (Saltman, 2009).

The two most notable venture philanthropies involved in education reform are the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Ravitch, 2014; Saltman, 2009). The Broad Foundation supports charter schools and trains school superintendents in a non-accredited program that emphasizes a managerial and business philosophy (Ravitch, 2014; Saltman, 2009). Broad considers knowledge a standardized product that is best delivered by a market-driven private approach and measured by standardized test scores (Saltman, 2009). The Gates Foundation also strongly supports privatization of schools and high-stakes accountability.

The non-profit organization Teachers for America (TFA) hires new college graduates who do not have credentials in education at significantly lower pay than experienced, credentialed teachers, and has been repeatedly used to break teachers unions and thwart collective bargaining (Korn, 2013). TFA recruits are often hired during hiring freezes and layoffs; they travel throughout the country essentially as “temp service” teachers and have only 5 weeks of intense training in education prior to entering classrooms in underserved communities (Korn, 2013). Teachers sign on with TFA for a 2-year commitment and often displace veteran teachers who are part of the mostly impoverished communities where the TFA teachers work (Korn, 2013). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donated 12 million dollars to Wendy Kopp’s TFA in 2009 (“Awarded grants—Gates”, 2009) and 11 million to TFA and 20.5 million to The New Teachers Project (TNTP) (a non-profit similar to TFA) between 2008 and 2011 (Follow the Money: Gates Giving for Its Teacher Agenda, 2013).

Other philanthropic organizations that influence educational policy include The Walton Family Foundation, the Donald and Doris Fisher Fund, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation (Hatch, 2015). Money from these primary foundations flows into other philanthropic, education-specific venture organizations, including

the New Schools Venture Fund and the Charter School Growth Fund (Hatch, 2015). Capital from these primary sources is also pushed into synergistic private corporations and non-profits such as The College Ready Promise, a charter school consulting organization that provides advice, data analysis, and assessment to charter schools (Hatch, 2015; Ensemble Learning – Together we grow strong schools, 2018). College Ready Promise received 25.5 million from the Gates Foundation between 2008 and 2011 (Follow the Money: Gates Giving for Its Teacher Agend, 2013). This is just the tip of the iceberg. There are also geographically-specific local philanthropic organizations with a cooperative hand in guiding educational policy (Hatch, 2015).

Because of the close ties between businesses and the dubious interpretation of venture philanthropy as charity, the school reform agenda has been steered toward a profit-driven corporate vision. What was once taxpayer revenue slated for public use is now revenue open to competition from private organizations, which profit from funding poorly-tested, experimental venture initiatives in education reform (La Times Editorial Board, 2016; Saltman, 2009). Additionally, there is little oversight for these private players who often self-regulate or submit to being assessed by others synergistic entities within the same public-private mycelium (Ertischek, 2013; La Times Editorial Board, 2016; Saltman, 2009).

The Testing Industrial Complex

An essential component of the neoliberal agenda in education is high-stakes testing. As described by Croft et al. (2016), the testing industrial complex (TIC), is “an attempted system of education reform catalyzed by standardized testing that emerged with NCLB” (p. 72). The TIC is based on founded on three, interrelated factors: (a) excessive high-stakes testing, (b) false narratives about educational improvement, and (c) the transfer of curricular and financial governance from local and state entities to national and private entities (Croft et al., 2016). In

terms of the excessive use of standardized testing, Croft et al. explained that never before, in the history of U.S. educational policy, has high-stakes testing been used to make so many policy decisions. The use of high-stakes test scores to make educational policy has created a trickle-down effect in which politicians pressure superintendents, who pressure principals, who pressure teachers, to implement strategies to increase test scores, such as teaching to the test (Croft et al., 2016). Despite empirical evidence that clearly indicates the futility of such high-stakes testing efforts (Ravitch, 2010), the neoliberal agenda remains steeped in standardized testing.

In addition to the trickle-down pressure from policymakers, the TIC has been fueled by false narratives regarding how educational improvements must be made (Croft et al., 2016). Top educational institutions in the United States, such as the U.S. Department of Education, insist that its goals are to increase educational standards, improve schools, and reduce the academic achievement gap (Croft et al., 2016); yet the ways such institutes insist on meeting these goals is through promulgation of the neoliberal agenda (Giroux, 2012). The false political narratives that support this idea of needed improvement is largely based on the idea that U.S. education is inadequate, which is of course, supported by poor student scores on high-stakes tests.

Finally, the TIC has fostered the shift in power regarding educational policies and decisions from states and local governments to federal and private entities (Croft et al., 2016). Specifically, in order for standardized testing to reveal student or teacher failure across the country, there must be a standardized, national curriculum. This is evident in nation-wide adoption of the Common Core State Standards.

Evaluation Systems

In order for the neoliberal agenda to proliferate throughout the U.S. educational system, it was necessary to develop evaluation standards across primary, secondary, and post-secondary

educational settings. Croft et al. (2016) created a model of the current evaluation system, entitled *The Mesoscale Evaluation System*. According to the scholars, the Mesoscale System is based on six components: (a) a discourse of failure, (b) evaluation methods, (c) assessment tools, (d) standards, (e) consortiums/corporations, and (f) catalysts. These components manifest uniquely in K-12 and higher educational settings, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

The Mesoscale Evaluation System

Components of the Mesoscale System	In K-12 Education	In Higher Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discourse of failure (to justify the need for increased effectiveness and preparedness) 	Effectiveness	Preparedness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation methods (used to determine educator and preparation program effectiveness based on quantitative and qualitative measures) 	Teacher/Leader Keys Evaluation System; Student Learning Objectives	Teacher Preparation Program Effectiveness Measure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment tools (used to assess in-service teacher effectiveness and pre-service teacher preparedness) 	Teacher Assessment of Performance	Ed Teacher Performance Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards (designed to encourage rigor, coherence, and consistency in curriculum and in educator preparation) 	Common Core State Standards	The Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consortiums/corporations (hired via competitive bids to develop and disseminate evaluation tools as well as compile and analyze evaluation data) 	Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers; SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium	Pearson Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catalyst (used to connect the components of evaluation via federal and state funding) 	Race to the Top	Race to the Top

Resisting Neoliberalism

Educator Resistance

The disservice of the neoliberal educational agenda has resulted in pushback from some teachers and educational leaders (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016; Wilkins, 2015). Dissent is essential to a strong and healthy democracy; it fosters new ideas and helps to empower the will of the people (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016). As Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda (2016) explained, “Many teachers from across America are equally frustrated by the pressures of high-stakes testing, loss of curricular influence, labor struggles, changes in state standards, teacher evaluation systems, and many other educational issues” (p. 165). Educators who resist neoliberal policies that harm students, such as standardized testing, can help ensure that the best interests of students – and the democracy – are followed (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016).

An extensive review of the available literature on neoliberalism in education and resistance among educators revealed no studies specifically focused on the strategies that principals or administrators may use to resist educational policy. This represents an important gap that was addressed in the current study. However, it is still appropriate and relevant to discuss the available research on educator resistance, which focused primarily on the resistance strategies employed by teachers, parents, and teachers unions. This section contains a review of the research on the ways various educational stakeholders have resisted the neoliberal agenda.

Small publics. One way that educators and educational leaders may resist damaging neoliberal policies is through small publics. According to Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda (2016), small publics are spaces that educators can use to voice their frustrations and concerns; they are, as the scholars posited, a starting point for change. Small publics can serve as a place for educators to collaborate, discuss their concerns, and eventually foster collective action to initiate

meaningful change. Publics can help educators and leaders see that their frustrations and concerns are shared, inspiring groups to come together to institute change.

Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda (2016) crafted a convincing narrative of small publics and their potential power as tools of educational reform. The scholars argued that schools are potential sites of dissent, communication, and action. A “public” is a body of individuals engaged in opposition or activities to foster mutual benefit. While publics can serve as important places for collaboration, it is important to note that they are not without flaws. Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda explained how the Common Core State Standards arose from some pushback by educators against previous educational standards. However, because the size of the public grew so large in this case, many teachers who were involved felt their voices were not heard and were dissatisfied with the new standards that were developed. As the size of a public increases, the incorporation of all members’ feedback and opinions becomes very difficult. Consequently, Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda discussed the importance of integrating everyone’s opinions in small publics, even those who do not worse to overtly practice resistance:

As teachers respond to a problem through communicating to name, frame, and act upon that problem, they must actively seek out and create space for the contributions of all teachers in the school, including the perspectives of those who may not be interested in, willing to, or able to participate in acts of dissent. (p. 175)

This is an important point to consider in the context of the current investigation. Dissent may not always be overt; a teacher or educational leader may practice more covert dissent to protect themselves professionally, but that does not mean they are not resisting unfair or unjust educational policies. Accordingly, an investigation of principal resistance must allow space for

leaders to describe ways they might push back against neoliberalism without directly putting their necks on the line.

Social media. Social media may provide another outlet for resistance among educational leaders. Brickner (2017) pointed out that as the neoliberalism agenda systematically strips teachers' unions of their power, it is increasingly important to pay attention to ways that individual educators may push back against educational policies. As Brickner explained,

Given the growing number of organizations engaged in education politics and the rise of social media, there are more opportunities to become engaged in resistance to neoliberal education policy for educators who are frustrated with policy trends or those who feel isolated and disconnected from their unions. (p. 11)

Brickner (2017) analyzed two Twitter campaigns – one in the United States and the other in Canada – to explore teachers' use of the social media platform to resist educational policies and demonstrate their various identities (as educators, unionists, and care workers). The researcher conducted a content analysis of the #EvaluateThat and #ThisIsMyStrikePay campaigns, which consisted of about 230 tweets, each. The #EvaluateThat campaign was started by in 2013, with three goals: (a) to present opposition to the Common Core State Standards, (b) to oppose high stakes standardized testing, and (c) to challenge myths about failing schools and teachers. All three of these goals can be viewed as push-back against a neoliberal agenda. The other campaign that Brickner analyzed, #EvaluateThat, was started by an Atlanta teacher who was fed up with the educational system's obsession with standardized testing, to the negligence of other, more important student and teacher issues. Teachers who participated in the #EvaluateThat campaign shared stories on Twitter to help demonstrate how the work they performed as teachers could not be reduced to metrics.

Brickner's (2017) analysis revealed four important effects of the two Twitter campaigns. First, the scholar reported that the campaigns created public spaces for educators to express themselves as workers engaged in caring labor that is impeded by current educational policies. In this way, Twitter served as a form of a small public, described by Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda (2016). The Twitter campaigns helped participating teachers see that their frustrations and concerns were common to many other teachers; in that way, participation helped them to feel empowered to voice their concerns. Similarly, the two campaigns facilitated camaraderie and solidarity among educators, regardless of their geographic location. Brickner reasoned that the solidarity inspired by the campaigns among geographically-disparate educators could help foster teachers' identities as activists and help facilitate more activism among educators. As Brickner explained, "As self-expression of identities led to solidarity and networking, educators' resistance shifted from internal to external" (p. 34).

A third important effect of the Twitter campaigns, as revealed in Brickner's (2017) analysis, was the mainstream, national media coverage received by both. The researcher explained that the media coverage generated by the campaigns demonstrated important pushback "against neoliberal narratives that demonize public education and educators" (p. 34) and are an important example of external resistance to neoliberalism. Finally, Bricker found that the Twitter campaigns strengthened the groups that started them, generating greater solidarity and engagement, and helping to position educators to work together to take action against damaging educational policies.

Online compositions. Online compositions provide another way for educators to resist educational policies, via the internet. These types of compositions are longer and more likely to appear in blogs and online publications than on social media platforms. Stewart and Boggs

(2015) conducted a qualitative analysis of teachers' online compositions that were written to express resistance to neoliberal educational policies. The scholars argued that online compositions are a powerful way for teachers to use the internet to critique, interpret, comment on, and distribute their opinions. Online compositions allow educators to play a more prominent role in the U.S. educational policy discussion. Further, online compositions represent a shift in the role that educators play in policy reform, diverging from the status quo of the past in which other actors spoke for educators (Stewart & Boggs, 2015). Stewart and Bogg's analysis revealed that educators often wrote about themed arguments, leveraged rhetorical moves (the utilization of semantics) to increase the strength of their arguments, and also carefully chose their words when crafting such online narratives.

Strikes. More recently, striking has become a tool of resistance to neoliberal educational policies, particularly among teachers. For example, in 2012, teachers in Chicago went on strike over a number of issues, including pay, job security, and work conditions. Rodriguez (2016) highlighted this strike as a form of resistance against neoliberalism.

Boycotts. An interesting, but less common strategy that educators may use to resist neoliberalism in education is the use of boycotts. One example of this practice was demonstrated in Seattle in 2013, when teachers at Garfield High School came together and refused to administer a standardized test that they claimed was flawed (Queally, 2013). In addition to internal issues with the test, teachers claimed it was a waste of time and money, and that the results did not produce useful information. The boycott garnered extensive media attention that created pressure for the area high schools to make the test optional for students. Because teachers refused to give the exams, the district had to enlist parents and administrators to proctor it to students who had not opted out. This example, as reported by Queally (2013), is another

valuable illustration of the power that educators possess when they band together to resist policies, such as mandatory, high-stakes testing, which they believe harm their students. Importantly, administrators and principals may be less likely to experience the community and sense of activism that teachers do – they may have to act in silos, and more covertly to resist these policies.

Media coverage. Another interesting strategy that has been used to push back against neoliberal educational policy is media coverage. Szolowicz (2016) conducted a qualitative case study to explore the micro-level politics surrounding efforts to resist the adoption of new Common Core textbooks in one U.S. school district. The resistance was first organized in 2013 by a group of parents who were concerned about the adoption of a new math textbook. The group of parents rallied with teachers at the school to resist the textbook adoption. They did so by speaking out in public forums, leveraging social media campaigns, and even appearing on talk radio shows. The result of the group's efforts was significant media coverage and pressure that eventually resulted in the district's acquiescence to the demands of the parent-teacher group for a new textbook. Working in concert, the parents and teachers leveraged the media to help win the battle against the adoption of the textbook.

Szolowicz's (2016) analysis of this particular incident illustrates how collaboration and leveraging the media can be powerful tools of dissent and resistance among parents and teachers, although it may represent a strategy less likely to be employed by school leaders who stand to lose their jobs for speaking out. Perhaps what made this particular scenario so effective was that it was started and led by concerned parents, rather than teachers or educational leaders. Parental instigation of the resistance may have made teachers more likely to join, sheltered by the outcry of concerned parents.

Grassroots efforts. Pushback against the neoliberal agenda in education has also been achieved through well-organized grassroots efforts. For example, Martinez, Cantrell, and Beilke (2016) conducted a qualitative case study to examine the election of Glenda Ritz as Superintendent of Public Instruction in the State of Indiana. Ritz's opponent, Tony Bennett, was highly favored to win. Bennett represented a trailblazer in pushing forward a neoliberal educational agenda that favored school choice, charter schools, Common Core adoption, and punitive teacher evaluations (Martinez et al., 2016). However, collaboration between teachers, teacher unions, and community members resulted in the unexpected win of Ritz, a candidate who publically expressed her resistance to the neoliberal policies that Bennett supported.

Ritz's win was largely the result of a grassroots campaign that involved her, among other things, driving hundreds of miles each week to personally get her message out (Martinez et al., 2016). Her campaign also relied heavily on a strong social media presence that involved encouraging supporters to share her messages and posting campaign videos on Youtube. Ritz rallied the support of the local teacher's union and encouraged supporters to purchase her "campaign in a box," which included yard signs, bumper stickers, and postcards. Although Bennet spent nearly five times as many campaign dollars as Ritz did, it was Ritz's grassroots approach that resonated with her supporters – individuals who were searching for a leader to help resist Bennet's neoliberal educational policies. As Martinez et al. (2016) explained, "Those seeking to demonstrate local resistance to neoliberal reforms may want to note the strategies implemented by the Ritz campaign" (p. 69).

Although findings from Martinez et al.'s (2016) study do not directly align with the goal of the current research – to explore dissent and resistance to neoliberal educational policies among principals – it does help to illustrate how a grassroots campaign that encourages the

involvement of a number of stakeholders (teachers, parents, and teachers unions) was used to push back against neoliberalism on a higher level of educational leadership. Indeed, it seems clear throughout the literature on resistance to neoliberal educational policies that involving multiple stakeholders and using multiple strategies may be an effective resistance strategy. Yet, little is known about how principals, specifically, may enact resistance.

In another study on the use of grassroots campaigns to resist neoliberalism in education, Crawford-Garrett and Riley (2016) conducted a cross-case analysis of two teacher communities located in Philadelphia, at a time when the district faced immense pressure to comply with neoliberal policies. The first case consisted of Teach for America Corps members, and the second was an adolescent literacy education study group of English teachers. The researchers attended meetings and study groups for each case, and then conducted open coding and thematic analysis on gathered data. Findings revealed that “teachers in both groups drew upon counter mandates in order to resist, negotiate, and respond to mandates that attempted to deny their autonomy” (Crawford-Garrett & Riley, 2016, p. 38).

The most common ways that teachers resisted were through autobiographical, social justice, and textual mandates (Crawford-Garrett & Riley, 2016). Crawford-Garrett and Riley (2016) explained that autobiographical mandates involved drawing upon teachers’ lived experiences to justify their teaching practices and resist top-down mandates that countered their practices. Social justice mandates involved teachers’ use of a social justice narrative to argue against the top-down policies because of their disservice to students, educators, schools, and communities. Finally, individuals in both groups employed textual mandates to resist neoliberal policies by invoking research and theory that countered the policies being enforced by the district. The scholars reflected on the importance of such grassroots strategies to push back

against neoliberal educational policies, explaining that they served as a call to teachers, educational leaders, and teacher educators to “open up new dialogues about possibilities for change within and beyond the classroom,” adding that the failure to enact such change would result in the continued enforcement of “a system that aims to quantify rather than humanize students” (p. 47).

Anderson and Cohen’s (2015) framework. Anderson and Cohen (2015) created a valuable framework for exploring resistance to neoliberalism among educators and educational leaders. The scholars explained,

In education, a new generation of teachers and administrators are being socialized into a very different workplace with a different conception of teaching and leading. For instance, while teachers increasingly teach to the test, leaders are expected to lead to the test. Since control is now exercised through market discipline and high stakes tests, that increasingly drive what happens in classrooms, principals are being given more and more “autonomy,” oftentimes, though, to exercise leadership over less and less. (p. 5)

Indeed, Anderson and Cohen explained that the shift toward neoliberal educational policies has thwarted educators’ use of professional judgement, exposed them to an audit culture, and even fostered internal and external competition via the marketization of the profession. In response, the scholars developed a framework that educators and educational leaders may leverage to exercise professional resistance. The framework is based on three different interactions that typically overlap, including (a) critical vigilance, (b) counter-discourses, and (c) counter-conduct and reappropriation. Through these forms of resistance, Anderson and Cohen argued that new alliances could be formed between students, parents, communities, and educators, which may ultimately foster greater resistance against neoliberal policies.

According to Anderson and Cohen (2015), critical vigilance involves recognizing and questioning how neoliberal policies influence organizational and professional identities, including how professional roles and responsibilities are changed to comply with policy revisions. After critical vigilance is enacted, individuals can begin to craft counter discourses that challenge the policy changes by deconstructing the practices and discourses thwarted upon educators. Finally, following critical vigilance and counter discourses, individuals may begin counter-conduct, which involves actions that challenge or reappropriate neoliberal policies “toward progressive ends” (Anderson & Cohen, 2015, p. 13).

An example of such reappropriation was described by Wood (2011) when teachers and a principal reappropriated their professional learning communities in order to maintain their sense of professional identity in the context of new policies that encouraged teachers to value technical solutions over professional judgement. As Anderson and Cohen (2015) explained, the technical approach forced upon the teachers “render the teachers’ inquiry into little more than a task of addressing a pre-defined problem” (p. 13). In this example, the teachers, with the support of their principal, were able to reappropriate the learning community into one that valued authentic inquiry, thus preserving teachers’ professional identities.

Counter publics. Following Anderson and Cohen’s (2015) framework for educator resistance, another important resistance strategy among educators may be the formation of counter publics. According to Fraser (1990), counter publics are discursive arenas where group members can create and spread counter discourses that preserve their identities and interests while formulating opposition. Counter publics, like small publics, consist of groups of individuals who come together to organize a collective resistance – today’s platforms for counter publics include protests, blogging, social media, strikes, protests, unionism, etc. Essentially,

counter publics are groups of like-minded people who leverage any of the aforementioned resistance strategies to push back against the neoliberal agenda in education.

Local Resistance

In context of the current investigation, two important events recent to the current investigation have occurred. In 2019, West Virginia teachers went on strike for the second time in a one-year period. The teachers argued for putting *public* back into public education. The strike was sparked after an omnibus education bill was killed by the House after the Senate added amendments that would provide funds for several charter schools. Because charter schools are privately managed, but publicly funded, public school teachers in West Virginia argued that charter school funding would drain the funding for public schools (The Associated Press, 2019). With support from local teachers' unions, this provides an example of the power that teachers have to push back against neoliberal policies – a power in numbers that public school principals do not have.

Another recent form of local resistance took occurred under the *Red for Ed* campaign (Red4EdNC, n.d.). This campaign was developed and implemented in North Carolina to support five educational priorities, which demonstrate resistance to the pervasive neoliberal agenda. These priorities included:

- A \$15 minimum wage for all school personnel, and a 5% pay raise for educational staff
- Meet national standards for school librarians, psychologists, social workers, counsellors, nurses, and other health professionals
- Expand Medicaid coverage for students and their families
- Reinstate retiree health benefits that were eliminated in 2017

- Restore compensation for advanced degrees that was eliminated in 2013

Teacher Unions

Resistance to neoliberal educational agendas has been undermined by the stripping away of powers traditionally held by teachers' unions. As the power of local elected officials and teachers' unions has been systematically stripped, educational leaders stand greater risks for pushing back against neoliberal educational policies. Neoliberal education reform is characterized by hostility toward unions (Brickner, 2017). Legislative changes have created barriers to unionism while restricting labor protections and collective bargaining rights. The weakening of teachers' unions has been a major objective of the neoliberal education agenda (Brickner, 2017). Thus, the unions that have historically protected teachers (who also enjoy the power of numbers) are being dismantled. Principals, who do not have the support of teachers' unions, may feel more vulnerable than ever.

Dilemmas Faced by Different Levels of School Agents

An intensive search through the existing scholarship revealed no studies specifically focused on how principals practice resistance against neoliberal educational policies. Thus, the current study addressed a significant gap in the current research. Studies were located in which resistance behaviors of teachers, parents, and even superintendents were used to push back against a neoliberal agenda. Although these represent different levels of educational leadership from public school principals, it is worthwhile to point out that although these different stakeholders possess different levels of agency and resist neoliberal policies in different ways, they tend to share a common, value-oriented desire to do what is in the best interest of the students.

For example, Norberg and Johansson (2007) examined the ethical dilemmas faced by different levels of school agents, including politicians, superintendents, principals, and teachers. While the researchers found that the ethical dilemmas may vary by professional level, all agents examined experienced a common conflict between their professional and personal values. That is, they desired to do what was right, according to professional standards, but often saw those professional standards in conflict with what they perceived to be in the best interests of their students. Indeed, this is essential to the problem of the current study, and one that is likely to manufacture resistance among educators and educational leaders. What remains unknown is how principals may demonstrate dissent when their professional and personal ethics are in conflict. These conflicts help determine how educational leaders navigate moral and ethical leadership.

Moral and Ethical Leadership

Moral leadership, according to Brown and Trevino (2006) describes a two-part process involving personal behaviors and moral influences. Through moral leadership, school principals may lead in ways that empower teachers while navigating the pressures of neoliberal reform policies (Greenfield, 2004). Starratt (1991) argued that school leaders are morally obligated to create ethical educational environments; in so doing, principals may serve as models of moral and ethical behavior for teachers and students (Campbell, 1999). Ethical behavior can be a challenge for many people, despite their best intentions. As Cherkowski et al. (2015) explained, “people of good will are still capable of overlooking a moral problem, developing elaborate and persuasive realizations to justify their action or inaction” (p. 2). Ethical decision require an understanding of the ways decisions are likely to affect others (Lawton et al., 2013). As Ehrich et al. (2015) explained, “Schools that demonstrate the elements of ethical leadership offer

authentic inclusive structures and cultures... where teachers, students, parents, and staff have a voice and are treated respectfully” (p. 10). This succinct definition of ethical educational leadership is in contrast with the neoliberal policies that public school principals are required to enforce.

School principals, in particular, face ethical challenges as they are tasked with acting as the moral agents of those they lead, including students, parents, communities, schools, and the state (Cherkowski et al., 2015). Previous researchers have demonstrated the ways in which principalship is an inherently moral and ethical profession (Furman, 2004; Johansson, 2004; Langlois & Lapointe, 2010). In order for leaders to act in ways that are both moral and ethical, they must develop a greater understanding of the effects of their actions (Campbell, 1999). Such understanding includes a moral sensitivity, which describes the awareness of ethical issues that are part of any professional situation (Bebeau & Monson, 2008).

In the case of school principals, particularly in the context of the current investigation, neoliberal educational policies may cause ethical dilemmas for principals. On one hand, they understand they must enforce neoliberal policies handed down from state and federal governments, such as high-stakes testing or evaluating test scores based on racial demographics. On the other hand, they may struggle to enforce a neoliberal agenda if they recognize the holistic disservices and harms it causes students, teachers, schools, and the educational system. Such is the moral and ethical dilemma that school leaders across the United States often face – a struggle between their professional duties and their moral obligations to the students and teachers they lead.

Five Domains of Ethical Leadership

Starratt (2005) developed a framework for examining moral and ethical leadership behaviors of educators. The framework consists of the following five domains: (a) engage as ethical people, (b) respect others' civil rights and act according to public trust, (c) understand appropriate use and application of educational curriculum, (d) develop and manage organizational structures that foster school efficiency, and (e) transform schools into communities of authentic learning. Each domain builds upon the previous, so that the culmination of ethical school leadership is school transformation.

When considered against a neoliberal educational agenda, one may observe the ethical conflicts inherent in Starratt's (2005) framework. For example, a principal tasked with respecting students' civil rights and serving the public trust may struggle to enforce policies that propagate racist ideas or nurture the achievement gap. Principals trying to develop and manage organizational structures to foster school efficiency may find that organizational efficiency is in conflict with the micromanagement and strict oversight of teachers.

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

Educational leaders are guided by the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). These standards include the following (as cited in National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, pp. 9-18):

1. Develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.
2. Act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

3. Strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being
4. Develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being
5. Cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school environment that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student
6. Develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being
7. Foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being
8. Engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being
9. Manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being
10. Act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being

The obvious challenge with the PSEL is not in the ethical obligations it requires of educational leaders, but the fact that those ethical obligations are in strong opposition to the neoliberal agenda that dominates the current educational system. For example, how is a principal to manage resources in a way that promotes *each student's* academic success when his or her school may receive funding restrictions based on poor student scores in an impoverished community? How does a principal have the autonomy to “Develop and support intellectually

rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being" when he or she is bound to the Common Core curriculum and high-stakes testing – the results of which determine funding and the security of teachers' jobs? It is easy to see how principals may feel handcuffed to policies that are not working, obligated to enforce them despite opposition to the very ethics enforced by the same government that obligates them to abide with an antithetical neoliberal agenda. Because of the negative effects of a neoliberal agenda, it is essential to revise it with one that is egalitarian and ethical.

Ethical Framework

The neoliberal agenda is firmly rooted in U.S. education; dismantling its stronghold will require new, ethical perspectives. An ethical framework consists of basic assumption about beliefs, values, and principles used to guide research decisions (Starratt, 2004). The scholarship of Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) provides a valuable framework for understanding school principals' perspectives regarding the ethical decisions they make at work. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) work provides an extensive and diverse pedagogical view of ethics and ethical reasoning from multiple ethical paradigms. The authors purported that in today's changing society, the study of ethics among school leaders is essential. Shapiro and Stefkovich suggested that "by using the different paradigms, educators should become aware of the perspective or perspectives they tend to use most often in solving ethical issues" (p.7). Their research is based on years of case study research on graduate students attending large research universities in urban and rural settings, many of whom were educational practitioners. The authors maintained that the practical application of the multiple ethical paradigms has overarching themes for understanding complex paradoxical dilemmas.

The result of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) research was the development of the multiple ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care, and profession. Although the current research only utilized the ethics of critique and profession, a review of the full model is helpful for understanding why the researcher limited the current study's framework to critique and profession. Accordingly, this section provides a comprehensive review of all four ethics described by Shapiro and Stefkovich.

The Ethic of Justice

Justice serves as the foundation for legal principles, ideals, rights, laws, fairness, and equity in individual freedoms (Shapiro & Gross, 2002; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011; Starratt 1994; Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004). The ethic of justice states that one should treat others according to a standard of justice applied to all relationships. According to Starratt (1994), the idea of fairness and equal treatment is the core value of the ethic of justice. Shapiro and Gross (2008) affirmed that the ethic of justice continually raises questions about the justness and fairness of laws and policies.

The ethic of justice supports the principle of due process and protects the civil and human rights of all individuals (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005). Strike et al. (2005) maintained that the effect of justice in educational decision-making is based on maximum benefits in respect to individuals' needs; this supposition supports Shapiro and Stefkovich's argument that school administrators should consider each member of the community in order to make fair and equitable ethical decisions. The ethic of justice requires an analysis of the issues at stake, in terms of the rights and laws of not only the students, but all stakeholders, including parents and school personnel. Because the current study was not focused on rights and laws, but

resistance to policies that contradict personal ethics, the ethic of justice was not strongly aligned and was not utilized in the current study's framework.

The Ethic of Care

The ethic of care is based on feminist research and is an essential component of the professional responsibilities of educators. As Noddings (1992) affirmed, "the first job of schools is to care for children" (p. 16). Noddings believed that education could not be separated from personal experience. An ethic of care, according to Noddings, reflects individuals' memories of caring and being cared for. The ethic of care brings the focus of moral decision-making to how the involved individuals are treated. Caring involves stepping beyond one's own frame of reference into another's, via empathy, characterized by moving away from self-focus (Mitten, 1996). In an ethic of care, one responds to another out of love or natural inclination, and the focus becomes connectedness and relationships (Mitten, 1996). Providing others with a sense of genuine caring and understanding can help to empower them (Mitten, 1996).

The ethic of care emerges from the ethic of justice and shifts the focus away from rights and laws, and toward compassion and empathy (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Furman (2004) noted that the ethic of care provides balance to the ethics of justice and critique, as it is less concerned with fairness and more concerned with caring for people as unique individuals. The ethic of care requires absolute regard for the dignity and intrinsic value of each person based on relationships, and demands care and respect in relationships with others (Noddings, 2003).

In her 1995 article, Noddings stated, "Caring is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likeable. Caring implies a continuous search for competence. When we

care, we want to do our very best for the objects of our care” (p.2). Noddings emphasized that “caring educators must help students make wise decisions” (p.4). In Noddings’ (1988) earlier research, she explained the ethic of care was “moral education, from the perspective of an ethic of caring, involves modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation” (p.222). This is evidenced in the decision-making processes of school principals. School administrators utilize the ethic of care through the relationships and connections they value in the ethical decision-making process, as they try to balance power with caring, nurturing, and encouraging students, rather than focusing solely on rules and techniques (Sernak, 1998). School administrators who utilize the ethic of care may consider how they can help individual students meet their needs and desires before reaching an ethical decision. While care is essential to principals’ professional duties, the ethic of care is not as strongly aligned with the investigation of resistance against neoliberal policies; thus, it was not selected for the current framework.

Conceptual Framework: The Ethic of Critique and The Ethic of the Profession

The Ethic of Critique

While the ethic of justice is about fairness (in terms of laws and rights), the ethic of critique is about the *barriers* to fairness. The ethic of critique is based on critical theory, which emphasizes social inequities. A major argument of critical theorists is that schools reproduce inequities present in the larger society (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Educators who work from a critical theory perspective seek to give a voice to those who have been marginalized or silenced.

School administrators must confront moral issues through an ethic of critique when they recognize how schools disproportionately benefit some groups in society and fail others through the inequitable distribution of resources and unequal application of rules (Freire, 1970; Furman,

2004; Giroux, 2010). The ethic of critique challenges the status quo by involving social discourse, which provides a voice to the marginalized and helps expose inequities (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Giroux defined this ethic as one that is “guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010).

The ethic of critique may help school administrators develop an awareness of social inequities and pursue measures to revise laws, policies, and regulations that are inconsistent with sound educational practices aimed at the fair and equal treatment of all students (Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). The ethic of critique forces school administrators to rethink, redefine, and reframe concepts such as privilege, power, culture, and social injustice. Essentially, the ethic of critique may serve as the impetus behind dissent or resistance to neoliberal educational policies that principals perceive as unjust. Thus, the ethic of critique was selected for the current study’s framework.

The Ethic of the Profession

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) suggested that the ethical frameworks of justice, critique, and care needed expanding. The authors called for school leaders to consider professional codes and personal ethical principles, as well as standards of the profession. They created a dynamic model that places the best interests of the student at the heart of the ethics of the educational profession (Begley & Stefkovich, 2007; Stefkovich, 2006; Stefkovich & O’Brien, 2004).

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) noted that the ethic of the profession often refers codes, rules, and principles, all of which align with the traditional concepts of justice; however, the scholars added that the ethic of the profession considers other paradigms such as professional judgment and

professional decision-making; this concept was inherent to the current investigation of resistance against neoliberalism. Principals have professional codes of conduct they must comply with in order to keep their jobs, but strategic navigation or covert resistance may be required resist neoliberal educational policies.

In their roles as educational leaders, the ethic of the profession has an overarching goal pertaining to decision-making processes, particularly regarding how school principals make ethical decisions in their work. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) explained, “In this era, schools have been asked to shoulder many of the responsibilities of society. This trend does not look as if it will cease and it probably will grow. With this trend come more paradoxes and dilemmas” (p. 23). This trend has developed to include the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, high stakes Testing, and school reform. The authors explain that a code applied in one stage of life need not be the same, over time. The ethic of the profession expects:

Leaders to formulate and examine their own professional codes of ethics in light of individual personal codes of ethics, as well as standards set forth by the profession, and then calls on them to place students at the center of the ethical decision-making process. (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 23)

Shapiro and Stefkovich believed that the school leader’s perspective is critical in decision-making and acknowledge the importance of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards. A guidepost for school leaders is established from the ISLLC Standards in connection to the decision-making process. As a whole, principals should certainly use professional codes, but they must also draw upon ethical decision-making practices. Thus, taking all these factors into consideration, Shapiro and Stefkovich’s ethic of the profession would require administrators to ask questions within the justice, critique, and care

paradigms, and would require them to move beyond these questions to ask what the profession would expect and what is in the best interests of the students (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011, p. 25).

The framework selected for the current study was based on two of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) ethical constructs: the ethics of critique and the ethics of profession. While the ethics of critique is designed to raise questions concerning the unfair treatment of diverse groups in society, the ethics of profession is designed to question inequities fostered by educational policies, and how they affect the evolving needs of students. Together, these two ethical perspectives support the best interests of children and foster resistance to neoliberal educational policies that benefit some and disadvantage others.

Conclusion

Resistance to neoliberal educational policies will require a willingness on the part of educators and leaders to dissent against the national and global economic engines of capitalism. Educational leaders will need to challenge the normative discourse of neoliberalism. While researchers have explored the potential detriments of neoliberal educational policies (Brickner, 2017; Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016; Wilkins, 2015), little is known about how educational leaders may resist such policies. Thus, the purpose the current study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, exercise professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies.

This chapter provided a review and synthesis of the existing research on neoliberalism, educational policy, and educator resistance. An examination of existing academic and professional literature revealed no studies that specifically focused on the resistance strategies employed by public school principals to resist neoliberal educational policies. Existing research

on the resistance strategies employed by teachers and parents were reviewed, including the use of small publics (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016), social media (Brickner, 2017), online compositions (Stewart & Boggs, 2015), strikes (Rodriguez, 2016), boycotts (Queally, 2013), media coverage (Szolowicz, 2016), grassroots efforts (Crawford-Garrett & Riley, 2016; Martinez et al., 2016), and counter publics (Anderson & Cohen, 2015). Largely, research indicates that when individuals work together and employ various strategies of resistance, the machine of neoliberalism can be, at least halted, in education. Indeed, these findings are promising. However, the resistance strategies and experiences of educational leaders may vary significantly from those of teachers, parents, activists, and union members. Thus, there remains a major gap in the existing research – one that was be addressed by the investigation.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Today's educators face an ethical dilemma regarding resistance of the neoliberal educational system. As Smyth explained, this resistance is "the most pressing moral problem educators have faced in the last 200 years" (as cited in Samier, 2016, p. 147). Those who choose careers in educational leadership must address the faulty assumptions under which neoliberalism effectively drives inequality and injustice through a racialized discourse that masks America's classism. The failure to criticize the current neoliberal discourse undermines the goal of the U.S. educational system – to provide fair and effective education to all students.

Research indicates that the ethical values of many educators include a strong desire for social justice, which they embrace as part of their professional ethic and identity (DeBray et al., 2015). Educators often possess values best described by the Multiple Ethical Paradigm (MEP) model, including justice, care, critique, professionalism, and community (DeBray et al., 2015). However, little is known about how educational leaders may resist neoliberal policies. Thus, the aim of the current study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, exercise professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies. Findings from this study addressed an important gap in the literature and revealed the strategies that participating principals used to push back against educational policies that do not align with their ethics. Educators and educational leaders are essential players in educational reform against the neoliberal agenda.

The nature of the study was qualitative and it followed a general qualitative design. A qualitative method was selected because the aim of the study is to explore participants' perceptions and experiences with professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies.

Data was gathered via individual interviews with a sample of eight public school principals located in a single school district located in North Carolina. The research was guided by the following essential question: Based on the perceptions and experiences of public school principals, how do the ethics of critique and profession guide decisions to resist neoliberal educational policies?

Semistructured interview questions focused on the ways participants use the ethics of profession and critique to determine if and how they resist educational policies that do not align with their personal and professional ethics. Essentially, the questions assessed participants' willingness to challenge the neoliberal discourse.

This chapter provides details of the study's method, beginning with a description of the approach and design, and a detailed description of the population and sample. The data collection and analysis procedures are presented, as are ethical considerations and study limitations. The chapter closes with a short summary and transition.

Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative method was selected because the aim of this study was to explore participants' perceptions and experiences with professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research is appropriate for exploring phenomena and the meanings that people assign to them. Through qualitative investigation, researchers can consider a number of dimensions that may influence informants' experiences of phenomena (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

A general qualitative design was selected for this study. This design allowed the researcher to examine participants' perceptions and lived experiences with resistance against neoliberal policies. According to Merriam (1988), general qualitative research allows

researchers to understand phenomena, processes, or perspectives of individuals involved with a phenomenon. A generic approach to qualitative research allowed the researcher to explore the study phenomenon without design constraints.

Because the aim of the study was to explore resistance, based on respondents' personal perceptions and experiences, a general qualitative design was selected. Although the researcher utilized semistructured interviews to gather detailed qualitative data, findings did not contribute to theory development. Themes were developed from interview data to shed light on how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, exercised professional resistance to neoliberal educational policies.

Participants

The researcher drew participants from a single school district located in North Carolina. This district was selected because of its diverse student population and the researcher's access to the sample. Principals were invited from selected schools, based on data provided by the study site school district and the North Carolina State Board of Education (ccs.k12.nc.us, 2018). In selecting the schools, the first consideration was to locate public (non-privatized) schools with diverse student populations, located in the study site district. The researcher desired to obtain data from principals who work in schools located in the same area in order to ensure participants experience similar social and geographic environments outside of school.

Because the study sought to explore how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, exercised professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies, the researcher examined information from the district data to confirm that evidence of neoliberal policies existed in the study site district, including the use of standardized test scores and the disaggregation of data along racial and ethnic strata. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2,

neoliberalism serves to maintain the class structure in the United States. Race is used to mask class issues in the larger society. Data from standardized tests are disaggregated along racial and ethnic strata, which affects the ways students are perceived and treated (Horsford, 2017).

Ultimately, disaggregation of data along racial and ethnic strata leads to rationing of education, providing poor and minority students with fewer resources and a subpar education (Horsford, 2017).

A criterion-based purposive sampling strategy was used to locate eight principals to participate in the current research. Purposive sampling is a strategy employed based on a-priori assumptions of the researcher that the pool of participants in the study should include certain individuals who are most likely to be able to address the phenomenon in question or who can ensure that a variety of perspectives toward the phenomenon in question have been explored (Mason 2002; Robinson, 2013; Trost, 1986). The researcher selected a purposive sampling strategy to ensure participants possess the experience needed to address the research question. Inclusion criteria are as follows: (a) possess a minimum of 2 years of experience as a public school principal in the study site district, (b) possess a minimum of a Master's degree (c) and who demonstrate resistance to neo-liberal practices and policies, as demonstrated in their questionnaire. To obtain the most appropriate sample for this study, 82 principals were invited to complete the demographic questionnaire, and eight were selected for interviews from this sample based upon their answers. These inclusion criteria were stated on the study invitation, as well as the informed consent form. Two screening questions were asked of potential participants to help ensure their eligibility for participation:

1. As a principal, have you ever had to do anything that you felt was ethically questionable because of a policy or procedure? If yes, explain.

2. Have you ever resisted a current policy that is in place in your school district?

Sample Description

Participants were recruited from a single school district located in North Carolina. This district was selected because of its diverse student population and the researcher's access to the sample. Principals were invited from selected schools, based on data provided by the study site school district and the North Carolina State Board of Education. The sample consisted of eight public school principals who currently taught at public schools in the study site district. In terms of gender, the sample was evenly divided (four men and four women). A brief description of each participants follows (see also, Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Years of Experience
Lois	late 40s	Woman	Caucasian	less than 10
Mike	mid 50s	Man	Caucasian	less than 10
Brian	early 40s	Man	Caucasian	less than 10
Rob	early 40s	Man	African American	less than 10
Charlotte	mid 30s	Woman	African American	less than 10
Rachel	early 50s	Woman	Caucasian	more than 10
Debbie	mid 50s	Woman	Caucasian	more than 15
Clark	early 60s	Man	Caucasian	more than 20

Lois. Lois is a Caucasian woman who has been a principal less than 10 years. Prior to that, she was an assistant principal and a teacher. She got into education because she is passionate about kids and education.

Mike. Mike is a Caucasian man who has been a principal for less than 10 years. For most of his career, he served as a health and physical education teacher, as well as an athletic director. Moving into administration was a natural progression in his career.

Brian. Brian is a Caucasian man who has been an elementary school principal for less than 10 years. Prior to that, he was an assistant principal.

Rob. Rob is an African American male who has been a principal for less than 10 years. He taught high school and coached football and track before deciding to go back to college for his Master's in Administration. After completing that degree, he moved into administration.

Charlotte. Charlotte is an African American woman who has been a principal for less than 10 years. She began her career in education as a music teacher. She has taught in public and private schools.

Rachel. Rachel is a Caucasian woman who has been a principal for over 10 years. She got into education because she, herself, struggled as a student. She wanted to be able to help kids.

Debbie. Debbie is a Caucasian woman who has been a principal for over 15 years.

Clark. Clark is a Caucasian man who has been a principal for over 20 years. He has been in education for 40 years, working in teaching and administrative positions.

Data Collection

Data were collected via individual, semistructured interviews with the eight participating principals. Prior to data collection, IRB approval was obtained, as well as permission from the superintendent at the study site district. Informed consent was collected from each participant. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, and were audio-recorded. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to protect the identities of all participants.

Data Collection Tools

Data for this study were gathered via audio-recorded, semistructured interviews. The interview style was non-directive. By allowing the interviewees a wide berth to discuss educational policies and resistance behaviors related to their professional ethics, the researcher was able to obtain rich, thick, data. The advantages of this non-positivist, inductive approach included the opportunity to learn about participants' perspectives and experiences without preconceived notions; this allowed the researcher to uncover unanticipated perspectives on the topics of neoliberalism, neoliberal discourse in education, principal resistance, and ethics.

Procedures

This study included eight principals located in the study site school district. Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to any data collection. Next, the researcher obtained permission from the district superintendent to interview principals at the study site school district. After all permissions were received, the researcher invited principals from the study site district to participate in the study, via email. The email invitation contained details regarding the study's purpose, participation requirements, risks and benefits, and the researcher's contact information. In addition, the email contained a consent form that interested participants were asked to sign and return to the researcher, via email. Further, the email contained a brief survey that allowed the researcher to ascertain perspectives on neo-liberal policies from principals. After consent forms were received, the researcher scheduled interviews with individuals who met all inclusion criteria. Interviews were held at locations and times that were convenient to participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Purposive sampling was selected to help ensure that participating principals possessed a variety of perspectives related to effects of neoliberal educational policies on students' success and well-being. Such policies included standardized testing, disaggregation of student test results along ethnic categories, and the stratification of students by ability. The researcher took field notes following each interview. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed by Rev.com, and data analysis were performed as indicated in the data analysis section. Member checking in the form of transcript review was also conducted. Each participant was emailed a copy of his or her transcript to look over and confirm. Feedback from all eight participants confirmed that transcripts accurately reflected the ideas and sentiments that participants desired to communicate.

All interviewees were consented as per IRB protocol. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identities and no identifying information was included in any study results. The document linking the identifier code to the subject along with all audio tapes were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office. The identifier document was stored in a separate secure location from the other documents and tapes.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, coding serves to organize the data and rearrange it into categories that facilitate the comparison of data within and between these categories, thus aiding the development of theoretical concepts (Strauss, 1987). These codes or categories emerge generally from the data, beginning with the field interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Sipe and Ghiso (2004) noted that "all coding is a judgment call" since we inevitably bring "our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions, and our quirks" (pp. 482-483) to the process. Coding allows the researcher to manage data by labeling, storing, and retrieving it for future analysis, according to the defined categories. Themes can be developed from the participants' data, and

rich, thick descriptions can be created by coding; Saldana (2009) provided an example in noting that “the word ‘security’ can be a code, though ‘false sense of security’ would act as the theme” (Saldana, 2009, p. 13). In the current study, data analysis included reading the interview transcripts, transcribing them, and coding the data gathered into categories of themes. More specifically, in the data analysis phase, the researcher followed the six-step process as outlined by Creswell (1998), which includes:

1. Organizing and preparing data.
2. Carefully reading and transcribing the data.
3. Using coding to design a detailed analysis of the information.
4. Generating a description of the findings by themes.
5. Representing the descriptions in a narrative and visuals.
6. Analysis to make meaning of the data.

The goal of the data analysis process was to describe lived experiences and supplement existing research regarding the school principal’s resistance to neoliberal policies. As such, the researcher followed Creswell’s (2005) suggestion and conduct the current study’s data analysis by “going through the data (e.g., interview transcriptions) and highlighting significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 61). Additionally, the researcher took direct quotes from the participants, use descriptive coding, using one word to describe the entire quote, as techniques to analyze the data and produce themes (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2009).

Initial Codes

Following these steps, the researcher began by submersing himself in the data. The transcripts were read several times in order to become well acquainted with the data. While

reading the transcripts, the researcher began making notes of ideas, sentiments, words, or phrases that seemed to be repeating or common to multiple interviews. Next, the researcher began coding the interviews. This process involved carefully and methodically moving through each line of the interviews while developing and assigning codes as they emerged. The researcher moved through each transcript three times to ensure the coding was exhaustive. In total, the eight interviews produced 113 pages of transcripts. Following the aforementioned analysis procedures, a total of 73 initial codes were identified. The name of each code and the frequency with which it appeared across transcripts, is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Initial Codes

Code	<i>f</i>	Code	<i>f</i>
Social media/technology	14	Give inflated evaluations	11
Social media – teacher use	7	Don't like evaluations	4
Lack of quality teachers	5	Teacher evaluations are important	2
Poor homes	8	School choice is unfair	2
Meeting needs of diverse learners	9	Affects enrollment	5
Poverty/socioeconomics	8	Cream-skimming	1
Apathy toward education (no value)	7	Propagates racial segregation	5
Not preparing kids for the real world	8	Taking money from public schools	7
Lack of community	2	Flaws in lottery	1
Student-teacher relationships	2	No accountability	5
Parent-teacher communication	3	Some aspects of school choice are fair	2
Leave no student behind	7	Redistricting	3
Test too much	18	Athletics	11
Disservice to students	7	Overcrowded schools	2
Pulling students out of class	4	Unfair advantage	2
Don't let test results define the school	3	Vouchers are bad	2
Doesn't paint the full picture	4	Inclusion is harmful	7
Don't use the results	11	Disaggregating is unnecessary	1
Go through the motions	1	School grades do not reflect school quality	2

Discarded Codes

After reviewing all of the codes for potential similarities and relevance to the research question, 12 codes were discarded (Figure 2). These codes were discarded because they either did not appear frequently enough, could not be combined with other codes to form themes, or they were not strongly aligned with the research question. This left a remaining 61 codes.

Lack of quality teachers	Flaws in lottery
Student-teacher relationships	Some aspects of school choice are fair
Parent-teacher communication	Redistricting
Go through the motions	Overcrowded schools
Scores define schools	Disaggregating is unnecessary
Teacher evaluations are important	

Figure 2. Discarded codes.

Final Themes

Next, the researcher organized the codes into groups according to similarities, searching for commonalities and considering how those groups could be arranged into themes and subthemes. After much reorganization, a total of 11 main themes were constructed. Five themes related to the ethics of critique, five themes related to the ethics of profession, and one additional theme related to teachers' lack of action and resistance. Those eleven themes, along with corresponding subthemes and codes, are illustrated in Table 4.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the concept of *trustworthiness* is used to reflect the rigor of the study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is ensured via credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Trustworthy data are that which accurately reflect the perceptions, ideas, opinions, sentiments, and experiences of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 4

Themes, Subthemes, and Corresponding Codes

Ethics of	Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Critique	Identified Concerns	Apathy	Apathy toward education Students need encouraged
		Diverse school settings	Meeting needs of diverse learners Leave no student behind Inclusion is harmful
		Home issues	Poor homes Lack of community Poverty/socioeconomics
		Social media	Social media/technology Social media – teacher use
	Standardized Testing	Over-testing	Test too much Over-testing 3 rd graders
		Harms students	Disservice to students Pulling students out of class Teaching to the test Test-related apathy Not preparing kids for the real world Teach whole child
		Using test data	Using test results Disaggregated data is useful
School Choice		Affects enrollment Athletics Taking money from public schools Propagates racial segregation Cream-skimming No accountability School choice is unfair Unfair advantage Vouchers are bad	
Performance Pay		Performance pay is unfair Teachers' salaries are too low	
Achievement Gaps		Highlight racial achievement gap EC/ELL gap	
Profession	Teacher evaluations	Critique of evaluation process	Teacher evaluations are subjective Too complicated Don't capture everything a teacher does Rubric too exhaustive Irrelevant content on observation forms Don't like evaluations
		Resistance to evaluation process	Not filled out completely honestly Checking boxes Want teachers to be happy Give inflated evaluations

Table 4 continued.

Ethics of	Theme	Subthemes	Codes	
Profession (cont.)	Attitudes toward school grades		School grades do not reflect school quality School grades do not define school	
	Attitudes toward standardized test results		Don't let test results define the school Doesn't paint the full picture Don't use the results	
	Resistance	Social media		Raise awareness of harmful policies Social media – keep it positive
		Rally teachers and parents		Rallying teachers and parents Attend protest Seek reform
		Voicing concerns		Writing letters to politicians Speaking to superintendents Talking with other principals
		No results		no results from resistance
Accountability			Teacher accountability Student accountability	
Lack of Action			No action – feeling powerless State-mandated Fear of losing job	

Credibility. Credibility refers to the degree to which data reflect participants' sentiments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility was improved via bracketing, which helped prevent the researcher's personal opinions or biases from affecting the data. Bracketing is achieved when researchers set aside their personal experiences and thoughts so they may view data with as much objectivity as possible.

Dependability. According to Bitsch (2005), dependability refers the stability of research findings, over time. Dependability may be improved via the study's audit trail, which was carefully recorded.

Transferability. Transferability describes how well findings from a study may be applied to other contexts (Merriam, 2009). Transferability was improved via thick description, which describes the act of keeping a detailed audit trail of research procedures.

Confirmability. Finally, confirmability refers to how well findings from a study are corroborated by other researchers (Anney, 2014). The strategies employed to improve credibility, dependability, and transferability all contribute to a study's confirmability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Ethical Considerations

The most significant ethical consideration was the protection of the identities of the principals involved in this study. Interviews are intrusions to interviewees' private lives; this is true with regard to their time as well as their exposure and sensitivity to the questions they may be asked (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Cohen et al., 2007). The principals in this study were individuals who are currently employed at the schools under consideration and any breach in the integrity of the process used to ensure their confidentiality could have very painful consequences.

Yin (2016) discussed the ethical problem inherent to the many discretionary choices open to researchers who work with human subjects. Conducting research (particularly qualitative research) in an ethical manner is a process that requires the researcher to be in touch with their own ethical spirit which “—transcends but is directly related to the specific procedures necessary to protect human subjects” (Yin, 2016, p. 41). The researcher believed it was important to reflect on his own ethical values before, during, and after interaction with each participant in order to remain clear of his role in protecting them and treating with dignity.

In this study, participants were not pressed to discuss anything they were uncomfortable with. The researcher informed all participants that they may choose to withdraw from the study at any time and that participation was completely voluntary. Finally, it was the ethical responsibility of the researcher to do his best to ensure the work is worthy of the difficulty that the research subject naturally endures in participating; research subjects often participate in

research to contribute to the greater good of society. It was important that the researcher reflect on the ethical responsibility that rests with him in respecting the interviewees' generosity and willingness to put themselves in a vulnerable position for the benefit of others.

Limitations

This study was subject to limitations. First, the study was limited by the small sample of principals located in a single North Carolina school district. Not only does the sample size and qualitative nature of this study preclude generalization of study findings, but it is also important to acknowledge that educational policies may vary from state to state. Further, enforcement of those policies may vary from district to district, under the leadership of different superintendents. Thus, the policies that principals must navigate, as well as how those policies are enforced, are likely to vary greatly based on a school's location.

Another limitation related to the relatively sensitive nature of this research. Interview questions specifically aimed to understand participants' criticisms of current educational policies, along with the ways they resisted those policies. While some mild resistance was indicated, it seemed that principals overwhelmingly followed protocols as expected, with the awareness that their jobs likely depended on it. Although the identities of all participants, as well as the study site school district, remained protected, it is possible that participants may have been reticent to share examples of more overt resistance due to concerns about how that information could affect them if the confidentiality of this study was ever compromised.

This study was also limited by time. In order to maintain the researcher's schedule for finishing this dissertation, the period of data collection was limited to 4 weeks. In this way, interview responses reflected respondents' perceptions and experiences with resistance for a limited period of time. In a different political or social climate, or under changing educational

policies, it is likely that responses would differ. However, the aim of this research was to examine resistance to neoliberal educational policies in the context of the current climate. Thus, this limitation was accepted.

Finally, this research was limited to an examination of select neoliberal educational policies. These policies, which were chosen according to their proliferation throughout the educational policy research, included standardized testing, teacher evaluations, school choice, school grades, disaggregated test data, and performance pay. Results of this study may have been different had other policies been the focus. This research was also subject to several delimiting factors, including the geographic location of participants, sample size, the theoretical framework, and the study design. Another important delimitation was the researcher's focus on principals, rather than other educational leaders, policymakers, or teachers.

Summary

As the U.S. educational system is increasingly controlled by neoliberal policies that are driven by performance-based assessments, marketization, choice, and even privatization, many teachers and educational leaders have found themselves in precarious professional situations, forced to navigate between damaging neoliberal agendas while upholding their moral and ethical obligations to always put the interests of their students first. The purpose of the study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, exercise professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies. The study examined participants' perceptions and experiences with resistance against such policies. Findings addressed a gap in the literature and produce preliminary data on the perceptions of principals regarding their willingness to engage in resistance against neoliberalism.

The nature of the study was qualitative and followed a general qualitative design. Data were gathered via individual interviews with a sample of eight public school principals located in a single school district located in North Carolina. The research was guided by the following essential question: Based on the perceptions and experiences of public school principals, how do the ethics of critique and profession guide decisions to resist neoliberal educational policies?

This chapter provided details regarding the current study's method. It included a description and rationale of the chosen design. The sampling strategy, data collection, and data analysis procedures were detailed. Importantly, ethical considerations and limitations were also presented.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, negotiate professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies. The study followed a general qualitative design to examine participants' perceptions and experiences with resistance against such policies. This study was guided by the following essential question: Based on the perceptions and experiences of public school principals, how do the ethics of critique and profession guide decisions regarding neoliberal educational policies?

This chapter provides results from the qualitative analysis of interviews with study participants. Results are discussed thematically, organized into themes and corresponding subthemes. The chapter closes with a brief summary.

Results

Because this study was guided by principals' use of the ethics of critique and ethics of profession, as factors that influenced their behaviors and decisions regarding neoliberal educational policies, the researcher carefully considered how each of the themes and subthemes were related to these ethics. A review of the ethics of critique and profession is useful before moving into a discussion of the themes related to each.

The Ethics of Critique

The ethics of critique is a perspective that involves the questioning of policies and laws, recognizing inequities based on class, race, and gender. Educational leaders taking this ethical standpoint may ask who creates educational policies and standards, and who benefits from their enforcement. Leaders who employ the ethics critique may question where power is delegated under educational policies and whose voices are silenced by them. The ethics of critique may

lead school leaders to question whether all children, regardless of class, race, and gender, have the same opportunities to excel.

The ethics of critique also emphasizes the ways individuals' internal values affect their behaviors. When schools disproportionately benefit some social groups and fail others, through the inequitable distribution of resources and application of rules (Freire, 1970; Furman, 2004; Giroux, 2010), school administrators are forced to confront moral issues through the ethics of critique. This ethical perspective challenges the status quo by involving social discourse, which provides a voice to the marginalized and exposes social inequities (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). From the ethics of critique, school administrators may become aware of social inequities propagated by educational policies and work on pursuing measures to correct such inequities (Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). The ethics of critique forces school administrators to rethink, redefine, and reframe concepts such as privilege, power, culture, and social injustice.

Ethics of Profession

The core of the ethics of profession is employing thoughtful, ethical decisions that emphasize the needs and interests of students (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). Sladek (2017) explained that educational leaders must be able to take responsibility for difficult ethical decisions. According to the ethics of profession, the best interests of the students should be the main drivers of professional decisions in educational settings. The ethics of profession is steeped in leaders' moral obligations to make decisions that benefit students, which may mean pushing back against a neoliberal agenda (Sladek, 2017).

Among principals, the ethics of profession guides ethical decisions at work. Under the ethics of profession, principals must examine their personal ethical codes in light of the

professional expectations, and then make decisions that are in the best interests of all students. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) ethics of profession encourages administrators to ask questions within the critique paradigm, while moving beyond those questions to ask what is in the best interests of the students.

The interview protocol was developed to examine the ways principals may employ the ethics of critique and profession to make decisions and respond to current, neoliberal educational policies. The main policies discussed included standardized testing, teacher evaluation, school choice, disaggregated test data, and performance pay. The researcher also asked participants to discuss the biggest challenges they perceived in education.

Ethics of Critique

In the context of the data that emerged from this study, the ethics of critique was mostly used to question and criticize the current educational system and neoliberal policies. Five areas of criticism corresponded with the ethics of critique, including (a) identified concerns, (b) standardized testing, (c) school choice, (d) performance pay, and (e) achievement gaps. Each of these themes and their corresponding subthemes are discussed, as follows.

Identified Concerns

Identified concerns was a main theme to emerge under the ethics of critique, as participants offered a critique of the factors they felt impeded students' educational success. Within this theme, the following four subthemes emerged: (a) apathy, (b) diverse school settings, (c) home issues, and (d) social media. Each of these subthemes are discussed below.

Apathy. Student apathy toward education emerged as a factor that participants found concerning. For example, when asked about the biggest challenges facing education today, Mike shared, "Apathy. I want to say student apathy is probably the biggest thing right now at this

level. They don't care about learning, doing their best." Similarly, Lois suggested that keeping students focused on their studies was a challenge that resulted from student apathy. Participants felt this apathetic attitude was problematic for students *and* parents. Rachel shared that a lot of students have parents who "either don't value education or just don't understand the importance of it because it's never been embedded in them." In turn, parent's negative attitudes toward education effects students' attitudes, impeding their motivation to learn and excel in school.

To overcome apathetic feelings toward education, participants felt that students needed to be encouraged and motivated. When discussing the racial achievement gap, Lois explained that students often need pep talks to get focused and raise the standards for themselves. When sharing her thoughts on standardized testing, Lois explained, "Students have to be made to realize that they do have the ability to do well on these standardized tests. They shouldn't just give up before they even walk in the room. They need to do their best." She later added, "We wear many hats as educators... [being an encourager is] one of our hats when we're in that classroom." Rachel echoed this sentiment, explaining, "We really try to instill every child to believe they can do it." To encourage students, Rachel emphasized the importance of not just giving students recognition for doing well on exams, but also helping them see that "they've endured it, they persevered, they gave their all."

Diverse school settings. Addressing the needs of individual learners in diverse student populations was also a concern expressed by participants. Lois highlighted this as a problem with teacher quality, suggesting that some teachers do not recognize the importance of differentiated learning to address individual student needs: "Some teachers, it's hard for them because they're so black and white... they're gonna teach this, this way, no matter what type of learning style the student has." Brian explained that in his school, "We have kids of all different

classes, we have kids of all different areas, so just discrepancies, how to make sure we reach everyone's needs.” Rachel acknowledged that many students “come to school with a lot of various needs, and we expect them to just sit down and learn before we attend to all of their needs.” Some participants discussed the value in standardized test scores and disaggregated test data, because when used correctly, it could help teachers and leaders see where unmet needs exist in diverse school settings. The problem though, as discussed later in this chapter, is that disaggregated test data are seldom utilized in this way.

The potential harm of inclusivity policies in diverse school settings was also brought up by some participants. Brian spoke extensively of the potential drawbacks of inclusion, especially in schools with large populations of exceptional children (EC) learners and English language learners (ELLs). He explained that EC students are often mainstreamed under inclusivity principles and as a way to foster dynamic and diverse classroom settings. However, Brian argued that doing so was a disservice to EC kids:

Sometimes, for a classroom of 24 kids, it's not the best place for that [EC] student [in a mainstream class]. That's one thing with EC that kind of, we need to not worry as much about hurting feelings, and get more to the best place for that child, and not just that child but also the 23 other kids in that child's classroom.

The challenges of meeting the needs of diverse learners also emerged during participants' discussion of standardized testing. For example, Rachel felt it was not fair to hold EC and ELL students to the same testing standards as native English speakers and developmentally normal students. She shared an anecdote about how this principle harmed a recently immigrated elementary student at her school:

We just got a student in last week, speaks no English, and she's a fifth grader coming from Honduras. She's got to take the EOG in two months and she's accountable for that test score and we are too, which is unfair. So, I think if she has to take it, there should be some sort of Spanish version because we're not measuring her reading comprehension, we're measuring her English ability.

Home issues. Challenges related to students' home lives were also brought up by participants. Rob explained that many students come from homes where they are not taught how to behave properly and have poor parental examples to model themselves after. Debbie shared a similar sentiment, explaining that many students come from "families that are broken, families that are multi-families in a home, families that don't have skills dealing with children's behavior. That's the biggest issue that I have on a daily basis." Rachel mentioned the "negative experiences" students have at home as a "major concern."

Poverty and low socioeconomic status (SES) emerged as concern related to the home. Often, older students from poor homes are required to work to contribute to the family income, which detracts from their focus on school. As Lois explained, "Some of them are having to go to work, and when they leave these doors, this [education] is not their priority." Similarly, when asked about some of the challenges that students faced, Rachel replied, "Also, just the poverty that some of them have, and the experiences they have at home, the negative experiences they have at home about life in school." Clark explained that low SES created barriers to experiences that were central to students' educations: "A lot of these lower socioeconomic kids don't have the experiences that these other kids have, and that's a problem."

Social media/technology. Issues with social media and technology were mentioned by every participant as a concern. When asked about the biggest challenges he faced as a principal, Rob highlighted the issues of cell phones and social media. He referred to cell phones as:

A distraction from learning all the time. Teachers are constantly taking cell phones from students, which is another problem in itself, and the social media stuff is crazy. It's really a national crisis. I don't think the general public understands how this is affecting our students. They're addicted to their phones like it's a drug. If there's one thing I could change, it would be that.

Similarly, Charlotte described social media as the biggest challenge she faces as principal. She described social media as a "constant battle of he-said, she-said," a lot of which "happens outside the school day, at night, and then trickles into the next day." Charlotte believed that social media "can cause major disruptions" to student learning. Debbie voiced similar concerns, stating that technology had become a challenge because society is now "completely dependent upon it." Debbie was particularly concerned about students being exposed to things they were not mature enough to handle, through technology and social media:

You want to put a device in everyone's hand, but everyone is not mature enough to handle a device in their hand, and they're very savvy, and they're going places, and doing things, and being exposed to things online that they did not have access to prior to this.

While most of the discussion about the challenges of social media and technology pertained to students, some participants also described challenges navigating social media use among the teachers at their schools. Lois felt that teachers often have a hard time navigating the "fine line" regarding what was appropriate and inappropriate to post on their personal social media accounts. She shared, "We gotta be careful on what we post always, and even though it's

their personal account, if it's out there on the internet, even though it's personal, all it takes is one screenshot and it's out there for everyone to see.” Mike felt that social media use among teachers was particularly problematic when they used the platforms to vent or voice professional frustrations, rather than coming to him to discuss it. He explained, “Social media is not where we're going to go out and spread our conflicts with each other about it.”

Standardized Testing

Standardized testing was a concern voiced by all participants. Within this theme, the following three subthemes emerged: (a) over-testing, (b) harms students, and (c) using test data.

Over-testing. The code related to over-testing, “test too much,” occurred 18 times, making it one of the most prominent codes to emerge from interview data. All eight participants expressed concerns regarding the quantity of standardized testing that students were subjected to. Lois shared, “The kids are just being tested too much.” When asked to share his thoughts on standardized testing, Mike said, “There’s just too much of it.” Rob stated, “We test way too much” and Charlotte shared, “I think we test the students too much.” Similarly, Rachel echoed, that there’s “too much testing.” Debbie said, “We over-test our students,” and Clark felt “the problem with standardized testing is there’s too much of it.”

While the sentiment of over-testing was evident across all grade levels, many participants specifically criticized the amount of standardized testing among third graders. For example, Charlotte and Rachel specifically mentioned over-testing in third grade. Rachel explained, “I think particularly third grade. They're testing with Read to Achieve, they're testing with Reading 3D. There are going to be testing with NC Check-Ins, or testing with EOG test. Specifically, third grade, they're tested way too much.” Debbie explained that third grade was a big year for bench marking – consequently, “All they [students] do is test.”

Harms students. Participants were also critical of standardized testing because they believed it harmed students, creating a disservice by taking away from their learning. For example, Lois voiced concerns about the way she felt testing took time away from learning in core classes. Rob felt that “the kids spend more time testing than they do learning.” Rachel was worried about the way testing and test preparation monopolized much of the educational time, limiting educators’ abilities to meet students’ actual learning needs in the classroom. Debbie felt that with all the emphasis on testing, teachers “miss great teaching opportunities because you’re so focused on getting to the goal of passing that test, that you miss the sharing things with students, like experiences and real-life social lessons.” Lois specifically mentioned her concerns with pulling students out of class to test them: “The kids are just being tested so much, and we’re pulling them out of instruction in their classroom.”

Using test data. While most of the participants’ sentiments surrounding standardized testing was critical, it is important to mention that some expressions of its usefulness were also shared. For example, Rachel detailed how she used results from data to identify areas of weakness and strength, from the teacher to the student:

We start with data as soon as we get it and we break it down. Looking at all of our subgroups, looking at teachers individually, their strengths and their weaknesses.

Looking at our whole school of data, seeing if we’ve not hit a specific standard across the board or if it’s individual teachers.

She later shared that this process of really analyzing standardized test scores allowed her and her teachers to be “real clear on the data.” Similarly, Debbie shared how standardized test data was useful for identifying low-performing teachers: “If you see patterns [in the data], they’re coming from different teachers, then that’s where your weaknesses lie.” Although Clark was very critical

of standardized testing, he admitted that examining the data was helpful for placing students in appropriate classes and making sure their individual needs were met.

School Choice

One of the interview questions prompted participants to share their thoughts on school choice. A number of sentiments were expressed, with most of them critical of school choice policies. Many participants were critical of school choice because they believed the policies negatively affected enrollment at traditional public schools. Lois explained,

I disagree to take students out of my building, whether I'm at that low-income school or at the school that I'm at now, I disagree that taking students out, just because the parent thinks that this other school might benefit their children more, that's gonna hurt my allotment.

Lois said that she wanted “what’s best for the student,” but also did not want to lose students from her enrollment because of school choice policies.

Ultimately, Lois’s concerns about school choice policies affecting her enrollment were related to her school’s funding, which is based on student enrollment. Criticism of school choice in this regard was voiced by almost every participant. For example, when asked for his thoughts on school choice, Mike shared, “I would say it’s a bad thing. I mean, they’re taking public education money to support other academic schools or whatever, and I don’t think that’s right.” The idea was that public charters and vouchers for private schools ultimately redistribute funding away from public schools. Rob echoed this sentiment: “When the state funds charter and private schools, the public schools see a lot less money.”

Charlotte felt that the funding redistribution through school choice ultimately benefitted more wealthy students and propagated segregation: “It takes money away from public schools so

the rich kids can have better schools. I think it also leads to segregation among other things. Not a fan at all.” The sentiment that school choice could ultimately contribute to segregation was also voiced by Rob and Rachel. Mike was concerned that school choice “takes good students and good athletes away from other schools that would benefit from having them at those schools.”

Rachel felt that parents should have the option of putting their children in non-traditional schools, but that public funds should not be used to fuel this choice:

I feel like if parents want their students to have an alternative education, they should pay for it. I don't think we should be paying ... I don't think the public school should be losing money for students to go to those schools.

Similarly, Clark did not take issue with the availability of educational options for students, via school choice; his issue was with channeling public funds to charters and private schools:

I believe that if parents want to send their kid to a Christian school, or they want to send them to a Catholic school, or they want to send them to just a private school, where they think there are opportunities for their child to learn, I have no problem with that. My problem becomes using tax dollars for that.

Another criticism of school choice was the lack accountability associated with it, in terms of student performance and acceptance into schools. For example, Rob explained that “Charter schools don’t have to accept everyone and there’s really no accountability with that.” Mike also shared this concern, explaining “I think it's [school choice] not fair. There are schools that have academies or choice programs that are not open to every other student in the county because their academies or schools of choice are already filled.”

Clark was concerned about charter schools receiving public fund and being staffed with unqualified teachers. He shared,

We have to have highly qualified teachers. We have to do standardized testing. We have to do these kinds of things. There are no standards at private schools. They don't have to have qualified teachers. I know for a fact there are private schools who have teachers teaching elementary school who don't even have a college education.”

Clark later added, “I’m not opposed to private schools. I’m opposed to vouchers if they are not held accountable.”

Lois and Mike specifically criticized school choice when it was used to attract athletes to certain schools. Lois referred to this as “legalized recruiting.” For Lois, a clear line should exist between athletics and academics. She explained,

If a student goes to a academy, I don't believe they should be allowed to play sports, because if that parent is saying that this academy is best for their student to get the job that they want, or get into the college or university that they want once they graduate high school, then athletics shouldn't be the driving force.

From her perspective, athletics were a driving force behind school choice decisions, and she felt this was unfair because the main objective of school and any decisions made around it should be academic. Mike shared a similar observation regarding school choice decisions made by parents and students: “I think they use it for athletics. I think they choose certain schools to go to because of a certain athletic program.”

Performance Pay

Participants were also critical of teacher and principal performance pay. For example, when asked her opinion of performance pay, Charlotte exclaimed,

I absolutely hate it. It's not a fair system at all. My students tend to be lower and typically don't do as well on the test so why should I be punished for that? I think I'm very good at helping children in poverty, in fact, I would say it's even a calling. So basically, someone who is good at this should go to a school where the students are more affluent and I think that hurts students of color or less affluent kids. A lot of our best principals go to better schools just to get paid more.

Debbie also felt performance pay was unfair. She shared that she believed 90% of the teachers in her school were high-performing, yet only seven of them got performance pay bonuses. Debbie explained that for the select few who received bonus checks, performance pay was exciting. However, she believed performance was “also a deterrent and just a pure depressant to the others who've worked their butts off too.” She also questioned the validity of the performance pay system, suggesting that sub-par teachers are often rewarded: “And the teachers that get the checks, it just blows your mind. You're like, ‘What? Seriously?’ Because of their growth, and because you don't know really what students count on your growth formula.”

Clark believed in holding teachers and schools accountable for providing high-quality education, but he did not believe performance pay was the right way to incentivize performance. He shared, “I believe in holding teachers accountable and I believe in holding the students accountable. But, right now, the incentive pay is a little bit difficult.” Essentially, Clark was concerned that performance pay opportunities were not available for teachers outside of core subject areas, and that it was nearly impossible for teachers in less affluent schools to obtain the bonuses.

Charlotte and Clark both believed that teachers' salaries were too low – but that performance pay was not the way to raise teacher pay. Clark explained, “I'm just not in favor of

incentive pay. I feel we could take that money and use it better elsewhere. I think if we paid the teachers a decent salary, we wouldn't need to worry about incentive pay.”

Achievement Gaps

The last theme to emerge for the ethics of critique were achievement gaps. The gaps that participants mentioned were related to race, English language proficiency, socioeconomic status, and cognitive abilities. Discussions of the achievement gap came up often when asked about standardized testing or disaggregated test data. For example, when asked about his thoughts on racially disaggregated test data, Brian mentioned that African American students persistently underperformed when compared to their Caucasian peers. Because a large percentage of the student body at Brian’s school were African American, he explained that the racial achievement gap negatively affected his school’s grade. Rachel also specifically mentioned the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students at her school. Rob explained that his school’s proficiency scores were not as good as those in more affluent school districts, highlighting the socioeconomic achievement gap. Rob also touched on the way the racial achievement gap affected school grades and funding, stating: “If you notice, all the white schools are B’s and some C’s and all the black schools are D’s and F’s. They do this on purpose to keep us separated.” In this way, Rob felt that school grades not only highlighted the racial achievement gap, but also worked to keep that gap in place.

The achievement gaps among EC and ELL students was mentioned by some participants during discourse on standardized testing. For example, Brian criticized the reality that EC students were held to the same testing standards as their typically-developing peers: “It just seems a little ridiculous when we know we have kids they have IEP's, they have all these extra accommodations and everything else, and they're still held to the same standard.” Brian’s point

was that EC students are taught differently all year, provided with special accommodations in class, but then are expected to take the same test that the rest of the students are required to take – and those students’ scores then affect schools’ overall grades. In this way, schools with a large number of EC students (or ELLs, poor students, or racial minorities) are likely to have lower grades because these groups of students typically perform more poorly on standardized tests.

Rachel shared Brian’s concerns about testing EC students. She explained, “Children with low cognitive abilities expected to take a regular EOG like typical children or children with average IQs. And the students are expected to pass that, which is unrealistic for some.” Rachel described the achievement gap (measured via standardized testing) among EC students at her school as “hugely significant.”

Ethics of Profession

In the context of this research, the ethics of profession highlighted the ways teachers acted or resisted neoliberal educational policies. Five themes aligned with the ethics of profession, including (a) teacher evaluations, (b) attitudes toward school grades, (c) attitudes toward standardized test results, (d) resistance, and (e) accountability.

Teacher Evaluations

Participants were asked to share their thoughts on the teacher evaluation process. Although the researcher anticipated that responses would be more critical in nature (and not necessarily involve any type of resistance), this theme aligned with the ethics of profession because participants did indicate some dissenting behaviors related to evaluation. The two subthemes to emerge for this theme were *critique of evaluation process* and *resistance to evaluation process*.

Critique of evaluation process. Overall, participants were critical of the teacher evaluation process. Lois, Rob, and Clark specifically stated they did not like teacher evaluations. Participants felt the process was too complicated and the rubric was too involved. For example, Mike explained that in the 20 years he spent in administration, the evaluation form had evolved from a two-page document to an 11- to 12-page form. Brian described the evaluation form as “very word,” adding that he did not think it served a good purpose. Brian, Charlotte, and Rob expressed that it would be impossible for even the best teachers to demonstrate everything they were required, per the evaluation form, during a single, 45-minute evaluation. According to Charlotte, “There’s no way even the best teacher in the world is doing all of those things on the rubric.” Rob explained, “There are six standards and it’s really too much, like, there’s no way a teacher is doing all of those things.” In addition, not all of the standards are applicable to every teacher, in every teaching situation. Rachel explained, “They’re looking for everything for everybody and some things are relative.” Because some of the content on the evaluation form was irrelevant in some contexts, Brian shared that he felt like he was spending a lot of time “just typing things that have nothing to do with the observation.”

In addition to feeling that the evaluation rubrics were too exhaustive, participants also believed the process failed to capture everything a teacher actually does in the classroom. For example, Mike explained that a 45-minute evaluation was not an effective way to really assess all the things teachers regularly do in their classrooms. Similarly, Brian shared, “It’s very hard to do a lesson, do one observation of one lesson, and be able to come up with an observation.” Clark echoed this sentiment, explaining that there were times when he wanted a teacher to perform specific standards, and he knew those standards *were* a part of that teacher’s regular instruction, yet he or she failed to demonstrate it during the evaluation.

Another criticism of the teacher evaluation process was related to its inherent subjectivity. Lois shared, “I think that our teaching evaluation instrument is very subjective.” Lois explained that different administrators placed different levels of value on certain aspects of the evaluation instrument. Essentially, there seemed to be an issue with inter-rater reliability. Participants also admitted that it was sometimes difficult to be objective when performing evaluations. As Brian shared, “In all honesty, there are some teachers you don't like as much and it's harder to find those good things.”

Resistance to evaluation process. As a result of their frustrations and criticism of the teacher evaluation process, many participants demonstrated resistance to it. Interestingly, the form of resistance was giving inflated evaluations, or not filling out evaluation forms completely honestly. Rob believed that this was common practice among principals: “I think most principals probably do this, but I basically just click boxes if the teacher is doing a good job.” Although Charlotte expressed the belief that teacher evaluations were important, she admitted, “I try to be as honest as I can, but sometimes I don't follow the rubric exactly.” Clark explained that he was more relaxed on evaluations, and would give teachers credit based on a more holistic view of whether or not they were meeting standards.

Many of the participants described the evaluation process as “checking boxes.” Lois stated, “I don't like the way that you just check a box.” Debbie described evaluations as a “check-the-box system.” Rob explained, “I basically just click boxes if the teacher is doing a good job.” Charlotte admitted that she will sometimes check boxes on an evaluation form to keep a teacher happy. Mike explained that it was important for teachers to feel good about themselves after an evaluation. When discussing teacher evaluations, Rob stated, “you have to keep them happy.”

This idea of “checking boxes” and “keeping teachers happy” gave way to a covert form of dissent in which principals would give inflated evaluations. For example, Lois explained that if she knew a teacher’s students were performing well on standardized tests, she was more apt to give them higher marks. She rationalized this action as erring on the side of the teacher.

Similarly, Mike explained,

You want them to continue doing the things that they're doing and then come back and be at your school. I think you do sometimes elevate those observations to meet what they're saying about themselves, even if it may not be 100% accurate.

Brian admitted that sometimes his personal feelings toward a teacher would lead him to give an inflated evaluation: “I think sometimes I also catch myself, I like this teacher, I know this is a good teacher and it's almost regardless of what I see, I'm more inclined to want to give them a higher rating, just in general.” Brian described inflated evaluation as throwing teachers a bone.

Rob admitted that sometimes he marks teachers as “accomplished on everything even if they really don’t deserve it.”

Attitudes Toward School Grades

Another way that participants demonstrated resistance to neoliberal educational policies was evident in their attitudes toward school grades. Despite the narrative in educational policy that places heavy emphasis on high-stakes testing and the school grades that result from student scores, many participants did not seem to place too much emphasis on school grades. They expressed an awareness that their schools were judged based on grades, but they resisted using scores to define their schools or reflect school quality. This was an interesting finding – participants were not *apathetic* about school grades, but they seemed to have learned to not take them too seriously. They understood that the school grading system was firmly in place, and

there was not much they, as individual administrators, could do to change that system. However, many adopted a perspective that limited the emphasis placed on school grades. For example, Lois explained that although her school was rated as a C, “We're not a C school. We're not. I don't have blinders on when I say that. There are great things going on in this building.” Rob admitted that he felt school grades were stupid: “I think it’s stupid to be honest. They are basing an entire grade on a few tests. They don’t see all the other good things.”

Attitudes Toward Standardized Test Results

Similar to the relaxed attitudes toward school grades, participants’ attitudes toward standardized test results may reflect some resistance to neoliberal policies. For example, Mike admitted,

I tell my faculty and staff that I'm not going to put a whole lot of emphasize or stock on one three-hour test at the end of the year, an end of grade test, that's going to define us.

As long as we're doing our best, as long as we're doing what's right by students and we do that on a daily basis and a weekly basis, monthly basis throughout the year, then I'm not going to put a whole lot of stock in what one three hour test is going to say about [our school].

Similarly, Charlotte explained, “The test is not the end-all, be-all at my school, so we try to focus on the more positive things.” Mike chose not to place too much emphasis on standardized test scores because it was just one way to examine a school’s performance – and that other metrics, such as GPA, attendance, and behavioral referrals, were not part of that equation.

In addition to taking a relaxed attitude toward testing, participants indicated resistance via the ways they handled test scores – that is, many admitted to not using data provided from standardized tests. For example, when discussing disaggregated test data, Mike shared,

I think I can honestly say at the several different schools I've been at we've had disaggregated data and looked different subgroups and figured out who was lower, who was higher, whatever but I don't think it's ever really changed our educational processes. I don't think we've ever said, "Okay, well we have this subgroup that is low. That needs more help with math or English so how are we going to change the way we teach or what programs are we going to put these kids in to help improve those test scores?" I think we kind of look at that stuff but I can't say we always make good educational choices on how to help those kids.

Similarly, Brian explained that he would “go through the motions” with examining test data, but “we don't primarily care too much about it.” Later, he admitted, “We don't use the results for anything.” Rob explained that his school was “not big on test scores.” In terms of the data received from scores, Charlotte did not find it terribly helpful, adding, “I don't use it.” When asked about racially disaggregated data, Debbie explained, “We get a lot of racially [dis]aggregated data from the county, but I don't necessarily see the benefit of saying that our black females are performing at this, and our black males are performing at that. I like to think of it more holistically.”

Resistance

A major theme related to the ethics of profession had to do with additional ways participants exercised resistance. Four subthemes emerged for the resistance theme, including (a) social media, (b) rallying teachers and parents, (c) voicing concerns, and (d) no results. Each of these subthemes are discussed below.

Social media. Another way that participants demonstrated passive resistance to the neoliberal agenda in education was through social media. For example, Rob admitted to posting

articles on his Twitter account to raise awareness about the dangers of standardized testing. He explained,

I think it's important to keep the parents, at least who follow my twitter or Facebook, informed about what's going on. Like we're not big on test scores so I will always put things on social media that sort of counter the trend against all this data stuff.

For Rob, social media was an outlet for him to express his distaste toward educational policies he disagreed with, while raising awareness and rallying others: "It's an outlet for me to keep people informed. A lot of people don't know the issues and this is a way I think is helpful in keeping people up-to-date." Similarly, Charlotte used social media to raise awareness and share her opinions about policies such as standardized testing. She referred to herself as "one of those social warrior types" and admitted she did "not have any issues just letting it out there." Despite referring to herself as a social warrior type, Charlotte also admitted that she did not resist policies in ways other than posting on social media.

It is important to note that other participants intentionally refrained from using social media to criticize policies, as they perceived doing so as negative. In this way, many participants elected to use their social media accounts to share positive information, rather than to criticize the system. Lois shared, "I don't want our school Facebook page to be a platform for negative talk." Rachel also reserved social media use in a similar way: "The only thing I post on social media about the school is on Twitter, and it's the great things going on in the classroom and what students are doing." Clark also tried to keep his social media posts positive, and explained that he would sometimes use it to fact check or correct misinformation that was proliferating on a topic.

Rallying teachers and parents. An important strategy for resistance to neoliberal educational policies described by participants involved rallying teachers and parents to become involved in resisting such policies. For example, Charlotte openly expressed her distaste for the third grade Read to Achieve exam and encouraged her parents to write letters and email the Governor to express their concerns. She also “gave out the number to his office and tried to get them [parents] to call in protest.” Charlotte was also involved in a teacher pay protest and organized caravans to transport teachers to the protest. She also convinced her superintendent to cancel school for the county so her and her teaching staff could attend the rally. Similarly, Rachel rallied parents, encouraging them to write letters to the state to protest a particular exam (EXTEND1). Debbie admitted to encouraging her teachers to write letters and send emails to push back against the neoliberal agenda in education.

Voice concerns. A more active way that participants expressed resistance was through directly voicing their concerns about neoliberal educational policies. The main ways that participants did this was through speaking with their superintendents, writing letters, and talking with other principals or colleagues. For example, Lois admitted to speaking with her superintendent to express concerns about standardized testing policies and athletic recruiting. Mike spoke to his superintendent about his concerns regarding a hiring freeze at his school. Brian expressed his concerns regarding school choice policies and the lottery system to his district’s head of elementary education. Rob admitted to “complaining” about standardized testing policies to his superintendent, but acknowledged that “she can’t really do much.” Charlotte spoke with her superintendent about unfair performance pay. Similarly, Clark raised issues with performance pay with his superintendent, but was not confident that the conversations made any difference, sharing “What good does that do?”

Some participants also demonstrated resistance by speaking with other principals and colleagues. For example, Lois explained that she had met with other principals in her district to discuss issues with school choice. By coming together in this way, the principals would then collectively express their concerns to the superintendent. Mike met with athletic directors in his area to discuss the school choice issue related to athletics and recruitment:

At central office, at athletic director's meetings, we have said that it's not fair and we have said we think School A or School B is violating these rules or finding loopholes in them to get students or to get athletes to their schools so we have voiced it that this is not a fair practice.

Mike also mentioned meeting with other principals to discuss the higher rates of disciplinary action taken with male African American students. Brian discussed meeting with other principals to talk about concerning school grade policies: “We actually talked about it this morning at our, we had a meeting on our little subset of principals, and we talked about it with the director of evaluation.”

Finally, some participants described writing letters to politicians to express their concerns. Charlotte not only wrote letters herself, but as previously mentioned, she rallied her teachers and parents to do the same. Rachel wrote to politicians about her concerns with over-testing students. Debbie said she had written letters as well: “When given the opportunity, I have voiced my opinions. I've written to legislators, I've sent emails. I'm not a moral majority or anything like that, but I do weigh in.”

No results. An important final subtheme to emerge for the theme of resistance related to the lack of results garnered from acts of resistance. For example, when the researcher asked Charlotte about the results from rallying teachers and parents, and writing letters to politicians,

she admitted she had received no response: “No, I never heard anything and they just went ahead with it.” When Rachel wrote letters about her issues with the EXTEND1 test, she “never got a response.” In addition, Rachel shared that none of the parents who wrote letters got responses either. The only response that Debbie had ever received after writing to politicians was “a ‘thank you for your input’ email – and that’s about it.”

Clark shared an interesting anecdote that suggested leaders may just try to placate administrators who are frustrated with current policies – without making any real changes. When having a conversation about teacher evaluation issues with a chairperson at the State Board of Education, Clark shared:

She goes, “I do value your input.” Well, what I found out is they really didn't value my input because anything that I had said that I disagree with, the wording of something, nothing changed. Basically, it was there, they pretended we were part of that committee and they really didn't use us.”

Accountability

The belief in the importance of teacher accountability was shared by all participants. The code for teacher accountability appeared more frequently (23 times) than other code. Overall, participants felt strongly that teachers should be held accountable in a number of ways – however, the sentiments among participants also indicated they did not believe current accountability practices (i.e., standardized testing, the current system of teacher evaluations, performance pay, school grades) were the best strategies for fostering accountability among teachers. For example, while Rob admitted he was “not a fan” of standardized testing, he did believe it helped gauge teacher effectiveness. He explained,

Like when we do our 8th grade science exam, we'll know which teacher was more successful. If one teacher exceeds growth and the other doesn't make growth and they have basically the same type of kid, you know something went wrong in the one teacher's class. That lets me know where I should be putting my resources and efforts. We want every kid to be successful and we have to make sure the teacher is doing everything she can to make that happen.

Charlotte, who voiced concerns about the dangers of the current standardized testing system, acknowledged that she also believed standardized testing "helps teachers stay on their A game." Similarly, Charlotte shared that she felt teacher evaluations were important for holding teachers accountable, but admitted she was "not a fan" of the current evaluation rubric. Rachel believed there should be some way of tracking students' progress, and holding *both* teachers and students accountable; however, she did not believe current standardized testing practices were fostering accountability in the best ways. Debbie echoed this sentiment about testing, sharing,

I do believe that there should be some accountability piece. I'm not sure that an end-of-year standardized test is what we're going for, but I do think there should be some accountability for teachers and students, for the materials that they're supposed to cover.

Clarke believed the goal of standardized testing was to hold teachers and students' accountable for progress, but that leaders needed to find a better way of doing that because the current system of over-testing was not working. Throughout his interview, Clark repeated his opinion that teachers and students must be held accountable, but that standardized testing and performance pay was not the way to do it.

Lack of Action

A final theme to emerge, which did not directly relate to the ethics of critique or profession, but was certainly integral to this study, was *lack of action*. Sadly, there was a sense of powerlessness among many participants that prohibited them from taking action (i.e., resisting policies, voicing their concerns, etc.). This lack of action seemed to correspond with a sense of apathy and resignation— a belief that there really was not much administrators could do to enact change. Mike gave a good example of this attitude when he was asked about how he navigated standardized testing policies in North Carolina: “Well, I mean I think it's something that you just have to do as part of the job, unfortunately.” He later explained, “I kind of go with the flow” and admitted there was never a policy that he took a stand on and resisted: “I can't say that there's anything that I've just said, ‘This is not right. We need to change. This is not fair.’”

Rob admitted to sharing his concerns with his superintendent, but believed “he probably can't do much about it either.” He said he didn't mind using social media to express himself, but never took much of a stand on neoliberal policies: “I usually don't mind expressing myself that way. But in reality, I just don't talk about. The kids are oblivious and I never get asked by parents about so I guess you can say I pretty much just ignore it.” Besides the “occasional post on Twitter,” Charlotte admitted that she had never openly resisted policies. She was even very careful about what she posted on social media because “They're pretty big on data in this county so the powers-at-be probably wouldn't like that too much.” This sentiment hinted at a fear of being reprimanded or losing her job if she did openly criticize policies. Rob echoed this belief when he explained why he had not openly resisted testing policies: “Well, you can't resist it as far as not letting the kids test because I would lose my job if I did that.”

Debbie expressed apathy toward racially disaggregated test data, admitting that she had not resisted the policies in any way. When asked why she had not taken any action, she explained, “Well, because when I just come here, I do nothing. I mean, we look at different levels... I'm not going to say I completely ignore it. I do take note of it, but it hasn't changed the way that I manage things.” When asked if he had ever taken any action to resist, Clark admitted, “I have not.”

Part of the apathy that may have inhibited resistance was the understanding that most of the policies participants disagreed with were state-mandated. For example, Lois shared that standardized testing was required “because the state says so.” Rachel believed that parents’ understanding that testing was state-mandated prevented them from resisting test policies. She explained that parents never really complained about standardized testing, and she believed that was because “I think that they know it's coming from the state.”

Summary

The aim of this research was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, negotiate professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies. The study followed a general qualitative design to examine participants’ perceptions and experiences with resistance against such policies. Analysis of interviews with eight principals located in a North Carolina school district revealed a total of 11 themes. The ethics of critique was mostly used to question and criticize the current educational system and neoliberal policies. Five themes of criticism corresponded with the ethics of critique, including (a) identified concerns, (b) standardized testing, (c) school choice, (d) performance pay, and (e) achievement gaps. The ethics of profession highlighted the ways teachers acted or resisted neoliberal educational policies. Five themes aligned with the ethics of profession, including (a) teacher

evaluations, (b) attitudes toward school grades, (c) attitudes toward standardized test results, (d) resistance, and (e) accountability. A final theme to emerge, which did not directly relate to the ethics of critique or profession, but was certainly integral to this study, was *lack of action*.

This chapter provided details of the analysis and findings. In the following chapter, a discussion of study findings is provided. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore if and how principals, guided by the ethics of critique and profession, negotiated professional resistance against neoliberal educational policies. Interviews with eight principals located in a North Carolina school district shed light on the ways the ethics of critique and profession were used to guide decisions related to neoliberal educational policies. Qualitative analysis of interviews revealed the following five themes of criticism, which corresponded with the ethics of critique: (a) identified concerns, (b) standardized testing, (c) school choice, (d) performance pay, and (e) achievement gaps. An additional five themes aligned with the ethics of profession, including (a) teacher evaluations, (b) attitudes toward school grades, (c) attitudes toward standardized test results, (d) resistance, and (e) accountability. A final theme, which did not directly relate to the ethics of critique or profession, but which shed light on the struggles participants faced when balancing their personal ethics with their professional responsibilities, was lack of action.

This chapter provides a discussion of the study findings, beginning with an interpretation of the results in light of findings from previous researchers. Study limitations are acknowledged, and recommendations for future research are provided. Practical and theoretical implications are also included in this chapter. The discussion closes with the researcher's concluding thoughts.

Interpretation of the Findings

Research indicates that the negative effects of neoliberal educational policies have resulted in resistance from teachers and educational leaders (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016; Wilkins, 2015). Resistance and dissent are integral to a healthy democracy, as these acts foster the development of new ideas that empower the will of the people (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda,

2016). Educators who resist harmful neoliberal policies that harm students, can help safeguard the best interests of students (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016).

An extensive review of the available literature on resistance to neoliberalism in education revealed no studies specifically focused on the strategies employed by principals and administrators. This represented an important gap that was addressed in the current study. Accordingly, findings from the current study are contextualized against findings from previous research, which was mostly limited to resistance exercised by teachers.

Previous researchers focused on a number of specific strategies employed by teachers to resist educational policies. These strategies included the use of small publics, social media, online compositions, strikes, boycotts, media coverage, grassroots efforts, and counter publics. While principals in the current study described use of some of these strategies, significant differences between their resistance strategies, and the strategies employed by teachers in previous investigations, were evident. A discussion of the ways findings from the current investigation align and contrast with prior investigations with teacher participants is discussed as follows.

Previous research indicated that teachers may use small publics to resist neoliberal educational policies. Small publics are spaces that educators can use as places to collaborate, discuss their concerns, foster collective action, and initiate meaningful change (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016). The key to an effective small public is that the size must remain small in order to incorporate the feedback and opinions of all members. Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda found that teachers used small publics as places to discuss concerns about educational policies; similarly, participants in the current study mentioned meeting with other principals or colleagues to share concerns with one another. Although it seemed that the meetings between principals did

not produce much action beyond forwarding concerns to superintendents, this was an indication that participants in the current investigation used small publics.

Previous investigators have reported that teachers also resisted neoliberal educational policies was through social media postings. For example, Brickner (2017) explored teachers' use of social media platforms to resist educational policies and found they created public spaces for educators to express their concerns about current educational policies. The social media platforms also helped participating teachers understand their frustrations and concerns as common to other teachers; in this way, participation created a sense of empowerment for them. Brickner reasoned that the solidarity inspired through social media facilitated more activism among geographically-disparate teachers.

The teacher resistance that Brickner (2017) found evidence of in social media platforms varied drastically from the use described by principals in the current study. Only Rob and Charlotte admitted to using social media as a tool of resistance by posting criticisms of current policies on their social media accounts. Other participants were careful to reserve social media use for reporting positive things that took place in their schools. There was a common sentiment among some participants that publicly criticizing educational policies could place them in professional jeopardy. It seemed that teachers in Brickner's study felt far more comfortable expressing criticism and resistance than did principals in the current study. This discrepancy may certainly be because principals are held to a different standard, and their expectations of professional conduct differ from those of teachers. Perhaps also, principals feel they have more to lose by expressing resistance, because they have worked up more professional ranks to earn their positions as administrators. Principals may also lack the sense of solidarity that large groups of teachers are able to generate when they come together, as in Brickner's study.

Previous investigators also found that teachers sometimes use online compositions, such as blogs and other virtual publications, to criticize educational policies. For example, Stewart and Boggs (2015) found that teachers often wrote strong arguments and narratives in blogs to voice concerns and raise awareness of the current educational climate. None of the principals in the current investigation mentioned online compositions. Given their reticence to express resistance in short social media posts, it was not particularly surprising that principals did not use online compositions.

Another way that teachers exercised resistance, as reported by previous investigators, was through strikes and boycotts. For example, in 2012, Chicago teachers went on strike over pay, job security, and work conditions (Rodriguez, 2016). Teachers have also launched boycotts in resistance to educational policy. For example, a group of Seattle teachers came together in 2013 and refused to administer a standardized test they believed was flawed (Queally, 2013). Importantly, acts of strikes and boycotts are often considered extreme, even for teachers. It was not surprising that none of the principals in the current investigation alluded to the use of these forms of resistance. It is likely that teachers feel empowered to engage in strikes or boycotts because they know there is power in numbers. If most of the teachers in a school agree to go on strike, the school could not function. However, most schools have one head principal. The “power in numbers” cannot be leveraged by principals in the same way that teachers leverage it. It is far easier to replace a striking administrator than it is to replace half the teachers staffing an entire school. Similarly, it is a lot easier to fire an administrator who goes on strike than it is to fire the majority of teachers at a school.

Previous researchers found that teachers also exercised resistance by garnering media coverage and enacting grassroots campaigns. However, none of the principals in this study

indicated use of either of these resistance strategies. An important theme to emerge from this investigation, which did not align with scholarship presented in Chapter 2, was “lack of action.” There was a sense of powerlessness among many participants that prohibited them from taking action. Participants’ lack of action seemed to correlate with a sense of apathy and concerns about the professional risks associated with resistance. Part of the apathy that inhibited resistance may have related to an understanding that most neoliberal educational policies were state-mandated. Overall, the sentiments expressed by participants were more aligned with “going with the flow” or “having their hands tied” than of a willingness to resist policies they knew were damaging to students.

It is important to reiterate that participants seemed aware of the dangers of many of the policies explored in this study, although they may not have been familiar with the termed concept of *neoliberalism*. They expressed frustration with these policies but largely felt as if their hands were tied. Further, it also seemed that some principals may have even developed a deficit mindset with regards to abilities with EC and low-socioeconomic students in regards to test data and classroom inclusion. This indicates that principals may not be using the ethics of critique in all of their decision making and may explain why lack of action was prevalent in the results.

Principals may feel as if they are *cogs in a wheel* of the neoliberal agenda, but their power against this agenda minimal. For example, participants mentioned the detriments of current neoliberal educational policies, and were aware of how it disadvantaged certain student groups, such as minority and EC students. However, they largely felt as if their hands were tied when it came to enacting change. Of all the actors involved in education and educational policy-making, principals may actually be the ones with the least amount of power. Principals do not

enjoy the support of unions (although dwindling), nor do they possess the power in numbers that teachers do. If a principal were to overtly dissent against the neoliberal agenda, he or she would simply be replaced. However, it is not so easy to replace an entire school of striking teachers. Thus, the lack of strong resistance against the neoliberal policies examined in this study should not come as a surprise.

It is also possible that principals assume they possess less power than they truly do. Just as teachers possess power in numbers, principals might also experience increased power to enact change if they collaborated on efforts to resist neoliberalism or develop alternative policies that better served all students. However, their abilities to enact change may prevent them from taking action that could actually transform the system. Throughout the interviews, participants expressed a sense of hopelessness; an attitude of *it is what it is* regarding the current state of educational policy. Very little actual resistance was expressed, nor did participants seem to believe that any potential actions they could take would result in change. Rather, action against current policies was viewed as a threat – a belief that pushing back against the system could have more severe professional repercussions than they could bear. In short, principals seemed disempowered, which is particularly concerning because of the significant role they play in public education.

Revolution, which is what a change to the neoliberal educational agenda would be, requires massive action. As educational leaders, principals should be leading the charge in this revolution against policies they know undermine the success of students. Top-down revolution that begins with principals could rally teachers, parents, and students in a way the educational system has never seen. However, in order for any hope of such revolution, principals need to feel protected in their professions and empowered to take a stand. Pushback against neoliberal

educational policies should not be treated with disciplinary action – it should be rewarded, regarded as the actions of leaders who are championing the needs of their students. If the U.S. public education system were truly democratic, the voices of those impacted by educational policies (students, teachers, and administrators) would be heard in a way that fostered change. Instead, principals feel obligated to remain quiet in order to prevent upsetting the status quo, even if the status quo violates their professional ethics.

With that said, it is important that principals not be crucified for their lack of action, when considering the paltry power they have in educational policy and the extreme professional repercussions they could face for resisting. Indeed, it could be argued that principals in the current study did the most they could with the tools available to them without putting their jobs at risk. Dramatic and lasting change to educational policy will require educational stakeholders to band together and demand change; it will require equipping principals with a sense of empowerment and a belief that they can fight for the best interests of their students without being punished. If principals cannot stand up and fight for their students, one may wonder what hope exists for beneficial changes to educational policy.

Recommendations for Future Research

A number of recommendations for future research may be made based on findings from the current study. First, to address the geographic limitations of the current study, scholars may replicate this investigation in other geographic regions of the country. This would allow investigators to examine the perspectives of principals on other states and school districts, where different policies may be in effect.

Another direction for future research is to conduct a large empirical study using survey data to examine principals' attitudes and resistance throughout the country. This would allow for

the examination of regional trends. For example, researchers could investigate how principals in other states handle teacher evaluations and whether they are used as grounds for covert resistance, as they were by participants in the current study. Further, an anonymous survey or questionnaire may encourage more forthcoming results. As mentioned in the study limitations, it is possible that the sensitive nature of this study created reticence that prevented participants from being completely forthcoming in their responses.

The current investigation could also be repeated with superintendents to see if and how these educational leaders criticize and resist neoliberal educational policies. A case study that integrated the perspectives of superintendents and administrators may provide a more holistic and dynamic examination of this topic. Future researchers could also conduct an examination to compare urban and rural principals' perspectives and opinions related to neoliberal educational policies. Researchers could also assess differences in perspectives by exploring criticism and resistance to educational policies among charter and private school principals.

Because all participants expressed frustrations with the teacher evaluation process and rubric, researchers may further explore the topic of teacher evaluation. For example, a qualitative investigation could be conducted to examine which aspects of the rubric principals perceive to be cumbersome and unnecessary, as well as which aspects they believe are useful. Importantly, participants in this study acknowledged the importance of holding teachers accountable and evaluating them; thus, participants did not feel that the evaluation process should be eliminated. Rather, the process should be updated and improved. Ultimately, updating and shortening the rubric may reduce the amount of "box checking" and inaccurate evaluations given by administrators.

Perhaps the most significant recommendation for future research is to conduct investigations that explore how principals and teachers believe the problems highlighted in the current investigation could be addressed. In educational policy, the focus is largely on the persistent problems of a broken system, or enacting the same tired strategies (such as high-stakes testing) that have proven ineffective for improving student performance. It is clear, from countless studies on trends in student performance, that policies defining the U.S. educational system need an overhaul. Perhaps one of the reasons that neoliberal educational policies have proliferated, despite their lack of efficacy, is because the leaders making policy decisions are too far removed from the realities of today's classroom settings, especially in the context of schools with student populations that are racially diverse and low-SES. Accordingly, researchers could solicit high-performing teachers and principals for ideas and possible solutions to the problems of today's neoliberal educational system. If this research were conducted on a national level in order to obtain perspectives and insights from a diverse group of educational leaders and teachers, findings may be presented in a way that encourages policymakers to take note.

Implications

Several practical and theoretical implications emerged from this study. Recommendations for practice and a discussion of how this study advanced theory are discussed as follows.

Practice

Practically, this study revealed that administrators are critical of neoliberal educational policies, and they do exercise some passive forms of resistance. However, it was clear that participants also were aware that resistance was professionally risky. Those who did resist would do so through appropriate outlets – such as writing letters to politicians, speaking with their superintendents, and rallying teachers and parents. However, the results from these

strategies were minimal, at best. In fact, none of the participants who openly criticized neoliberal educational policies through these appropriate channels reported any effects from their actions. The lack of results from principals' efforts, in terms of voicing their concerns to superintendents, politicians, and other educational leaders, suggests that the U.S. educational system is quite undemocratic.

Policy

It is one thing to elect political leaders and even superintendents who are tasked with developing and implementing educational policies; but there appears to be a significant disconnect between the policies that are developed at the top, and the teachers, students, and principals who are affected by them. It would seem that educational policy in this country may benefit from the inclusion of more perspectives, ideas, and recommendations from those principals and teachers who are on the front lines of education –those individuals who are observing first hand, and on a daily basis, the *effects* of neoliberal educational policies.

Indeed, policy makers would be wise to solicit and integrate feedback from successful, highly qualified teachers and administrators when making educational policy decisions. At the very least, those policymakers should acknowledge the feedback from principals, teachers, and parents who write to voice concerns about the policies they believe are negatively affecting today's students. Findings from the current study should be considered carefully by educational policymakers, as they may be overlooking an incredibly valuable resource (i.e., the opinions of teachers and principals) when making policy level decisions. If the aim of education is to improve student performance, policies designed to achieve performance gains should start at the ground level, in the classroom, rather than at the top, with political testing and performance pay initiatives.

Results from this investigation also indicated some concerns regarding the teacher evaluation process. While some participants took the process seriously and saw the value in it, others had issues with teacher evaluations and did not conduct them with fidelity. By nature, the teacher evaluation process is understandably subjective; however, there should be more consistency across principals in how the evaluation process is conducted. If some principals are “checking boxes” and giving high marks to teachers they personally like, regardless of whether or not those teachers are actually demonstrating the standards they are being assessed on, it is unfair for those teachers who have principals that follow the rubric closely. The inconsistencies in how teachers may be evaluated is also troubling because decisions regarding contract renewal are often based on the marks a teacher receives during an evaluation. Similarly, if a principal at one school conducts lax evaluations, a teacher may apply for a position at another school and be hired based on performance feedback from previous evaluations, only to find that teacher is not nearly as high-performing as expected. Accordingly, addressing discrepancies in the teacher evaluation process may require training, follow-up, and oversight from the district to hold principals accountable for the accuracy of teacher evaluations.

Research

From the standpoint of research, the main implication is that more investigation is needed into the effects of neoliberal educational policies. Further, viable alternatives must be developed and tested. Only then is it possible that policymakers will be presented with alternative options that value and address the needs of each individual child. Importantly, involving principals and teachers in the development of alternatives to current neoliberal policies could be highly beneficial, as these are the professionals who are in the educational *trenches* each day and witness, firsthand, the effects of educational policies.

Theoretical

Ethics of critique. The ethics of critique is a perspective that involves the questioning of policies and laws, recognizing inequities based on class, race, and gender. Educational leaders taking this ethical standpoint may ask who creates educational policies and standards, and who benefits from their enforcement. Leaders who employ the ethics critique may question where power is delegated under educational policies and whose voices are silenced by them. The ethics of critique may lead school leaders to question whether all children, regardless of class, race, and gender, have the same opportunities to excel. In the context of the data that emerged from this study, the ethics of critique was mostly used to question and criticize the current educational system and neoliberal policies. Five areas of criticism corresponded with the ethics of critique, including (a) identified concerns, (b) standardized testing, (c) school choice, (d) performance pay, and (e) achievement gaps.

In context of the current investigation, participants were acutely aware of the negative effects of the different neoliberal policies they were asked about during interviews. On topics such as standardized testing, school grades, school choice, and performance pay, most participants had strong, clearly-articulated opinions that indicated they had given much thought to these issues. In addition, when given the opportunity to discuss their biggest concerns with today's educational climate, participants provided thorough, thoughtful responses that indicated they believed part of their job was to question policies and criticize factors that may undermine students' well-being and academic outcomes. These well-thought opinions and criticisms indicated that participants regularly employed the ethics of critique to reflect on policies and other dilemmas in education.

Ethics of profession. The core of the ethics of profession is employing thoughtful, ethical decisions that emphasize the needs and interests of students (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). Sladek (2017) explained that educational leaders must take responsibility for difficult ethical decisions. According to the ethics of profession, the best interests of the students should be the main drivers of professional decisions in educational settings. The ethics of profession is steeped in leaders' moral obligations to make decisions that benefit students, which may mean resisting neoliberal policies (Sladek, 2017). In the context of the current research, the ethics of profession highlighted the ways principals resisted neoliberal educational policies. Five themes aligned with the ethics of profession, including (a) teacher evaluations, (b) attitudes toward school grades, (c) attitudes toward standardized test results, (d) resistance, and (e) accountability.

Findings from this study revealed that principals did, indeed, use the ethics of profession to guide their professional behaviors and decisions. Although some principals may have developed a deficit mindset in regards to EC students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, they expressed great concern about the well-being of their students and were aware of the negative effects of neoliberal educational policies. While some participants demonstrated minor resistance (through letter writing, attending protests, posting on social media, or giving inflated teacher evaluations), it was clear they also felt their hands were tied. Overall, while participants had much to criticize about educational policies, they also felt that pushing back too much would place them in professional jeopardy – and likely, they were right.

Consequently, participants felt forced to enact policies, such as high-volume standardized testing, even though they knew these policies were detrimental to their students. In this way, the ethics of profession created conflict for participants – conflicts that ultimately led them to make decisions that were professionally safe. This is problematic in a couple of ways. An intrinsic

responsibility of principals is student advocacy. Principals are professionally obligated to look after the well-being and success of students at their schools. However, when they are disempowered to take action on behalf of their students, over fears of professional repercussions, this responsibility is undermined. In light of the ethics of profession, results from the current study revealed a significant problem that principals are forced to navigate each day— toeing the line between running effective schools and enforcing policies that undermine the effectiveness of their schools.

Conclusion

Dissent is an essential part of democracy, and it must not be confused with disloyalty (May & Hammond, 2010). Despite the essentialness of dissent for correcting wrongs or injustices in systems, resistance is heavily frowned upon in the U.S. educational system. When teachers and leaders speak from their professional positions to criticize or express resistance to educational policies, they are afforded no First Amendment protections and may be punished by their employers (May & Hammond, 2010). This lack of protection places educational leaders in precarious situations, forcing them navigate the conflicts between their personal ethics and the policies they are tasked with obeying and enforcing.

The struggle between personal ethics and professional responsibilities was prevalent throughout interviews with principals in the current study. While participants expressed thoughtful criticisms of many issues and policies in today's classrooms, they also demonstrated very mild resistance to those policies. Overwhelmingly, there was a sense of apathy and resignation to neoliberal policies despite passionate opinions and clear understandings of the ways these policies may undermine student and teacher outcomes. This finding was troubling, as the democratic nature of our educational system rests on the willingness of leaders to speak out

and resist policies they know are damaging. If fears of professional repercussions foster passivity among principals, the current neoliberal policies are likely to remain comfortably rooted. The democracy of our public educational system rests in holding political leaders and decisionmakers accountable for the policies they enact, and forcing them to make changes when those policies are not working. In this way, findings from the current research shed light on a troubling dilemma experienced by educational leaders. Providing public school principals with professionally protected opportunities to criticize and resist problematic educational policies is an important first step in correcting imbalances of the current system.

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APPENDIX
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- **Arrival –**

Introductions and rapport building [This may take considerable time—there is a trade-off between rapport building and taking up too much of the allotted interview time].

- **Introducing the topic –**

Describe the overview including topics you we are exploring (neoliberalism /neoliberal discourse in education, ethics [principal and teacher], educators as potential activists) < 10 minutes to avoid biasing the interviewee.

Discuss informed consent and assure the interviewee of anonymity (include full explanation of how I will protect their privacy. Assure the interviewee that they may withdraw from the study without any explanation at any point. Also, request verbal permission to tape the interviewee (audio).

- **Beginning the interview –** start with non-sensitive background information —then bring up the topics in general ways; listening more than inserting my own opinion. When the opportunity appears, and I feel the interviewee has more to say, follow up by discrete probing.

- **During the interview –**

Improvisation on topics of neoliberalism, disaggregation of standardized test data, race, class, tracking, learning disabilities, discourse, and ethics. There will be no set order for questioning. Allow the interviewee to follow her train of thought. I will attempt to listen more than direct. I will ask teachers to discuss their experiences as they relate to these general topics. If there is uncomfortable silence I will offer some of my own reflection (this should be very limited but may be useful in maintaining rapport). I must keep in mind that the interviewee is the person who should be talking. I already know how I feel.

- **Improvising**

In semi-structured or unstructured interviews, improvisation may be the key to success. Arksey and Knight (1999) offer the following tips:

- ❖ Vary the question order to fit the flow of the interview.
- ❖ Vary the phrasing of the questions to help the conversation seem natural.
- ❖ Let the interview seem to go off track.
- ❖ Build trust and rapport by putting something of the interviewer’s self into the interview, possibly by raising similar or different experiences (Gray, 2004, p. 225).

• **Ending the interview –**

suggest interview is nearing an end—ask if the interviewee wishes to introduce any outstanding concerns or has any concluding thoughts

• **After the interview –**

Don't forget to thank the interviewee— affirm your commitment to confidentiality and protection of data and try to make sure that the interviewee feels secure in the assurance that her contribution will be held in confidence. Don't overdo it! Too much assurance can have the opposite effect.

Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself?
2. What motivated to go into education? To become a principal?
3. What are the biggest challenge you face on your job? How do you overcome these?
4. What are the biggest challenges in education in the 21st century from your perspective
(after having been a teacher, and now an administrator)?
5. Please share your thoughts with me about standardized testing. How do you perceive the benefits or risks of standardized testing for students?
If they indicate they perceive risks.. follow up with..
6. As a professional, how do you navigate standardized testing policies?
7. Do you demonstrate resistance to policies related to standardized testing in any way? If so, please explain how.
8. Please share your thoughts with me about teacher evaluations. How do you perceive the benefits or risks of teacher evaluation for students?
If they indicate they perceive risks.. follow up with..
9. As a professional, how do you navigate teacher evaluation policies?
10. Do you exercise resistance to policies related to teacher evaluation in any way? If so, please explain how?
11. Please share your thoughts with me about school choice. How do you perceive the benefits or risks of school choice for students?
If they indicate they perceive risks.. follow up with..

12. As a professional, how do you navigate school choice policies?
13. Do you resist policies related to school choice in any way? If so, please explain how.
14. Please share your thoughts with me about racially-aggregated test data. How do you perceive the benefits or risks of racially-aggregated test data for students?
If they indicate they perceive risks.. follow up with..
15. As a professional, how do you navigate racially-aggregated test data policies?
16. Do you resist policies related to racially-aggregated test data in any way? If so, please explain how.
17. Are there any policies that you demonstrate resistance to that I haven't mentioned?
18. Anything else you would like to share?