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A 'Bad Fit' for 'Our' Kids: Politics, Identity, Race and Power in Parental Discourse on Educational Programming & Child Well-being

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Abstract

Issues of race and class have long been at the center of discourses involving the American public education system. Although contemporary discourse regarding issues of race and power in American schools may be less overt in racist ideology than in previous decades, the impact of coded racist discourse can be equally powerful and dangerous. A need exists to identify racist and classist discourse in educational contexts so that the ideologies and practices these discourses reflect can be challenged. This paper uses critical discourse analysis and Critical Race Theory to examine how the discourses of race, class, and power are enacted within a discussion of educational programming and child well-being in a predominantly White, upper-middle class suburban public school.

Key Words: critical discourse analysis; Critical Race Theory; whiteness as property; parental discourses on education

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Introduction

The American public education system has been a primary context, both historically and contemporarily, in which issues of race, class, power, and privilege have been debated and enacted (Kohli, Pizzaro, & Nevarez, 2017). Primary actors in these discourses throughout the history of the U.S. public education system have been parents (Woyshner & Cucciarha, 2017). As consumers (through their children) and funders (through their taxes and private donations) of public education, parents, particularly White middle and upper-middle class parents, have wielded significant influence on the discourse, policies, and practices of K-12 public education (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Woyshner & Cucciarha, 2017). Prior to and during the Civil Rights movement, racial and racist discourses from parents around schooling tended to be explicit in tone and intent, as is evident in some of the more famous, publicly documented school desegregation fights, such as the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957, the enrollment of Ruby Bridges in a New Orleans elementary school in 1960, and the court-ordered desegregation of Boston's public schools in the mid-1970s. Since the Civil Rights era of the last century, the language White parents use to enact race and class discourses in the context of education has become more subtle, or coded, often masquerading within a discourse purporting to be addressing another topic entirely (Kohli et al., 2017; Lewis, 2001). This covert "new racism" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) has allowed for the normalizing and acceptance of racist and inequitable educational policies and practices, supported by White parents, while permitting deniability of their racist intent.

Although the presidential campaign and eventual of election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 has led to a dramatic increase in overtly racist discourse and actions in many areas of American public life (e.g. the Trump administration's "Muslim ban," references to Mexican immigrants as

"rapists," and "bad hombres," the white supremacist march on Charlottesville, VA, etc.),

discourse regarding race in *public k-12 education* has not followed suit (Kohli et al., 2017).

Even in the era of Trump, it remains socially unacceptable for White parents in most areas of the

country to make statements such as "I don't want my children to go to school with Black

children." However, beyond being socially unacceptable, these types of overt racist statements

are no longer necessary to reinforce and produce racial inequality in schools. For example, since

the mid-1980s, as explicit public support of racial segregation in schools has decreased, the

actual practice of racial segregation in schools has increased (Hannah-Jones, 2014; Orfield,

Frankenberg, Ee, & Kuscera, 2014).Under the "new racism" of public education, White parents

can advocate for more "school choice," and test-based selective public schools, both of which

increase school segregation and racial inequality of educational outcomes (Kohli et al., 2017),

while maintaining an air of deniability over the racists intent of their discourse and actions.

A strong example of how "new racism" discourse is currently expressed by White middle

and upper-middle class parents in the K-12 public education context can be found in a 2015

piece on school integration for the radio program *This American Life*. In this piece, journalist

Nikole Hannah-Jones reported on a school board meeting in a predominantly White, middle- and

upper middle-class St. Louis suburb in 2013, in which the impending busing of African

American students from lower income areas in a neighboring community to their public schools

was greeted with virulent opposition from White parents (Glass, 2015). In their public

comments, the White parents insisted their objections were not racially motivated but involved

concerns about school safety and academic standards (Glass, 2015). However, the parental

concerns about safety and academics were solely connected to the arrival of lower income

African American students. White parents asked if the arrival of the students from the

neighboring district would be accompanied by the installation of metal detectors and drug-sniffing dogs; they expressed horror at the prospect of their district "inheriting" the lower standardized test scores of the incoming students; and they questioned school leaders on their ability to keep their young children from getting stabbed or robbed (Glass, 2015).

The parents in this example used discourse that clearly signaled to all attendees at the meeting the deficit construction of urban low-income African American students and families that is commonly held by Whites from the middle and upper classes (Picower, 2009). In this view, the lives of low-income African American students are characterized by violence, drug use, and low academic ability and achievement (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Milner, 2012; Picower, 2009). However, not once in the radio piece did the audience hear a parent *explicitly* refer to race or class (i.e. using words like "Black students," "White students," or "low-income families"). At one point a speaker sounds as if she is about to use a word that would explicitly name the racial or socio-economic identity of the incoming students and their communities, but she catches herself, pauses, and says, "I'm going to be kind," and then substitutes "the different communities . . . bringing with them everything we're here today fighting against" (Glass, 2015). These discursive choices do not seem to be accidental. It would be easier for parents to say, "We don't want the poor Black kids from across the bridge coming to our town." Instead they use coded discourse which conveys the same meaning but gives them the social cover to avoid charges of racism, increasing the likelihood that their demands will be heard and met.

This example illustrates the assertions of Bonilla-Silva (2014) and other race scholars (e.g. Dvorak, 2000; Kohli et al., 2017; Pollack, 2012) of the potential for the coded racist discourse in today's public K-12 education context to be equally as or more powerful and dangerous than the overt in racist ideology than in previous decades, the impact of coded racist

discourse can be equally as powerful and dangerous (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Dvorak, 2000; Kohli et al., 2017 Pollack, 2012). It can be more difficult to dismantle racist practices when the enactors and supporters of these practices can deny their inherent racism. Thus, there is a need to use better tools to identify racist and classist discourse in educational contexts so that the ideologies and practices these discourses reflect can be challenged and ultimately changed. One important tool that can be especially useful in this work is critical discourse analysis (Gee. 2014). Critical discourse analysis allows for the examination of how people use language to achieve social goals (Rogers, 2004), with particular attention to how power, privileges, and identities are reflected and reproduced through discourse. Critical discourse analysis can allow us to draw attention to how purportedly race-neutral or "color-blind" discourses produce and reinforce the race and class inequalities.

Despite the significant power that White, middle- and upper-middle class parents have in shaping school policies and practices, limited research exists that specifically analyzes *parental discourse,* particularly from White parents with high socio-economic status, regarding issues of race and class in the U.S. K-12 public education context (see Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005). When attempting to address racial and economic injustice in schools, it is critical to move the focus beyond the inside of the school (i.e. faculty, administrators, and students) and to look to powerful groups, such as parents, who exist outside the formal school structure but who play significant roles in shaping school practices and outcomes.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how race and class discourses are enacted within the context of a parent-authored petition regarding the restructuring of an elementary school

recess program in one suburban community in the Upper Midwest. The analysis attempts to answer the following question:

> How are the discourses of race, class, power, and privilege enacted within a discussion of educational programming and child well-being in a predominantly White, upper-middle class suburban public school district?

Materials & Methods

Context

In this article, I use critical discourse analysis, particularly Gee's (2014) analytic framework, and elements of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2004) to examine the public discourse produced by a group of parents of students at River Hills[1], suburban elementary school in the Upper Midwest in response to the implementation of a recess program designed by the national non-profit, Playworks. Before explaining the specifics of the data and methods, it is important to provide information about the setting and context of the analysis.

River Hills Elementary school is located in Lakeside[2], an inner-ring suburb of a major metropolitan area in the Upper Midwest. According to the most recent demographic data available, in the 2014-2015 school year, River Hills enrolled 736 students in grades K-5, 85% were identified as White, 8% as Asian, 4% as African American, 3% as Latino, and less than 1% as American Indian (Minnesota Department of Education, 2015). Approximately 6% of students qualified for free or reduced price lunches, 7% met criteria for limited English proficiency, and 10% received special education services (Minnesota Department of Education, 2015).

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[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to refer to the school and the community in which it is located.
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Playworks is a national non-profit based in Oakland, CA with local offices in 21 states and the District of Columbia. According to their website, Playworks' mission is to change "school culture by leveraging the power of safe, fun, and health play at school every day," with the goal of creating "a place for every kid on the playground to feel included, be active, and build valuable social and emotional skills" (Playworks, 2015a). Playworks' primary program is the Playworks Coach model. In this model, the organization provides an elementary school with a full-time "recess coach" who organizes recess by introducing and facilitating a variety of structured games designed to be inclusive and accessible to all children, while also teaching and modeling conflict resolution skills (Playworks, 2015b). In addition, recess coaches lead "class game time" activities weekly in each classroom, to introduce new games and practice problem solving in a smaller setting, organize after-school interscholastic sports leagues, and run a 'junior coach,' peer leadership program for older students (Playworks, 2015c). The Playworks Coach model is targeted at elementary schools in which 50% or more of the student population qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch (Former Playworks staff, personal communication, November 18, 2015). Playworks also offers a training program, called Playworks Pro, in which schools, regardless of the income level of their students' families, can hire Playworks to train their own recess staff in the Playworks recess model (Playworks, 2015b).

In the late spring/early summer of 2015, Lakeside district leaders and administrative staff decided to hire Playworks to implement the Playworks Pro program at two elementary schools, Kennedy and River Hills, and in their after-school district-wide childcare program. Staff were trained over the summer and the recess staff began to implement the Playworks model at recess on the first day of school, August 31, 2015. A number of students, particularly those in the upper grades (4th and 5th), had initial negative reactions to the Playworks model during the first week of

school, as it instituted new rules on what areas of the playground were available for play and

what types of activities the students could engage in at recess (River Hills Teacher A, personal

communication, October 24, 2015; River Hills Teacher B, personal communication, November

19, 2015). Students communicated their complaints about recess to their parents and by the third

day of school, some parents were contacting the River Hills principal[3] and district leaders to

express their strong concern about the program (River Hills teacher A, personal communication,

October 24, 2015). By Labor Day weekend, after five days of school with the Playworks model,

a group of parents opposed to Playworks at River Hills created an on-line petition demanding the

removal of the Playworks model from River Hills. The petition, titled *Don't Turn Recess Into A*

Multiple Choice Question received 177 signatures and is the primary focus of this analysis. In

addition to the petition, parents opposed to Playworks reached out to the press, with the first

news piece questioning the appropriateness of the Playworks model at River Hills appearing on a

local NBC affiliate on September 11, 2015, followed by articles published in one of the area's

major newspapers in October 2015, as well as a follow-up story on the local ABC affiliate on

October 5, 2015. Parents also wrote blog posts and testified at the September Lakeside Schools

School Board meeting, requesting the removal of Playworks from River Hills. In response to the

parent protest, Lakeside Public Schools district administration focused on the positive

contribution they believe Playworks would make to the experience of recess for all students and

stated that the first year's implementation is a pilot program and the district would collect

feedback from students, teachers, and parents about Playworks at the end of the 2015-2016

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[3] The River Hills principal was new to his position as of July 2015. He was also the first African American principal in the Lakeside Public Schools. Although he was not involved in the decision to bring Playworks to River Hills, some parents initially believed he had brought the program to the school (River Hills teacher A, personal communication, October 24, 2015).

school year and then make a decision about whether to continue, expand, or terminate their

relationship with Playworks (Kohls, 2015; Raghavendran, 2015).

The focus of this analysis is the on-line parent-authored petition, titled *Don't Turn Recess*

Into a Multiple Choice Question, which was posted on Labor Day Weekend 2015 and signed by

177 individuals (See Appendix A). For the remainder of this paper, I refer to this text as either

the Recess Petition or the petition.

Disclosure of personal relationship to Playworks and River Hills Elementary

I first became aware of the controversy surrounding the implementation of the Playworks

model at River Hills Elementary school when I read about it in a newspaper article

(Raghavendran, 2015). I was particularly interested in this debate as I was the school social

worker at River Hills from August 2007 – June 2014 and my husband was the City Executive

Director of the local Playworks office from August 2010 – October 2014. Thus, I had a personal

connection to both organizations. Neither my husband nor I were employed by either the

Lakeside Public Schools or Playworks at the time when the decision was made to implement

Playworks Pro at River Hills, nor were either of us involved in any discussions during our times

in our respective positions about the possibility of bringing Playworks to River Hills. However,

my previous experiences with River Hills and Playworks obviously play a role in shaping my

understanding of and interpretation of the discourse involved in this debate. The focus of this

analysis is not on whether or not the decision to bring Playworks to River Hills was the right

decision, but rather involves a critical analysis of the discourse used by parents who opposed this

decision. Although my perspective has been informed by personal experiences with race, class,

power, and privilege in my previous work experiences at River Hills, my analysis is rooted

firmly in theoretical frameworks of critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) and Critical Race

Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and the public texts available regarding this debate.

Methodology and theoretical orientation: critical discourse analysis and Critical Race Theory

As previously mentioned, this analysis is guided primarily by Gee's (2014) framework

for critical discourse analysis and concepts derived from Critical Race Theory (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2012), specifically 'whiteness as property' (Harris, 1993) and white supremacy as an

active process of domination (Leonardo, 2004). Gee (2014) describes critical discourse analysis

as involving both method and theory. Discourse analysis, from a theoretical perspective, "is

about seeing interactive communication through the lens of socially meaningful identities" (p.

25). According to Gee (2011), we don't just say things, we do things by saying things and it is

through this doing that we are constantly building and rebuilding our world and our own

identities. Critical discourse analysis believe that all discourse is political (see Fairclough, 1992;

Gee, 2011; 2014; van Dijk, 1993; 1995; 2001) and thus Gee (2014) argues that all discourse

analysis should be critical, in that it should examine the "institutional, social, or political issues,

problems, and controversies in the world" (p. 9) that are enacted through language and text.

Critical Race Theory asserts the centrality of race and racism to all analyses (Love,

2004). Basic tenets of Critical Race Theory include the ordinariness of racism in American

society and the everyday experiences of people of color, the social construction of race, and the

interest convergence of American racism, in which the ascendency of whiteness benefits the

material interests of white elites and the psychic interests of working-class whites, resulting in a

large portion of society having no incentive to eradicate it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical

Race Theory (CRT) also acknowledges that other forms of oppression, specifically class and

gender, often intersect with race and contribute to the discrimination against and oppression of people of color (Howard, 2008).

Two concepts that are based in CRT that are used to guide this analysis include Harris' (1993) idea of 'whiteness as property' and Leonardo's (2004) conceptualization of the active processes inherent in white supremacy. 'Whiteness as property' describes how the relationship between race and property can be used to understand inequality and oppression (Kolivoski, Weaver, & Constance-Huggins, 2014). Under early American law, the provision of property rights solely to White men formally solidified the ideology of the supremacy of Whites to other races, who were thus deemed "fundamentally antithetical to ownership" (Vaught, 2012, p. 53). The institution of slavery further cemented Whites' power of ownership (in this case the literal ownership of Black bodies), making Whiteness 'the right to own property and to never be owned . . . in other words, Whites owned the right to humanity' (Vaught, 2012, p. 53). Harris (1993) explains that racialized slavery afforded 'whiteness actual legal status,' (p. 1725), which transformed race from 'a privileged identity to a vested interest' (p. 1725). This ideology produced additional rights that were only available to Whites, such as voting, representation, and citizenship (Vaught, 2012). In contemporary contexts, 'whiteness as property' is exercised through the claim of Whites 'to craft and instantiate meaning, to accrue benefit, and to expect exclusivity and legal protection' (Vaught, 2012, p. 53).

'White supremacy' refers to the political, social, and economic system in which Whites control the vast majority of power and material resources, ideas of white superiority and entitlement, both conscious and unconscious, are pervasive, and "relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings" (Ansley, 1997, p. 592). Leonardo (2004) has argued that analyses guided by CRT need

to go beyond examining *White privilege*, which he asserts is conceptualized as a passive state of being for Whites, to identifying *White supremacy*, the active process of domination carried out by Whites, regardless of what they profess to believe or desire (hooks, 1989).

To understand the context of the on-line petition, I read or watched public material available regarding this decision, including articles in one of the metro area's primary newspapers, a blog post written by a River Hills parent opposed to Playworks, news segments on local ABC and NBC affiliates, and the testimony of two River Hills parents at a Lakeside Public Schools board meeting in September 2015. In addition, I spoke with three former coworkers of mine who continue to work at River Hills to gain their perspective on the specific events that led to the petition.

To conduct the analysis, I read the Recess Petition multiple times through and then began to note words or phrases that reflected any of Gee's (2014) seven building tasks (significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems). I also applied Gee's (2014) "tools of inquiry and discourse," including situated meanings, figured worlds, and conversations, to further explore what the building tasks were accomplishing in the petition. During my analysis, to check my interpretations, I conferred with six colleagues who are familiar with Gee's (2014) model of critical discourse analysis, one of whom is also well-versed with Critical Race Theory, but none of whom had previous knowledge of or experience with the specific context of the petition. I also shared my interpretations with three former colleagues from River Hills, as a way of checking if my analysis of the recess petition was consistent with themes they were experiencing in the actual context. All reviewers concurred with my interpretations, application of theory and methodology, and analysis.

Results

Building tasks of discourse

Identities

Gee (2014) asserts that a central task of discourse is the creation and projection of identity. By design, all petitions explicitly enact identities by declaring that those who are signing the petition are defining themselves as part of a group with a shared value or opinion. Common petition language includes a statement such as, "We, the undersigned," thereby literally creating a collective "we" among the signees. However, throughout the Recess Petition, the task of identity creation and projection plays a particularly prominent role. The subject and object nouns representing a collective identity, "*we*," and "*us,*" are used seven times within the short petition. The adjective "*our*" is used five times, and the adjective "*together*" is used once.

In the first paragraph of the petition, the authors establish who they and their children are by first describing who Playworks is meant for and then illustrating that they are not part of that group. In defining the "other," the authors write: "*Playworks is used by urban schools with limited green space, limited facilities, limited equipment, grave safety issues, and high poverty rates . . .*" The use of the word "*urban*" serves to highlight the geographical distance between the authors and their identified group and the group for which Playworks is meant, as River Hills is located in a suburban community. However, the use of "urban" also reflects an additional, situated meaning (Gee, 2014). In addition to evoking a specific geographic area, "urban" is a word that is frequently used to refer to a community that is poor and predominantly Black and Latino (Milner, 2012; Watson, 2011), replacing the now unpopular term "inner-city," while still retaining the same coded meaning. Milner (2012) recounts an example of school professionals describing a middle school that was populated almost exclusively by low-income students, the majority of whom were African American and Latino, who had high rates of truancy and lower

scores on standardized tests, as a "struggling urban school," (p. 556), despite the fact that the school was located in a *rural* area, "out in the midst of trees, unoccupied space, and farmland" (p. 556). "Urban" is frequently a coded word that not only evokes associations with low-income African American or Latino students, but with a host of negative characteristics that are associated with these students (Milner, 2012; Watson, 2011), what Picower (2009) refers to as "the deficit construction of urban schools, students, and families" (p. 202). Students in "urban" schools are often assumed to be unprepared for school, to come from families that do not place a high value on education, to lack motivation for learning, and to demonstrate poor educational outcomes (Milner, 2012; Picower, 2009; Watson, 2011). This interpretation of "urban" in the Recess Petition is supported by the words that come after it, "*limited green space, limited facilities, limited equipment, grave safety issues, and high poverty rates.*" In this passage the authors of the petition are constructing what Gee (2014) refers to as a "figured world" – the "simplified, often unconscious and taken-for-granted theories or stories about how the world works" (p. 95) that allow people to "picture or construe aspects of the world in their heads" (p. 95). The authors of the Recess Petition are evoking the figured world of the inner city – an area that is low on resources and high on crime, and one in which the racial make-up, though not explicit, is assumed to be non-white.

In the next section of the petition, the authors identify themselves in contrast to this low-resource, inner-city context: *"We have recess. We have green space. We have equipment. Playworks is the WRONG program for us."* [underlining and caps in original document]. The repeated use of "*we,*" the use of underlining, and the application of all caps in the phrase "*WRONG program for us*" reinforce the significance the authors place on conveying to the readers of the petition a distinct identity that stands in direct contrast to the identity of the inner

city. In using this strategy, the authors are appealing to the readers' recognition (Gee, 2014) of

this identity as a way of convincing them to align with the petition's goals.   In addition, this use

of contrasting identities serves to reinforce the primary claim in the last line of the petition: *"We,*

the undersigned believe the new pilot recess curriculum Playworks is a bad fit for River Hills

Elementary School." In this context, "*bad fit*," refers to the assertion that Playworks is for a

certain group of people, and "*we"* (the signers of this petition) are not a part of that group. In

addition, through these two sentences, the authors are again engaging in Gee's (2014)

"connections" building task of discourse. By explicitly connecting Playworks with the inner-city,

racial minority, low-resource identity, the authors reinforce the disconnect (or "bad fit") between

Playworks and their suburban, white, high-resource identity.

Politics

Critical discourse analysts argue that all discourse is inherently political (Fairclough,

1992; Gee, 2014; van Dijk, 1993; 1995) as it enacts social practices that "involve social goods

and the distribution of social goods" (Gee, 2014, p. 10). Through discourse, specific beliefs

about the "normal," or "good" distribution of social goods (or conversely, the "abnormal," or

"bad" distribution) are conveyed (Gee, 2014). Additionally, discourse is political in that it

produces, reproduces, and organizes existing power relations (Briscoe, 2006). van Dijk (2001)

notes that "members of more powerful social groups and institutions . . .have more or less

exclusive access to . . . public discourse" (p. 356), resulting in these groups becoming "the

producers of the dominant discourse, supporting particular power relations and their related

knowledge paradigms, while delegitimizing others" (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015, p. 740).

In the Recess Petition, an example of public discourse, a group of parents representing

the group with power in the school and community (i.e. white, upper-middle class, educated)

discuss the distribution of the social good of children's educational and social development, as it is enacted through the structure and process of elementary school recess. The authors of the petition state their belief that "*[recess] is a time to test skills they [children] already have and are still developing – how to play, how to deal with conflict, how to be inclusive – in a safe environment with adults offering intervention when necessary.*" In this statement, the authors enact a figured world (Gee, 2014) regarding elementary school recess. The assumptions of this figured world of recess include a "*safe environment,*" children with relatively competent social skills ("*time to test skills they already have and are still developing*"), and adults who are present but intervene only during some implicitly agreed upon time ("*when necessary*"). The authors of the petition then contrast this figured world of recess, which represents that which is "normal," and "good," with a description of the perceived qualities of recess under the Playworks model, in which, *"supervisors are trained to instruct, make rules, intervene early, make teams, teach the kids games many already know, and create a controlled, very intentional environment."* This description, with its heavy use of action words attributed to recess supervisors, evokes a figured world in which adults direct and control children's actions and behavior.

By contrasting these two figured worlds of recess, the authors of the Recess Petition are referencing what Gee (2014) refers to as a "Big 'C' Conversation." According to Gee (2014), Conversations are public debates, arguments, and issues 'that swirl around us in the media, in our reading, and in our interactions with other people' (p. 72). In the Recess Petition, the authors are evoking a Conversation that is prevalent in modern dominant-culture American parenting literature and popular media regarding the balance between adult direction and control and child independence and agency (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Gray, 2015a; Gray, 2015b; Jacobs, 2014, de Lench, 2014; Purcell, 2012), as well as the Conversation about the differences in parenting

practices and schooling preferences between middle/upper-middle class and working class families (Matthews, 2012; Petrilli, 2012). In addition, the petition authors evoke the ubiquitous Conversation regarding the negative impacts of widespread standardized testing on child development (e.g. Levitt & Candiotti, 2011; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ravitch, 2010; Simon, 2012) by titling the petition *Don't Turn Recess into a Multiple Choice Question*. By using this title, the authors again engage in Gee's (2014) "connections" task of discourse by linking the Playworks model of recess with standardized academic testing.

In making their argument for the elimination of the Playworks model at recess, the authors of the petition are making a political statement about the current distribution of the social good of children's educational and social development and are arguing for a redistribution of control of this social good from the school district to the parents. The political act of protesting the distribution of this social good and demanding its control return to the white upper-middle class authors of the Recess Petition is an example of what Leonardo (2004) identifies as the enactment of white supremacy. Under white supremacy, whites are active participants in "direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated it" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 137). In the case of the Recess Petition, the authors take swift action to ensure that their perspectives and needs are privileged over those of other groups, thereby acting out and reestablishing their racial dominance.

Establishing and reinforcing ownership through discourse

A significant theme in the petition that links the political and identity building tasks is that of ownership. Throughout the petition, the parents make demands regarding the ownership of social goods and also define themselves as those as owners. The petition authors refer to '*our school*,' '*our play spaces*,' and '*our school population*.' In addition, they explicitly enact the

action of ownership when stating: '*Recess is the only scheduled 25 minutes in the school day for our kids to "own" their independence*.' The repeated use of possessive pronouns and the explicit use of the verb 'to own' suggest the significance (Gee, 2014) that the petition authors are giving to the concept of ownership. Interestingly, through the action of protesting what they perceive to be the denial of their children's agency at recess by the structured nature of the Playworks model, the authors of the Recess Petition are themselves impinging on their children's agency by asserting ownership over their children's school environment through the use of phrases like "*our school*" and "*our play spaces*," and excluding any references in the petition to their children's opinions of the Playworks model.

The significance of ownership in the maintenance of white supremacy is the core of the CRT concept of 'whiteness as property' (Harris, 1993). According to Harris (1993), in legal terms, property refers not solely to concrete items but 'to anything to which value is attached' (Vaught, 2012, p. 55). The American public education system has been, since its creation in the mid-19th century, the property of whites, as it has been designed by and for whites of the middle and upper classes and rooted deeply in the belief systems that underlie white dominance, such as the theory of meritocracy, the idea of manifest destiny, and the belief in American monoculturalism (Hallinan, 2001; McIntoshm 2012). Despite rhetoric since the Civil Rights movement of the mid-20th century that promotes public education as a tool for racial equality, the American public education system continues to function as a primary tool in cementing white cultural, political, and economic hegemony (Hallinan, 2001; McIntosh, 2012). In the petition, the authors enact 'whiteness as property'[4] in their claim of ownership to both the concrete

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[4] Although I was unable to confirm the racial identity of all 144 parents who signed the recess petition, the parents who drafted the petition, spoke at the school board meetings, appeared in the news reports, and wrote on-line blogs were all White.

aspects of the school, such as the playground, and abstract concepts, such as their children's independence, and by contrasting the implied needs and rights of their children with that of children for whom they believe Playworks is appropriate, namely low-income students of color. Through the use of a petition, the authors are responding to a threat to the exclusivity of their property rights as Whites (Vaught, 2012) by challenging the introduction of an alternative structure of recess and perspective on play that they associate with non-White populations, which, according to 'whiteness as property,' makes those structures and perspectives both illegitimate and dangerous.

Discourse as hegemonic practice

Examining the Recess Petition through the lenses of critical discourse analysis and Critical Race Theory illuminates how the authors engage in political and identity tasks that assert and reinforce their race- and class-based status and power. Fairclough (1992) would describe this activity as hegemonic, whereby the authors of the Recess Petition are engaging in discursive practice that reproduces the existing social and power relations, namely that social goods belong to those of the dominant racial and economic classes. Support for the notion of a hegemonic practice enacted in the Recess Petition can found when considering the timing of the release of the petition. As previously noted, the authors of the Recess Petition posted it on-line over Labor Day weekend, after only five days of the Playworks model being used at recess. On the surface, it might seem odd that changes to the structure and practice of an elementary school recess period would require a response in the form of a petition (an inherently political and conflict-oriented form) only five days into the school year. However, this sense of urgency suggests that the authors and signers of the petition felt the use of the Playworks model at recess was particularly threatening to what Fairclough (1992) describes as 'the unstable equilibrium which

constitutes a hegemony,' (p. 93) and thus aggressive action was required in order to maintain the existing social order. The Recess Petition serves as an example of Leonardo's (2004) assertion that white racial hegemony "saturate[s] everyday life," (p. 137) through active participation of whites in "processes of domination" (p. 137).

Discussion

A key function of critical discourse analysis is to 'uncover, reveal, or disclose what is implicit, hidden or otherwise not immediately obvious' (van Dijk, 1995, p. 18) in social practices in which the dominance of certain groups and oppression of others is enacted. Critical Race Theory holds a similar goal, with the focus being more specifically on demonstrating how these power relations are based on white privilege and supremacy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). By identifying the enactment of oppressive structures, critical discourse analysis and Critical Race theorists aim to challenge the normative framing and passive acceptance of unjust social, political, and economic structures so that true social transformation can occur (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Gee, 2014). In this paper, I have attempted to illustrate how the discourse around a relatively mundane, site-specific topic of recess programming at an elementary school relates to and enacts a larger discourse involving race- and class-based power and privilege. Through their enactment of the political and identity building tasks (Gee, 2014), the authors and signers of the petition are making strong claims about who belongs to the school community, whose children have the right to have school structures and practices align with their needs, and who should have control of the social goods distributed within the context of public education. The discourse enacted in the Recess Petition also serves as an example of what Bonilla-Silva (2014) refers to as 'new racism:' a new racial structure that includes 'the increasingly covert

nature of racial discourse and racial practices, the avoidance of racial terminology' and 'the

elaboration of a racial agenda over political matters that eschews direct racial references' (p. 26).

When using critical discourse analysis, it is important to consider not only what is said,

but also what is unsaid by creators of texts (Gee, 2014; van Leeuwen, 2008). I would argue that

it is also important to consider *who is and who isn't* creating the texts – whose voices are being

heard in the discourse, and whose are absent. In the case of the Recess Petition, the 177 parents

who signed the petition represent only around 15% of the parent population at River Hills

Elementary, meaning that 85% of parents chose not to sign on to the petition. However, in

addition to not signing the petition, 85% of parents at River Hills Elementary made no public

statements regarding the Playworks debate at all. In reviewing public material, the only voices

responding to the critiques of parents who strongly opposed the Playworks model were those of

district officials (Croman, 2015; Kohls, 2005; Raghavendran, 2015). The comments from the

district officials focused on the programmatic benefits of Playworks in terms of inclusive,

successful recess, but made no attempt to name the privileged race and class discourse (Croman,

2015; Kohls, 2005; Raghavendran, 2015). In addition, River Hills staff were told firmly by

district officials that they were not to engage in any public conversations regarding the

Playworks decision or the reactions of the parents responsible for the petition (River Hills

Teacher B, personal communication, December 4, 2015; River Hills Teacher C, personal

communication, November 20, 2015; River Hills Teacher D, personal communication,

November 20, 2015). Longtime human rights activist, Ginetta Sagan, declared that, 'Silence in

the face of injustice is complicity with the oppressor.' By remaining silent, the larger community

of parents, school staff, and district administrators allow the discourse presented by the Recess

Petition authors and signers, in which the rights and needs of the dominant group are exclusively

privileged over all others, to remain unchallenged. As educational researchers and practitioners, we cannot be complicit. We have a responsibility to challenge ideologies and practices of oppression in our school communities if we are to have any hope of creating socially just and transformative schools for all children.

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Appendix A[5]

Don't Turn Recess Into A Multiple Choice Question

Community Education has purchased a recess curriculum that will impact every elementary

       school student, in every school, every day. River Hills Elementary is a pilot school.

Playworks is used by urban schools with limited green space, limited facilities, limited

       equipment, grave safety issues, and high poverty rates with success. Many of these

       schools have cut recess; Playworks is a way to bring it back. <u>We have recess. We have</u>

       <u>green space, We have equipment. Playworks is the WRONG program for us. Playworks</u>

       <u>was brought in to solve a staffing solution - not as the best option for the kids.</u>

Recess is the only scheduled 25 minutes in the school day for our kids to 'own' their

       independence. It is a time to test skills they already have and are still developing - how to

       play, how to deal with conflict, how to be inclusive - in a safe environment with adults

       offering intervention when necessary. <u>With Playworks, the supervisors are trained to</u>

       <u>instruct, make rules, intervene early, make teams, teach the kids games many already</u>

       <u>know, and create a controlled, very intentional environment.</u>

To enhance recess for every student at River Hills Elementary we say:

1. **Remove the Playworks model from our school.**

2. **Bring back the FULL 25 minutes of true free play.**

3. **Bring back the use of ALL of our play spaces.**

4. **Let additional staff engage in but not direct the play.**

5. **Let the kids invent their own games.**

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[5] The name of the school has been changed from the original petition.

6. **Together as a school, let us figure out ways to make River Hills an inclusive atmosphere all day and at recess. Not by using a "Playworks Playbook" that isn't the right fit for our school and doesn't meet the needs of our school population.**

We, the undersigned believe the new pilot recess curriculum Playworks is a bad fit for River Hills Elementary School.