



Reframing Policy Discourse on the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Abstract

This work selects a political cite in which the state policy reform occurs to examine reasons and underlying ideologies for some consensus on the debates regarding the need to criminalize or decriminalize truancy. Studying the legislation help to unpack the nature of relationships in social systems, with the purpose of eliminating unbalanced power relations in the politics of school discipline policy reform. Embedding whiteness as a grounded lens, we conducted critical discourse analysis and critical policy analysis to deconstruct one bill to capture major competing political discourses pertinent to school disciplinary policy reform the Texas State Legislature. Although the counter-discourse of the reform shows resistance toward change, findings reflect widespread concerns across broad constituencies about the injustice of school disciplinary policy, the necessity of decriminalizing students, and the ideologies of discipline and control. The rich discourses reveal tensions of opponents' political stances on the issues of school-to-prison pipeline at the macro-level. With an eye toward reframing the academic discourse with respect to school disciplinary issues, we further discuss the language used in describing truancy issues and offer an in-depth understanding of the dominant discourse of discipline policy reform.

Keywords Policy reform · School-to-prison pipeline · Critical discourse analysis · Critical policy analysis · Truancy

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Introduction

This research explores how policy actors talk about a truancy¹ reform bill that intended to remove the truancy policy, which is considered a contributing factor to the school-to-prison pipeline in Texas public schools—in a Texas Legislative Session (TLS). The purpose of this research is to bring researchers, policymakers, educators, and grassroots advocates' attention to the discursive practices in the process of policy formations rather than solely focusing on understanding implementations of a policy or evaluating outcomes of a policy after a policy has already become law. As we observed, policy reforms happen in a concentrated space—state capitals located in urban cities, and bring various interest groups to this highly politicized space to promote different policy meanings through public hearings. We chose to analyze a truancy reform bill in 2015 because this bill is a polarized bill that has enough participants for us to analyze and compare competing political discourses regarding issues of the school-to-prison pipeline, which is shockingly relevant to the current political dynamic in the U.S. We also aim to broaden the conversations regarding policy reforms in education beyond the achievement gap (Evans, 2005; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Valencia, 2015) by including in-depth understanding of the ideologies behind a policy that can address the root causes of student disciplinary problems and problematizing the ideologies of student discipline policies through the understanding of stakeholders' discursive practices in the process of policy formations.

Texas has had a problematic history with regard to disciplinary policy. Since 2011,² many local juvenile justice advocates in Texas have pushed to pass a progressive school discipline reform legislation to prevent schools from pushing students toward the school-to-prison pipeline. Later, in the 2013 83rd Texas Legislative Session, two bills were passed and became law. The new disciplinary policies were implemented to prohibit schools and law enforcement from issuing tickets to students for committing Class C misdemeanors (e.g., using foul language, making unreasonable noises, or chewing gum in school). In 2015, truancy was the primary focus for school discipline policy reform advocates. Texas and Wyoming were the only two states that send students with truancy issues to adult criminal court.³ Texas Appleseed⁴ (2015) found that Texas refers approximately 100,000 students to truancy court each year. Latinas/os, African Americans, and students from low

¹ Scholars define truancy as unexcused student absences (Gage, Sugar, Lunde & DeLoreto, 2013; Gleich-Bope, 2014).

² Since 2011, Texas legislators have led on a series of bills related to school disciplinary reform efforts in order to address this pipeline through what we might term “the school-discipline gap.” (Texas has a biennial legislative session with regular sessions meeting every other year).

³ See Complaint filed with Dep't of Justice by Disability Rights Texas, Nat'l Ctr. for Youth Law, and Texas Appleseed concerning Dallas County Truancy Courts (Jun. 13, 2013) at n. 15, available at [http://www.texasappleseed.net/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=966&Itemid=\[hereinafter DOJ Complaint\]](http://www.texasappleseed.net/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=966&Itemid=[hereinafter DOJ Complaint]).

⁴ Texas Appleseed is a nonprofit public interest justice center. They focus on many policy issues, ranging from debt collection to helping kids stay in school and out of the criminal justice system. See <https://www.texasappleseed.org>

socioeconomic status families are disproportionately referred to a truancy court. Once students are issued a truancy ticket, it becomes a criminal record for students. It is apparent that treating truancy as a criminal matter was one of the contributing factors feeding students of vulnerable populations to the school-to-prison pipeline. It further prevented students from pursuing higher education and limited their career trajectories. These issues raised concerns for many organizations, juvenile justice advocates, and policymakers.

This study investigates a public hearing and a Senate general session debate on Senate Bill 106,⁵ a bill seeking to decriminalize truancy in the 84th 2015 Texas Legislative Session (TLS).⁶ It was considered a progressive truancy reform bill that led to news media attention and received strong pushback from groups that had operationalized truancy programs under the truancy law. If the bill became state law, law enforcement involvement in suspension-related truancy problems would have gotten restrained to a historic minimum; truancy courts would have been forced to shut down; truancy prevention programs would completely replace current for-profit truancy programs. Policymakers consider this bill a radical bill. Its purpose was to build a new truancy system to decriminalize truancy, reduce fines for truancy from five hundred dollars to fifty dollars, and reinforce the role of schools as an educational space with less involvement of the criminal justice system in Texas.

Because the bill received many advocacy and interest groups' attention, as many people participated in the public hearings, we were able to gather rich discourses and various perspectives from practitioners on the issue of truancy. The purpose of this study is to focus on the discourses from both supporters and opponents of the truancy reform bill to examine reasons and underlying ideologies on each side of the debate regarding the need to criminalize or decriminalize truancy. Accordingly, we use critical discourse analysis through whiteness and critical policy lenses to examine the legislation and unpack power relations among policymakers, advocacy groups, and the Texas K-12 education system.

Literature Review

Before Michelle Alexander's (2012) call for attention on the social problems of mass incarceration and police brutality involving African American communities, research on the negative impact of school discipline policies had already addressed the issue of racial disparity (Fabelo et al., 2011; Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2002). The trends of racial and gender disparity in school disciplinary systems have remained similar for years (Alexander, 2012). Although most school disciplinary policy research focuses on addressing the disproportionate use of in-school

⁵ Texas Legislature Online, 2015. Senate Bill 106. <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=84R&Bill=SB106>

⁶ Since 2011, Texas legislators have led on a series of bills related to school disciplinary reform efforts in order to address this pipeline through what we might term "the school-discipline gap." (Texas has a biennial legislative session with regular sessions meeting every other year).

and out-of-school suspensions, truancy in Texas is also a contributing factor to the school-to-prison pipeline (Texas Appleseed, 2015). Texas has a unique truancy policy that allows schools to refer students with truancy issues to adult criminal courts. Massachusetts was the first state that implemented a truancy law in 1952 to remove students with extensive absenteeism in school. Thirty-two states followed Massachusetts to adopt truancy laws by 1990 (Trujilloal, 2006). Before registering truancy policies into state laws, schools had already practiced student removal with the truancy issues in early 1900s. Texas Education Codes describe truancy as a criminal offense, and Texas schools regularly referred students to adult criminal court for truancy. Before the 84th 2015 TLS, Truancy records became a permanent criminal record in Texas' truant system. The records followed students through life, consequently impeding individuals to find secure and steady employment in the future. This trend shockingly echoes the New Jim Crew system, defined in Michelle Alexander's (2012) book.

Truancy is not only an indicator of social problems that students face in their everyday lives in school and at home but also a predictor of social struggles in the future (Gage et al., 2013; Hemphill et al., 2014; Monahan et al., 2014; Rodney & Mupier, 1999). Mallett (2015) found that mental health, substance abuse, family-related difficulties such as high mobility rates have to do with parental joblessness and general economic insecurity, and inadequate access to affordable housing, exposing students in poverty to have more unexcused absences. Truancy is a strong predictor of future arrest in school (Monahan et al., 2014), and violent, criminal behavior in adulthood (Rocque et al., 2017). In short, the extant literature on truancy points strongly to its presence being a societal issue that merits greater research and policy attention. Throughout the school-to-prison pipeline and truancy literature, a common thread is the negative impact of suspensions and the disproportionality of poor, under-served students.

As McDermott (2007) states, “what matters for schools and students is what happens as a result of the law, not what policymakers intended the law to do.” (p. 97) Yet, researchers should not overlook the intention of the law. A formation of law is heavily related to written policies and legislators who deploy rhetoric and language, generally, to frame and deliver their ideas and agendas. Research on truancy issues is overwhelmingly concentrated on the consequences of implementing the truancy policy (Anderson et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020). Accordingly, there is a research gap in understanding the discourses of policy actors who play major roles in legitimizing their ideologies to establish state-wide policy reforms that directly impact students' everyday school lives. Yet, creating criminal records only perpetuates systemic inequalities, including racism and classism (Alexander, 2012), and does not focus on preventive measures such as connecting students with social workers or counselors, providing mentorship programs, offering community-based services.

Conceptual Framework

To better understand the complex power dynamics and competing discourses from various interest groups involved in a truancy reform movement during the 84th 2015 TLS, we used concepts of whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), critical policy analysis

(Diem et al., 2014), and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2014; Taylor, 1997) as the foundations of this research. These concepts share several common components that, in combination, help researchers to understand complex power dynamics, including articulations of white privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), among other competing discourses. We introduce the three theoretical concepts in a blended way instead of introducing them separately because we believe these three concepts are not mutually exclusive but are used fluidly in a highly politicized space. Critical policy analysis and critical discourse analysis are essential conceptual *and* methodological tools. These three concepts are used to illuminate the interests and ideologies at play with respect to the groups involved throughout the 84th session of the TLS.

Discourse does not simply mean *language use*, but language use relative to social, political, and cultural formation. Discourse is when language is taken to both reflect and shape the social order, and in so doing, “shaping individuals’ interactions with society” (Jaworski & Coupland, 2014, p. 3). *How* language is used in certain ways by individuals in a specific space is a more precise definition of discourse than simply *language use*. In this vein, it is crucial to understand that discourse is a system of representation (Hall, 2006a). Accordingly, discourse concerns ‘the production of knowledge through language’ (Hall, 1992). Foucault sees discourse not only as of the linguistic components but embedded in material *practices*. Discourses are collections of interrelated texts and practices that ‘systematically form the object of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972). Meaning and meaningful practice is thus constructed within discourse (Hall, 1992) through practices (Foucault, 1972). As Gee (2014) explains, discourse occurs when people build identities and activities by using language together with non-language-related context (e.g., shared belief systems or histories of word choices to convey a particular identity or commitment). Stated differently, *discursive formations* are also related to Foucault’s understanding of the reciprocal nature of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1972). Discourse informs the production of knowledge, meaning, and meaningful practice. However, which knowledge becomes more popular than others is implicated in the power relations that allow certain kinds of knowledge to become more visible than others. As Foucault (1980) conceptualizes power as circulated through discourse and operated dynamically at an intentionally organized place and time in a more or less coordinated cluster of relations (p. 199). “Power cannot be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse” (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). We draw on this conceptualization of power to explore how discourse shaped the Texas truancy policy and the truancy reformers’ discursive strategy to push for policy change as well as to understand the white space, which is defined as 1) a space that leaves whiteness and white privilege uninterrogated; and 2) space where White is considered as a universal insider (Jackson II, 1999).

The essential component of meaning is *difference*. Hall (2006b) explains that without a difference, meaning does not exist. For example, policy texts are the product of a political struggle over meaning (Taylor, 1997). The outcome of political struggle over meaning is through a dialogue with the *other* and the processes involved in subordinating one meaning. Processes of understanding meaning are dialogic and constantly negotiated. Similar to Fairclough’s (1992) notion

of critical discourse analysis—meanings are constructed and propagated symbolically and the social contexts within which they are propagated to othering marginalized voices. In order to visibilize the *othered* voices, using constant dialogs and negotiations to form various discourses and applying cross-disciplinary frameworks like critical race theories or media studies can provide a space for marginalized meanings. For example, using cultural studies and critical race theories to challenge the mainstream representation of racial minorities (e.g., racial stereotypes) in news and media to reclaim the *othered* image (e.g., the images of diverse female body types) is a common application. In this research, the concepts of *difference* and *othered* voices are used to expand the understanding of dominant and subordinate discourses of truancy and their power relations during Texas' 84th TLS.

Critical policy analysis (CPA) serves as a conceptual tool to understand policy roots and processes, compare political rhetoric to reality, understand the unequal distribution of power, knowledge, and resources, and examine the relationships between policies and the reproduction of stratified social relations (Diem et al., 2014). CPA provides researchers an opportunity to look into the relationships between inequality and educational policy through critical lenses at a macro-level. Critical discourse analysis is a conceptual tool to look closely at language use to understand the reproduction of social structures and power; language is seen as a site of struggle over power and representation (Fairclough, 2001). From a critical discourse perspective, a policy can be viewed as equivalent to discourse (Bacchi, 2000). Policy development is a process of competing for discourses (Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017) to identify a social problem and negotiate its legitimacy. In other words, a policy is generated through a struggle over meanings. Critical discourse analysis provides conceptual and analytical tools to look at the functions and meanings of *language-in-use* and connects it to sources of meaning and power in society (Erickson, 2004; Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2013). The notion of whiteness and critical discourse lenses help researchers understand how race operates through language and colorblind discourses that get marshaled in political settings. Whiteness is often defined as a process or a system of domination that privileges people perceived to be whites over people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Mills, 1997). Whiteness connotes white privilege, the construction of individual merit, social advantage, and benefits that accrue to the dominant race through a legal process (López, 2006). Whiteness is an uninterrogatable space and a metaphor for the universal insider (Jackson II, 1999). The rhetoric of ignorance and innocence can invisibilize a white person's guilty of behavior or speech as intentionally prejudiced or discriminatory (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In contemporary society, *urban schools* have become a coded word to refer to majority-minority students (López, 2014). This kind of race-less talk can be observed frequently in higher education settings (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) and political settings (López, 2014). Accordingly, we use the notion of whiteness and critical discourse theory as our theoretical approach to analyzing the truancy reform debate in Texas with our grounded perspective of both the visible or obvious—as well as the invisible or not-so-obvious—power relations that convey interests and agendas in discourses or language that circulate throughout but which are largely taken for granted by casual observers of the process.

Methods

The collected data on SB 106⁷ for this study is the publicly available information on the Texas Legislature Online (2015). After briefly reviewing the literature and constructing the theoretical framework, research questions were identified as follows:

What were the competing discourses of the truancy reform occurring from different policy actors in the process of moving the bill out of committee to the Senate floor—and later, in the context of the Senate floor debate itself?
How was inequality presented or silenced by policy actors?

The research questions utilize critical policy analysis (CPA) as a methodological approach to form research questions and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a data analysis tool to examine the process of one of the truancy reform bills in Texas' 84th TLS. The fundamental difference between CPA and policy analysis is that the former is a multi-disciplinary field that grows out of critical theory (Gale, 2001). Aligning with the theoretical perspectives introduced in the previous section, CPA is an appropriate methodology because it provides a platform to connect policy studies and whiteness studies to ask important questions such as the role of race and racism in policy formation, and to interrogate policy processes to examine power relations in terms of whose knowledge counts and who have been silenced in historically white spaces like the Texas State Legislature (Diem et al., 2014; Gale, 2001; Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Taylor, 1997). Most importantly, using CDA together with CPA and whiteness perspectives can unpack “common sense” discourses and assumptions, and in so doing, open up spaces for individual’s agency (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Taylor, 1997).

Data Collection

The bill received more attention from practitioners, legal actors, and social activists than other truancy-related reform bills because it would obliterate the Texas truancy court system if the bill became law. The basis of the analysis is one Senate and one House public hearing and one Senate general session, all of which are contained

⁷ SB106 is related to court jurisdiction and procedures relating to truancy, providing criminal penalties, and imposing a court cost. This bill intends to decriminalize truancy by changing the regulations of referring students to truancy court (Texas Legislature Online, 2015). If the bill had passed, students would no longer have been referred to adult court but the juvenile court instead. Students would not be fined \$500 for truancy. SB106 accords schools with greater responsibility for resolving truancy issues than sending students to court. SB106 establishes truancy prevention programs, decreases the initial truancy fine to \$50, and refers truancy cases to civil court instead of criminal court. In other words, this was the most robust truancy reform bill that was considered during the 2015 session such that once it became law, law enforcement’s involvement in suspension-related truancy problems would get restrained to a historical minimum. Regrettably, however, the bill was passed in the Texas Senate but did not pass through the House or, consequently, to Governor Greg Abbott’s desk. The present analysis offers partial but compelling evidence regarding the role of the participants’ language use to construct their support or opposition of SB106.

within the state's archived publicly available video recordings. All of the sessions were at least one hour long, with supporters' and opponents' testimonies. Original bill language, news reports, public hearings, Texas legislative sessions, and relevant documents were collected to triangulate (Patton, 2015) information provided by interest groups. Data analyses primarily focused on the three publicly available videos. All three videos were transcribed and imported into a qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo (Version 11), to identify themes, code participants' discursive strategies, and use matrix and cluster analysis to understand the relationships among each code and participants.

Due to the nature of the research setting, researchers have no power to select participants, nor did we recruited the participants. We transcribed a video recorded a legislative session of a bill. All testifiers of the bill recorded in the pertinent public hearings and a floor debate are included in this study. One of the most senior members of the Texas Senate, Senator John Whitmire (D-Houston), is the author of the bill. There were 52 participants total across three separate hearings, and thusly, videos. We learned information about the participants from two public hearings on the Senate floor and the House floor from a 2 h and 52 min-long video and a 2 h and 23 min-long video where we were able to transcribe and identify all the participants' names, job titles, the organizations they represent, and their positions on the bill.

Data Analysis

The primary functions of CDA are relational, dialectical, and transdisciplinary (Fairclough, 2010, p. 3). Instead of analyzing individual conversations, CDA provides a platform for researchers to disentangle the power relations among the broader structural features of societies, languages in shaping social practices, and particular ideologies (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). CDA reveals ways that the transformation of the hegemonic norm of school disciplinary policy is performed. To understand the discourse of school disciplinary policy reform from different political members, intertextuality (Fairclough, 2003) and interdiscursivity (Johnstone, 2008) are used to investigate the dominant and silenced voices, the historical connections of texts, and the assumptions that are made by policymakers.

Intertextuality and interdiscursivity across genres connect a chain of different genres to reinforce particular ideas and forms of communication in political discourses and further reveal styles between social identities and individual ones (Fairclough, 2003). Intertextuality refers to relationships between literal texts; interdiscursivity connects one discourse to another. Genre chains comprise documents and activities in different genres to constitute social relations like social hierarchies and social distance (Brown & Gilman, 1960). Examples of the Texas school disciplinary policy reform genre chain are public hearings, conferences, and documents. The combination of genres results in restructuring ideas and language where the reordering of discourse is examined. Although analyses of a policy shift and cultural idiosyncrasies weave throughout state policies, our scope resides primarily in the realm of discourse, with CDA serving as an analytical tool for deconstructing the discourses from legislators' opinions about school disciplinary policy reform.

Table 1 Steps to develop a codebook

Step 1	Create an initial codebook (Saldaña, 2013) Participants' justifications of their language use in support of or opposed to the proposed truancy reform bill—Taxonomic, dramatical, and value coding strategies Interdiscursive analysis—pattern and theme coding strategy Identification of participants' discursive strategies—value coding strategy (Saldaña, 2013)
Step 2	Referenced Jiwani & Richardson (2011), Bonilla-Silva (2013), & Diem and colleagues (2014) to align the inductive codebook and the selected theoretical framework
Step 3	First round of coding
Step 4	Readjust the initial codebook. Add five discursive strategies in the codebook (van Dijk, 2011) Referential strategies Predicational strategies Argumentation strategies Perspectivization Intensification or mitigation
Step 5	Reference Alexander (2012, Bonilla-Silva (2013), and Delgado & Stefanic (2007) to create discursive strategies subcodes
Step 6	Reference Chilton & Schaffner (2011) to develop codes focusing on the politics of discourses Coercion and resistance Legitimization and delegitimization Representation and misrepresentation

Therefore, critical policy analysis is used as a subordinate analytical tool to analyze two phenomena—policy shifts and cultural idiosyncrasies.

Before coding the data in Nvivo, we used an inductive coding strategy to create an initial codebook (Saldaña, 2013). Table 1 shows the process of developing a codebook. Taxonomic, dramatical, and value coding strategies (Saldaña, 2013) were used to develop codes related to participants' justifications of their language use in support of or opposed to the proposed truancy reform in the bill. Pattern and theme coding strategies were selected for interdiscursive analysis (Taylor, 2007), which help us to identify competing discourses that circulated the bill. Value coding was adopted to understand participants' discursive strategies to express their thoughts on race and inequality issues pertinent to the truancy system. After exploring different examples of CDA codebooks and CPA research articles, Jiwani & Richardson (2011), Bonilla-Silva (2013), and Diem and colleagues (2014) provide useful directions to develop our inductive codebook for analyzing discursive strategies of the participants while simultaneously aligning with the selected theoretical framework.

We focused data analysis on five discursive strategies (van Dijk, 1993) to understand the power relations of language use and discursive strategies in participants' speech. The five categories include: (1) referential strategies (how people are named and referred to semiotically); (2) predicational strategies (what qualities or characteristics are attributed to people whom participants describe); (3) argumentation strategies (positive or negative justification); (4) perspectivization (identifying sources of naming, descriptions, and arguments); and (5) intensification or mitigation (explicit or implicit language use to intensify or mitigate specific values). We also created subcodes based on Alexander (2012), Bonilla-Silva (2013), and Delgado (2007) in each of the five categories for more in-depth analysis with respect to

notions of race and racism and the discursive connections with the new Jim Crow discourse in education (e.g., Alexander, 2012).

In order to deconstruct policy assumptions (Diem et al., 2014), we looked at the politics of discourses by adopting Chilton and Schaffner (2011) to specifically analyze (1) coercion and resistance; (2) legitimization and delegitimization; (3) representation and misrepresentation through individual linguistic practice, in particular on the use of pragmatics (interaction between speakers and listeners), semantics (meanings and structure), and syntax (usage of word choices). Merging both critical policy analysis and critical discourse analysis allows us to have a relatively complete understanding of how rhetoric on race and (in)equality operated in the context of Texas' truancy reform movement in 2015.

Three triangulation methods (Patton, 2015) are used to enhance the credibility of our findings. Multiple resources such as newspapers and relevant public documents were collected for triangulating participants' expressions of their positions on the bill. An expert on education policy was invited to review the findings. The third method uses cluster analysis in qualitative software, Nvivo (Version 11), to conduct a coding redundancy check. Our study contains mess-spoken information from multiple participants with various political backgrounds. The cluster analysis function in Nvivo helped us identify redundant codes that have similar inferential relationships and select the most coded data to present the findings. Two limitations of the methodology are that we did not interview any of the participants. Therefore, their race and ethnicities are unknown unless they are dark-skinned African Americans (and thusly, visible on archived state videos) or their names are recognizable in Spanish. Based on the combined sources of information (visual archive and names), sixty-five percent of the participants are white males; fifteen percent are white females. Seven percent Black females, five percent Latinos, four percent Latinas, and four percent Black males participated as either citizens or senators.

Findings

Upon a close examination of public hearings, documents, and legislative meetings on the bill in the 84th 2015 TLS by using interdiscursive analysis (Taylor, 2007), the discourses of school disciplinary policy reform encompassed three main competing discourses, in which participants debated on (1) definitions of decriminalizing truancy, (2) the rooted problems of truancy, and (3) control of knowledge. These findings reflect the complexity of the political system. The following sections provide a more detailed analysis of the three themes to understand the politics of language use in supporting or opposing a truancy reform and demonstrating the connections between representations of race and class in relation to linguistic practice in a highly politicized white space.

Definitions of Decriminalizing Truancy

One of the heated debates of the bill is whether truancy should be treated as a civil or a criminal matter. Findings show several competing discourses that are based on fundamentally different understandings regarding the decriminalization of truancy. At the most general level, the competing discourses are interwoven around the reasons that truancy should or should not be treated as a criminal matter, focusing on either students' or legal actors' perspectives.

⁸Chief Justice Hecht: [T]here were close to 100,000 criminal charges against school children in the last fiscal year [2014], which is, as [Senator Whitmire] suggested, more than all the rest of the states combined. But that's a little misleading. The difference between civil and criminal is that civil truancy cases can usually be handled less formally and limits children's exposure to the justice system, whereas justice courts and municipal courts don't have the same freedom when they are dealing with criminal charges. But, when we step back we have to ask ourselves playing hooky is bad, but is it criminal? The consequences are \$90 in court cost, about \$7.5 million state-wide in fiscal year '14, fines up to \$500, waived in many cases to be sure but still 5.6 million dollars state wide during the last fiscal year. But, even more important than the money is the criminal conviction on the child's record. And this has a potential impact on future housing, on education, on military service, and all aspects of the child growing up to be an adult's life. But there is yet another problem and that is the exposure to the criminal justice system, it's just not a place for kids. To treat them in the criminal justice system, for the most part kids should not be there, they should be in class. When we have 100,000 tickets, you got a real problem keeping the kids in school when you are threatening them with criminal penalties and it doesn't encourage them anymore than that, then it seems to me it's a serious problem.

Chief Justice Hecht is one of the supporters of the bill. His testimony summarizes most of the definitions of decriminalizing truancy. Not sending students to the justice system for truancy is the first definition of decriminalizing truancy in Chief Justice Hecht's statement. The second definition is that truancy is not a crime (by asking the rhetorical question, "Is it criminal?"). His third definition of decriminalizing truancy is the amount of the truancy fee. He did not provide more detailed information about how the harsh consequences occur with truancy fines, but he did imply that the consequences of truancy fees affect students' future housing or career opportunities. He then leads his testimony back to issues of exposing children to criminal courts. Research has shown that exposing children to criminal courts does not stop misbehavior, but, rather, increase violent or nonviolent misbehavior, potentially considered criminal behaviors (Petitclerc et al., 2012).

⁸ All the quotes are selected based on numbers of codes and themes from both supporters and opponents of SB 106 after running a cluster analysis on Nvivo.

Chief Justice Hecht's definitions of decriminalizing truancy focus on truancy referral and truancy fees. The definition of decriminalizing truancy is similar to the definition of the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2014). The school-to-prison pipeline refers to disciplinary practices involved with law enforcement such as campus arrests or ticketing students for a minor violation of school rules or pushing students out of schools, expose students to the justice system, and increase students likelihood to involve in the juvenile or justice system in the future (Curtis, 2014; Farmer, 2010; Fenning, 2007; Fowler, 2011; Meiners & Winn, 2010; Nance, 2014).

Senator Hinojosa: We have juveniles who don't show up [for truancy] when they are cited to appear in court, and then there is a warrant issued for their arrest. That warrant is usually not served till they are 17 or 18 even though they are in high school, many times they are arrested and they are placed in jail. They are picked up, handcuffed and taken to jail. [School-to-prison] cases do exist. And [a student's] record does go into the [criminal] record once they become an adult.

Senator Hinojosa is one of the supporters of the bill. His example provides another definition of decriminalizing truancy. His notion of decriminalizing truancy is after students become legal adults, which is associated with future exposure to the jail system (Kirk & Sampson, 2012). In other words, decriminalizing truancy is part of the many steps to prevent the school-to-prison pipeline in Texas. Both of the supporters did not mention that schools disproportionately fine African American and Latina/o students for truancy. But they both implied that truancy tickets jeopardize students' future by providing multiple sources of information, including stories, historical contexts, and research-based information.

Opponents have different definitions of decriminalizing truancy. Some of the opponents do not witness any of their truant students exposed to the jail system. Some belief referring students to court and issuing students fines help to resolve truant issues. The definition of decriminalizing truancy is to keep the current truant system.

Mr. Kelly: This new bill is called by folks to decriminalization, but I would [argue] in my mind it is more of hyper-criminalization in the sense that you are allowing more kids to stay at home unobstructed by the law.

In contrast to supporters' definition of decriminalizing truancy, opponents like Mr. Kelly, the only superintendent who testified against the bill, believe that the bill does not decriminalize truancy but increases students' criminal activities. Meanwhile, he added the term hyper-criminalization to intensify the severity of removing the current truancy system. In other words, opponents' notion of decriminalizing truancy means keeping truant students away from criminal activities by sending them to court. The competing discourses reveal a different understanding of the notion of the school-to-prison pipeline between supporters and opponents of the bill. The bill supporters tend to agree with the definition of the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2014). Moreover, the opponents of the

bill believe that the current truancy system kept students away from entering a school-to-prison pipeline.

In this section, we also noticed the language use among supporters and opponents when they described or made reference to truancy. As Kayama et al. (2015) found, using criminal justice language to describe misbehaviors can develop a criminalized self and social identity to students. We highlight, in particular, the word “hooky,” which was used by both Chief Hetch (supporter) and Justice of the Peace Payton (opponent). In Chief Hetch’s testimony (the first full quote in the previous paragraph), he asked a rhetorical question about whether it is necessary to criminalize truancy.

Chief Justice Hetch⁹: We have to ask ourselves: **playing hooky** is bad, but is it criminal?

In comparison to Judge Payton’s word choice in describing truancy, he says the following:

Judge Payton: Furthermore we talk about, so the concern over criminalization, it doesn’t exist because we already protect them. The information should never get out. Furthermore, diversion programs already in existence, they have been. There is tons of study here in Texas, New Jersey and New York. Those diversion programs were great for kids that are **committing hooky**. However, the incident-based reporting system reveals that crimes committed by youth between years of 10 and 17 are crimes committed during the school day. We’re not talking about children committing hooky.

In these two quotes, the two judges use different verbs before the word “hooky.” In the first instance with Chief Justice Hetch, “playing hooky,” a commonly used slang term, connotes conduct that amounts to little more than youthful indiscretion or childish behavior. In contrast, Judge Payton uses the verb “commit” to bring out a more serious meaning of the term. The definition of the word *commit* from dictionary.com is “to perform (a crime, error, etc.).” “Commit” is a widely used term in the criminal justice system, such as “commit” a crime or “commit” a murder. Between the first and the second times mentioned, he uses “commit” to suggest criminality.

To wit, except for Judge Payton, there were no other proponents or opponents of the bill that marshaled this phraseology. Contrasting with Chief Justice Hetch’s word choice, Judge Payton’s language use represents a process of criminalizing children’s misbehavior through his language practice. Specifically, for high-status, power-wielding authorities like Judge Payton to derive vocabulary from official criminal justice discourses to describe students’ misbehavior is one clear mechanism through which the school-to-prison pipeline becomes a reality for many youths (Kayama et al., 2015).

⁹ See page 14 for a complete quote.

Roots of the Problem

The second highly used discourse pattern is that sending students to truancy court does not solve the root of students' problems. Supporters of the bill use storytelling strategies to humanize truancy cases and reveal the need to change the current truancy system.

Juvenile Justice Attorney Mr. Nezami: I think one case that exemplifies is one of my clients. She was getting bullied for some years. Complained to the school *over and over and over again*. The school did *absolutely nothing* about it. So one day her bullies eventually caught up with her, beat her up so bad that she got a brain condition. Because of this brain condition she would get these horrible migraines. She wouldn't be able to wake up; she wouldn't be able to go to school. The teachers wouldn't accept or school wouldn't accept parents' notes, they needed a doctor's note, and the parents couldn't afford taking her to the doctor every time. This to me represents systematic failure not just starting from the teachers and the principals but also going to the prosecutors and judges. No one stopped to ask them why these children were missing classes or stopped to ask these children why they are missing classes. And I see this *over and over and over and over and again*, I represent them *over and over and over and over and again*. I invite you to come and see these children who are being criminalized for things that occur at home, I invite you to come and see them getting encouraged to plead guilty because the alternative for pleading not guilty is just too difficult and it extends the process out. I have seen this *over and over gain* and this is a serious issue and I think that Chairman Whitmire, I think this committee, this is a serious issue that needs to be handled and I ask you to handle it.

Mr. Nezami is one of the supporters of the bill. As evident by the quotation from Mr. Nezami, the rooted problem of his client's truancy was not her skipping school on purpose. Rather, it was a long-term bullying problem, together with family financial struggles and a lack of teachers and school administrators' support, that were responsible for her brain condition that led to an accumulation of absences and, ultimately, her truancy. In his speech, he uses particles (underlined words) repeatedly to emphasize the frustration of seeing injustice meted out by the courts against youth whose lives otherwise remain invisible and unknown. Truant students are punished, but the root of the truancy problem was not properly addressed. This discourse had the potential power to disrupt current policy practices that led to the reproduction of criminalizing certain students for whom truancy is symptomatic of root causes. Stated differently, many of Mr. Nezami's students (clients) who need school support were repeatedly and systematically treated unfairly by the system. We can also see the same trend in punitive disciplinary practices such as out-of-school suspensions (Crosby, et al., 2018; Losen, 2015; Owen, & McLanahan, 2020; Skiba et al., 2014).

A "roots-caused" perspective, however, is not a seamless one. Although not directly mentioned, stories provided by supporters surfaced marginalized discourses associated with systemic problems in schools, the judicial system, or any possible array of structural impediments like poverty, homelessness, or family

dissolution. Another discourse—echoing with traditional criminology “self-control theory” (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990)—implies that individuals lack self-control and that this problem is what accounts for criminality. As one of the strong opponents of the bill, Judge Payton stated, “the cause of truancy is not only because children are inherently indigent, but also children’s lack of self-control or lack of parental involvement.” He further explained:

“You know, when I was growing up, my mother was a single parent with two kids had to go on food stamps to be able to take care of her two kids and she made it clear to us, there will be things that you will always do. One, you always be clean when you leave my house, I don’t care how poor we are. You will always be dressed appropriately, and you will always go to school.”

Judge Payton’s testimony in support of punishing children for lack of self-control and parental involvement weakened many supporters’ arguments to address issues of systemic inequality that led to truancy. Although both attorney Nezami and Judge Payton used storytelling strategies to shape organizational meanings (Mumby & Mease, 2011) of the root problems, Judge Payton located the problem in the students themselves rather than acknowledging the social challenges in students’ everyday experiences.

Defending the current truancy system, Judge Payton used dismissive rhetoric regarding how the lives of poor children of color are systematically circumscribed by the conditions they face in schools and society. This discourse represents the mainstream ideology of the current truancy policy in Texas. His individualistic, power-evasive lens is that if students violate truancy codes, they should be punished.

Judge Payton’s other statement used during his testimony was that he does not care what race or class a student is, “all students should go to school.” Viewing students as race-less, class-less, and rational individuals to further punish students with truant issues while ignoring social challenges, systemic inequality, and relationship building with students is a form of carelessness. Stories that Judge Payton shared manifest a “carelessness perspective” that not only maps onto a conservative, white-privileged worldview of color- and class-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) but also mystifies the notion of the American Dream in U.S. society—as long as we all work hard and do our job, we will succeed.

Attorney Nezami presents his concerns about the rooted problem of truancy cases from students’ perspectives and opts to use his elite power to visibilize marginalized children’s everyday challenges of schooling. The power struggles are beyond different understandings of rooted problems of truancy. It is also a struggle to problematize the whiteness ideology that is operationalized in the truancy system and to take actions to change status quo.

As conveyed by Mr. Nezami, the former view of truancy was a symptom of the broken system. Whereas Judge Payton’s view downplayed systemic issues and blamed students’ or parents’ deficient values and irresponsible acts. These different understandings of “rooted problems” of truancy lead to our next finding, namely, the control of knowledge (information).

Control of Knowledge—A System of Representation

This section discusses the complex power struggle between the dominant and subordinate discourses of truancy reform from viewing discourse as a system of representation (Hall, 2006a, b). Representation also means control of knowledge. Knowledge is connected to power not only to reproduce “the truth” but also to reinforce the legitimization of “the truth.” Which “truth” has more legitimized power over another relies on the power of “difference” (Hall, 2006b). Difference matters as an essential linguistics strategy to legitimize official discourses to the exclusion of all others.

In the following example, the author of the bill, Senator Whitmire, told two stories of students who were criminalized in the current truancy system in Texas.

Senator Whitmire: I could give you all types of horror stories of why [truancy] needs to be decriminalized. I have 12 to 13-year-olds being ticketed for truancy, the ticket didn't mean anything to them. They did not give it to their parents; they don't go to court. Then when they are in 17 and while they are in school, attending high school there is a failure to appear filed against him as a 17-year-old adult, Police officers go to the high school asks if the student is there. The student is doing well in high school. They call the student out of class, to clear up a warrant; The officers handcuff him and take him to the Harris County Jail; that's just one horror story. I can give you additional horror stories, a 14-year-old in the city of Houston ticketed, case manager goes to her house, why is she not going to school? She is 14-year-old, pregnant, no maternity clothes, she and her parents both got truancy tickets.

Another supporter of the bill, Ms. Merger, who represents a local nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, offered the following:

Ms. Merger: I think you really see two types of students who are prosecuted for truancy. On the one hand, you have students like Tai, who are engaged in school, succeeding in school and yet prosecuted for truancy nonetheless. Tai is a student in the Dallas area who has been convicted for truancy twice at this point and both cases, Tai was actually present at school and doing what he was supposed to be doing and yet mistakenly prosecuted for truancy. In the first case, when he was a seventh grader, the teacher was marking him absent because Tai is his nickname. And another name appeared on the roll book. And the next prosecution [is] when he was in high school. Tai was marked absent from his regular classes when he was attending his special education classes. Many times, we see these students who are mistaken marked absent or who may not have followed the school's precise rule for excusing an absence and prosecuted for truancy without any inquiry by the schools and whether that court referral is necessary or appropriate.

The current truancy system has given schools, law enforcement officers, and judges power to mark, assign, and classify students with truancy problems as

criminals, regardless of the causes of truancy. The ideology of the truancy policy in Texas allows adults to view students with truancy problems as criminals. In contrast, Senator Whitmire and Ms. Merger's testimonies problematized the system of knowledge of students who were being treated as criminals and, in so doing, challenged the legitimacy of categorizing truancy as a criminal matter. Although their stories highlighted a different meaning of truancy, the discussion illuminated the symbolic power of accepted representational practice as an exercise of symbolic violence (Hall, 2006b). Many supporters of the truancy reform bill provide counter-narrative stories to reclaim a system of representation that children are not criminals; truancy is a symptom of a complex array of social problems.

Opponents of the bill used different discursive strategies to weaken the supporter's system of discourse. While supporters provide counter-stories with research reports to legitimize and validate the necessity of passing the bill, opponents cite both legal documents and common sense to delegitimize counter-stories and, in so doing, secure the dominant system of representation of children with truancy problems. Accordingly, the following example is a quote from a truancy officer:

Mr. Barrington: Without the court as a tool and without laws that help hold juveniles and parents accountable, then our attendance rates will drop, and our dropout rates will increase. Common sense and national data indicate that juveniles and dropout of schools are extremely more likely to end up in criminal justice system. Chronic truancy in Texas and everywhere is a very serious situation.I have been doing this for 17 years, we have 22,000 students in our schools district, I have never seen [students being mistreated] before.

From a critical policy perspective (Diem et al., 2014), we found that almost all opponents use the term "juveniles" to speak about students with truancy problems. None of the supporters or opponents problematize this word choice. In other words, using "juveniles," a term borrowed from criminology, has already been naturalized and normalized to describe students with truancy problems. The use of attendance rates and dropout rates as a supporting argument to weaken the need for truancy reform also appeared several times. The concerns about attendance and dropout rates are from an administrative, rather than pedagogical, perspective. With this assumption at play, the truancy system makes sense because it keeps children in schools and prevents them from becoming real criminals. According to Jiwani and Richardson's (2011) typology to analyze discourses of ethnicity and racism, Mr. Barrington uses *reversal* as an argumentation strategy and *criminalization* as a referential strategy to delegitimize a need for changing the current truancy system in Texas.

Another discursive strategy used by Mr. Barrington, also commonly used by other opponents of the bill, is "apparent ignorance" (Jiwani & Richardson, 2011). As Mr. Barrington said, "I have been doing this for 17 years ... I have never seen [students being mistreated] before," other opponents also referred to their experience of not witnessing any of the stories that the supporters of the bill shared. Although supporters of the bill cited a research report that over 115,000 students were punished and criminalized for truancy (Texas Appleseed, 2015), opponents retained a strong sense of disbelieving the need to reform the truancy system because they have not

personally witnessed any unreasonable punishment to students with truancy issues. This discursive practice reinforces the dominant knowledge and representation of a system created by their white privilege.

Looking at the discursive strategies Superintendent Kelly used in his statement, the critical discourse analysis of ethnicity and racism (Jiwani & Richardson, 2011) is useful to understand how Superintendent Kelly shapes the realities of minority students with truancy issues. He not only associates economically disadvantage minority students with drugs and crimes to criminalizing minorities but also reverses the negative impact or result of the current truancy system on students as the cause of criminalization (“this new bill is hyper-criminalization not decriminalization of truancy”). The only superintendent provides a clear discursive strategy to reaffirm a dominant system of representation of truancy and to reverse a definition of the school-to-prison pipeline. Discourses related to criminalizing poverty and students of color, in particular, boys of color are not unique in truancy policies but a universal one in disciplinary policies in general (Basile, 2020; Edelman, 2019; Hirschfield, 2008; Morris, 2016; Portillos et al., 2012).

Commonly used discursive strategies that are associated with forming a symbolic system of deficit representation of students with truant issues involved the following: (1) reversing the negative impact of truancy as a cause of criminalization, (2) naturalizing the view of students with truant issues as criminals by listing several deficits together and providing contrasting cases (Bonilla-Silva, 2013); and (3) referencing students with truant issues in negative, alarming contexts (van Dijk, 1991).

In contrast, discursive strategies that were used for reclaiming a system of representation to students’ realities included using storytelling strategies to humanize students with truancy issues, legitimizing a sense of urgency to reform the current truancy system through interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 2003) by relating other discourses on decriminalizing school discipline policies, and using representative discursive strategy from speech acts theory (Blum-Kulka & Michael Hamo, 2011) to present research-based information to redefine the purpose of criminalizing truancy.

Supporters and opponents of the truancy reform bills have different discursive practices to reclaim or reinforce a system of representation on students with truancy issues. Different discursive strategies are used to prevent or produce new practices (e.g., preventing truancy) and a new system of practice—new truancy laws. Opponents’ discursive practices reinforced the following (1) because the current truancy system works, Texas has low dropout rate across the nation; (2) the truancy system holds students and parents accountable for their truancy problems; (3) none of the opponents have witnessed any students being handcuffed or put in jail for truancy, therefore demonstrating to them that the school-to-prison pipeline is a false premise or an exaggeration; (4) the bill is producing hyper- or quasi- criminalization, not decriminalization; and (5) *all* students with truancy issues should be punished regardless of their race or class.

Supporters of the bill used other discursive strategies to reveal rooted problems of the current truancy system, including: (1) current truancy policy practices are not effective in preventing chronic truancy; (2) students’ court records are not protected; (3) truancy should be an education matter not a crime; (4) truancy is a symptom of other social problems; and (5) Texas truancy policy unfairly punishes social and

economic hardship that students and their families experience while exposing them in a hostile way to the criminal justice system without care to supporting students' actual needs. Although only one supporter of the bill explicitly mentioned the issue of racial disparity in truancy, participants repeatedly cited a research-based truancy report that directly addressed issues of racial disparity in the Texas truancy system (Texas Appleseed, 2015).

Interestingly but not surprisingly, racialized discourses do exist in the testimonies of the opponents and the supporters of the bill. We observed that majority of the opponents of the bill are old white men, and supporters of the bill are from more diverse ethnic backgrounds with mixed of Latinas/os, African Americans, and white women. We observed a strong sense of entitlement and owning the white space from white opponents of the bill during the hearings. For example, Judge Payton ignored the rule of 2 min time limit for each testifier unapologetically, and the committee allowed Judge Payton to go over 30 min and would allow him to continue if he did not finish voluntarily. This observation echoes with the notion of the white space as an uninterrogated space for white individuals (Jackson, 1999), while people of color have to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence (Anderson, 2015).

The findings echo Hall's (2006a) notion of discourse as a system of representation and Foucault's (1972) explanation of the connections of discourse and power and knowledge. Opponents and supporters of the bills used discursive strategies to form discourses that produce or reproduce certain power and knowledge of the truancy policy. These discourses of the truancy policy reveal certain ways of talking about truancy and how truancy links to criminalization, which is particularly prominent in white spaces. This trend is so prominent that it produces ways of using language and influencing the production of what truant is and who should be punished.

Overall, the competing discourses of truancy are based on definitions of the school-to-prison pipeline and decriminalizing truancy. Whereas opponents reversed the meaning of the bill's attempt to criminalize truancy—and in so doing, resist any change to the extant power structures in Texas' discipline policy system in public schools—supporters approached the decriminalizing of truancy in ways that mirrored its usage in scholarship on the school-to-prison pipeline that originated from researchers (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba, 2014). Although there are relatively fewer words borrowed from criminological terms in describing students with truancy issues from supporters than from opponents, the mixed usage of criminological terms in both groups reveals the normalized ideology of criminalizing students' misbehaviors.

Discussions and Implications

Using critical discourse and critical policy analysis helps us understand ideologies of competing discourses through language use from different truancy reform interest groups. Meaning is dialogic and fluid (Hall, 2006a, b). Individuals construct meanings through language practice. From a critical discourse perspective, a power relation can manifest itself through individuals' word choice, depending on one's position and ideology. For example, the word choice of "committed hooky," as opposed

to the most commonly used expression, “play hooky,” reveals individuals’ perceptions of truancy. Moreover, word choices are socially constructed as part of symbolic systems contained within language practices. Were the term “committed” not already associated with describing criminals, we could not readily conclude that its usage here amounts to an automatic referencing of students in this manner. As Kayama et al. (2015) found, using criminal terms to describe student behavior issues negatively impacts students’ social identity and leads a sense of criminal self to students. Educators, school leaders, and policymakers must problematize the usage of criminal terms describing student behavior issues and encourage educators and school administrators to use terms that properly describe behavioral issues.

Findings reveal some problematic linguistic practices in describing truancy, such as colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), deficit discourses associated with low socioeconomic status populations, and an association with criminality (Basile, 2020; Edelman, 2019; Hirschfield, 2008; Morris, 2016; Portillos, 2012). Supporters of the bill primarily focused on students’ financial struggles than racial disparity; the opponents of the bill used Texas accountability ratings to argue the importance of having truancy courts (the truancy courts help to increased attendance rates and lower drop-out rates), and push back on the definition of the school-to-prison pipeline itself, namely, quasi- or hyper-criminalization, as opposed to decriminalization which they negated.

At the micro-level, critical discourse and critical policy analysis methods allow us to understand perspectives of truancy through language use and recognize the silenced voices. At the macro-level, both methods help us acquire the complex relations between social structure and discourse structures (van Dijk, 2008). In other words, power relations are hindered in language use and discursive strategies that give individuals opportunities for word choices that align with their worldviews. The definitions of words are particularly interesting because different word choices can completely change audiences’ perceptions of a social issue. Giving opposite definitions or reversing the meanings of political terms are commonly used discursive strategies used to serve either social justice or the perpetuation of abuse (van Dijk, 2008).

Based on the bill’s language use and political intent, this was a social-justice-oriented truancy reform bill from supporters’ perspective. On the other hand, opponents harnessed their elite power through language to contest their counterparts’ knowledge and discursive approach to maintain the status quo. For example, Judge Payton utilized his power to testify the bill using “common sense” to support his statements without being interrupted or questioned even when he went over the time limit for all the testifiers. Superintendent Kelly tried to redefine the term *criminalization* and described that not sending students to a truant court as *quasicriminalizing* students. As a remedy, we recommend that social-justice-oriented policy reformers and school leaders provide a clear definition of content-specific terms to prevent power plays that can reverse the ideology of social justice in order to perpetuate hegemony (e.g., school-to-prison pipeline, white supremacy, or classism). In our analysis of the public hearings and a Senate general meeting, the power dynamic between supporters (the subordinate ideology of truancy) and opponents (the mainstream ideology of truancy) was not balanced, even though the subordinate ideology of truancy had

more empirical support (Mellet, 2015; Texas Appleseed, 2015). Many opponents agreed with Senator Whitmire about harmful legal practices on punishing the poor with harsh fines for truancy; however, it appears that the majority of the opponents resisted the proposed truancy policy reform because they either financially benefit from truancy cases, or they see the current truancy system working in their courts or school districts, from the lens of state and national school accountability ratings on dropout rates. That is, opponents operating in the context of a “test and punish” system (Cawelti, 2006) construe the truancy system as operating within the same logic.

From whiteness studies standpoints, political environment—a highly politicized space in particular—is a white male elite space (Collins, 2009; Diem et al., 2014; Lopez, 2003; Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). And with Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, which is to see power as culturally and symbolically created (Bourdieu, 1982), we refer to this highly politicized space as a white, elite *habitus* where embedded symbols of white male bodies and privilege are conveyed. As Jackson II (1999) described whiteness is an active ingredient of racism and is a cultural territory and politically charged space. School leaders, social activists, scholars, and educators should nevertheless be aware of the nature of this kind of political space in order to effectively represent voices from marginalized communities.

In terms of truancy reform in Texas, scholars and educators should be more active in participating in school discipline policy reforms. Many of the opponents of the bill used discursive strategies to ignore students’ needs in schools and emphasize the importance of keeping the status quo from adults’ perspective. Some use personal experiences to devalue current scholarship in this regard. Knowing that the punitive truancy policy affects students of color the most (Texas Appleseed, 2015), opponents—white males leveraged their white privilege in an uninterrogated white space (Jackson II, 1999) to maintain the status quo. Many supporters of the bill overlooked the conflicting role that state and federal accountability systems play in constructing the poor youth of color as potential liabilities to school ratings, which closely tie to school finance. Therefore, the power struggles continued with the minimum success of passing the bill.

This research revealed political discourses in one of many recent school disciplinary reform processes in political settings and surfaced the importance of language use to address student disciplinary issues. Kayma et al. (2015) found that using criminal justice language contributes to the issue of the school-to-prison pipeline. Understanding meanings of language use is a form of understanding meanings of a social environment. Both supporters and opponents use criminal terms to describe truancy; only a few supporters did not borrow criminal terms in describing students with truancy issues. Moreover, no participant challenged others’ word choices. Taking a critical linguistics perspective that views linguistic action *as* social action (Kress, 2006), no participants problematized the usage of criminal terms to describe truancy, which normalized the criminality of truancy.

In conclusion, using critical discourse methods can help educators and policy actors seek social change to challenge the presumptions of word choices in policy language use. Policy actors are influential in either changing education policies or maintaining the status quo. Their discourses present not only their actions and ideologies but also others’ in the policy arena.

This study has helped us locate the core issues in the process of the truancy reform and how social problems are viewed at the state level. In order to expand the possibilities for policy changes that support an education equity agenda, word choice and discursive strategies can help policy actors, including teachers and school leaders, to construct compelling arguments in delivering their positions with respect to reforming school discipline policies at the state level. In light of this insight, it is also important to have more educators and school leaders bring conversations about the issues of racism, classism, sexism, and ableism into their state capitals to reclaim the highly politicized space as a space for all citizens, as opposed to one that participates in the systematic “othering” and silencing of minorities’ voices and presence. In addition, the findings suggest that using critical discourse and critical policy analysis methods to analyze public hearings and legislative sessions on education reform bills can benefit educators, policymakers, and researchers to exercise greater awareness of the hidden ideologies that sustain the status quo and how doing so potentially maximizes positive policy changes in education.

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