Critical Education

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Volume 13, Number 3, 2022

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091162ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v13i3.186605

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Publisher(s)

Institute for Critical Education Studies / UBC

ISSN

1920-4175 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Hadley Dunn, A. & Kretchmar, K. (2022). "A Very Difficult Decision": Teacher Educator Parents, their Children's Schooling, and the Misalignment of Values and Choices. *Critical Education*, *13*(3), 18–38. https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v13i3.186605

Article abstract

In this paper, we explore how teacher educator parents' (TEPs) feelings about their choices for their children's schooling and how these choices align or don't with their professional values. We provide a nuanced look at the emotional elements of "school choice" and the delicate intersections of teacher educators' personal and professional identities amid a neoliberal educational system that is grounded in choice. This paper illuminates TEPs' cognitive dissonance and struggle through conflicted and emotional choices as they strive to live in ways that reflect their ideals, while parenting within a racist and stratified school system.

Critical Education

Volume 13 Number 3 July 15, 2022 ISSN 1920-4175

"A Very Difficult Decision"
Teacher Educator Parents, their Children's Schooling, and the Misalignment of Beliefs and Choices

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Citation: Dunn, A. H., & Kretchmar, K. (2022). "A very difficult decision": Teacher educator parents, their children's schooling, and the misalignment of beliefs and choices. *Critical Education, 13*(3), 18-38. http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186605

Abstract

In this paper, we explore the ways teacher educator parents' (TEPs) ideological beliefs around education align and do not align with school choices for their own children. We provide a nuanced look at the emotional elements of "school choice" and the delicate intersections of teacher educators' personal and professional identities amid a neoliberal educational system that is grounded in choice. This paper illuminates TEPs' cognitive dissonance and struggle through conflicted and emotional choices as they strive to live in ways that reflect their ideals while parenting within a racist and stratified school system.

When Sandra was thinking about where to send her children who identified as White and Chinese to school, it was not an easy decision. She knew a lot about schools as a former teacher who prepared preservice teachers in North Carolina. “I fear that my daughters will pick up bigoted values at school, or become ashamed of their Chinese heritage, or feel isolated if their perspectives are different from the dominant perspective,” she reflected. Making a decision in her children’s best interests may have meant a choice that did not align with her values about supporting public education. “I would prefer for my kids to go to school in an environment that is not only diverse but also committed to equity and justice. I also want my children to learn their heritage language of Chinese, but the school does not teach any second language in a robust way. We had seriously considered sending them to school 3 hours away from where we live to achieve this. We ended up deciding against that, but it was a very difficult decision.” What is this mother to do when her values and ideals about education come into conflict with the realities she feels are necessary for her own children?

Such is the ongoing debate for many teacher educators who are parents and who are faced with a bind at the nexus of the personal and the professional. TEPs are making the same choice that many parents make every day--where to send a child to school and what to do if that choice is not ideal for any number of reasons--but, as teacher educators who self-identify as having a commitment to social justice, they bring (hopefully) vast experiences and understandings about teaching, learning, and the school system. Thus, TEPs serve as an interesting case of the ways individuals navigate neoliberal and racist school systems. To that end, this study explores: 1) What are the ideological beliefs of teacher educator parents? 2) How do contextual factors support or hinder alignment between TEPs’ ideological beliefs and their choices for their own children’s schooling? 3) How do TEPs navigate cognitive alignment or dissonance?

Theoretical Framework

Since the 1970s, we have experienced the global proliferation of neoliberalism – through policies, through the ways we talk about and understand society, and through the ways we govern (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism prioritizes freedom and individualism over the collective, and defines freedom and individualism in consumer terms. Neoliberal policies promote the free market, personal responsibility, choice and private enterprise, and view government as ineffective and bureaucratic. In action, this includes increased privatization and deregulation and decreased state intervention, coupled with the defunding of public services, such as higher education, libraries, and health care (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2007; Burch, 2009; Harvey, 2005). Finally, neoliberal capitalism is inextricably linked to racism and both are deeply intertwined to frame American society (Kelly, 2017, Kendi, 2019, Robinson, 2000).

Shifts towards neoliberalism are evident in many spheres of life, but they have had an especially profound impact on education, evidenced by policies such as the dramatic expansion of school choice, mayoral control in many large cities, the No Child Left Behind Act and its reauthorization, merit pay initiatives for teachers, and the deregulation of teacher education (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2007; Burch, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). The focus on bureaucratic problems and managerial solutions, rather than resource neglect and racist public policy obfuscates the racist structural, systemic, and historical root causes of an increasingly stratified society. This divorce of education from a race and economic analysis is often used by educational reformers to convince the general public that we do not have to alleviate poverty or dismantle racist structures to work towards equity (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2013).

Parents make school decisions within this increasingly neoliberal educational system (Lipman, 2013). School choice is sometimes narrowly equated with charter and voucher schools, but "the notion of 'parent choice' and the discourses that frame parents as choosers have been institutionalized into mainstream educational reform efforts, including NCLB and intra and inter district 'open enrollment' practices" (DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski, & Scott, 2007). A growing number of districts operate on a choice model where parents select from all the public schools in the districts versus defaulting into a neighborhood school. Opponents of school choice have argued that these policies lead to further segregated and homogenous school populations and exacerbate racial inequality (Apple, 2013). This neoliberal framework ultimately creates a system in which individual parents are deemed responsible for ensuring a quality education for their child/ren through choice, further abdicating the government's responsibility to provide high quality, equitable schools for all students.

Literature Review

A body of research examines how racial and socio-economic privilege impacts childrearing, school choices, and school environments, with a focus on analyzing the role of parents' individual decisions and actions within a neoliberal system that is structurally stratified and racist.

School Choices

Parents rely on informal and formal criteria to make school choices, including examining school report cards with attention to test scores, racial composition, and graduation rates (Buckley & Schneider, 2003); gaining information through social networks (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Schneider, Teske, Toche, Marschall, 2000); visiting schools and teachers; and considering the child's opinion (Smrekar and Goldring, 1999).

Race and socioeconomic status also inform how parents make school choices and the barriers inherent in the choice process (Cooper, 2005; Hannah-Jones, 2016; Pattillo, 2015). Social networks play a key role in shaping parents' school decisions and yet these social networks are frequently segregated, influencing the type of information that is transmitted (Schneider, et al., 2000). For example, White middle class parents not only *rely* heavily on their social networks, but actually *construct* school reputations through these networks (Roda & Wells, 2012). Research has cautioned against examining parents' school decisions devoid of context and without an understanding of parents' histories, stories, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009).

Conundrum of Privilege

Within the literature exploring the impact of racial and socio-economic privilege on parenting, school choice, and school environments, a limited number of studies include a subset of parents who self-identify as social justice oriented. For these parents, choices about education are often rife with tension and impossible to separate from structural inequities (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Hagerman, 2018; Posey-Maddox, 2014). Hagerman (2018) coined the term "conundrum of privilege" to describe the paradox many privileged parents navigate:

> In order to be a 'good parent,' they must provide their children as many opportunities and advantages as possible; in order to be a 'good citizen,' they must

> resist evoking structural privileges in ways that disadvantage others. Decisions about navigating this paradox are part of a complex, ongoing, everyday process of parenting (p. 207).

The parents in Hagerman's (2018) study who identified as social justice oriented described feeling "regularly conflicted about their choices" as "they attempt to solve structural problems on an individual level" (p. 60).

Relatedly, research has looked at the tensions that arise between the protection of privilege and a commitment to public schooling in a diverse environment for White middle class parents who enroll their children in urban schools (Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). Parents look closely at the socioeconomic and racial composition of the school and are more likely to choose an urban school with a "critical mass" of similar families (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2016). Posey-Maddox's (2014) study of middle-class parents who chose urban schools found "even the most well-meaning parents can contribute to inequality in public schooling because of their positions within broader systems of advantage and disadvantage" (p. 145). An influx of middle class privileged families in urban schools brought benefits, such as new programs and resources, but also led to the marginalization of low-income students and families. Other research has focused on dimensions of parent engagement in middle class schools (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2011) and examined the ways White privileged parents explicitly or implicitly limit the voices of parents of color in the school community through Parent Teacher Organizations or other advocacy avenues (Cucchiara, 2013; Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Posey-Maddox, 2013).

School Choice for Parents of Color

Studies have also examined how parents of color navigate complex school decisions amid a segregated and racist school system. A history of exclusionary and deficit mindsets toward students of color in schools (Delpit, 2006; Noguera, 2001, 2004), as well how parents of color are disproportionately subjected to surveillance and discipline by school systems (Alexander, 2010; Baquedano-López, et al., 2013), has led many with the resources to utilize school choice to attempt to meet the needs of their child. Cooper found that Black mothers explained their school decisions through recounting "numerous negative encounters they and their children have had within such schools, particularly those involving public school teachers they characterized as unqualified, uncommitted, uncaring, or biased toward their children" (Cooper, 2005, p. 180). Thus, parents of color "strategically select[ed] schools that they believe match their educational goals and expectations and that they think will enhance their children's long-term educational outcomes" (Diamond & Gomez, 2004, p. 417). Yet, barriers are inherent in the school selection process for many parents of color and the challenges reflect the social and political realities of their environment, their lives, and the status of urban public schools (Cooper, 2005; Pedroni, 2013). Generally, studies of school choice for parents of color highlight the complex ways parents meditate between their children's experiences and institutions (Lareau and Horvat, 1997) while "being mindful of their marginalized identities, and the limited resources and power that situate them on uneven ground" (Cooper, 2007, p. 502).

Methodology

This study utilized grounded theory methods to examine questionnaire data from 200 teacher educators who self-identify as parents. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the choices parents make for their children and how those decisions align or fail to align with what they want for other people's children.

Data Collection

In 2018, one of the author's (Dunn) created and distributed a questionnaire that focused on TEPs' perspectives on their children's education. The questionnaire was distributed online in eight pertinent Facebook groups (e.g. those focused on academic parents, major educational research organizations, teacher educator groups, etc.), as well as via email to colleagues at institutions across the U.S. Snowball sampling was then used as the questionnaire link was forwarded beyond those groups and individuals. Aligning with strategies for online research methods, a second invitation to participate was also shared publicly on social media via Facebook and Twitter "for potential participants to view and respond to if they wish" (Hewson, 2017, p. 66). Participants had one month to respond while the questionnaire remained open. All questions were open-ended. While the questions focused on a wide variety of items related to TEPs' experiences with their children's schooling, this study focused on a smaller subset of those responses related to our research questions. For example: "How did you decide to send your child(ren) to their current school?" and "Did you experience any challenges (logistical, emotional, psychological, political, etc.) with deciding where to send your child(ren) to school? If so, what were these challenges?"

This study is limited in that the authors did not have opportunities to clarify and probe participants beyond their initial responses on the questionnaire. When researchers examine only written responses, it is under the assumption that the meaning of the text is evident. However, we found that the depth and length of the written responses offered the opportunity for meaningful analysis. An additional benefit was that the use of an online questionnaire allowed for a much larger participant sample that included a wide range of geographical locations, backgrounds, and school types. A next step in this research would be to contact participants who expressed a willingness to participate in focus groups or interviews in order to expand this research to include a variety of types of data sources.

Participants

Participants were eligible if they self-identified as a teacher educator, either as graduate students or faculty, and were currently parenting children between ages birth through 18. We also asked that they self-identity, in some way, as being committed to justice and equity in their practice. 200 participants completed the entire questionnaire. When asked to share the terms they would use to describe their justice-oriented commitments, they included terms like culturally relevant pedagogy, justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, anti-racism, liberation, and humanizing pedagogy. We also asked participants to share basic demographic information and professional information, included in the image below.

Table 1: *Participant demographics*

Age	21-30 2	31-40 105	41-50 76	Over 50 16		
Sex	Female 174	Male 26				
Position Type	Tenure track/Tenure 123	Non-tenure track/fixed term 27	Adjunct/part time 24	Grad Student 13		
Type of School [1]	Public 97	Private 89	Charter 26	Daycare/pre school 22		
Number of children	1 child 58	2 children 90	3 children 37	4+ children 15		
Political affiliation[2]	Liberal 126	Progressive 110	Democrat 75	Leftist 47	Conservative 8	Anarchist 5
Type of community	Large College Town 26	Small college town 34	Suburban 48	Urban Emergent 46	Urban Intensive 31	Rural 12
Self-identified race/ethnicity	White & Causican 127	Black & African American 12	Latinx/Latino 10	Asian American 8	Native American 1	Bi/Multiracial[4] 8
			Race/ethnicity not identified 18	Jewish 7	Other[3] 7	European 2

[1] Many participants listed more than 1 school since they have multiple children, which is why the number is more than the total number of participants.
[2] Participants self identified and many identified more than one term
[3] Self identified as: Other, Queer/White/Settler, European, Italian, Australian, Aran American, Syrian
[4] Self-identified as: Latinx-Asian American, Chinese and White, Multiracial Black, Multiracial, Hispanic and White, White Hispanic, White Mexican, mixed ethnicity

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we drew on Charmaz (2014) who explains grounded theory as a systematic process for analyzing data to generate theory. Grounded theory asks researchers to engage in a process of "(a) interrogating the taken-for-granted methodological individualism pervading much of qualitative research and (b) taking a deeply reflexive stance called methodological self-consciousness, which leads researchers to scrutinize their data, actions, and nascent analyses" (Charmaz, 2017, p. 34). We took up this call by interactively engaging with the data through individual reflection and through collaborative dialogue and analysis.

Using Microsoft Excel and then MAXQDA data analysis software, we engaged in multiple rounds of open coding. First, we individually coded twenty questionnaires each and then debriefed about interesting responses we were seeing and any initial patterns we were noticing. Then, we

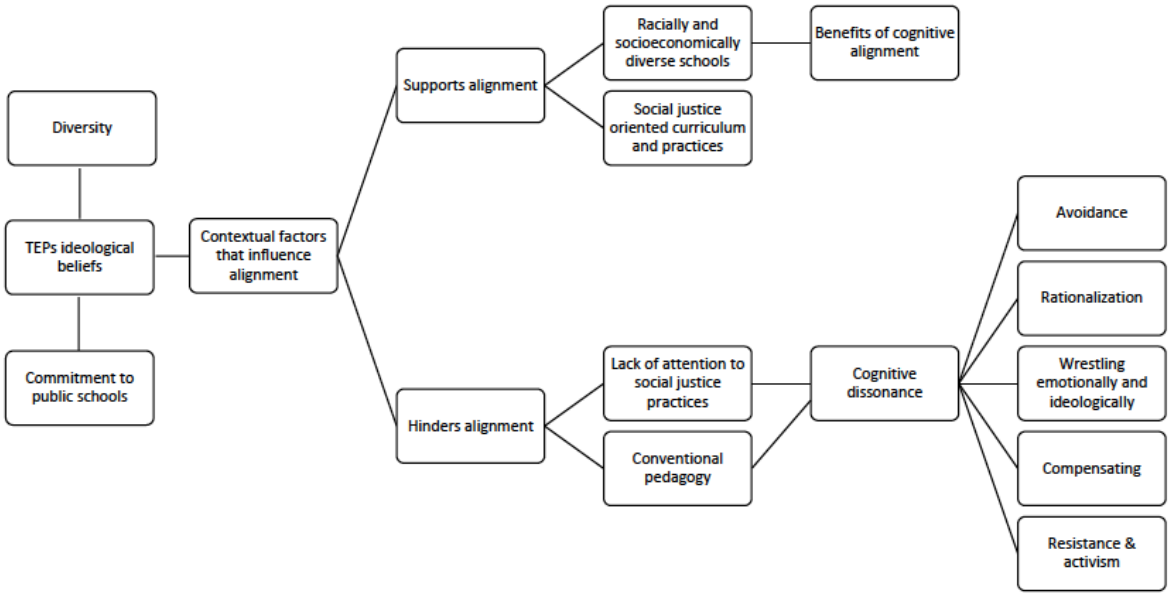
each coded an additional 50-75 cases per person, noting in the software and in memos any central ideas that we saw emerging from the responses. At each stage, we discussed our noticings. We then focused in on the central topic of this study because those responses were often the lengthiest and most evocatively written. After we established this central focus, we re-coded each case according to preliminary codes we agreed upon. For example, we coded "challenges with diversity" and "type of school" as two top-level codes and then found evidence of sub-codes like "lack of social justice curriculum" and "public school by default" or "public school by choice." We continued to refine our codes and used analytical memos to consider the relationships between the categories. Finally, we worked collaboratively to transform these codes into the conceptual framework displayed in Figure 1 and described in the findings section. In each phase, we attended to constant comparison and theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz, 2014). The responses that we present here are reflective of both the patterns we saw across the data and the unique stories that stood out, thus representing the range of what is possible.

Positionality

We come to this work, first and foremost, as mothers. While we were both scholars before we were mothers, we find the two identities have become inextricably linked in the years since becoming parents. Though some scholars see parenthood as separate from their professional selves, for us, being our whole selves means a constant dialogic between our roles, responsibilities, and practices in our homes and in our universities. To this, we also add in our communities, as we strive to be scholar-activists and co-conspirators (Love, 2019) in the fight for educational justice and equity for all children. We, like the participants in this study, wrestle with the choices we make for our children and how to align those choices with what we want for other people's children. Within that wrestling is a recognition of our own privileges, as white, cisgender women with doctorates, who have the social and cultural capital to navigate the complex racist, cisheteropatriarchical, capitalist structures (hooks, 2013) that dominate universities and public education today.

Findings

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



TEPs Ideological Beliefs

Most TEPs clearly articulated strong ideological beliefs about schooling, with a particular focus on a desire for diversity and a commitment to public schools. They used these beliefs as a reference point for navigating school choices and to frame whether they experienced alignment or cognitive dissonance about their school choices and their own beliefs.

Desire for Diversity. Diversity, a term that came up in 118 of 200 responses, played a key role in TEPs' decisions, and respondents unequivocally viewed racial and economic diversity as an asset. Respondents mentioned diversity as a priority in decisions they made for their child's education, or noted a lack of diversity as a significant challenge. For parents of children in marginalized groups, a diverse school environment was critical to their decisions and feelings.

Parents with children of color wrote emotionally about immense challenges. For example, a Black parent said, "Whiteness is overwhelming and, when combined with economic privilege, it is, at times, unbearable. I knew about this, but I have been more challenged by it than I thought I would be. My daughter has had a difficult time finding her footing in the social world of the school." For many parents of children of color, racially diverse school environments were not always easily accessible. Some parents endured logistical hardships like long commutes so their children could attend a more racially congruent school. As the opening vignette reveals, these are "very difficult decisions" to make.

Including and beyond parents of children of color, a subset TEPs considered themselves politically progressive/liberal and were working in "rural, conservative" communities. These

parents often worried about the isolation of their children and how "the values of some students and families have contributed to the school not being a very inclusive environment," evident in examples like "bullying on Day of Silence" and a "themed spirit 'Merica Day" and pro-Trump drawings as displayed student artwork" in rural Minnesota.

"All students benefit." Many TEPs sought out schools specifically for their racially and/or socioeconomically diverse environment. A White mother noted, "I feel that this is a major factor in his learning and growth and a reason we chose the school." White parents saw this as a way to give their children "access to people and life stories that I [they] could have never given him." Parents with children of color framed their decision around finding an environment that would feel inclusive for their children: "We moved so he could go to this school." TEPs also choose more diverse school environments because they saw it as a way to use their privilege to support the collective good. One White parent in an urban area in Georgia acknowledged that they were attracted to a particular school because it "opened with an explicit mission to serve students who have been historically marginalized and misserved by our education system."

"They only care about white people and whiteness." One of the most frequently identified misalignments between TEPs' ideals and their choices was a "lack of diversity." One White parent from Michigan wrote, "The school they attend was our last choice because of the lack of resources and access to experiences, how little diversity there is in the student body and teachers, and the tendency to lean pretty conservative and pro-gun in ways that are inconsistent with our family values and beliefs." Others identified "emotional challenges due to lack of diversity" in their children's school.

Navigating the choices available to them. Parents also based their decision on the type of school(s) available to them. Some families sent their children to the zoned public school because of a lack of choices, and others chose the public school purposefully. Others chose a private, charter, or alternative public (as opposed to the zoned, neighborhood one) with confidence; still others chose non-zoned options with unease.

"100% committed to public schools." Very few respondents noted selecting the public school by default as opposed to a conscious choice, though some did acknowledge that "We can't afford private school so it wasn't so much a choice as it was a default." This likely reveals the economic privilege and social capital of the majority of our respondents. Many TEPs felt strongly about their children attending their zoned public school and did not consider other school choices. As a Georgia TEP said, "I'm living my values about strong public education for all by choosing to stay in the system, rather than opting out."

> Some remained committed to public schools, but made decisions to put their child into another non-zoned public school or magnet school for a variety of reasons, including curriculum, diversity, and specialized programs (i.e. dual language immersion). Many of these parents were conflicted about these decisions to utilize school choice within the public system. One White parent discussed this conflicted feeling in detail--reflecting common feelings expressed across participants-- and is worth quoting at length here:
>
> I'm always battling an internal struggle between my ethical commitment to a great neighborhood school for every child, and the fact that I have used school-of-choice to move my kids out of our neighborhood school. . . I'm fully aware that it's a privilege to have been able to send my kids to a place that's well-resourced and

> provides a rich, well-rounded curriculum. On the other hand, the school my kids are in does a good job with things like providing safe[ty] for queer kids, they've done a great job of not tolerating sexual harassment, etc. They have done a good job supporting my child who has a disability, and providing inclusive education opportunities. So although I am often conflicted about having used schools-of-choice, I feel ok about the particular school we chose, regarding social justice I see both of those things and that's complicated sometimes. One way I make sense of having moved my children to a different school district is to think of it as making a statement about the kind of schools I want for all children.

Context Matters: Factors that Supported or Hindered Alignment Between Choices and Beliefs

Contextual factors both supported and hindered the level of alignment between TEPs their choices and their ideological beliefs. Though some TEPs indicated there was alignment, the vast majority wrote instead about a lack of alignment, primarily related to curriculum and pedagogy.

Contextual Factors that Supported Alignment

"Acceptance, tolerance, and appreciation of differences:" Socially justice-oriented curriculum and practices. TEPs saw social justice curriculum as a collective and individual benefit. As a White TEP from Wisconsin explained, "It means my son is able and has the freedom to discuss his views and listen to other people's views, have healthy conversations with others, develop empathy and a justice related perspective and identity." Parents also valued "strong teachers" and non-traditional pedagogy, with "hands-on" and "project-based" learning, "play-based" early childhood programs, inclusive communities, and practices that "focused on teaching more of the whole child than focusing on test scores."

Contextual Factors that Hindered Alignment

"They could do a lot more:" Lack of attention to social justice. Parents who purposefully selected a racially or socioeconomically diverse school for their children still often reported a "lack of attention to equity." TEPs reported problematic practices, such as "racial divides," "a pattern of pushing out students of color," "hyperpolic[ing] black male students," and practices that are "not inclusive of children with different abilities." A White parent from Massachutes recounted, "My oldest daughter is experiencing transphobia and homophobia… I did not know the extent to which hateful language was used, particularly in informal school settings (hallways, cafeteria)." For parents of color, their children continued to face and "critique injustices" whether in racially diverse environments or not. A Black TEP recounted her child saying, "She [teacher] talks down to us like we don't understand things."

Conventional pedagogy. Many TEPs critiqued "superficial heroes and holidays" approaches to curriculum. One TEP in suburban Connecticut critiqued the school's "understanding of culture as a static phenomenon reserved for the 'exotic other' and tied to surface elements like food and foreign language." A parent in rural North Carolina explained, "The school teaches whitewashed versions of Christopher Columbus, the pilgrims, MLK, and so forth. They prefer a more color-blind approach and to focus on the importance of getting along and kindness than to provide more accurate history and delve into the complex and uncomfortable topics." In particular,

many parents noted problematic representations of Thanksgiving, such as "dressing up like 'Indians and cowboys'" (Arizona) and "giving spirit names" (Colorado).

Other critiques of teaching practices focused on "traditional" teaching styles where the "teacher talks and students listen" and "test-centric curriculum." For example, a White New York TEP said, "The school is quite traditional, placing too much emphasis on high-stakes testing, seat work, and homework, which as educators we know is not beneficial for young children but which is the result of top-down mandates/policies." Some had critiques of particular content areas, such as an Indiana TEP who noted that "Math instruction tends to be very procedural, as opposed to being investigative/inquiry-based/ content-based."

TEPs were often critical of behaviorist discipline systems, such as "stoplight behavior modification systems." Another parent, a White TEP from Idaho, wrote at length about how "discipline, behavior, and grading [and] the day-to-day treatment of children matters the most to me, because if they feel safe, supported, free to take risks, part of a community, etc--they will realize that learning is vital to being human, and it's hard to stop someone from learning after that." Finally, TEPs often noted the challenges of the working conditions of teachers and issues like "high teacher turnover," struggles with "teacher retention," and "the need for more teachers of color."

How TEPs Navigated Cognitive Alignment & Dissonance

"We won the lottery:" The Benefits of Cognitive Alignment

Fewer than 20% of TEPs who participated felt their choices were entirely aligned with their philosophies. Those that did found the alignment to be very important. Especially for TEPs of color, alignment "means a lot." "The alignment means that my son attends a school where most kids look like him or are majority kids of color," explained a TEP of color from Oregon who chose a private school, "He has Latinx teachers. The young people in his school just 'get social justice issues.' The Principal is a Latino man. Cultural diversity is deeply valued and honored." For both TEPs of color and White, their choice to send their children to aligned schools meant that home-school discussions and beliefs supported, rather than contradicted, one another. Some said that living out their values through their children's schooling was a matter of being able to "look [at] myself in the mirror" and "if they were misaligned, I would feel hypocritical." As a White TEP from Ohio wrote, "If education faculty are not willing to send their children to the local public schools that are serving students across a range of economic levels, they lose credibility in suggesting that schools should be about social justice."

"I wonder if I am a hypocrite:" Cognitive Dissonance.

80% of TEPs experienced misalignment between their ideological beliefs and their choices for their own children and they struggled to make sense of this cognitive dissonance. Those TEPs responded to the misalignment in a variety of ways including (a) avoidance, (b) rationalization, (c) wrestling emotionally and ideologically, (d) compensating, and (e) resistance and activism.

Actions Creating Dissonance. By far, the participants who wrote the longest and most emotionally-laden responses were those who wrestled with this misalignment. They are struggling to live within the tension of making choices that often do not represent "what I really believe." These TEPs wrote that the misalignment left them "heartbroken," "saddened," and

"uncomfortable," struggling with the fact that "This is America--contradictory to the core. I think digging into the contradictions is essential to being a citizen." Some tried to find "balance and acceptance" and "figure out what battles are worth picking and what are not. I cannot change everything that bothers me, so I have to decide what is most important."

For TEPs with children of color, their greatest misalignment struggle came from a belief in public education but making a different choice for their own children. For example, an Illinois TEP wrote, "How could I not allow my Black children to have access to the best education available to them, simply because I believe in public education? Just because I believe in the potential of public education does not mean that it serves all students well." Another TEP of color felt "protective of my children's joy" because they "know that there are elements of the public system that take away joy from learning." One mother wrote powerfully about the choice to find a magnet program that supported her son learning in her native language of Chinese, a language that she herself had lost: "I'm taking him out of our community school to put him in a magnet program, and that doesn't align with the fact that I believe that our community's funds of knowledge are rich and with the fact that I shouldn't have choices that others don't have, but I do. But, I also have to make sense of it because I didn't want him to be disempowered in school settings and I wanted him to have exposure to his Chinese heritage."

For many White TEPs, their greatest struggle came from recognizing their own privilege and theoretically wanting to make a choice that abdicated that privilege, yet facing a different reality as parents. One participant from Kentucky compared this choice to "put[ting] my oxygen mask on first," because feeling like her children were in magnet schools meant she could rest easier at home and then fight for justice for other people's children more forcefully. They struggled with knowing that "I want all students to have the same opportunities for a strong education," yet making a personal choice for their children to experience "benefits that all kids deserve but do not have access to." They described the range of their feelings about the difficulty of this choice: "Half the time I feel hypocritical. The other half the time I am thankful I can send my kids to a progressive school in the state of [Mississippi]." A respondent from Texas summarized well the feelings we saw reflected in the statements from many other White TEPs around the country: "I say, work, think, feel one thing about diversity, equity, and inclusion and then I think, say all bets are off when it comes to my own child. I don't 100% make sense of it. I continue to problematize it and question it and try to learn from it and be better. I know my white privilege is my responsibility to unmask and recognize and fix."

The decision to send their child to a charter or a private school was fraught with emotion for most TEPs because, as a White TEP from rural Pennsylvania wrote, "I have dedicated my career to advocating for public schools and training teachers for public schools and now I send my child to a private school using taxpayer money." In some cases, they made the decision because they felt it was best for their child, yet also felt "ashamed to not be part of making the public system better for all kids." In other cases, they choose a charter for a dual language program, for more diversity, or for a social justice focused curriculum. For example:

> I feel good about where my daughter goes to school each day, she WANTS to go to school, and I can go about my work related to urban teacher preparation. However, then I teach courses where we talk about charter schools in our local school district... and problematize the idea of charters/school choice. I also attend guest lectures and listen to very powerful, smart people talk about the veil of urban

> education reform... and state very passionately that there are no "grey areas" when it comes to charters. I think I had been trying to convince myself that our charter school was different (White TEP, Georgia).

For parents of color, this decision sometimes felt necessary in order to ensure a quality education for their child:

> I have spent my life dedicated to public education, as a right and a reality. I still feel like I betrayed my own beliefs by switching my children to a private school. However, I decided that the privilege I received as a white-looking Black woman, had decidedly impacted my educational trajectory in public schools. I wasn't willing to refuse my Black children an opportunity to have a robust education, especially when the state of our public schools is declining rapidly (Black TEP, Illinois).

"It is hard to justify:" Avoidance. TEPs experiencing cognitive dissonance dealt with it in a range of ways. Some of TEPs avoided thinking about it, either passively or actively. They had to come to terms with not having answers. For example: "Yes, I'm taking advantage of the system that keeps others back. I don't make sense of it." These parents felt there was not much to be done with the misalignment, so they accepted it and did not seem to struggle, seeming to accept the "inevitable" that "this is something we have to deal with" and "life is complicated; choices are limited at times."

"A reflection of the cultural reproduction of schools:" Rationalization. Other TEPs who felt there was a misalignment rationalized their experience through understanding themselves as an individual within a complicated system. They stated that this helped them put their individual choices and feelings into perspective. Many said they were not surprised there was a misalignment because "I know the system needs work," even if the "flawed and messy" system "is working for me and my family right now." As described by respondents from Arizona to Indiana, Ohio to New Hampshire, the way communities and schools were organized reflected "a white supremacist, patriarchal, imperialist, and capitalist, and, and, and society and add to that the post-truth era of Trump." This state of schools was "consistent with the fact that the overwhelming proportion of teachers are white and have not had to reflect on issues of social justice in their training." Change was difficult, they acknowledged, because "even the most 'woke,' best-intentioned teachers and administrators will have trouble making systemic change at the school-level because of the status quo within district-level, state-level, and federal-level leadership." Within that structure, schools "are not--and could not--be leftist, socialist, atheist, feminists the way that our family is. It would not be possible." Yet, for many, acknowledging the broken system did not mean making a "broken choice" for their own children. From two White TEPs: "I am not willing to sacrifice my child's education while the world gets better" and "I'm part of a broken system, and neither I nor my spouse are willing to experiment on sending our children to a low-income city public school if we don't have to." One TEP of color from Illinois reflected on sending her three children to a private school: "I want to believe that public education is a right of all students and that it serves all students equitably, but it isn't and it doesn't. Allowing my kids to experience a school community that does not criminalize them, belittle them, or squelch their curiosity, I believe, is the most justice I can distribute to them with my limited power."

Compensating: "More determined in my work." When TEPs experienced "excruciating" misalignment, some compensated for this by using it to inform their own practices and pedagogy. For example, a White TEP from Iowa wrote that the misalignment "makes me even

more determined in my work as a teacher educator... I need my students to do what my daughter's teachers can't/won't." Others explained that even though they acknowledge the contradiction of "selfishly want[ing] what's best for my kids, they "continue to work so that all kids can have what's best and the schools all kids deserve." Several offered concrete examples of their changed practices, such as a TEP from Pennsylvania: "As a public school parent living in an urban environment with my education students (most of whom grew up in suburban, white, affluent or middle class communities), I have spearheaded our college's partnership with the district so that our students can have field experiences in these settings." Additionally, a White TEP from Georgia, who served on the board of her daughter's predominantly White charter school yet who writes in her own scholarship against the charter schools, explained: "Many people -- mostly privileged white people or people who have had financial security -- have not had to think about these issues and certainly have no idea how to talk about issues of justice, injustice, race, racism, whiteness in schools, etc. We need to work hard to make space for those conversations. I just wrote a grant for the school and included LOTS of money for sustained PD on this that would include teachers and community members."

For those TEPs who experienced misalignment, they often offered additional and supplemental conversations and experiences related to social justice outside of school. This was especially true for TEPs who considered themselves ideological outsiders in their communities. As one White TEP from rural Maine wrote, "I deal with the misalignment by brooding over it and looking for ways to provide my child with perspectives that align with mine, through books, other media, and conversations. A Minnesotan wrote, "It means that I have to be extra vigilant about explicit and implicit messages my children receive at school. It's more difficult to navigate the tensions between my role as a parent, as a citizen and as a professional."

For TEPs of color, supplementing the school's misalignment meant highlighting their family, community, and cultural histories. For example, if their schools were not racially and ethnically diverse, a New Jersey parent wrote that she "want[s] my children to have experienced having a Black teacher and other teachers of color. This won't happen here. Therefore I create other spaces for them to engage in where they get to see Black folks doing amazing things, teaching, as their doctor, organizing, creating, engineering, making decisions." A Black mother from Indiana explained that a misalignment between school values and home values "has been the history of my people. I use the same tools and talking points my parents and my husband's parent used to talk to the children of my generation. Not much has changed in that conversation."

For White TEPs, supplementation often included discussions of injustice. "It means I need to do more work at home and consider the experiences my children have outside school," explained a participant from Arkansas. Many respondents talked about directly addressing issues of privilege with their children and trying to help their children realize what that privilege meant for them, as this mother explained: "I have made [our home discussions] mostly about his privilege as a white male and emphasize that yes, we are lucky that we don't have to worry about not being trusted by the police or other people, but with that good fortune comes much responsibility."

"There is work to be done!" Resistance and Activism. Some TEPs who struggled through misalignment resisted the system in various ways and engaged in activism. The misalignment meant that "my job as their mother and a teacher educator is that much more important" (Texas) and part of that job was resistance to the norms that perpetuate schools today. For White TEPs, this resistance looked like activism outside of school contexts, such as a TEP

from Washington who wrote of committing to "work [that] must be on all levels of society--helping provide affordable housing, changing the policies around gifted education, and drawing district lines to encourage more integration." Schools were part of a structural problem, they wrote, and as a White parent of Black children wrote, "a social justice worker is in all spheres -- so where there is work to do, you just do it."

For TEPs of color, resistance looked different. Some respondents wrote about needing to leave certain schooling contexts that were working for their children, but not all children of color. As one Black mother in Georgia wrote, "The misalignment means we cannot stay. I can barely stand to face the administrators who I know literally pushed a family of color out." For others, existing is resistance. One participant, who identified as a "Syrian immigrant, woman of color, Arab" living in an urban area of Ohio wrote:

> You just learn to cope. In a white supremacist society the only way to exist is to be aware of what's happening and to exist in schools and academy. Existing is in and of itself a mode of resistance for people like me and my children. The academy ensures that people like me do not survive in it or have a future. Terrible advising, racism, sexism, linguistic supremacy, and no tolerance to immigrant perspectives. I am not surprised that the education field is submerged by whiteness.

Some TEPs became actively involved in existing efforts--or creating new ones--that they felt represented values that were missing in their schools. Their efforts often built upon their professional knowledge and focused on issues of social justice. For example, a White TEP from Michigan stated that, "we try hard to use our power and privilege to work for better educational equity for all children and families. This has led to my efforts to write and promote legislation in the state senate and house to establish an elementary music requirement in Michigan's schools. I also negotiated last year with the superintendent of schools to restore 4 elementary music teaching positions that were eliminated from the budget 3 years previously." Another TEP from Minnesota notes that, while advocacy "happens in small conversations, but not yet in action," they are committed to "finding radical friends and informant teachers across the district is the long game for strategizing and holding the district accountable."

Other advocacy efforts happened at the school level, as TEPs attempted to move schools closer to alignment with their justice-oriented beliefs, such as through conversations with teachers and administrators: "I have had several discussions with school staff about justice-related issues. I see my role as calling out misalignment and educating as to why this is important to rectify. I am working with my son so that he is able to call this out as well." Some of these efforts focused on professional development for educators. For example, a White TEP from Virginia said, "I have a lot of hope for the future of the school AND I feel I am in a position to help nudge the school in the right direction pedagogically, as a member of the Board and as a potential PD provider." Referencing different levels of awareness, one TEP described "working hard to find ways to fund race-based professional development initiatives at the school. I think everyone at the school is in Discourse 1 (so talking about how we value equity, but not really knowing what that is, and certainly not thinking deeply about racism that operates in schools). I want to move to Discourse II where the school faculty and students are having hard conversations about justice and difference."

Finally, some TEPs focused their efforts on advocating for change as part of a collective. They talked about finding "allies" and "other activist parents" in the school because of the power

of collective agency to make more change. For example, a White TEP in California wrote: "Because of my work, I am much more aware of injustice and justice-related work and movements. Because I am to the left of many spaces I am in, it isn't surprising to me to see this misalignment. However, I'm allying myself with others to bring about change." In New York, a mother explains: "I've worked this year with a group of moms from my son's school to create a social justice committee. We just kicked off programming around a 6-week race/power/privilege parent study group. The misalignment for me has prompted me to join forces with other like-minded parents to create ways to open up safe spaces to discuss these issues in the hope of opening hearts AND minds. In the end, we want our kids to be part of a school where there is alignment. But it's gonna take a lot of work."

Discussion

"Even when parents want to teach their kids to recognize and fight against injustice, how much commitment is enough, especially when this commitment implicates their own children's futures or includes elements perceived to be beyond their control?" (Hagerman, 2018, p. 60).

Overall, findings from this study revealed the ongoing cognitive dissonance experienced by many teacher educator parents, who teach and write about social justice but sometimes make choices for their own child/ren that do not align with those ideals. Most often, TEPs *tried* to make choices that aligned with their commitments, but they were frequently unsuccessful. We find this struggle results, in part, due to the abundance of choice in the changing landscape of schooling (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). The tensions our participants expressed provide a more nuanced look at the emotional elements of "school choice" which increasingly extends past charters and vouchers to choices within public schools (DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski, & Scott, 2007). These findings illuminate the ways parents struggle to navigate a neoliberal educational system through conflicted and emotional choices, which are rarely clean and clear.

While there was some divergence in choices and rationales, all of the participants viewed racial and socioeconomic diversity as an asset. This seemed clear-cut in participants' minds, even as they wrestled with specific moves. White parents wanted their children to be in a school that was not all White; and parents of children of color wanted their children to be in a school where their child was not the only child of color. Yet finding diverse environments was challenging for many TEPs, which illustrates the segregated nature of schools and communities (Crowder & Krysan, 2016).

Responses illustrated the truly difficult experiences of TEPs with a child of color, adding to the limited literature (Cooper 2005, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004) from the somewhat unique lens of TEPs. By nature of academia, many TEPs have to move to predominantly White areas in order to find an academic job and may be surrounded by the overwhelming presence of Whiteness (Sleeter, 2017) not only in their universities but also in the connected community. Parents of children of color experienced tension in trying to protect their own children from oppression while teaching about public education. Parents in this study appeared to have more economic resources and social capital than the participants in much of the existing research on parents of color and school choice (Cooper, 2003, 2005; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Pedroni, 2007). They often had access to the schools their children needed, but faced a conundrum of their economic privilege because they knew they were able to do things that others in their racial group weren't able to do and it often meant that their kids were surrounded by White people and not people of color.

Parents in our study relied on many of the same criteria as the general population to make sense of school choices, such as information from social networks (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Schneider, Teske, Toche, Marschall, 2000), visits to schools, talking to teachers, and the child's opinion (Smrekar and Goldring, 1999). Yet it felt impossible to separate the personal and professional for most TEPs. Their depth of understanding of the educational system and teaching and learning meant that personal school choices had profound professional implications. Responses to the survey questions were fraught with emotion and the "conundrum of privilege" (Hagerman, 2018), especially as TEPs described the misalignment between their beliefs and their children's schooling experiences. Many White parents acknowledged that they made an individual choice that was ultimately not in the collective good, yet no participant said they were entirely comfortable with this decision. They did not appear ignorant or ambivalent about the impacts of their decisions; rather, they clearly knew what their choices meant and made that choice while living in conflict. In the end, we are glad that people are conflicted in this way, because this conflict may compel people to fight in other ways. Especially for White parents, there is a need to move beyond the existential wrestling and adopt practices or strategies to move toward systemic change in solidarity with parents of color (Cucchiara, 2013; Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009; Posey-Maddox, 2013). As participants demonstrated, this may look like participating in school councils on equity and changing their own practice as teacher educators. This has implications beyond research for the ways teacher educators engage with students and others. It is important that this struggle is not just internal. TEPs must connect with others to make sense of these decisions and take action in our school settings to try to live our ideals.

Conclusion

We initially approached this research with the same question as many participants: In the absence of massive institutional change and systemic revolution, how can parents do the least harm and the most good? Yet ultimately that question is too narrow. The notion that our agency lies in individual choices is a neoliberal conception that "places the responsibility for combating systems on individuals" (Cooper, 2018, p. 122). We cannot negate the consequences of individual decisions and we must be reflective about the ways our choices perpetuate inequality, and we must also acknowledge that the choices we are presented with are unequal by design and we cannot repair a broken system simply through our individual choices. We must push and challenge larger systems with the same emotional commitment and persistence we bring to school decisions for our own children. The fact that 80% of TEPs with professional and personal commitments to social justice experience misalignment between their ideals and their school choices for their own children underscores that we cannot create equitable schools solely through individual actions — if that was possible, many TEPs would make those choices.

The TEPs in this study illustrate how neoliberalism functions to narrow our frame of reference and our ways of thinking (Harvey, 2005). Collective progress toward equity is incredibly difficult when individual parents are deemed as responsible for ensuring a quality education for their child/ren through choice, effectively shifting the responsibility away from the government to provide high quality, equitable schools for all students (Apple, 2006; Ravitch 2010). Analyzing neoliberalism in action, through parents' understandings of schools, can illuminate the challenges that limit our progress. The findings from this study require us to question the very structures and "rules of the game" in an educational system that is set up to create winners and losers and center our individual needs (Kumashiro, 2015, p. 4-5). TEPs navigate schools in ways that often serve to perpetuate inequities and cause significant angst and pain for many parents, even those considered

as “winners” in the system. TEPs feel stuck within an oppressive and unequal system lacking “right choices.”

While this is not an absolution of responsibility for consequences of our personal choices, we must also ask as a guiding question: How do parents collectively create massive institutional change and systemic revolution? What does it look like for parents and educators to come together to dismantle racist, neoliberal systems? This work offers a call for parents to be engaged in working toward building a new system, or “freedom dreaming,” defined by Love (2019) as a “a collective space to tear down the educational survival complex and collectively rebuild a school system that truly loves all children and sees schools as children’s homeplaces” (p. 102).What would it look like move beyond our individualized notions of responsibility for quality education for *our* children in order to embrace a truly collective vision for schooling for *all* children?

Note

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