2019

"We're Rags to Riches": Dual Consciousness of the American Dream in Two Critical History Classrooms

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Background/Context*: Within the United States, wealth disparities are growing and upward social mobility is becoming increasingly difficult to attain. These trends call into question the American Dream ideology that anyone can succeed through hard work. This meritocratic ideal has traditionally been one of the unifying ideologies promoted through the public school curriculum. The topic of economic inequality, on the other hand, is largely absent from most social studies curricula. When teachers do address this issue, they tend to omit discussions of causes or potential policy solutions. Students are thus left with few resources with which to develop positions on policies related to inequality that would help them become more informed voters and contributors to public discourse on this issue.*

Purposes*: Critical pedagogy is an educational approach that aims to develop students' sociopolitical consciousness of the world and understanding of the underlying causes of contemporary injustices such as rising economic and social inequality. We investigated whether students in classrooms using critical pedagogy might develop understandings of the roots of contemporary inequality.*

Setting and Participants*: The study took place in two U.S. History classrooms in culturally diverse public high schools in a midsized city in the Southeast. The classrooms were selected because both teachers demonstrated critical pedagogy by helping students question norms and analyze underlying causes of contemporary social and economic inequalities.*

Research Design*: We used a critical case study design with ethnographic methods to examine students' understandings of structural causes of inequality in classrooms where they are most likely to encounter this knowledge, namely critical history classrooms. Data included 10 weeks of observations in both classrooms, classroom artifacts, in-depth interviews with 14 students, and two in-depth interviews with each teacher along with daily informal interviews.*

Findings/Results*: Students critiqued the notion of the American Dream and described ways in which certain social structures such as the judicial and educational systems reproduce*

Teachers College Record Volume 121, 090307, September 2019, 40 pages

0161-4681

social inequalities. Some pointed out how the "rags to riches" ideology precludes tax structures that might reduce economic inequality. However, many also made comments reflecting a belief that the United States is indeed a meritocracy.

***Conclusions/Recommendations**: We recommend that teachers explicitly teach the structural causes of economic inequality so that students have the language needed to understand their dual consciousness that both meritocratic elements (e.g., hard work) and non-meritocratic elements (e.g., race, family wealth) play a role in social mobility within the United States.*

One of the roles of formal education—and particularly social studies education—has been to transmit the social norms and cultural values necessary to ensure the nation remains one unit, bound together for the purposes of democratic governance and maintaining domestic peace (Barton, 2001; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Helmsing, 2014). In the American context, these binding narratives include the quest for freedom and the gradual expansion of rights to all Americans (Epstein, 1998; VanSledright, 2008). Another unifying ideology legitimated through schools is the American Dream ideology (Apple, Au, & Gandin, 2011). This refers to the notion that one's potential for climbing the socioeconomic ladder has more to do with hard work and talent than with the family into which one is born (McNamee & Miller, 2009). This ideology has roots in the founding of the nation as a land of opportunity for colonists and immigrants fleeing economic immobility in their homelands (Adams, 1931). It was further secured in the American ethos through the 19th century Horatio Alger novels, which told of young men going from rags to riches through hard work, perseverance, and honesty. One can find evidence of continued fascination with the American Dream ideology through films like *Forrest Gump* (Finerman, Tisch, Starkey, & Zemeckis, 1994), countless pop and hip-hop lyrics, and cultural icons such as Oprah Winfrey, Eminem, and LeBron James.

Although the United States is more of a meritocracy than, for instance, feudal societies, it is actually less of a meritocracy than many other contemporary industrialized nations (Reynolds & Xian, 2014). Barriers to the realization of the American Dream ideal include discrimination, inequitable education, the effect of wealth inheritance on future life outcomes, the decline of manufacturing, and the effects of corporatization on the potential for self-employment (McNamee & Miller, 2009). The ideology remains strong, however, because it promotes a unifying and pacifying sense that the current system justly rewards those who are most deserving. In doing so, the myth also serves to prevent the populace from pushing for major reforms to economic policies or challenging the legitimacy of those currently benefiting most from the present system.

The danger of adherence to this myth is that it obscures the many structural causes for inequality. Such structures include the growing influence

of money on politics (Westheimer, Rogers, & Kahne, 2017), the tendency for schools to reproduce existing social hierarchies (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989), and the institutionalization of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. As long as these phenomena are kept hidden from most Americans, we can expect limited support for policies that attempt to address these structural causes, such as progressive tax codes and housing policies, more equitable school funding, and mandated school desegregation (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez, Gurin, & Nagda, 1998). Such policies are becoming more urgent as economists predict that wealth disparities will continue to rise under our current capitalist system (Piketty, 2014). While some degree of economic inequality may be inevitable or defensible (Rawls, 1971), the levels that currently exist in the United States are posing a threat to democracy (Stiglitz, 2013). As wealth and political power become ever-more concentrated in the hands of the few at the top, the many in the middle and bottom have less political influence, reduced public trust, and less reason to participate in a system that devalues their interests (Wright-Maley & Davis, 2017). As a result, they have less capacity for righting this course, and this results in a self-reinforcing downward cycle of both wealth and power (Westheimer et al., 2017).

Social studies education can honestly teach about the constraints, present and future, on meritocracy while still providing "enough sociocultural cement to ignite loyalties to [the nation's] best democratic elements" (VanSledright, 2008, p. 137). Part of democratic citizenship education must include learning about economic inequality and the structures that prevent individuals from moving up the socioeconomic ladder, so that students can ultimately make well-informed decisions regarding economic and social policies (Davies, 2006; Sober, 2017a). To date, however, few authors have examined how schools teach about economic inequality (Westheimer et al., 2017) and fewer still have studied classrooms in which these constraining structures are openly critiqued. In classrooms where teachers espouse a critical orientation to ideologies such as the American Dream, how might students respond? Do students become more critically conscious of economic inequality and its causes? Are students able to comprehend how individual actions and beliefs may be shaped by structural forces (an understanding that is admittedly difficult for many adults to acquire)? Finally, can they question taken-for-granted assumptions such as the notion that the United States is a meritocracy in which anyone can climb the economic ladder through hard work (McNamee & Miller, 2009)? This research is important because the degree to which people subscribe to meritocratic assumptions about society influences their beliefs about the fairness of existing economic inequality and possible policies to reduce it (Hochschild, 1981; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

MERITOCRACY

A meritocracy is a society in which the upward social mobility of each individual is dependent only upon hard work and ability (merit), as opposed to social networks, for instance, and without regard to the circumstances into which s/he is born. Although the term was not coined until 1958 (in Michael Young's essay, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*), the concept was at the heart of the founding of the United States and has since remained an ideology associated with American culture and identity (Adams, 1931; Reynolds & Xian, 2014), in spite of empirical research that suggests the current economic system does not offer widespread upward social mobility (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Economists have used large datasets from the United States and Europe to show how and to what extent wealth inequality is widening (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Piketty, 2014; Saez, 2013) and upward social mobility is becoming more limited for various groups in contemporary capitalist societies (Causa & Johansson, 2009; Ermisch, Jäntti, & Smeeding, 2012).

Nevertheless, Americans today are more likely than residents of other countries to believe that social mobility is tied to effort rather than family wealth, even though this is actually truer in other industrialized nations than in the United States (Reynolds & Xian, 2014). In a 2012 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 60% of respondents agreed with the statement "most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard" (Pew Research Center, 2012). In reality, 70% of those who are born in the bottom income quartile never make it to the middle, and a full 43% remain in the bottom quartile (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2013). Moreover, working hard—whether that is measured in number of hours worked or amount of exertion expended—has no association with income or wealth levels (McNamee & Miller, 2009). While Americans do continue to cling to the myth of meritocracy, a recent study found that some actually layer on top of this adherence additional beliefs about non-meritocratic elements of success, such as race, gender, parents, and access to quality education (Reynolds & Xian, 2014). About one quarter of the 2,209 respondents to the 2010 General Social Survey believed that both meritocratic elements (e.g., ambition, hard work) and non-meritocratic elements (e.g., race, coming from a wealthy family, knowing the right people) are about equally important for getting ahead in life. However, a greater portion (33%) believed only in meritocratic explanations for upward mobility (Reynolds & Xian, 2014). The authors described the former as a "dual consciousness" (p. 130) and found that older, lower-income minorities were more likely than any other group to reflect this view. On the other hand, higher-income Whites were the

group most likely to attribute success primarily to meritocratic factors (Reynolds & Xian, 2014).

Subscribing to strong meritocratic thinking tends to reduce support for policies that could address inequality through attention to those nonmeritocratic factors that do impact social mobility (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez et al., 1998). Schools could use empirical evidence to teach how social mobility in the United States really works without promoting one type of social policy or another, so that students are able to freely come to their own conclusions about what should be done. However, curriculum that helps students to understand and contemplate social mobility and inequality is rare (Rogers & Westheimer, 2017; Sober, 2017b). This may not be surprising, given that schools tend to bind the nation together through collective pride in American justice and equality (Barton & Levstik, 1998). However, critical pedagogy is a promising alternative that encourages interrogation of the root causes of power imbalances without necessarily sacrificing students' sense of belonging or commitment to their compatriots (Parkhouse, 2018a).

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND MERITOCRACY

One of the aims of critical pedagogy is to raise critical consciousness of the underlying causes of power imbalances, such as the hegemonic ideologies that sustain social hierarchies (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009; Freire, 1970/2008). McLaren (2009) defined ideology as "a way of viewing the world, a complex of ideas, various types of social practices, rituals, and representations *that we tend to accept as natural and as common sense*" (italics in original, p. 69). Racial superiority, patriarchy, and the myth of meritocracy represent examples of ideologies that produce fewer opportunities for those in nondominant groups (Apple et al., 2011; McLaren & Torres, 1999).

Most of the scholarship on critical pedagogy has been conceptual and often based on macrolevel analyses of schooling systems, rather than in-depth examinations of classroom practices (Parkhouse, 2018b). A few self-studies have shed light on the challenging nature of this work and also issued important warnings about the risk of imposing a framework rather than cultivating independent thinking (Ellsworth, 1989; Shor, 1992; see also Applebaum, 2009; Freedman, 2007; Sibbett, 2016). Of the classroom-based studies that do exist, most have focused on the teachers' practices rather than their effects on students (Parkhouse, 2018b; Zirkel, 2008). In addition, many studies that included data from students focused more on their positive racial/ethnic identity development, recognition of multiple perspectives, and interest in social action than on

critical consciousness of inequality and social mobility (e.g., Martell, 2013; Ramirez, Ross, & Jiminez-Silva, 2016; Tyson, 2002). The next two sections review the literature on students' understandings of social inequality in general, followed by students' understandings in the context of critical classrooms.

STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Much of the research on children's understanding of economics has focused on their conceptions of various elements of the economy (e.g., banks, profits, supply and demand) or on their role as economic agents (e.g., savings behaviors, rational choice decisions; Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2011; Webley, 2005). Regarding economic inequality, some studies have examined poor and middle class children's ideas about themselves and each other (Weinger, 1998, 2000) or their understanding of poverty (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005; Halik & Webley, 2011). While some found that children think that personal characteristics like laziness or lack of hard work are the primary reasons the poor do not advance from their economic position (Halik & Webley, 2011; Weinger, 2000), others found that at younger ages, children's explanations of poverty included more external factors than deficiencies within the individual (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005; Leahy, 1983).

Much of this literature has focused on children below high school age (Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2011); however, one large-scale study comparing adolescents to young children found that older youth attributed poverty to controllable factors like effort and education, rather than luck or intelligence, and were more likely than younger children to hold fatalistic views about the immutability of social hierarchies (Leahy, 1983). Leahy interpreted these findings as evidence that socialization leads to acceptance of the legitimacy of economic inequality. Support for this interpretation can be found in research on adults' views of distributive justice. Through extensive interviews with 28 American adults, Hochschild (1981) found that they applied the principle of equality in the social and political domains of life (e.g., school, home, voting), but the principle of differentiation in the economic domains of life (e.g., workplace and marketplace), with some supporting the latter because they viewed it as inevitable or could not conceive of any other system than the one they knew. Although these studies did not specifically examine ideologies like the American Dream, their conclusions about the power of socialization processes to garner acceptance of current economic hierarchies are consistent with critical theorists' understandings of how hegemonic ideologies operate.

Ideologies shape students' background narratives, or cultural curricula (Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007), which in turn shape the meaning students make of the classroom curriculum (Porat, 2004) and current events (Mosborg, 2002; see also Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2011; Barton, 2001; Barton & Levstik, 1998). Students of different cultural groups read and remember texts through culturally specific frameworks, resulting in divergent representations of facts (Mosborg, 2002; Porat, 2004). Thus far, little research has examined how critical pedagogy may mediate this process by leading students to interrogate their background narratives in order to surface ways in which these narratives may be constraining their understanding of the world.

Several studies not focusing explicitly on students' conceptions of inequality, but rather their general perceptions about the United States, found that many students associate the nation with inequity (Cornbleth, 2002; Epstein, 1998, 2000, 2009). In Cornbleth's (2002) interview study with 25 high school students from a variety of cultural and school backgrounds, she found that about three quarters included inequity, past or present, in their image of the United States, and half of these mentioned racism. At the same time, many students also espoused a belief in the American Dream, including a few who were skeptical that it is still attainable. One student said, "I want what's left of the American Dream, the little bit" (p. 533). All of the high school-aged African American students and half of the European American students Epstein (1998) interviewed believed racial inequality was still a problem. Many White students, like those in Wills' (1996) study, expressed moral outrage or pity when confronted with racial injustice rather than a commitment to political action to resolve this inequity.

Economics courses may seem, theoretically, to offer the best opportunity for learning about constraints on social mobility and potential corrective policies; however, a look at the most recent Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics (Council for Economic Education, 2010) reveals not a single mention of equality, inequality, social class, or poverty. Most state economics standards omit economic inequality, and those that do include it tend to merely acknowledge it without addressing causes or possible solutions (Rogers & Westheimer, 2015). Moreover, many states are placing an increased emphasis on personal finance skills, resulting in even less time for covering these macroeconomic topics (Sober, 2017b). In terms of social studies education as a whole, inequality is almost entirely absent from the curriculum. For instance, within the C3 Framework—the curricular guidance document created by the National Council for the Social Studies—the only mention of inequality appears in the appendix for sociology units and courses (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013).

Recognizing that the enacted curriculum often differs from the prescribed curriculum, Rogers and Westheimer (2017) conducted a study of whether California high school teachers talked about economic inequality, and if so, how. They surveyed 783 teachers of math, English, science, and social studies, and then conducted 15 follow-up interviews. Although they found that 60% did talk with their students about economic inequality, many merely sought to convey facts rather than explore causes and possible remedies for inequality. Another study found that high school social studies textbooks tend to depict inequality as inevitable and to downplay structural forces (Bedolla & Andrade, 2017). The present study seeks to build on this work by investigating how students respond to classroom discussions that *do* explore the root causes of inequality. In addition, by focusing on students' perceptions in the context of a U.S. History classroom, we can examine how students employ their knowledge of the past to make sense of present inequality and construct meaning of their own lives (Barton, 2001; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Seixas, 1994).

IMPACTS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY ON UNDERSTANDINGS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

A few classroom-based studies have examined the impacts of critical pedagogy on students' understandings of social inequality (Lee & Walsh, 2015; Sensoy, 2011). Sensoy (2011) studied a photo essay project for seventh grade students in which they were prompted to communicate their lived experiences related to race, class, and gender. She found that their essays reflected "the discourses of the broader school and societal culture of neoliberal multiculturalism" (p. 339), despite their year-long class with a critical pedagogue who attempted to complicate these concepts with them. Sensoy also found that students' own positionings along lines of race, class, or gender were not predictive of the narratives they created. This study, like many others (e.g., Howard, 2004; Ramirez et al., 2016) focused more on students' counternarratives of their experiences with racism or sexism than on their ability to identify the structural nature of these phenomena or their relationship to meritocracy.

One study that did touch on students' understanding of meritocracy was Lee and Walsh's (2015) study of an ESL teacher attempting to teach students about the intersections of gender, race, class, and immigrant status. The authors found that the students tended to locate barriers to social mobility at the individual rather than institutional or systemic level. Although they recognized the existence of a racial hierarchy that constrains people of color, they also espoused a belief in meritocracy, perhaps due to their

experiences as immigrants from countries in which the United States is perceived as offering greater social mobility.

The present study seeks to address several gaps in the research reviewed here. Studies of children's thinking about inequality have provided an overview of the development of such thinking and a theory that with age (and socialization) comes greater meritocratic thinking and acceptance of inequality as inevitable. However, that body of research has not examined how classroom practices may mediate this process. By contrast, classroom-based studies of critical pedagogy have explored its impacts on students' thinking about race, class, and gender; however, these have not closely examined students' understanding about structural and institutional underpinnings of social inequalities. As Barton and Levstik (2004) pointed out,

> if students fail to understand how individual actions and opportunities are shaped by cultural patterns and societal institutions—such as economic structures, legal and political systems, and religious denominations—then they will be poorly equipped to engage in reasoned judgments about matters of the common good. (p. 163)

Such understanding is particularly necessary if students are to make policy judgments that reverse our current course toward greater inequality and thus weaker democracy. This study examines whether and how critical pedagogy might support structural thinking about economic inequality and social mobility in the United States.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research questions guiding this study were: 1) What understandings and opinions of contemporary inequality are expressed by students in a critically oriented U.S. History class? 2) To what extent do these students understand the underlying causes of contemporary inequalities and constraints on social mobility?

This study is part of a larger critical ethnographic project (Anderson, 1989; Carspecken, 1996; Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2001; J. Thomas, 1993) conducted by the first author from January 2015 through September 2016. This larger study examined critical pedagogy practices and student responses in two U.S. History classrooms in a midsized city in the southeastern United States (see Parkhouse, 2018b for further analysis of the critical pedagogy practices). In the present study, the second author served as an independent data coder (detailed below) and collaborated on conceptualization as well as situating the study in the literature on critical consciousness of American social mobility.

Critical ethnography is an appropriate method based on our research questions because this study seeks to question the role societal structures, such as schools and dominant ideologies, play in reproducing social and cultural inequities (Anderson, 1989; J. Thomas, 1993). Homing in on students' understandings about underlying causes of inequality for this particular study led us to critical case study methodology as well. A case can be considered critical if either of these maxims holds: "If it is valid for this case, it is valid for all (or many) cases" or "If it is not valid for this case, then it is not valid for any (or only few) cases" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). We believe that if students do not develop understandings of underlying causes of inequality in these two classrooms, students are unlikely to develop such understandings in most U.S. History classrooms, due to the distinctive emphasis these teachers placed on helping their students analyze root causes of inequalities. Although Flyvbjerg (2006) admits that "no universal methodological principles exist by which one can with certainty identify a critical case" (p. 231), he advises researchers to look for the most or least likely cases. As described below, these two classrooms represent most-likely cases for fostering understanding of structural causes of inequality within U.S. History classrooms.

Critical ethnography involves researcher reflexivity and disclosure of our biases and assumptions (Anderson, 1989; J. Thomas, 1993). Our interest in this topic stems from our experiences as high school social studies teachers, specifically our witnessing of vastly inequitable outcomes for students based on non-meritocratic factors such as their race, zip code, or immigration status. We hold out hope that better systems are possible for reducing such injustices, and we—as teachers who worked to redress these injustices within our own classrooms—continue to place some of this hope in the public school.

CONTEXTS: MS. RAY'S AND MS. BOWLING'S CLASSROOMS

I (first author) used purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2013) to select the classrooms of Ms. Ray and Ms. Bowling. I sought out teachers who had an explicit goal of raising students' critical consciousness of social inequities in order to investigate how this goal might translate to student understanding. Through 3 years of working with Ms. Ray as a colleague and with Ms. Bowling as her student teaching supervisor and then research collaborator, I had observed that both teachers pushed students to question dominant ideologies and seek root-cause explanations for social inequalities. During the study, both classes included frank discussions on topics such as race, immigration, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, welfare programs, and the ways in which the United States does not live up to its

ideals of equality and freedom for all. As a result, students in both classes quickly learned these were spaces in which they could safely critique and pose critical questions about American society without fear they might be deemed disruptive, cynical, or anti-American. See Table 1 for detailed information about each school and teacher.

Table 1. Teacher Participants and Schools

Teacher	Age & Race	Years Teaching	School	Free/Reduced Lunch Schoolwide	Racial Demographics of Class	Gender Demographics of Class
Ms. Bowling[a]	28 White	3	Creekside *(comprehensive public)*	59%	9 Black 8 White 7 Latinx	13 F 12 M
Ms. Ray	24 White	2	Health Academy *(small public magnet)*	55%	21 Black 3 Latina 3 White 1 Jamaican/ Egyptian	22 F 6 M

[a] All individual and school names are pseudonyms. IRB approval and signed consent from all participants were obtained.

Ms. Ray

Ms. Ray regularly prompted students to make connections between historical events and contemporary conditions, and as a critical pedagogue, she particularly attended to those most impacting her students, such as racism, sexism, and nativism. When teaching about reduction of welfare programs during the Reagan administration, one student said, "Most of the people on welfare at the time were Black" (class observation, April 24). Ms. Ray clarified that actually more people on welfare—then and now—are White. She then explained the origins of that common misconception and others so that students would see one mechanism through which discrimination gets reproduced and even amplified without most people even noticing. She asked, "How many of you have heard the expression 'welfare queen' or 'welfare king'?" Several students raised their hands. Ms. Ray explained that the Reagan campaign propagated this notion of widespread abuse of welfare assistance based on a single individual they found who had cheated the system. See Table 2 for other selected examples of Ms. Ray's teaching.

Always vigilant about the possibility of students becoming cynical or hopeless, Ms. Ray consistently "couched the oppression in resistance—not teaching about any [oppression] without showing how someone was pushing back against it" (interview, September 19). Students also learned how resistance movements can be suppressed through portrayals of activists as superhuman, messianic individuals that ordinary people could never emulate (Woodson, 2016). To help students dispel this myth and others associated with the Civil Rights Movement, Ms. Ray had the class analyze primary sources to support or discredit claims like "The Civil Rights Movement was a spontaneous uprising of exceptional individuals" and "Most effective organizers of the Civil Rights Movement were men." Students began to see the importance of questioning these common sense ideas that we often uncritically adopt from the past (Gramsci, 1971).

Table 2. Selected Moments From Ms. Ray's Class Related to Economic or Social Inequality

Topics Discussed	Selected Moments Related to Economic or Social Inequality
Causes of the stock market crash, the Great Depression, Hoover's response, the Bonus Army	- The class discusses several causes of the Great Depression, including individuals over-borrowing, companies under-borrowing, overproduction, and uneven distribution of wealth. Ms. Ray used a visual of an inverted triangle to represent the "wobbly" nature of this uneven distribution. - Ms. Ray explains Hoover's response from his perspective: "The American people don't need the government to get involved. We've had these setbacks before…So we just need to wait it out. People in America are rugged individuals. They are tough people. And so they don't want the government coming along and just giving them handouts. They're going to pull out of this on their own." One student responds, "That sounds so stupid." Ms. Ray later says, "While everybody blamed Hoover for the Great Depression, I don't think that's really fair. Because the reality is there's nothing Hoover could have done to stop it. It's possible if he had caught it early there may have been a little he could have done, but that wasn't what his beliefs were. He was sticking by his beliefs about the economy, and he got blamed for the Great Depression." One student, "I wouldn't have blamed him for the Great Depression. I would have just blamed him for that Bonus Army thing he did [not providing the bonuses that were promised]."

Topics Discussed	Selected Moments Related to Economic or Social Inequality
World War II, expansion of opportunities for women & Black Americans, continued discrimination, resistance movements	- The class discusses the Women's Army Corps (WAC) and the photo of the "unsung Black Rosie"—a Black woman drilling holes for rivets and wearing a red bandana similar to that in the famous (White) Rosie the Riveter poster. - Ms. Ray describes the strike of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters (a union of predominantly Black train workers), A. Philip Randolph's threat to march on Washington, and the effectiveness of these actions in convincing FDR to issue an executive order banning wartime employment discrimination. - The class compares stereotypes used to dehumanize Blacks in the 19th century and those used to dehumanize the Japanese during WWII, and watches a propaganda video used to justify interning Japanese Americans.
Cold War, JFK, Red Scare, Lavender Scare	- The class discusses why communism scared Americans. Ms. Ray states, "The whole idea of the American Dream is you start from the bottom and you get above everybody else by working hard. Right? Whether or not that happens for most people, that's the idea." - Ms. Ray describes the Lavender Scare that resulted from Eisenhower's executive order which banned federal employment of LGBTQ individuals.
1960s & 70s social movements, 1980s urban life, War on Drugs, 1990s	- Students read the Black Panthers' 10-Point Program and write a 10-Point Program for today based on racial inequalities that still need to be addressed. - Students analyze early hip-hop lyrics as protests against urban conditions. - Ms. Ray describes the War on Drugs as failing to address "the root of the problem" so "this is the cycle we're still kind of in." - Rodney King protests are connected to Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown.

Ms. Bowling

Ms. Bowling also led critical and frank discussions of the forces that sustain social inequality, past and present. While teaching about the New Deal programs and connections to today's social safety net, Ms. Bowling prompted students to critically consider contemporary perceptions about welfare recipients as lazy. She explained that benefits are suddenly cut off when a family surpasses a certain threshold—often still quite low—which can incentivize people to avoid reaching that level of earnings. Several students exclaimed, "That's not fair!" Ms. Bowling added:

> You can't get mad at the families, because they're actually pretty smart. They're thinking economically. You have to get mad at the system, at the policies that are designed that support a program like this. How do you change that? How do you change a system? (class observation, March 20, 2015)

The class then discussed options such as petitioning or replacing elected officials with those who support gradual reduction of benefits. Ms. Bowling concluded, "You have the power to do this. A lot of you guys will be 18 for the next election. You should be finding people that identify with what you value in America." This is one example of the many times in which Ms. Bowling encouraged students to look past surface-level explanations to consider how social structures may be contributing to problems of social mobility. See Table 3 for additional examples of Ms. Bowling's teaching.

Ms. Bowling also taught critical media literacy lessons in which she helped students notice and question how the media shapes public perception. On April 29, Ms. Bowling paused the history curriculum to discuss the unrest in Baltimore following the unexplained death of Freddie Gray, an unarmed Black youth, while in police custody. She asked students to compare four images, identifying which were more commonly shown. Students stated that the images of looting and fire-setting were abundant, but rarely seen were the two images of a congregation peacefully marching and a young boy handing a police officer a bottle of water. She then asked students to describe the impacts of these choices on public perception and how these perceptions then serve to further impoverish Black communities.

Table 3. Selected Moments From Ms. Bowling's Class Related to Economic or Social Inequality

Topics Discussed	Selected Moments Related to Economic or Social Inequality
1920s, Harlem Renaissance	- Class discusses the Lost Generation and *The Great Gatsby*, which they have all read in English class. Ms. Bowling describes the book as "all about how there are two social systems existing in America. You have the rich, affluent social system and then you have those that are still struggling to get by." - Ms. Bowling describes Harlem Renaissance and the beginning of ongoing White appropriation of Black music and culture that continues today: "Where African American culture will originate some kind of music, whether it be jazz, whether it be rock and roll, or hip-hop, they [White Americans] will take it to make it their own."
World War II	- Ms. Bowling describes resistance to racial discrimination: "African Americans don't have equal rights in our country during this time period. But they sign up just as quickly to defend and fight for their country. So they come back home and say, 'Our blood spills just like yours. We love this country just like White people, just like anybody else. Why don't we have equality?'"

Topics Discussed	Selected Moments Related to Economic or Social Inequality
1950s, Red Scare, Cold War, John F. Kennedy	- Class analyzes social norms and expectations of women in the 1950s. - While describing the Red Scare, Ms. Bowling says: "Martin Luther King and some of the big civil rights leaders were labeled as communists because they wanted equality in America." - Ms. Bowling describes the rationale behind passage of the Taft-Hartley Act: "A lot of people see labor unions as being synonymous with communism. That is, you have a group of people that are trying to control the decisions, you have a group of people that are controlling the way that business is being operated." - Ms. Bowling describes JFK's "The New Frontier—to correct for injustices, to get rid of poverty, to encourage space travel. He is the president that starts the legislation for public housing, better known as section 8 housing today. He is the president that initiates some civil rights legislation at least in attempt to make our country more equal." Angela says, "He's my favorite president so far. . . because he wants to help the poor and he's giving everybody a chance." - Ms. Bowling explains that President Johnson "passes education bills, Medicare and Medicaid, HUD, tax cuts, and many civil rights bills. . . . He's not very favored, in part because these increased the nation's debt. These programs aren't cheap. Who pays for these?" Students answer, "Taxpayers."
Civil Rights Movement and other social movements of the 1960s	- Ms. Bowling tells class, "Most people say the Civil Rights Movement is still going on today. Marginalized groups in our society—African Americans, Hispanics, LGBTQ, anyone who is not seen as the status quo—they're still fighting for equality." Connects protests to those in Ferguson, MO in 2014. - Ms. Bowling describes the United Farmworkers movement, the gay liberation movement and Stonewall Inn, and the women's rights movement. She adds, "What's important for you guys to realize is that these movements are still going on."

DATA COLLECTION

I (the first author) collected four types of data at each of the sites: classroom observations, teacher interviews, student interviews, and artifacts such as lesson plans and student work. I spent 10 weeks at each site in the spring of 2015. For each teacher, I observed one 90-minute class, four to five days per week, and during independent work time I often circulated to assist and converse with students. I audio recorded each class observation and transcribed all portions related to critical consciousness. This resulted in over 500 pages of transcripts from classroom observations. I also conducted two formal interviews with each teacher as well as daily informal interviews related to their reflections on each lesson and student comments in class. During the first in-depth interview with each teacher,

which occurred about halfway through the 10 weeks of observations, I asked them about their goals and the instructional strategies they use to achieve these goals. I conducted the second formal interview the following fall semester, after I had transcribed the student interviews and the teachers were no longer teaching the same students. During these interviews I asked the teachers to read their students' transcripts and describe the extent to which they perceived their students to have developed critical consciousness of inequality, based on both their classroom comments and transcripts.

I purposively selected (Maxwell, 2013) seven students per teacher to interview regarding their perceptions of social, political, and economic inequalities in the United States. (See Table 4 for details of the student participants). I asked students open-ended questions such as "Do you think the U.S. equally protects all citizens?" In an attempt to distinguish between opinions influenced by their U.S. History class and those formed elsewhere, I followed these questions with "Has your opinion been influenced by what you have been learning in your U.S. History class in any way?" (See Appendix A for the student interview protocol.) I also collected written lesson plans, instructional materials, and student work as needed throughout the observation period for triangulation purposes.

Table 4. Student Participants

Student	Gender	Religion	Race/Ethnicity/ Nationality[a]	Duration of Interview
Ms. Ray's Class, Health Academy High School (Public Magnet, grades 9–12)				
1. Amina	F	Muslim	Black American	50 min
2. Melony	F	Christian	African American	43 min
3. Ida	F	Christian	African American	31 min
4. Josephine	F	Christian	Black/Afr. Amer.	33 min
5. Diane	F	Christian	Black/Afr. Amer.	40 min
6. Dolores	F	None	Hispanic	28 min
7. William	M	Jehovah's Witness	White/U.S. citizen	38 min
8. Kiara	F	Unknown	Black/Afr.-Amer.	(Not interviewed)
9. Jamilah	F	Unknown	Black/Afr.-Amer.	(Not interviewed)
Ms. Bowling's Class, Creekside High School (Public Comprehensive, grades 9–12)				
1. Kiya	F	Christian	Afr. Amer./Black	30 min
2. Angela Davis[b]	F	Theist	African American	45 min
3. Isabel	F	blank	Amer./Dominican	40 min

Student	Gender	Religion	Race/Ethnicity/ Nationality[a]	Duration of Interview
4. Alex	M	blank	Mexican	26 min
5. Feisty Rebel	F	None	White/American	31 min
6. Roman	M	Christian	Black/ Native American	35 min
7. Matt	M	Christian	White, American	33 min
8. Lexa	F	Unknown	Black/Afr.-American	(Not interviewed)

Note. There were more students in each class. These are the only students quoted in this particular paper.

[a] Students who were interviewed filled out a demographic sheet in which they self-identified their religion and race/ethnicity/nationality.

[b] Participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms. Amina, Melony, Angela Davis, Isabel, and Feisty Rebel were the only ones to do so.

DATA ANALYSIS

The teachers coanalyzed much of the data, through reading their students' interview transcripts, debriefing with me (the first author) after each observation to share their thoughts on the lessons and students' comments, and giving me extensive feedback on my initial written analysis. I personally transcribed all interviews for fuller immersion in the data (Maxwell, 2013). I then used MAXQDA data analysis software to undertake substantive coding (Holton, 2010), beginning with open, inductive, line-by-line coding of all class transcripts, interview transcripts, and field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; D. R. Thomas, 2006). From the original list of 280 codes within the larger project, 84 were selected as salient to the focus of this paper. (See Appendix B for a sample of selected codes and their counts.) Through a process of constant comparison of incidents within the data, I continued theoretical sampling and selective coding of data until theoretical saturation was achieved (Holton, 2010).

The second author and I then initiated analysis through independent parallel coding (D. R. Thomas, 2006). The second author was given the raw student interview data without my initial coding scheme and asked to code and then develop a set of themes to be compared with my own. The only instruction given to the second author was to attend to confirming and disconfirming evidence of depth of understanding regarding inequality. Both researchers independently generated many similar codes for the same segments of text (e.g., "problems with welfare," "defending injustices/oppression," and "individualistic thinking vs. systems"). We

then discussed the rationales behind our coding for each text segment in order to see similarities and differences and to determine agreed-upon findings. This approach, part of our critical ethnographic methodology (J. Thomas, 1993), allowed for continued reflection, debate, and deliberation on codes and themes, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; D. R. Thomas, 2006).

After we agreed on the primary themes, I (the first author) re-coded the relevant class observation data to seek additional confirming and disconfirming evidence of our themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For instance, after we established that students continued to exhibit some meritocratic thinking despite rejecting the American Dream, I found additional supporting evidence in the class discussion of Americans' attitudes toward the Bolshevik Revolution (described below). Whenever possible, I apposed student references to class discussion with the transcripts of the discussions to which they referred in order to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which the class influenced students' thinking.

LIMITATIONS

This study is part of a larger ethnographic study examining how school contexts shape critical pedagogy approaches and how those approaches then impact students. As a result, the interviews asked a wide variety of questions, not all of which were directly related to perceptions of inequality and social mobility. Another limitation is that open-ended interview questions and class discussions may not provide enough structure to elicit students' thinking about such complicated topics. On the other hand, "topics as complex and slippery as beliefs about income, property, justice, equality, and the role of the government in the economy and vice versa require a research method that permits textured, idiosyncratic responses" (Hochschild, 1981, p. 21). It may be that the interviews thus overly channeled responses or were too short to capture sufficient texture. However, we believe that triangulation across the 57 class observations (in which more idiosyncratic comments emerged) and the 14 student interviews—as well as the four formal teacher interviews and daily informal teacher interviews—produced sufficient data, from multiple sources, to generate the insights posited here about this particular group of students (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To determine the representativeness of these insights for larger populations would require larger-scale studies.

FINDINGS: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Like one quarter of the adults surveyed in Reynolds & Xian's (2014) study, youth in this study layered skepticism toward the American Dream ideology on top of meritocratic assumptions about how American social mobility works. The first section of the findings details this dual consciousness. Students ranged in their abilities to identify the root causes of social inequality and immobility and to imagine solutions that penetrate the surface of those problems, although most students did express a burgeoning awareness that ideologies, institutionalized discrimination, and other social structures constrain the ability of many individuals to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. The second section of the findings describes students' explanations for unequal access to the American Dream: both the surface-level and more structural, root-cause explanations. The last section explores influences on students' dual consciousness. It presents evidence that the teachers' critical approaches played a role in shaping student understandings, even while personal experiences, family conversations, media, and other classes were also cited by the students as influential. This final section also explores the ways in which lessons learned within and outside these classrooms reinforced each other, as should be the case within critical pedagogy given its grounding in students' out-of-school realities.

DUAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

All 14 of the students interviewed thought the United States does not provide equal opportunity to all. Two students explicitly stated that the American Dream was "not a reality" and three others, without referring specifically to the American Dream, said that climbing the socioeconomic ladder is harder than many think. Roman explained that he did not believe in the American Dream idea that hard work delivers a good position in life because

> even though hard-working people work hard every day, still they are stuck in the same spot. Unless you have friends who could boost you, or you make connections, or in some cases you make a deal with the devil, you aren't going to really get to where you thought your dreams would take you.

When I asked what he meant by "make a deal with the devil," he answered, "If you have to do something illegal" (interview, April 23). Amina (a Muslim woman of Egyptian and Jamaican descent) described the American Dream as "just a dream. It's not a reality at all." She described how

> we have a system set up. . . it might be easier for someone from Europe to come over here and be successful than someone from Africa or even Mexico. . . I don't want to say America is racist. . . But I do think America favors White people. (interview, April 1)

She went on to describe how nationality and native language can also play a role. Similarly, Diane said, "Getting from one [social] class to another is really hard, I think. Because everything is really focused around the money—what you can pay for, what you can't pay for. So if you're already struggling, that struggle becomes harder" (interview, April 8). She added that "things are determined a lot of times on how people look. Or how they articulate their words, their diction." These insights regarding linguicism and discrimination based on appearance added nuance to simplistic conceptualizations of racism. During one class, Kiya stated her belief that even if one does climb the economic ladder, this higher status is more tenuous for some than others: "It's proven that the African Americans that do end up being successful and move out of the ghettos, their children in later generations fall back into that situation" (class observation, April 29).

Despite this suspicion that the American Dream may not be achievable for many Americans, other student comments reflected a belief that the United States is a meritocracy. Isabel (a second-generation Dominican American) said she's proud to be a citizen of the United States because it gives her "the chance to move to . . . a higher social status." Just a few seconds later, however, she said that the United States is

> not giving everybody opportunities to move from their social level. Like for example, immigrants. It's hard for them to move from their social level. Because like Ms. Bowling says, some of them work in farms and they get threatened to get sent back if they say they want more money. That's basically treating them like a slave. (interview, April 15)

While she recognized that barriers to upward social mobility do exist for many immigrants, she conveyed a belief that the United States nevertheless offers such mobility to her personally, even while she is a second-generation immigrant.

At least six students[1] across both classes at some point made comments similar to the following quote from Ida: "Wealthy people, they work for their money, they definitely deserve it" (interview, April 2). While describing the New Deal, Ms. Bowling gave a hypothetical example to help students imagine how they would feel about the government redistributing their money to poorer families. She asked them to imagine that they held a Ph.D. and earned $250,000 a year, some of which was to be given to a family of three in

which the mother was unable to work due to a disability. Some students said they would be fine with this, while three others exclaimed, "It's *your* money"; "It's not my fault I worked hard"; and "You worked hard for it, so you should be able to spend it how you like" (class observation, March 19).

During a lesson in which Ms. Ray taught about Huey Long's plan to combat the Great Depression through a 100% income tax rate on the wealthy, Jamilah declared, "See I don't think that's fair because if I was wealthy I'd be upset" (class observation, March 4). While discussing the communist revolution in Russia, Kiya stated, "In America you work for what you get, but in the Soviet Union everybody gets the same thing, so it's not fair to people in the Soviet Union that work harder than others" (class observation, March 2). At least four of these students were the same ones who had expressed awareness of structural causes of inequality at other times (Ida, Alex, Jamilah, and Kiya). At the same time, these particular comments reflect a belief both that the United States is a meritocracy, empirically speaking (e.g., "Wealthy people deserve [their money]"; "in America you work for what you get"), and it should be a meritocracy, normatively speaking (e.g., "you should be able to spend [your money] how you like"). No students made this distinction, however. No student pointed out, for instance, that a meritocracy may be the fairest system, but it is not exactly the system we have. Rather, many seemed to agree that it is both the superior system and the one currently characterizing our economy.

The students' skepticism of the American Dream but persisting faith in meritocracy could be read as *contradictory consciousness* (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci's concept refers to the conflict between one's *good sense*, or practical wisdom based in lived experience, and his/her group's *common sense*, which is knowledge that members of that group inherit from the past and absorb without questioning. We read the students' simultaneous skepticism of and adherence to the ideology, not as contradictory consciousness, but rather as *dual consciousness* (Reynolds & Xian, 2014). Generally speaking, there are both meritocratic and non-meritocratic contributors to social mobility, and thus simultaneous recognition of both influences is more in line with reality than attributing success to either one or the other. However, if students believe meritocratic elements apply more to themselves than to the population as a whole—as Isabel's comment suggests she might, and which motivated reasoning[2] might lead us to believe—then that view would be unsupported by the empirical data. To better understand students' dual consciousness, we need to examine their beliefs about the causes of inequality and immobility, attending to the degree to which students think these causes are within individuals' control (i.e., corresponding to meritocracy) versus outside individuals' control (i.e., contradicting meritocracy).

RANGE OF SURFACE-LEVEL TO ROOT-CAUSE EXPLANATIONS AND SOLUTIONS FOR INEQUALITY

Student explanations for inequality fell along a spectrum from relatively simplistic reasoning to complex and layered, with some students fluctuating in the complexity of their analysis. When students were asked, "Do you think the U.S. equally protects all citizens?", all 14 interviewed said "No" or "Not 100%." When asked to expand, all but one student mentioned immigrants, police brutality, or racism more broadly. A few comments during interviews and class discussions suggested that individuals could overcome their situations if they took the right steps (as would be the case in a pure meritocracy), or that race relations could be improved if individuals would overcome their prejudices. However, most students conveyed some understanding that inequality cannot be explained solely through the variability of individuals' efforts and that discrimination is embedded in larger, institutional levels of society.

Surface-Level Explanations and Solutions

Although most students' explanations of inequality referenced structures beyond the control of individuals such as the judicial or educational system, three indicated a belief that changes to the attitudes or work ethic of individuals could solve this problem. When Melony (an African American woman in Ms. Ray's class) said she was concerned about discriminatory policing practices, I asked if the incidents she described changed her opinions about the United States. She answered, "I don't know if it's the U.S.'s fault. I think it's just personally them [the officers]. . . like certain people who don't know how to control themselves" (interview, April 2). She seemed unaware of the larger social structures that might be contributing to discriminatory policing, such as racialized poverty and entrenched norms within policing practices (Fryer, 2016).

Two students proposed that social inequalities could be addressed through individualistic solutions that failed to examine root causes. Lexa (an African American woman in Ms. Bowling's class), during a class discussion about Freddie Gray's neighborhood in Baltimore, suggested that "Black people should educate themselves" so they could improve their communities (class observation, April 29). Such reasoning conveys a belief that inequality results from a lack of motivation or effort of lower-income individuals. Similarly, Kiya argued in her interview that people receiving welfare "should go out, get a job, get an education, so they wouldn't have to depend on that [welfare income]" (April 9). The very same students had acknowledged race-based oppression in other comments, but in these statements they failed to link such forms of systemic oppression to differential access to education and jobs.

Root-Cause Explanations

At the same time, many students expressed awareness that cultural norms and ideologies, legal structures, and even the school curriculum play a role in maintaining social inequality, in part through covertly shaping those individual actions described above. As critical pedagogues, their teachers tried to help them to understand these deeper causes. The extent to which students attributed their opinions and knowledge to their U.S. History class is explored in the next section, but we share one classroom vignette here to illustrate how the teachers attempted to teach about structural, historical roots of contemporary inequality. Here Ms. Ray introduces a lesson on the crack epidemic of the 1980s and the subsequent War on Drugs.

> Ms. Ray: Does anyone remember from after WWII why is it that poverty exists so much in cities rather than spread out evenly? Where did people move to [after WWII]?
>
> Multiple students: Suburbia.
>
> Ms. Ray: And why did people move to suburbia after WWII?
>
> Amina: Because they wanted families?
>
> Ms. Ray: Ok because they wanted families, all the soldiers had just come back from war, it was the baby boom—
>
> Amina: —it was segregated.
>
> Ms. Ray: Ok it was segregated. What gave them money to buy houses?
>
> Multiple students: The GI Bill.
>
> Ms. Ray: Good. Very good. . . But who mostly got to access that GI Bill?
>
> Multiple students: Whites.
>
> Ms. Ray: Mostly White soldiers. So there's this idea in the fifties that you move to suburbia, you get your 2.5 kids and a dog. . . And so who is left then in the inner cities?
>
> Multiple students: Minorities, African Americans.
>
> Ms. Ray: Yes, people who are poor, people who can't afford to get out, people who are disproportionately excluded from the White suburban communities and are more likely to be poor, Black and Brown. So that's kinda the background that we need to know. I think it's easy to live in the world and assume, "Oh it's always been

> like that; it's always going to be like that." No, no, no. It happened like this for a reason, and so we need to get the back-story of why there's poverty in the cities. (class observation, April 24)

Here Ms. Ray emphasized the importance of recognizing that the present state of affairs is not natural or inevitable and looking to the past to understand the origins of current conditions, such as the concentration of poverty and racial minorities in urban areas. The remainder of this section presents examples of students identifying layers of causation for inequality, and the final section analyzes the extent to which this knowledge emerged from their history classes.

Structural Racism and Classism

Race-based oppression was by far the structural contributor to social inequality that students discussed most often. At least four students even recognized that the system of White supremacy serves to obscure racism as a driver of inequality. When I asked Angela (an African American woman in Ms. Bowling's class) the first interview question, "Can you tell me a little about your general opinions about the U.S.?" she replied,

> Well the U.S. pretty much got a whole bunch of immigrants and foreigners to build it, got Black people to keep it maintained, and just at the end of the day all everybody else sees is just a whole bunch of White people smiling, saying everything's all good, but really in reality, no it's not. (April 13)

Other students were beginning to see how this acceptance and normalization of inequality and racism are also perpetuated via institutions such as schools and the criminal justice system. Matt (a White male student in Ms. Bowling's class) recalled that his prior teachers glossed over how horribly African Americans were treated during slavery and the Jim Crow era. He inferred this was "because they were White and they don't want to teach what really happened." When I asked what he thought their concerns might be if they taught what actually happened, he replied, "That Black people or African Americans will disrespect and not look up—or look at White people the same" (April 28). Although he did not explicitly link this to the reproduction of racial hierarchies, he was starting to notice how White dominance allows suppression of knowledge that might undermine it. Support for his suspicion can be found in Epstein's (2009) study of pedagogical treatment of race and racism in U.S. History courses.

Other students identified how the criminal justice system maintains this hierarchy. Isabel explained,

> because of racism, [police] go towards people or blame people for something they didn't do. And then kill them and then make an excuse. And then usually the government—well court—accepts it because they're cops. . . and they just get like two years in jail. . . . Because of the past, some people just still view Black people wrong. (interview, April 5)

Here she recognizes that prejudices are rooted in history and that social institutions such as the judicial system in some ways permit and thus preserve race-based oppression.

Amina noted how the justice system also privileges higher income people. When I asked if she thought the U.S. equally protected all, she answered:

> No. . . It's not a Black versus White thing. I think it's more a rich versus poor thing. Because you'll find two people that did the same exact thing. But maybe a woman will get let off easier, or a man of color will be put in for 20 years, or the death sentence, and someone who's White maybe get like a month or something. I've seen that a lot, and it kind of breaks my heart because if two people do the exact same thing, they should get the exact same time. Some people can afford a better lawyer. And to me that's rich versus poor, because just because I get a state-appointed lawyer doesn't mean I should go to jail for 20 years. (April 1)

Although she highlights class here, she also alludes to the impact of race and gender on criminal sentencing. She appears not to blame the prejudice of judges, but rather the system that provides adequate legal defense only to those of higher socioeconomic status.

Economic and Ideological Structures

In general, students did not discuss how capitalism or liberal/neoliberal ideologies constrain individuals' potential for mobility, with one exception. When I asked Amina about her opinions related to political economy, she said that she thought the rich should be taxed at a higher rate than they currently are, so that more support would be available to the poor. When I asked why she thought the government does not change tax codes she answered, "Because we're America. We were built on capitalism and all that stuff. We're rags to riches. They don't want to infringe on people's rights to make money" (interview, April 1). Here she indicated how the liberal ideology pervading American common sense prevents a tax structure that might better fulfill the national ideal of equal opportunity for all. Angela and Kiya's comments during their lesson on antiunion/

communist sentiment in the 1920s (described above) reveal their awareness of the power of this ideology, but they do not critique it in the same way Amina does.

In sum, although three students suggested that people should work harder or get more education in order to improve their conditions, most expressed a sense that this would be insufficient as long as the playing field remained uneven. Students cited discrimination based on race, language, accent, religion, and class as producing uneven access to the American Dream. They did not mention discrimination based on gender, physical ability, sexuality, or other identity dimensions which present even more non-meritocratic factors that can impede social mobility. With the exception of Amina, students did not view the economic system as a whole, nor the liberal ideologies upholding that system, as contributing to inequality.

These findings parallel students' dual consciousness of the American Dream. Just as students stated the American Dream was a myth and yet clung to some meritocratic assumptions, they explained inequality in both meritocratic terms (e.g., individuals need to work harder) and non-meritocratic terms (e.g., "we have a system set up"). Meritocratic and non-meritocratic elements do both play a role in upward social mobility (Reynolds & Xian, 2014), and if students thought only the latter did, they would have no reason to put forth effort. However, they need a clearer framework for understanding how the two can exist simultaneously and how better policies are available that might reduce the impact of non-meritocratic factors.

MUTUALLY REINFORCING INFLUENCES ON BELIEFS ABOUT INEQUALITY

It is impossible to isolate the role that a history class plays in shaping students' opinions, given the multitude of other influences such as family, church, media, peers, and other classes (Cornbleth, 2002; Epstein 2000, 2009; Wineburg et al., 2007). Although I followed up many interview questions with the question, "To what extent did your U.S. History class influence your opinion?", it is difficult for a person to know exactly how an opinion was formed, and students could have overestimated the influence of their class because they knew it was the focus of our study and because they liked their teachers. However, 10 students at some point gave negative responses, indicating they would honestly state when the class content had not shaped a particular view. When I asked Diane whether any moments from class shaped her thinking about government assistance to the poor, she answered, "No, I think it's more my own seeing type of thing" (interview, April 8). Other students identified specific alternative sources for their opinions, such as social media (Feisty, Matt), religious beliefs

(William), other classes (Alex, Isabel, Josephine, Kiya), documentaries (Angela), magazines (Kiya), parents (Angela, Matt), friends (Isabel), and other personal experiences (Diane, Feisty, Isabel, Kiya, Matt).

Nine students did attribute at least one of their opinions to their U.S. History class, including many listed above who also identified additional influences (i.e., Kiya, Angela, Feisty, Dolores, Melony, Amina, Matt, Roman, and Josephine). When I asked Kiya if her U.S. History class had shaped her opinion, she answered,

> Yeah, like when we was talking about the Great Depression, I think it was Hoover. How he just stood by, but Roosevelt he came in and he took America under his wing and he helped us get back on track. We should have more people in office like that, who help us. (interview, April 9)

Two students (Matt and Angela) mentioned the lesson in which Ms. Bowling described how the welfare system incentivizes people to stay below a certain income threshold so they do not lose benefits (described above in the contexts section). Matt said, "I think it should be like Ms. Bowling said, you slowly take it away the more money you make. Not just all of it at once" (interview, April 28). Angela stated:

> Well when [Ms. Bowling] taught the government assistance thing. I was like, OK, some of them people are lazy. . . They seem like scammers, like they try not to go out of their way, to not get any type of work. But then when she showed the bigger picture, of how actually when she broke it down the mathematical way, even if it's like one penny over, you could get it cut off. . . And if I was just to get one penny over, I'm going to try everything not to get that one extra penny, like I would quit my job or I'd try to get less hours. (interview, April 13)

This change of opinion is representative of other students' descriptions of the problems with the welfare system. Several students at one point in their interviews said that people "take advantage of" (Feisty, Josephine, and Isabel) or "become dependent on" (Angela, Kiya) government assistance, but at other points recognized that the system might incentivize this and therefore the blame did not rest solely with the individuals.

The teachers helped students forego simple explanations that poor people are lazy or exploiting the system in an effort to understand how larger social structures play a role. After saying that some people take advantage of government assistance, Josephine then added that the government should

> try to understand why they're in that bad predicament. Try to talk to them and basically find out why—how did they get themselves in that predicament. And that's how you go coordinate for how to get them out of it. But if you never hear people out, or give them the opportunity to explain to you, how will you ever know? (interview, April 6)

This reasoning contrasts with simplistic explanations for inequality that highlight only the problems with individuals and not with systems and incentive structures. It also shows how Josephine—a student whom Ms. Ray described as having more of a "2D understanding" of complex issues when she first taught her as a 10th grader—was beginning to have more of a "3D understanding" (Ms. Ray interview, March 28) and an inclination to drill down to the core cause of an issue. During a lesson on the Reagan administration's reduction of welfare programs and implementation of the War on Drugs, Josephine spontaneously raised the question,

> I would think in order to kill the situation [drug addiction] at the source, why are you cutting the programs that are meant to help people? That's what I don't understand. That's how you fix the problem—help the people. (April 24)

Several students clapped as she said this, and Ida added, "That is the truth." Students were beginning to independently seek root-cause explanations to understand new phenomena.

Opinions of social inequality seemed to be shaped by the interaction of students' in-class and out-of-class experiences, rather than solely from one or the other (see also Cornbleth, 2002; Porat, 2004). Within critical pedagogy, students actually shape the curricular content teachers present (Parkhouse, 2018b). Illustrating this point, Ms. Ray described how one student, Kiara, was

> always bringing something in, like "Did you hear about this?! Did you hear about this news story?!" And wanting to try to connect it or wanting me to try to help her understand it. And she got so much more out of the class because of that tendency to want to see what's going on and link it back to what we're learning about. (interview, September 19)

Similarly, Ms. Bowling would often answer questions students brought in from their experiences with the economy, such as how social security disability benefits work and whether jobs paying minimum wage are primarily for teenagers. Students were not only asking the teachers to help them make sense of what they heard away from school, they also used

their out-of-school lessons to deepen the knowledge gained from history class. If the number of interview responses referencing the New Deal is any indication, students remembered and understood that unit in part because of their ability to connect it to their own experiences with the economy and government. In this way the two sets of influences were mutually reinforcing.

DISCUSSION

This study suggests that while critical pedagogy did not immunize these students from the American Dream ideology, it may have helped them to identify flaws in that ideology through providing language and context for making sense of the counterevidence they had witnessed in their own lives. Such observations had given them a pre-articulated sense that policies, the media, and other social structures may contribute to inequality, but the class helped them articulate specifics such as the way in which welfare policies and tax codes grounded in rags-to-riches ideology sustain inequality. In the context of critical classrooms, students did not use history to justify the state of the present (Barton & Levstik, 1998), but rather to help them understand the present (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998; Seixas, 1994) and present-day injustices in particular.

Attending to economic inequality requires an awareness of the "intertwined and reinforcing nature of [race, gender] and similar structural dynamics" (Westheimer et al., 2017, p. 1044). Students of all backgrounds were able to identify structural constraints to upward social mobility, such as racism, linguicism, classism, and nativism—in contrast to the many American adults (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez et al., 1998; Reynolds & Xian, 2014) and young people (Leahy, 1983) who believe the causes of income and racial inequality relate more to lack of individual effort and ability than to structural factors. The ideologies of colorblindness and post-raciality (Rich, 2013) were rejected by all students, regardless of cultural background, in their acknowledgments of the differential obstacles that people of color face. This contrasts with earlier studies finding racial differences in justifications for poverty (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005) as well as studies in which significant portions of White students believed racial inequality no longer exists (Cornbleth, 2002; Epstein, 1998). This difference could be a result of the increased media focus on institutional racism and the growing #BlackLivesMatter movement at the time of our study, or the teachers' candid discussions of racism—or the mutual reinforcement of these and other influences.

In addition, foundations for counterhegemonic thinking were evident in the instances in which students recognized how ideologies can mask

reality, perpetuate themselves, and preserve the status quo (Gramsci, 1971; McLaren, 2009; Parkhouse, 2018b). For instance, Angela critiqued the way Whites misrepresent everything as "all good," evoking the narrative of progress and ever-expanding freedom promoted in the collective memory (VanSledright, 2008). Matt noticed that some White teachers downplay racial atrocities, thus skewing students' knowledge of history and rendering race-based oppression less visible (Epstein, 2009). The data suggest that developing critical consciousness of the underlying causes of social inequality may require more than what has been documented in other critically oriented classrooms, such as curricular inclusion of social justice issues, personal reflections on power and privilege, sharing of counternarratives, and attention to instances of interpersonal discrimination (Howard, 2004; Martell, 2013; Sensoy, 2011). These approaches are important but do not help students understand specific structural causes of inequalities. The teachers in this study warned students against accepting the present state of affairs as natural and encouraged them rather to examine historical and cultural origins of current conditions (e.g., concentration of poverty in urban areas, popular perceptions of welfare recipients as cheating the system). In leading students to examine these underpinnings, teachers laid the foundation for students to look for structural causes in future observations as well.

At the same time, several students expressed meritocratic beliefs while they consciously discounted the ideology. Like some of the students interviewed by Cornbleth (2002), they acknowledged unequal access to the American Dream without compromising their optimism about their own ability to access it. The students in both studies viewed racism and other forms of discrimination as constraining but not deterministic. In this way, the students were similar to the 25% of survey respondents in Reynolds & Xian's (2014) study who layered awareness of non-meritocratic factors on top of their belief in meritocracy.

The American Dream ideology may be particularly hard to dismantle because it is part of the cultural curriculum that shapes student understanding as much as the school curriculum does (Mosborg, 2002; Porat, 2004; Wineburg et al., 2007). It is also highly susceptible to motivated reasoning as it is much more appealing than the alternative (i.e., that we are, to a large extent, not in control of our own economic fates). Thus, rather than fully demystifying the American Dream ideology, critical history pedagogy seems to have bolstered dual consciousness, and in particular, the top layer of awareness that non-meritocratic elements, such as race, language, and religion, drive differential access to upward social mobility.

IMPLICATIONS

Although students held a dual consciousness of the simultaneous existence of both meritocratic and non-meritocratic elements of American social mobility, they did not seem conscious of their layered beliefs, but rather fluctuated back and forth between the two without questioning how they fit together. To help students make sense of these seemingly contradictory beliefs, critical pedagogues might explicitly teach how both meritocratic and non-meritocratic elements coexist and interact as they drive social mobility. Understanding the concept of structural causation—and the fact that it is harder to detect than individual causation—would help students see how non-meritocratic elements play a larger role than most people realize (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez et al., 1998). Structural and systemic causation are difficult concepts for adults to grasp (Lakoff, 2008) and therefore may seem inappropriate for secondary students, but these students were already demonstrating a burgeoning understanding of how institutions such as schools, the judicial system, and the media play a role in shaping public perceptions and therefore individual behaviors. Giving them a term like *structural causation* to group together and communicate these understandings would likely help them recognize and categorize other cases they encounter throughout their lives. This recommendation parallels one made by psychologist Paul Webley (2005) that children need to understand "power, institutional arrangements, and place the current situation into historical context" (p. 64) in order to make sense of economic concepts.

For U.S. History teachers in particular, the implications are that greater attention should be paid to the historical roots of contemporary economic inequality, including but not limited to race-based oppression. Economic literacy should be a vital component of democratic citizenship education so that students have the skills necessary to assess economic policies for their impacts on society (Davies, 2006; Sober, 2017a). Therefore, the topic of economics should not be siloed to the Economics course, especially because that course is only required in 20 states and is rarely taken before the final year of high school (Council for Economic Education, 2016). Economic education researchers have argued that "for economics to be taught well, it needs to be taught early and often" (Niederjohn & Schug, 2008, p. 169). Moreover, deliberate embedding of economic concepts into U.S. History curricula has been shown to improve students' understanding of economics (Niederjohn & Schug, 2008).

We would add that the interactions of economic mobility, social structures, and democracy, in particular, must be taught early and often, if students are to make sense of current economic inequality and the policies

that affect it. Sober (2017b) found that even when the economics course is taught by a critical teacher, the discourse may fail to acknowledge the ways economic policies are shaped by people, leaving students with the impression that the economy is driven only by natural laws and not by human decisions. Discussing concepts such as social safety nets, collective bargaining, government regulations on corporations, and supply-side economics within the context of history can help make apparent the ways in which a nation's economy is shaped by human forces as well as the fundamental laws of economics (e.g., supply and demand). Those human forces play as much a role today as they did in history, which means that students themselves have a role to play. If youth fail to grasp the impact of human decisions on economic conditions, the policies that maintain and exacerbate income inequality will continue to be shaped only by the few already in power and benefiting from the existing system.

U.S. History teachers should continue to discuss political economy in units on the Industrial Revolution, Great Depression, New Deal, Great Society, and Reaganomics, among others, but they should also continually guide students to draw lines from those periods to today. They could ask questions such as: *What lessons were learned from those periods? What were the competing ideological positions during these periods? How are those similar to or different from competing positions today?* Such questions are essential to the goal of social studies education, which is "to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world" (NCSS, 2010). In other words, if we hope for critically conscious and democratically participatory students, they need to be able to see how history has shaped present economic inequality and how they, as historical actors, can impact future conditions (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Giroux, 1983).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how critical teaching might enhance student critical consciousness of the American Dream ideology that anyone can achieve success if they have talent and are willing to work hard. Students of all backgrounds consciously rejected this claim, pointing to oppressive forces such as discriminatory policing and judicial systems and the shaping of public consciousness through schools and the media. Although evidently a result of the "complex interplay between home, community, school, and the historicizing forces of popular culture" (Wineburg et al., 2007), students' conceptions were often expressly connected to their critical U.S. History class.

However, students also demonstrated a persisting faith in meritocracy that may obscure the realities of social mobility in the United States and interfere with their ability to make informed decisions about which policies to support (Lopez et al., 1998). We conclude that while critical history teaching did help normalize frank and critical evaluation of social realities, more explicit discussion is needed of the hegemonic forces that sustain adherence to dominant ideologies. Students need more language to help them make sense of their dual consciousness of the myth of meritocracy alongside their lingering hope that their personal efforts will allow them to go from rags to riches.

NOTES

1. During class conversations it was difficult to get precise counts of comments because multiple students were often speaking at once.

2. Motivated reasoning refers to the psychological tendency for people to perceive information that supports what they want to believe as more valid or accurate than information that opposes what they wish to believe (Ditto et al., 1998).

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APPENDIX A

Student Interview Protocol

1. Will you tell me a little about your opinions of the United States?
2. Do you think the U.S. government usually makes good decisions?
    a. Has your opinion been influenced by what you've learned in Ms. __'s class in any ways?
3. Do you think the government does too much, too little, or the right amount in terms of assisting the poor?
    b. Has your opinion been influenced by what you've learned in Ms. __ class?
4. If you held political office, what would you change about the United States?
5. Have you learned anything in Ms. __'s class that was different from what you'd heard or read about the United States in the past?
6. How would you describe Ms. ___'s opinions about the United States?
7. Do you think the United States equally protects all citizens?
8. Do you plan to be politically active in the future? If yes, how? If no, why not?
9. Has taking this class changed how you think about your role as a citizen in any ways?

APPENDIX B

Codebook Excerpt Showing Selected Codes of Interest and Corresponding Counts

Code	Count
outside-of-school knowledge	21
current injustices/inequities	7
injustices students care about	9
homophobia	3
police brutality/criminal justice	21
American Dream	14
preserve rags-to-riches myth	3
America is flawed	16
inequality in America	10
unequal access to the vote	4
nativism	7
classes/poverty	16
discrimination against poor	4
problems with tax code	10
problems with welfare	17
gov't should give jobs/ed/housing	5
pre-critical	23
individualistic thinking (vs. structural)	21
people can pull selves up by bootstraps	9

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BRYAN P. ARNOLD is a doctoral student in Curriculum, Culture, and Change at Virginia Commonwealth University. His primary research interests are critical citizenship education and the teaching of critical and controversial issues. He is also interested in how teachers in affluent, privileged school settings experience and interpret social justice curriculum/issues. He co-authored a forthcoming chapter in the *International Review of History Education* which examines the impacts of critical historical inquiry on students.