ABSTRACT

SINGLETON, DRE'SHA T. A Risk Revealed: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Colorblind Ideology in A Nation at Risk. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance Fusarelli)

This study examined the *A Nation at Risk* through a critical discourse analysis framework to understand how colorblind ideology is embedded in education reform rhetoric. *A Nation at Risk* (1983) played a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of educational failure, framing the issue as a national crisis while obscuring systemic inequities. By analyzing modality, values, and ideology in the text, this study identified how the report constructed authority, agency, and narratives reinforcing individual accountability rather than structural reform. The findings revealed that the rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk* aligned with colorblind frames, particularly through appeals to meritocracy, abstract liberalism, and crisis-driven urgency. These discursive strategies have had lasting implications, influencing educational policies and maintaining inequitable systems under the guise of fairness.

A Risk Revealed: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Colorblind Ideology in A Nation at Risk

by
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DEDICATION

To my Village, thank you. If you are reading this and wondering if I remembered you or thought of you, the answer is yes. I always will. I couldn't have done this without the unwavering support from all of you, and I'm deeply grateful for each of you in my life.

Thank you!

BIOGRAPHY

Dre'Sha T. Singleton is an education researcher, policy analyst, and advocate committed to advancing justice in education. Born and raised in South Carolina, she will always consider it home, but she has also built a beautiful life in North Carolina.

Before transitioning into education research, Dre'Sha built a diverse career in legal firm development, sports and entertainment, and philanthropy operations. Currently serving as Assistant Director of Programs and Initiatives at the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at NC State University, she coordinates leadership development, supports research administration, and strengthens internal operations.

Her research explores critical discourse studies, the politics of education, and the intersection of policy and justice in educational systems. She holds a Graduate Certificate in Counselor Education from NC State University, complementing her Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Bachelor of Science in Sport Management from Winthrop University. With the completion of this dissertation, she now holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development with a focus on Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis from NC State University.

Dre'Sha is a firm believer in the journey over the destination. She loves turtles—a constant reminder that, just like the fabled race, slow and steady wins. The path to success looks different for everyone, full of unique challenges and rewards, but she embraces each step with patience, purpose, and persistence.

With a unique blend of interdisciplinary expertise, Dre'Sha is dedicated to driving meaningful change for students, educators, and communities. Her work continues to shape education policy and practice, ensuring a more promising and just future.

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A heartfelt thank you to my committee for their endless support and guidance, which helped me stay on track. To my brilliant editorial team, your speedy and thorough work was nothing short of magical. To my family and friends, your love, encouragement, and occasional pep talks have kept me going. And to Frankie, our sweet dog, and Chance, our mischievous cat, thank you for the cuddles, company, and always reminding me to take breaks with your entertaining antics. I am deeply thankful for the continuous support from all of you, which was instrumental in reaching this milestone

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The *A Nation at Risk* report, released in 1983, was a critical piece of discourse addressed to U.S. citizens arguing that the terrible state of education was damaging the country's global economic competitiveness. This report from the executive branch of the U.S. government ushered in intense rhetoric around the United States' failing education system. Decades later, it is still critical to our understanding of education reform. It reflected an ideological focus on the values of competition, excellence, and choice (Horsford, 2013). Ginsberg and Lyche (2008) suggested the sense of risk and fear regarding education still permeates the media many years after *A Nation at Risk*.

In the decades since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the dominant ideology undergirding the report remains prevalent. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study focused on examining the colorblind ideology embedded in *A Nation at Risk*. This chapter begins with a general background on the fruition of *A Nation at Risk* and surrounding education politics. Next, I provide the purpose of this study, the significance of the study, and important problems the study addressed. This chapter concludes with an overview of the approach, including the research questions, key terms, and a detailed outline of the theoretical framework.

Background

Education is a part of the "American Dream" and is folded into all the corners of U.S. history. The economically and socially poor, which are historically majority Black communities, look to education as an escape route to the American Dream (Ladson-Billings, 2009), as do other communities of color. The background for this study centered on the 1980s and the Reagan administration. During the 1980s, national policymakers were focused on maintaining the United States' global standing, especially as the country faced a significant economic downturn

(Fusarelli, 2002). Ronald Reagan, during his first presidential term, appointed Terrel Howard Bell as U.S. Secretary of Education. Bell created the blue-ribbon National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE or The Commission) and appointed the members to examine problems in U.S. education (Gardner et al., 1983). Although the creation of the NCEE is what directly led to the report, events in the previous decades shaped the Reagan administration's approach to education reform.

After the Vietnam War, there was a decline in public confidence in the government to improve social and economic problems (Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007). Though there was progress in some civil rights areas, the nation was still divided (Vinovskis, 1999). After Richard Nixon was forced to resign due to the Watergate scandal, Gerald Ford tried to restore the public's confidence in the federal government. Ford's pardon of Nixon contributed to his defeat and his successor, Jimmy Carter, did not have much success in improving public confidence in the government. Stagflation (i.e., persistently high inflation combined with high unemployment), the Iran hostage crisis, and the increased threat of economic competition from Asia, particularly Japan, threatened the international dominance of the United States (Kaufman, 2011). A general malaise swept the country as the United States appeared to be a superpower in decline (Vinovskis, 1999).

The 1970s continued to be a trying time, specifically in education with high expectations for educators and failure to achieve the intended objectives of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). According to Vinovskis (1999):

> Although there were serious reservations, about the wisdom of creating a cabinet-level education office, President Carter and the 96th Congress went ahead and narrowly passed

> (by a vote of 210–206 in the House) legislation creating the U.S. Department of Education (DoEd) in 1979. (p. 4)

A federal judge from California, Shirley Hufstedler, was selected as the first secretary of education (Vinovskis, 1999).

As concern over public education grew, divisive issues developed between Republicans and Democrats regarding the federal role in education. Carter pushed for a larger federal role in education while his successor, Reagan, strongly opposed the increased federal role in education. Stickney and Marcus (1984) noted that if Carter had won in 1980, "it is likely that educators would have lethargically accepted an expanding federal role with little serious questioning of what that role should be" (p. 89). The Reagan administration cut back on federal funding for compensatory education in elementary and secondary schools and on financial assistance for college work or graduate study. This adversely affected arrangements that were making opportunities more equitable for Black people and low-income communities. Meanwhile, "this is the same administration that finds our nation at risk because of the 'mediocrity' of its educational system. This inconsistency between policies and rhetoric is not lost on most individuals who support the concept of equity" (Barnett, 1989, p. 41). Reagan's supporters scrutinized Secretary Bell as he was an early advocate of the DoEd. When Bell created the NCEE, he hoped to provide more balance and a more positive picture of U.S. education, as he said in a 1993 Phi Delta *Kappan* issue:

> I felt that my main mission on behalf of American education was damage control, and I believed that a major study of the condition of education would focus public attention on our schools and colleges and make it difficult politically to eliminate or significantly diminish the federal role. (Bell, 1993, p. 593)

The commission began operations in August 1981 with David P. Gardner as the chair and Milton Goldberg as the executive director. The 18-member committee worked together to produce the report as an open letter to the U.S. people in April 1983 (Vinovskis, 1999).

A Nation at Risk is often criticized for the NCEE's misuse of data. Scholars have also "point[ed] out that the rhetorical style employed by the NCEE created a false and menacing sense of impending doom rather than providing a balanced and objective assessment of American education in the early 1980s" (Vinovskis, 1999, p. 10). The use of the word risk and the fear that the word provoked was used to push a political agenda. Yvonne Larsen was the president of the San Diego Unified School District when she became a part of the NCEE. She said, "We wanted to get America's attention. So, therefore yes, we thought we needed stronger language" (Good, 2010, p. 378). The NCEE members knew the language used in the report needed to be strong and intentional to get the people's attention and provoke reform. Good (2010) found the NCEE members were aware of the potential impact of the report and understood the political nature of the document. The NCEE members did not know the audience for the report. Any report from the executive branch serves a political purpose, creating a dialogue throughout multiple levels of leaders in the political and educational systems. Chapter 2 provides more information on the NCEE and the report.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to (a) identify how colorblind ideology is embedded in the discourse (i.e., *A Nation at Risk*), (b) identify values and modality used in the discourse, and (c) determine how values and modality reinforce colorblind ideology. This study examined how the colorblind ideology in *A Nation at Risk* was embedded and reinforced through the reform

recommendations promulgated by the Commission. The full impact of *A Nation at Risk* was beyond the purview of this study.

This study marks the beginning of a larger research inquiry into how the colorblind ideology in *A Nation at Risk* perpetuates racism by erasing the contemporary, lived, and systemic oppression of Black communities and other communities of color. I believe education is still in the reform era ushered in by *A Nation at Risk*. I also take the position that the federal government should be held accountable for federal discourse that disproportionately impacts education politics. Through this study, I emphasized the prevailing and enduring legacy of *A Nation at Risk.*

Significance of the Study

This study was significant for four reasons: (a) the importance of the relationships between the levels of government (Marshall et al., 1986), (b) *A Nation at Risk* is still relevant (Bowen, 2023), (c) CDA deserves more credit as a framework (Lin, 2014), and (d) colorblind ideology composes a new form of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Understanding these factors underscores how policy and ideology intersect, with the president, along with the cabinet and executive departments, shaping the national agenda and influencing educational discourse. The executive branch is also responsible for creating special committees such as the NCEE. Although the judicial and legislative branches have also contributed significantly to education reform, this study focused on the executive branch. *A Nation at Risk* suggested the federal government "has the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education" and "should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that interest" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 23).

A Nation at Risk turned 40 in 2023, and while literature has been abundant on *A Nation at Risk*, there has been limited research that treats *A Nation at Risk* as critical discourse. Horsford (2013) acknowledged the significance of *A Nation at Risk*, saying:

> Thirty years later, the report is still critical to our understanding of education reform and how we got where we are today in two important ways; first, support for increased federal role in education as part of the "national interest"; and, second, a shift from a historical focus on equity in the mid 1950s and 1960s towards standards for excellence and accountability in the 1980s and beyond. (p. 11)

This study was significant and timely because over 40 years later *A Nation at Risk* is still a part of the discussions around education politics and education reform.

As for the methodology used in the study, CDA is an underused approach in education research, specifically in education politics research (Bukhari & Xiasoyang, 2013). The CDA principles and concepts have also proved significant in examining ways in which power is constructed rhetorically in educational spheres. This study contributed to the use of CDA in educational research. Contributions from other fields have provided a starting point for the use of CDA, but what other fields do not address are the complex structures and values in education. Wirt et al. (1988) reviewed the values of choice, quality, efficiency, and equity and conceptualized them as influences in the educational policymaking process. Wirt et al. also reviewed the dimensions that exist where these values interact, suggesting that conceptually and historically, there is conflict within the intersection of some of these values. This study identifies the values in the discourse and considers how these values intersect with colorblind ideology as it relates to educational reform.

Colorblind ideology constitutes a new racism in the era of political correctness and free-market individualism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Carr, 1997; Choi, 2008). Colorblindness is the racial ideology that assumes the best way to end discrimination is by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity. Gordon (2005) wrote, "Colorblindness is a bid for innocence, an attempt to escape our responsibility for our White privilege. By claiming innocence, we reconcile ourselves to racial irresponsibility" (p. 143). Bonilla-Silva (2021 contended that a new racial structure, New Racism, accounts for the persistence of racial inequality. Bonilla-Silva (2014) determined the main elements of this new racial structure as:

- the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and racial practices;
- the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience "reverse racism";
- the elaboration of a racial agenda over political matters that eschews direct racial references;
- the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality; and, finally,
- the rearticulation of some racial practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period of race relations. (p. 32)

Colorblind ideology is a concept in the New Racism. Bonilla-Silva (2014, 2022) provided frames for the colorblind ideology that I used to analyze the data in this study. The following chapters encompass more on these frames.

Problem Statement

Since the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, there have been no rebuttal or response reports from the executive branch. There have been advances and milestones from the judicial and legislative branches, but the declaration of *A Nation at Risk* has been preserved as an

influential discourse from the executive branch. A year after *A Nation at Risk*, Gardner (1984), then Dean of the College of Education at the University of Minnesota, said:

> The basic point is not that Risk is without merit. The report will likely be the most influential of its genre because it is readable, timely, and superbly promoted. It has succeeded in drawing considerable (albeit negative) attention to education after several years of neglect by policy makers. The Commission's [NCEE's] narrow perspective on social and educational issues needs to be challenged, however, precisely because of Risk's importance and impact. Followed blindly without critical analysis, the Commission's [NCEE's] recommendations are likely to be damaging. In short, we could adopt the Commission's [NCEE's] recommendations and mislead ourselves into thinking that much has been accomplished when little has. (p. 15)

Good (2010) suggests that through the text and discourse from *A Nation at Risk,* the executive branch of the U.S. federal government used emotional ideas and influence to provoke U.S. citizens and policymakers. Strategies such as intentional word choice and the decision to include or exclude clear term definitions supported the provoking discursive practice. The language was powerful and condemning; it represented a call to action for the U.S. people to change the conditions of education (Good, 2010). Vinovskis (1999) noted, "When *A Nation at Risk* first appeared, some educational analysts argued that it was much too pessimistic and had misrepresented the data on student achievement in order to portray a decline in the quality of American schools" (p. 10).

Although the validity of the report and its assertions have been questioned, questioning and examining the veracity of *A Nation at Risk* are beyond the scope of this study. The

colorblind ideology used in *A Nation at Risk* comprised the scope of this study and how it was embedded and reinforced in the discourse.

Overview of Approach

Crotty (1998) proposed four elements of a well-designed research framework that should also demonstrate congruence and interlinkage which are: (a) epistemology, or broad assumptions about the nature of knowledge; (b) theoretical framework, or philosophical stance; (c) methodology, or the broad research strategy; and (d) methods, or the particular "techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data" (p. 3). This study used CDA as a theoretical and conceptual approach. The following research questions guided the development and execution of this study:

- How is colorblind ideology embedded in *A Nation at Risk*?
- What values from *A Nation at Risk* are used to reinforce colorblind ideology?
- How does modality in *A Nation at Risk* reinforce colorblind ideology?

According to Diem et al. (2022), CDA is a transdisciplinary methodology, including various theories, approaches, and terminology. This CDA was also framed by colorblind ideology, a component of critical race theory (CRT), which allows one to "pay particular attention to power dynamics behind the discourses, policy rhetoric, and how race continues to be central in guiding policy interests" (p. 3).

Definitions and Key Terms

To assist readers, the following are terms and associated definitions used in the study.

America or *American* is used only when the cited source used that term to identify the United States.

Discourse is a "political practice establishes, sustains, and changes power relations, and the collective entities between which power relations obtain. *Discourse* as an ideological practice constitutes, naturalizes, sustains, and changes significations of the world from diverse positions in power relations" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 67). Fairclough (1992) recognized discourse as language used as a form of social practice, implying that discourse is a mode of action.

Federal and *national* are used synonymously throughout the paper.

Language is used to reference the function of language as a sign system to communicate.

NCEE or *The Commission* is used to reference the National Commission on Excellence in Education.

Politics does not mean government and political parties; it means any situation where the distribution of social goods is at stake. Social goods are anything with value to a social group or society (Gee, 2004).

The Report and *A Nation at Risk* are used synonymously throughout the paper.

Theoretical Framework

As an extension of critical linguistics, CDA is the study of language and ideology where ideology is a system of ideas and practices that operate to either advantage a social group or to disguise the relationship between dominant and dominated classes (Mesthrie et al., 2000). Beginning as a small network of scholars, CDA is not a method nor a theory but rather it is an established paradigm where humanities and social sciences intersect (Hodes, 2018). This section provides an overview of the theories, terms, and assumptions that exist in CDA, and provides the foundation for colorblind ideology. Chapter 3 contains details on the unified methodology used to conceptualize this study.

Discourse

Discourse can have many definitions because discourses are practices, processes, and products with social, historical, and political interventions. Hodge and Kress (1988) defined discourse as "the site where social forms of organization engage with systems of signs in the production of texts, thus reproducing or changing the sets of meanings and values which make up a culture" (p. 6). Gee (2004) is known for differentiating between "discourse" and "Discourse." Discourse with a capital "D" is a way of representing, believing, and valuing, while discourse with a lowercase "d" is the grammar (Rogers, 2004). Fairclough (1992) recognized discourse as language used as a form of social practice, implying that discourse is a mode of action.

Fairclough (1992) and Gee (2004) recognized discourse as a function to reproduce and transform society in creative and agentic ways. The agentic ways discourse is used are important when considering individual agency and social structures related to critical discourse studies. For this study, discourse is a "political practice establishes, sustains, and changes power relations, and the collective entities between which power relations obtain. Discourse as an ideological practice constitutes, naturalizes, sustains, and changes significations of the world from diverse positions in power relations" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 67).

Political Discourse Analysis

The critical study of political discourse closely aligns with the discourse analytic approach of CDA. Aligning political discourse analysis (PDA) and CDA assumes that political discourse is and should be, conducted through a critical lens, and CDA is, at its core, a political endeavor. van Dijk (1995) contended that PDA should be understood as encompassing the analysis of political discourse and a political approach to discourse analysis. He also insisted that

political discourse analysts should assume a critical stance, examining how political power and power abuse or domination are visible in and are validated through discourse structures and practices (Dunmire, 2012).

CDA is an overtly political investigation into social, economic, and cultural power (Luke, 2002). Depending on how inclusively or exclusively political discourse is defined, most CDA research could be characterized as PDA. This study assumes an inclusive definition of political discourse that recognizes the key role language plays in struggles over power, meaning, and material resources, acts of cooperation and resistance, and the political nature of discursive practice (Muntigl, 2002).

Politics and Public Policy

Cochran (2009) defined public policy as:

> An intentional course of action followed by a government institution or official for resolving an issue of public concern. Such a course of action must be manifested in laws, public statements, official regulations, or widely accepted and publicly visible patterns of behavior. (pp. 1–2)

In this study, politics does not mean government and political parties; it means any situation where the distribution of social goods is at stake. Social goods are anything with value to a social group or society (Gee, 2004).

Policy is a set of objectives or an agenda that legitimizes the values, beliefs, and attitudes of its creators. Although the discourse used in this study is an executive committee report and not policies, they impact policy and agenda-setting. Issues of how problems arise and appear on agendas, how issues are developed, how policy is developed, and how policy is implemented are each important features for critical policy analysis (Prunty, 1985). Kingdon (1995) and Prunty

(1985) provided a framework for policy analysis that offers explicit analyses of the contexts, constructs, and social roles played by those inside and outside of policymaking. Although these frameworks address critical analysis, they omit critical social analysis and political power constructs, making CDA a more suitable methodology for political discourse studies (Haley-Woodside-Jiron, 2004).

Critical Theories

Critical approaches treat social practices not just in terms of social relationships but also in terms of their implications for things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods, and power (Gee, 2004). Critical social theory (CST) provides a foundation for critical approaches to discourse analysis, with approaches inspired by Marxism, feminism, and CRT. Overall, CST is based on "a dual agenda of critiquing and resisting domination and creating a society free of oppression" (Rogers, 2004, p. 4). A shared assumption among approaches to CST is that confronting inequality means acknowledging the social arrangements that create societal disparities and understanding their root sources. What makes critical discourse studies critical is the centrality of power. Power exists everywhere. Fairclough (1989) urged us to consider power in the following ways: the power to, the power over, and the power behind (Rogers, 2004).

Critical Language Studies

Documented in Fairclough's (1989) book *Language and Power* was a dissatisfaction with the treatment of language and power which led to the proposal of critical language studies. Fairclough's critical language study defines discourse as language and practice determined by social structures. The goals of critical language studies are to uncover nonobvious connections in language, power, and ideology. Fairclough suggested a three-stage analysis of text, interaction,

and context to reveal relationships between language, power, and ideology (Waring, 2017). The conceptual methodology used in my studies is discussed further in Chapter 3.

Modality

There is meaning embedded in who we are and what we do. Systemic functional linguistics provides a language theory for understanding language as a representational or sign system used to create meaning. According to Rodgers (2004), "[Systemic functional linguistics] as a theory of language is oriented toward choice and privileges meaning makers (language users) as agents making decisions about the social functions of their languages use" (p. 6). This theory of language is socially semiotic with the assumption that meaning is always being invented and created rather than inherited. Within the invention and inheritance of meaning is agency. Language and discourse represent agency, through the concept of modality. Modality is expressed by modal auxiliary verbs like "may," "might," "must," "should," "can," "can't," and also by various other formal features. According to Fairclough (2003), modality is a relationship set up between the author and the representation of the truth. Modality regards the authority of the speaker and depends on the direction in which that authority is oriented (Pesic, 2023, p. 102). The authority and power relations based on what the producers of text withhold permission from, or impose obligations, are not explicit. It is precisely the implicitness of authority claims and power relations that makes the modality of relations a matter of ideological interest (Fairclough, 2015). Although text is used in this study, text is only one language mode for making meaning. There are other meaning-making modes such as body language, movements, verbal speech, nonverbal speech color, space, time, images, and gestures.

Power

Essential to CDA is the concept of power or the resistance of others. Power can be institutionalized such as in an organized hierarchical structure. Power can also be institutionalized by compartmentalizing small groups of leaders empowered by unique roles in the structure. Dominance, the abuse of power, engages control of one group by another, including but not excluding control of action or cognition (van Dijk, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2001, as cited in Mullet, 2018). Symbolic power refers to how symbolic systems such as language can act to legitimize domination (Bourdieu, 1984). An example of symbolic power is when:

> The rules governing the practice of systems and institutions, such as business (e.g., rules for stock trading), become the legitimate ways of social practice, and as these social practices are reproduced, they become the acceptable ways of doing and acting. (Jaipal-Jamani, 2014, p. 805)

Policies and rules that ignore issues of power, oppression, and marginalization, at best, "are ineffective in provoking change that improves people, communities, and institutions and, at [the] worst, violent toward them" (Diem & Brooks, 2022, p. 5). Fairclough (2003) captured this occurrence in the idea of ideological-discursive formations, where a dominant ideological-discursive formation becomes accepted as common sense and inequitable power relations are reduced and obscured. According to Jaipal-Jamani (2014), "Discourse analysis approaches that attempt approaches such as symbolic dominance and dominant ideologies visible are referred to as CDA" (p. 805). The objective of CDA is to uncover the ideological assumptions hidden in the worlds of text, oral speech, and languages, which resist and sustain exercising unrecognized power use (McGregor, 2010; Mogashoa, 2014).

Ideology

A fundamental effect of texts that has been a major concern for CDA is ideological effects, the effects of texts in introducing and sustaining ideologies. Ideologies are representations of the world, aspects that can be shown to contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination, and exploitation because "such representations can be enacted in ways of interacting socially and inculcated in ways of being in people's identities" (Fairclough, 2004, p. 123). Ideologies are frames of thought manifested in discursive practices; the importance of ideology for establishing and contributing to the maintenance of unequal power relations must be stressed (Ewing, 2017). van Dijk (1995) believed that ideologies are both cognitive and social. van Dijk (1995) assumed that "ideologies are typically, though not exclusively, expressed and reproduced in discourse and communication" (p. 17). van Dijk (1995) suggested a three-level ideological analysis: social, cognitive, and discourse. The theoretical and analytical interests of Gee (2011) were very similar to those of Fairclough and van Dijk. Gee (2011) saw talk and text as inherently political, and it is the responsibility of discourse analysts to unveil "how talk and text function politically in social interactions" (p. 28). According to Fairclough (1995), language is a material form of ideology, and language is invested by ideology.

The effects of ideology are revealed in discursive practices that are the site of social struggle (Thomas, 2006). According to Fairclough (2001a), "Discourse is the site of power struggles" (p. 61). Discourse may concurrently be a part of a situational struggle, an institutional struggle, or a societal struggle (Ewing, 2017). A critical view of ideology is "seeing it as a modality of power; contrasts with various 'descriptive' views of ideology as positions, attitudes,

beliefs, perspectives, etc. of social groups without reference to relations of power and domination between such groups" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9).

Colorblind Ideology

Colorblindness is an ideology, a worldview, which is rooted in the belief that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be considered when decisions are made, impressions are formed, or behaviors are endorsed (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). Although CDA is the theoretical framework used to conceptualize this study, CRT is important to note when discussing colorblindness. Although it has grown to be so much more, CRT originated as a response to the critical legal studies movement in the 1970s. Critical legal studies began in the era of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, arguing that the power and dominance of certain groups "over an unequal status quo was continuing and social and political change was needed" (Taylor et al., 2023, p. 1). The founding critical race theorists in law include Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Alan Freeman, Angela Harris, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2019). According to Taylor (2023):

> CRT comes from a long tradition of resistance to the unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines in America, and across the globe, with the support and legitimacy of the legal system, which makes possible the perpetuation of the established power relationships of society. (p. 1)

Critical Race Theory Tenets

The 1993 first edition of "*Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*," co-authored by four of the founding CRT scholars, is one of the first

publications describing CRT and outlining its defining tenets (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2019). According to Lawrence et al. (1993):

1. CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. CRT expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colour-blindness, and meritocracy.
3. CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law.
4. CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of colour.
5. CRT is interdisciplinary and eclectic.
6. CRT works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (pp. 6–7)

In my own words, the six CRT tenets are: (a) racism is central and ordinary, (b) race is a social construct, (c) racial equity is accommodated only when it converges with white interest, (d) narratives and storytelling provide knowledge, (e) intersectionality exists in the theory and research, and (f) CRT aims to understand and resist European colonialism and oppression.

Colorblindness

According to Apfelbaum et al. (2012), "The logic underlying the belief that color blindness can prevent prejudice and discrimination is straightforward: If people or institutions do not even notice race, then they cannot act in a racially biased manner" (p. 205). From a critical perspective colorblind ideology is based on the assertion that "race no longer 'matters' as an obstacle to social and economic success in the United States, that substantial racial barriers no longer exist to keep historically oppressed groups from realizing the 'American dream'" (Doane, 2017, p. 976). Colorblind ideology has been assigned to a "postracial" society; however, recent

research has demonstrated that color blindness may perpetuate existing racial inequities (Knowles et al., 2009).

In this study, I was interested in how colorblind ideology has been embedded in education reform discourse. Kohli et al. (2017) asserted:

> Masked as equity discourse, colorblind ideology is actually a form of racism that erases the contemporary, lived, and systemic oppression of communities of Color. The literature that names colorblindness as racism, as manifested in school policies such as punishment and curriculum, shifts the analyses from individualizing explanations of inequity back to institutionally driven, systemic patterns of displacement, dehumanization, and criminalization. (p. 190)

There is a need to develop a more nuanced explanation of the relationship between colorblindness and inequality. Doane (2017) suggested that colorblind theory is a racial ideology about racial inequality, and it maintains white dominance in a racialized social system. Doane (2017) argued:

> That one component of a more complete understanding of racial ideology is to articulate the relationship between color blindness and more general ideologies of meritocracy and individualism. This is essential to understanding the complex and contradictory ways in which both whites and persons of color explain the persistence of inequality. (p. 984)

I assert that attention must be paid to racialized microevents and how they connect to macrostructures of racial injustice. Surprisingly, there is but a small body of research that has unpacked the everyday racism in schools, "given the powerful evidence of racism in K–12 educational policy and practice" (Kohli et al., 2017, p. 191). The insights gained from this study will help to uncover the "often unseen ways everyday racism along with evaded racism and

‘antiracist’ racism serve as collective and systemic mechanisms to maintain the status quo of racial inequity” (Kohli et al., 2017, p. 193).

I used the Bonilla-Silvas (2003) logics of colorblind ideology. Bonilla-Silva used race theory to present four frames of colorblind ideology: (a) cultural racism, (b) naturalization, (c) minimization of racism, and (d) abstract liberalism. According to Jayakumar and Adamian (2017):

> The cultural racism frame replaced longstanding genetic inferiority rationales for racial disparities. According to Bonilla-Silva (2010:28), this frame “relies on culturally based arguments . . . to explain the standing of minorities in society.” By attributing cultural deficits to communities of color to explain gross inequities, their suffering becomes a consequence of their own harmful cultural practices. Likewise, the naturalization frame normalizes oppressive policies and practices by arguing that occurrences such as racial segregation are based on individual or group choices, and are, thus, detached from social structures and policies. Similarly, the minimization of racism frame relies on commonsense thinking about racism as a thing of the past—the idea that “discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances” (Bonilla-Silva 2010:29). In this frame, whites agree that discrimination persists yet ignore how institutional racism continues to negatively impact people of color. Last, the foundational and defining frame of colorblind ideology, as described by Bonilla-Silva (2010), is the abstract liberalism frame. Those who operate from this frame believe that institutional racism is a thing of the past, and that the United States systemically provides equal political, economic, and social opportunities to all. (p. 915)

Chapter 2 connects the tenets of CRT to the literature, legitimizing colorblind ideology. Chapter 2 also provides more information on the frames of colorblind ideology, as well as a review of existing literature on colorblind ideology in education. Chapter 3 explains how the frames of colorblind ideology were used to conceptualize the analysis and findings of the study.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provided a general overview of the study's purpose, significance, conceptual and analytical framework, and methods. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature concerning education politics and education reform. Also included is additional information on state education politics and discourse. Chapter 3 details the research methodology, data collection, and analysis I conducted in this study. Chapter 4 details the findings, providing themes, frames, and values. Chapter 5 is a discussion of the results of the study, connecting the findings back to the existing literature as well as providing an opportunity to further this research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with a description of *A Nation at Risk* and the response to the release of the report, then moves to education reform to provide the setting for the educational excellence reform era. Next, I explore education politics, both federal and state, and the relationship between the two levels. Chapter 2 ends with a review of studies using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine educational politics as well as literature on colorblind ideology and education.

A Nation at Risk

Chapter 1 provided background about how *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983) came to fruition. The report contains six major parts: the letter, the introduction, the risk, the findings, the recommendation, and the final words. In this section, the commission and the content are discussed in further detail. Existing literature responding to the report follows this discussion.

The Reagan administration released the powerful *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983. A federal special commission examined the state of public schools in the United States and suggested the education system was putting the whole country at risk. The report recommended more rigorous curricula, new standards, improved educator preparation, and increased accountability (Edwards & Allred, 1993). Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign to reduce the size of government in education was supported by Secretary Bell. President Reagan (1983) said, "I believe that parents, not government, have the primary responsibility for the education of their children," also saying, "Our agenda is to restore quality to education by increasing competition and by strengthening parental choice and local control" (para. 14). As Hunt and Staton (1996) analyzed the report a decade later, evidence suggested the narrative became more critical than

the content and dialogue led to a new reform movement. Essentially, the language and rhetoric placed the burden on the public rather than the government.

The Letter

A Letter of Transmittal can be connected back to the inception of the U.S. Constitution. The purpose of a letter of transmittal is to accompany a document or report, providing the recipient the specific context for which to place the document that follows. Included with the letter are the commission members' names and affiliated institutions. The Chairman, David Gardner, wrote the letter to the Secretary of Education on behalf of the commission (Gardner et al., 1983).

The commission included "educators, politicians, business elites, teachers, all with a civic-minded approach toward assisting the nature of education in the United States" (Good, 2010, p. 369). The members of the commission were made up of four college presidents, three school administrators, two university professors, two administrative officials from private foundations, two school board members, one former state governor, and one former state education teacher.

Good (2010) used an oral history approach to study the reflections and recollections of the commission members. At the time of the study, six members were identified as being deceased and seven members could not be located or reached. He interviewed five of the committee members: Dr. Norman Francis, Dr. Gerald Holton, Annette Kirk, Yvonne Larsen, and Jay Sommer. Good also included Gardner's (2005) *Earning My Degree*, Bell's (1985) *Thirteenth Man*, and Holton's (1984) article *A Nation at Risk* "*Revisited*" as primary resources. In this study, Good (2010) had six findings:

- Failure was apparent at the start of the commission, and then reaffirmed.

- The political nature of the document was known.
- Committee members were not aware of the potential impact of the report.
- Members were disappointed that direct change was stifled or slowed.
- *A Nation at Risk* was to examine the secondary education level exclusively.
- The audience for the report was unknown. (pp. 382–384)

The appendix of the report acknowledged over "200 individuals who provided testimony at the public hearings" (Hlebowitsh, 1990, p. 84).

The Introduction

The introduction is just that, an introduction into what the commission was chartered to do. Within 18 months of the first meeting, they were able to make a report with what they deemed "practical recommendation for educational improvement" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 1). The commission was directed to examine the quality of education in the United States; however, the introduction stated:

> The commission's charter directed it to pay particular attention to teenage youth, and we have done so largely by focusing on high schools. Selective attention was given to the formative years spent in elementary schools, to higher education, and to vocational and technical programs. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 2)

This is important to note as a report recipient because the statement implies that the following sections covering the risk, the findings, and the recommendations are based on high schools and respective stakeholders.

The Risk

Along with catalyzing the education reform movement, *A Nation at Risk* has been attributed with turning the words "at risk" into an education policy buzzword (Placier, 1993). The report

was quite clear that the nation is at risk, but there are many questions about this risk. The report developed in the context of the world and foreign competition stating, “We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 5). This report was heavily immersed in the ideology and political rivalry between the United States and the then Soviet Union as well as the economic competition between the United States and Japan. After the context of the risk was provided, the dimensions of the risk were provided in the form of indicators. These indicators included comparisons and averages based on assessments, standardized tests, and other testimony received by the commission.

In addition to the word “risk,” the risk portion of the report also provided other important terms and definitions to note, specifically movement, excellence, equity, life-long learner, and public commitment. Movement was defined in the context of the tensions between hope and frustration at every level in education suggesting that the frustration will overwhelm the hope, and the tension will have significant political implications. Movement was used to explain the direction and momentum of educational reform (Gardner et al., 1983).

Although educational reform entails various goals, excellence and equity are at the center of the movement. Excellence appeared at least 29 times in the report and supporting appendices. The commission provided the following definition of excellence:

> We define “excellence” to mean several related things. At the level of the individual learner, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a society that has

> adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Our Nation's people and its schools and colleges must be committed to achieving excellence in all these senses. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 12)

Although equity and equitable are used much less than the word excellence in the report, the idea of equity was present in the report. In the definition of excellence, equity was defined in the following manner:

> We do not believe that a public commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a strong public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population. The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or in practice. To do so would deny young people their chance to learn and live according to their aspirations and abilities. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 13)

The report suggested that educational reform should be focused on creating a learning society, a society committed to the values of lifelong learning. The term was not used in the report, but the concept was discussed as the following passage suggested:

> At the heart of the Learning Society are educational opportunities extending far beyond the traditional institutions of learning, our schools and colleges. They extend into homes and workplaces; into libraries, art galleries, museums, and science centers; indeed, into every place where the individual can develop and mature in work and life. In our view, formal schooling in youth is the essential foundation for learning throughout one's life.

> But without life-long learning, one's skills will become rapidly dated. (Gardner et al., 1983, pp. 13–14)

The report identified the tools and essential raw materials needed to reform the education system. These tools were characteristics and qualities of various groups in the United States, with specific emphasis placed on the public's commitment. Public commitment includes support, awareness, and action. The report suggested that public support for education is the most powerful tool at hand. In a message at the National Academy of Sciences meeting in May 1982, President Reagan commented on this fact when he said: "This public awareness--and I hope public action--is long overdue . . . This country was built on American respect for education . . . Our challenge now is to create a resurgence of that thirst for education that typifies our Nation's history" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 16).

Findings and Recommendations

The findings and recommendations were presented similarly in four sections: content, expectations, time, and teaching. The recommendations were based on:

> The beliefs that everyone can learn that everyone is born with an urge to learn which can be nurtured, that a solid high school education is within the reach of virtually all, and that life-long learning will equip people with the skills required for new careers and for citizenship. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 24)

Content was defined as the stuff of education or the curriculum. Expectations were defined as knowledge, abilities, and skills students should have at graduating phases of education. Included in the expectations were also time, hard work, behavior, self-discipline, and motivation. Time refers to the effectiveness and efficiency of instructional time. Teaching covered the profession and university-based educator preparation university programs (Gardner et al., 1983).

Content

The commission examined patterns of courses high school students took in 1964–1969 compared with course patterns in 1976–1981 (Gardner et al., 1983). Based on that analysis, they concluded that secondary education had been diluted to the point of no central purpose, and low percentages of students were choosing to take the intermediate STEM course offered. The commission recommended the Five New Basics including the curriculum taken during high school:

> (a) 4 years of English; (b) 3 years of mathematics; (c) 3 years of science; (d) 3 years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science. For the college-bound, 2 years of foreign language in high school are strongly recommended in addition to those taken earlier. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 25)

Expectations

When examining the standards and expectations, the commission examined the different ways expectations are expressed to students. Deficiencies and declines were found in time spent on homework, student achievement, college selectivity, academic challenge, and expenditures for operational and instructional resources. The commission recommended "that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct, and that 4-year colleges and universities raise their requirements for admission" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 27), with the intent to support students to learn and achieve educationally accomplishments.

Time

The commission scrutinized time compared to other countries, noting that students in the United States spent less time on schoolwork. The commission examined the school week in the

United States and found some schools provided only 17 hours of academic instruction each week, with the average being approximately 22 hours each week. A study of classrooms in California found that poor management of class time led to some elementary students receiving less instructional time. The commission recommended that "significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics. This will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or a lengthened school year" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 29). The recommendations suggested increased homework, 7-hour school days with at least 200 school days each year, and clear attendance policies.

Teaching

The commission found students were not being drawn to the teaching profession, leading to a serious shortage of teachers. The shortage of teachers was identified as most severe in mathematics, science, foreign languages, education for gifted and talented, language minority, and education for students with disabilities. The commission provided a seven-part recommendation to address this problem. Each was intended to improve the preparation of teachers or to make teaching a more rewarding and respected profession. These recommendations included (a) improved preparation programs, (b) increased teacher salaries, (c) 11-month teacher contracts, (d) a developed career ladder, (e) engage nonschool personnel resources, (f) incentives for teacher candidates, and (g) increased experienced teacher involvement in teacher preparation (Gardner et al., 1983).

Leadership and fiscal support were not included in the findings section, but the commission provided the recommendations that "citizens across the Nation hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessary to achieve these reforms, and that citizens provide the fiscal support and stability required to bring about the reforms we

propose" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 32). This section of the recommendations focused on the crucial role of principals and superintendents and state and local officials, as well as the federal government. The recommendations section closed with a call to educators, parents, and public officials, to assist with the given recommendations, including financial support. As noted in the report, "Excellence costs. But in the long run mediocrity costs far more" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 33).

The Final Words

The report concluded with a final call to action, or as the commission characterized, a plea. The commission acknowledged that faculty, administrators, policymakers, and the mass media play a crucial role in educational reform but suggested that parents and students are even more important stakeholders. Parents "must be a living example of what you expect your children to honor and to emulate" and students should "take hold of your life, apply your gifts and talents, work with dedication and self-discipline" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 35). Moreover, Gardner et al. (1983) noted:

> It is their America, and the America of all of us, that is at risk; it is to each of us that this imperative is addressed. It is by our willingness to take up the challenge, and our resolve to see it through, that America's place in the world will be either secured or forfeited. Americans have succeeded before and so we shall again. (p. 36)

The Response to the Report

Over 400,000 copies of the physical report were distributed, reaching millions of readers. The widely accessible document was and continues to be criticized, supported, and revisited. After the report, all 50 states established task forces to follow the recommendations set by the

commission. Within 10 months of the report's release to the public, then Secretary of Education, Bell (1984) reported:

> 44 states were raising their high school requirements, 20 were considering a longer school day, 13 were adopting master-teacher plans, 42 were examining their systems of teacher preparation and certification, and 36 were addressing shortages in science, math, and computer technology. (p. 531)

The report became the top news story within hours of its release. *The New York Times* described the report "as one of the most significant documents in the history of American public education" (Fiske, 1988, para. 1). In May of 1983, *Newsweek* credited the commission with identifying the crisis in education and providing a strong plan aimed at reversing the steady decline in educational performance. The October 1983 cover of *The New York Times* credited the commission with improving the schools (Hlebowitsh, 1990).

Not all responses to the report were positive and supportive. Peterson (1983), at the time the director of the Government Studies program at the Brookings Institute, stated the report made "exaggerated claims based on flimsy evidence, pontificated on matters about which there could scarcely be agreement, and made recommendations that either cost too much, could not be implemented or were too general to have any meaning" (p. 3). Some of the commission members also publicly criticized the report. Gardner, the commission chairman, made a critical statement against the report by saying, "that the report's reform recommendations were ahistorical and overly simplistic, and that the overall thrust of the report failed to recognize the contributions of the public schools to society" (Hlebowitsh, 1990, p. 82). Baker, who also served on the commission, supported that the report was overly simplistic. He responded to charges that the NCEE ignored important National Assessment of Educational Progress data that pointed to an

improvement in mathematics and verbal achievement at the junior high and elementary school levels, by boldly proclaiming that "we disregarded what we didn't believe" (Fiske, 1983, para. 8). This statement affirmed the importance of further research and investigation on and around *A Nation at Risk*. Hunt and Staton (1996) conducted a content analysis of papers written in response to *A Nation at Risk*, observing that the report:

> Catapulted the issue of educational reform into the public sphere . . . [and] was followed by lively discourse, the emergence of numerous additional reform report and educational policy documents, the publication of essays and studies in the scholarly educational literature, legislative action and gubernatorial attention in many states across the country, and widespread corporate involvement. (p. 271)

The report served as a political document that initiated a reform era that has continued for decades. *A Nation at Risk* may best be remembered for its sharp language and terminology—a deliberate tactic (Hlebowitsh, 1990). For example, "the ubiquitous 'excellence' in education policy rhetoric is more a symbolic expression than an actual achievable reality" (Pak Tee, 2008, p. 596). There has been no report to follow or provide an update, suggesting the country is still under the pressures of *A Nation at Risk*.

Education Reform

A Nation at Risk incited the education reform movement in the United States (Guthrie & Springer, 2004; Horsford, 2013; Hunt & Stanton, 1996; Wong & Nicotera, 2004). Labeled the "excellence era" in U.S. educational reform, the period from 1980 to the turn of the 20th century presented a generation of educational policies intended to enhance student learning. The education reform movement of the 1980s and 1990s "emphasized higher educational standards for students and teachers, greater accountability for school and student performance, and

increasing parental choice" (Goertz, 1996, p. 183). Education reform is still in the excellence era that the report pushed forward (Murphy & Adams, 1998). This excellence reform era had a comprehensive structure; it was overwhelmingly entrenched with components such as justice, equity, efficiency, and economics. The prevailing paradigm of standards, quality, and excellence in *A Nation at Risk* was new at the time. This was different from the frames of equity and efficiency previously supported in the decades prior. The word efficiency was not mentioned once in the 36-page document. Equity and equitable were only stated once each as emphasized in the following passage:

> We do not believe that a public commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a strong public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population. The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or in practice. To do so would deny young people their chance to learn and live according to their aspirations and abilities. It also would lead to a generalized accommodation to mediocrity in our society on the one hand or the creation of an undemocratic elitism on the other. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 13)

Howard (2003), a social psychologist, agreed with most of the report but was still troubled by what he interpreted as a juxtaposition between the objectives of excellence and equity, as am I. About the report's sole mention of equity, Howard concluded "it seems to turn on the assumption that in a diverse society a commitment to excellence will work at cross proposes to equity, unless the balance is carefully managed" (Howard, 2003, p. 85).

Excellence

Education reform is implied through education excellence, and education excellence is oftentimes not clearly defined. Many authors permit the readers to provide the interpretation. In general, the excellence movement focuses on both superior performance and stresses the highest performance standard for all students, teachers, and schools. A "fundamental fault is the failure to link excellence to public purpose of public schooling" (Jones-Wilson, 1989, p. 29). The notion of excellence in the report is defined in the context of human capital theory. What is at stake is economic competitiveness, not with the point of doing something well but to do it better than someone else. Economic competitiveness frames excellence in the context of human capital development. Thus, "it is no accident that A Nation at Risk spends a good deal of time discussing education in Japan" (Strike, 1985, p. 411), as well as other countries.

The report declared that the federal government "must provide the national leadership to ensure that the Nation's public and private resources are marshaled to address" education excellence (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 23). This foreshadowed the forthcoming expansion of the federal role in education for decades to come; however, *A Nation at Risk* did not provide clear direction as to what will be needed to address the "rising tide of educational mediocrity" (Horsford, 2013, p. 12). Mediocrity was the diagnosis, and the report gave the cure for mediocrity, excellence, "as well as the core of the reform movement" (Horsford, 2013, p. 12). Equity has taken a backseat to excellence. The less fortunate need additional support through policies and practice to overcome the limitations of their life circumstances (Jones-Wilson, 1989).

Equity

Rhetoric of equity and justice has been used to "promote neoliberal-driven educational laws, policies and institutions that, in fact, protect and exacerbate racial inequity in and through K–12 schools" (Kohli, 2017, p. 189). Jones-Wilson (1989) suggested that "equity emphasizes justness and fairness" (p. 29) and I disagree. Equity is an individualist concept that creates a juxtaposition with other concepts applied to education reform, such as excellence, efficiency, and justice. Justice is an institutional concept that encompasses excellence, efficiency, equity, and other critical components needed for education reform (Jones-Wilson, 1989).

Gans (1973) claimed that equity requires some degree of equality, for inequality is unfair. Conversely, more equality would generate greater equity, and once major inequalities were removed, individual cases that might require some new inequalities in the name of equity could then be dealt with more easily. According to Jones-Wilson (1989), "The democratic ideal of equality of opportunity translates into equality of educational opportunity with respect to formal schooling" (p. 29). Schools are expected to meet the needs of a diverse population and prepare an employable population. Public schools are expected to provide a literate labor force for the changing economy thus making the United States economically competitive with foreign countries, the latter goal is beyond the power of the school to achieve (Jones-Wilson, 1989).

Economic

The economy has two contexts: domestic health and global readiness. In addition to excellence and equity, *A Nation at Risk* was heavily rooted in the economic component of education reform, specifically human capital theory and market-oriented reform supported by greater choice in education. The compatibility of excellence and equity is a problem of resource allocation, contributing to the economics. Both require the disbursement of resources and "unless

one of these goals is a byproduct of the pursuit of the other, choices need to be made as to how resources will be allocated" (Strike, 1985, p. 409). Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB), neoliberal education has grown to include an extensive range of market-oriented structures (Scott, 2011). According to Hursh and Martina (2003), "NCLB along with charter schools and voucher systems introduces markets into education, therefore introducing a market system in public education" (p. 3). Scott (2011) claimed, "The transfer of government funds and oversight to private enterprise is at the heart of neoliberal economic restructuring" (p. 277).

In addition, choice in education, higher standards, accountability, and testing were also connected to the economic component in the report. Often, events triggered angst about the effectiveness of schools, such as World War I, the fear of unassimilated immigrants, the civil rights movement, Sputnik, the threat of the Soviet military, or technical supremacy in the Cold War (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Global economic trends, wars, and competition have moved nations toward high-tech industries. This shift demands a workforce with greater academic and problem-solving abilities, challenging public schools to educate all at the highest skill level (Boyd, 2000). Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that the framing of the achievement gap serves as a distraction from "the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society [and] have created an education debt" (p. 5) owed to Black and Latinx students. Rather than continuing to evade racism in K–12 school research, Kohli et al. (2017) argued there is a utility in an interdisciplinary approach to racism research in schools and specified:

> Improved tools are needed to name, challenge, and transform the racializing conditions in which students of Color are educated. With these tools, education scholars, policymakers,

> practitioners, and activists will be better equipped to disrupt the 'new racism' of K–12 schools and move us further toward a racially just educational system. (p. 196)

The commission created the illusion of impending economic doom, which gave education reform extreme urgency, suggesting all must rally and work together to win the alleged global battle against all nations in a war of economies (McIntush, 2000).

Mediocrity and Meritocracy

As mentioned, mediocrity was the diagnosis in *A Nation at Risk*, suggesting that the country was at risk because of the mediocre education system and the solution was to strive for excellence (Gardner et al., 1983). Mediocrity has largely evaded academic scrutiny and definition (Rodriguez & Van Ruyskensvelde, 2021). Villarreal (2006) explained the complexity of the concept but also suggested deeper historical and contextual elements that have contributed to how mediocrity is conceptualized in education. To Villarreal, mediocrity is the "paralysis of an education institution that maintains the status quo regardless of its effectiveness, is content with its limited capacity to produce excellence, believes that improvement is out of reach, and masquerades itself as excellence" (Villarreal, 2006, para. 8).

Rodriguez and Van Ruyskensvelde (2021) aimed to conceptualize the history of mediocrity in U.S. education by analyzing newspaper articles, with the intent to identify how mediocrity in education became public discourse. Rodriguez and Van Ruyskensvelde (2021) suggested that the concept of mediocrity embodied a range of meanings, and the concept of mediocrity helped facilitate the "developing narratives on meritocratic and neoliberal education polices" (p. 1193). Meritocratic ideology, "or the belief that hard work will pay off, is one of the U.S. public's deep-seated educational creeds" (Choi, 2008, p. 62). Meritocratic values ground the ideology of the American Dream, which "casts the United States as a profound experiment in

democracy" (Meroe, 2014, p. 487). Hochschild (1995) identified the core beliefs of the American Dream as: (a) individuals can succeed on the basis of their autonomous decisions and actions, (b) this success is based upon moral virtue, and (c) equal opportunity applies to everyone regardless of origin or social identity.

According to Meroe (2014), "Education and rigorous competition have always been principal methods of enacting a meritocratic order" (p. 487). One way that meritocratic ideology is present in education is through educators and educators' beliefs system:

> This belief system is particularly appealing to many teachers because meritocratic ideology insists that one's status is earned by hard work, and that school gives students this chance to succeed. Meritocratic ideology effectively cancels out race-discourse by minimizing the significance of the impact of racism. (Choi, 2008, p. 62)

Educational attainment and performance are seen as a key factor in determining merit, and "many assume that education improves one's chances for gainful employment and is therefore the most transparent means for social mobility" (Meroe, 2014, p. 492). McNamee and Miller (2009) argued that the widespread acceptance of meritocratic values in the United States exists regardless of real conditions of social stratification and the unequal distribution of resources and power. The definition of merit itself is fluid, historically a concept that has been socially constructed to reflect the values and interests of those with the power to institutionalize particular ideals and values (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Karabel, 2005). According to Meroe (2014), education has the potential to reduce inequality:

> It remains a principal venue for the reproduction of social stratification and the perpetuation of stigmatizing narratives of failure and social exclusion. In the United States, educational attainment and meritocratic social mobility is positively correlated

> with (family) socioeconomic status. It also can be argued that political representation and influence within our present democracy show similar patterns of association with SES [socioeconomic status]. Seemingly, the most robust returns for democracy and meritocracy are subsumed within overarching networks, institutions and logics of hierarchical social power. (p. 495)

The meritocratic belief system is one of the U.S. deep-seated creeds in educational politics.

Education Politics

Although this study focused on the excellence reform era, throughout history public education held many roles in the United States. The ideologies of progress or regress in education are political constructs (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Because public education is woven into the history and structure of this country, education is always political. Agenda setting is the first step in the policy-making process, followed by the specification of alternatives, identifying an authoritative alternative, and then implementing the decision (Kingdon, 1995). The totality of the policy-making process is not explored in this study, but it was connected. This study examined gubernatorial ideology on educational reform, which can directly impact state-level agenda-setting.

Educational politics is not linear; rather it is constant web of balance. Educational improvement from one perspective could seem like a decline from another. The constant balancing act leaves stakeholders to be satisfied with compromises that create minimum conflict. So, "if schools do not seem to work very well, one key reason is that we continue to ask them to achieve ends that are mutually exclusive" (Labaree, 1997, p. 71). The doctrine of neoliberalism drove educational policy in the United States over the past 40 years, free-market capitalism "where people are defined as economic maximizers governed by self-interest, whose value is

narrowly equated as being a self-sufficient worker and engaged consumer" (Scott, 2011, p. 271). Corporations and policymakers have worked forcefully to incorporate the market into public education, with *Fortune* magazine confidently observing in 1998 that many analysts believed that education would emerge as one of the leading investment sectors over the next 20 years (Justin, 1998; Means, 2008).

Federal Role in Education

The Department of Education (DoEd) originated in 1867 under President Andrew Johnson, with the purpose of collecting information and statistics about the country's schools. Congress officially declared the DoEd a cabinet-level department in 1979. The purpose of the DoEd is in Section 102 of Public Law 96–88. According to the Department of Education Organization Act (1979) :

> The establishment of a Department of Education is in the public interest, will promote the general welfare of the United States, will help ensure that education issues receive proper treatment at the Federal level, and will enable the Federal Government to coordinate its education activities more effectively. (p. 670)

It is inconceivable for the DoEd to achieve this mission with the federal government only accounting for approximately 8% of total spending on education (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Historically, international and domestic crises prompted and motivated the impact of the federal government on education. In the 1940s, there was a significant expansion of federal support for education (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). After World War II (WWII), the Lanham Act, GI Bill, and impact aid laws provided funding to communities affected by the military presence and authorized postsecondary education assistance to send millions to college

(U.S. Department of Education, 2024). The Lanham Act was passed to fund public works, such as childcare in communities with defense industries to ease the burden of military presence in communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). The GI Bill authorized education assistance, sending approximately 8 million veterans to college. Impact aid laws post-WWII led to a large expansion of federal support for education (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Another example of a comprehensive expansion of federal support for education was after the Cold War. Out of crisis, such as war, comes opportunity; the Cold War kindled a similar response as WWII with the National Defense Education Act of 1958 in response to the space race and the launch of Sputnik. The National Defense Education Act was intended to help guarantee highly trained people by providing loans to college students, STEM education, fellowships, foreign language studies, and vocational-technical training (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Some of the military-focused educational policies widened the gaps between Black Americans and their white counterparts because the legislation did not explicitly include Black Americans, so they did not reap the full benefits. According to Humes (2006), "The G.I. Bill was race neutral on its face, but the vast majority of veterans who benefited from the bill were white. Blacks, in most cases, were funneled into industrial and vocational schools" (p. 92). Some of the military-focused policies did not achieve educational excellence for all but rather maintained whiteness in the U.S. and global competitiveness.

In the 1980s to the present, the federal focus shifted to addressing poverty and civil rights (Vinovskis, 1999). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibited discrimination based on race, sex, and disability, led to a fundamental change in focus for the DoEd. From President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" came the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA was the landmark representation

of the federal commitment to education equity and quality from the federal government (Boyle & Lee, 2015). ESEA is or should be reauthorized every 5 years including revisions and amendments.

Due to the complex and evolving nature of governance in the United States, particularly the constitutional absence of a mandated federal role in education, limits exist on the DoEd's power and authority. Section 103[a–b] of Public Law 96–88 explicitly explained what the DoEd cannot do. Section 103[a] of Public Law 96–88 reads as follows:

> It is the intention of the Congress in the establishment of the Department to protect the rights of State and local governments and public and private educational institutions in the areas of educational policies and administration of programs and to strengthen and improve the control of such governments and institutions over their own educational programs and policies. The establishment of the Department of Education shall not increase the authority of the Federal Government over education or diminish the responsibility for education which is reserved to the States and the local school systems and other instrumentalities of the States. (Department of Education Organization Act, 1979, p. 4)

Section 103[b] of Public Law 96–88 reads as follows:

> No provision of a program administered by the Secretary or by any other officer of the Department shall be construed to authorize the Secretary or any such officer to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school, or school system, over any accrediting agency or association, or over the selection or content of library resources, textbooks, or other instructional materials by any educational institution or

> school system, except to the extent authorized by law. (Department of Education Organization Act, 1979, p. 4)

Throughout the eight reauthorizations of ESEA, there was a theme of passing burdens and responsibilities between federal and state education agencies. The 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution also limits the federal reach into education because the Constitution does not explicitly list education as a federal or national issue. The federal role in education, although small, is powerful. The lack of constitutional clarity and exclusivity regarding education has resulted in a decentralized intergovernmental education system that creates variation and disparities in outcomes across the state.

The minimized and decentralized role of the federal government made the 1989 Education Summit an astonishing event. According to Elmore (1997):

> President Bush and 50 governors meet in Charlottesville, Virginia, to draft national goals for education. This Education Summit inaugurates as all-too-brief period in which there appears to be a broad bipartisan support for some sort of national movement to support explicit state and local goals and standards. (p. 42)

For only the third time in U.S. history, on September 27, 1989, President Bush summoned all 50 governors for a 2-day education summit (Vinovskis, 1999). Concerned about the delay in progress after *A Nation at Risk* the H. W. Bush administration worked closely with Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton and South Carolina Governor Carroll Campbell, chair and cochair of National Governor Association's education initiative, to agree on the national goals presented in the Educational Excellence Act of 1989 during the education summit (Vinovskis, 1999). They concluded their convening by pledging:

> As elected chief executives, we expect to be held accountable for progress in meeting the new national goals, and we expect to hold others accountable as well . . . [and] the time for rhetoric is past; the time for performance is now. (Vinovskis, 2008, p. 193)

President Bush announced in the1990 State of the Union message the six national education goals:

- By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.
- By the year 2000, we will increase the percentage of students graduating from high school to at least 90%.
- By the year 2000, American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography.
- By the year 2000, U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
- By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning. (Vinovskis, 2008, pp. 193–194)

Following the announcement of the six national education goals and the failure to pass the Educational Excellence Act, President Bush in early 1991 appointed former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander as Secretary of Education. Alexander developed the America 2000 Excellence in Education Act, loosely reflecting the six national education goals. Arkansas

Governor Bill Clinton was elected President in 1992 and continued national action on education reform. Like President W. H. Bush, Clinton promised he would be an effective "education president" (Vinovskis, 1999). Clinton appointed South Carolina Governor Richard Riley as the secretary of education and promoted K–12 school reforms throughout his administration (Vinovskis, 2008). Congress finally passed Goals 2000 in March 1994 and about 6 months later, ESEA was reauthorized as the Improving America's School Act (Vinovskis, 1999) Goals 2000 and Improving America's School Act, like parts of the proposed America 2000 initiative, enhanced the role of states in education reform and recommitted the nation to reaching the eight national education goals by the year 2000 (Vinovskis, 1999). Governors now play a more active role in state and national education reforms due to the increasing gubernatorial influence in state education as well as their contributions to the National Education Goals Panel and NGA (Vinovskis, 2008).

The Presidential Role in Education

The president sets the agenda for the country. Although education is not a federal issue, the voice of the federal government can influence education nationwide, specifically the power of the president to use the bully pulpit to advocate for preferred education reforms. President Theodore Roosevelt first used the term bully pulpit, meaning a strong platform to push an agenda and bully was an adjective meaning wonderful (Nelson, 2009). Kingdon (1995) found at the federal level, the president can significantly advance an issue onto the decision agenda. Young et al. (2010) found governors have parallel influence at the state level. In state politics of education, more information on the gubernatorial role is provided. In a study of how U.S. presidents define the purposes of education, Carpenter (2005) determined four broad purposes: economics, citizenship, self-realization, and human relationship. Through content analysis of State of the

Union and inaugural speeches, Carpenter found "economics and citizenship garnered the most attention, but the mention of the purposes differed over time—citizenship prevailed until the early 1900s, and economics grew prominent in presidential rhetoric throughout the 20th century" (Carpenter, 2011, p. 3). Presidents can influence the public's policy agenda. When presidents give a high-profile speech devoted to one policy problem, the policy problem will rise on the public agenda (Behr & Iyengar, 1985), such as the State of the Union Address. The president "does not need to convince the public that a policy problem is important by offering substantive positions. Merely mentioning a problem to the public heightens public concern with the policy problem" (Cohen, 1995, p. 102).

In addition to setting the agenda for the country, the president has nominating power. The president selects a vice president running mate, as well as nominates and assigns cabinet members, committees, commissions, and federal agencies. The president also has nominating power in the judicial branch of government, nominating supreme court judges and federal judges. The secretary of education is one of these nominated positions, which leads the mission, goals, and objectives of the DoEd (Vinovskis, 1999).

The nominations the president makes can impact if and how the national agenda moves forward. *A Nation at Risk* came to fruition because of the commission ordained by the Reagan administration. Presidential commissions also serve a legitimizing function to issues and specific policy proposals. Commissions can set the agenda. Their creation defines an issue as an important problem, and their reports offer solutions (McIntush, 2000). The NCEE was stacked with prestigious members, including some highly regarded members of the university community (Hlebowitsh, 1990). Considering *A Nation at Risk*, the commission's impact on the

educational agenda has been lasting. The physical structure of the commission also serves as a legitimizing function.

Educational Federalism

Federalism is a philosophy, principle, and ideology that favors a distinct possessive pattern of government, one that combines the centralization of some political powers and the decentralization of others (Watts, 1998). Education federalism is a balance of power between the federal, state, and local governments. Education federalism in the United States has been decentralized, with state and local control over public schools and a limited federal role, emphasizing substantial state independence over education (Robinson, 2015). The constitutional foundation for this approach resides in the omission of education as a federal responsibility and the 10th Amendment's reservation to states of authority in all areas not assigned to Congress in the Constitution.

Federalism is not merely a method of organizing but also an ideology that can be traced back to the teachings of Plato (Inman, 2007). Federalism comes from the Latin root word *foedus* which means league, treaty, or compact. The meaning has come to signify the relationship between the centralized and decentralized aspects of a system or organization. Elmore (1997) suggested:

> I do not think that control of education is actually decentralized in the United States. The notion of local control of schools is, I think largely inaccurate and outmoded, especially in light of the direction education reform has taken in the past decade. (p. 41)

Roth et al. (2022) extracted the organizing principles of federal organizing structures by analyzing 51 political science papers, finding that empowerment, separation of competencies, organizational flexibility, and cooperation and coordination can define fundamental values in

federalism ideology. Young et al. (2010) sought to understand how reading became prominent on the agenda of state governments in the late 1990s. Using Kingdon's (1995) policy stream model Young et al. (2010) suggested that "from a policy domain at the federal level to a discrete issue within a state education policy domain is influenced by the nature of the issue as well as the advocacy efforts of the executive branch" (p. 15).

State Politics of Education

This section continues to discuss educational politics, but now at the state level. As previously mentioned, education politics is a web of connections. This section begins with a discussion of the values in state education politics and then leads into the gubernatorial role in education. Since the Reagan administration, federal strategies to advance devolution, including decentralization, deregulation, and diminution, have impacted state agencies in various ways, symbolically, organizationally, politically, and programmatically (Astuto & Clark, 1988). The social relationships and common values in states create an opportunity to observe how culture and values influence state political systems.

Culture is shaped by things such as geography and history. Culture is intertwined with the identity of political actors. Wirt et al. (1988) emphasized values found in state education politics. The values that a democratic system often pursue are a mix of quality, efficiency, equity, and choice. Marshall et al. (1986), Sergiovanni et al. (1999), and other scholars, have highlighted the role of values conflict in education, in the shaping of education policy, and in the implicit determination of the suggestions that are or are not placed onto an agenda. How these values are prioritized on the educational agenda depends on state political actors such as governors, state boards, and organized education groups (Mazzoni & Campbell, 1976). Although this section is on state education politics, the federal context is critical to the state and gubernatorial role.

Governors, as a state's most visible and powerful elected official, have considerable influence on the policy process; their values, opinions, and ideology have important consequences for state education policy (Rosenthal, 1990).

Vinovskis (2008) noted, "While the federal government could play an important supporting role, education is primarily a state responsibility and that governors must maintain the authority to oversee the operation of education in their states at all levels" (p. 201). Most governors are also responsible for developing the state's initial budget as well as selecting agency heads (Beyle, 1999); they also initiate most of the policy proposals discussed in the state legislature. According to Goertz (1996), "Gubernatorial activism increased dramatically in the 1980s when a group of reform-minded governors undertook an education reform movement that sought to respond to calls by the public, the business community, and the president for improved education" (p. 186). Governors' preferences are important (Coffey, 2005).

Southern governors have been significant during the excellence reform era, as many of them have become Secretary of Education and President of the United States. According to Vinovskis (2008):

> Through NGA, governors also played an extensive role in fostering and implementing national education reforms such as national education goals, America 2000, Goals 2000, and No Child Left Behind. Former governors, particularly Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, played major roles in promoting national education reforms; and GOP and Democratic administrations recruited other former governors such as Lamar Alexander and Richard Riley to serve as their secretaries of education. (p. 202)

The southern states that coined the term "education governor" are Tennessee, Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Mississippi, as they became leaders in the national

movement for educational reform (Vinovskis, 1999); these states were the sample selected for this study.

Gittell and McKenna (1999) found governors gained new "formal powers over education, formed coalitions with powerful interest groups, and overcame resistance of other interest groups" (p. 289). Their study of the politics of education revealed a profound shift in power relations at the state level and policy agendas. Governors' roles in public policy are open and ambiguous, even more so in education politics. Barrilleaux and Berkman (2003) provided three reasons why governors' influence on state policymaking is important to understand. To assess the distributive consequences of differing governmental designs, governors are the most visible officeholders in any state. It is also arguable that governors are poor vehicles for achieving statewide policy goals due to the parochialism of legislatures. Governors have the opportunity for a wide range of interactions with different groups, seeing the big picture surrounding policy areas. There is only one governor in each state and these leaders must balance the needs of the state, being held personally accountable for state outcomes (Mokher, 2010).

For educational policymaking, how governors define the purposes of education is significant and contributes to what policies these leaders pursue (Carpenter, 2011). According to Coffey (2005), few studies have attempted to measure governors' policy ideologies, supporting the need for a study as such. Carpenter (2011) used gubernatorial State of the State (SOS) speeches from 2001 to 2008 to identify overall patterns and trends, finding that as with modern presidents, governors define education in economic terms most often, regardless of other factors (i.e., political party, region, time). The most common vehicle for gubernatorial agenda-setting is public rhetoric (Crew, 1992; DiLeo, 1997), for governors, like other policymakers, assert power through language (Carpenter, 2011; Marshall et al., 1985).

State of the State Addresses

An important part of governors' leadership responsibilities is to report to constituents via an annual or biannual State of the State (SOS) address. Although governors give many speeches and generate various public documents, "the state of the state address represents one of the most significant occasions of gubernatorial rhetoric from which the public can reliably infer a macroscopic story" (Carpenter, 2011, p. 3). Governors routinely present these speeches to the state legislature in the early part of the year, usually at the beginning of the legislative session, if there is one, making them comparable units of analysis across states and across time (Coffey, 2005).

Through the SOS addresses, governors attempt to set the agendas for the state, clearly intended to influence both public opinion and the legislative process (Rosenthal, 1990; Van Assendelft, 1997). Governors also often push the agenda of the federal executive branch, occasionally persuading the public to behave in certain ways or support initiatives. This is an occasion where governors urge local governments, other states, and the federal government to follow certain recommendations (Carpenter, 2011).

SOS addresses are a direct statement by a governor, including their most valued legislative goals, thus providing a gauge of their ideological views and policy agendas (Ferguson, 2003; Van Assendelft, 1997). These speeches are also mainly prospective, specifying what a governor intends to do or desires to have done, thus they are also ideal for analyzing or explaining subsequent actions (Jackson & Kingdon, 1992; Segal & Cover, 1989). Coffey (2005) used SOS speeches to develop a "reliable, valid, and replicable measure of gubernatorial ideology that can be used in models of a variety of policy and political phenomena in the states" (p. 89), further emphasizing the utility of the SOS address. Coffey (2005) added:

> In short, lacking detailed interview or survey data from governors, their major public addresses provide the best insight available into their preferences, values, and ideology. And as a regular and, arguably, the most important such address, gubernatorial state of the state speeches is an excellent data source for this information. (p. 90)

Governor Kunin (1990) of Vermont described the use of public discourse in framing and shaping educational reform, saying:

> My first step was to make the best possible use of the bully pulpit. At no time does a governor receive more exclusive attention than when giving [the] . . . state of the state speech. . . . In addition to enacting legislation, I was able to raise the public awareness of the value of education. On one level, a governor—any political leader—personifies values. I do not think that values can be an overlay, added on to speeches because a pollster indicates that certain values are in vogue. (pp. 51–52)

Governors can impact the states' political agenda. Although this study examined *A Nation at Risk*, the implications from this study extend to state-level policymaking, highlighting how education discourse continues to shape policy priorities, reinforce colorblind ideology, and influence contemporary debates on equity and reform.

The South

The modern education reform movement has roots in the South. Following the release of *A Nation at Risk*, southern states adopted laws focused on strengthening standards and increasing accountability (Robson et al., 2019). Bellwether Education Partners identified 15 states in defining "the South" including Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. This region is home to more than half of the Black population in the United

States and more than 40% of the southern population live in rural communities (Robson et al., 2019). Southern states have higher poverty rates, lower median incomes, and lower educational attainment. More than one-third of the K–12 students in the United States live in the South and the per-pupil spending is lower than the national average in the South (Robson et al., 2019).

The South became an important area for education reform as there was a shared historical context, regional trends, and education trends. The Black community in southern states catalyzed the movement for free public schools. Several Supreme Court decisions supported this movement, specifically with deliberate school desegregation. By the 1980s, 23% of students were enrolled in segregated schools, down from 78% the decade prior (Robson et al., 2019). In 1985, only 62.8% of Black 18–19 years old graduated from high school, compared to the 76.7% of white students of the same age (Robson et al., 2019). The enrollment rates of Black students in 4- and 2-year institutions in 1984 were 5% and 3.8%, respectively, compared to the 51.5% and 28.8% of white students, respectively (Robson et al., 2019). The number of Black students who received a terminal degree in 1980–1981 was 1,265, compared to the 25,908 terminal degrees earned by whites (Jacob, 1989). In addition to being influential at the K–12 level, the South has also been a significant region for postsecondary education. The South is home to 90 of the remaining 102 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). According to Robson et al. (2019), "Any movement serious about improving education and life outcomes for underserved student groups—including low-income, minority, and rural—must engage the South" (slide 3). This information documents a crisis. Jacob (1989) stated:

> The real responsibility rest with the federal government whose action to ensure quality education for all groups have fallen far short of its rhetoric. The real responsibility rest with school systems that accord preferential treatment to nonminority school districts.

> The real responsibility rest with teachers who fail to engage black students in the kind of challenging educational experience that tap their full potential. (p. 14)

To forfeit the development of one's potential "is a form of suicide," which, if it were to become prevalent within Black communities, could lead to a "form of self-inflected genocide" (Cheek, 1989, p. 20). It is of grave importance that the nation ensure there is equal education opportunity for Black communities to take full advantage of such opportunities represents the best hope for continued racial progress (Cheek, 1989).

Governors

As far back as the 1940s, southern governors, legislators, and other state leaders were thinking strategically about improving education in the region using data. The Southern Regional Education Board was created to improve public education. Southern state leaders worked together to set goals and advocated for education reform and improvement (Robson et al., 2019). The 1980s mobilized the national crusade for education reform. After *A Nation at Risk* captured the attention of the public, organizations and politicians began to foster platforms for public school reform. Both the Reagan and Bush administrations had strong beliefs that education "historically has been and should be primarily a local and state responsibility, it made sense for the federal government to work closely with the National Governors' Association (NGA) to reform American schooling" (Vinovskis, 1999, p. 7). Governors became important, as this role is crucial for mobilizing legislators and the public at the state-level. The term "education governor" became popular when discussing "Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Bill Clinton (D-AR), Bob Graham (D-FL), James Hunt (D-NC), Thomas Kean (R-NJ), Richard Riley (D-SC), and William Winter (D-MS)" (Vinovskis, 1999, p. 7), as they became leaders in the national movement for educational reform. The Southern Regional Education Board, the National Assessment of

Educational Progress, and the National Governors' Association worked closely with the Reagan administration to further the *A Nation at Risk* agenda (Robson et al., 2019).

CDA in Education

Chapter 1 provides an overview of CDA as a theory and Chapter 3 provides details on CDA as a concept that shaped the methodology used in this study. This chapter ends with an overview of CDA and colorblind ideology used in education. Rogers et al. (2016) conducted extensive literature reviews: one includes literature from 1983–2003 and the other from 2004–2012. The first study found that 39% of CDA research in education focused on literacy education. Literacy education research increased significantly 10 years after the studies. This significant increase led Rogers et al. (2016) to focus specifically on the relationship between CDA and literacy education. According to Rogers and Schaenen (2014):

> The significant proportion of literacy scholarship in all CDA in education since 1983 signals the special relationship between CDA and literacy education and therefore warrants focused study now that CDA is well established as stance and methodology in the field of education. (p. 122)

In the former study, Rogers et al. (2005) found, in education, scholars defined CDA in four different ways: (a) in relation to poststructuralism; (b) in terms of its goals, aims, or functions; (c) basis on its association with systemic functional linguistics, critical linguistics, or interactional sociolinguistics; and (d) through a description of the analytic framework used. All the scholars agreed that CDA brings together a micro and macro analysis, which offers a description, interpretation, and explanation of social events (Rogers et al., 2005).

Discourse has been featured in educational policy studies as an analytic tool, methodological tool, theoretical frame, realm of implication, and a foundational definition of

educational policy itself. Anderson and Holloway (2020) conducted an interpretive analysis of 37 empirical studies, suggesting that "acknowledgment of conceptual definitions and theoretical and epistemological stances are paramount toward establishing methodological coherence that allows for the continued creative and productive uses of discourse analysis to push the field forward" (p. 214).

Queensland, Australia has one of the best-performing education systems, allowing for rigorous research and findings to inform the top evidence-based challenges and solutions. Produced in 2000, the Queensland State Education 2010 (QSE 2010) is an ambitious reform agenda for Queensland. Taylor and Henry (2003) concluded that QSE 2010:

> In its distinctive response to rapid global pressures for change QSE 2010 has interwoven economic priorities with social goals. There is an emphasis on building social capital as well as human capital, and a strong commitment to public schooling. State schools are viewed as having an important role in building social capital in communities. There is recognition of the need for differentiated schools and teaching approaches to meet the needs of diverse communities; and the proposed approach to learning, New Basics, is a framework designed for all students. (p. 350)

QSE 2010 was directed at the wider public, including teachers, parents, and policymakers, similar to *A Nation at Risk*. Taylor and Henry (2003) explored how equity issues were being addressed in the new Queensland education reform agenda. Taylor (2004) explored the possibilities of using CDA through critical policy research of Queensland's education reform agenda. She suggested that CDA is a tool for political practice and activism that can be used for educational policy research and change.

Although some scholars have proven that CDA is formidable tool and theory, there is a lack of training in language studies for education researchers receive. Luke (2002) stated:

> We need more research and scholarship that documents and analytically explicates analyses that focus on affirmative, emancipating and redressive texts and discourse practices turning our attention to instances where discourse appears to lead systematically to the redistribution of wealth and power. (p. xi)

Fairclough (2001a) asked how CDA studies can contribute to democratic struggle; how academics and scholars can connect their papers and books to political movements. He wrote:

> I think we have to keep rethinking how we research, how and where we publish, and how we write. How we research: . . . the public sphere is cut off from struggles over the public sphere - why not work with activists in designing and carrying out research, tying it for instance to the campaigns of disabled people over welfare reform? How and where we publish: . . . why not seek to publish pamphlets, articles in newspapers or magazines, or on the web? How we write: [our] publications are written in academic ways - is it possible to develop ways of writing which are accessible to many people without being superficial? (pp. 264–265)

A real problem for education researchers who are interested in CDA is their relative lack of experience in dealing with the microstructure of texts (Rogers et al.,, 2005).

Colorblind Ideology in Education

Colorblind ideology is race-neutral, disregarding race and ethnicity has significantly shaped educational policies in the United States. Oftentimes presented as a path toward equality, this approach perpetuates systemic inequities embedded in the nation's racial history (Wells, 2014). Some scholars believe that the race-neutral principle of colorblindness masks structural

injustices, maintaining the societal racial order (Mueller, 2017). This section explores the historical, practical, and global implications of colorblind ideology in education, providing a foundation for understanding its influence on the policies and rhetoric of A Nation at Risk and subsequent political discourse.

Historical Context

Colorblind ideology in U.S. education can be traced back to Reconstruction and the Fourteenth Amendment, which introduced the equal protection clause. This clause informed the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, where the Supreme Court declared that "separate but equal" educational facilities were inherently unequal (Lopez, 2007). Although that ruling sought to demolish segregation, its reliance on race-neutral language has since been used to oppose race-conscious measures like affirmative action and desegregation policies (Anderson, 2007).

The debate over whether the Reconstruction Congress envisioned a colorblind constitution continues to shape discourse. Anderson (2007) posed the question "Did the Reconstruction Congress intend to establish a color-blind constitution that forbids race-conscious educational policy and thus compels our contemporary generation to rely exclusively on race-neutral means to achieve desegregation in public schools and racial diversity in higher education" (p. 250). This suggested the impact of colorblind interpretations has far outpaced any measurable intent. Moreno (2007) similarly argued the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment were not designed to support policies explicitly benefiting individuals based on race, further complicating efforts to address racial disparities in education.

Practical

In U.S. education, colorblind ideology reinforces the myth of a meritocratic, postracial society where individual achievement supersedes systemic barriers (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). Educational institutions often adopt policies that obscure racial inequities, leaving Black students to navigate environments that fail to address their unique challenges (Mueller, 2017). This issue is evident in teacher education programs. Cross (2003) highlights the enormous gap between, predominantly, white teacher educators and their increasingly diverse student populations, leading to a disconnect that impacts the academic achievement of Students of Color, specifically Black students. According to Gay (2002), teacher preparation programs must adopt culturally responsive practices to address this gap effectively. Yet, as Gordon (2005) noted, many white educators and faculty members avoid discussing race, which perpetuates a colorblind stance that prioritizes silence over meaningful engagement (McIntosh, 1989; Thompson, 1999).

Choi (2008) emphasized that unlearning racism requires a systemic approach, where educators confront their complicity in racial hierarchies as well as reflect on their beliefs about power. This process is critical, as the presence of colorblind ideology at the teacher level suggests its broader influence throughout the educational system.

Global Perspectives

Internationally, colorblind ideology manifests differently based on cultural and historical contexts. In France, universalism, a principle emphasizing a singular national identity, shapes educational policy by minimizing racial and ethnic distinctions (Beaman & Petts, 2020). This approach is intended to safeguard against discrimination but actually limits the ability to address systemic inequities in schools. In contrast, the United States adopts a meritocratic framework

that frames educational success as a product of individual effort, often ignoring structural inequalities that impede access and outcomes (Rallu et al., 2006).

In both contexts, colorblindness reinforces existing racial hierarchies by denying the role of race in shaping educational experiences. This is particularly evident in the United States' opposition to affirmative action, where policymakers argue against policies that address persistent racial disparities in access to higher education (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). Meanwhile, the absence of racial data in France prevents the identification and resolution of inequities, effectively maintaining the status quo (Beaman & Petts, 2020).

Implications for Education Politics

The adoption of colorblind ideology in educational policy and rhetoric, as shown in *A Nation at Risk*, reflects a broader trend of framing systemic inequities as individual failings. The report's emphasis on national economic competitiveness and meritocracy, coupled with race-neutral language, aligns with colorblind ideology. A common misinterpretation of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, which selectively focuses on the "content of their character" rather than systemic critiques of racism, further underscores the ideological underpinnings of this approach (Lipsitz, 2019). By reframing racial inequities as issues unrelated to race, colorblind ideology limits the potential for meaningful educational reform. Addressing these challenges requires acknowledging racial and ethnic differences to create equitable policies that meet the needs of all students (Mueller, 2017).

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

A variety of theories and approaches to critical language and discourse studies have been developed. Discourse analysis can be used to create theories and test hypotheses in a scientific manner (Herrera & Braumoeller, 2004). This study used critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodology. This chapter explains the significance of the methodology used, including definitions, theories, and systematic steps. The following research questions guided the development and execution of this study:

- How is colorblind ideology embedded in *A Nation at Risk*?
- What values from *A Nation at Risk* are used to reinforce colorblind ideology?
- How does modality in A Nation at Risk reinforce colorblind ideology?

Research grounded in critical theory often examines social institutions and the dynamics of power among individuals and groups in those institutions (Swartz, 1997), a focus that also guided this study. This chapter contains an overview of CDA, including theories, approaches, and terminology. Then, I discuss the data collection and analysis process used in this study. This chapter concludes with a discussion of research quality and rigor, including biases, ethical issues, and the limitations of the study.

Conceptual Framework

Critical theories seek to "explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation" (Bohman, 2013, p. 1). Critical analytical and methodological approaches that are used to better understand, reveal, and act against extant (in)equities in society are becoming more commonly used in educational research (Diem & Young, 2015). Critical inquiry is not a new way of framing research as "scholars have been using this approach to challenge and

expose power and oppression for quite some time" (Diem & Brooks, 2022, p. 3). Critical approaches to discourse examine power and inequality, rooted in the established relationship between discourse and society. In this study, CDA is a transdisciplinary methodology including various theories, approaches, and terminology. Fairclough (2003) defined CDA as an "analysis of the dialectical relationships between discourse (including language but also other forms of semiosis, e.g., body language or visual images) and other elements of social practices" (p. 205). Gee (2005) emphasized that CDA approaches must go further and "treat social practices in terms of their implications for things like status, solidarity, distribution of social goods, and power" (p. 33). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) provided a very popular definition among CDA researchers:

> CDA sees discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of 'social practice'. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it. The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people . . . Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects – that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people. (p. 258)

In this study, I went further to understand the impact and implication of the federal voice in education politics at the state level, making CDA an appropriate methodology. Those who

employ CDA do not follow a step-by-step method but aim to "critique the power in individual and interacting discourses to produce transformative work" (Diem & Brooks, 2022, p. 3).

Colorblind Ideology

In addition to CDA, colorblind ideology is also used to frame the methodology and findings. Colorblind ideology supports this obstruction of civil rights policies and progress by allowing individuals to defend the racial status quo under the rhetorical façade of equality and sameness across racial groups (Alexander, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2001). This study was centered on how colorblind ideology is masked in discourse, specifically in *A Nation at Risk*. As mentioned in Chapter 1 the colorblind ideology and frames of Bonilla-Silva (2010) were used theoretically and conceptually. Bonilla-Silva (2010) identified and defined the frames as follows:

- The frame of abstract liberalism involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., "equal opportunity," the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters. (p. 70)
- Naturalization is a frame that allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences. (p. 70)
- Cultural racism is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as "Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education" or "blacks have too many babies" to explain the standing of minorities in society. (p. 71)
- Minimization of racism is a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances ("It's better now than in the past" or "There is discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there"). (pp. 70–71)

Colorblind discursive practices are dangerous because they mask, and in some ways dismiss, entrenched racial inequality as well as more subtle acts of prejudice and discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Carr, 1997; Forman, 2014). Cochran-Smith (1995) asserted that we can "unlearn" racism by reexamining our own biography and situating it in the larger sociohistorical context that contributes to the socialization process. Choi (2008) emphasized:

> "Unlearning" does not always mean dismantling colorblind ideologies. The process of "unlearning" racism, with careful pedagogical planning and mediation, essentially invites reflections on our own complicity in racism and our own racial identity. In other words, unlearning racism is not substituting colorblind beliefs with color conscious beliefs, but instead allowing students to struggle with their own belief system and their locations in relation to power relations. (p. 67)

Discourse analysis specifically examines the power and power relations of the text, language, and knowledge (Zajda, 2022).

Data Sources and Data Collection

Chapter 2 provided details on *A Nation at Risk* including the significance of the report for this study. *A Nation at Risk* marked a shift in education. The report was a call to action, urging the public to prioritize education. Given its lasting influence, *A Nation at Risk* was chosen as the focal point of this study to critically examine how its language and ideological underpinnings continue to shape education policy and reinforce colorblind ideology. The selection of *A Nation at Risk* was also informed by its historical significance and the persistent references to its recommendations in contemporary educational debates, making it a crucial text for understanding the evolution of education discourse over the past 4 decades. Copies of the *A Nation at Risk* report were collected using the North Carolina State University library services.

One copy was a photocopy of the original report to confirm accuracy. The other copy was a transcribed cleaner copy that was used for analysis in Atlas.ti.

Conceptual Framework

Chapter 1 provided an overview of CDA as the theoretical framework. Here in Chapter 3 is an overview of CDA as the conceptual methodology. This study used Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional analysis, including a descriptive analysis, interpretation analysis, and explanation analysis. This was a preliminary study that will lead to further examination including other samples and a multidimensional CDA approach.

Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Analysis

According to Fairclough (1989), discourse is three-dimensional and there are three dimensions of analysis. The three dimensions of the discourse are the text (i.e., product), discourse practice (i.e., interactions), and sociocultural practice (i.e., context). The discourse text is the product. The discourse interaction includes the process of production and the process of interpretation, also referred to as discourse practice. The discourse context includes the social conditions of production and the social conditions of interpretations, also referred to as sociocultural practice. The three dimensions of the analysis are description, interpretation, and explanation. The description dimension is concerned with the formal properties of the text. The interpretation dimension is concerned with the relationship between the text and the interaction. The explanation dimension is concerned with the relationship between the interaction and the social context (Fairclough, 2001a).

According to Fairclough (2001b), productive and interpretative processes involve an "interplay between properties of texts and a cognitive recourses of people" (p. 20) and are so-called "members resources." Member resources:

> Draw upon in producing or interpreting texts – including their knowledge, and representations of the world, assumptions, values, beliefs and so on. These recourses are basically cognitive, but their nature and conditions of their use are socially determined; they are socially generated, transmitted and unequally distributed. Social conditions shape the resources that people bring to production and interpretation, and these in turn shape the ways in which texts are produced and interpreted. (Pesic, 2023, p. 94)

Member resources are important to note as during the explanation analysis dimension member resource is understood to be specific ideologies (Fairclough, 2001a).

Description Analysis

The first analysis dimension involves the description analysis of the text vocabulary, grammar, and structure (Fairclough, 1989). There are three formal values to examine the features of the texts: experiential, relational, and expressive. The experiential value captures how the person or institution that created the text represented their natural and social experiences; it is regarding contents, knowledge, and beliefs. The experiential values of discourse, according to Fairclough (2015):

> Have to do with the ways in which the grammatical forms of a language code happenings or relationships in the world, the people, or animals, or things involved in those happenings or relationships, and their spatial and temporal circumstances, manner of occurrence, and so on. (p. 137)

The main question regarding experiential values is how text represents agency; whether actions are represented in ways that specify or elide the agency of actors and, consequently, causality, or responsibility.

The relational value captures the text's social relationship with social groups. Expressive value captures societal integrity and grounds the person's or institution's social identity (Gölbaşı, 2017). The concept of modality is important for both relational and expressive values in discourse. According to Fairclough (2003), modality is the relationship set up between the author and representations—what authors commit themselves to in terms of truth or necessity. Modality is the expression of the judgment of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what is said or written. There are two main types of modality: "'epistemic modality' (modality of probabilities), and 'deontic modality' (modality of necessity and obligation)" (Pesic, 2023, p. 102). Fairclough (2015) also characterized "relational modality," the authority of one participant in relation to others, and "expressive modality," the matter of authority of the author with respect to the truth or the probability of representation of reality. The power relations based on which the producers of text withhold permission from, or impose obligations, are not explicit. It is quite the implicitness of power relations that makes the modality of relations a matter of ideological interest (Fairclough, 2015). Formal features can also have a connection value, which captures the text's internal compatibility (Gölbaşı, 2017). Text structure also concerns the architecture of texts, and "specifically higher-level design features of different types of text: what elements or episodes are combined in what ways and what order to constitute" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 77). The following section provides an overview of the interpretation and explanation to provide context on Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional analysis.

Interpretation Analysis

The second analysis dimension is the interpretation analysis, establishing a relationship between the text and discursive practice by mediating "what is in the text and what is in the interpreter" (Fairclough, 2001a, p. 141). The mediating occurrence between the text and

discursive practice is a discourse in the sense that the values of the textual features are only embedded in the discursive practice. Texts are interpreted on the background of assumptions of meaning (i.e., member resources). According to Pesic (2023), “The interpretation stage deals with precisely these discourse processes and their dependence on background assumptions” (p. 103). Fairclough (2015) provided a two-step analysis for the interpretation dimension, connecting the values of the textual features (i.e., experiential, relational, and expressive) with three aspects of discursive practice (i.e., contents, relations, and subjects) all constrained by power and their sociocultural structural effects. The first step relates to the levels of interpreting the text, an interactional analysis focused on linguistic features and interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 1989). The interactional analysis addresses local coherence, and the interdiscursivity analysis addresses global coherence. Coherence addresses how the parts of text link (i.e., local) and how the text links to the presupposed world (Fairclough, 2001b). The second step relates to the interpretation of context providing both situational context and intertextual context. The interpretation analysis examines the production of and consumption of the texts, interested in the habitual structure and practices that identify the discourse type. The interpretation analysis does not illuminate “the relations of power and domination and the ideologies which are built into these assumptions, and which make ordinary discourse practice a site of social struggle. For this, we need the stage of explanation” (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 162).

Explanation Analysis

The social effects of discourse and social determinants of discourse should be investigated at three levels of social organization: the societal level, the institutional level, and the situational level. The explanation analysis presents discourse as part of processes of social struggle in a matrix of relations of power (Fairclough, 1989). The multiple dimensions of the

matrix are not different features of the text but rather an examination of the same features from different perspectives. The objective of the stage of explanation is to "portray a discourse as part of a social process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures, and what reproductive effects discourses can cumulatively have on those structures, sustaining them or changing them" (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 163).

Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics

What is often missing in CDA studies are the specific analytic procedures. Halliday's (1975, 1978) theory of systemic functional linguistics emphasized language as a meaning-making process, informing critical linguistics. In the framework of systemic functional linguistics, the unit of analysis is a clause rather than a sentence. According to Cordeiro (2018):

> Clauses are grammatical structures that contain a finite verb (verbs that carry tense such as has gone, is going, will go) in contrast to grammatical structures that contain non-finite verbs that occur in infinitive such as to go or going (a gerund). (p. 212)

Fairclough (1989) drew from Halliday when developing a three-dimensional analysis, as did this study. The unit of analysis refers to the portion of discourse that was the basis for decisions made during the development of codes. As the researcher, defining the unit of analysis was a very important decision that guided the coding process. For this study, changes in modality identified the unit of analysis, which I refer to as a modality cluster or cluster.

Data Analysis

This study used approaches from Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) and Halliday (1975, 1978) to implement the best CDA approaches for this study. According to Gölbaşı (2017), "While developing the analytical framework of his method, Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) benefited from Halliday's systematic functional linguistics, Foucault's order of discourse,

Gramsci's hegemony, and Habermas' colonization of discourses" (p. 9). Discourse is used strategically every day and widely used in educational politics. Jaipal-Jamani (2014) stated, "SFL [systemic functional linguistics] makes a significant contribution to discourse analysis by providing a linguistic analysis technique to interpret the different language functions in discourse" (p. 804).

Using methods from Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995), Halliday (1975, 1978), Nuyts (2000), and Bybee and Fleischman (1995), the analysis began with using all three steps to analyze *A Nation at Risk* to create the codebook. Table 1 shows the steps for analyzing each document in this study.

Table 1

Steps of Analysis for A Nation at Risk

Step	Level of analysis	What is analyzed	How is "it" analyzed	Outcome of analysis
1	Description	The text	Vocabulary, grammar, and structure	Identify definitions, modality, and formal features of the text.
2	Interpretation	The discursive practice	Produced and interpreted	Identifying the values in the text and the values of practice
3	Explanation	Sociocultural practice	Societal level, institutional level, and situational level	Define ideology and power structures, in a historical, social, and cultural context

Description Analysis

The descriptive level analysis focused on the vocabulary, structure, and modality. When analyzing vocabulary, the focus is on word choice and the definition of the words chosen in the text. When analyzing structure, the focus is on grammatical and sentence structure. Modality is the semantic domain that pertains to features of meaning expressed in discourse, covering a broad range of nuances, semantics, lexical, and morphological (Bybee & Fleischman, 1995).

Using methods from Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) and Bybee and Fleischman (1995), the following modality types were used to identify clusters: deontic modality (dem), epistemic modality (epm), expressive modality (exm), and relational modality (rem). Table 2 provides details about each of the modality codes.

Table 2

Modality Code Descriptions

Modality code	Deontic (dem)	Epistemic (epm)	Expressive (exm)	Relational (rem)
Laws applied	Social laws	Rational laws	Natural laws	Natural laws
Domain	Agency	Knowledge and understanding	Speaker-oriented	Speaker-oriented
Power source	Set of rules for, desires, ability, and for social order	Belief systems and evidence. Committed to the truth	The authority of the speaker to evaluate with respect to reality	The authority of the speaker in a hierarchy
Force initiation point of power	The addressee, the subject	The speaker	The speaker's authority position	The speaker's authority position
Cluster function	To identify obligations or permissions regarding the subject	To provide the speaker's level of certainty of necessity or probability	To impose the speaker's authority and the evaluation	To impose the speaker's authority and expectation

The first step was to reduce the six parts of *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983) down to a unit of analysis. The modality changes defined the unit of analysis, and I refer to each unit of analysis as a modality cluster or cluster. Clusters were chosen as the unit of analysis because individual words were too narrow, while entire sentences were too rigid to capture the nuance and flow of the writers' thoughts. A cluster consisted of a clause, a single sentence, or a group of sentences, depending on how the ideas were organized and conveyed.

Interpretation Level Analysis

The interpretation analysis is intended to connect the production and interpretation of the text by assigning values using thematic coding. Using the modality cluster determined in the descriptive level analysis, open thematic coding was conducted to determine the values present in *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983). Each cluster was assigned at least one value code and some were assigned more than one value code. Table 3 outlines the value code and shows how the codes were defined by identifying the product and the process of each value.

Explanation Analysis

The purpose of the explanation step was to explain the social structures and processes through ideology and power dynamics. *A Nation at Risk* was coded using the colorblind frames discussed in Chapter 3: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). During the step, the modality clusters were open-coded again by using the colorblind code. The analysis identified the presence of colorblind ideology and how it is embedded in the discourse. Table 4 outlines the colorblind codes and the definition for each code.

During the first step, the description analysis, the text is reduced to modality clusters and then each modality cluster was classified based on the kinds of modality: epistemic modality (epm), deontic modality (dem), relational modality (rem), and expressive modality (exm). From those four big classifications, each modality cluster was further classified based on their class and whether the expressions belonged to modal auxiliary, adverbs, lexical verbs or multiword units, etc. Also, during these steps, vocabulary and grammatical patterns were identified. For example, consider the sentences from *A Nation at Risk*, " Our Nation is at risk" and "Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being

Table 3

Values Codes and Definitions

Value code	Product: What is in the text	Process: How the text is interpreted
Accountability	References to measuring performance, setting standards, or evaluating success.	The emphasis on holding individuals, schools, or systems responsible for outcomes.
Economics	Mentions of financial resources, workforce development, or economic competitiveness.	Education is framed as an economic driver, preparing individuals for the labor market.
Equity	Discussions on fairness, access, or addressing disparities.	Education is seen as a tool for reducing inequality and ensuring opportunities for all.
Excellence	References to high achievement, standards, or competitiveness.	The belief that education should push students and institutions toward superior performance.
Human capital	Focus on developing skills, knowledge, or workforce readiness.	Education is viewed as an investment in individuals to enhance economic productivity.
Mediocrity	References to underperformance, decline, or lack of rigor.	A critique of education systems perceived as failing to meet high standards.
Nationalism	References to national identity, global competition, or patriotism.	Education is framed as essential to maintaining national strength and superiority.
Public responsibility	Mentions of roles, civic duty, or collective investment in education.	Education is seen as a public good requiring shared support and accountability.
Purpose of education	Statements on the fundamental goals or mission of education.	Interpretations of education's role in society, whether economic, civic, or personal development.

Table 4

Colorblind Codes and Definitions

Colorblind frame code	Definition
Abstract liberalism frame	Involves using ideas associated with political liberalism and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to explain racial matters
Cultural racism frame	Attributing racial differences to cultural practices
Minimization of racism frame	Suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life choices
Naturalization frame	Allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences

overtaken by competitors throughout the world." The cluster could be classified as expressive modality based on the speaker's assumed authority to speak on and evaluate the situation. Significant words to note and define in this modality cluster would be: our, risk, and competitors. A significant grammatical pattern to note is the use of the word risk at the end of a sentence. These are just a few examples of how a cluster was analyzed during the first step.

During the second step, the interpretation analysis, values were identified and assigned to the production and interpretation of the text. Continuing with the example from *A Nation at Risk*, "Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 9). Values that could be assigned to this modality cluster are pride, nationalism, and fear, I assigned nationalism.

The third step is an explanation analysis, which considers sociocultural practice at the societal level, institutional level, and situational level. The outcome of this step was to define ideology and power structures in a historical, social, and cultural context. Colorblind ideology is a part of the theoretical and conceptual structure of this study. This step used the colorblind ideology frames to discuss the social process and power dynamics in the discourse.

The analysis from the report was used to create a codebook to examine the SOS addresses from the sample. Chapter 4 provides a detailed overview of the findings. In this study, I examined *A Nation at Risk* and SOS addresses as critical discourse. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), its structure, members, and stakeholders' narratives, and each individual's sense-making and sense-giving were beyond the scope of this study.

Validity and Reliability

The trustworthiness of a discourse analysis was based on the understanding and knowledge of the researcher. To ensure the full rigor of trustworthiness in a discourse study, the researcher and the methodology must be systematic and grounded in evidence and a set of rules. Lincoln and Guba (1985) were the first to address rigor in their model of trustworthiness of qualitative research: truth-value (i.e., credibility), applicability (i.e., transferability), consistency (i.e., dependability), and neutrality (i.e., confirmability). Credibility and transferability are similar to validity while dependability and confirmability are similar to reliability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Analysts are responsible for the quality of the analysis and should prepare for the intensive planning and decision making involved in CDA prior to starting a CDA project. To ensure adequacy of interpretation, researchers should clearly describe the methods used in their frameworks, providing an illustration of the methods with concrete examples (Mullet, 2018).

Validity

The credibility of discourse analysis is greater when the interpretation of the text is also critical, revealing the role of "language in maintaining and reproducing social, political, economic and structural inequities and dominance in relation to the actors involved" (Jaipal-Jamani, 2014, p. 805). The frame problem raises problems about validity for discourse analysis; this was addressed with the use of a case study research design. An analysis is not valid unless

researchers keep widening the context in which the discourse is considered until the widening appears to make no difference to our interpretation. Researchers can then stop and make our claims (Gee, 2004). To maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, the researcher must balance many perspectives, such as those of the dominant group, the oppressed group, and the author's own perspective. According to van Dijk (1993), "Imposition of the researcher's ideologies or perspectives on research runs contrary to the aim of CDA: to disclose implicit or hidden power relations in discourse" (as cited in Mullet, 2018, p. 136). An imposition of the researcher's perspective on the research is a form of power abuse and can create biases in the study.

Reliability

To have reliability is to have dependability and confirmability, a study that can be replicated and repeated. In this study, reliability "is a measure to produce consistent results when the same entities are measured under the same conditions" (Field, 2005, p. 743). As the researcher, I was also a tool in this study. As the researcher, I used a common set of rules and beliefs as a frame of reference to interpret discourse analysis; the articulation of the system used is as important as the interpretation (Jaipal-Jamani, 2014). According to Hopf (2004), "All discourse analysts should act with such methodological self-consciousness, with an eye to both the replicability and competitive validity of their findings" (p. 32).

The frame problem means "any aspect of context can affect the meaning of an (oral or written) utterance" (Gee, 2004, p. 27). The frame problem is both a problem and a tool. It is a problem because discourse analytic interpretations, like everyday interpretations of language, are always vulnerable to change. People widen the context in which a person interprets a piece of language. Context, however, is indefinitely large, stretching from local matters like the

positioning of physical people, through people's beliefs, to historical, institutional, and cultural settings. It is a tool because framing can be used by widening the context to see what information and values are being left unsaid or fade in a piece of discourse (Gee, 2004).

Ethical Issues

This study used public texts, *A Nation at Risk*. Accessing and analyzing these texts did not require direct or indirect interaction with human subjects. An institutional review board application and approval was not needed and was confirmed by the director of the institutional review board at North Carolina State University.

Limitations

The limitations of this study can be categorized into two areas: the limitations of CDA and the limitations of this study.

Limitations of Critical Discourse Analysis

Most discourse studies focus on speech or text. Kress believed in a multimodal social semiotic approach to critical discourse studies, challenging discourse analysts to go beyond language as the preferred mode of meaning-making: speech and text (Rogers, 2004). This study only used text and speech which could have limited the probability of a comprehensive analysis.

Martin (2004) drew attention to CDA's emphasis on objectionable, offensive, and problematic speech acts and texts and suggested that critique is about negativity, researchers should also "emphasize those texts and speech acts that are admirable and motivating" (Hodes, 2018, p. 75). Although this study was not interested in emphasizing the offensive or problematic text of *A Nation at Risk*, this study did contribute to the literature that scrutinizes the validity and impact of the report.

Areas of multiethnic perspectives include differences between Western and Eastern theories of communication. Western is more centered on the individual, the speaker, as the arbiter of meaning, whereas Eastern is oriented toward the listener with the speaker being a part of the collective (Rogers, 2004). The United States is a Western country; although the population is diverse, the country tends to cater to the Western model of communication. CDA does not (re)produce simple deterministic relationships between language and the social world. Instead, it calls on researchers to investigate the multiple ways that "language mediates ideology" (Hodes, 2018, p. 74) through the production of discourse in the context of social institutions (Fairclough, 2001a; Hodes, 2018; Wodak, 2006).

Limitations of the Study

Researcher bias was a possibility due to cultural differences and perspectives. My beliefs and expectations could have influenced the study design and the data collection process. In the next section, I describe how I combated researcher bias.

Researcher Bias

One way to proactively address author bias is through subjectivity, that is, a transparent view of researcher bias in the form of a self-as-researcher statement. Another is by exercising reflexivity, such as peer debriefing, keeping memos through the inquiry, and offering their work to other critical researchers for feedback before seeking publication. According to Mullet (2018), "CDA researchers could avoid departures from the critical paradigm by formulating positionality statements" (p. 137). To safeguard against research bias, when I began working with the data sample, I journaled daily or any day that I interacted with the sample. I also passed my preliminary defense where my dissertation committee and I discussed biases, validity, and

reliability of the study. The section that follows is a researcher positionality statement to locate myself in relation to the context and process of this study.

Researcher Positionality

Having made a few shifts and changes in my academic journey, I have experienced the gaps and flaws that exist in and around the educational system. I have a passion for learning and knowledge, which brought me to education policy, by way of business and law. Teaching in the classroom is not my goal but rather the ability to create spaces for those who want to teach and learn, doing so through policy and research. The education system was built during a time when all people were not considered equal or considered human. Black people and other people of color were dehumanized and were not considered in U.S. social systems as people but rather as property. Oppression, racism, and discrimination exist throughout the education system; I hope to tell these stories and use these stories to support policy change that will lead to an improved and more just education system in the United States.

My family identifies as Black American, Black, or African American. I considered myself middle class because I observed a spectrum of economic realities—some had less than me, while others had more. Along with these economic differences, I found myself in the middle regarding access to opportunities. The county where I completed my K–12 education was rural, predominantly low-income, and largely white. Although the community was diverse, that diversity was not equally represented. Most People of Color in the county, including my family, were middle-class or low-income. Growing up, my parents ensured that I was surrounded by a supportive network, my village, to complement their efforts in raising me and my brother. The composition of my village was diverse and balanced. As a child, I felt like I had everything I wanted and needed. It was not until my higher education experiences that I began to critically

understand the environments and systems that shaped my identity and perspective as an individual. These experiences not only expanded my worldview but also challenged me to confront assumptions and develop a deeper understanding of societal structures.

Higher education has played a pivotal role in shaping the person I am today, influencing my perspectives, beliefs, and aspirations. My role as a student has been where I have faced the most significant intellectual and cultural challenges, pushing me to grow in ways I never imagined. Now, as my formal journey as a student nears its end, I remain committed to being a lifelong learner and engaging with new ideas. As a researcher and scholar, I aim to contribute to meaningful dialogues, challenge existing norms, and pursue solutions that promote justice and understanding. I am committed to applying the curiosity and perseverance from my educational journey to make a meaningful impact in my field and beyond.

Connecting to Research

This study focused on critical discourse and power dynamics in educational politics. Discourse can take many forms. The stories and narratives that shape discourse can be powerful tools in education politics; however, there has been limited research on using critical discourse approaches in the education policy process. I wanted to study discourse and policy narratives in education to develop evidence-based practices that can support the policymaking process. I must present as a researcher and policymaker who will be inclusive and knowledgeable, all while maintaining my personal and professional integrity.

Research is about learning and challenging things. As a researcher, I want to create a safe and inclusive space for people to learn and further their knowledge. I also want to create a space for people to challenge their thoughts and others' thoughts. Theories, systems, policies, and all

positionality pieces are meant to be challenged because progress comes from challenging our position and others' positions.

Research is also a community, as a whole, and in our specific disciplines. Researchers have a responsibility to each other and to the profession. As an education researcher, I want to maintain the creditability and integrity of the research process, methodology, and results which lead to effective and efficient policies and programs. This is a critical job and requires a community of people striving to create a positive experience for schools, parents, students, and communities.

Representation is essential in research because it ensures that all voices are heard and valued. As a Black woman, I feel a deep responsibility to create and strengthen pathways for other Black women and underrepresented groups. Growing up, I never imposed limits on what I could achieve—at one point, I dreamed of becoming an attorney as a step toward becoming the U.S. president. I want to inspire this same confidence and ambition in others, especially students.

Representation in research and scholarship matters, too. My work focuses on engaging underserved groups to inform policies that impact diverse populations. To exclude these voices would be both biased and unjust. Research, for me, is a tool for sharing stories. I identify as a storyteller, recognizing that everyone and everything has a story worth telling. Through my research, I listen to and amplify the stories of others, aiming to understand their cultures, needs, and perspectives. My goal is to use these stories to drive meaningful change through the policy process.

The following chapters dig into the heart of this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings, offering a detailed account of the data collected and the insights that emerged. These findings provide the foundation for deeper discussion in Chapter 5, which situates the results in the

broader context of existing research. Chapter 5 also explores the implications of the study, offering recommendations for future research and practical applications to further inform policy and practice. Together, these chapters complete the narrative of the study, bridging the gap between research and actionable insights.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter includes the findings from analyzing the colorblind ideology in *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983). Ideologies are beliefs manifested in discursive practices. It is important to stress the significance of ideologies to establish and contribute to maintaining unequal power relations (Fairclough, 2001a). This chapter outlines the findings from analyzing *A Nation at Risk*. The steps used to analyze *A Nation at Risk* are shown in Table 1.

Description Analysis of A Nation at Risk

A total of 226 modality clusters were identified: 57 clusters identified as deontic modality, 42 clusters identified as epistemic modality, 64 clusters identified as expressive modality, and 63 clusters identified as relational modality. Modality types were identified by the parts of speech. The parts of speech are nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, phrases, and clauses. Vocabulary and grammatical structure were also used in the analysis to identify the clusters and the changes in modality. The percentage breakdown of the modality codes for *A Nation at Risk* is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Percentages of Modality Codes

Modality code	# of codes	% of total
dem	57	25.22
epm	42	18.58
exm	64	28.32
rem	63	27.88
Total	226	100.00

A Nation at Risk Values

Although only one modality code was assigned to each cluster during the *A Nation at Risk* description analysis, during the interpretation analysis more than one code could have been

assigned to each cluster. Table 4 provides the distribution of values codes in each modality code. Table 6 is the first table to include the groundedness (Gr) of a code; groundedness refers to the number of quotations or clusters that were coded with a specific code, essentially showing how frequently that code appears in the data. The identified values were accountability, economics, equity, excellence, human capital, mediocrity, nationalism, public responsibility, and the purpose of education.

Table 6

Values Codes in Modality Clusters From A Nation at Risk

Value Code	dem Gr = 57	epm Gr = 42	exm Gr = 64	rem Gr = 63	Total
Accountability	18	5	27	13	63
Economics	9	2	1	5	17
Equity	3	5	1	11	20
Excellence	1	3	3	4	11
Human capital	2	5	4	2	13
Mediocrity	3	5	7	3	18
Nationalism	8	8	13	16	44
Public responsibility	10	3	3	13	29
Purpose of education	9	11	13	7	38
Total	63	47	72	74	256

Note. Gr = Groundedness of a code (number of quotations coded by a code).

Accountability was the code most used, and the theme of accountability encompassed three types: policy, principle, and performance. Policy accountabilities are driven by mandates and regulations from the government or authorized agencies. Principle accountability is driven by professional norms and personal standards. Performance accountability is driven by assessment and goal attainment. The dominant accountability found in *A Nation at Risk* was

performance accountability. The second most used value code was nationalism. Nationalism is a theme that emphasizes loyalty and devotion to the greater good of the country.

The economics code identified efficiency and effectiveness, regarding finances and/or time. Equity was only mentioned once in the report; however, the concept of equity was still included throughout the report. The parts of the report that were coded with equity include phrases such as "meet the needs of," "resources for all," "regardless of race or class or economic status," and "all children by virtue of their own efforts." The human capital code captured the parts of the report that discussed the workforce. The human capital code also captured the best way to prepare people to participate in society.

The concept of excellence in the report is used to enforce a standard of possibilities and similarly, the concept of mediocrity is presented to highlight an alternative standard of possibility and expectation, but it allows room for continued underperformance or failure. The difference between the mediocrity code and the excellence code is that mediocrity implies a lower threshold for success, possibly perpetuating failure; whereas, excellence sets a higher bar that demands improvement and success. There were many calls to action in the report; those specific parts of the report were coded using public responsibility. Purpose of education was the third most used code. Accountability and nationalism were the primary themes found in *A Nation at Risk*. Table 7 shows how the other values intersect with accountability, nationalism, and the purpose of education. Chapter 5 discusses the significance of these themes and how they interact.

Table 7

Values Codes in Accountability, Nationalism, and Purpose of Education

Code	Accountability Gr = 63	Nationalism Gr = 44	Purpose of education Gr = 38
Accountability	0	4	4
Economics	2	1	2
Equity	1	2	0
Excellence	5	2	0
Human capital	2	4	0
Mediocrity	1	5	0
Nationalism	4	0	2
Public responsibility	2	3	2
Purpose of education	4	2	0

Note. Gr: Groundedness of a code (number of quotations coded by a code).

Table 7 shows that accountability and nationalism overlap or intersect with all other value codes. Purpose of education did not intersect with equity, excellence, human capital, or mediocrity. This suggests that the purpose of education, based on *A Nation at Risk*, does not align with those values. The purpose of education intersects with accountability, economics, nationalism, and public responsibility.

Explanation Analysis

The purpose of the explanation step is to explain the social structures and processes through ideology and power dynamics. *A Nation at Risk* was coded using the colorblind frames discussed in Chapter 3, abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). The analysis identified the presence of colorblind ideology and how it is embedded in the discourse.

A Nation at Risk Colorblind Codes

After conducting open coding for values, a second round of coding was carried out on *A Nation at Risk* to analyze the text through the lens of four colorblind frames: minimization of

racism, abstract liberalism, cultural racism, and naturalization. Table 8 displays the distribution of these colorblind frame codes across the identified modality clusters, highlighting patterns and variations in their usage. Although all modality clusters were reviewed during this process, not all clusters were found to contain instances of colorblind framing. Although some clusters were not assigned a colorblind code, each remains relevant to the explanatory analysis and the examination of the impact of colorblind ideology.

Table 8

Colorblind Frames in Modality Clusters

Colorblind frame	dem Gr = 57	epm Gr = 42	exm Gr = 64	rem Gr = 63	Total
Abstract liberalism frame	2	2	2	3	9
Cultural racism frame	2	1	0	0	3
Minimization of racism frame	9	4	6	7	25
Naturalization frame	0	0	2	1	3
Total	13	7	10	11	

Note. Gr: Groundedness of a code (number of quotations coded by a code).

The minimization of racism frame emerged as the most frequently coded, appearing 25 times in *A Nation at Risk*. This frame, which downplays or dismisses the significance of racial discrimination, was predominantly associated with the deontic modality cluster, where expressions of obligation or necessity are common. However, it is important to note that the minimization of the racism frame was also present, although to a lesser extent, across all other modality clusters. This broad usage suggests a pervasive reliance on this frame in the document, potentially reflecting a systemic inclination to overlook or downplay racial inequities.

The abstract liberalism frame, which emphasizes individualism and meritocracy as solutions to social inequalities, was the second most frequently used, emerging nine times. This

frame aligns with broader neoliberal ideologies often present in discourse on education reform, particularly in calls for increased accountability and standardized measures of success.

The cultural racism and naturalization frames were the least present, each being coded only three times. The cultural racism frame typically attributes disparities to perceived cultural deficiencies, while the naturalization frame normalizes racial inequities as inevitable or natural. The limited appearance of these frames may indicate a preference in the text for framing inequality in ways that appear less overtly critical of marginalized groups or structural systems.

This disparity in the frequency of coded frames, particularly the significant gap between the minimization of the racism frame and the other three, raises questions about the ideological foundations of *A Nation at Risk*. The dominance of minimization of racism suggests that the report's framing may intentionally or unintentionally obscure systemic barriers in favor of promoting a colorblind narrative. The implications of these findings are discussed further in the Chapter 5.

Modality and Colorblind Ideology

The findings chapter continues to build on the three-step critical discourse analysis (CDA) conducted on *A Nation at Risk*, beginning with a descriptive analysis of modality, followed by an interpretive focus on values, and culminating in the explanation phase centered on colorblind frames. These layers provide a comprehensive analysis for understanding the power of the colorblind ideology found in *A Nation at Risk*.

Modality reveals how the text conveys authority, obligation, and possibility. This linguistic device plays a crucial role in framing the arguments and recommendations in *A Nation at Risk*. When examined in the context of colorblind frames, modality was a tool used to embed race-neutral ideologies into the discourse. For example, deontic modality is often used to

emphasize universal goals such as excellence and equal opportunity, which align with the abstract liberalism frame. By emphasizing individual responsibility and meritocracy without addressing structural barriers, modal expressions reinforce a race-neutral narrative that marginalizes systemic inequities. Similarly, epistemic modality works to minimize the significance of racism in shaping educational outcomes, aligning with the minimization of racism frame. Statements that suggest racial progress or downplay ongoing inequities use modal certainty to validate these claims, discouraging critical engagement with racial disparities.

By connecting modality with colorblind frames, it became clear that discursive choices in *A Nation at Risk* were not merely stylistic but ideological. They served to establish a race-neutral perspective on education, shaping how readers interpret the issues and solutions presented in the text. This connection between modality and colorblind ideology laid the foundation for the detailed findings that follow, beginning with a closer examination of the modality patterns identified in the descriptive analysis.

Deontic Modality

Deontic modality uses agency to identify obligation and permission. The speaker is not giving obligation or permission but rather acknowledging the set the rules that indicate obligation and permission. Deontic modality identifies the norms that set the expectation of how the world should work. In *A Nation at Risk,* there were 57 clusters coded as deontic modality (25.22% of the total amount of coded clusters).

The following excerpt from Gardner et al. (1983) used the word “can” to express that U.S. people have permission to act:

> In light of the urgent need for improvement, both immediate and long term, this Commission has agreed on a set of recommendations that the American people can begin

> to act on now, that can be implemented over the next several years, and that promise lasting reform. (p. 20)

The same is true for the following sentence, that "can" is used to identify permission. This sentence from *A Nation at Risk* acknowledges the reader's agency over their future: "When you work to your full capacity, you can hope to attain the knowledge and skills that will enable you to create your future and control your destiny." Here "can" is used to express that the reader is entitled to hope. The word "when" is used as a conjunction to create an if-this-then-that statement. Another important part of speech to identify in this sentence are the clauses: "create your future" and "control your destiny." The verbs create and control the readers' agency. Also, agency is stressed through the use of the words "you" and "your," indicating the readers' ownership of the subjects discussed in the sentence.

The word "can" also expresses obligation or expectation. In the deontic clusters from *A Nation at Risk*, "cannot" was used three times. The following excerpt cannot be used to suggest the obligation of the parents to ensure children are prepared for the world. It stated, "You know that you cannot confidently launch your children into today's world unless they are of strong character and well-educated in the use of language, science, and mathematics" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 27).

In the excerpt, "you know that you," are the words immediately before the word "cannot." This suggests that the reader is also expected to know and understand the obligation expressed in this sentence. The following excerpt also expresses both obligation and expectation:

> The Department of the Navy, for example, reported to the Commission that one-quarter of its recent recruits cannot read at the ninth grade level, the minimum needed simply to understand written safety instructions. Without remedial work they cannot even begin,

> much less complete, the sophisticated training essential in much of the modern military. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 9)

The first instance "cannot" expresses expectation—the expectation that naval recruits should read at the ninth-grade level. The second instance "cannot" is used to express obligation, suggesting that for naval recruits to complete training remedial work is necessary. The words can or cannot were used 10 times in these deontic clusters from *A Nation at Risk*.

Another common word used in the deontic clusters was "should." The word "should" was used 28 times in the deontic clusters from *A Nation at Risk.* The word "should" creates a sense of responsibility. There were many instances when "should" was used to suggest the purpose of teaching and the education curriculum. For example, in the following excerpt from *A Nation at Risk*, "should" is used to explain the purpose of the curriculum from first grade to eighth grade:

> The curriculum in the crucial eight grades leading to the high school years should be specifically designed to provide a sound base for study in those and later years in such areas as English language development and writing, computational and problem solving skills, science, social studies, foreign language, and the arts. These years should foster an enthusiasm for learning and the development of the individual's gifts and talents. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 22)

In the following deontic cluster, "should" is used to suggest students need more homework, and homework has positive implications: "Students in high schools should be assigned far more homework than is now the case" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 24). Although students are referenced in this sentence, the responsibility is being placed on educators to assign more homework. The same is true for the following excerpt in which "should" is used to place responsibility on school administrators to implement adequate attendance policies: "Attendance policies with clear

incentives and sanctions should be used to reduce the amount of time lost through student absenteeism and tardiness" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 24).

As is discussed further in the discussion in Chapter 5, "should" is also used to identify the responsibility of the federal government. In the following excerpt, "should" is used to say nationwide change is expected but not as a federal initiative. The following is an example from *A Nation at Risk* of the use of "should" to emphasize federal expectations without federal responsibility: "The tests should be administered as part of a nationwide (but not Federal) system of State and local standardized tests. This system should include other diagnostic procedures that assist teachers and students to evaluate student progress" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 23).

As noted, the word "should" highlights what is expected, but it is important to observe the phrase "nationwide (but not Federal) system." This distinction between "nationwide" and "federal" is intentional. "Nationwide" refers to a system that is implemented across the country but remains the responsibility of the states, while "federal" suggests a system implemented nationally and managed by the federal government. These intentional definitions and distinctions illustrate how the report uses "should" to clarify not only what is expected, but also what is not the responsibility of the federal government.

This next example from *A Nation at Risk* shows how "should" is used to identify for what the federal government is responsible regarding education. It stated:

> The Federal Government has the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education. It should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that interest. It must provide the national leadership to ensure that the Nation's public and private resources are marshaled to address the issues discussed in this report. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 26)

These examples highlighted the dual role of "should" in the report. On one hand, use of "should" defines what is expected without federal involvement, and on the other, it specifies the federal government's obligations in funding, supporting, and leading national educational efforts.

The use of "you" and "your" throughout the document incites a sense of ownership. Using the words "you" and "your" emphasizes the obligation, expectations, and responsibility, as shown in the following excerpt:

> You know that you cannot confidently launch your children into today's world unless they are of strong character and well-educated in the use of language, science, and mathematics. . . . You have the right to demand for your children the best our schools and colleges can provide. Your vigilance and your refusal to be satisfied with less than the best are the imperative first step. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 27)

A theme from the deontic clusters is obligation, expectation, and responsibility and the different types of agency each word promotes. Obligation is based on social order, expectation is based on a set standard, and responsibility is based on social norms. Chapter 5 includes a discussion about the different types of agency each word promotes.

Epistemic Modality

Epistemic modality uses the speaker's knowledge and belief system to emphasize necessity and probability. The assumption is that the speaker is committed to the truth. Similar to the deontic clusters, the word "can" was used often. In the epistemic clusters, "can" was used eight times. "Can" in the epistemic cluster was used to express certainty. In the epistemic clusters, the word "can," "confident," and "fully" expressed the certainty of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). For example, the document stated:

> We are confident that America can address this risk. If the tasks we set forth are initiated now and our recommendations are fully realized over the next several years, we can expect reform of our Nation's schools, colleges, and universities. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 13)

The same is true for the following excerpt from *A Nation at Risk*:

> The Commission deeply believes that the problems we have discerned in American education can be both understood and corrected if the people of our country, together with those who have public responsibility in the matter, care enough and are courageous enough to do what is required. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 2)

"Can" is used to express certainty as well as the phrase "deeply believes." This excerpt is also an example of an if-this-then-that statement. If-this-then-that statements express certainty about actions and outcomes. Another example of an if-this-then-that statement is in the before-mentioned excerpt:

> We are confident that America can address this risk. If the tasks we set forth are initiated now and our recommendations are fully realized over the next several years, we can expect reform of our Nation's schools, colleges, and universities. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 13)

If-this-then-that statements were used throughout *A Nation at Risk*; in the epistemic, each was used to emphasize the certainty of the NCEE.

"Should" is another word that was used often in both the deontic and epistemic clusters. "Should" in the deontic clusters was used to express responsibility, but in the epistemic cluster "should" was used seven times in place of the word "must." "Must" was only used three times in the epistemic clusters. The following excerpt is an example of how *A Nation at Risk* used the

word “should” to express necessity: “We believe the assistance of the Federal Government should be provided with a minimum of administrative burden and intrusiveness (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 26). It is also an example of how *A Nation at Risk* emphasized the minimal responsibility of the federal government regarding education. This point is discussed further in Chapter 5.

“Believe” and/or “belief” were used 11 times in the epistemic clusters. The following excerpt outlines the beliefs of the NCEE: “Our recommendations are based on the beliefs that everyone can learn, that everyone is born with an urge to learn which can be nurtured, that a solid high school education is within the reach of virtually all” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 20). Throughout *A Nation at Risk*, the NCEE used its belief system to establish the purpose of education and to set the role of various stakeholders in educational politics. In the following excerpt, the NCEE uses “believe” to establish what is desirable and why for student achievement:

> We believe it is desirable that students achieve such proficiency because study of a foreign language introduces students to non-English-speaking cultures, heightens awareness and comprehension of one’s native tongue, and serves the Nation’s needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense, and education. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 22)

Another example of the NCEE’s effort to define what is true can be seen in the statement: “All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 6). This reflects the epistemic cluster’s theme of the NCEE’s vision for education in the United States, which is explored further in Chapter 5.

Expressive Modality

Expressive modality is speaker-oriented; the speaker imposes authority through the evaluation of what is true and a probable representation of reality. The expressive modality clusters provide a metric or set the position of the nation. These clusters are usually positive or negative, and active or passive clauses. The theme from the expressive modality clusters in *A Nation at Risk* is that most of the active cluster are also positive statements and most of the passive clusters are also negative statements. The following excerpt is an example of an active and positive expressive cluster: "More recently, our institutions of higher education have provided the scientists and skilled technicians who helped us transcend the boundaries of our planet" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 27).

Starting with "our institutions" made the state active and the statement is positive because of the clauses "have provided" and "helped us transcend." This expressive cluster suggests that the commission has the authority to speak on the effectiveness of higher education institutions as well as the effectiveness of the scientists and technicians. The following excerpt is also a positive and active expressive excerpt: "We define 'excellence' to mean several related things. At the level of the individual learner, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 11).

Starting this statement with "we" creates a sense of ownership and togetherness. The excerpt is intended to define the word "excellence." "Excellence" is inherently a positive word, and excellence is a theme in *A Nation at Risk* and is used throughout the report. Noted in the previous section, in the epistemic cluster, "excellence" is used as an adjective to describe or measure education. In the expressive clusters, "excellence" is used as a noun, as if it is a tangible

object that can be obtained. This is important to note because in the excerpt that follows, "excellence" is pursued: "Defining problems which must be faced and overcome if we are successfully to pursue the course of excellence in education" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 4). Excellence is a significant theme in this analysis. In the expressive modality cluster through excellence statements, the commission imposes its authority to define and evaluate excellence in education reform. Excellence is discussed further in Chapter 5 along with other themes.

In addition to excellence the "American Dream" is also referred to as a tangible object in the expressive modality cluster. The expressive clusters are often used to both evaluate the success of the recommendations the NCEE provides and the success of the American people if they participate in implementation. The following excerpt used a positive clause to imply that the pursuit of the American Dream can have a constructive impact on one's future: "The persistent and authentic American dream that superior performance can raise one's state in life and shape one's own future" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 13).

Before moving on to examples of passive and negative expressive modality examples from *A Nation at Risk*, the following is an example of expressive modality that is active and neutral: "We define expectations in terms of the level of knowledge, abilities, and skills school and college graduates should possess" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 17). Starting the sentence with "we" made this an active statement from the NCEE but the statement is neutral, simply defining expectations. The NCEE, through *A Nation at Risk*, had the authority to define expectations and terms used in education reform.

The way the report uses active and positive modality suggests that the commission assumed ownership when making affirmative statements about the country and the authority of the NCEE. In contrast, the NCEE pairs passive and negative statements, which appears to intentionally

distance its authority from negative assessments. In the following excerpt, for instance, the subject is not an individual but the country's status: "America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 7).

This statement is negative because it highlights the nation's declining position by contrasting what it once was with what it is not. Another example of a passive and negative statement is as follows: "Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 16). In this excerpt, the curricula is the subject, a passive approach, and words like "diluted" and "diffused" are negative. This statement also references what the subject, curricula, is not. The following expressive cluster is passive and negative, as "books" are the subject, and the statement discusses what the books do not do: "Many books do not challenge the students to whom they are assigned" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 17).

The following expressive cluster is passive and negative. The sentence references the search but not whose search it is. The sentence also discusses what needs to be included, suggesting that something is missing. It states, "The search for solutions to our educational problems must also include a commitment to life-long learning" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 11). The expressive modality clusters in *A Nation at Risk* identified areas in the report when the NCEE used its authority to align with positive statements and distance itself from negativity.

Relational Modality

Relational modality is also speaker authority oriented in the hierarchy. Different from expressive modality, relational modality imposes the speaker's authority to set expectations. Like deontic modality, relational modality expresses obligation, but it is different because the

obligation is a specific instruction from the speaker to the audience. Deontic obligation is based on ability while relational obligation is based on expectations. The relational modality clusters were best examined based on the function of each cluster. There are four basic sentence functions: declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory. Declarative sentences are used to communicate facts, opinions, or observations. Interrogative sentences are requests for information or confirmation. Imperative sentences are used to give commands or advice. Exclamatory sentences are used to communicate fact, opinion, or observation but with more emotion or urgency than a declarative sentence. The following relational modality cluster includes two interrogative sentences:

> We must emphasize that the variety of student aspirations, abilities, and preparation requires that appropriate content be available to satisfy diverse needs. Attention must be directed to both the nature of the content available and to the needs of particular learners. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 20)

The word "must" is used to impose expectations based on the recommendations from the NCEE. The following is another relational modality example that uses an imperative sentence and the word "must": "Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 12). The word "must" is used often throughout *A Nation at Risk*. In the relational modality clusters, the authority of the speaker is critical. The NCEE used the report to assert the federal authority to set the agenda for education reform.

An example of a declarative sentence in the relational modality clusters was: "This report, therefore, is as much an open letter to the American people as it is a report to the Secretary of Education" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 7). This sentence makes an observation and a statement of

fact about the intended recipient of *A Nation at Risk*. Another example of a declarative relational modality cluster was: “Our concern, however, goes well beyond matters such as industry and commerce. It also includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 7).

Similar to a declarative statement, the relational modality group also included exclamatory sentences and statements. Although the exclamatory statements were not punctuated with exclamations, the word choice was intentional to add emotion. For example, the following excerpt starts with the word “very:” “Very clearly, the public understands the primary importance of education as the foundation for a satisfying life, an enlightened and civil society, a strong economy, and a secure Nation” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 15). Starting the statement with “very” suggests the certainty of the NCEE. This excerpt also references a strong economy and a secure nation, topics that incite nationalism and pride. Another exclamatory example from *A Nation at Risk* was: “We firmly believe that a movement of America’s schools in the direction called for by our recommendations will prepare these children for far more effective lives in a far stronger America” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 28). The sentence starts with another clause of certainty: “we firmly believe.” This example also incites pride and nationalism by suggesting the recommendations provided in *A Nation at Risk* would lead to a stronger country.

The following excerpt explains the expectation is widespread and will take time: “Our present plight did not appear overnight, and the responsibility for our current situation is widespread. Reform of our educational system will take time and unwavering commitment” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 28). The phrase “unwavering commitment” also added to the relentless effort required of the American people. Out of the four modality types used in this analysis, pronouns were most powerful in the relational clusters. The use of “we,” “our,” and “us” created

a sense of unity and teamwork. Although the relational modality is grounded in the speaker's authority in the hierarchal structure, the NCEE created a sense of unity by using inclusive pronouns.

The use of relational modality stresses the authority of the speaker to impose expectations and obligations on the audience. Through various sentence types, interrogative, imperative, declarative, and exclamatory, the report suggests a sense of urgency and importance in addressing educational reform. The frequent use of terms like "must" highlights the critical nature of the recommendations and the federal responsibility to lead the way in education policy. Also, the strategic inclusion of inclusive pronouns such as "we," "our," and "us" fosters a sense of collective responsibility and unity among Americans, suggesting that reform is not a federal priority but rather a national effort that requires shared commitment. Overall, the relational modality serves to both assert authority and urge widespread participation in the educational reform agenda.

The description analysis focused on the formal features of the text, vocabulary, grammar, and modality. The modality is a critical part of this analysis because it defines the agency and authority embedded in *A Nation at Risk*. Next, this chapter explores how the modality types, align with the colorblind frames and the values that emerged from *A Nation at Risk*.

Connecting Modality and Colorblind Frames

The analysis of modality in *A Nation at Risk* revealed how discursive choices shape authority, obligation, and possibility, particularly in relation to colorblind ideology. By linking modality to colorblind frames, it became evident these discursive strategies are not just stylistic but ideological, embedding a race-neutral perspective that influences how readers interpret educational issues and solutions. Additionally, the values expressed in the text are closely tied to

the colorblind codes, reinforcing the ideology embedded in the discourse. This connection sets the stage for a deeper exploration of modality patterns and their role in shaping colorblind discourse. Table 9 shows how the colorblind frames were also coded with the top three values codes, further illustrating how these values align with and support the race-neutral narrative promoted in the report.

Table 9

Colorblind Frames in Accountability and Nationalism Values

Code	Accountability Gr = 63	Nationalism Gr = 44	Purpose of education Gr = 38
Abstract liberalism frame	2	0	1
Cultural racism frame	2	0	0
Minimization of racism frame	6	2	4
Naturalization frame	0	1	1

Note. Gr: Groundedness of a code (number of quotations coded by a code).

To what extent the top three values interact with the colorblind frames was important when addressing the research questions regarding how colorblind ideology was embedded in *A Nation at Risk*. Although the colorblind codes are present less than the values, it does not mean that they are less significant. Although the colorblind frames were coded substantially less, once colorblind ideology was coded with a value, the subsequently use of the value reinforces the colorblind frame, I am calling this the “Echo Effect”. Other values interacted with the colorblind frames as noted in Table 10.

Table 10

Colorblind Codes Through the Values

Code	Frequency
Abstract liberalism frame	9
Abstract liberalism frame in equity	1
Abstract liberalism frame in mediocrity	3
Abstract liberalism frame in public responsibility	1
Abstract liberalism frame in purpose of education	1
Astract liberalism frame in accountability	3
Abstract liberalism frame in excellence	2
Cultural racism frame	3
Cultural racism frame in accountability	2
Cultural racism frame in human capital	1
Cultural racism frame in purpose of education	1
Minimization of racism frame	25
Minimization of racism frame in accountability	7
Minimization of racism frame in economics	1
Minimization of racism frame in equity	7
Minimization of racism frame in excellence	1
Minimization of racism frame in nationalism	4
Minimization of racism frame in purpose of education	6
Naturalization frame	2
Naturalization frame in equity	1
Naturalization frame in nationalism	1
Naturalization frame in purpose of education	1
Total	83

Accountability, nationalism, and the purpose of education were the most used values in *A Nation at Risk* and the minimization of racism frame was the most coded colorblind frame. This theme is discussed in Chapter 5.

Minimization of Racism Frame

The minimization of racism frame downplays the role of discrimination as a factor that impacts the opportunities and experiences of minorities. This frame also redefines racism narrowly, focusing solely on explicit and extreme acts of prejudice (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). This frame overlooks the systemic racism embedded in post–Civil Rights America, dismissing many

racially motivated actions. In education, this perspective minimizes the structural inequities that persist in schools and universities, preventing reform to address disparities.

Minimization of Racism Through Accountability

The relational modality in *A Nation at Risk* uses minimization of racism to assert shared accountability, emphasizing individual effort over structural challenges. For example, it stated, "Nevertheless, there remains a common expectation: We must demand the best effort and performance from all students, whether they are gifted or less able, affluent or disadvantaged, whether destined for college, the farm, or industry" (Gardner et al., 1983). Here, the focus on a "common expectation" universalizes the challenges faced by students, neglecting the systemic barriers that affect marginalized groups. By framing success as equally attainable for all, the report minimized the role of the structural inequities that shape educational outcomes.

Deontic modality reinforces this frame by emphasizing obligation and self-discipline as the keys to success, as seen in:

> When you give only the minimum to learning, you receive only the minimum in return. Even with your parents' best example and your teachers' best efforts, in the end it is your work that determines how much and how well you learn. If you do not, you will have your future thrust upon you by others. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 28)

This was also present in the statement: "Take hold of your life, apply your gifts and talents, work with dedication and self-discipline. Have high expectations for yourself and convert every challenge into an opportunity" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 28). Both excerpts frame educational success as an individual responsibility, effectively shifting accountability away from institutions and structural barriers. This ignores the systemic racism that limits access to resources and

opportunities for Black students and suggests that individual effort alone determines success or failure.

Minimization of Racism Through Equity

The epistemic modality in *A Nation at Risk* reflects a minimization of racism by framing equity as a universal potential rather than acknowledging systemic inequalities. For example, "Our recommendations are based on the beliefs that everyone can learn, that everyone is born with an urge to learn which can be nurtured, that a solid high school education is within the reach of virtually all" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 20). This statement assumes a level playing field in which "everyone can learn" and education is easily and equally accessible. By not addressing the structural inequities, the report minimizes the barriers that Black people face in accessing a "solid high school education."

In addition, references to nationalism and cultural unity reinforce a shared purpose in education, as seen in the following excerpt: "A high level of shared education in these basics, together with work in the fine and performing arts and foreign languages, constitutes the mind and spirit of our culture" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 7). This framing suggested a connection between educational success and cultural cohesion, further obscuring systemic inequalities by presenting education as a unifying force that transcends racial and social divides.

The following relational modality cluster was also coded with the minimization of racism frame: "The natural abilities of the young that cry out to be developed and the undiminished concern of parents for the well-being of their children" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 15). The use of the phrase "the natural abilities" and "the undiminished concern of parents" makes assumptions that minimize or do not consider the impact of race and socioeconomic status. Natural abilities

imply that ability cannot be taught, and there is a clear definition of how to identify natural abilities.

Minimization of Racism and the Purpose of Education

Deontic modality also plays a role in framing the purpose of education in ways that minimize systemic racism. For example:

> The teaching of English in high school should equip graduates to: (a) comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use what they read; (b) write well-organized, effective papers; (c) listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently; and (d) know our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding, and how it relates to the customs, ideas, and values of today's life and culture. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 21)

This excerpt reflected a focus on skill-building and cultural literacy as individual responsibilities, again, failing to address the systemic inequities that might hinder access to these educational outcomes. Similarly, the following quote highlighted individual effort as the determining factor for success: "When you work to your full capacity, you can hope to attain the knowledge and skills that will enable you to create your future and control your destiny" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 28). By emphasizing individual effort and meritocracy, *A Nation at Risk* minimized the structural barriers that continue to limit educational opportunities for Black communities. This perspective shifts the focus away from institutional reform and toward personal accountability.

Abstract Liberalism Frame

The abstract liberalism uses ideas from political liberalism, such as "equal opportunity," as well as from economic liberalism, including concepts like individualism and personal choice. (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). These ideas are applied in an abstract way to address racial issues. By

using the language of liberalism, individuals can present themselves as "reasonable" and "moral" while opposing most practical strategies aimed at addressing everyday racial inequalities.

Abstract Liberalism and Accountability and Excellence

In *A Nation at Risk*, relational modality is used to reinforce abstract liberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility and accountability. The following quotation highlights this principle by framing educational excellence as something contingent on an individual's integrity and commitment: "Finally, help your children understand that excellence in education cannot be achieved without intellectual and moral integrity coupled with hard work and commitment. Children will look to their parents and teachers as models of such virtues" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 28). Emphasizing clauses like "hard work" and "commitment" as the prerequisites for success shifts the accountability onto individuals while dismissing the wider systemic barriers that Black communities experience.

Abstract Liberalism and Public Responsibility

Relational modality also appears in the discussion of public responsibility. The report appeals to collective action across diverse groups but remains abstract in addressing the specific needs of marginalized communities when it stated:

> On a broader scale, we sense that this undertone of frustration has significant political implications, for it cuts across ages, generations, races, and political and economic groups. We have come to understand that the public will demand that educational and political leaders act forcefully and effectively on these issues. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 11)

This statement raises the idea of unity and shared responsibility aligning with the abstract liberal tendency to generalize issues rather than address systemic inequities.

Abstract Liberalism and Mediocrity

Abstract liberalism is also noted in the value of mediocrity in the education system. Deontic modality highlights the perceived dangers of either accommodating mediocrity or fostering elitism, shown in the following expert: “It also would lead to a generalized accommodation to mediocrity in our society on the one hand or the creation of an undemocratic elitism on the other” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 12). Epistemic modality supports this concern by critiquing student choices in elective courses, as demonstrated by this statement:

> In 13 States, 50 percent or more of the units required for high school graduation may be electives chosen by the student. Given this freedom to choose the substance of half or more of their education, many students opt for less demanding personal service courses, such as bachelor living. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 17)

These statements frame mediocrity as a result of individual choices and societal attitudes, which aligns with abstract liberalism’s focus on individualism.

Abstract Liberalism Equity and Opportunities

Epistemic modality is also used to push the value equity through abstract liberalism, emphasizing opportunities for lifelong learning without directly addressing structural barriers as in the following:

> These raw materials, combined with the unparalleled array of educational organizations in America, offer us the possibility to create a Learning Society, in which public, private, and parochial schools; colleges and universities; vocational and technical schools and institutes; libraries; science centers, museums, and other cultural institutions; and corporate training and retraining programs offer opportunities and choices for all to learn throughout life. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 14)

Although the report emphasized access and choice, it overlooked the disparities in resource distribution and systemic challenges faced by minority communities in accessing these opportunities.

The abstract liberalism frame in *A Nation at Risk* uses modality to promote the values of accountability, excellence, and equity. This ideological strategy aligns with abstract liberalism frame, dismissing structural issues while framing racial matters through the lens of individualism and universalism.

Cultural Racism Frame

The cultural racism frame uses culturally based stereotypes to explain the social standing of minorities, assigning disparities to perceived cultural deficiencies (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). This frame has been analyzed by scholars, and it can be traced back to earlier periods, such as slavery and Jim Crow, when racial exclusion was justified by claims of biological inferiority.

Cultural Racism and Accountability

In the epistemic modality quote: “In contrast to the ideal of the Learning Society, however, we find that for too many people education means doing the minimum work necessary for the moment, then coasting through life on what may have been learned in its first quarter” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 12), a cultural stereotype emerges that casts minority students, especially Black communities, as lazy. This statement attributes underachievement to a suggested lack of cultural value for education. By framing academic failure as a cultural deficiency, this perspective overlooks the historical and systemic inequities that shape educational outcomes for Black communities. The perpetuation of this stereotype was reinforced through the same excerpt using epistemic modality, which places the responsibility for success or failure squarely on the individual, ignoring the structural factors that contribute to educational inequity.

The quote, “Doing the minimum work,” assumes that certain cultural groups are less motivated and their failures are due to a lack of effort or cultural commitment. This framing contributes to the narrative of personal accountability while obscuring the societal forces that affect students’ educational experiences. By attributing failure to cultural factors, *A Nation at Risk* misrepresented the complexity of racial disparities and reinforces harmful stereotypes.

Cultural Racism and Human Capital

The concept of human capital in *A Nation at Risk* also revealed the influence of cultural racism, particularly when discussing educational gaps. The following excerpt, which uses deontic modality, implied that educational deficiencies can simply be corrected by introducing external knowledge, rather than acknowledging the deeper cultural and institutional challenges faced by Black communities:

> Substantial non-school personnel resources should be employed to help solve the immediate problem of the shortage of mathematics and science teachers. Qualified individuals, including recent graduates with mathematics and science degrees, graduate students, and industrial and retired scientists could, with appropriate preparation, immediately begin teaching in these fields. A number of our leading science centers have the capacity to begin educating and retraining teachers immediately. Other areas of critical teacher need, such as English, must also be addressed. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 25)

This quote reflects the assumption that educational gaps are due to a lack of external expertise, framing the solution as a matter of bringing in temporary fixes from outside sources.

Naturalization Frame

The naturalization frame rationalizes racial phenomena by portraying them as natural and inevitable occurrences (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). This perspective suggests that behaviors, such as preferring to associate primarily with people of one's race, are biologically driven. By framing these behaviors as universal, it rejects them as nonracial and often justifies them with the claim that it is common across all groups in society.

Naturalization and Equity

The naturalization frame is evident in the way *A Nation at Risk* discussed equity and national resources in terms of race and educational disparities. For example, the following quotation uses relational modality to push a colorblind ideology, framing racial inequalities as natural occurrences that are to be addressed through collective action:

> The Federal Government, in cooperation with States and localities, should help meet the needs of key groups of students such as the gifted and talented, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority and language minority students, and the handicapped. In combination, these groups include both national resources and the Nation's youth who are most at risk. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 26)

This statement suggested an idea of inclusion but also normalized the disparities it mentions by grouping "minority" students alongside other "at-risk" groups, such as the socioeconomically disadvantaged. The language used here frames these groups as inherently in need. The quotation does not delve into the root causes of these disparities but instead presents the solution as one of simply "meeting needs," implying that these inequalities are inevitable and require external support, not structural reform.

Naturalization and Purpose of Education

The naturalization frame also manifests in the way *A Nation at Risk* discusses the role of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Here, expressive modality was used to suggest these institutions have naturally provided opportunities for Black Americans, framing this as a positive, natural outcome as with the statement: "Similarly, the Nation's Black colleges have provided opportunity and undergraduate education to the vast majority of college-educated Black Americans" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 26). By using this expressive modality, the report framed the existence of HBCUs as a natural response to the educational needs of Black Americans. The excerpt presented HBCUs as an essential, perhaps even inevitable, solution to educational inequalities, masking the broader racial and historical context that led to their creation. In doing so, it naturalizes the presence of these institutions without critically examining the circumstances that shaped their necessity.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Through this study, I was interested in the colorblind ideology in *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983). This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from the findings, implications for research, and implications for practice. The following research questions guided the development and execution of this study:

- How is colorblind ideology embedded in *A Nation at Risk*?
- What values from *A Nation at Risk* are used to reinforce colorblind ideology?
- How does modality in A Nation at Risk reinforce colorblind ideology?

The purpose of this study was to (a) identify how colorblind ideology is embedded in the discourse (i.e., *A Nation at Risk*), (b) identify the values and modality used in the discourse, and (c) determine how the values and modality reinforce colorblind ideology. This study examined how the colorblind ideology in *A Nation at Risk* was embedded and reinforced. *A Nation at Risk* is an example of how the voice of the federal government disproportionately impacts education politics. The use of discourse in *A Nation at Risk* allowed the federal government to have a large influence on education but carry minimal burden and responsibility (Friedman & Solow, 2013).

Modality in A Nation at Risk

This study used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the power in the discourse, specifically through modality. I found at least four modality types were used in *A Nation at Risk*. The findings revealed that obligation, expectation, and responsibility, as expressed through deontic clusters, promote distinct types of agencies. The nuanced differences in these forms of agency reflect the mechanisms through which discourse can shape the trajectory of educational discourse in the United States. Obligation is tied to power through social order, compelling adherence to institutional norms. Expectation enforces power through standards, defining what is

acceptable or achievable. Responsibility draws power from social norms, emphasizing moral accountability. Language is a "medium of power that can be used to sediment inequalities of power, legitimate social relations and language is political" (Richardson, 2007, p. 14). Together, these forms of agency reinforce hierarchical relationships and sustain power structures in education. By focusing on obligation and expectation, a meritocratic narrative emerges—one that assumes equal opportunities for all students and schools. This narrative masks the racial and socioeconomic disparities shaping educational access and outcomes, framing inequities as individual or community failures rather than systemic issues.

As Gordon (2005) noted, "Colorblindness is a bid for innocence, an attempt to escape our responsibility for our White privilege. By claiming innocence, we reconcile ourselves to racial irresponsibility" (p. 143). The emphasis on responsibility mirrors this dynamic, framing educational success as a matter of personal accountability. This perspective ignores structural inequities and shifts the focus away from systemic barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups.

The modality in *A Nation at Risk* employs positive and negative clauses, through expressive modality, to claim and navigate power. Positive clauses, often paired with active statements, suggest the ownership and authority of the commission to lead and affirm the nation's educational strengths, and its potential for reform. Passive and negative clauses seem to distance the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) from responsibility for the nation's deficiencies, shifting focus from the commission's agency to broader, more abstract entities like the "country's status." This discursive choice lessens liability for systemic issues while amplifying its authority in recommending solutions.

By pairing negative assessments with passive constructions, the NCEE avoids directly addressing systemic racism, implicitly attributing disparities to universal or cultural deficiencies rather than systemic barriers. The active and positive framing upholds a narrative of meritocracy, suggesting that success stems from individual or collective effort rather than confronting entrenched inequalities.

Values in A Nation at Risk

I agree with Horsford (2013) that *A Nation at Risk* had an unprecedented role in shaping U.S. education policy through discourse because it is a political document. Horsford (2013) also argued that the values of equality, access, equity, and opportunity pose an equal risk to the nation, as they lack consideration of the cultural and community in education reform. Although the results of the study found a different distribution of values than Hosford (2013), the values in this study also lacked a consideration for culture. I used colorblind ideology to understand the sociocultural and power dynamics. The colorblind frames are discussed later in this chapter; all four frames were present in *A Nation at Risk*, but minimization of racism was the most present.

The most prevalent theme found in both *A Nation at Risk* was accountability. In the theme of accountability, there were three types of accountabilities: policy, principle, and performance. Policy accountabilities are driven by mandates and regulations from the government or authorized agencies. Principle accountability is driven by professional norms and personal standards. Performance accountability is driven by assessment and goal attainment. The dominant accountability theme found in *A Nation at Risk* was performance accountability. In the accountability theme, regardless of the driving force (i.e., policy, principle, or performance), there was a "regime of relative standards and slide scale of expectations" (Howard, 2003, p. 16). By framing accountability as driven by performance metrics, the report perpetuates the notion

that outcomes are the result of effort and merit, rather than the result of systemic inequities in funding, access, and representation. For *A Nation at Risk*, nationalism and the purpose of education were two topics that contextualized accountability throughout the report.

Nationalism was the second theme identified, and the purpose of education was the third theme, both interacting with accountability directly and indirectly. Nationalism, as a theme, reinforces both accountability and colorblind ideology through its focus on competition, domestic and global, to motivate educational reform. This competition, framed in terms of performance rather than equity, dismisses the racial and socioeconomic disparities embedded in the education system. This perpetuates the cultural racism frame by suggesting that disparities stem from deficiencies in effort or culture rather than structural inequality.

The purpose of education has been a longstanding question in education politics. Considering the political nature of *A Nation at Risk*, the purpose of education often was a conflicting theme because the purpose of education is subjective. The public discourse surrounding education reform continues to fluctuate from the idea that "schools don't matter" to the belief that schools should solve all societal problems. These conflicting paradigms supported the need for research that will "consider and conceptualize a more complex and iterative relationship between school and society" (Wells et al., 2004, p. 50).

In essence, these themes—accountability, nationalism, and the purpose of education—are infused with the tenets of colorblind ideology. They create a discourse that prioritizes performance and competition, obscuring the systemic inequities that cause educational disparities and reinforcing narratives that shift responsibility away from structural reform and onto individuals or cultural groups.

Modality Discussion

Modality played a crucial role in identifying the agency and authority of the speaker in *A Nation at Risk*. Through the use of strong declarative statements, necessity markers, and certainty indicators, the report positioned itself as an authoritative voice on the state of U.S. education. The discursive choices in the text reinforced the urgency of the message, signaling not only who had the power to define the problem but also who had the authority to propose solutions.

Values, on the other hand, were central to understanding how meaning was both produced and interpreted. The *product* of values—what is explicitly stated—reflects the priorities and ideological stance of the speaker, in this case, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). The *process* of values—how the audience interprets and internalizes them—demonstrates how discourse shapes public perception and policy. By embedding particular values, such as accountability and nationalism, the report steered public discourse toward a specific vision of education reform, one that downplayed structural inequities in favor of meritocratic ideals. The intersection of modality and values revealed how *A Nation at Risk* crafted a compelling and seemingly objective narrative about the failures of U.S. education.

Colorblind Ideology Discussion

Franklin and Moss (2000) suggested, “It is not possible to measure the effects that separate and unequal education had on both white and Black population in the areas where it was maintained” (p. 362). Discourse analysis specifically examines and conceptualizes the power of the text, language, and knowledge. Individuals’ sociocultural and political status can block the understanding of “critically social and economic conditions defining their lives, or perceive them uncritically, accepting them as a given, together with various organizational constraints affecting their work, lives, destinies and equality” (Zajda, 2022, p. 111). Colorblind ideology is used to

frame the importance of cultural and historical context in discourse. This study used Bonilla-Silvas's (2001, 2003) four frames of colorblind ideology: cultural racism, naturalization, minimization of racism, and abstract liberalism.

Minimization of racism was the most present frame in *A Nation at Risk*; however, Bonilla-Silva (2021) asserted:

> Whites used these frames in combination rather than in pure form. This is understandable since informal expressions of ideology are a constructive effort, a process of building arguments in situ. Therefore, the examples of Whites using a particular frame may be mixed with other frames. (p. 85)

I agree with Bonilla-Silvas's assertion that the use of colorblind frames is complex and interactive, they are used in combination rather than purely. The colorblind ideology frames do not function in isolation but interact with each other to obscure systemic inequities while promoting narratives of individualism, meritocracy, and universality. In the context of education reform, these frames work together to mask structural barriers disguised as fairness and equality, reinforcing existing power dynamics. For instance, the accountability narratives in *A Nation at Risk* demonstrate how colorblind frames interact. Abstract liberalism emphasizes the freedom and responsibility of individuals, downplaying systemic issues and framing success as a matter of effort and choice. Simultaneously, cultural racism attributes educational disparities to perceived deficiencies in certain communities, shifting blame away from systemic inequities and onto individuals or cultural practices.

Minimization of racism is a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a factor affecting people, but Bonilla-Silvas (2001) suggested that it does, just differently. *A Nation at Risk* launched the word "risk" and the concept of mediocracy, but it varies by field, discipline,

and context. Kaufman and Bradbury (1992) provided the following definition in a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal study, “Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, from minority groups, or whose parents are not directly involved in their education are at risk of educational failure, either by failing to learn while in school or by dropping out of school together” (p. 1). Through the concepts of equity, excellence, and accountability, the word risk created a stigma that minimizes historical and cultural experience. Horsford (2013) discussed the “achievement gap” conceptually, rhetorically, politically, and historically. This study aligned with the consideration of the historical and political context, primarily U.S. school segregation, desegregation, and legacy of racial inequality. School achievement or policy-based accountability “is a metaphor to conceal U.S. apartheid education” (Cross, 2007, p. 247).

Abstract liberalism is the frame that involves individualism and liberation, ignoring institutions of racial inequality. Franklin and Moss (1988) determined:

> White supremacy has a stronghold, especially in the South, that contributed to the perpetuation of a leadership that was devoted not only to the idea of separate education but also to the maintenance of economic and political inequalities between the white and black populations. (p. 362)

A Nation at Risk used abstract liberalism by suggesting that the public is solely responsible for their destiny. There was a belief that the decline of the U.S. economy was caused by “our lack of competitiveness internationally as a result of the inadequately trained labor force—especially in the South, which trailed the nation in school expenditures as well as student achievement” (Vinovskis, 1999, p. 5).

Naturalization is the frame that suggests natural occurrence can explain away racism. On the other hand, cultural racism is the frame that uses racism to explain society. Some scholars

embrace the idea that accountability is not focused on race, but rather on "poverty, language, or an array of other factors, their roots trace back to the gaps in educational opportunity and access available to children of color, namely, African American children" (Horsford, 2013, p. 17).

A Nation at Risk is a political document, and by its nature, political discourse is designed to influence people's representations of cultural norms and the values of classification that underlie them (Woodside-Jiron, 2004). According to Fairclough (1995), "The power of political discourse depends upon its capacity to constitute and mobilize those social forces that are capable of carrying into reality its promises of a new reality, in its very formulation of this new reality" (p. 182). *A Nation at Risk* exemplify this by embedding and perpetuating a colorblind ideology. Even when a single sentence, statement, or clause acknowledges inequities, the broader discourse consistently reinforces the colorblind frame. This Echo Effect in the discourse sustains systemic inequities while obscuring their structural origins.

Implication for Future Research

The findings of the study contribute to the existing literature on *A Nation at Risk* and the limited literature on critical discourse in education politics. CDA is not a concrete methodology; it relies on the expertise and discretion of the researcher. The analysis of *A Nation at Risk* should be repeated with a research team to increase the validity and reliability of the methodology. Another part of the methodology that should be retested is the unit of analysis used when identifying the modality types. This study identified modality cluster based on modal indicators. Further methodological testing may consider using sentences, clauses, phrases, and/or each word as a unit of analysis. Further consideration should also be given to the possibility that some units of analysis may not have a modality type or be nonmodal. Fairclough (1989) noted that

expressive and relational modality features overlap. It is almost impossible to separate them cleanly. Based on this study, modality is fluid and could be tracked on a spectrum.

In addition to improving the methodology by further examination of *A Nation at Risk*, this methodology should be applied to other forms and mediums of discourse. CDA is used mostly on text but there are other modes of discourse that can impose power, such as verbal speech and body language. For example, CDA could analyze body language by examining gestures, posture, and facial expressions to reveal nonverbal cues of dominance, submission, or alignment with certain ideological positions. CDA is an approach that could also be useful when analyzing political ads and campaign materials.

In addition to contributing to the literature on *A Nation at Risk*, this study also contributes to the literature on CRT and colorblind ideology. Although CRT is well established, the boundaries are not clear. Carbado (2011) suggested that a fixed range is needed for CRT as "a theory without clear boundaries is hard to mobilize and describe as theory" (p. 1602). Continuing to use CRT exclusively and with other theories will help identify the limits and possibilities for CRT research across all disciplines. Colorblind ideology emerged from CRT and is developing as an independent theory. Bonilla-Silva (2003, 2014) identified the colorblind frames used in this study, but more research is needed to further ground the colorblind frames. Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) identified a fifth colorblind frame, the disconnect power-analysis frame, as:

> The disconnected power-analysis frame resides in whites' ability to align with racially progressive theoretical understandings of structural racism, whiteness, and counternarratives that challenge racial hierarchy, while disconnecting from a critical analysis of their own positionality, personal narratives, experiences, and/or actions. (p. 929)

This addition illustrates the complexity of colorblind ideology and its nuanced frames. Continued investigation into colorblind ideology could uncover additional frames or enhance the understanding of the original four frames, for both practice and research. Such research could shed light on how these frames perpetuate racial inequality in other disciplines, offering critical insights for addressing systemic inequities (Gordon, 2005).

Another implication for research is the promotion of colorblind ideology as a solution to race-conscious policies, suggesting that ignoring race will create equality. However, this approach overlooks systemic inequalities and the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Colorblindness functions as a new form of racism. By denying the importance of race, it perpetuates the status quo, allowing racial disparities to remain unaddressed. Presenting colorblindness as a solution implies that racism, in a more subtle form, is acceptable, and it limits the effectiveness of policies that aim to rectify historical injustices. It is also important to consider how colorblind ideology is experienced by different groups.

The final recommendation for further research is the continued exploration of the federal role in education. In *A Nation at Risk*, the NCEE said:

> The Federal Government has the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education. It should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that interest. It must provide the national leadership to ensure that the Nation's public and private resources are marshaled to address the issues discussed in this report. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 26)

In addition to the purpose of education, the appropriate federal role in education is a longstanding question in education politics. Through *A Nation at Risk*, the federal government has had a lasting impact on the way education reform is discussed and approached. I argue that

the United States remains in an "excellence era" of education reform, shaped by the legacy of *A Nation at Risk*. Future studies should examine this ongoing era, its implications, and how current political and social discourses intersect. Specifically, using CDA to analyze criticism against CRT, equity, and DEI initiatives could illuminate how these debates shape, and are shaped by education policy and reform efforts. This could deepen the understanding of the relationship between federal leadership, ideological frames, and systemic inequities in education.

Implication for Practice

A Nation at Risk turned 40 in April 2023. Forty years later there is an opportunity for the federal government to revive the NCEE and release a new response to *A Nation at Risk*. Until a formal response of the same magnitude is released to the public, the United States could remain in this excellence era. Given the transformative impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic, scholars and practitioners should reflect on whether the nation is still "at risk" and, if so, identify the nature of that risk. Is it academic decline, systemic inequities, or a broader societal challenge? These questions demand urgent examination.

Although this study focuses on educational politics, its implications extend far beyond the education sector. Speech writers and communications teams should consider the sociocultural impact they can have simply through discourse; some have already mastered this technique in the public sector. Corporate communications teams could use discourse to actively promote diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, ensuring that messaging aligns with an inclusive workplace culture. Nonprofit organizations working in areas such as healthcare or housing can employ discourse to challenge inequities and advocate for systemic change. Recognizing and addressing the power of language in public narratives is essential for fostering equity and accountability across all sectors.

According to hooks (2003), Black communities "view of education differs from the view of education as a means to individual success because they value fully holistic individuals who nourish their souls through spiritual life and service to others" (pp. 11–12). Findings in this study supported the need for constant consideration of the historical and cultural context. For too long, the racialization of achievement and, more recently, the rhetoric of the accountability discourse have "normalized academic failure and decreased educational expectations for students of color while underestimating the significant role of neighborhood context and community" (Horsford, 2013, p. 17). Empirical research documenting how these policies play out on students of color is sorely needed and will make important contributions to education research, policy, and practice.

Conclusion

This study examined the intersection of language, power, and ideology in the educational reform discourse of *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983), offering a critical analysis of how colorblind ideology operates at systemic and individual levels. The findings revealed that discourse is a powerful tool used to shape perception, reinforce existing power structures, and perpetuate ideologies such as colorblindness. By exploring themes like accountability, the purpose of education, and nationalism, this research highlighted how policy language can obscure systemic inequities and maintain the status quo while appearing to promote equity and excellence.

At the systemic level, colorblindness denies the structural and institutional practices that uphold racial and socioeconomic disparities. This denial assumes an equal playing field, which overshadows the real, enduring inequalities experienced by marginalized groups (Sleeter, 1994). Meanwhile, at the individual level, colorblindness shifts focus to personal and professional attitudes, creating a front of moral virtue while avoiding an examination of the systemic

privileges afforded by whiteness (Gordon, 2005). This layered operation of colorblindness emphasizes its complexity in shaping public policy and discourse.

The implications of this study extend beyond education. It demonstrates the need for a critical lens in analyzing the discourse of political and institutional leaders across all sectors. Words are not neutral; they carry the power to either challenge or reinforce systemic inequities. As such, practitioners in fields ranging from policy to communications must carefully consider the cultural and historical contexts of their language and the sociopolitical narratives they advance.

This study emphasizes the urgent need for ongoing research into the impact of discourse on marginalized communities, particularly in light of evolving societal challenges such as the COVID-19 global pandemic and increasing backlash against equity and inclusion initiatives. Revisiting the questions posed by *A Nation at Risk,* and considering whether new risks have emerged, can guide policymakers, educators, and researchers toward more just and inclusive practices. Disrupting the colorblind ideology embedded in educational and political discourse is critical to creating a system that acknowledges and addresses systemic inequities, rather than perpetuating them.

The relationship between discourse, power, and ideology is a profound and enduring one. Recognizing the influence of language in shaping policy, public perception, and systemic inequities is a necessary step toward fostering meaningful change in education and beyond. Through continued research and reflection, the Nation can move closer to a future where justice is not just an ideal but a reality.

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