The Erosion of Trust in Public Schools

by

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B.S., Columbia College, 2015
M.S., Missouri State University, 2017

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

The erosion of trust in public institutions, especially within the world of public schools, has become one of the most pressing concerns in contemporary American society. Over the last fifty years, there has been a drastic decline in public confidence in key institutions, raising alarm for the stability and functionality of our democratic systems. This study aims at investigating the erosion of trust in public schools, which serve as key components of social cohesion and community engagement in the United States. Trust functions as an important currency in democratic landscapes, it allows citizens to engage meaningfully with public services and institutions. This research highlights that without trust, the effectiveness of public schools diminishes, potentially leading to severe societal ramifications such as alternative forms of education that may not uphold the same standards or equity and accessibility.

The examination unfolds through a qualitative approach, leveraging Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis to investigate the factors contributing to this trust erosion. Key culprits such as political influences, power dynamics, class influences, neoliberal influences, and various forms of oppression and manipulation will be analyzed to explain their respective impacts on public perception. Crucial incidents, ranging from legislative reforms to systemic failures have not only led to disillusionment but have also fostered a climate of distrust towards the K-12 educational systems. The sewing of distrust and the effects of truth decay hinder parental engagement, student participation, and community participation, ultimately compromising the educational experience and outcomes.

Furthermore, the role of social media in shaping public opinion and reinforcing distrust will be examined through the lens of participants on the online platform Reddit. The ability for misinformation and disinformation to propagate quickly through digital spaces helps to

exacerbate existing tensions and creates an atmosphere of distrust regarding the motives and effectiveness of public schools. As schools continue to struggle with the multifaceted challenges posed by both external perceptions and internal dynamics, understanding the root cause of this erosion of trust becomes paramount for educators, policymakers, and community leaders.

As the study progresses, it aims to offer not only insights into the nature of the issue, but also potential pathways for rebuilding trust in public schools. Identifying successful trust-building initiatives from around the country may help to provide a framework for building applicable strategies and to foster a well-informed and engaged community which is essential for not only public schools but for the health of our democracy.

The findings from this research will contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding educational reform and public policy, providing content driven recommendations for building back trust in public schools. By addressing the identified culprits of trust erosion, public school stakeholders can create environments favorable to transparency, accountability, and community involvement, which are critical for building robust democratic institutions such as public schools. The implications of this study extend beyond the realms of education by highlighting the connections between trust, civic participation, and societal well-being. In the end, restoring trust in public schools is not only an educational challenge, it is a fundamental necessity for sustaining the democratic fabric of our society, enabling a collective commitment to quality education for all.

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Abstract

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Acknowledgements

To my parents and step-parents, despite the odds, here I am thanks to you all. I could not have done this without you all. I love you! To my wife Bonnie. Thank you for being by my side through this entire process, through years of my silliness, and for the endless support you provide. You are amazing, I love you so much! To my children, I am so very sorry. My stubborn dedication came at quite the price. Years meant for you were spent in the name of securing some sort of future for us all, some way to rise above the fray. I am sorry for all the moments lost. My hope is that this endeavor will somehow make up for the lost time, that it will open doors for us that were once impossible. It is never too late to try to make the world better, and I hope I can use this to make yours the best I possibly can. It was always for you, the loves of my life.

To my brother Mike, thank you for being there for me when I needed support, I love you dude! To my sisters, thanks for loving me and hating me all at the same time. I know that putting up with my snarky antics is not ideal so thank you for your support! I love you both! To Atlas, I wish you could see this buddy. Thank you for your company, especially in your final days. I hope to one day bring as much warmth to the world as you brought to mine early in this process, minus all that whining whenever we put you outside. You really were a Velcro dog. I miss you! To Bandit and Callisto, you are great fuzzy distractions! I appreciate your lighthearted perspectives and your companionship. I love you both!

To my friends, thank you for your steadfast support throughout the process! Doing something like this alone would have been horrible. You helped to inspire me through it all! To my professors, thank you for your leadership, inspiration, and guidance. I would still be trying to figure out what I was going to write about if it were not for you all. Thanks! To David Lynch,

thank you for your inspirational film-making! RIP! To everyone else, you all rock! Thanks for all your support!

Dedication

In the name of succinctness, I shall keep this dedication concise. This work is dedicated to my amazing family, my supportive friends, my enlightening professors, and to everyone else who has made an impact on my life and my work. I love and appreciate you all! Thank you for your support throughout this most excellent adventure!

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Overview

"Trust is the scarcest commodity in the world. Nothing else comes close." said Ted Gioia succinctly in his blog *The Honest Broker* (Gioia, 2023, para. 7). My interpretation of Mr. Gioia is he is trying to convey that trust is exceedingly important; it is a finite resource that must be cultivated like flowers in a garden. Unfortunately, few see trust as endangered as Mr. Gioia. From public schools to elected officials, trust has been decreasing substantially over the last fifty years (Brady & Kent, 2022). What has caused trust to decline steadily over the previous five decades? My research provides an answer to that question and recommendations for educators to combat the erosion of trust.

This chapter introduces the reader to the heart of this study. First, I discuss the general problem, or the general what. Second, I transition into a brief discussion of this project's focus, the specific what. Third, I highlight the importance of the study, or what I call the why. Fourth, I detail the inquiry framework, the how conceptually speaking. Here I also include information on my chosen theoretical framework. Fifth, I discuss the inquiry statement, how procedurally speaking. This is where I will lay out the research questions and highlight the methodological choices I made. Sixth, study boundaries, such as delimitation and limitations, are provided. Lastly, I conclude this chapter with a summary and transition to the next chapter. A more detailed explanation of the information below is included in subsequent chapters.

Statement of the Research Problem

The problem I investigated was the erosion of trust. As I said before, trust has become one of the scarcest commodities in the known world. Additionally, the public's trust in institutions across the United States has also become scarce, plummeting greatly over the last

five decades (Brady & Kent, 2022). This is a substantial issue due to the need for trust and transparency in a democracy like ours in the United States. If trust continues to erode, democratic pillars such as public schools will fail, and private institutions will surge to fill the void for better or worse.

Purpose of the Study

Specifically, uncovering the culprits for the erosion of the public's trust in public schools was the primary aim of this study. If trust is a critical aspect of social cohesion, it follows that trust in public schools, one of the institutions where many citizens spend a substantial portion of their lives, all play a large part in maintaining social cohesion (Niedlich et al., 2021). Additionally, according to Schaeffer (2024), approximately 83% of students attend traditional public schools, compared to 10% in private schools, and 7% in public charter schools in the 2021-2022 school year. Despite these statistics, the role of trust in traditional public schools has received scarce investigation over the years, and this research seeks to fill that gap (Niedlich et al., 2021).

Research Questions

In this research, I have used Critical Theory to establish the research questions out of the ruminations in my mind and set the path and goal. The aim of this section is threefold. First, I introduce the research questions that form the basis for this inquiry. Second, I discuss the basis for each question. Third, I discuss the methodology informed by the research questions. Lastly, I briefly cover the methods I will use to attain the answers to my research questions.

1. Why is trust eroding in public schools, and who or what has contributed?
2. What events have contributed to the erosion of trust in public schools?
3. What are the benefits of eroding trust in public schools?

4. How can a trust erosion in public schools be reversed and what steps might be taken?

Research Question Basis

The research questions above were chosen because I believed that each of them would allow a deeper examination of the erosion of trust in public schools. The purpose of each of these questions was to explore the foundations of the erosion of trust and to slowly build toward potential mitigation efforts. To better explain why, I now break down the basis for each question individually.

The first question was the foundation for this study. Its purpose was to delve into why trust is eroding in public schools, and to discover who or what is contributing to the erosion. The second question builds upon the why by looking into events that have contributed to the erosion of trust. By understanding the events that have led to trust erosion, we can trace the lineage of the issue. The genesis of each lineage helps to bring awareness to potential catalysts. If one understands the catalysts, one can begin to realize who might benefit from the erosion of trust in public schools. The third question then moved to focus on what might be beneficial about eroding trust, bringing to light the potential motives. Lastly, the final question focused on how the trend of erosion might be reversed, ultimately building back trust.

Framework and Methodology

The purpose of the research heavily informs the selection of one's methodology, the theoretical framework chosen, and the research questions asked. The philosophical stance or framework one chooses informs methodology, providing a foundation for criteria and logic, as well as context. Another way to think of it is as one’s strategy, a plan, process, or design that supports one’s choice of methods. It helps to connect one’s choice of methods to the desired outcome one is aiming for (Crotty, 1998). It became apparent that I needed to select a framework

and one or two methodologies that critically focus on the content of publicly available data and the discourse inherent in such data. Therefore, this section briefly explains the framework and methodology behind this study, which is a threefold process. First, I explain the inquiry framework chosen. Second, I discuss the methodologies I used to conduct this study. Third, I briefly explain the reasoning behind my methodological choices. A more detailed account of the framework and methodologies I use are in chapter three of this study.

Framework

It was vital that I took ample time to delve into the root causes of the decline of trust in public schools. Of all the possible frameworks, I needed to utilize one critical of social structures and power dynamics. A critical framework aids in making social structures visible by challenging assumptions of societies' dominant forms of thinking and assumed power relations tied to dominant forms of thinking (Paradis et al., 2020). As such, this study employs critical inquiry. Specifically, this work aimed to question dominant ideologies' assumptions and challenge normative and assumed power relations, which are all essential aspects in Critical Theory (Paradis et al., 2020). Therefore, I have challenged the current beliefs surrounding the erosion of trust in public schools and uncovered the power relations at play.

Content Analysis

This section briefly explains what Content Analysis is and how I used it in this study. Krippendorff (2004), one of the most prominent figures in Content Analysis, suggests that Content Analysis is a research technique one can use to make valid inferences, which can be easily reproduced from texts to the contexts of the use of texts. I take this to mean the inferences made from the texts or use of text could be made by others with a similar aim, essentially stating that my inferences could be made by others who wish to follow in my footsteps. As such, the

user of this form of analysis can use analytical constructs derived from existing theories, practices, experiences, knowledge, or previous research to move from the text toward answering their research questions (Krippendorff, 2004).

Content Analysis is also understood as any technique for interrogating messages and making inferences using a systematic and objective identification process to discover specific characteristics of the messages or codes (Holsti, 1969). Holsti further discusses three crucial aspects of Content Analysis that separate it from carefully reading a document. He first states that an analysis must have objectivity. Secondly, it must include a consistent and systematic analysis so others may reach the same conclusions. Third, it must have generality and theoretical relevance (Holsti, 1969). Furthermore, one must ensure the codes used represent the elements of the object of study. Such codes must be exhaustive, enabling the classification of every item of importance to the study (Holsti, 1969). Lastly, Content Analysis is conducted in three phases: preparation, organization, and reporting, which all tie into how I will use Content Analysis (Elo et al., 2014).

With all the above information briefly explained, I now explain how employed Content Analysis. I particularly liked a checklist developed by Elo et al. (2014). The checklist highlights each of the phases of Content Analysis, which are then broken down into subsections and have questions one needs to answer to ensure the utmost trustworthiness in their study (Elo et al., 2014). Following the checklist, ensures results with rich rigor, results that can be reproduced, which is vital to quality research. To clarify, the thoroughness of this checklist enhances the quality and accuracy of the results by providing an exhaustive set of analysis objectives. If another researcher were to follow this checklist, they should reach similar results, though with slight differences due to the nuance of individual perspectives.

Digital Discourse Analysis

This section briefly explains what Digital Discourse Analysis is and its use in this study. Before explaining Digital Discourse Analysis, I first define its foundation, discourse analysis. Discourse analysis allows examination of discourse to identify power structures, uncover hidden ideologies, and ultimately contribute to the betterment of society (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Discourse analysis is the study of the meaning we place upon language and the actions one carries out when using language in a specific context (Gee & Handford, 2012). Furthermore, discourse analysis examines the myriad ways reality and experience are constructed through social and interpersonal practices. These practices can take the shape of texts or anything of meaning that may be written or spoken. For example, this can include texts as professional as journal articles or as simple as social media posts (Korobov, 2020).

As for Digital Discourse Analysis, the definitions above are then focused more specifically on the rise in digital technologies that have provided new ways for people to work, communicate, and maintain social relationships. This new avenue has a significant impact on how we make friends, how we work, how we learn, and how political systems function. Think of it as the gamut of actions brought about by the many utilities we now have that are tied to digital technologies. These new implements provide many ways to attain social goals, enact social identities, and even reproduce aspects of social relationships (Jones et al., 2015).

As such, the near-instantaneous rate of digital communication has given rise to new forms of good and evil. The birth of digital communication can be seen as good due to the wealth of digital information brought to our fingertips from across the web. Conversely, there is now an evil that has the power to spread malicious intent across the cyber universe using the same availability. Using digital communication for good, this research capitalizes on the rapid data

availability the digital realm brings. Thus, for this study, the focus was on the digital forms of discourse made available via journals, news articles, books, and social media contributions. These mediums were selected because each has a discourse that works within the context of the medium. Thus, each offers a nuanced lens to view and study discourse while optimizing availability.

In terms of using Digital Discourse Analysis, the approach is similar to that of Content Analysis. In Vivo coding identifies power structures and ideologies in the data collected. Saldaña (2021) likens In Vivo coding to using the words of those represented in the data. For example, if a person suggested political rhetoric is to blame for some educational issue, the exact words of the person, political rhetoric is to blame, as the code for that specific section of the text. The reason for choosing In Vivo coding is because discourse analysis focuses on discourse, and discourse is made up of the words of actual people. Thus, In Vivo coding is the best fit. To be thorough, I will perform at least two rounds of coding to identify categories, subcategories, and themes in the data, allowing me to develop answers to my research questions.

Methods

We live in a world that surrounds us with data. From the radio waves producing the news to the internet and various social media platforms, we live in an ocean of information. All these sources of information have a direct impact on our thoughts, feelings, and trust. These datasets are available instantly, providing a figuratively direct connection with end users anytime. For these reasons, I chose to primarily use digital data from digital sources. In summation, the following paragraphs briefly highlight how I collected and analyzed data procedurally. For a more detailed account of my methods, consult chapter three of this study.

Terms

The following provides definitions for key terms, constructs, technical language, and any abbreviations used in this study that may not be common knowledge. First, I define the sixfold actionable data selection process or SAD technique. Second, I define thought streams. Third, I define shop talk, or what I intend shop talk to be, Fourth, I define trust, and lastly, I define public schools.

Sixfold Actionable Data Selection Process (SAD) Defined

The Sixfold Actionable Data Selection Process, or SAD, is a data selection process I created, that takes a funnel-like iterative approach to data selection. The process starts with a broad collection of data that is constantly narrowed down with each step. The result is a carefully curated selection of data tailored to meet the intent of the research being conducted. This is highlighted in detail later in this chapter.

Thought Streams Defined

Thought Streams are a derivative of analytic memos. Saldaña (2021) suggests that analytic memos are brain dumps, blogs, or journal entries about processes, phenomena, or even one's thoughts. As such, Thought Streams are memos, notes, or annotations comprised of my thoughts about various aspects of this study. This is highlighted in detail later in this chapter.

Shop Talk Defined

Shop talk is the verbal sharing of thoughts with family, friends, peers, professors, and coworkers to elicit thought-provoking responses. These informal discussions provide an alternative lens to view one’s research. It also provides a check and balance aspect to ensure I remain on topic and that the information provided in this study remains relevant. This is highlighted in detail later in this chapter.

Trust Operationally Defined

As stated previously, McEvily et al. (2003) suggest that trust is made up of three parts, trust as a belief, trust as a decision, and trust as an action. Belief is considered confident, positive expectations of a person or institution. The decision is explained as a desire to make oneself vulnerable concerning persons or institutions. Trust as an action is acting in a way congruent with one who has decided to believe in a person or institution.

Public Schools Operationally Defined

For the intent of this study, public schools are defined as schools that are supported by public funding, be it local, state, or federal funds. More specifically, public schools are schools that are available to everyone within the United States populace, regulated and funded through government authority. This funding usually comes from the taxation of United States citizens, which is then allocated by local, state, and federal entities.

Data Collection Process

Knowing when, where, and how to find data that are significant enough to include in one's studies is a skill that is sharpened over time. The same can be said for the methods one uses for a given study. Next, I discuss all parts of the process which are date range selected, participants and site of the study, data collection methods, and finally Artificial Intelligence usage.

Date Range Selection

The erosion of trust in public schools is not a recent theme, as I have highlighted trust has been decreasing substantially over the last fifty years, and likely beyond (Brady & Kent, 2022). Nevertheless, focusing on beyond the past fifty years would be a daunting task, thus I needed to

provide a more tailored scope for this project. As such, I chose to focus primarily on the most significant events of the past fifty years that have led to trust erosion in public schools.

Participants and Site Selection

This study focused on digital data that is readily available on the internet through academic search methods, social media postings, and news articles and books. As such, this study did not have participants in the usual form or at a specific site. Put succinctly, all the data is publicly available and can be pulled from the internet or a library without the need for additional permissions. For example, I used Journal Storage or JSTOR, ProQuest, and the Education Resources Information Center or ERIC for academic articles, books, and news articles. Additionally, I used social media sites such as Reddit to gather social media postings.

Data Collection Method

Since the data I am searching for can be pulled from existing digital sources, I have developed the sixfold actionable data selection process or SAD. The SAD selection process is an iterative approach to data harvesting, starting at an elevated level before moving into more finite levels of data. Using this funnel-like approach, the selection process naturally leads to identifying the primary culprits of trust degradation, seen broadly across all mediums and, more specifically, across specific media.

Though I explain in further detail in Chapter 3, the SAD process is a concept I created derived from my experiences as a meteorologist for the United States Air Force. Briefly put, I modified a technique called the forecast funnel, which is a process akin to what was explained above. One starts with a broad look at the weather to get the big picture of what may be causing the weather locally. From there, a forecaster will iteratively narrow their focus, gathering all the

possible culprits for the weather, before settling on finer scale factors driving the weather. For more background on how I developed the SAD method, Chapter 3 provides a broader look.

Data Collection Using Artificial Intelligence

Due to the prevalence of Artificial Intelligence or AI usage in academia today, I felt it prudent to include a minor section on the usage of AI in my data collection methods. Other than standard academic search engines provided by the Kansas State University Library and the gamut of resources it has, or the search capabilities inherent in social media platforms, I made no specific use of AI in my data collection. In fact, the only thing AI was used for in the creation of this work was for spelling, grammar checking, and the occasional hints regarding how I might make my work sound more professional. Nevertheless, there exist multiple academic search engines to use such as Google Scholar or Semantic Scholar that would fall under explicit AI-based research implements, both of which were unused in my regard.

Data Analysis

Analyzing data is an arduous process that should be done with a caring mindset. Being thorough and methodical throughout the process is necessary. For those two reasons, I developed another process to reach the heart of the data. I created a four-part process involving coding, analytic memos or thought streams, shop talk, and theming.

First, coding assigns a word or phrase to a part of the data to highlight significance, essence, and symbols and summarize data. I think of coding as a way of analyzing data to highlight words or passages I felt were important or that led to further refinement. Second, analytic memos, which are brain dumps, blogs, annotations, or journal entries about processes, phenomena, or even thoughts. I call my analytic memo writing thought streams because I stream my thoughts from my mind to a piece of paper or computer program. I do this to provide insights

into my thinking, learning, or feeling to have transparency in my analytical processes (Saldaña, 2021).

Third, shop talk is like sharing thoughts with family, friends, peers, professors, and coworkers to solicit feedback. It is an informal discussion to poke holes in or confirm aspects of my research. Another way to think of it is as an informal form of peer review. Lastly, theming, which is derived from coding, categorization, and analytic reflection. Therefore, it uses developments from coding, analytic memo writing, and talking shop to identify themes in my data (Saldaña, 2021).

Delimitations

I first explain what delimitations are before moving into the specific delimitations of this study. Theofanidis & Fountouki (2019) suggest that delimitations are the limitations one purposely sets on a study. Think of these as the boundaries set by the researcher that limit the scope of work so the objective of completing a study does not grow beyond what is possible to achieve. Delimitations are primarily situated on the study's theoretical background, objectives, research questions, and any variables or samples under the study's purview. The easiest way to think of delimitations is to consider it a section for why study was not conducted a certain way.

For my research to be possible, I set boundaries. Maintaining focus and decreasing drift was essential in developing a delimitation plan. The key to this plan was to ensure that data was representative of the opinions of not only the subject matter experts but also the opinions of the public. Furthermore, it was necessary for the information used to be easy to access so others might have the ability to understand as much of my study as possible. As such, first, I chose to focus solely on digital data. The reason for this choice was because there are copious amounts of data that already exist on the internet or in libraries. The ease of access was a significant

contributing factor to this first choice. Second, due to the nature of my methodologies, Content Analysis, and Digital Discourse Analysis, focusing on retrieving digital forms of journals, books, news articles, and social media was the logical choice.

Limitations

According to Theofanidis and Fountouki (2019), limitations are the weaknesses of the study outside the realm of control for the researcher. Typically, limitations are brought upon by the type of research being conducted, time and funding constraints, and other factors. Consider limitations as imposed restrictions that may affect the study.

Focusing solely on digital media has inherent limitations. First, this study does not rely on gathering information directly from participants but rather through digital media that may or may not include participant posts. The nuanced data that can be gathered by talking directly to the experts in person must be recovered in translation. Second, it is difficult to know if the data I archive is sourced from an adequate population sample. Social media postings are often anonymous. Thus, I do not know the demographics of said posters. Third, news articles and social media postings come complete with biases that must be understood and navigated. The same could be said for academic journal articles. Ultimately, I must be aware of bias and provide multiple perspectives to paint reality better. Fourth, social media postings are not the opinion of the masses but merely a subset, so generalizations cannot be made from those data. Nevertheless, this study is significant because it assimilates a fresh perspective on the lack of trust in public schools.

Significance of the Study

A phrase many people echo, trust is everything, immediately emerges when thinking of the importance of this study. A thought experiment best serves this section. If public trust in our

institutions, specifically educational ones, continues to erode, less money will be allocated to those institutions from the public and state or federal officials might be less inclined to support public schools via legislation and taxes. Where might this lead next?

To continue the experiment, perhaps private schools will fill the void if less money is spent on public schools. As with public schools, private schools are not free and require additional sources of funding. Thus, parents from lower income ranges may need more money to put their children in private schools, so they will either need to find an underfunded public school, push for legislation to help subsidize private schools through more taxes at the state or federal level, or take on an additional job to pay for a private school as well as transportation to it. That means more children will receive a poorer education or have less parental interaction due to their parents working more to pay the bills. What might happen to class dynamics and wealth gaps if such a scenario were to unfold?

Another interesting side effect of the erosion of trust is that fewer kids will want to be teachers when they grow up, and fewer parents will want their kids to be teachers. According to Stanford (2022), 62% of parents say they would not want their children to become teachers. They cite poor pay, difficulties, demands, stress, and lack of respect as the greatest factors. If parents cannot trust that society will properly support their children as teachers, why would they push their children to become teachers? Who would want an underpaid job that affords a person little respect from the public? Unfortunately, fewer children becoming teachers would further contribute to the erosion of trust. As indicated from the discussion above, trust is indeed everything. If little is done to stop the slow annihilation of trust in our institutions, it may result in the potential failure of our democracy.

Positionality and Researcher Bias

The objective of this section is to provide the reader with the lens from which I viewed this study. This lens allows the reader to better recreate what I accomplished in this study. To do this, I first discuss my positionality concerning this study. Lastly, I disclose the biases I harbored.

Positionality

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) suggest that positionality reflects the position a researcher takes within their study. It is identified by locating a researcher within the subject being researched, the participants, and the research context and process (Darwin Holmes, 2020). Taking the identification process further, Savin-Baden and Major (2013) provide examples for each of the three ways of identifying positionality. First, I acknowledge my position and how it may influence the research. Second, I consider how I view myself and how others may view me while understanding I may not be fully aware of how I and others may have developed our identities. Lastly, I acknowledge that the research I conducted was influenced by my position and by the context of the research itself. The following is my account of each of the three ways of identifying positionality, done in a thought stream style.

Locating Myself Within the Research Subject

Where do I fit in the erosion of trust in public schools? I first see myself as a parent, deeply interested in all aspects of public schools and how they impact my children. I want nothing more than for my children to have the best education possible, one that is trustworthy, transparent, and critically transformative. As such, I find that it is my duty to uncover the source of the erosion of trust in public schools. Secondly, I see myself as a student of education, thus a person with a deep investment in public schools and their well-being. I care profoundly about trust in public institutions and the culprits that may be degrading that trust. Lastly, I see myself

as an educator at heart, and as such, I have I love for all things education. The love I feel for the education community is very influential on my life and beliefs.

At this juncture, it is apparent that I hold education in high regard. The problem with this is that my placing so much importance on education can provoke blind spots in my research due to the emotions this subject elicits. As such, I must be careful to keep my emotions in check and to be as transparent as possible about the aspects of this research that bring about these strong feelings. Ultimately, transparency about my mental state allows those who read this to understand my position and views more clearly.

Locating Myself Within the Participants

Where do I fit within the participants of this study? This study is different in that the participants are not the typical type. As I am using Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis, I rely primarily on digital forms of data, which are typically not participant-driven. Nevertheless, I gathered data from public sources of information such as the social media platform Reddit, so in a sense, I should place myself among those posting on these public forums. When using Reddit, I primarily focus on education or teaching-related subreddits. As such, many of those postings are individuals with at least some investment in teaching and education, be they parents, teachers, taxpayers, or some other stakeholder. I also have a level of investment in teaching and education being a teacher, student, and parent of students, so I may place myself firmly among these individuals as an investor. Each investor, myself included, has a position and belief system that informs their perspective. These perspectives can easily impact judgment and responses on the forum. I see individuals I side with and those with whom I disagree. The key is to keep an open mind to any perspectives given and to give them all a voice.

There are many culprits impacting trust in public schools, and many investors have opinions about each.

Acknowledgment of Influence

Where there are positions to take there are influences in such positions. We are humans and humans are imperfect. It is almost inevitable that all humans will pick a side in almost any debate or subject and education is no different. Until a time arises that humanity can relinquish all desire to seek out sides and find the middle way, we will find ourselves being pulled this way and that. I feel the influence of politics, classism, sexism, racism, religion, power, and social media daily. Every choice I make is consciously or subconsciously affected by those who raised me and the world around me. Programming from the decades of existence on this planet pulls at my strings, coaxing me this way and that. The truth is that this research was no different, my positionality has influenced all aspects of the research. The key is being as transparent as I can about what strings are being pulled and why. I acknowledge this and have done my best to be as transparent as possible.

Researcher Bias

Polit and Beck (2014) suggest that bias is any influence that may distort a study's results, so by extension, researcher bias is any influence on a researcher that may distort the results of their study. In the name of rigor, trustworthiness, and reflexivity, it is best to explain what biases we harbor wittingly and unwittingly, through introspection. As I did for positionality, I did for researcher bias, I now provide a thought stream of sorts about bias.

First, I am a White male, born and raised in a primarily White community in a suburb of Kansas City. Much of the lens from which I view the world is tinged with a White male perspective, which comes complete with a multitude of privileges that open a wide assortment of

doors. I would be foolish to declare this has little impact on the way I conduct research. Nearly everything I do is affected by my being a White male. Thus, my White male perspective impacts the way I view the world and may skew the results of any research in which I partake.

The White male lens and privileges have allowed for my next bias to take shape, and that is the bias of my education. Not only have I had access to well-funded public schools, but this education was based on a primarily White male perspective of the world. How I have been nurtured throughout my life has been largely orchestrated via a male-dominated society and education, thus my programming reflects such.

Another bias I hold is my spiritual bias. I subscribe to what might be considered a derivative of Buddhism, thus most of what I do in my life is situated around finding balance. I would not call myself a Buddhist outright though I would say many beliefs related to Buddhism resonate within me. As such, my spiritual beliefs inform and influence how I look at the world, which also bleeds into my research.

As I discussed in the positionality section, I am a human being; thus I come equipped with the ability to have feelings. These personal feelings such as anger, fear, and passion all have a way of influencing my judgment. Often, I am conscious of my feelings and am able to simply let them pass. Consequently, there are times when conscious feelings, unconscious feelings, stereotypes, and assumptions may bleed into my research.

This section could continue in an almost infinite manner due to the never-ending sources of bias-producing events. Ultimately, the goal of this section was to showcase the most prevalent bias that may affect the research I conduct. By being forthcoming about them, this transparent account allows readers to make their own decisions about what is influencing me, and decide how they may go about reproducing what I have done in this study.

Organization of the Study

In summary, this chapter supplied an overview of the significant parts of this study. First, it highlighted the general problem that was the focus of my research. Second, the research funnel became narrower with the description of the study focus. From there, the third part of this chapter focused on the importance of the study and the likely results. Fourth, the inquiry framework was discussed, and a theoretical framework was established. Fifth, I discussed the inquiry statement, which was a collection of research questions, the methodology used for the study, and methods. Lastly, I discussed the boundaries of the study, specifically the delimitations and limitations.

Moving forward, Chapter 2 covers the literature review, showcasing what is already known in the literature and building the foundation for the remainder of the study. From there, methodology is discussed in Chapter 3, detailing the critical perspective of this qualitative inquiry, providing a detailed description of the methodological framework and research design. Afterwards, findings from the research process are provided in Chapter 4, highlighting the various themes uncovered in the data. Finally, the study is finished with Chapter 5 which details a discussion about contributions, improvements, questions and surprises, literary cohesion, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the available relevant, substantive, and methodological literature related to this study's purpose. While telling the literature story from my perspective, I showcase the lineage of the literature by following my five-step process for conducting a literature review. First, I produce an examination of research literature and theory specific to this study, organized around my theory and research questions. Second, I offer a summary of literature review, discussing what is known and unknown about my topic through a broad range of research studies, including a summary of results. Third, I discuss the contributions of the study, explicating what the dissertation brings to the field. Fourth, I provide insights into the theory discussed throughout the literature. Lastly, I showcase a summary of the chapter before transitioning to Chapter 3.

Research Literature

Trust in public schools, specifically K-12, has been eroding more quickly for at least the past 50 years (Brady & Kent, 2022). Until recently, this form of trust erosion has seen little research. In fact, the current body of research related to the erosion of trust in public schools is so limited that many of the uncovered studies do not completely relate to the nature of this study. Much of the available research focuses on specific ideologies, with some secondary and tertiary connections to the erosion of trust in public education.

I heavily relied on Butin (2010) and his literature selection processes. Using the keywords trust, public schools, erosion, decline, and catalysts in the databases of Journal Storage or JSTOR, ProQuest, and the Education Resources Information Center or ERIC, I collected a limited selection of related literature. I then used supplementary sources such as references in

literature and standard searches on the internet using various internet search engines, searching for sources that inform the erosion of trust in public schools.

What follows are sections organized around the research questions for this study, providing a thorough overview of literature related to this work. First, I provided an overview of trust, which is a building block for the rest of the literature review. Next is an examination of current literature relating to why trust in public schools is eroding, and who has contributed. From there I showcased literature concerning events that have contributed to the erosion of trust in public schools. Next, I shifted the focus to what the literature says about who might be benefiting from the erosion of trust in public schools. Lastly, I highlighted the current literature related to how to reverse trust erosion's impacts in public schools, and the steps involved.

Trust

According to Tschannen-Moran (2014), trust has become a sparse commodity, especially over the last few decades. As trust is at the heart of this study, the purpose of the following section was twofold. First, I defined trust in the context of this study and the literature review to follow. Second, I delved into the types of trust presented in the literature that supports and strengthens this work.

The definition of trust changes based on the context in which trust is used. For the intent of this literature review, trust is defined from an educational context while supporting such a definition without examples from other contexts. Regardless of the definition, trust is one of the most critical aspects of relations, personal or societal. If taken in the context of a public institution or organization, Tschannen-Moran (2014), suggests that trust is the glue that keeps an organization humming along, though through mysterious means. Trust is a binding agent that keeps society together and is one of the key ingredients for society's general development. Think

of trust as a model car; without glue, the car is simply an assortment of parts in disarray, but with glue, the car is a functioning whole.

Regarding the theme of glue, Tschannen-Moran (2014) also states that trust is fragile. Once something fragile breaks, like glass, it is difficult to restore to its original shape. Imagine picking up the pieces of a glass figurine, reassembling it with adhesive, and comparing it to a photo of how it was before, the cracks quite literally can be seen. Repairing trust takes a degree of effort, of humility, and it cannot mend overnight; it is a marathon process.

From a slightly different angle, and related to the operational definition used, in Chapter 1, McEvily et al., (2003) suggest trust is made up of three parts, (1) trust as a belief, (2) trust as a decision, and (3) trust as an action. Belief in this framework means confident, positive expectations of a person or institution. The decision in this three-part definition is a desire to make oneself vulnerable concerning persons or institutions. Trust as an action is acting in a way that is congruent with one who has decided to believe in a person or institution. Thus, trust is a multifaceted concept made up of individual decisions to be vulnerable and to believe and take voluntary actions to support the trust process (McEvily et al., 2003).

Next, I shift to the types of trust gleaned from the research literature. According to Cerna (2014), there are several types of trust, such as interpersonal, organizational, and institutional. By understanding the multifaceted nature of trust, one begins to understand how complex the notion of trust is. Interpersonal trust comprises two forms of trust, particularized and generalized or social trust. Particularized trust is trust in family, friends, and co-workers. It ties into shared experiences, attachment, and a keen knowledge of one another. Generalized or social trust is trust in others, specifically not family, friends, or co-workers. Think of this trust as shared values and norms of behavior in society. Organizational trust is the trust in an organization, a desire to

be vulnerable to an organization. This type of trust connects to order and the social environment of an organization. The last form of trust is institutional trust. This type of trust is the primary concern of this study. Institutional trust is the most important for this study because it concerns trust in government and governmental institutions such as public schools. This form of trust is contingent with actions taken by institutional entities, e.g., if politicians or schools take actions in line with personal beliefs, trust will build. If actions are taken by government entities that do not align with personal beliefs, trust in those entities declines (Cerna, 2014).

Why is trust eroding in public schools, and who or what has contributed?

According to the research, this section's title was a question with many answers. Controversial topics such as diversity, equity, inclusion, Critical Race Theory, standardized testing, curriculum, LGBTQ+ rights, classism, racism, sexism, and religion can create tension in local school districts and their communities (Poynton et al., 2018, p. 266). Additionally, those who have been present and aware of politics towards the end of the 20th and early 21st centuries have likely witnessed a polarization thanks to political posturing and rhetoric from all sides of the spectrum. To a degree, the increasing polarization has helped further erode trust in many institutions in the United States (Brady & Kent, 2022).

Understanding the implications of these contentious issues requires recognizing the various forms of trust that come into focus when examining institutions. From an institutional standpoint, the relevant form of trust is institutional trust. This type of trust is central to this study as it pertains to confidence in government and public institutions such as schools. Institutional trust depends on the actions taken by these entities, when policies or decisions align with personal beliefs, trust strengthens. Conversely, when government actions contradict individual perspectives, trust diminishes (Cerna, 2014). Institutional trust is rooted in the guiding

principles or framework of an institution. It ties into the transparency and efficiency of institutional operations. A shared belief in these foundational values fosters trust not only in the institution itself but also among individuals who adhere to the same principles (Niedlich et al., 2021).

Interpersonal trust, or relational trust, also plays a significant role in the erosion of trust in public schools. This type of trust falls into two categories: particularized and generalized (or social) trust. Particularized trust refers to the confidence people place in family, friends, and co-workers. Shared experiences, close attachments, and deep understanding strengthen these relationships. This trust directly connects to the bonds between students, families, and their teachers (Cerna, 2014).

Generalized or social trust, conversely, extends beyond personal circles. It reflects confidence in others outside of family, friends, or co-workers. This form of trust applies to the public school system, particularly the elements that students and parents do not interact with directly (Cerna, 2014). The next section explores institutional and relational trust through a series of divisive topics which I call lenses.

Politics

Institutional trust is primarily based on transparency and effectiveness. Unfortunately, the transparency and effectiveness of current political parties in the United States are at a significant low point. Over 70% of Republicans and Democrats feel they cannot agree on plans, policies, or basic facts (Dimock, 2020). A more recent study by Rekker (2024) which was a survey experiment, sought to dig into how political beliefs aided in deepening the polarization between Democrats and Republicans along factual lines. Their research builds upon Dimock (2020) in that despite being presented with factual information, the relationship between Democrats and

Republicans on policy and how they see one another provides little if any political polarization mitigation. If they cannot agree on the most basic facts, that leads to a degradation in effectiveness. Additionally, according to *ABC* News, over the period of January 2022 to January 2023, the United States Congress was only able to pass a meager 34 bills, the lowest overall amount since the Great Depression, which directly ties into effectiveness. If effectiveness is one aspect of trust in institutions, and these institutions are the same institutions to tell the people what they should and should not learn in public schools, what might that do to trust in public schools that are impacted by politics?

Hess and Sanon (2022) suggest a view of trust declining from a political perspective, highlighting that a mere 13 percent of Republicans had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in public schools in 2022, two years into the pandemic, which also coincided with the lowest levels of trust ever. They suggest there were three catalysts that led to the decline in trust among republicans. First, they point to teachers' unions fighting to keep schools closed, saying that they leaned on the Center for Disease Control to make reopening as difficult as possible. They also suggest that remote learning opportunities for children during the pandemic were dismal at best. Finally, they note that The National School Board Association said that parents who were angry about school conditions during the pandemic should be treated like domestic terrorists (p. 1).

Similarly, Brady and Kent (2022) amassed data from Gallup Poll, the General Social Survey, and the Harris Poll from the last fifty years to highlight the growing polarization and the weakening trust in public institutions. This data highlights that over the last fifty years, Democrats have trusted labor, the press, science, higher education, and public schools more than Republicans (Brady & Kent, 2022). The resulting question from this is why?

A recent example of a politician delving into the realm of public schools for gain is Governor Ron DeSantis' work in Florida. Governor DeSantis has been a firebrand since his rise in the political realm, capitalizing on the energy of a divided political climate. On April 22, 2022, Governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill in Florida limiting discussions based on race in K-12 public schools. He further opined that Critical Race Theory, or CRT, was a form of state-sanctioned racism that indoctrinates students and employees. On that same day, the governor also signed the "Stop Wrongs Against Our Kids and Employees" or "Stop WOKE Act" that stood against teaching CRT in schools and corporations (Miller et al., 2022). It could be argued that Governor DeSantis either believes these things are wrong, or he is politically posturing himself for a presidential run or more political power.

Depending on one's political leaning and personal beliefs, abolishing the teaching of CRT in public schools has positive or negative connotations. For those who disagree with the governor's choices, these decisions might lead to a decline in institutional trust in public schools. Those who agree with the governor might trust public schools more, or they may not, depending on the way they look at the issue. Therein lies the problem, the politicization of public schools and other institutions that were once less political, at least at a surface level. This is not to say curriculum is apolitical, only that it has increasingly become more political, which I posit is due to the advent of more recent forms of media, e.g., social media and sensationalized round the clock news channels. Unfortunately, there has been increasing polarization in these institutions as they have increasingly become points of contention between political factions, weaponizing education for political points (Brady & Kent, 2022).

The above example is one of the more significant during the past few years. It is not just the governor of Florida trying to appeal to one side or another. Both sides of the political

spectrum in the United States are to blame. Whether it is the No Child Left Behind legislation from the Republicans or the Race to the Top version from the Democrats, both sides can be seen pandering to their political bases at the expense of trust.

Building upon Brady and Kent, Saad (2022) pulls from her work on the Gallup Poll Social Series, implying the increased politicization of public schools is to blame for the differing levels of trust in public schools among Democrats and Republicans. Her work suggests that Republicans were more opposed to the changing requirements of the pandemic, specifically distance learning and mask mandates. She also writes the debate between Democrats and Republicans over curriculum that includes racism, gender theory and sexual orientation plays a part in trust declination (p. 5).

Saltman (2021) shares a similar emphasis on politics playing a role in the erosion of trust in public schools. He explains that, on the right side of the political spectrum, there has been an increasingly dubious view of expertise as they feel that experts have interests and agendas that might not agree with personal beliefs on the right (p. 1). He then firmly argues that hegemony, material and symbolic precarity, and agency have all led to an increase in distrust of experts and specialists (p. 2). From that point, he presents a series of crises he believes have affected trust in the experts in many of our public institutions. The first crisis is disinterested objectivity and the distrust of specialists (p. 2). Second, is what he calls the pedagogy of paranoid politics (p. 5).

Saltman (2021) begins by showcasing what he means by disinterested objectivity by explaining that as public officials have been more inclined to rely on numbers, or information, from experts, there is a reduction in the need for a deeper level of knowledge and trust. He claims the authority given to the sciences for their objectivity and the faith placed in objectivity

has paved the way for disinterestedness. This disinterestedness then helps to conceal political actions and power wielded by those using the objectivity of the sciences (pp. 144-145).

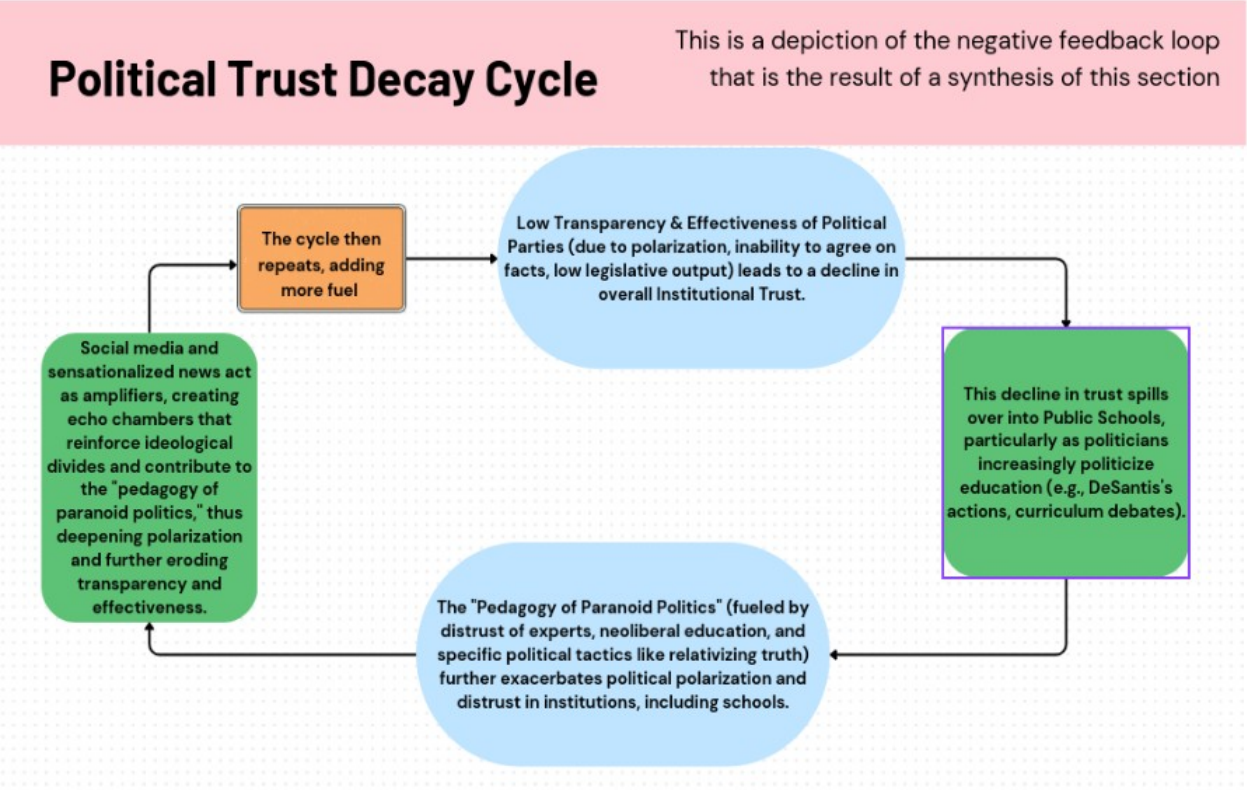
He continues to argue we can no longer assume expertise is inseparable from objectivity. Saltman (2021) believes we now live in an age where paranoia is on both sides of the political spectrum (p. 145). He claims this paranoia became evident in the vaccine conspiracy theories of the political right and the criminal pharmaceutical conspiracies of the political left. Rather than seeing the truth, as he says, the impacts brought about from capitalist pillage being, we see an amalgamation of healthy epistemic doubt and skepticism about the objectivity, disinterestedness, and neutrality of claims of truth. He places the blame directly on the progressively questionable legitimacy of economic, political, and cultural social orders (p. 145). Saltman (2021) backs that up with blaming instruments for agencies like education, policy influence, and journalism for failing to provide people with education and skills to theorize, investigate, interpret, and judge claims to truth (p. 145-146).

Focusing on the education aspect, Saltman (2021) asserts that due to the focus being on positivist standardized testing and disinterested objectivity in curriculum, there is now a disconnect between learning from social import and abilities for agency. This is due to schools' deficient critical literacies that promote students being able to better interpret claims to truth about social locations of a petitioner as well as larger constructions of cultural, political, and economic power influencing the framework for learning. The positivist focus paved the way for a neoliberal reconstruction of education, reformed as something consumable, a commodity, all for academic and economic exchange. He finishes by saying the neoliberal movement has made dialogue, debate, dissent, analysis, reasoning, and many more intellectual and democratic temperaments as threats (p. 146).

Saltman (2021) then pivots to what he calls the “Pedagogy of Paranoid Politics” (p. 147). This ties directly to excessive specialization, which helps to disconnect knowledge from social totality, narrowing understanding and the ability to intervene in society. Over specialization leads to the obscuration of social and political implications. Not to say some specialization is not warranted, such as specialized surgeons, just that it is unlikely anyone would desire surgery from non-surgeons or education developed by businesspeople who are not educators and who may be more interested in making a profit than educating (p. 148).

Saltman (2021) next provides the pieces that make up the pedagogy of paranoid politics. First, there is a relativizing of claims of truth by politicians, particularly those on the right side of the spectrum. Second is the establishing of truth claims in bodies and essentialized identities frequently in ways that posit exaggerated agency and conspiracy. Third, we see increased faith in data, quantification, and a lack of critical perspectives tied to science. Fourth, the molding of agonism into antagonism, pitting political rivals against one another, pushing them to perceive one another as enemies to eliminate. Fifth, the exchange of political agency with forms of depoliticized agencies such as conspiracy, flawed interpretative frameworks, and mechanical objectivity in machines. Lastly are the uncertainties of political polarization. Saltman saw this as an echo chamber brought about by social media, which reinforces and regurgitates back political ideological inclinations, setting people against one another and broadening the political divide. (p. 148-152). Turn on the news and flip between news stations to see all this at work.

Figure Literature Review.1 Political Trust Decay Cycle



Note. Political Trust Decay Cycle, by Andrew Kobularcik, 2024a

Classism

Classism has several definitions, but only a few fit the context of this work. For this study, I selected two of the more prominent definitions of classism. First, classism is the unfair advantage of people in certain social or economic positions over others. As such, classism embeds itself in the very fabric of society in the United States (Picower & Mayorga, 2015). Put another way, Lott (2012) explains that classism can be beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes towards individuals with less power or those from socially devalued backgrounds. Distilling both definitions down into their purest form, classism is harmful and corrosive.

Three types of classism exist when discussing classism concerning public schools (Langhout et al., 2007). The first is citational classism, which is related to the stereotypes of

people with decreased economic resources perpetuated by negative comments about those of lower social classes. The second type of classism is institutionalized classism, which is the institutional structure in schools or other institutions that exclude people without the necessary resources. Interpersonal classism is the last type, consisting of negative behaviors towards economically marginalized people. Interpersonal classism breaks down further into four distinct types.

The first is interpersonal classism via separation, which is related to the behaviors inflicted on a person, directed in a way that protects said person from confrontations based on the wealth of others, acting as a barrier between the individual and the situation. The second type of interpersonal classism is interpersonal classism via devaluation. This form of classism is based on behaviors directed at a person due to their perceived lower-level social class status. Often, these behaviors seem harmful to an individual's experience due to the cruel or devaluing aspects of said behaviors. The third type of interpersonal classism is interpersonal classism via discounting. These are dismissive behaviors directed at people due to their lower social class status. The fourth type of interpersonal classism is interpersonal classism via exclusion. As the name implies, these are exclusion-related behaviors directed at a person because of their lower social class. All three types and their sub-types play a significant role in the erosion of trust in public schools. As such, I next discuss how the corrosive nature of these types of classism erodes trust in public schools (Allan et al., 2023).

Put bluntly, one’s class plays a significant role in student success rates in K-12 public schools and public universities. Miller (2017) states that there is an increase in default rates on student loans, which have direct ties to students from historically marginalized classes at a wildly disproportionate rate. This increased rate ties into higher financial struggles for these same

classes. To extend this, these same students are more likely to have decreased school satisfaction (Allan et al., 2023).

From the examples above, one could extrapolate from here that classism, in any form, can lead to adverse effects for any on the lower-class end of the spectrum. Rather than being able to use wealth and the power that comes from one's status, those in the lower classes have fewer resources from which to draw to maintain a decent level of education (Miller, 2017). Fewer advantages lead to increased struggles or work to maintain or achieve the same quality of education as those from upper classes in more wealthy school districts. Struggles lead to frustration with how the education system works in the United States, which can breed mistrust in our institutions. As the wealthy receive quality education and the less wealthy struggle to do the same, a gap in student success rates grows, leading to many outcomes that are far from opportune for the lower classes. Thus, the cycle of trust erosion continues, and letdown festers for those with fewer resources (Miller, 2017).

Sexism

Next, I pivot to sexism. To understand how sexism erodes trust in public schools, I first define sexism. Merriam-Webster (2023) defines sexism as prejudice or discrimination based on sex, especially discrimination against women. Additionally, sexism is the behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex. As Slovska (2022) states, sexism is discrimination based on sex or gender, or that men are superior to women, and that the oppression of women is valid due to said superiority. As seen below, sexism is far more than these definitions state, with many forms that impact the public in many ways.

Slovska (2022) suggests there are six types of sexism. The first is called hostile sexism. Hostile sexism is overt sexism that focuses on maintaining male dominance in society.

Furthermore, this form of sexism is blatantly antagonistic and unconcealed. It usually appears in the form of victim blaming, belittling, and harassing those who do not comply with gender norms.

The second type of sexism is benevolent sexism. This is sexism, as its name suggests, which appears to be more benevolent even though it is still outright sexism. This includes believing women should adhere to stereotypical roles that focus on being mothers, wives, or girlfriends. It also manifests as praising women's looks over other values they may hold. Furthermore, it may also support policies that make it harder for women to be independent, work, or move away from traditional gender roles (Slovska, 2022).

The third type of sexism, according to Slovska (2022), is ambivalent sexism. This form of sexism combines hostile and benevolent sexism and, as such, shares many of its traits. As confusing as it may seem, this form of sexism simultaneously holds women on a pedestal and seeks to demean women. This takes the form of men having unrealistic or oppressive expectations of beauty for women. It also includes being overly judgmental of how women dress or act. Lastly, it includes explicitly deciding to hire women based on looks or to deny entry into social situations with women who do not meet a man's unrealistic expectations.

The fourth type of sexism is interpersonal sexism. This form of sexism is when a person directly judges another for not orienting with gender stereotypes. It also includes making assumptions about sex or gender. Some examples are justifying sexism based on stereotypical sexist norms, accusing others of not acting like their sex or gender should, and knowingly minimizing or invalidating the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of another because of their sex or gender (Slovska, 2022).

According to Slovska (2022), the fifth form of sexism is internalized sexism. As the name implies, this form of sexism becomes internalized due to repeated exposure to sexist language, ideals, and behaviors, all which lead to women believing them to be true despite their false nature. Some examples include feeling unintelligent or incompetent because a person's sex or gender and viewing and treating themselves as an object meant only for the pleasure of others. It also includes suggesting others conform to stereotypical norms for specific sexes or genders and conform to gender ideals despite not personally agreeing with them.

The last form of sexism, which is the primary focus of this study, is institutional sexism. This form of sexism happens when institutions such as media, education, religion, or any other institution reinforce sexist ideologies. This is the type of sexism built into our governmental systems and laws, sexism that is apparent in magazines and on the news. This form of sexism is comprised of all the previous forms and can significantly reinforce internalized sexism. Some examples are the lack of women in leadership positions, the shaming of women with children who focus on their careers, and the gender pay gap (Slovska, 2022). In the following section, in concert with the definition above, how sexism erodes trust in public schools is addressed.

With a primary focus on institutional sexism and the fact that schools are often considered institutions, an understanding emerges regarding how sexism may be a culprit in the erosion of trust in public schools. As Slovska (2022) states, institutional sexism is a form of sexism ingrained in the inner workings of our institutions. This could be the makeup of leadership, the policies that govern schools, the selection of curriculum from which to instruct students or the lack of inclusion in various school sports.

If someone investigated the makeup of leadership in various public schools around the United States, they would see that White males are more likely to be in leadership positions in

most schools. In fact, twenty-one percent of school administration positions belong to individuals identifying as women (Polka & Litchka, 2008). Though that was less recent, Morrison (2018) reached the same conclusion, with women disproportionately underrepresented in leadership positions across the continuum of education in the United States.

Racism

According to Grosfoguel (2011), racism is a political, cultural, and economic-based hierarchy of superiority and inferiority, which has been produced and reproduced for hundreds, if not thousands, of years in some fashion. Racism, in the sense of this study, is a form of the capitalist patriarchal modern colonial system. Described another way, Fanon (2008) would say racism is placing people below a line of humans, considering them subhuman or even non-human, and as such, an extension of human rights, material resources, and the recognition of things such as identities and epistemologies are denied to them. DiAngelo (2018) states that racism is a form of oppression in which one racial group dominates others, more specifically in the United States, it is a finely detailed system controlled by Whites that poses an advantage to Whites as a group, Regardless of the definition, racism is engrained in our society, and it too poses a threat to the trust we have in our public institutions. The following section details how racism erodes trust in public schools.

Racism exists all around us, often in ways that are less overt than others. Put another way, racism presents in a multitude of forms. According to Day (2016), three distinct forms of racism pervade the world around us, forms such as institutionalized, person-mediated, and internalized racism. The following sections depict each of the above forms.

The first form discussed by Day (2016) is institutionalized racism. This is the type of racism that builds up structural barriers such as access to institutions such as schools or

government. Think of it as a stunted reaction to the needs of the people, taking the form of a lack of health care, food, transportation, and much more. Even more detrimental, this is the type of racism that injects itself in laws and policies. It is a form of racism that restricts opportunities for employment and even compensation for employment. This is the form of racism that I focus most heavily upon in the next section.

The second form of racism, per Day (2016), is person-mediated racism. This form of racism is one of the more common and overt forms. It is based on acts of prejudice and discrimination that help to build and maintain structural barriers. This can be the perpetuation of racism both wittingly and unwittingly. Additionally, it often gives differential treatment based on race or makes assumptions about different races.

The third form of racism is internalized racism. According to Day (2016), this is a form of racism brought about by those stigmatized, believing that they are indeed the assumptions and stereotypes suggested by more institutional or personal mediate forms of racism. It could be the belief that one ought not to apply for a job or school based on the race that one holds for fear of stigmatization. Think of it as fully believing in the social stigma and stereotypes purported against one's race.

According to Evangelist (2022), research shows that people of color often report significantly lower levels of generalized trust than their White counterparts. Supporting this is the fact that the founding of the United States' political and economic systems was partially based on slavery. As such, traces of those slavery-based policies in each system remain ever apparent today (Feagin, 2006).

According to Bonilla-Silva (2001), some Whites continue to have a personal stake in ensuring the maintenance of racial hierarchy so Whites can benefit economically, socially, and

politically. In a group of systems maintained in such a way, it makes it difficult for people of color to reap the same benefits. This closely corresponds with Bell (1980) and the concept of interest convergence, which posits that the rights of the oppressed will only find support when doing so also supports the rights of those in power. When the needs of the oppressor align with the oppressed, then and only then will the oppressor make concessions to maintain the power dynamic. This begs the question, what are the true motives of those in power?

It is not difficult to imagine that some Whites may continue to block the efforts of people of color to maintain racial inequality by opposing efforts such as affirmative action, neighborhood integration, and school bussing (Marsden, 2012). Until White-controlled institutions demonstrate a sincere commitment to abolishing racial hierarchy and changing racist policies to promote more equality, people of color will continue to have a reason to distrust such institutions (Evangelist, 2022).

Religion

Pivoting away from racism, I now discuss how religion contributes to the erosion of trust in public schools. According to Glazier and Ember (2018), religion is comprised of attitudes, beliefs, and practices related to spiritual power, be they gods, spirits, demons, or the like. Religious beliefs and practices can drastically differ depending on the location or society at any given time. Religion can explain worldly things, the consequences of specific actions, and it can bring people together. Finally, depending on the circumstances, religion can serve as a means of social integration (Glazier & Ember, 2018).

Despite the more positive aspects and benefits of having strong spiritual health, religion does not always play a positive role in promoting trusting environments. According to Zhai (2021), religious beliefs are negatively associated with institutional trust. Put into context, if an

institution acts unfairly, even if only suspected, trust in it declines more significantly among religious individuals compared to their non-religious counterparts.

The above segment receives further corroboration from an article by Patrikios and Huhe (2022). In their paper, they detected a distinct relationship between non-traditionally religious people and institutional trust. Furthermore, they discovered a definite association with supernatural beliefs and the tendency to distrust public institutions. As an example, think of this from an individual's point of view. If an individual identifies as a non-traditional religious person, being a person who is spiritual without traditional religious structures, they would be more likely to distrust public institutions than individuals who were completely non-religious. This brings up an interesting question, what makes religious people more prone to distrust in public institutions than non-religious individuals?

To triangulate the relationship between religion and trust, Berggren and Bjørnskov (2011) conducted research what made use of Gallup World Poll data across 109 countries and 43 U.S. states. Their work showed how important religion in daily life was in impacting social trust. Their world spanning analysis found individuals who practiced religion more frequently had decreased social trust, which they state is the trust in people in general, unlike trust in known people or trust in institutions. They stated that this was a typical result in their study since religions and those who believe in them were more likely to cause divisions between themselves and non-believers due to a lack of trust in those who do not follow their religion. This was typical of believers and non-believers and between believers of different religions.

Extrapolating from the three examples above, it is possible to fathom that religion could be harmful to some degree to institutional and social trust. What they suggest is that if public institutions such as public schools do not adhere to religious beliefs or their faculty do not

observe the same religious beliefs, this could lead to a distrust in institutional and social trust related to schools. Lastly, non-religious people may regard religious people with suspicion, especially if religious people are pushing religious beliefs on others or public institutions such as schools. This suspicion could also lead to an erosion in trust in the institutions that give in to religion-based changes (Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2011).

This leads to an article by the Pew Research Center, by Gregory A. Smith. Over the past decade, Smith (2019) writes that religious affiliation for adults has tumbled by double-digit percentages for Christianity. On the contrary, affiliation has grown by double digits for those with no religious affiliation and stayed similar for other religions. In the Christianity group, Protestants have declined by approximately ten percentage points in contrast to a decline in Catholics by three percentage points despite the negative coverage of Catholics in the media. Unfortunately, the article does not discuss the reasons behind the decline, though it does beg the question, why is religious affiliation declining?

The other question is what might trust have to do with declining religious affiliation? Extrapolating from Berggren and Bjørnskov (2011), when fewer people follow certain religious beliefs, it may lead to distrust in increasing amounts of non-religious individuals. When coupled with Pew Research Center's 2019 version of the same study which includes religious statistics for Democrats and Republicans, the data highlights that Democrats are outpacing Republicans in declining religious affiliation (Smith, 2019). This may be interpreted as Democrats are more frequently seen as non-religious than their Republican counterparts. Reinterpreted, if Democrats appear less religious than Republicans, levels of trust in Democrats should also decline among religiously affiliated members. With more extrapolation, we can begin to see a broader picture of declining trust, not just institutionally. This brings us to our next lens, power.

Power

As with religion, power plays a significant role in contributing to the erosion of trust in public schools. Although elements of power exist in each of the lenses preceding this section, I felt it prudent to give it a singular and focused treatment. Power is an important lens from which to view the world because power permeates every aspect of society, embedding itself in discourse. Understanding how power functions and fits into the fabric of the world around us is crucial.

A robust lens to understand power is from the works of Michel Foucault. Foucault et al., (1997) believed that power was not something that was merely wielded or something with a quickly depleted supply. He believed that power was a force that could constantly reconstitute itself by forming diverse types of power, such as power over, power with, power to, power within, and identity power. Foucault believed that power shapes what we say and who says what or even when we say something (Foucault et al., 1997). Power is all encompassing, and those who wield it can shape the very fabric of society.

Power also encompasses the ability to determine what remains unspoken, to choose whom to silence, and how resources are allocated (Gutting & Oksala, 2003). Gutting and Oksala (2003) suggest power is also a form of control over people, which could materialize by merely observing the people. They suggest that people could think of power as an observation system that allows those who enforce power to guard against anything the people may do to usurp power from the observer. In perfect form, it is a system comprising a hierarchy of enforcers that work in tandem to ensure power transfers only to those whom the enforcers deem necessary.

Why is understanding power necessary? The purpose of Critical Theory is to understand and challenge notions of truth and the structures of power that we take for granted. We challenge

the notions of truth and those in power because they are the ones who control what society deems truthful. By controlling the truth, those in power can silence all others. All this to say that power is an important concept or lens from which to view the erosion of trust in public schools. If we challenge those in power, we get at the essence of trust and can begin to form an ensemble truth rather than truth as seen from the dominant cultural lens.

After understanding what power is, all it takes is a degree of extrapolation from the definition above to realize how power erodes trust. Power has a way of shaping what is said and who might say something. To expand further, power over an institution such as a public school would shape what could and could not be said. Furthermore, power can dictate the silencing of individuals (Foucault et al., 1997). If power is coupled with sexism or classism, it may be deduced that leveraging power to silence those from certain sexes or classes is possible, i.e., the silenced would begin to distrust the institutions silencing them (Gutting & Oksala, 2003).

Additionally, as Foucault suggests, power over the allocation of resources is a form of power that could significantly impact public schools (Foucault et al., 1997), e.g., funding allocation in public schools and other public institutions around the United States. Those in positions of power can decide where resources flow. It would be easy to use this power and restrict funding for certain schools over others. As an example, consider the perceptions and feelings of those serviced by public schools with far less funding than schools in more affluent regions (Gutting & Oksala, 2003).

This ties neatly into a study by Poynton et al., (2018), which suggests excluding community input in public school decisions can inhibit trust formation between all stakeholders. Exclusion is a form of exercising power. When educators are more likely to exclude or have less interaction with community stakeholders, those same members are often more likely to mobilize

against tax initiatives or refrain from other forms of public-school support such as volunteering, advocation, or otherwise serving the schools (p. 267). Poynton et al., emphasize decreased public participation is often an important contributing factor of distrust in public schools as well as disagreements about educational policies (p. 269).

Tschannen-Moran (2014) adds two more catalysts based on the wielding of power. In her work, she focuses on a lack of discipline and support mechanism as potential catalysts of trust erosion. She writes that trust can be broken if there is a lack of a support mechanism for rectifying exploitative behaviors in school systems. More precisely, there must be a tempering of trust, one that is built on the willingness to seek out and mitigate exploitive behaviors of stakeholders, be they teachers, administrators, superintendents, local political leaders, or parents. This is not to say that everyone should be micromanaged. When space given to operate freely begins to become a detriment to success, it is important to course correct or temper institutions so those witnessing corrective actions will have faith in institutional processes.

What events contributed to the erosion of trust in public schools?

In the past 50 years, there have been various events that contributed to the increase in the erosion of trust in public schools. The most impactful of which are tied to *A Nation at Risk*, the No Child Left Behind Act, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* Supreme Court Decision in 2002, the rise of modern social media on the world wide web, the introduction of the Common Core Standards Initiative, and the Every Student Succeeds Act, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence in schools.

A Nation at Risk

Though this is not the beginning of the trust erosion in public schools, it started what I call the modern era of trust erosion. The Reagan administration issued a report titled *A Nation at*

Risk, released in 1983, which suggested the educational foundations of the United States were crumbling and that mediocrity was threatening the future of the nation. The report implied that schools were not producing competitive students on an international scale and that declining standards existed in our public schools. This report profoundly impacted trust in public schools, and what follows details how it affected trust erosion.

Standing on the shoulders of Milton Friedman and his book *Capitalism and Freedom* (1982) the political right began to build a coalition of think tanks and political institutes funded by wealthy individuals and business groups in the 1960s and 1970s (Thayer-Bacon & Ellison, 2011). The purpose of this coalition was to build a framework of political and education policy solutions that could be utilized during an educational crisis. This helped to create a rise in political advocacy as well as an industry of knowledge production with a penchant for the exploitation of socio-political crises to bolster corporatist policies and to dismantle the foundations of the liberal welfare state (p. 22).

The coalition was well in place by the beginning of the Reagan administration in the early 1980s. The administration immediately created a blue-ribbon panel comprised of business leaders and experts named the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This panel's role was to evaluate the performance of public schooling and all its challenges. *A Nation at Risk* was born from this panel (pp. 23-24). Taking advantage of the economic crises of 1983, *A Nation at Risk* helped strengthen the political right by providing an alarmist response in the guise of an education crisis that was linked to the economic issues prevalent at that moment. This helped to undermine public perceptions of public schools and even cast the blame at foreign powers who may have helped push the school system down its crisis-ridden path (p. 24).

Mehta (2015) extends where Thayer-Bacon and Ellison leave off by expanding the impacts of *A Nation at Risk* forward through time. He explains that the report invoked a crisis that was so expansive that its impact continues to reach us today (p. 21). Through its projection of a nation afflicted by elevated levels of illiteracy, inferior performance on international comparisons, and declining SAT scores, the nation's trust in public schools was rocked. By 1984, more than 250 task forces were created in all 50 states, trying to study the flaws purported by *A Nation at Risk* and recommend changes (p. 21). Public confidence, already rocked by the Watergate scandal years before, hit a new low thanks to the report's release (p. 23).

Nevertheless, not everyone bought into the inflammatory rhetoric. In fact, many critics noted that the panel had suspended the typical standards for such reports, decreasing the scientific scrutiny in the name of producing a confrontational document. Harold Howe II went as far as to suggest that the risk the nation faced regarding education was more akin to a common cold rather than the pneumonia the report suggested. The critics went on to suggest that the comparisons of SAT scores were unfair due to differences in test entry standards in other countries. They even pointed to SAT score trends that showed that students from underrepresented populations had seen increases in scores since 1980 and that scores were on the upswing for the same students since the 1970s (p. 22). Unfortunately, despite their efforts, the critics' counter-narrative was not enough to stem the tide of a perception of a decline of social capital in America (p. 23).

What followed was a rising tide of school reports rather than a tide of mediocrity. States across the United States began issuing reports of their own, evaluating whether they were doing well in comparison to the measures of excellence from *A Nation at Risk*. Since states, politicians, and the media mostly bought into rhetoric surrounding the report, school began to shift from an

institution promoting the creation of citizens, bolstering social cohesion, promoting patriotic values, and stimulating growth, creativity, and critical thinking to an institution with more of an economic focus (pp. 22-23).

Due to the focus on international economic competition, state economic growth, and individual returns to education, politicians managed to blur the lines between economic advantages and educational performance and began connecting it to the need for school reforms (p. 23). As such, even more state and federal legislators joined a rising influx of business groups to reform public schools. With this lack of trust in public schools, the fabricated crisis has continued to impact and govern how we approach public schooling to this day.

No Child Left Behind Act

The No Child Left Behind Act was a 2001 law that updated to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. This law materialized to try to make American schools more competitive. Doing so, this act increased the federal role regarding responsibility in schools, holding schools accountable for the academic progress of their students. The focus was on ensuring states and schools increased performance of specific groups of children such as English-language learners, special education, and other underrepresented children. Though schools were not forced to comply, they risked losing federal funding if they did not. Next, I delve into the literature that surrounds the No Child Left Behind Act and show how it has affected trust in public schools.

Thayer-Bacon and Ellison (2011) begin by discussing the implications of a pincer approach to bettering public schools. On the left, we have the political left who focus on criticizing teachers in such ways as to build an effort to foster equality through reforming public schools. On the political right, the focus is on improving public schools through the

encouragement of privatization of schools, pushing for more competition and choice in schools to improve public schools. Holding teachers accountable, the two sides of the pincer meet. Both sides have pushed a de-professionalization of teachers, taking accountability away from teachers and building a system of standards from which outsiders can hold teachers to account, such as the one built into No Child Left Behind (p. 17).

This bipartisan passed policy continued many of the same goals of the Reagan era, though it took the issue of responsibility much further, constructing a policy framework built on daunting academic goals and accountability rules for public schools. All the while, charter schools and other private schools continued operating in a world of loose regulations, advancing the corporatist approach to education promoted by the Reagan administration (pp. 29-30).

Hamilton et al., (2020) continue building on the No Child Left Behind Act by providing more details. As before, the No Child Left Behind Act was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This legislation is used to determine how schools can spend federal funds, hence the emphasis on the act's narrow set of academic outcomes. Specifically, the act required states to assess students in reading and mathematics each year from 3rd through 8th grade and once in high school. If schools did not meet the baseline standard of adequate yearly progress, the federal government sanctioned the schools.

From the threat of sanctions and loss of federal funding, prioritization on student performance and standardized testing grew Due to this prioritization, a small number of academic subjects became the fixation, usually reading, the sciences, and mathematics. This narrowing of focus on specific curriculum and tunnel vision that detracted from other essential functions of schooling led to an uptick in critics. As a result, social studies and social and emotional learning took a back seat (p. 7). The decrease in social and emotional learning

increased social and emotional issues which, alone, have a profound impact on learning and the learning environment (Hamilton et al., 2020). Ultimately, No Child Left Behind was unpopular with parents and other stakeholders, leaving many to seek waivers and hope for something better to replace, which would not come to fruition until 2015 (Walsh et al., 2022).

Zelman v. Simmons-Harris Supreme Court Decision

The *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* Supreme Court decision was a significant case in the summer of 2002. This decision upheld the constitutionality of Ohio law that allowed provisioning vouchers to Cleveland students so they could attend their school of choice. This included the ability to attend public or private schools, including religious schools (Bodwell, 2002). To some, this was viewed as an inspirational win for school choice. For others, to include the dissenting judges from the case, fear began to spread that the verdict of the case would have serious ramifications for the viability of public schooling (Sutton & King, 2011). What follows is how the *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* Supreme Court decision affected trust in public schools.

The immediate impact after *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* was in the judicial system where countless court battles came to life throughout the nation. According to Sutton and King (2011), the outcome of *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* led to expanded school choice initiatives, which brought about a counter-expansion of legal challenges to determine the lawful use of vouchers. The decisions made in multiple cases put state and local laws in the crosshair, often with one side concerned about the negative consequences for public schools, which are already suffering from decreasing levels of trust, and the other side focused on expanding school choice (Sutton & King, 2011).

One example is found in Colorado. In 2004, the state of Colorado implemented its Opportunity Contract Pilot Program. The goal of this program was to direct tax-supported

vouchers to students in under-performing districts who also qualified for the federal free and reduced lunch plan (p. 253). On the surface, it appeared to be a worthy cause, but this is not always the case as it is not always legal. Accordingly, plaintiffs challenged the plan by first invoking the provision of no aid in the state's constitution. Succinctly put, this provision stated that religious schools would not receive public aid. Nevertheless, the no aid provision was not what doomed the pilot program. What halted the program was another section of the state constitution stating that school boards control the instruction in public schools of their respective districts, and the pilot program was found to provide little or no discretion concerning expenditure or implementation of the program, thus it was against the state constitution (p. 260).

Sutton and King (2011) provide another example of a program started in the state of Arizona. This program was to provide scholarships for children with disabilities enrolling in public or qualified schools. To be impartial, funds were allocated at an amount equal to the base funding generated by each student within the state funding program (pp. 253-254). Arizona did not stop there. On the heels of their first program, Arizona lawmakers also implemented the Displaced Pupils Choice Grant Program which aimed at providing up to $5,000 in scholarships for children in foster care to enroll in nonpublic schools. Again, reading what the programs intended to do might imply they were legally sound plans; nevertheless, both ended due to challenges in court. These challenges stated that both programs had violated the state's no aid clause (p. 254). Despite these two early losses, school choice proponents continue to this day to push for school choice and government funding, and school choice critics push to do the opposite.

What are the implications both sides are so afraid of if they fail? According to Sutton and King (2011), voucher advocates want people to believe that a lack of school choice in K-12

public schools will continue to enable the decline of public schools and the trust that comes with it. They believe that by starting voucher programs, low performing schools will either start performing better or face elimination. In their minds, this makes schooling more beneficial and cost effective as money comes only to schools that are worthy of it (p. 262).

Advocates for vouchers cite examples such as Pell Grants, used by thousands of students annually, and the GI Bill as instances of voucher-like programs that allow students to pay for their schools of choice. They also point to programs that sprung up in after hurricane Katrina New Orleans to help reform the struggling school system. They imply that if these programs work in these instances, why would they not work in others (p. 262).

Countering voucher advocates, the opponents believe that school vouchers will do nothing but harm public schools. Foremost, they believe that school voucher programs are unconstitutional, and in many states they are correct. In their opinion, already underfunded public schools are the status quo, and the redirection of valuable resources will exacerbate the issues. By extension, these issues are some of the same ones leading to the distrust already apparent regarding public schools. They also believe that voucher programs further entangle politicians and religious entities into the locus of control for public schools, which may or may not foster trust and inclusion, but further segregation and segmentation.

According to Sutton and King (2011), despite conservatives and their disregard for the plight of underrepresented children, they often side with parents in allowing parents to control where their children go to school. Interestingly, conservatives do not seem as willing to provide support for religious schools that are Christian or Jewish in nature (p. 265). On the other side liberals and their willingness to provide programs for those in poverty and minorities are acting

to counter school voucher programs that might help. This presents a unique perspective of how politics and public schools have become more intertwined and perplexing (p. 264).

Regardless of which side is right or wrong, the central issue still exists. Public schools are far from operating as they should, and that has an impact on whether stakeholders will trust their public schools. The sad fact of the matter is that as of 2011, there were some 50 million K-12 students, the majority of whom were underrepresented students, who need remedial education to compete in the world as adults (p. 265).

Stakeholders across the nation have begun to discover new ways of supporting either side of the cause, if only to find a solution to truly provide a strong education for these children. Fittingly, platforms have risen, one from a group of college students, which allow people to engage nearly instantly across the world. As I highlight in the next section, social media is allowing both sides of the argument to bring their thoughts and beliefs to the public at large.

The Rise of Modern Social Media on the World Wide Web

The arrival of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s was significant, though arguably not as significant as the rise of modern social media starting in the early 2000s. By modern, I mean the likes of Facebook, Reddit, X, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, and TikTok. Next, I examine the impact social media has had on the erosion of trust in public schools.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught society anything, social media is an excellent platform for sharing information, albeit sometimes misinformation or disinformation. Some have gone so far as to label the recent onslaught of social media misinformation as an epidemic within a pandemic (Ahmed Siddiqui et al., 2020). The issue now faced with social media is that copious amounts of non-vetted information are sitting on various social media platforms for anyone to read and believe. Pondiscio (2022) implies that the recent pandemic, parental disappointment,

political animosity, and alternatives to public schools have all contributed to the decline in trust in public schools. He believes that all these contributors have more recently become the perfect mix to bring about further trust erosion and an exodus of parents from more traditional public schools to alternatives (p. 7).

According to Pennycook and Rand (2018), addressing the spread of misinformation in social media is one of the major challenges of our time. To compound the problem, many individuals consume news via social media sources, and not all users can distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources. Without practical solutions in place, people will continue to consume misinformation. which can potentially guide them to believe false information about public institutions such as schools. Add to this the fact that social media can be used to enhance other forms of trust erosion, such as erosion from politics, sexism, racism, and classism, and we can see how a means once thought to bring people together could also be used to push them apart (Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

Kavanagh and Rich (2018) build upon the argument by suggesting that there are four primary drivers of trust erosion or truth decay. First, they suggest the cognitive biases we all hold have an impact on the decay of truth. Second, they attribute changes in the information system to the erosion of trust, specifically, the rise of social media and the introduction of round-the-clock news cycles. Third, they suggest that the conflicting demands on the educational system are wreaking havoc on the system's ability to keep up with changes in technology, politics, sociodemographics, and economic polarization. Lastly, they suggest there are various variables or agents that help to amplify trends related to the decay of truth (pp. 1-2).

All these studies point to overlapping variables. The first is that lies run rampant on social media, often traveling much faster than the truth. Keeping up with the speed of misinformation

and disinformation is impossible. Second, the near instantaneous nature of social media and the 24-hour news cycle can overwhelm users with information. The information crushing users is often the sort that makes for a good headline, which is overpoweringly negative. The third variable is the biases we all harbor, biases exploited by the information systems we choose to use. With all these variables combined, we are at a major disadvantage regarding truth discovery, and the onslaught of negativity further exacerbate the downward trend in trusting public schools (Ahmed Siddiqui et al., 2020; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2018; Pondiscio ,2022).

Common Core Standards Initiative

According to Gewertz (2015), the Common Core Standards Initiative was a joint project by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to develop a common standard for K-12 reading and math, initiated in 2009 but adopted by some states as early as 2010. The intent of the initiative was to prepare students for college and their careers by creating standards useful to teachers and accessible to students, their parents, and the public. These standards were supposed to allow students to understand key content, build cognitive skills, and prepare students to apply what they learn to creatively solve problems. The following section's focus is on the literature behind the Common Core Standards Initiative's impact on trust erosion in public schools.

At face value, the Common Core Standards Initiative was a way to turn performance around in a country that was facing the fact that 20% of students entering college required college remediation (Gewertz, 2015). It was also a way to get all states on similar pages. Thus, when assessing performance based on the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, all states would be on an even playing field. It was promoted as a method to remedy the widespread

dissatisfaction of employers with the literacy and math skills of young job applicants (Gewertz, 2015).

Unfortunately, in the decade following the adoption of common core in many states, the outcome was not as profound as advocates might have wanted. In fact, Goldstein (2019) wrote a piece in the *New York Times* that looked at the overall impact of the Common Core Standards Initiative 10 years after it started. What once started as a hopeful proposal, one that would get students around the country on track to be competitive with higher performing students in other countries, appears to be a failure by some critics as student performance remains stagnant. The lower performing students who were to be the benefactors of the switch to common core continue to struggle (Goldstein, 2019).

Why is this the case and what impact has it had on trust in public schools? Gewertz (2015) believes that the federal government and the standards themselves are to blame for the lack of change in student performance. Some have argued the standards have focused too much on non-fiction and not enough on quality fiction in the realm of literature (Gewertz, 2015). Others feel that the standards have been too much for younger students who are not prepared (pp. 4-5). Regardless of the beliefs, the Common Core Standards Initiative seemed to increase a lack of trust surrounding public schools.

As for what unfolded in the government, political conservatives and some lawmakers felt that pushing a standard across all states was a violation of states' rights, and liberals felt that it would undermine tailoring instruction to meet students where they and their communities need (p. 5). States' rights advocates argued that the initiative violated laws by trying to mandate what public schools were teaching, despite advocates countering with federal officials having no part in writing the standards. Again, both sides of the political spectrum used pieces of the initiative

to expand their individual causes and further entrench their supporters, bolstering an already terse political divide.

Every Student Succeeds Act

Every Student Succeeds Act came to fruition when President Obama signed it into existence on December 10, 2015. According to Klein (2016), the law promised to ensure success for students and schools through six main goals. First, it promised to advance equity for America's underrepresented and high-need students by upholding critical protections. Second, it required that students in America learn at high academic standards to prepare them for college and beyond. Third, it implemented an information pathway to provide educators, families, students, and communities statewide assessments used to measure student progress toward the new exacting standards. Fourth, it intended to support and grow innovation at the local level, whether evidence-based or place-based. Fifth, it expanded investment and access into high-quality preschools. Sixth, it provided an expectation that there will be accountability and action to positively change the nation's lowest-performing schools (Klein, 2016).

On paper, this act seems as though it would be beneficial for schools. Specifically, the inclusion of information pathways should increase transparency and communication among the stakeholders, which is critical to building trust. What follows is a look at the literature surrounding trust related to Every Student Succeeds Act.

Hamilton et al., (2020) begin by explaining how Every Student Succeeds Act differs from No Child Left Behind. Taking into consideration the criticism that followed the narrowing of curriculum, Every Student Succeeds Act pushed to broaden the definition of student success. The act required that, in addition to No Child Left Behind's focus, there should be additional focus on some form of civic learning. Almost immediately after passing, most states began requiring civic

learning or some form of social studies standard. Shortly, many states also began to align themselves with the National Council for the Social Studies agenda called the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards, providing and encouraging a focus on social studies and civics (p. 8).

Jochim and Gross (2016) suggest that Every Student Succeeds Act provides three areas of opportunity for state education agencies to bolster their schools. First, he highlights that there is more flexibility in developing assessments. Second, the act provides an approved accountability system. Lastly, they claim that the act allows for the crafting of better approaches to school turnaround. Overall, the increased flexibility has the potential for some significant changes to public schools (p. 11).

Unfortunately, despite many states working toward implementation and the potential benefits of the changes inherent in the act, as with No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act has received its fair share of criticisms and has been met with significant challenges. Wong (2022) leads off with a journal article suggesting the hands-off approach of Every Student Succeeds Act has the potential to allow states to institute less ambitious goals and to reduce accountability for struggling institutions, which could have the ramifications for achievement gaps. Ayscue et., al (2022) state the Every Student Succeeds Act allows states to customize their accountability systems. This leads to greater variability among states, allowing them to identify under-performing schools and what should be done about them if they are under-performing. They go on to state most schools have ignored federal feedback in finalizing their plans which were formally approved anyhow by the U.S. Department of Education. No punitive or corrective actions have been taken by the federal government regarding states that

have defied or ignored their feedback, even feedback regarding noncompliance (Ayscue et., Al, 2022)

Gibbs et al., (2023) continue the argument by suggesting that regardless of the positive aspects of the act, standardized testing continues to be a significant piece of accountability. This does little to assuage the concerns that teachers may only be teaching to the test or fears that curriculum is narrowing. Ayscue et al., (2022) argue the overall effectiveness of Every Student Succeeds Act remains to be seen as it is still being evaluated. However, they suggest that concerns remain regarding the impact of the act on student achievement on more vulnerable populations. They also point out that there is a lack of consistency regarding the implementation of the act, thus measuring it against other states might be difficult. According to Chu (2019), there is a lack of consistency among states regarding how they define equity centered on equitable access to educational resources. Chu (2019) also notes that many states evaluate equitable outcomes using standardized test performance as the key indicator, which if there are already concerns about teaching to the test, how much stock can be placed on equitable outcomes based on standardized test scores?

Ayscue et al., (2022), argue that much of the research they initially gathered did not seem to show an increase or decrease in equitable educational environments nor any changes in existing inequities, which brought about a desire to dig deeper into changes since the implementation of the act. As they dug deeper into Every Student Succeeds, they discovered that the act could either promote or hinder equity in schools, and that was fully dependent on how states made use of the act. If anything, their work showed that control over schools that were once more federally oriented in the 1990s was swinging back towards local control. They feared that with a return to local control, district capacity to support schools, especially under resourced

schools, will decrease even further. The capacity to support schools equitably at the local level will have to increase if the Every Student Succeeds Act is to succeed (Ayscue et al., 2022).

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 Pandemic had a broad and devastating impact on public schools and their stakeholders. According to CDC.gov, the virus appeared in late 2019 in Wuhan, China. The virus quickly spread throughout the world, leading to school closures, the use of remote learning, and a host of novel issues. With remote learning, what teachers taught was on full display for parents as they now had a firsthand look at teaching in local schools, and this display had a profound impact on trust.

An op-ed by Hess and Sanon (2022) provides a more recent frame of reference for when trust began to erode due to the pandemic. Bringing to light a Gallup poll conducted in 2020, they suggested that trust in teachers was at an all-time high, rising to 75 percent during the beginning stages of the pandemic. As the data shows after fast forwarding merely two years, those numbers dropped to an all-time low of 64 percent (p. 1).

Pondiscio (2022) also believed the pandemic played a significant role in the erosion of trust in public schools. His opinion piece connects parents' ability to observe remote schooling lessons to concerns about the content taught. Parents had a firsthand account of what teachers were teaching; the content and instructional rigor were on full display and perplexed some parents because of what they saw (pp. 4-5). He also wrote that parents were outraged about Critical Race Theory, activist teachers, and what some considered woke curricula.

The last reason he poses is that he believes there was a lack of urgency among public schools during the pandemic. Looking at teachers' unions, their lack of effort in getting kids back to school and keeping them in place was a momentous detractor. He proposed that remote

learning harms students' academic and social development, even more so with children from underrepresented backgrounds, and keeping them away from schools was doing far more harm than good (p. 6).

Gross et al., (2021) point to pressing issues that arose during the pandemic. They state that prior to the pandemic, there was already an issue regarding chronic absences in schools. They suggest that part of the issue was that only about half of students felt that what they were learning was relevant and enjoyable. Now fast forward, and add the pandemic to the mix, not only were kids taking issue with the relevance of school, as well as enjoyability, they were facing the need to undertake remote learning. This issue was even more critical for students living in poverty and students of color due to access issues (pp. 1-2).

With remote learning active, teachers were reporting twice as many student absences each day, up to a staggering 13 percent of high school students. The problem, compounded further, was the inability to constantly police student participation as they were now outside the schools. There was no way to tell if the students participating were engaged in the work, so even more students began falling through the gaps (p. 3).

If that was not enough, reports of students between the ages of 12 and 17 being hospitalized for mental health issues increased by 31 percent due to the dire conditions. Students missed seeing friends, participating in sports, and being part of other school activities. All the better aspects of schooling did not exist for that age group and school became more difficult to cope with and was far less gratifying (p. 2). It is not a stretch to say that this all had a profound impact on student and parent trust in public schools.

Artificial Intelligence

Switching gears, the dawn of Artificial Intelligence is here, and its implications are many. The rapid digitalization of our lives is impacting us in countless ways, many of which we may not fully understand for many years to come. Singling out ChatGPT alone, we are now witnessing an AI that is nearly successfully authoring academic articles, helping students to polish their work, and opening new avenues for learning. The question now is how might Artificial Intelligence impact trust in public schools?

A news article by Cochran (2025) suggests that there are concerns about students' newfound ability to use ChatGPT and other AI to develop a school paper in less than an hour, with little understanding of how to properly compose a paper. As a counter, classic writing assignments will need reworking to take into consideration the ability of students to bypass the intent of writing assignments, learning to write well and to use critical thinking. This raises the point that the article was trying to make. With the advent of AI being used in educational settings, all educational stakeholders are going to have to rethink their approach to public schooling. In an era where they are already having a tough time working together, educators, policymakers, and parents will have to find a way to work together to ensure children are learning how to learn, use critical thanking, and to put in real work rather than having a machine do it for them.

This is now more important than ever because the Trump administration have recently signed an executive order to incorporate AI into classrooms. Though this may be the technology of the future, critics argue that the roll-out needs ample doses of caution and guardrails. Interviews conducted by Cochran (2025) in her news article for *The Hill* suggest that educators need to work through the problems of AI with innovative thinking, and an initiative-taking

approach. Educators must now think about the way teachers conduct their teaching, what we are asking students to accomplish, and how they pose questions.

Towards the end of the Cochran (2025) article, an interviewee began suggesting a course of action to grow with AI rather than against it. She suggested that AI could help students study for exams more efficiently. By inputting rubrics into generative AI implements, teachers can develop new ways of helping students to learn or to gather feedback on schoolwork instantly. Finally, she suggests focusing on project-based learning, with collaborative homework, which is difficult for AI to replicate. By building methods to build trust that students are learning what they need to despite the use of AI, educators can potentially stem the tide of trust erosion whilst building innovative schools and creating more efficient learning environments.

Another article by Hanlon (2024) at the University of Illinois, echoes much of the Cochran article. He suggests that teachers use AI as an opportunity rather than a potential detractor from educating. The roles of educators and the education systems themselves will need to adapt to prepare for a future with AI. This means shaping AI into an instrument that makes teachers more effective at their jobs. By increasing teacher effectiveness, trust in what teachers do would receive a boost.

On the other hand, according to the article by Cochran (2025), some interviewees suggested a renewed focus on specific no-go areas for using AI. They suggested that there should now be more focus on exams as using AI during exams will be inadvisable or considered cheating. Though with renewed focus on exams and their shortcomings, refocusing there might lead to the same issues faced with the focus on standardization and test scores seen in past education reforms.

Hanlon (2024) also speaks of potential detractors of AI usage. He first points to the concern that many educators have about generative AI because of how these companies train AI. This fear exists because a corpus of legacy information or a corpus coming from online sources could aid in propagating racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression. The many forms of oppression detract from building an inclusive environment of trust.

Additionally, the issues with AI do not end with perpetuating forms of oppression. According to Hanlon (2024), there are documented instances where AI has produced fabricated and hallucinated information or copies of others' work, which brings to the forefront a concern based on ethics. Educators need to understand the negative and positive aspects of AI to overcome the potential detractors and build trustworthy and inclusive environments with AI trained to do the same.

Pushing even further into the potential horrors of AI I turn again to Ted Gioia. In another of his articles on *The Honest Broker* Substack, Gioia (2025, para. 13) looks back to his 2023 article on trust being the scarcest thing in society. He elaborates on the original article by invoking present-day examples of trust eroding even more so, perhaps even disappearing entirely from society thanks to technological deceptions. He refers not just to misinformation and disinformation being perpetuated on various online platforms, but also to AI and its ability to produce nearly perfect fake audio, video, and text that are indistinguishable from human productions (Gioia, 2025, para 7). From increased psychological breakdowns to people believing they are the next messiah, he paints a dire picture of the downward spiral technology currently has us on (Gioia, 2025, para 16). Extrapolate, if you will, the implications of an inability to distinguish reality from fiction, whether we are gods from humans. What happens to schools or even society if we cannot agree on what is real or what is fabricated.

Gioia (2025, para 24) then discusses six behavior patterns in this misinformation, disinformation, AI riddled world. The first stage of the fall of trust will be a rise in skepticism. Take only a few moments to watch news on just about any news channel and anyone could find heightened levels of skepticism. The second stage will be heightened aloofness. Here, Gioia (2025, para 24) suggests that if everything we know begins to be questioned, there will be little reason for communities to have shared actions. The third stage is a great silence. This is when discussions no longer aid in mitigating issues and there is no reason to speak the truth. Fourth comes a great indifference. People lose connection with each other and lose interest in events. The penultimate stage is that of distrust. Due to a lack of shared reality, experts and institutions lose all ability to earn the trust of the people. The final stage, the most brutal of all, is hostility. Without the ability to connect to individuals, without a shared reality in which to bond, traditional bonds shatter. Without community, without a shared purpose, conflicts and violence become more likely (Gioia, 2025, para. 24). The question that comes to mind is which of these are we already witnessing?

With all the above in mind, the use of AI in schools looks to further divide stakeholders for the time being. At its current state, AI's foundation builds upon a legacy of information built upon many forms of oppression. AI is also capable of allowing students to bypass current standards to produce assignments, taking away their ability to critically compose writing and research assignments. This is not so say that AI should not be used, but if we choose to use it in an unwise manner, we are likely to produce the same divisive and truth eroding results we have seen in the No Child Left Behind Act, the Common Core Standards Initiative, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (Ahmed Siddiqui et al., 2020; Gioia, 2025; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018 Pondiscio, 2022; Pennycook and Rand, 2018).

What are the benefits of eroding trust in public schools?

It takes little imagination to develop a list of what or who might benefit from maintaining a decline of trust in public schools. From a political perspective, the maintained decline of trust in public schools could bring political benefits by bolstering more of the business-savvy constituents or appealing to voters in general. It could be that some individuals enjoy their class status and wish to keep it that way, or some may wish to climb the ranks. It could be the mostly male-dominant society that wishes to keep it that way, peddling sexism and patriarchy. White supremacists might wish to keep people of color from achieving. It could be people from certain religious backgrounds who wish to spread their beliefs and achieve dominance over schooling. What follows explores these themes and more.

Strengthening Support for Religious, Private, Charter, and Homeschooling

Since the early 1990s, states have been allowing students to attend private schools using public dollars. Thanks to decades-long campaigns by school-choice advocates, the last few years have seen a rapid expansion of school-choice, especially with the frustration from pandemic actions. According to a report from Cohen and DiMarco (2024), 33 states have private school choice programs, 12 of which have laws that allow any child, regardless of income or need, to be able to apply for government subsidized private, religious, and homeschool programs. This is conducted using not only vouchers but education savings accounts, tax-credit scholarships, and refundable tax credits. Their report, which expands even further, aimed at collection data from other public reports, state websites, state laws and statutes, press releases, news accounts, and interviews. Using such data, they were able to develop a comprehensive corpus of information that helped to provide a better view of the current school choice landscape across eight states (Cohen & DiMarco, 2024).

Despite looking potentially helpful, what follows are additional perspectives from various articles that paint school choice in a drastically different light. Starting off, Pondiscio (2022) posits that religious schools, private schools, charter schools, and homeschools are the beneficiaries of maintaining a decline of trust in public schools. He writes that, due to the pandemic and its impact on public schools, enrollment in religious schools and charter schools increased by up to seven percent in some cases, and homeschooling rates increased threefold as well (p. 6).

McDonald (2023) takes a page from Pondiscio and suggests that due to a decrease in public confidence in public schools, parents are bypassing public schools and making the move to smaller, cost-effective private schools or homeschooling. The growing support for school choice policies has helped to move funding typically for public schools to other institutions such as secular and private schools.

What draws many to religious, private, charter, and homeschooling are a series of myths about the benefits of schools other than public schools. Speaking of voucher programs, the National Education Association (2025) claims that there is little evidence to indicate that voucher programs are improving overall student success. They go on to claim that there is even some evidence to suggest that there are negative effects for students receiving vouchers. The National Education Association makes further suggestions that the myths about better accountability for private schools are false, claiming that vouchers undermine accountability due to the almost complete autonomy of private schools. They claim that there has been rampant fraud, waste, and abuse in the current voucher systems that are draining taxpayers' money from public schools (National Education Association, 2025).

Their claims do not stop there. The National Education Association state that rather than reducing public education costs, vouchers have increased costs which require even more taxpayer money. As for giving parents real educational choices, they claim that voucher programs in some states are capped and limit enrollment, maintain exclusive admissions policies, or charge high tuition fees that far exceed the voucher coverage. If anything, they give choice to the private schools. Even more damning is the fact that private and religious schools are not held to the same standards as public schools which allows for discrimination in admissions based on gender, religion, sexual orientation, ability, prior academic achievement, a student's behavioral history, and even income. Expanding on that, they state that vouchers are rooted in segregation and help to perpetuation racism as they often operate with impunity and are not subject to the same oversight as public schools. (National Education Association, 2025).

Despite much of the negative from the articles above, there are contrasting views that suggest homeschooling is a viable alternative. According to Ray (2025) of the National Homeschool Education Research Institute, during the pandemic there was a large influx of homeschoolers, to roughly 3.1 million students in total. In relation to all students, 6% were homeschooled. Many feel that homeschooling helps to provide a safer environment, that it helps to enhance familial relationships, and that it protects children from racism and other forms of oppression.

Another study by Ray (2017) suggests that 78% of peer-reviewed research he reviewed shows that homeschoolers achieve statistically significantly better than students in institutional schools in general academic achievement. Moreover, home-educated children score on average 15-25 percentile points above public–school students on standardized tests. Perhaps the most impressive is the 87% of peer-review studies on social, emotional, and psychological

development indicate statistically significant levels of higher performance with homeschooled children over children in conventional schools (Ray, 2017). Regardless, alternative schooling may have just as many positives and negatives associated with them as public schooling depending on the perspective. Politically speaking, perspective and perception are everything, and I highlight in the next section.

Political Gains

Mehta (2015) provides a combination view that ties neatly into McDonald (2023) and Saltman (2021). Due to the impacts of the loss of trust in public schools brought by *A Nation at Risk*, both sides of the political spectrum have thrived due to the distrust. Democrats used the distrust to pitch reforms tied to their usual concerns of a lack of funding and resources for schools to boost the economy. Republicans saw the distrust to appease their business constituencies and to bolster the markets by pitching reforms that would allow Republicans to gain an edge over the Democrats' typical advantage on education (p. 23). Saltman (2021) states that neoliberals and the political right benefit from paranoia and contribute to conditions for political authoritarianism by doing all they can to undermine dialogic, intellectual, and critical approaches to education, to bolster their authority over society (p. 157). Regardless of the political sides chosen, public schools and their alternative have become one of the most sought-after political point gaining topics thanks to events during the pandemic and the continued political debate regarding schooling.

Corporate Gains

Saltman (2021) points a finger at the growing corporate focus on education. Specifically, he focuses firmly on corporations building their wealth and advancing new technologies to firmly grab hold of public schools. Tech companies have begun to insist that Adaptive Learning

Technologies are the future of learning, helping children to learn by adjusting the delivery of standardized and homogenized curriculum to meet the pace of the student. I must say that this does not sound bad on a surface level, but then he shines a light on the darker aspects of such learning. Looking at his example of the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative or CZI, he shows the initiative is an LLC, which is structured to allow the company to move money and data without oversight from the public. Additionally, he states that CZI's use of third-party data could have implications for student privacy (p. 157). This ties neatly into Chan Zuckerberg's husband Mark Zuckerberg's business model of using the lucrative data produced by his company to further fill the coffers and expand his power. The other downside of this, as Saltman (2021) indicates, is that this model creates a technological tracking system that could have serious cultural and social implications for students and their futures (p. 157).

McDonald (2023) adds that small businesses have seen an increase in confidence, which she attributes partly to the move away from public schools. As such, educational businesses around the United States are taking advantage of the benefits of low trust in public schools, rising to the alternative demands of parents. This allows parents to potentially bypass the political polarization around public schools, providing an education aimed at reducing political and social strife.

How can trust erosion in public schools be reversed and what steps might be taken?

As with many processes, an equal and opposite process can often reverse outcomes. In this instance, we are talking about how to reverse the erosion of trust in public schools. Poynton et al., (2018) make compelling suggestions for reversing the erosion of trust in public schools in their quantitative mixed methods study that aimed at examining the impact of parent training programs at five school districts. To gather the information necessary for their study, they

conducted surveys and interviews with 67 trainees and 5 superintendents across the school districts. Their findings led them to suggest focusing on four domains: knowledge, relationships, willingness, and efficacy to increase trust (p. 274). By knowledge, they suggest learning about the functioning of schools; topics include school finance, federally mandated assessments, curriculum development, support services, governance, technology, and instructional practices. All this helped local stakeholders understand most of the inner details of the local school system, which helped dispel misimpressions and provide factual evidence (Poynton et al., 2018, p. 275).

Relationships offer a unique perspective on improving trust. The aim of relationships is to build them among parents, teachers, district officials, and other stakeholders. Building these connections with key decision-makers helps stakeholders foster trust development among one another and bolster communication. This leaves individuals feeling empowered, knowledgeable, and confident. Furthermore, building close relationships between stakeholders helps alleviate concerns as they know exactly who to talk to about any apprehensions (Poynton et al., 2018, p. 275).

An article by Merod (2022) shares similar suggestions with Poynton et al., (2018), in that they recommend engagement between stakeholders. She suggests that families, teachers, administrators, support staff, community organizations and others need to come together rather than give in to the political rhetoric. Political discourse has been pushing censorship and exclusion, limiting classroom discussions around race and LGBTQ+ issues. This all divides and runs counter to family engagement. With true engagement across all stakeholders, with true ownership among all parties involved, kids have a chance to succeed (Merod, 2022).

Kavanagh and Rich (2018) take a slightly different approach. According to a synopsis of a study they conducted at the RAND corporation, they recommend using a combination of

multifaceted and interdisciplinary efforts. They believed interdisciplinary research done in cooperation with educators, policymakers, and research organizations that highlights the problem of truth decay, which impacts trust in various organizations such as public schools, can reverse trust decay. They feel developing a focused understanding of the ways truth erodes will enable stakeholders to devise possible solutions (p. 2).

Kavanagh and Rich (2018) then shift the focus onto four different high-priority research areas. First, they suggest that stakeholders must closely examine truth decay, how it has formed in the past in the United States and elsewhere, building lessons learned that may help reverse truth decay, thus stemming the tide of trust erosion as has been framed in this study. Second, they suggest focusing on truth decay trends, specifically how media content has evolved as new forms of media grow, how fast the flow of information has become, changes and developments in educational systems and the related curriculum, how political polarization and gridlock provide impacts, and a breakdown in civil discourse, civil engagement, and uncertainty about policies in the United States (p. 2).

Third, Kavanagh and Rich (2018) advocate investigation of processes and mechanisms that bind information disbursement, processing, and consumption to truth decay. This includes looking into the ways truth decay is tied to institutions, authorities, and intermediaries. Add to this a need to learn how polarization, engagement, and discourse impact truth decay and to learn about the benefits and drawbacks of technological innovations and advancements, and this renders a good understanding of the interconnected system built around truth decay (p. 2).

Lastly, Kavanagh and Rich (2018) advise the development and evaluation of solutions such as educational intervention, information market improvements, and rebuilding and developing institutions in support of truth decay reversal. They go on to suggest that

developments bolstering the connecting of social divisions, technological innovations, behavioral economics, psychological and cognitive sciences, as well as organizational self-assessment skills will all help reverse truth decay, which will in turn reverse trust erosion in our public institutions (p. 2-3).

Saltman (2021) argues for agnostic politics as agonism helps overcome the antagonistic aspects of neoliberalism, aspects that lead to political adversaries being seen as enemies to be destroyed rather than potential allies with which to build. He claims that healthy suspicions linked to truths can lead to engagement, which then allows for an arrival at truth based on discussion, dissent, and curiosity. He further builds upon this with the addition of providing a foundation for truth through debate, evidence, and the revelation of the theoretical assumptions behind claims to truth. Add to this a consideration for how the social positions or locations of those conducting the research and how it ties into their perspective on any given subject, and the result is a more accurate account of how culture and science function (p. 150). Saltman (2021) continues by explaining that it is critical we create educational conditions for questioning relationships between knowledge and social authority. This task is the basis for critical thinking and for critical thinking to be the basis of the fight for justice, equality, and liberation (p. 153).

From a different angle, Hess and Sanon (2022) believe that the first thing for education leaders and professional associations to do is call out indefensible conduct. Furthermore, they say that school leaders need to work to reassure the public that individual misconduct does not speak for the masses. The means by which school leaders should take the time to release public statements during events where teachers or leaders are in the news for individual misconduct, statements that reaffirm that they denounce any such behaviors will help. They believe that active reassurance of Americans, letting them know their beliefs and values are respected and

they will address issues as they arise with responsible professionalism, will help build back trust (p. 5).

Building upon everything suggested thus far, Davidson and Hughes (2019) suggest five simple ingredients that can be cultivated to build or earn trust. First, public schools and those who run them must exhibit benevolence. This means that compassion and kindness are necessary when undertaking any rebuilding of trust. Next, honesty really is the best policy. Nothing degrades trust like learning that institutions are not being honest; thus, all actions must come from a foundation of honesty. The third ingredient is openness. It is difficult to trust in what someone cannot see. Blind faith does not work as well for public schools as it does for religions. Openness and transparency regarding school policies and decisions is critical, and school districts need to ensure all stakeholders are made aware of the reasoning behind any actions or stances taken. Additionally, reliability is crucial. Schools need to operate in ways that make people feel confident. Nobody wants a car that does not start every time, and people do not want schools that do not deliver quality education. Lastly, competence is the keystone that locks all other pieces together. The teachers and school leaders need to display the professionalism they have earned, displaying their unique talents. All this comes together to form the humility and sincerity necessary to build back trust in our public schools.

Forsyth et al., (2011) suggest focusing on what they call the five facets of trust, all of which are necessary ingredients of one whole. The first ingredient in building and maintaining trust is benevolence. This is the confidence that a person or group will act in one's best interests. This is not a one-off show of goodwill towards another but a continued and consistent benevolence. The second component is reliability. To have trust and to build it, we must be able to rely upon others for action and goodwill. Others must meet our needs in positive ways, and

this must be consistent. The third ingredient is competence. Not only do we need the competence to achieve desired outcomes, but we also need others to have the same competence to build and maintain trust consistently. The fourth component is honesty. Honesty is tied to one's character, integrity, and authenticity. The three aspects of honesty must manifest in others if trust is to hold or blossom. The fifth ingredient for the upkeep and bolstering of trust is openness. For the intent of this study, openness is one of the most important aspects of trust. Openness is the willingness to share relevant information among people, no matter how vulnerable it leaves a person or group. Vulnerability shows that trust is reciprocal and helps reinforce trust and confidence in others (Forsyth et al., 2011).

Mehta (2015) argues that we need to look at the events that have changed public schools, specifically the publishing of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), and do our best to get out from under them. He suggests that we need to change the focus of schooling, shifting schools to focus on expanding the mind and preparing people for the workplace. Politicians need to empower educators to shift the impetus from controlling schools and focusing on test scores to learning and growing. The teachers versus politicians and parents' problem needs to change to one of collaboration among the three. Issues outside the school such as the economy, poverty, and healthcare need not be placed on the shoulders of educators but on the shoulders of all. Schooling must be seen as more than a utilitarian enterprise. We need to trust in the profession of teaching and work together to combat the many issues we face as a country. If we focus on building up one another rather than holding one another to unfair or impossible standards, there is potential to reverse the decline in trust in our public schools (p. 26).

Lastly, Hamilton et al., (2020) contend that the best way to counter truth decay is to teach children the skills necessary to navigate civic life. Students need to be given the skills to evaluate

information critically. What we have now is a lack of ability to critically assess the information that we are presented with every day. To better navigate the media-based worlds we find ourselves in, we need the ability to search for, evaluate, and verify social and political information wherever we find it (p.10).

In synthesizing the above, there are four significant steps in rebuilding trust. First, to build trust stakeholders must enhance understanding and build relationships among one another. This means educating the public about the inner workings of schools, dispelling misconceptions, and providing factual evidence regarding processes. It also means building strong relationships and ensuring engagement happens between parents, teachers, district officials, community organizers, and other stakeholders (Forsyth et al. 2011; Hughes 2019; Merod 2022; Poynton et al. 2018).

Second, truth decay must be addressed, and critical thinking must be promoted. This means examining historical patterns to understand the history of truth erosion. The analysis trends are another aspect of the second step, as trends allow for uncovering the evolution for truth decay. Understanding mechanisms which cause truth decay is also critical in this step, considering the roles that institutions, authorities, and technology play in the decay. Step two also includes developing solutions that focus on educational interventions, improve information markets, and rebuilding institutions to support trust building. As for critical thinking, stakeholders, especially the children, need to be able to critically evaluate information if truth decay is to be countered, meaning they need to know how to search for, evaluate, and verify social and political information to allow them to navigate civic life effectively (Hamilton et al., 2020; Kavanagh and Rich 2018).

The third step is to uphold core institutional qualities and professionalism. This is done by exemplifying benevolence, honesty, reliability, openness, and competence. Additionally, this includes addressing misconduct and reassuring the public that indefensible conduct will be properly addressed. Step three includes empowering educators to teach and to recognize them as professionals. It includes fostering collaborations between teachers, parents, district leaders, and politicians rather than maintaining an adversarial dynamic. Lastly, step three involves shifting the focus of schooling from control and test scores to expanding the mind and preparing individuals for being productive members of society (Davidson and Hughes, 2019; Forsyth et al., 2011; Hess and Sanon, 2022; Mehta 2015).

The fourth and final step is embracing agnostic politics and open dialogue. This feeds back into transparency, moving beyond adversarial approaches and toward constructive dialog. Political adversaries need to see each other as potential allies for constructive engagement. This means having healthy suspicion about truths, encouraging discussion, dissent, and curiosity, and building a foundation for truth based on evidence and the revelation of theoretical assumptions. This step is also bolstered by creating conditions for critical thinking, because educational conditions must foster relationships between knowledge and social authority, which serve as the basis for critical thinking, justice, equality, and liberation. All of this fosters a more informed, engaged, and trusting relationship between the public and its educational institutions (Saltman, 2021).

Theory

Critical Theory

Critical Theory, encompassing various perspectives, makes social structures visible by analyzing power relations (Paradis et al., 2020). This visibility is crucial because many public

trust issues are linked to the social structures and power dynamics present in our country. Consider how social media impacts trust or how various forms of power decreased public trust in the Centers for Disease Control during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pollard & Davis, 2021). This study investigates the trust issues that our public academic institutions face by problematizing the phenomenon of trust erosion in public schools to understand it better and inform changing the current trend.

Another item to note is that power shapes language, and language reflects power (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Thus, by exploring how the many structures of language influence public organizations, interactions, and behaviors, Critical Theory helps identify the source of distrust, reveal it, and help mitigate it (Paradis et al., 2020). What follows keeps my theoretical framework in mind whilst building a foundational collection of literature that supports the intent of this study.

Critical Race Theory

Besides Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT) held a prominent position throughout the literature review. Critical Race Theory is an academic legal framework based on the idea that race and racism are critical components in forming law and society in the United States. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) state that as the 1960s civil rights momentum began to wane, lawyers, activists, and legal scholars realized a need to bolster support and stop the advances of the era from being pushed back. New strategies and theories were badly needed, and greats such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw put their minds together to tackle this task. From their efforts sprang Critical Race Theory, which was founded upon critical legal studies and radical feminism. As such, CRT scholarship examines relationships between race and law and challenges how the United States constructs and

represents race (Miller et al., 2022). According to Tate (1997), Critical Race Theory is founded upon the endeavors of the civil rights era of the 1960s as detailed above, which focused on bringing about justice, liberation, and empowerment. Tate (1997) states that from the inception of Critical Race Theory, it has had a mixture of social activist and academic goals, which coincide with the aim of this study. It critiques the status quo and current reform efforts. It asks us to look upon the persistent problems of racism endemic in our institutions and to apply this new lens to rethink traditional aspects of society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) explain that CRT comprises three themes. The first theme, ordinariness, states that racism is hard to face or mitigate because it is not properly acknowledged. They go on to state that only the most blatant forms of racism are addressed as the color-blind conceptions of equality only treat the symptoms of racism, not the root causes. The second theme, interest convergence, which is sometimes called material determinism, posits that racism advances the interests of Whites even when Whites may desire to help people of color such as during the successes of the civil rights era. Put simply, only when it is advantageous for Whites to maintain power will Whites have a desire to help those they oppress. The third theme of CRT, the social construction thesis, states that social relations and thoughts, or more precisely, society, helps to create, alter, and abolish race and races as categories when necessary or convenient. To add to the themes of Delgado and Stefancic, I posit a fourth theme called differential racism, also known as cultural racism and neo-racism. This theme suggests that the dominant culture essentializes ethnicity, which cages people in unchangeable reference categories (Ben-Eliezer, 2004).

Intersectionality

Another or the more profound theories that became apparent during the literature review process was the theory of Intersectionality, which according to King (1988), is a collection of diverse concepts and theories. These concepts and theories are often related to notions such as multiple jeopardy, vectors of oppression and privilege, and interlocking systems (King, 1998; Grant & Zwier, 2011; Combahee River Collective, 1977). Grant and Zwier (2011), building upon a theory Kimberlé Crenshaw coined and Patricia Hill Collins brought into prominence, explain Intersectionality as the interrelation of oppression based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, class, species, and disability. The interrelation means that these forms of oppression do not function as independently as some may think; more so, they form a system of oppression that comprises many discriminatory forms.

As hinted at before, Intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. She revisited Intersectionality prior to the AAPF's 20th anniversary celebration. During a question-and-answer panel at that celebration, she looked back on her work and provided a detailed explanation of Intersectionality and its evolution through the many years since she brought it into the light. According to Crenshaw (2017), Intersectionality is a perspective that allows one to see where power becomes apparent, interlocking and intersecting. She continues by highlighting that Intersectionality is not simply a race problem, a gender problem, a class problem, or an LGBTQ problem. It is the framework of viewing problems from one perspective that erases what occurs to individuals who find they are subject to all the problems highlighted above. It is what Kimberlé Crenshaw states that provides a foundation from which I wish to build. Her words tie directly into the ensemble perspective and solution this study aims to bring forward, because, as she says, viewing problems from one perspective erases what occurs to the individual. To fully

understand what is happening regarding the erosion of trust in public schools, we must view the problem from the perspectives of the many individuals overshadowed by those in power.

Review of the Literature Summary

The goal of this section was to synthesize the above into a summary of the literature discussed throughout the review. First, I summarize what is now known about the topic from the literature reviewed above, highlighting the most significant discoveries. Second, I summarize the unknowns, or the gaps presented in the literature review.

Knowns

According to the literature reviewed above, there are several key factors, events, and beneficiaries related to the erosion of trust in public schools. Trust in public K-12 schools has been eroding at an accelerated pace for at least the last 50 years (Brady & Kent, 2022). Political polarization has been a significant contributor to the declination of trust, especially when considering that Republicans and Democrats feel they cannot agree on basic facts (Dimrock, 2020). The literature paints that this has led to differing levels of trust, with Republicans often showing less confidence in public schools than Democrats (Hess & Sanon, 2022; Brady & Kent, 2022). Additionally, the political divide has often been spurred on by controversial topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, Critical Race Theory, LGBTQ+ rights, curriculum content, and religious additions to public schools that serve to create tension and erode trust, especially when school policies do not align with personal beliefs. (Poytonet al., Cerna, 2014).

Critical issues such as racism, sexism, classism, religions inserting themselves into education, and power dynamics have also presented themselves as known issues in the erosion of trust in public education. Of note, people of color report significantly lower levels of trust than Whites in public schools, which is brought about from systemic racism in U.S. political and

economic systems (Evangelist, 2022, Feagin, 2006). Also, institutional sexism, ingrained in public schools, has led to an underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, with as few as 21% of school administration positions held by women according to multiple studies (Slovska, 2022; Polka & Litchka, 2008).

The review also highlighted that classism has increased the erosion of trust in public schools as shown in multiple articles suggesting students from lower economic classes have fewer resources, struggle more, and have decreased school satisfaction, leading to a cycle of frustration and mistrust (Miller, 2017; Allan er al., 2023). The literature review showed that religious beliefs are negatively associated with institutional trust, showing that individuals who practice religion more frequently tend to have decrease social trust towards those who do not share their beliefs, often leading to issues when beliefs do not align with school curriculum. Power dynamics also had an impact on the erosion of trust in public schools. Of note, the exclusion of community input in school decisions and a lack of mechanisms to address exploitative behavior by those in power has inhibited trust building and accelerated trust erosion (Poynton et al., 2018; Tschannen-Moran, 2017).

Beyond the issues presented in the review, several events were highlighted that contributed to the erosion of trust in public schools. Though there were many events discussed, four specific events had the greatest impact. The first was *A Nation at Risk* (1983) which framed the U.S. education system as being in a crisis of mediocrity. This led to an undermined public perception of public schools and shifted the focus of schooling toward economic competition (Mehta, 2015). The second was No Child Left Behind Act (2001), which increased federal accountability and created a narrow focus on standardized testing in reading and math. This led to criticism and a deprofessionalization of teachers (Hess & Sanon, 2022; Pondiscio, 2022).

The third was the rise of social media. The modern form of social media has become a primary driver of truth decay. It has enabled the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, overwhelming users with negativity and exploiting cognitive biases (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Ahmed Siddiqui et al., 2020). The final event was the COVID-19 Pandemic. The profound impact of the pandemic led from trust in teachers dropping from a high of 75% in 2020 to an all-time low of 64% two years later. Much of the decline was attributed to parents observing remote learning firsthand, frustration over school closures, and outrage over curricula considered too liberal by some (Hess & Sanon, 2022; Pondiscio, 2022).

The review also uncovered multiple beneficiaries of trust erosion in public schools. The first was alternative schooling. As confidence has continued to decline in public schools, enrollment in religious schools, charter schools, and homeschooling has increased. A great example of this was the threefold rise in homeschooling since the pandemic (Pondiscio, 2022). Various political factions have also been seen to benefit from the trust erosion. Both Republicans and Democrats have used the decline of trust to push their own reform agendas and appeal to their respective bases to further fortify their political positions (Mehta, 2015). The last big beneficiary highlighted was corporations. The decline in trust in public schools has opened the door for corporate interests, particularly tech companies marketing products like Adaptive Learning Technologies and other educational business catering to parents seeking alternatives (Saltman, 2021; McDonald, 2023).

Unknowns

The body of literature reviewed throughout this review has highlighted the limitations of knowledge surrounding the erosion of trust in public schools. Though some of the works from both academic and from media sources provided a firsthand analysis of the erosion of trust in

public schools, much of what was presented had only secondary or tertiary connections to the topic. There were few studies that were specifically focused on the impacts of racism, sexism, classism, religion, politics, power, and social media on the erosion of trust in public schools, and none of them focused on how public schools are impacted by the intersection of these culprits.

Additionally, much of what has negatively impacted trust in public schools has occurred in the last 50 years, with many significant events happening in the last two decades. We still do not know the long-term impact of these newer events, nor does much of the research ponder the future implications. For instance, we don't know what will come of the misinformation and disinformation being pushed via social media. We do not yet know the full impacts of political tinkering regarding No Child Left Behind Act, the Every Student Succeeds Act, or the second coming of the Trump Administration. Add Artificial Intelligence into the mix and we are just beginning to unfold what is on the horizon of trust erosion in public schools, and if any of this research is to be trusted, the horizon looks dim.

Contribution of the Study

The research literature supported a gap in the literature regarding the erosion of trust in public schools. Many issues plague public schools, and many culprits are the catalysts. This study highlighted the issue of trust erosion, specifically that it cannot be solved using one perspective, which is the key to this study. Rather, a collective of perspectives is required to tackle this issue. A lack of welcoming for perspectives other than those of White males and the elite has led to the gamut of issues detailed in the literature reviewed.

As for how the findings of this literature review fit with or contradict existing research, this study does a small amount of both. It fits existing research in that it agreed that there was an erosion of trust occurring and that there were many reasons why trust continues to decline. This

literature review uncovered politics, classism, sexism, racism, religion, power, and social media play the most prominent roles in the erosion of trust in public schools at various points in history. This research took things further because the true culprit is a combination of each of these issues. In contrast, much of the existing research is focused on one lens over another. This study's focus was on diverse perspectives and not exclusive to the powerful few.

I chose to use an ensemble of lenses to tackle the complex issue of trust erosion in public schools. As Crenshaw (2017) states, it is the framework of viewing problems from one perspective that erases what occurs to individuals, hence the necessity of an ensemble approach What I mean by an ensemble is that I looked at the issue through multiple perspectives such as racism, sexism, politics, the people and much more, to build an ensemble lens from which to view the erosion of trust. In essence, this supports and challenges the multitude of existing theories on why trust is eroding in public institutions across the United States. Rather than looking at the issue through one lens, the lens of the oppressors, I analyzed how the different lenses intersect and align at various points, helping to further or possibly counter the erosion of trust in tandem rather than solely on their own. This brings up unique combinations that might not be considered while endeavoring to mitigate the damage, providing yet another avenue for healing.

What this study brought to the field was a welcoming perspective that is built on a foundation of truth. The essence of the truth is that, from my perspective, the only way to approach a shared reality or a shared truth was to analyze content and discourse from all perspectives. This means including views from multiple sexes, all levels of wealth, every single class, race, and religion, and to view it from all forms of media, especially the social media that influences the masses nearly instantly. It borrows from this ensemble of lenses to pave a path

towards a reversal in trust erosion by building yet another ensemble of solutions, solutions that are applicable to more than those in power or those with White skin.

The literature above is like a two-thousand-piece puzzle with all four corners complete though there are pieces missing to connect them into a viable whole. What this review has shown is that the literature I collected only goes so far as to partially explain the issue at hand. Only pieces of the issues surrounding the erosion of trust in public education are explained, and many provide few possible solutions. The literature revealed the need for a synthesis of knowledge, a piecing together of the problems perceived and solutions posited into a whole. This whole will be for the many rather than the few.

Summary

Chapter 2 described the available relevant, substantive, and methodological literature related to this study's purpose. While telling the literature story from my perspective, this section showcased the lineage of the literature by following a five-step process for conducting a literature review. First, I produced an examination of research literature and theory specific to this study, organized around my theory and research questions. Second, I offered a summary of literature review, discussing what is known and unknown about my topic through a broad range of research studies, including a summary of results. Third, I discussed the contribution of the study, explicating what the dissertation brings to the field. Fourth, I provided insights into the theory discussed throughout the literature. Next, Chapter 3 delved into the methodology of my study.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

Every research project requires the use of one or a multitude of methodologies to investigate the research focus. Methodologies provide the reader with a guide or perspective from which to read and digest the materials presented in later sections. What follows is a detailed account of the methodologies I chose and how I used them.

In highlighting how my research was conducted, I first discuss the research purpose to provide the reader with the foundation from which my chosen methodologies were selected. Next, I touch on my subjectivity, articulating my positionality and the need for transparency. It is then important for me to discuss why I chose qualitative inquiry as my primary form of inquiry, discussing both the purpose and standards of quality for qualitative research. Next was restating my research questions as they inform subsequent sections as much as they inform the design of said research. Following that, I explain the methodological framework of this study. From there I discuss the overall design of my research, highlighting the structure, framing, and building aspects of this project. Next, I discuss data representation and how I show my findings in a manner that aligns with my methodologies. From there, I touch on ethics and the ethical considerations I made in this study. Lastly, I summarize the premise of this chapter, addressing the most pertinent aspects of what I covered.

Research Purpose

The purpose of my research was to investigate the erosion of trust in public schools. Trust has become one of the scarcest commodities in the known world. It does not matter if one is a scientist or a brain surgeon; the public's trust in institutions across the United States has plummeted over the last five decades (Brady & Kent, 2022). This is a substantial issue due to the

need for trust and transparency in a democracy like ours in the United States. If trust continues to erode, democratic pillars such as public schools will fail, and private institutions will surge to fill the void for better or worse.

Subjectivity Statement

The purpose of a subjectivity statement is to articulate my positionality whilst being transparent about my subjectivities. To meet this intent, I discuss why I believed it was important to be transparent about my subjectivities. From there, I delved into what motivated me to pursue the erosion of trust in public schools. Lastly, I divulged the sociocultural lived experiences that I brought to my research and how they helped to deepen insight and understanding whilst also creating potential blind spots in my research.

Throughout my life, I have continually pursued education. This pursuit is derived from a wish at a very young age to be a student for the remainder of my life. Ever since I can remember, I have been enamored with all things education. From my early love of science and all things atmospheric to my eventual love of psychology, sociology, and philosophy, my interest in education has only grown.

With such a high interest in a subject, it would not be difficult to draw a line from such a love to a level of concern for all things academic. I feel that a quality education is one of the most important things we can offer a human. I know, what exactly does quality mean, is that not just a cop-out word? To a degree, I left it vague for a reason. A quality education means something different to everyone. From the child learning for the first time to the astrophysicist unlocking the secrets of the cosmos, we all have an idea of what quality looks and feels like. I see education as a key that unlocks a gate to a world of nearly endless possibilities. I see education as a resource that can be sharpened into a critical thinking apparatus that challenges all

that it touches to become the best version of itself. I see education as a means of liberation for those seeking out ways to change the dominant ideologies. Education can literally and figuratively set us free.

In contrast, some might believe that a quality education is one that merely makes cogs of people for political and commercial means. Those with enough power may see education as a gate-keeping mechanism, one that will only allow individuals from certain backgrounds or classes into the deeper world of education. Some see education as another way to control people, to manipulate and deceive. Regardless of the motives, education is powerful and it can raise nations and peoples or systematically destroy them.

As such, education is important to me, and I would hope, to us all. If people do not trust education, they will either seek out alternative forms of education or potentially forego a quality education wittingly or unwittingly. It is the unwitting part of that last statement that scares me. What if people are unable to afford school? What if people are actively being discouraged from pursuing education overtly or covertly? What of the students who lack the representation that White males like me have?

There is a reason why trust is declining, and my aim was to uncover as much detail behind the decline as I possibly could. If I bring to light what I feel are the primary culprits, if I put them out in the open for all to see, maybe someone will see and make use of what I have shared. Change starts with an individual's decision to make a change. Change starts with one person who wants to change the world around them. One person is all it takes to be the spark that ignites the flame of change.

So, what are the sociocultural lived experiences that I brought to my research and how do they help to deepen my insight and understanding whilst also creating potential blind spots in my

research? This is a massive question to try and answer in a short space. Nevertheless, I have done my best to explain where my background and how the social and cultural aspects of my upbringing influence my research for better or worse.

The easiest way to start is from the beginning. I was born a White male in the state of Kansas in the mid-eighties. I grew up in the primarily White suburbs of Kansas City in Johnson County. For those who aren't aware, Johnson County is one of the most affluent counties in the state. The county is predominately White with a median household income in the lower six-digit range according to the United States Census Bureau (United States Census Bureau, 2024).

Most families that I interfaced with in my salad days were all very similar to mine. By salad days, I mean the period of youth filled with carefree innocence. The general makeup was of stay-at-home moms and dads who worked in one of the trades or who were businesspeople who worked for the wealthier companies in the region. A mix of primarily blue- and White-collar workers with more of the wealth in the northern portion of the county. The section of the county that I grew up in was mostly blue-collar workers so that holds the most sway over me.

The schools that I attended were mostly White, with a sprinkling of people of different colors and backgrounds. I was taught from a working-class White perspective for much of my youth, so socially and culturally speaking, this is the sort of ideology that was ingrained in me from the start. I might call it the typical work hard and make it far sort of mentality. It was a mostly positive perspective filled with limitless potential. My school experiences included playing sports, being part of a gifted program for a brief stint, being bullied for my size, and spending time in computer science and media production classes. I was the sort that could fit nearly anywhere, which I suppose helped me to learn to love differing perspectives.

Post K-12 is when things started to take a drastic change in my life. Working towards my first associate degree was my first eye-opening experience. The biggest influences were the mix of people that I saw, the classes that were offered, and the nearly infinite number of perspectives that I could learn from. No longer was I in a mostly White school; I began to interface with people who were from different backgrounds and cultures. No longer were the lessons watered down. I learned about more of the history of the United States than I feel I ever learned in K-12. I got to experience philosophy class and world religions which gave me a new perspective. Just as my world was starting to open, life threw a curve ball and again things changed drastically.

I had my first child at the age of 20. I had just finished my associate degree and had to make some big decisions. I had to drop out of the University of Kansas and get a job that would provide for a family. Luckily, growing up with blue-collar family and friends allowed for a rather painless transition into the trades. I spent roughly half a year in the trades before bouncing around odd jobs to make ends meet while living in my in-laws' basement with my family. Eventually, with another kid on the way, I had to make another decision. I felt horrible for overly relying on friends and family, so I decided to join the United States Air Force to finally get out of the basement and provide my family with the best I could afford.

For the next sixteen years leading up to this moment, I have been serving in the armed services. Not only did this allow me to fully provide for my family, but it allowed me the opportunity to build a firm foundation for what was to come. I spent many of these years focusing on doing well in my job and getting the best education I could in the free time that I had. I was able to acquire two more associate degrees, a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree before finally working on a doctorate.

The military also provided me with a lot of the same perspectives that I gained from my early days in college. No longer was I working and spending time with a primarily White crowd, I was immersed in a world with people from all sorts of cultures and backgrounds. Add to that the time spent working on my doctorate, and I have had my eyes opened to more perspectives than I could ever imagine. I have learned from my peers, professors, and coworkers, their experiences with classism, racism, and sexism. No longer was my world seen from just a White male perspective, I could see how the real world looked.

From a severely limited perspective to one with more range, I have grown quite a lot in my nearly forty years of living. The gained perspectives deepen my ability to see beyond the confines of my privileged White male viewpoint. Learning that there is more than one way to see the world has been the most profound skill set that I feel I have developed. I now have a deeper understanding of how the dominant ideologies of the world I live in shape this world. Thanks to all those I have learned from, I can use their insights to further refine my own, to dig deeper and more critically.

Nevertheless, I am still a White male from a privileged background. I was born and raised from a nearly singular perspective, with a very limited understanding of what the world truly was. We are talking about decades of programming that make up the core of who I am. As such, I have flaws that impact my perspective, my insights, and my understanding. I must slow down to consider the world around me, to bypass the knee-jerk reactions and biases that show themselves more readily than I would like.

As Kahneman (2011) suggested, the brain has two systems of thinking. System 1 is the fast reactionary type of thinking, that is the first line of effort towards producing a reaction. It is this system that we must understand and try to bypass with the more logical and critical System 2

type of thinking. To overcome bias and fallacy, we must take the time to understand our weaknesses. We won't be able to mitigate all bias and fallacies, but that doesn't mean we can't try. I choose to slow down, use the perspectives that I have learned from those around me, and use critical thinking skills to make the best choices in my research as possible.

Qualitative Inquiry Explanation

To further bolster my research, I wanted to explain why I chose qualitative inquiry and how it aligns with what I accomplish in this research. First, I discuss why I chose qualitative inquiry. Next, I explain the purpose of qualitative inquiry from my perspective. Following this, I highlight qualitative research standards and how I planned to adhere to them.

The reason why I chose qualitative inquiry was that I am more interested in the thoughts, perspectives, experiences, opinions, and attitudes surrounding the erosion of trust in public schools. Qualitative inquiry can also be used to address social problems at a smaller scale, one that might be too small of a scale for representative studies that might deter under-represented groups, and I feel that there may be some small-scale factors involved in trust erosion (Flick, 2015). Furthermore, as Denzin and Lincoln (2018) imply, qualitative research is more likely to face the constraints of society in the world we live in today. They go on to suggest that qualitative research is more focused on the specifics of any cases discovered, which helps me to better construct a web of influence.

Additionally, the problems we face in the world are human and as such, directly impacted by the many far from logical choices humans make daily. By understanding what others are thinking and seeing, I could dig deeper into the myriad of reasons that exist that lead to trust erosion. I could use perspectives other than my own to connect dots that I might not be able to

connect with the biases that I harbor. I felt the best way to counteract my weakness was to call upon an ensemble of characters, be they humans or the products of humans.

The purpose of qualitative inquiry was derived from the definitions I provided above. I partook in qualitative inquiry to uncover different perspectives or lenses from which I could amass a corpus of data that would lead to deeper insights than I would otherwise be able to provide with my limited perspective or more quantitative methods. Qualitative inquiry is interested more in the lived experiences of humanity than cold hard statistics. This is not to say that statistics are not helpful, they are but one more way to view an issue.

The issue of trust erosion is more intimate; it stems from personal feelings we all have. Again, “Trust is the scarcest commodity in the world. Nothing else comes close.” or so said Ted Gioia in his blog called *The Honest Broker* (Gioia, 2023). If we know anything about limited commodities, we know that humans hold last chances with deep regard. A great example is toilet paper during the most recent pandemic. When people noticed that something important was dwindling, the toilet paper, they scrambled to hold onto as much as they could and limited the supply drastically for others. If we were to interview these same individuals, we would find a vast array of reasons behind their choices, all which stem from emotions and biases.

Trust in public schools is indeed eroding; it is a limited commodity that will one day dwindle into nothing if we don’t find out the root cause or causes of the issue at hand. We can put out polls to point this way and that, but until we build the web of reasoning, a canvas of human choices and chaos that have led to this moment in time, we cannot fathom a potential solution. I need rich and detailed accounts of this phenomenon to uncover the culprits and shine a light on what this means for mitigation. Thankfully, as Denzin and Lincoln (2018) suggest,

qualitative inquiry can help to uncover rich descriptions of the social world, the very rich and detailed accounts that I needed to build my case.

Research Questions

1. Why is trust eroding in public schools, and who or what has contributed?
2. What events have contributed to the erosion of trust in public schools?
3. What are the benefits of eroding trust in public schools?
4. How can a trust erosion in public schools be reversed and what steps might be taken?

Methodological Framework

The purpose of this section was threefold. First, I provide a thought stream on how I came to select my primary methodologies. Next, I provide an overview of the two primary methodologies that I chose for my work. Lastly, I explain the reasoning regarding why I felt these methodologies would best support the intent of this study.

Thoughts on Methodological Positioning

Before I was able to decide on the specific methodologies used in this study, I needed to fully understand the roots of what I was trying to grow. The nature of this study was to be critical of the erosion of trust in public schools and to uncover what might have driven the negative trends over the decades. As such, it became apparent that I should lean heavily on Critical Theory and the theories under its umbrella. I have showcased what I felt Critical Theory was and some underlying theories that would help to inform the research I conducted. I knew that I needed to challenge societal norms, biases, assumptions, and power structures, and Critical Theory was the best solution I uncovered.

I then began to consider the various methodologies that might help to form the larger branches of this study, i.e., some of the walls as some might say. I needed lenses that would help

me see into the lives of people, I needed something that would provide rich detail of lived experiences. I also needed something that was accessible and that allowed for greater flexibility in data selection. It didn't take long for me to discover Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis, both of which had critical aspects as well. It seemed to me that a combination of these two methodologies was a natural extension of Critical Theory and that both could help to discover and mitigate the culprits of trust erosion.

Content Analysis

I chose Content Analysis as one of the two methodologies for this study. First, I explain what Content Analysis is, albeit on a more detailed level. Second, I highlight the phases of Content Analysis and how I use it to a greater degree than before. The goal was to provide ample reasoning for the inclusion of this methodology and to pave the way forward by laying the basic framework for all to see.

Content Analysis and its Rules

To borrow from what I discussed in this work's introduction, Content Analysis is a research technique that I can use to make valid inferences that are easily reproduced from texts to the contexts of the use of texts. It allows those who use this method to search for different interpretations of data by considering diverse voices, perspectives, ideologies, critiques, or alternative uses of texts. The user of this form of analysis can use analytical constructs derived from existing theories, practices, experiences, knowledge, or previous research to move from the text towards answering their research questions (Krippendorff, 2004).

Content Analysis can also be understood as any technique for interrogating messages and making inferences using a systematic and objective identification process to discover specific characteristics of said messages or codes (Holsti, 1969). From what I highlighted earlier, there

were five main rules of Content Analysis that separate this methodology from reading a document or post.

The first rule is that my analysis must have objectivity. What this means is that my analysis must lack any favoritism or bias toward any specific research outcome. This is where transparency is key because bias is innate, and it must be brought to the forefront so others can see from my perspective or lens. As I mentioned, I shared my thoughts and feelings in the form of thought streams and shop talk throughout this research journey. I have also been transparent about my positionality, biases, and limitations. It takes a conscious effort to address and overcome favoritism and bias, so merely reading a document or post and forming my opinion does not make the grade with Content Analysis (Holsti, 1969).

The second rule of Content Analysis is that my analysis must be consistent and systematic, which establishes a firm foundation from which others may reach the same conclusions. This hearkens back to transparency but takes transparency a step further. Not only must I tell my story openly, but I must showcase my exact methods, step by step in a systematic way, ensuring a resounding consistency between each page (Holsti, 1969).

The third rule of Content Analysis is that my analysis must have generality and theoretical relevance. My interpretation of this rule is that what I analyze must apply to the majority of trust erosion in public schools. This means that what I uncover must consistently tie back to the general theme, never straying from my original intent unless such a tangent is necessary. As for theoretical relevance, I interpret that to mean the facts that I uncover must be traceable back to the theoretical choices that I have made for this study. This means that moving away from my overall critical analysis of trust erosion would not be productive, nor would my failing to use Content Analysis or Digital Discourse Analysis (Holsti, 1969).

Rule four is that I must ensure that the codes used are representative of the elements of the object of study. Furthermore, such codes must be exhaustive to allow for the classification of any and every item of importance to the study. This ties back into the consistent and systematic nature of Content Analysis. Going beyond light reading, I must code every aspect of the content I add to the data corpus, leaving no stone unturned nor any detail unclassified (Holsti, 1969). With all the rules in place, I now discuss the three phases of Content Analysis, which are preparation, organization, and reporting.

Phases of Content Analysis

The phases of Content Analysis mimic the typical flow of a dissertation in that I had to first prepare, much like in the first and second chapters of this study. From there I had to organize the data I obtain before performing the actual analysis. Finally, I needed to present my analysis. Thankfully, there was a checklist developed by Satu Elo and company that helps to break down what must be done at each of these stages (Elo et al., 2014). I answered all the sections of the checklist and ensured I met the mark set out by my predecessors. More details of how I prepared are included in the research design section of this chapter.

Preparation Phase

Stage one, or the preparation phase, is comprised of three checks. The first check is tied to my data collection methods. Here I planned how I collected the most suitable data for my analysis. I had to also question whether my methods are the best available to answer the research questions that I developed, be they descriptive or semi-structured questions. I had to also ask myself what my skills are as a researcher, did I have the skills necessary to complete my study or must I develop new skills to tackle the task? Lastly, I had to decide if pre-testing my data collection method is advisable (Elo et al., 2014).

The second check of the preparation phase was a check of my sampling strategy. Here I asked myself what the best sampling method for my study might be. What might be the best type of informant or location to pull data for my study? What criteria should be set for data selection purposes? Is the size of my sample appropriate and is my data well saturated (Elo et al., 2014)?

The final check for the preparation phase was selecting my unit of analysis. The first question I asked myself was what was the unit of analysis for my study? Once I decided on my unit of analysis, I then asked if the unit selected is too narrow or too broad. Eventually, these questions allowed me to settle on the best possible unit of analysis for this study (Elo et al., 2014).

Organization Phase

This phase was akin to the conducting of research in a dissertation, assembling and organizing the data I gathered. As such, the first part of the organization phase was categorization and abstraction. Here I decided how the concepts or categories are created. Once I created the proper concepts or categories, I decided if I have too many or too few to move ahead. This also involved ensuring that my categories or themes did not overlap and that they thoroughly covered my data corpus (Elo et al., 2014).

The second part of the organization phase was interpretation. Here is where I asked myself two questions. The first question was what was the degree of interpretation in my analysis? I asked myself whether I felt the data accurately represents the information gleaned from my sources. If what I analyzed accurately accounted for the information from my sources, I would have satisfied this second part (Elo et al., 2014).

The final part of the organization phase was representativeness. Here I asked how I might check the trustworthiness of my analysis process. Was I hitting my marks on transparency? Then

I asked myself how I checked the representativeness of the data corpus. Was I biased towards one part or another, and if so, how would I mitigate my biases (Elo et al., 2014)?

Reporting Phase

The final phase of a Content Analysis study was the reporting phase. This directly tied into the latter chapters of a dissertation. The reporting phase was broken down into two parts, reporting results and reporting analysis process. The reporting results phase included around eight checklist items that I considered whilst reporting my results. The reporting analysis process phase was two checklist items that also required consideration. What follows are each of the questions from these two sections (Elo et al., 2014).

The first question from the reporting results section was are the results of my study reported systematically and logically? This means that there must have been a method to my actions, and they must be displayed in a way that makes logical sense. From there, the second checklist question I asked myself was how are the links between the data I collect and the results of my analysis reported? As I have discussed, showing the connections between the data and the results was paramount to ensuring trustworthiness and transparency (Elo et al., 2014).

The third checklist question was about ensuring the content and structure of concepts were disclosed in a way that is easy for readers to understand. Think of this as keeping my presentation simple, concise, and to the point. The fourth question was tied to the transferability of the results to the reader. This asked whether my reporting properly describes the data, my sampling methods, and participant information as applicable (Elo et al., 2014).

The fifth checklist question asked about whether quotations are used systematically. This means that, again, there must have been a reason and method behind the selection of any quotations that I used. The sixth checklist question focused on whether the categories that I use

properly cover the data. Any codes or themes I derived from the data must have ensured that the data corpus was fully attended to, leaving minimal gaps in the coverage of data (Elo et al., 2014).

The seventh question asked whether there were similarities within and differences between any codes, categories, or themes I found. I saw this as ensuring that categories, codes, and themes were unique and concise, with no space wasted on unnecessary additions. The eighth and final question for the reporting results section asked whether scientific language was used to convey my study's results or not. I took this to mean that I needed to speak the language of my target audience for my study (Elo et al., 2014).

As for the reporting analysis process section, there were two checklist questions. First, was there a full description of the analysis process? This tied directly back into previous sections of my dissertation, the transparency of my methods for all to see. The second and final checklist question for this section was whether the trustworthiness of the Content Analysis of my study was based on specific criteria or not. I took this to ask whether I am following the guidelines set out such as Tracy's Big Tent Criteria for Qualitative Quality. This helps to ensure I have a product that is backed by enough rigor, credibility, and ethical considerations (Elo et al., 2014).

Digital Discourse Analysis

I also chose Digital Discourse Analysis as the second of the two methodologies for this study. To begin, I explain what Digital Discourse Analysis is, albeit on a more detailed level. Next, I show how I used Digital Discourse Analysis to a greater degree than before. The endgame was to be as transparent as possible to allow for the reproduction of my work using the same methodologies that I described below.

Digital Discourse Analysis Review

The best way to explain Digital Discourse Analysis is to first define Discourse Analysis. Discourse Analysis is the study of the meaning that people place on language and the actions that they carry out whilst using language in a specific context (Gee & Handford, 2012). Additionally, it is a method that allowed me to examine discourse so I might identify power structure, discover hidden ideologies through analysis, and eventually help to make a positive contribution to society (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Using Discourse Analysis, or the digital variant, allowed me to examine all the ways that reality and experience are constructed through social and interpersonal actions such as verbal conversations, or in the case of this study, typed digital conversations (Korobov, 2020).

Digital Discourse Analysis is Discourse Analysis but with a focus on digital forms of discourse such as those undertaken on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit. It expands far beyond social media platforms to all digital platforms, even to the code written in computer programs and Artificial Intelligence. The reason behind the specific focus on digital discourse is that digital technologies are rapidly expanding, impacting how we work, communicate, maintain relationships, and learn. These digital platforms allow for a near-instantaneous connection to billions of people around the globe, significantly impacting social relationships, political systems, balances of power, and various ideologies. The extent to which digital discourse impacts the globe is still unknown, but we are learning each day about the ramifications of the adoption of convenient digital technologies (Jones et al., 2015).

Digital Discourse Analysis Process

The process of Digital Discourse Analysis is much the same as other forms of analysis. First, I gathered the materials I wished to analyze. My process allowed me to select the materials I analyzed, and are included later in this chapter. After selecting materials, I read, re-read, and

read them again, making note of interesting themes or ideas. It was at this point where coding came into play. These codes were keywords or notes about the material I analyzed, meant to produce specific and distinct themes.

After developing all the codes whilst maintaining specificity and distinctness, it was prudent to read through the materials once again, keeping the code words handy, enabling constant comparisons to be made. Glaser (1965) penned a method where for each new piece of data I found, I then constantly made comparisons within and between any of my existing themes or ideas so my codes were constantly refined. This is where I found some contradictory cases that further challenged my understanding and helped me refine my analysis, which is known as Deviant Case Analysis (Seale, 1999).

This brings us to one of the most important steps of Digital Discourse Analysis, ensuring quality and reflection. My job as I completed my analysis was to demonstrate to others that my arguments are convincing and derived from the archive of data I amassed. To do so, I described how I generated, manipulated, and analyzed all my datasets. This means outlining any pragmatic or theoretical issues that sparked interest in the overall process (Rapley, 2007).

Furthermore, I demonstrated that I did all the checking and re-checking of my ideas in comparison to the materials that I gathered. This means that I have taken the time to search for anything that might contradict or refute any of my claims. This ties into the Constant Comparison Method and the Deviant Case Analysis that was discussed earlier in this section (Rapley, 2007).

Additionally, for any of the main points given in my analysis, I gave the readers access to a detailed account of any materials I have that have led me to my claims in the form of pages of references at the end of this dissertation. This means ensuring the utmost transparency, a theme

repeated throughout this study. Essentially, always be able to provide the necessary level of evidence for any claims made. Also, make sure any claims made have been compared to previous work on the same subject. If my claims are vastly different from previous claims from others, being able to explain why my claims may be different is key (Rapley, 2007).

The steps above led me to a point where the data collected and my analysis yielded no further themes requiring further analysis. This point in my analysis is much akin to saturation, which was when I reached a point where my studies or reviews failed to uncover any new avenues for interrogation. It was at this point in the process I transitioned from analysis to writing my findings (Rapley, 2007).

Thoughts on Methodological Reasoning

The main intent behind the methodological choices I had made for this study was rooted in the need to be accessible. What I mean by accessible is that I wanted to create a study easily understood by anyone who would learn about Content Analysis or Digital Discourse Analysis. This choice was not only constructed from my desire for transparency but also from my desire to structure my research around my strengths and weaknesses.

What I mean by strengths and weaknesses is that I have a set of skills and a life that allows for only certain types of methodological choices to be more easily made than others. I may have the gift for gab, but my interviewing skills are limited. Add to that the difficulties of easily getting out to interview people thanks to my job and its many sometimes unforeseen challenges, I chose methodologies focused on data that was readily available from anywhere at any time. I needed to make choices to support my vocation as well as my skill sets, and Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis checked all my personal and professional ability boxes.

Additionally, I have always been fond of detective novels, going page by page, and witnessing a grand plot unfolding in front of my eyes. The plots could sometimes be so intricate that, had the author not done the very hard work of building their web, the plot would collapse into a pile of yarn or be so simplistic as to be a waste of time. The brilliance of noir is pausing right at the end, when all the arcs intersect, and tracing the lines back to each of the choices that led to the endgame. I feel that Content Analysis is much like building a detective story, and Digital Discourse Analysis is part of getting the lingo down right to make it as believable as possible.

Much of my research heavily relied on Content Analysis, as I feel it is one of the most approachable research methods available. I built my data corpus and spent as much time as possible, reading and re-reading, searching for codes, themes, and clues as to where my research took me next. Just stop and think about the vast amount of content available at the click of a mouse or pressing the enter key, and one can see why this methodology is perfect for the digital age we live in.

I supported my analysis of content with the analysis of discourse I pulled from digital sources; those same sources used for Content Analysis plus a new source in the form of social media. Digital Discourse Analysis provided deeper insights by providing another lens from which to view my archive of data. I think of Digital Discourse Analysis as the icing that went on the Content Analysis cake at the end, providing an extra layer of support to the conclusions that I arrive at. The result being an intricate web of truth that is transparent and traceable back through all the twists and turns laid out in my analysis.

Research Design

The purpose of this section was to discuss the details of how my research design aligned with the methodological frameworks I chose. In accomplishing this task, first I briefly discuss my pilot study and how it helped to refine and inform my research design. Secondly, I discuss my content selection process. From there, I showcase the process behind data site selections. Then, I disclose my membership role in the research. Next, I highlight my data collection methods. Moving forward, I then highlight my data management plan. Lastly, I articulate my plan for the analysis of collected data.

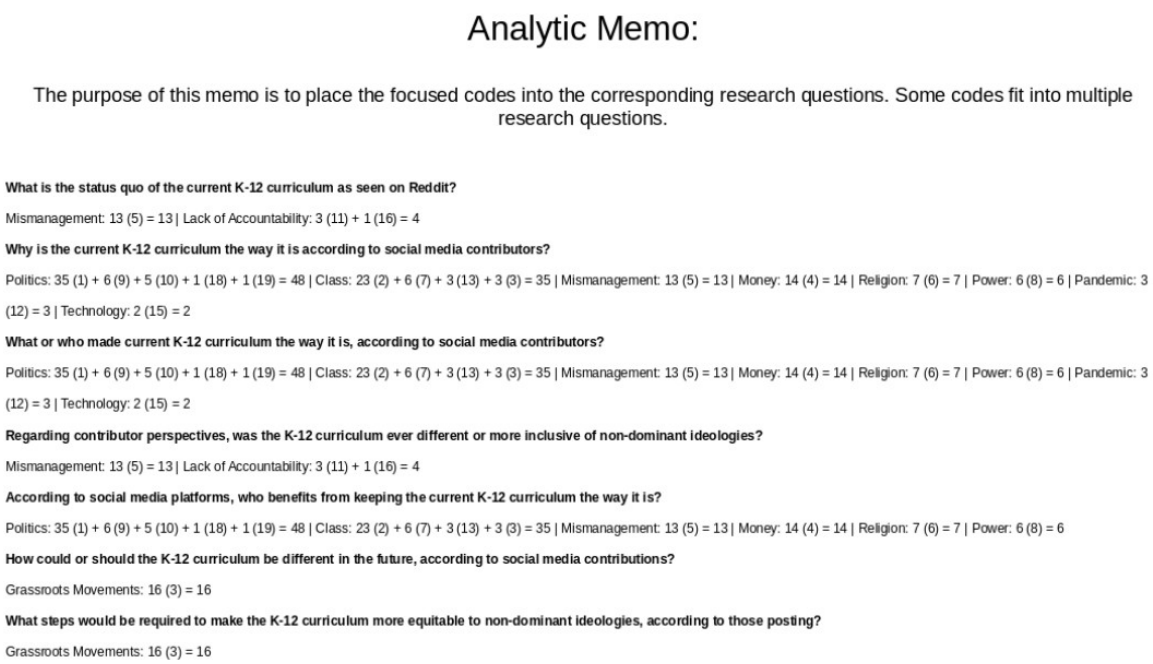
Pilot Study

Before I delve into the research design process, I felt it was important to discuss where the idea for this research came from, my pilot study. The problem that my pilot study attempted to address was why educational systems were light on history and other critical subjects to maintain the status quo of the dominant ideology or ideologies. The practical goal was to highlight the issues with the current system and to offer possible solutions to whatever issues I might uncover. The intellectual goal of the pilot study was to better understand how dominant ideologies impact the world of education. The pilot study was dependent on Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis as the primary methods of analysis. Structure-wise, the study was situated on Reddit forums and Reddit itself was the research site I selected. I played the role of an outsider looking in upon conversations taking place online. I used a screen-capturing program to collect data, which I analyzed after coding, memo writing, thought streaming, shop talking, and eventually theming.

Pilot Study Visual Representations

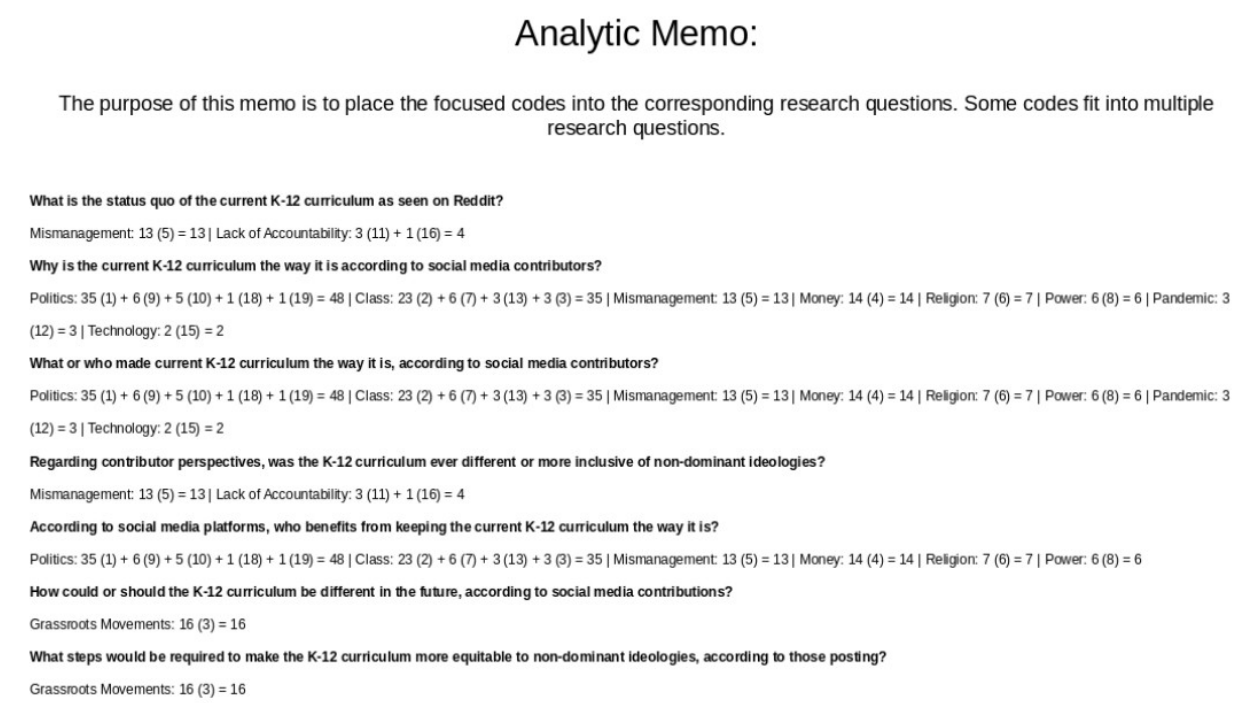
This section provides a few visual representations from a pilot study to better explain how I represented my findings and themes. Table 3.1 (Kobularcik, 2024b) is a memo I wrote that shows the transition from my first eighteen codes or themes, which became apparent during the study into the focused code or theme list. Table 3.2 (Kobularcik, 2024c) was the second memo I created and it shows how each of these themes fits into the research questions posed in the pilot. Table 3.3 (Kobularcik, 2024d) provides a mind map that I created which depicts all this in a clear web, and it shows how they all connect, much like the detective analogy that I continually reference.

Figure Methodology.2 Analytic Memo Organizing



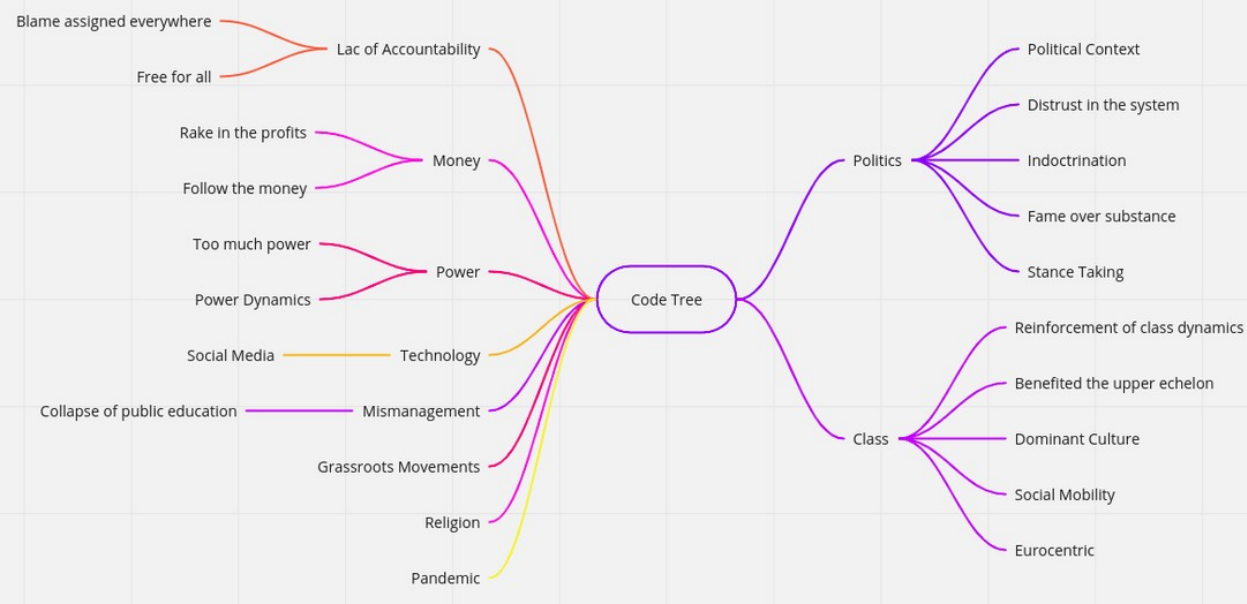
Note. Analytic Memo Organizing, by Andrew Kobularcik, 2024b

Figure Methodology.3 Analytic Memo Focusing



Note. Analytic Memo Focusing, by Andrew Kobularcik, 2024c

Figure Methodology.4 Mind Map



Note. Mind Map, by Andrew Kobularcik, 2024d

Following the captures from first to last shows many looks at how the data relate and how they evolved throughout the pilot project. The journey showcased in the representation shows how I initially parsed through the Reddit commentary to develop the initial codes and themes. It then shows how those themes fit into that study's research questions to a map that shows how I reduced the themes to a focused list of themes. I followed a similar path so the representations from this study provided the necessary information to properly support the results and conclusions drawn.

Pilot Study Findings

The pilot study ultimately culminated in the finding of the codes or themes highlighted in the mind map in Figure 3.3. as well as an overarching theme. Overall, the study found that politics were the primary source of contention, with many user posts pointing to political ideologies as the main culprit behind why educational systems were light on history and other

critical subjects. Blame was cast across all parts of the political spectrum with no specific political party taking the brunt of the attacks.

Most importantly, the other themes brought about an interest that eventually helped me form the basis of this study. I found that I had a deep desire to look through each of the codes or themes as lenses so I might delve deeper into another issue of interest to me, the erosion of trust in public schools. It also helped me to decide how I should establish the structure and foundational aspects of my dissertation, which follows below.

Content Selection

The content selection process followed a method identical to the method used for my literature review, as much of the research conducted used Content Analysis or Digital Discourse Analysis. I justified the procedures I used while identifying and selecting relevant content. This justification included the databases used, my review criteria, and content selection criteria. Finally, I highlighted details such as search engines used, search terms used, the number of hits per search term, and steps taken to filter out irrelevant data.

To conduct thorough research, I first identified the databases utilized throughout the research process. As in the second chapter, I used a small assortment of multidisciplinary database services that housed journal articles, books, and primary data sources across numerous disciplines. The key was to find databases that allowed for as many perspectives as possible while focusing on the education-based aspects of each discipline. Using the Kansas State University Library, I selected Journal Storage or JSTOR, ProQuest, and the Education Resources Information Center or ERIC.

To frame my thought process, I chose JSTOR because it is a large digital library with over twelve million journal articles, books, and primary sources across seventy-five disciplines. I

also chose ProQuest because it was just as diverse as JSTOR, providing over ninety thousand sources that span academic journals, videos, three centuries of newspapers, periodicals, historical collections, and more. For my final selection, I chose ERIC because it provides over one million records, such as journals and non-journal literature from the 1960s to the present, specifically in education research and information.

Search Term Information

Similar to how I conducted my literature review, I heavily relied on a derivative of the Butin (2010) academic word bank development process and then provided a refined list of search terms used in this study. The academic word bank development process is a multi-step process that walks the researcher from a single keyword or search term to a word bank full of applicable search terms. By supplying the steps and an example, I added to the rigor of my study.

The first step was to select a key term or phrase that best describes the study and search for that word in one of my databases; in this case, I use ERIC. The second step was to choose an article out of the results from the previous step that is interesting and related to the study. The article must not be read in full; only the descriptors must be read. The third step was to write down the keywords and phrases for that article to start the academic word bank process. The fourth step was to repeat the second and third steps until I amassed fifty keywords or search terms. The fifth step was to reduce the list of fifty keywords or phrases to twenty-five keywords or phrases that most closely relate to the study. The sixth and last step was to reduce the list to around a dozen words or phrases that relate directly to the study.

I started with the search phrase trust in education, which helped me to create the initial list of fifty keywords or phrases. From there, I consulted my research questions and parsed through the list until I found twenty-five keywords or phrases that best matched my intent. From

there, I further refined the list to focus on the twelve most common keywords or phrases I found during my search of the ERIC database. From this point, I could now perform content searches corresponding with the terms and phrases I identified to allow for a more thorough dive into the information.

Filtering Process

The filtering process was more straightforward than the previous section in that I explicitly filtered results, looking for academic journals, books, and news articles. The key was for all three sources to come from credible locations, so academic journals and books should be peer-reviewed, and news articles should come from reputable sources. Filtering for peer-reviewed academic journals is as simple as selecting the peer-reviewed checkbox in JSTOR, ProQuest, and ERIC. As for news sources, I used the International Fact-Checking Network and the American Press Institute, and AllSides to vet news sources properly.

Content Selection Criteria

For this study, sources were selected by reading the abstracts and key terms of academic journal articles and reading the tables of contents and reviews of books. If what I reviewed matched or was closely related to the word bank I created, I could be sure something in the article applied to my study. As for news articles, they are reasonably short, so a quick read through the article is often all I needed to decide whether it is worthy. If the information in the journal articles, books, and news articles might help to answer my research questions, I added it to my collection.

Data Site Selection

In this section, I focused on the methods behind the selection of data sites or sources. I began by discussing the primary sites that I used and why I selected them. From there I discussed

how I gained access to these sites. Following that, I discussed how my methodological choices informed my decision to select the sites listed in this section.

Site Selection

In addition to the content selection, I also needed to search for data on various social media sites, which was one of the primary ways I conducted my research. To be selected for usage, the site had to have large and diverse user-bases, that were routinely updated with posts or new threads. The site also had to be easy to access and not hidden behind paywalls that might discourage participation.

Additionally, the site had to allow for purposive sampling, which allowed me to identify complete and accurate answers to all the research questions I posed. It had to allow me to present the big picture of what diverse sets of people were thinking and saying about the erosion of trust in public schools. Leaning on a previous pilot study, I knew of one well known site that would allow for all my requirements to be met. As such, I was able to settle on Reddit, a social media platform with large sets of users and plenty of posts and threads from which I found useful data.

Site Access

This process is slightly more involved due to the nature of account creation. Much like going to school and accessing the digital libraries there, I established an account on the social media platform called Reddit. This process was as simple as going to a site's corresponding web page and creating a new account. I made sure to create a new account used strictly for observation purposes. The account had to be secured and as anonymous as possible for safety concerns. Once the account was properly set up, I had access to a wealth of information that I could then delve through to find relevant data.

Methodological Influences

Because my study heavily relied on Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis, I knew that the sources of data had to match closely with the methodology of this study. Social media platforms are filled with all sorts of information that could be analyzed, be it the content as a whole or the individual conversations taking place within specific threads. As such, these types of platforms seemed to be the most logical choice for meeting my selection criteria.

Membership Role

Most research involves a researcher serving in the capacity of an insider, outsider, or a combination of both. For the intent of this study, I took on the role of an outsider in part due to the Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis approach to this study. To further elucidate, I analyzed content readily available on the internet, in a library, or in one of the many formats that news takes in this age. This means that the information I sought did not require that I interact with participants directly as I am interacting with content only.

Data Collection

The focus of this section was to articulate how I collected my data. It is important to reiterate that this study focused on data from digital sources. As such, much of the information was available through internet mediums such as academic search engines, online libraries, social media sites, news sites, and books. The data I collected was pulled from Journal Storage or JSTOR, ProQuest, and the Education Resources Information Center or ERIC for academic articles, books, and news articles. Additionally, I used the social media site called Reddit to gather forum postings.

My data collection strategy, the sixfold actionable data selection process or SAD, is an iterative method used for collecting data. It takes the shape of a funnel, starting with an elevated broad approach that eventually narrows down into more finite data levels. By going from broad

to narrow, I sifted through all the possible culprits involved in the degradation of trust in public schools and eventually discovered the primary antagonists.

At this juncture, it is important to explain how I developed this method before moving into the finer details of the process. The SAD method came to fruition through my experience with meteorology in the United States Air Force. In my day job, I first look at the big picture, or macro-scale or synoptic-scale picture of meteorological phenomena. This is done to identify patterns in the weather that may impact the region where I am to write a forecast. This is akin to the broad section of the funnel discussed above. I can highlight all the possible culprits for the weather that is being experienced at the ground level. Once I have the possibilities in mind, I can refocus my pursuits on more mesoscale or micro-scale features, delving deeper and more narrowly into the meteorological catalysts. The fine-scale investigation allows for the development of a Terminal Aerodrome Forecast or TAF, which is a forecast for a five-mile radius around a specific location. Eventually, I realized I could adapt the forecast funnel method to investigate the main forces behind the degradation of trust in public schools. I could use this same method to sift through all the chaos of the world to identify those agents that would cause perturbations and bifurcations in the world of education that alter levels of trust.

First, I found potential data sources through existing materials such as books, journal articles, news articles, and social media posts. From past experiences, finding materials about my research subject often led to the discovery of more sources of data. Second, I parsed the list of data sources I discovered on the first pass of existing materials. Much like the first round, the second round highlighted other source regions for data.

After the first two rounds of searching, I moved to a third round that begins to focus on a specific medium, as at this point, I discovered many sources from different mediums. Before I

moved forward, I must mention how the focus changes from now on. Of note, for the third through sixth rounds, I primarily focused on data already obtained before searching for additional data. By reading through the abstracts and looking at keywords, I discerned which articles met my intent and which did not. If I did not reach the desired saturation level for each medium, I sought additional sources. Desired saturation means I ceased uncovering new details in a specific medium. Think of it as a detective building a web of culprits. Eventually, the detective gets to the point where new culprits cease to be discovered. This works the same for seeking sources. Once my sources began to echo the same information, I knew that I reached saturation in that medium.

Now that I clarified the intent moving forward, it is time to discuss round three. The third round focused on data harvesting from news articles. These news articles are the easy-to-reach articles I found in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*. Most importantly, news articles can be beneficial primary sources. First, they allow the researcher to see people's reactions when the articles were written. Second, some newspapers allow for viewing an issue from multiple perspectives. Third, and most significantly for this study, newspapers allowed me to see how the lack of trust in education has changed. The key is to take a large enough sample from as many perspectives as is manageable to reach a state of saturation.

From there, I moved to the fourth round, focusing on social media posts. These posts are great for perspectives from those close to the issues, as they are pulled directly from those facing the problems. As for why anyone might wish to add social media data to the mix, Rogers (2019) suggests that the researcher’s aim should be to produce new forms of information and that social media offers another source to produce new content or information.

She may have meant this in a way that social media allows one to present data in a new way, but this also means that social media provides researchers with a unique opportunity to gather data. If other academics and budding researchers agree, one could argue that social media is ripe with unique perspectives and new forms of information. Additionally, the key is to take a large enough sample from as many perspectives as is manageable. As such, I collected as many posts as necessary to cover my research questions in depth fully.

The fifth round moved to focus on academic journals as sources of data. Academic journals supply rich data that has already been analyzed to a degree, which helps to provide enhanced focus. Journals were peer-reviewed and strongly accredited, which adds authority and credibility to the data source. Again, the key is to limit the number of datasets to a degree that did not overly exert me. For this study, I selected as many articles as necessary related to the erosion of trust in public schools in the United States. The collection ended when enough coverage was archived to cover the intent of this research.

SAD's sixth and final round is to move to books as data sources. Books are much like academic journals, though more robust, which helps to supply an understanding of a subject at a much more detailed level. The downside to books is that they are usually hundreds of pages long, so parsing through all that data can sometimes be challenging. For this study, I selected only books covering all aspects of my intended research. Thus, they are related to the decline of trust in public schools in the United States.

Artificial Intelligence Usage in Data Collection

Due to the prevalence of Artificial Intelligence or AI usage in academia today, I felt it prudent to include a minor section on the usage of AI in my data collection methods. Other than standard academic search engines provided by the Kansas State University Hale Library and the

gamut of resources it has, or the search capabilities inherent in social media platforms, I made no specific use of AI in my data collection. Nevertheless, there exist multiple academic search engines one could use such as Google Scholar or Semantic Scholar that would fall under explicit AI-based research implements, both of which went unused in my regard.

This brings up an excellent set of questions, e.g., how might AI usage impact one's search for sources or possibly steer one's findings towards any given direction, and how will I know if AI is impacting my studies? The only way to be sure of what is going on behind the scenes of any given academic search engine is to research AI usage in any of the search engines used in one's data collection exploits.

In the interest of transparency, the three search engines that I used from the Kansas State University Library system were ProQuest, JSTOR, and ERIC. ProQuest released a press statement regarding the use of AI, stating that their AI research assistant is currently under development (ProQuest, 2024). Additionally, I retrieved information for JSTOR, which stated that they were offering a beta release of a generative AI-powered research method (JSTOR, 2024). Unfortunately, ERIC did not provide any information on AI usage. As I did not partake in the use of the beta release provided by JSTOR, I have not knowingly or purposely used AI for data collection.

One might wonder why I decided to include this section and the answer is that AI presents an unknown in the world of research. AI instruments are developed by human beings and human beings have their own unique perspectives and biases that bleed into whatever they create. These perspectives and biases that are baked into AI have the ability to alter or shape the research of others, whether they wish it so or not. Going forward, this will have an impact on research, however, the extent of this impact is yet unknown, thus it is important to be as

transparent as possible about AI usage. Regarding this study, AI in the form of Google Gemini and Grammarly were used as an editor to assist in checking for spelling and grammar issues, as well as providing insights and suggestions into how I might better word my work.

Data Management

As the data I used was public and resided on the internet, the data management was unique. I used a password-protected and encrypted laptop to perform all data collection. I used a screen-capturing program to capture data that cannot be downloaded. These captures were placed into a password-protected folder and backed up on a password-protected thumb drive. Lastly, all data that was captured will be destroyed after three years of storage in case the public data is removed by those who provided it. The data I collected and used was and will continue to be protected to the best of my ability.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this section was to discuss how I analyzed the data I collected. In doing so, I reiterate what I discussed previously in Chapter 1 that relates to data analysis. From there, I discuss my consideration for my subjectivities and how I managed them throughout the data analysis process.

Coding

Coding is the process of assigning a word or phrase to part of one's data to highlight significance, essence, and symbols (Saldaña, 2021). Furthermore, coding can even be used as a methodology to summarize vast amounts of data. When I considered coding, I thought of it as a way to analyze data to highlight specific words or passages I felt were significant or I believed would open further areas of research potential or higher levels of refinement. Saldaña (2021)

further expresses that coding is much more than just a one-step approach to data analysis. Coding involves a researcher selecting an initial coding method for first-round coding.

This first round of coding works as a foundation-building layer of analysis, framing the proverbial organizational house. From there, a researcher typically selects a second-round coding option and possibly a third and fourth depending on how much refinement a researcher desires. These secondary and beyond rounds of coding act in a manner that allows the researcher to break down the data further, filling in the frame of the organizational house with walls and insulating substances (Saldaña, 2021). It is important to remember that coding takes time. One codes and recodes, refines, and continues with the coding process. Sometimes a researcher takes breaks to step away from the data for a moment before digging back in, applying fresh eyes to the data which is ideal.

To me, coding was a beginning and sort of an open ending to the research process, providing the essentials to build the big picture. This open-ended approach leaves room for further areas of research, paving the way for sequels or for others to pick up where the researcher leaves off. As I learned, coding is hands-on, coding is dirty, and coding can be subjective, but coding is also priceless in that it allows for clarification and higher levels of organization and refinement for research (Saldaña, 2021).

Analytic Memos or Thought Streams

Part of the data analysis process I utilized was Analytic Memos or Thought Streams as I labeled them. Analytic memos can be thought of as many different things, from brain dumps, blogs, annotations, or journal entries to include processes, phenomena, or thoughts (Saldaña, 2021). The last aspect of that definition is where I derived my inspiration for Analytic Memos, or as I call them, Thought Streams. I called my memos this because I like to stream my thoughts

from my mind, down through my hands, and into a journal or computer for later consumption or review.

The reason for this analysis method is that it helped to provide insights into what my thinking was at any time. It also helped by showing the learning process taking place throughout the course of my studies. By showcasing all this and perhaps even what I may be feeling at a given moment, I allowed for the utmost transparency into my mind and analytic processes. As I said before, transparency is key in that it leads to higher levels of trustworthiness and quality, both of which are crucial.

As Saldaña (2021) opines, there are a multitude of ways that a person may produce analytic memos, with no one way being the single best answer for such practices. I treated my memo writing as a diary of sorts. My words are like a stream flowing from my consciousness, though they included important information that helped me code, theme, shop talk, and even make edits to my work. The best way to look at these is as detailed and intimate insights into how I conduct myself and my research.

The last aspect of thought streams I found important is that they helped me to deeply reflect on the data I gathered from my research, to analyze intricacies more deeply in the patterns. One look at the data is not enough, I reflected and was reflexive to move beyond summarizations of data or simple note taking. I took my memos and wrote questions about what I discovered and used the questions as springboards for further research or deeper delving. Each deliberate word led to subsequent deliberate steps further down the rabbit hole and into future directions, changes, and more questions. The goal of all this was to enhance and bolster the data archive I gathered to use in conjunction with my other data analysis methods to create an intricate yet detailed insight into my work.

Shop Talk

Shop talk is the verbal sharing of thoughts with family, friends, peers, professors, and coworkers to elicit thought-provoking responses. These informal discussions provided an alternative lens to view my research. It also provided a check and balance to ensure I remained on topic and that the information provided in this study remained relevant. I leveraged their perspectives while analyzing data and further refining my study by sharing my codes, memos, and thoughts with others.

The best way to explain shop talk is to provide an example of how the process looks. Throughout many of the steps I took throughout this study, I made many thought streams that detailed data selection, analysis, thoughts, and further questions. The key point is that the thought streams are all from my thoughts, so they are all from my lens. To expound further on my thought streams, I needed to incorporate outside perspectives, such as those of peers, family, and professors. The lenses of others brought to light many things I might miss from my limited perspective. The conversations elicited during the shop talks further fortified the expounding process, which brought about additional codes, thoughts, perspectives, and maybe the occasional question. I shared my memos and held conversations with my family, friends, peers, professors, and coworkers to bolster my research beyond that which I created alone.

Theming

Much the same as in Chapter 1, themes are one of the outcomes that may come from coding and analytic reflection. The good news about deriving outcomes from coding and analytic reflections, such as thought streams, is that I already conducted a few rounds of coding and created an assortment of memos before I began theming the data. As such, I used what I developed during the previous data analysis steps to produce a corpus of data.

The data underwent multiple rounds of coding, categorization, and reflection. As I explained before, expounding what I already produced is essential because there is more than one way to look at data, so there is more than one way to write, analyze, and expound upon data. The more the data was analyzed, the more I discovered avenues of similarity among the data. These threads were spun into an elaborate web of trust erosion perpetrators, significantly driving further sections on analysis, results, and conclusions. Much like the private investigators in old detective novels, who were always highlighting the connections with old photographs and string, I undertook a similar endeavor during the theming process of my research. The result of my efforts culminated in a post-it-note web of erosion that showcased the status of trust in public schools.

Data Representation

The purpose of this section was to discuss how I planned to articulate and show my findings in a manner congruent with my methodological choices. First, I described my anticipated forms of representation. Next, I provided a brief look into a representation of findings from my pilot project. What follows paint a picture of what unfolded throughout the execution of my research.

Forms of Representation

Throughout this project, the data took on many different forms, but it mostly came in the form of text. Much of the Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis was conducted on text, so I felt it most prudent to follow the same structure. Thus, I showcased my data in a text form that was clear and in as straightforward a manner as possible.

In addition to data being represented as discussed, data also took the form of more artistic mind maps or diagrams as shown in Chapter 2. A mind map or diagram is used to show

connections between findings and the main themes I uncovered. Think of these mind maps or diagrams as the detective's picture or post-it-note diagram, complete with yarn connecting each idea to broader codes and themes.

Ethics

Regarding ethics, the code of ethics put forth by the American Educational Research Association explains ethical considerations for researchers to be aware of (AERA Code of Ethics, 2011). Due to the public nature of the data I collected, the various ethical guidelines held different weights in this study. As such, I focused on the three most relevant aspects of their code of ethics.

Of the many guidelines in AERA's code of ethics, the most important ones were considering one's bias and ensuring transparency. First, I examined my bias and was as transparent as possible about anything that influenced the analysis. Things that influenced me were conflicts of interest, my perspective, and my positionality, which were acknowledged and in writing for all to see. Second, I ensured my evidence and reasoning are clear by being forthcoming about texts, artifacts, visual representations, and archival data are maintained. I ensured any other researcher wishing to understand my study can do so with little difficulty. Lastly, I closely adhered to AERA's principle of integrity. As this study primarily focuses on trust, integrity is the glue that binds all aspects of this study. I maintained integrity by being honest, fair, and respectful of all my sources and conducting myself in a manner worthy of trust and confidence (AERA Code of Ethics, 2011).

Summary

In summary, I first discussed the research purpose to provide the reader with the foundation from which my chosen methodologies were selected. Next, I touched on my subjectivity, articulating my positionality and the need for transparency. I then discussed why I chose qualitative inquiry as my primary form of inquiry, discussing both the purpose and standards of quality for qualitative research. Next, I restated my research questions because they helped to inform subsequent sections just as much as they informed the design of said research. Following that, I explained the methodological framework of this study, delving deeper into Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis. From there I discussed the overall design of my research, highlighting the structure, framing, and building aspects of this project. Next, I discussed data representation and how I planned my findings in a manner that would be conducive to my methodologies. From there, I touched on ethics and the ethical considerations I made in this study. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings of my data analysis.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings derived from the research. It begins by reiterating the research questions that guided this study. Next, it provides a brief overview of the themes identified throughout the research process. Subsequently, it highlights the results of the data analysis, incorporating journals, books, dissertations, news articles, and social media posts, by examining eight central themes which emerged from the research, and which address the research questions. Finally, a summary of this chapter is provided before concluding and moving to Chapter 5.

Research Questions

1. Why is trust eroding in public schools, and who or what has contributed?
2. What events have contributed to the erosion of trust in public schools?
3. What are the benefits of eroding trust in public schools?
4. How can a trust erosion in public schools be reversed and what steps might be taken?

Theme Outline

Public schools are currently positioned at the epicenter of a profound ideological, political, and cultural conflict. An analysis of the data, contemporary educational discourse, pedagogical practices, and legislative actions reveals a systemic, highly coordinated effort to redefine the purpose of public schools by eroding public trust. To better understand this erosion, I analyzed the data corpus and identified eight themes, which structure the following eight sections. The first seven themes address research questions one through three, while the eighth theme addresses research question four.

The first theme, which establishes a foundational understanding for the subsequent sections, explores the mechanics and erosion of trust. Trust is a central pillar of my research; it operates as both a victim of and a cure for the current crisis in public schools. This section presents my analysis of relational and institutional trust, detailing its breakdown among parents, teachers, schools, and communities. Furthermore, it highlights how accountability measures, standardized testing, and manufactured dissatisfaction have actively contributed to this decay.

The second theme addresses the politicization and weaponization of education, often referred to as the culture wars. As the research demonstrates, public schools have been transformed into highly polarized political battlegrounds. This section discusses how deliberate strategies employed by political actors, think tanks, and grassroots political groups have fomented fear and paranoia, effectively turning the curriculum into a partisan weapon.

The third theme examines neoliberalism, neoconservatism, privatization, and market-based education. As I demonstrate, economic motives have served as a major catalyst for the attacks on public education. This section highlights how foundational documents like *A Nation at Risk* have provided scaffolding for the modern push for school vouchers. It also explores how intentionally framing public schools as failing monopolies has been used to justify privatization and reframe education as a private commodity rather than a public good.

The fourth theme focuses on media manipulation, misinformation, and propaganda. Here, I discuss how media critiques and social media algorithms have shaped public perception, swaying opinion, and manufacturing outrage. This phenomenon, driven by the profit-centric era of news and the digital echo chambers of social media, is utilized to spread false narratives, sow doubt, and delegitimize public schools.

The fifth theme investigates censorship, silencing, and the battle over the curriculum. Control over what is taught, and how it is taught, emerged as a prominent theme within the data. This section discusses how a recent wave of legislation aimed at banning books and restricting discourse on race, gender, and sexuality has profoundly impacted trust in public schools. The primary consequence is a chilling effect on educators, creating an atmosphere of fear and paranoia, and the resulting erasure of marginalized histories.

The sixth theme highlights systemic inequality through racism, classism, and marginalization. This section examines who benefits and who suffers from the current educational landscape and the ongoing erosion of trust. Specifically, it highlights how school choice initiatives have, wittingly or unwittingly, exacerbated racial and socioeconomic segregation, and how the enforcement of Eurocentric master narratives alienates and harms BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students.

The seventh theme analyzes power dynamics and hegemonic control. This section provides an analysis of raw power and those who wield it. I examine the motives of political elites and corporate entities, bringing to light their attempts to exert control by silencing dissenting voices and restricting critical thinking.

The final theme explores pathways to restoration. In that chapter, I discuss various solutions and counter-movements identified through my analysis, culminating in my proposed framework for saving public schools. It emphasizes how relational trust, transparent communication, and community building can serve as vital mechanisms to restore trust in public education.

Theme 1

As discussed in Chapter 2, Tschannen-Moran (2014) suggests that trust acts as the glue that keeps an organization functioning smoothly, albeit through complex mechanisms. Trust serves as a binding agent that holds society together and is a key ingredient for general social development. Consider the analogy of a model car: without glue, it is simply a disarray of disconnected parts, but with glue, it becomes a cohesive whole.

Building on this concept, Tschannen-Moran (2014) emphasizes that trust is also highly delicate. Once a fragile object, such as glass, is broken, it is difficult to restore it to its original state. If one imagines reassembling a shattered glass figurine with adhesive, the cracks remain visibly apparent even when compared to its original form. Repairing trust requires significant effort and humility; it cannot be mended overnight, but rather demands a sustained, marathon-like process. To effectively repair this damage, we must first understand the mechanics of the two primary forms of trust most severely impacted by the erosion of public confidence in schools.

Institutional and Relational Trust

Institutional and relational trust serve as the bedrock of this study; therefore, they must be properly defined to understand how they might be restored. To begin, institutional trust, also referred to as political trust (Gabriel & Zmerli, 2006; Newton, 2001;), is the trust between groups of people tied to different organizations. This form of trust is placed in an institution's guiding ideals, procedural codes, achievements, and mechanisms of control (Niedlich et al., 2021). In essence, institutional trust relies on an institution's transparency, fairness, effectiveness, and efficiency.

Conversely, relational trust, often termed interpersonal trust, plays a significant role in the erosion of confidence in public schools. This type of trust falls into two categories: particularized trust and generalized (or social) trust. Particularized trust refers to the confidence individuals place in family, friends, and co-workers. Shared experiences, close attachments, and deep understanding strengthen these relationships, connecting directly to the bonds between students, families, and their teachers (Cerna, 2014). Generalized or social trust extends beyond personal circles, reflecting confidence in individuals outside of one's immediate network. This applies directly to the public school system, particularly regarding the systemic elements with which students and parents do not directly interact (Cerna, 2014).

Furthermore, relational trust emerges from interactions between and within role groups. It is built upon an assortment of social exchanges that occur within operational processes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In an educational context, this constitutes the trust tethered to the relationships among students, parents, teachers, and administrators. According to Adams et al. (2009), trust levels are stronger when social exchanges align with the expectations and responsibilities of these respective stakeholders. Moreover, when social interactions among these groups satisfy the criteria of openness, honesty, benevolence, competence, and reliability, stakeholders are more likely to risk vulnerability, a primary outward sign of trust (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999).

How does this framework connect to the current crisis in public education? Hosking (2019) suggests that a primary indicator of the recent trust crisis is the sharp decline in public confidence in government, business, and the media. This decline has fostered a rising sense of fear, paranoia, helplessness, and skepticism toward governmental institutions, including public schools. Such fear and paranoia are likely driven by a perceived lack of transparency, fairness, effectiveness, and efficiency, narratives often amplified by the news media, political discourse,

and community conversations. Without these foundational aspects of institutional trust, confidence inevitably deteriorates, affecting the trust individuals place not only in institutions but also in one another (Bachmann, 2018).

Institutional trust in the public school system has been declining since Gallup first began annual polling on institutional confidence in 1973 (Gallup, 2023; Jones, 2022; Saad, 2023). Though this downward trend predates the Gallup polls, it accelerated significantly in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This acceleration was largely driven by a perceived decline in institutional quality following the release of *A Nation at Risk*, a report that has played a pivotal role in the erosion of trust in public schools.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Reagan administration released *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, a report asserting that the educational foundations of the United States were crumbling and that mediocrity threatened the nation's future. The report implied that public schools suffered from declining standards and were failing to produce internationally competitive students. Unfortunately, *A Nation at Risk* not only introduced the narrative of failing public schools into the political lexicon, but it has also sustained this discourse for over 40 years, continuing to drive market-based reforms today (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Carson et al., 1991, 1993; Farfan, 2020; Giroux, 1984).

Understanding the decline of relational trust requires investigating the dynamics among all stakeholders in the public school system such as students, parents, teachers, administrators, the community, and local government. More importantly, relational trust hinges on openness, honesty, benevolence, competence, and reliability. Brady and Kent (2022) illustrate that trust levels regarding public schools vary vastly between political affiliations; Republicans have reported a decrease in trust, whereas Democrats have reported an increase. This political divide,

coupled with the cumulative impacts of politicians meddling in how schools should function, has led to widespread dissatisfaction, issues surrounding accountability practices, and growing skepticism regarding the competency and responsiveness of public schools. Since competence and reliability are prerequisites for strong relational trust, it appears these elements are particularly waning among those on the political right.

Regarding accountability, the political left often views heightened accountability measures as a divisive strategy enacted through neoliberal reforms, such as the push for high-stakes testing and intensified teacher evaluations. The neoliberal push toward the marketization of public schools, discussed in detail in subsequent sections, has fostered competition-driven reforms that pit schools against one another, teachers against their peers, and parents against the system itself (De Saxe et al., 2020). Consequently, when stakeholders are forced into direct competition to secure the highest achievable positions for themselves, the foundational tenets of relational trust dissolve due to a lack of openness and benevolence.

The result is a low-trust, highly monitored environment where teachers and schools hesitate to take pedagogical risks for fear of appearing incompetent or unmarketable (Reina & Reina, 2006). Accountability has effectively become a surrogate for relational and institutional trust, a substitution that ultimately weakens trust overall (Trow, 1996). Bipartisan support for these accountability measures and policy shifts has facilitated the marriage of education, marketization, and privatization, pushing schools further away from serving as a public good and closer to operating as a private commodity (Labaree, 1997, 2010).

Theme 2

The following data are divided into two distinct sections. First, I discuss the culture wars based on the Content Analysis performed on the primary data corpus, excluding Reddit. The

second section examines the culture wars through the discourse of Reddit users, exploring their perspectives on various subthemes uncovered within that specific dataset.

Content Analysis Perspective

According to Schneider and Berkshire (2024), the aim of public schooling in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was to separate education from politics. This meant insulating the administration of public schools from political influence, allowing them to be managed by professional administrators, teachers, and other educational experts. Nevertheless, public schools have become one of the centerpieces of the culture wars, caught in a political tug-of-war between the left and the right.

In the last 50 years alone, public schools have increasingly been drawn into a political landscape defined by divergent worldviews that have spawned national-level controversies, particularly concerning the curriculum. The professional structure of schooling, originally designed to keep politics at bay, has paradoxically become highly politicized (Schneider & Berkshire, 2024). This section investigates the past five decades of political influence and explores how these forces have systematically infiltrated and transformed the public school system.

As noted in the introduction, public schools enjoyed broad, bipartisan support in the late 1800s and early 1900s. School administrators actively worked to construct a professionalized system built on specialized management structures. Politics were largely excluded from this system, leaving operations to educational experts. Although disputes arose occasionally regarding religious, racial, and ethnic lines, the majority were handled locally, with only a few escalating to the national level (Schneider & Berkshire, 2024). This autonomy allowed local communities to conceptualize how their schools should operate within the parameters of state

and national-level requirements. During this era, a prevailing belief held that public schools were a public benefit, providing an education that prepared youth to become capable citizens who would strengthen the nation. However, as the 20th century progressed, public schools began to undergo significant ideological shifts.

Upon reviewing the last 50 years, the late 1970s and early 1980s emerge as the one of the more significant flashpoints for educational change. This shift was catalyzed by a series of high-profile reports produced during attempts to diagnose the cause of a decade-long recession and widespread economic downturn. As discussed in greater depth later in Chapter 4, the neoliberal movement began to take hold and heavily steered the political atmosphere of the late 1970s.

Near the end of the Carter presidency, a commission was formed to build a national agenda for the 1980s. This agenda suggested that United States schools were experiencing a crisis of purpose, which in turn caused them to fail at adequately performing their traditional roles (Gabbard & Ross, 2005). At this juncture, the political discourse surrounding public schools began to change rapidly, culminating with the arrival of the Reagan administration in the early 1980s.

President Reagan campaigned on a promise to abolish the Department of Education and overhaul the public schooling system. This initiative led to one of the most consequential contributions of the Reagan administration: the formation of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The commission's objective was to investigate the state of the U.S. education system and uncover the underlying causes of the nation's economic woes. The culminating effort was *A Nation at Risk*, released in 1983. This jarring report fundamentally altered the public and political perspective on public schools, resulting in an impact that remains significant today (Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007).

The groundwork preceding this moment, laid by the neoliberal movement, initiated a cascade of political reforms fueled by the report's efforts to reframe the purpose of education. Education was redefined as a mechanism for global competitiveness, social mobility, individual success, and merit. Decades of reform followed. First came No Child Left Behind, which was eventually succeeded by the Every Student Succeeds Act. Subsequently, initiatives such as Race to the Top and, more recently, the Common Core State Standards were introduced into the educational landscape (Au, 2016; Kumashiro, 2012; Rury, 2016).

Each of these initiatives was touted as a common-sense reform aimed at imposing high standards on students, teachers, and schools. These reforms were heavily promoted to convince the public that the playing field was finally being leveled, that social justice was being pursued, and that schools would ultimately deliver higher quality education and strict accountability for underperformance, particularly from an economic perspective (Kumashiro, 2010; Monbiot, 2016).

Unfortunately, claiming the playing field was level without actively dismantling systemic inequalities only framed public schools as the root problem. The problematization of public schools through half-truths and falsehoods culminated in a severe decline in faith and trust in the system. Shifting the blame not only opened the door for public school alternatives but also paved the way for the neoliberal movement to dominate the public narrative, pushing the country further toward the privatization of education (De Saxe et al., 2020).

Disseminating falsehoods, disinformation, misinformation, and hyperbole is an effective strategy for changing public opinion, frequently employed by politicians attempting to sow doubt, paranoia, fear, and confusion. Historically, similar tactics were visible during the McCarthy era, when the political right targeted individual teachers for their affiliations amid

widespread fear of communism. The critical difference today, however, is that the political right is directly interfering with the curriculum and classroom pedagogy (Kamola, 2025).

The strategy of attacking the curriculum became highly prominent during the first Trump presidency and continues into the present. Through these efforts, public schools have been transformed into battlegrounds for cultural and political dominance. Politicians have suggested that schools teach students to hate the United States by introducing topics such as socialism and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Some officials claim schools are indoctrinating students with harmful, anti-American ideals or even suggest that public schools are purveyors of pornography. These polarizing debates surrounding race, gender, and inclusiveness have stunted educational development while exacerbating ideological divisions. The resulting culture wars have severely diminished trust in public schools, creating momentous challenges for the institutions, their students, and the supporting communities (LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Shoka, 2025; Walker, 2023).

One of the most intense recent political battles over public schools centers on Critical Race Theory. Fundamentally, CRT examines the relationship between race, racism, and power while exposing both historical and contemporary forms of systemic racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It posits that oppression and racism are experienced through intersectional facets such as classism, sexism, ableism, and the law (Anya, 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 1998; Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Shoka, 2025). In essence, CRT frames race and racism as embedded components of economic, political, and social systems that disproportionately disadvantage certain social groups (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Lynn, 2004). The intense political resistance to exposing students to these realities raises vital questions regarding the underlying fears surrounding difficult discussions about charged historical and contemporary events.

Certain political figures argue that teaching topics such as systemic racism detracts from the instruction of exceptionalism and patriotism, framing these as traditional American values (Hornbeck & Malin, 2023; LoBue & Douglass, 2023). These same figures argue that controversial public policy topics or subjects that might induce feelings of guilt or distress should be entirely excluded from the classroom (Samuels et al., 2023; Welton et al., 2023). Most notably, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has equated such teachings with indoctrination, suggesting that these subjects will lead to the ruin of the United States (Grice, 2022; Pollock et al., 2025).

This movement extends well beyond Florida. Since 2021, roughly a third of all U.S. states have banned K-12 curricula that contain critical perspectives on the racial history of the United States (Waxman, 2023). Additionally, 40 percent of all states have introduced more than 200 bills aiming to silence and penalize educators who teach concepts associated with race, diversity, gender, sexuality, and oppression (Shoka, 2025). Increasingly, Republican-controlled states have utilized a three-pronged approach to silence critical perspectives: passing state legislation, enacting executive actions by governors, and mandating curriculum bans via state boards of education (Hornbeck & Malin, 2023).

The banning of curricula profoundly impacts students by silencing narratives of historical oppression, thereby limiting the scope of knowledge obtained. This decreases the ability of both students and teachers to critically evaluate society and educational systems, which disproportionately impacts marginalized groups (Shoka, 2025). According to López et al. (2021), restricting this critical examination can cause students to develop a distorted understanding of U.S. history and society. Consequently, this leads to a broader ignorance regarding the diverse identities, histories, and experiences of the American populace (Hornbeck & Malin, 2023;

Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ultimately, this erasure not only impedes the development of empathy but also perpetuates stereotypes, undermines representation, and reduces inclusivity in public schools, further eroding trust in the educational system (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015).

Politics also impacts students by establishing laws that enforce a silencing effect, generating a level of fear and paranoia that leads to self-censorship in classrooms. These legislative efforts alter not only the curriculum but the learning environment itself. This dynamic hamstrings students' ability to engage critically in discussions about history and identity, as teachers become increasingly fearful of answering questions related to these topics (Shoka, 2025).

For example, Hornbeck and Malin (2023) highlight how political polarization in public schools has triggered an explosion of restrictive legislation. Since 2021, states across the U.S. have passed laws censoring discussions surrounding gender and sexuality, with proponents claiming these subjects are divisive and motivated by progressive ideologies. Such legislation aims to remove curricula that might induce guilt or shame, restricting the historical and social teachings necessary to understand systemic inequality. PEN America (2023), a nonprofit organization focused on raising awareness for the protection of free expression in the United States and beyond, warns that this silencing only causes more harm and further marginalization, as it restricts discourse on diversity, oppression, gender, sexuality, and race, systematically erasing the experiences of marginalized populations.

Regrettably, these limitations affect not only students but also teachers and administrators. According to Lehrer-Small (2023), political restrictions have spawned strict classroom censorship policies, generating profound confusion and anxiety over acceptable instructional material. Educators face complaints if they inadvertently cross the vague boundaries

established by these laws. Consequently, teachers avoid certain subjects out of fear of losing their jobs, severely complicating an already demanding profession.

The consequences for teachers cyclically impact the students. Restricting what teachers are taught in their preparation programs, alongside what they are permitted to teach in their classrooms, results in a fundamental lack of understanding regarding race and racism. This deficit can culminate in a limited critical consciousness, diminished cultural competence, and a truncated sociopolitical awareness, ultimately making educators less equipped to support their marginalized students. This dynamic risks producing a generation of teachers who lack the skills to navigate a diverse world, leading to the further marginalization of non-White students and severely decreasing trust in the schools they attend (Grice, 2022; Kaerwer & Pritchett, 2023).

Digital Discourse Analysis Perspective

Further supporting the preceding information, the data analyzed from Reddit posts echoed many of these same perspectives while establishing what I categorize as subthemes. Two primary subthemes emerged that build upon the claims above. The first subtheme highlighted users noting an increase in political polarization, and the second centered on users' concerns regarding the indoctrination of students.

Political Polarization

In recent years, political polarization has exacerbated the decline of trust in public schools. According to numerous Reddit users, trust in public education is heavily influenced by broader political and societal debates, which are frequently centered on curriculum content and funding. Consequently, the educational sphere has become a battlefield for competing political ideologies, most notably neoliberal and progressive principles.

Within the collected Reddit data, two specific threads predominantly illustrate this theme of political polarization. The first thread, initiated by Zipper222222 (2026), centered on a Gallup Poll that reported record-low satisfaction with the quality of K-12 education in the United States. Zipper222222 (2026) suggested that this widespread dissatisfaction stems from systemic issues rather than individual failures. This prompt generated a string of responses that effectively summarize the prevailing user sentiments.

Users algernon_moncrief (2026) and LouDubra (2026) echoed similar perspectives, asserting that the Gallup data indicates dissatisfaction with public schools runs strongly along party lines and is likely the result of toxic political discourse. They argued that the core issue is not public schooling itself, but rather individuals strictly adhering to party lines and parroting the opinions of their respective political affiliations. They concluded that misinformation targeted at partisan bases, such as exaggerated reports regarding gender identity issues and children acting like cats, using litter boxes in schools, is a primary driver of this dissatisfaction.

Within this context, the politically charged issue of book banning enters the conversation. Fueled by existing polarization, controversial topics regarding race and sexuality have become lightning rods for further division. RelativeTangerine757 (2026) argued that political pressure dictating library content, coupled with funding cuts, is worsening the situation and ultimately leading to a decrease in student reading.

Conversely, Haunting-Ad-9790 (2026) attributed the blame to both sides of the political spectrum. This user argued that the political right actively pushes to underfund public education to facilitate privatization, while the political left attempts too many unproven approaches that fail to resolve underlying issues. The user concluded that both factions are utilizing education to score political points, leaving schools saddled with the consequences of this polarization.

Firm_Baseball_37 (2026) echoed this sentiment, describing the past 45 years as a continuous propaganda assault on public schools. This user claimed the political right seeks to privatize education to generate private profit and reduce taxes for the wealthy, showing little regard for the average American.

The second thread, started by democracys_sisyphus (2023), focused directly on how polarization harms American public schools. The user opened the discussion by framing education as one of the most vital services a government provides its citizens. They argued that contrasting policy shifts in states like Florida and California have exacerbated the culture wars, ultimately damaging the public school system.

YoBFed (2023) expanded on this by highlighting how conservatives, particularly religious conservatives, have pushed to silence specific topics and ban books. Furthermore, the user noted that the refusal to teach diverse perspectives on topics like race is having a concerning impact. However, YoBFed (2023) did not solely blame the conservative right; they also criticized the political left. The user suggested that many teachers lean liberal and integrate liberal messaging into their classrooms, predominantly featuring anti-Trump, anti-corporate, and socialist perspectives. Adding to this critique, YoBFed (2023) argued that the open discussion of political opinions with students exacerbates the issue, particularly when right-leaning teachers and students face mockery for their beliefs.

A contrasting perspective was offered by OscarMiled (2023), who argued that framing the issue merely as "polarization" is dangerous. This user claimed that the political right turning actively anti-education is not equivalent to standard polarization, asserting that the right supports neither intellectual honesty in education nor fundamental democracy. Bridalhat (2023) supported

this viewpoint, suggesting the political right has waged a long-standing war against the concept of a common public good.

Ultimately, both threads converge on a central theme: political polarization sits at the heart of the erosion of trust in public schools. According to the users, the political right actively works against public education by silencing curricula and banning books that contradict their beliefs. Conversely, users suggest that the political left utilizes similar silencing tactics and often causes more harm than good through continuous, ineffective reforms. Cumulatively, both political factions are fueling widespread dissatisfaction, which ultimately diminishes public trust in the educational system.

Indoctrination Concerns

Fears of indoctrination have increased substantially over the past 50 years, particularly during the lead-up to the Trump administration. Debates transcending political allegiances have arisen regarding whether public schools are actively indoctrinating students. This section examines several profound Reddit threads that highlight the digital discourse surrounding indoctrination and how these narratives erode trust in public schools.

Approximately one year ago, user Resvrgam2 (2025) initiated a thread by posting a link to a White House Presidential Action aimed at ending radical indoctrination in K-12 schooling, a prominent talking point among political conservatives. Briefly, the presidential action addresses the purpose of public education, emphasizing that parents are losing trust because they feel schools no longer provide a rigorous, patriotic education that instills traditional American values.

The resulting Reddit thread features a mix of users debating the presidential action, touching upon racism, sexism, slavery, religion, White privilege, and LGBTQ+ issues, connecting each to the broader debate on public school indoctrination. The conversation

meanders through these topics, frequently devolving into heated debates about the moral rightness of each subject. Bobcatgoldthwait (2025) opened the discussion by evaluating the main objectives of the executive order. They agreed with aspects of the order but expressed reservations about its wording and context. To frame the lengthy discussion, they argued that teachers should avoid speaking poorly of any political party. Furthermore, they suggested that an accurate, honest interpretation of American history requires acknowledging past mistakes, and that teachers should not fear sharing these difficult truths. This served as a point of demarcation; from here, the conversation fragmented into debates over terminology like ennobling, the efficacy of anti-CRT bills in stopping fringe ideologies, and claims that U.S. schools are indoctrinating students akin to practices in North Korea and China.

The discourse intensified around claims that schools teach children that it is inherently bad to be American or White. Necessarysmartassery (2025) sparked this debate by asserting that public schools propagate anti-White and anti-American narratives. This statement ignited an intense argument, with both sides relying on anecdotes and personal observations rather than concrete evidence to support or refute the existence of a systemic anti-American plot. Users traded barbs; some dismissed White privilege as a myth, while others labeled Trump and his supporters an extremist group attempting to indoctrinate youth. This pattern persisted throughout the discussion before shifting to subsequent topics. Ultimately, users on both sides exhibited a profound fear regarding the opposing faction's intentions toward children and the public school system.

The conversation then wove through historical debates regarding the idolization of historic figures with problematic pasts, such as slave ownership, before transitioning to LGBTQ+ rights, specifically transgender issues (Sabertooth767, 2025). The debate over

transgender rights, particularly claims that public schools are grooming children and promoting transgender ideologies without parental consent, became highly charged and dominated the remainder of the thread. OKbuddyliberals (2025) cautiously noted that it is unpopular for schools to keep secrets from parents, establishing a conservative baseline for the discussion. The debate then pivoted to the use of pronouns, alternate names, and student attire. This user also noted a growing societal pushback against transgender rights, resulting in the othering of transgender individuals.

The debate escalated further when happy_snowy_owl (2025) entered the thread, asserting that gender dysphoria requires a medical diagnosis before any transition therapy should occur. They argued that accommodating a name change is part of a clinical treatment plan, a point other users contested. This exchange continued, exploring arguments for and against schools facilitating student transitions, until happy_snowy_owl was banned from the thread for their hostility toward another user. Ultimately, while users agreed that parental rights are important, some argued that unchecked parental control could be weaponized and leave vulnerable children without support. Regardless of ideological stance, the topic proved highly emotional, revealing a shared fear that children would be harmed by the processes either supporting or restricting transgender rights.

The next thread, initiated by phantomthief_phoenix (2024) on the r/TrueChristian subreddit, questioned the fairness of the original poster's (OP) distrust in public schools. The OP shared their backstory to contextualize their views and asked the community if their distrust of schools they deemed "liberal and anti-Christian" was unwarranted.

The first respondent, LucidNytemare (2024), validated the OP's feelings, describing public schools as sources of "demonic indoctrination." This user argued that public curricula are

worsening annually, particularly in secular, liberal areas. Conversely, Zestyclose-Secret500 (2024) suggested that while liberal biases may exist in some states, fears of indoctrination are often overblown and fueled by media exaggeration, noting that such practices are likely not as widespread as portrayed.

LucidNytemare (2024) then attributed this indoctrination to the science and history curricula, expressing deep concern for the future. This sparked a tangential debate regarding academic content. LucidNytemare (2024) identified evolution as an obvious conflict for Christians and argued that history education is overly focused on race, women's rights, and nationalism. Zestyclose-Secret500 (2024) countered that discussing social history is vital and that historical racial injustices must be addressed. They advised concerned parents to speak directly with teachers to understand the context of these lessons and assess any personal prejudice or bias.

The conversation then shifted to a comparative discussion of public, private, and homeschooling options, featuring various personal anecdotes. A significant portion of the users appeared highly religious and strictly anti-public school. However, one unidentified user challenged this consensus, expressing concern that their Christian peers were isolating their children in private or homeschool environments. They argued that such isolation contradicts the Christian calling to serve the broader world. This comment highlighted a nuance within the religious debate that is rarely discussed.

The thread concluded with a final comment by Zestyclose-Secret500 (2024), who reiterated that public school quality varies. Drawing on their experience as a public school educator, they acknowledged the presence of liberal teachers but argued they are less prevalent than assumed. They added a lighthearted perspective, stating that if teachers possessed the power

to indoctrinate students, they would simply indoctrinate them to complete their homework. They concluded that while valid reasons exist to trust or distrust public schools, parents must balance these factors to determine what is best for their families.

The final Reddit post aligning with the theme of indoctrination was initiated by wolverine4562 (2025), who asked whether wokeness is a genuine issue in public schools. The user's premise stemmed from their 2022 student teaching experience; having worked across various schools, they observed no inappropriate lessons or overtly left-wing political agendas. This prompted diverse responses from users across the political spectrum.

LukasJackson67 (2025), who claimed to be a teacher, responded first, asserting that most teachers lean left and that wokeness is present, albeit subtly. This sentiment was echoed by PugnansFidicen (2025), who argued that leftist ideology has been problematic since the mid-2010s and is reportedly worsening. SobekRe (2025) shared a similar view, suggesting that leftist pedagogy peaked during the COVID-19 era, with anti-racism, partisan government teachings, and gender confusion emerging as primary issues.

The discussion eventually focused on gender and LGBTQ+ issues. random_guy00214 (2025) suggested that wokeness is a major problem, specifically citing the presence of Pride flags in classrooms. User lottery2341 (2025) challenged this by asking what the difference was between displaying a Pride flag and displaying a Bible, attempting to highlight a double standard. random_guy00214 (2025) replied that the Bible belongs in the classroom because it is true. This prompted a flurry of responses. Some users argued that LGBTQ+ topics negatively impact children and should remain outside the classroom, while others maintained that inclusive education is appropriate and necessary. This cyclical debate continued for the remainder of the thread.

Ultimately, the original poster's question generated a highly polarized political discussion. Both sides expressed heated opinions regarding curriculum content and omissions. While some users maintained that schools are not inherently leftist and that media narratives focus on fringe cases, a deep, pervasive distrust of public schools was evident among conservative-leaning users.

Theme 3

This section highlights the profound impact that neoliberalism, neoconservatism, privatization, and market-based education have had on the erosion of trust in public schools. First, I discuss these issues from the vantage point of the Content Analysis. From there, I analyze the discourse of various Reddit users and examine their perspectives.

Content Analysis Perception

Neoliberalism and Neoconservativism

Driven by neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies, society began to depict public schools as monopolistic organizations that fundamentally contradicted the fabric of a capitalist society. Framing public schools as monopolies was a strategic method to convince the public that these institutions were inherently undemocratic and in dire need of reform. However, this was not the sole aim of the neoconservative movement; suggesting that public schools held a monopoly also established a mechanism to justify privatization, paving the way for competition and school choice under the guise of democracy (Zenkov, 2000).

Zenkov (2000) notes that this ideological shift birthed the precursor to the voucher system, a tax credit, which subsequently laid the foundation for the broader school choice movement. The voucher movement became a focal point of the Bush administration in the early 1990s, and conservative rhetoric actively altered the public's perception of public education. No

longer were public schools viewed as the exclusive institutions serving the public; instead, conservatives argued that any school serving the public should be considered a public school, a redefinition that catapulted the voucher movement into the mainstream media (Karp, 1992).

The concept of vouchers may initially appear beneficial. Proponents argue that any school serving the public deserves access to public funding and that parents should be able to redirect their allotted public school funds to a school of their choice. This model is undeniably useful for upper-class individuals who possess the supplemental resources necessary to navigate systemic roadblocks and secure placement in private institutions. However, for lower-class and minority families, the reality is starkly different. While some have successfully used vouchers to fund alternative schooling, many others remain unable to afford the remaining tuition or logistical costs required to enroll their children in private schools (Miner, 1992-1993).

Despite these exclusionary consequences, followers of Friedman (1962) argue that school choice cultivates higher levels of institutional responsiveness within public schools. They contend that choice breeds innovation, drives school improvement, and enhances student success. In alignment with neoliberal ideals, proponents believe that a market-driven approach redistributes decision-making power directly to the consumers of the educational system. Under this framework, the individual preferences of parents and students theoretically dictate curricular changes and resource allocation (Henig, 1994). Essentially, advocates of the choice system posit that privatization and voucher plans offer the best opportunity for educational excellence, thereby justifying the rejection of traditional public schooling. According to Apple (1993), the conservative forces blaming the economic crisis on public schools are driven by an ongoing effort to ensure that anything public is perceived as detrimental, while anything private is championed as the optimal path forward, a sentiment that continues to resonate heavily today.

Conversely, critics of the privatization and voucher movements argue that privatization will severely restrict the curriculum. Schools driven by profit motives are disincentivized from teaching controversial subjects, as controversy threatens their business models. Consequently, rigorous discussions of economics, politics, race, and other critical social issues risk being dismissed in favor of safe, sanitized topics that do little to foster the tenets of a free and democratic society (Zenkov, 2000). As Apple (1993) warned in the early 1990s, the citizenship purposes of education and the very existence of public schools are increasingly falling by the wayside to make room for institutions that serve specific political and economic agendas. This paradigm reduces education to matters of economics, choice, and consumption, effectively transforming the educational landscape into a retail market. Instead of cultivating a nation of critical thinkers unafraid to unflinchingly examine the historical and contemporary realities of the country to build a better future, the system risks producing an education model that plays it safe merely to maximize private profit.

It is critical to evaluate the driving forces of the market when anticipating the outcomes of an increasingly privatized school environment. While privatized schools may promote innovation and student success if the market demands it, one must ask what happens if the market desires something discriminatory or exclusionary. What if the majority's definition of quality education conflicts with the needs of minority populations? What if the market determines that religious schools are more profitable than secular ones, or that all-White schools are more marketable than racially integrated schools? If schools fail to generate profit, they face closure, which disproportionately impacts already underserved communities. As Smith and Meier (1995) suggest, an increasingly privatized educational system carries the potential for just as many negative consequences as positive ones.

Unfortunately, these negative consequences have not stemmed the tide of privatization, and the neoliberal prioritization of individual social mobility continues to erode trust in public schools. Parents and students increasingly view schooling as a vehicle for personal social mobility rather than a mechanism for serving the collective interests of democratic equality and social efficiency (Labaree, 1997, 2010). Decades of neoliberal reform have established a reality where the global free market dictates educational value. In this paradigm, K-12 schools are evaluated based on how effectively they provide students with a competitive economic advantage, rather than how well they foster a democratic society (Labaree, 1997, 2010). In an era characterized by heightened accountability, fierce competition, and normalized privatization, it has become apparent that institutions designed to create public goods and services are fundamentally incompatible with neoliberal ideology (Burch, 2009; Sadovnik et al., 2013; Saltman, 2014).

As highlighted throughout this analysis, the privatization of public schools has long been a primary objective of the political right. The propaganda strategies rooted in the neoconservative movement have profoundly altered the public's perception of education. One of the chief contemporary proponents of this push is Christopher Rufo, who is entirely transparent regarding his privatization goals. He has explicitly stated that for the United States to achieve universal school choice, conservatives must operate from a premise of generating complete distrust in the public school system (Kamola, 2025).

How are these actors successfully eroding public trust? Neoconservatives operate on the premise that a specialized elite should guide the public. This has driven ongoing attempts by political and economic elites to dictate educational content and pedagogy. This strategy ties directly back to the neoliberal efforts that propelled Ronald Reagan to the presidency in the early

1980s. During that period, neoconservatives seeking to assert control over public schools promoted a propaganda campaign centered on the release of *A Nation at Risk,* an effort designed to reorient public schools toward servicing the demands of the economic elite (Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007).

This same push precipitated a targeted attack on liberalism (Johnson, 2003) explicitly aimed at advancing the privatization of public schools. The synthesis of neoliberal and neoconservative agendas culminated in the high-stakes testing and accountability measures embedded within the No Child Left Behind legislation. This effort persists today, actively seeking to eliminate what conservative elites perceive as a democratic threat posed by progressive educational policies (Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007). The tactical methodology of these movements extends deeply into public rhetoric, most notably through the metaphor of the public school as a monopoly.

Originating with Milton Friedman over 50 years ago, the concept of schools as monopolies provided intellectual scaffolding for the neoliberal and neoconservative movements. Friedman argued that public schools were the only viable option for most parents because they were legally obligated to pay taxes to support them while lacking the financial means to afford private alternatives. He characterized public schools as monopolies because they operated without market incentives and faced no risk of closure due to a lack of genuine competition. Furthermore, Friedman argued there was no structural incentive for public schools to improve efficiency or educational quality since parents had no alternative options (Friedman, 1962). By the 1990s, this rhetoric was mobilized in a renewed push to dissolve public schools. Drawing directly from Friedman, advocates characterized public education as a monopolistic entity that required the democratic interventions of privatization, competition, and consumer choice

(Zenkov, 2000). These efforts laid the groundwork for the relentless drive toward increased testing, heightened accountability, and expanded school choice options implemented through successive waves of educational reform.

In the contemporary context, commissioners and politicians utilize standardized test scores to pinpoint areas where they argue further testing and privatization are necessary. Low scores are weaponized to justify the expansion of charter schools. Perhaps most notably, these accountability metrics are accompanied by renewed claims that public schools act as monopolies. Employing this specific terminology frames public education in a negative light, drawing intentional parallels to the corporate monopoly busting seen in the technology sector. A prime example of this rhetoric occurred during New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's second term. By portraying public schools as monopolies that needed to be dismantled and forced to compete with charter and private institutions, Governor Cuomo simultaneously bolstered the interests of campaign donors who contributed approximately $4.8 million and directly profited from pro-charter legislation (Hursh & Martina, 2016). The unifying thread connecting these diverse efforts to problematize public education is the underlying potential for capital gain; the push to alter the perception of public schools is driven less by the prospect of better education and more by the pursuit of profit.

Digital Discourse Analysis Perception

The perspectives of Reddit users regarding neoliberalism, neoconservatism, privatization, and market-based education spanned multiple threads. These discussions covered themes of corporatization and privatization, government intervention, teachers' unions, curricular changes, and standardized testing. The following section provides a compilation of user perspectives related to this overarching theme.

Corporatization, Neoliberalism, and Privatization

Examining the r/education subreddit, I identified a thread directly related to the corporatization of public schools and found it necessary to extract a series of observations that align with the broader discussion on neoliberalism. The thread, initiated by Cherry-care-bear (2026), centered on a question regarding the legality of the rampant corporatization of public education in America. The user questioned whether this phenomenon constitutes a violation of the Constitution or represents another equally serious breach. This inquiry ignited a debate featuring perspectives across the two primary sides of the political spectrum.

TheGoshDarnedBatman (2026) began by attempting to answer the question directly. They argued that corporatization does not violate the Constitution because the document does not explicitly address education. Instead, they noted that the United States judicial system and state constitutions established public education as a right, thereby placing power in the hands of local and state governments. The user further suggested that corporations can exert such a high degree of control over education simply because the average citizen does not pay close attention to state legislatures, thereby making it easier for corporate interests to maneuver. Several users agreed with these points before the conversation digressed into tangential discussions about the Constitution and software companies.

The next comment to tie directly into the neoliberal aspects of corporatization was provided by Professional-Dot3734 (2026), who placed the blame for corporatization squarely on the neoliberal movement. They argued that neoliberal ideology has caused the public to increasingly view education as an economic issue, an observation that reflects my previous analysis of the impacts of *A Nation at Risk* during the 1980s. In this view, schooling is perceived primarily as a mechanism for personal economic gain. The user noted that this ideology drives a

reduction in regulation and governance, even though framing schools as monopolies paradoxically requires some degree of governmental oversight. This deregulation allegedly provides greater flexibility, allowing schools to react to market trends, alter enrollment practices, and make structural adjustments to maximize profitability.

Professional-Dot3734 (2026) continued by arguing that public schools will lose their cultural capital as high-achieving students migrate to schools perceived as superior. This migration is inherently tied to the use of standardized test scores to elevate certain schools above others. The user equated this dynamic to dataveillance, defined here as the weaponization of standardized test scores to promote specific schools by providing resources to high achievers while penalizing institutions with lower performance levels. This dataveillance prompts parents to remove their children from struggling schools, exacerbating the decline of underfunded institutions while bolstering the growth of others. The user concluded by asserting that the ideologies of neoliberalism and late-stage capitalism thrive because they serve as mechanisms for acquiring power and wealth, adding that fighting these forces is an impossible task.

A counterargument centered on the concept of liberty followed. 10xwannabe (2026) framed the issue by asking if it is truly liberty to be forced to send one's children to a specific, geographically assigned school. The user asked how parents would react if they were forced to use a doctor assigned to their region, positing that parents would resent being told they could not choose the best available medical care for their children. This sparked a debate regarding systemic fairness. Another user, Firm_Baseball_37 (2026), retorted by asking why, under that logic, anyone should settle for government-funded roads or subsidized public transportation instead of pushing for private alternatives like helicopters. The argument evolved into a debate

over systemic constraints, culminating in the consensus that while people technically have options, they often lack the financial ability or desire to utilize them.

The conversation continued along this trajectory until a user named Glum-Pop-5119 (2026) contributed to the thread. This user stated that families currently have the ability to utilize public schools, pay for private education, or homeschool their children. However, they noted that taxpayers are also forced to fund busing, private charter schools, and religious institutions that they may neither use nor support. The user argued that the fundamental purpose of public education is to ensure every child has access to the quality instruction necessary to become a productive citizen. Furthermore, they asserted that the most effective way to address issues within public schools is through active community involvement, as well-regulated public schools are foundational to a functioning democracy. Addressing the topic of indoctrination, the user claimed that the only indoctrination occurring in schools is the teaching of good citizenship and civic cooperation. Plus-Plan-3313 (2026) supported this perspective, reiterating that because education is governed by state legislatures and local school boards, civic engagement at the local level is the key to school improvement.

The thread concluded with a brief discussion regarding the efficacy of charter schools. cherry-care-bear (2026) argued that citizens should strive to improve public schools rather than segregating their children and ignoring systemic issues. This user warned that pivoting away from public education contributes heavily to national divisiveness, an outcome where ultimately no one wins. Glum-Pop-5119 (2026) closed the thread by warning that defunding public schools removes a vital safety net for disadvantaged children, questioning what resources these students will have left if charter schools eventually fail or depart.

Overall, this thread illustrates the ongoing tension between proponents of corporatization and privatization, and those who steadfastly support public schooling. The themes identified in the Content Analysis regarding neoliberalism merge seamlessly with the Reddit discourse, confirming that segments of the population are acutely aware of neoliberalism's impact on public education. Ultimately, the political polarization is on full display, and the ideological impasse appears stronger than ever.

Unions and Government Involvement

The neoliberal movement has been quick to blame stagnating public schools on teachers' unions, as discussed earlier in Chapter 4. Proponents of this view claim that teachers' unions resist reform movements and prioritize their own interests over those of their students. Conversely, many critics point to state-level control as the true culprit, arguing that curricular changes are driven by state education committees rather than teachers' unions. The following section examines a Reddit thread discussing the perceived impact of teachers' unions on curricular changes.

The thread initiated when Katie888333 (2026) provided a link to an article from *The Atlantic* regarding leftist pessimism toward school reform. This article served as the catalyst for the subsequent conversation. The first respondent, SuzannaMK (2026), shared a personal anecdote detailing their experience with curricular changes that they believed negatively impacted public schools. This user observed that students are struggling significantly with both literacy and mathematics. They attributed the decline in math proficiency to the advent of applications like Photomath and the recent rise of Artificial Intelligence. Furthermore, they criticized recent changes to the social studies curriculum in Oregon, arguing that the shift toward an almost exclusive focus on Western Hemisphere history severely handicaps students' global

understanding. SuzannaMK (2026) concluded by expressing frustration with the tendency to blame teachers' unions for curricular shifts, noting that these mandates typically originate from state-level education committees and local school boards.

Korrocks (2026) responded by suggesting that widespread cynicism regarding government effectiveness exacerbates the situation. This user claimed the public lacks faith in the government's ability to enact helpful changes, particularly when it struggles to manage foundational issues like childcare and housing. This comment sparked a tangential discussion exploring the root causes of the public's lack of faith in government institutions.

Expanding on this, afdiplomatll (2026) argued that the decline in government trust stems from multiple political and economic fiascoes over the past 70 years, citing the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, and the Great Recession as primary examples. Additionally, they posited that the federal government is ineffective at self-promotion, meaning the tangible benefits it provides often go unnoticed by the public. The user concluded by shifting a portion of the blame to the political right, accusing conservative factions of executing a deliberate campaign to delegitimize the government. They highlighted the Republican aversion to utilizing government for public benefit and their persistent claims of widespread fraud, waste, and abuse within government programs. This observation aligns closely with my analytical framework regarding neoliberalism's ongoing impact on public schools.

The discussion temporarily shifted before being redirected by greatauntcassiopeia (2026), who argued that the original article was misinformed. This user asserted that education is heavily dictated by federal government incentives and regulations, rather than the agendas of teachers' unions. In a subsequent response, greatauntcassiopeia (2026) argued that educational regulations are frequently authored by individuals who are not teaching professionals, resulting in 30 years

of misguided policy. They advocated for educational autonomy, arguing that standardized testing and heavy regulation are not best practices. Ultimately, this user maintained that educational professionals, rather than government officials, are best equipped to determine what benefits students and should be entrusted with those decisions.

Katie888333 (2026) later reentered the thread, arguing that the political left bears more responsibility for educational stagnation than the right. Specifically, they criticized the left for delaying the adoption of new, potentially more effective teaching methods, providing multiple sources to support their claim. This user questioned the wisdom of teachers' unions advocating for total teacher control over curricular changes. Additionally, Katie888333 (2026) suggested that teachers, like other professionals, might benefit from stringent license renewal processes to ensure they remain current in their field. Ultimately, a consensus emerged among the users: the government, encompassing both left- and right-wing factions, bears the primary responsibility for current curricular issues, rather than the teachers' unions.

Theme 4

Media manipulation, a near-constant flow of misinformation, and a relentless onslaught of propaganda have profoundly impacted trust in public schools. This section aims to analyze this erosion of trust through a twofold approach. First, I examine the issue from the standpoint of the Content Analysis conducted on my primary data corpus, specifically focusing on the themes of media manipulation, misinformation, and propaganda. Subsequently, I provide a Digital Discourse Analysis exploring how Reddit users conceptualize and discuss these exact same topics.

Content Analysis Standpoint

In the era of the 24-hour news cycle and the proliferation of social media platforms, information travels further and faster than ever before. Consequently, the public has the capacity to stay more informed than at almost any other point in human history. However, this global interconnectivity acts as a double-edged sword, functioning as an implement that can be wielded either to inform the masses or to sow widespread distrust.

This leads to a foundational premise that has persisted since the inception of mass media. According to Powell (1971), the vast majority of media outlets are owned and controlled by corporations focused on profit survival, a trend that has only accelerated since Powell's initial writing. Furthermore, many of these media conglomerates are controlled by elites possessing immense financial resources and extensive influence. This raises a critical question: what generates more revenue, a sensationalized narrative, or a standard human-interest story? Invariably, sensationalized stories yield the highest return on investment. All forms of media, whether print, radio, television, or digital, are increasingly utilized to shock public sensibilities and maximize engagement, ultimately generating continuous profit for corporate elites. The following section discusses how news and social media are manipulated by elites, corporations, and politicians to perpetuate captivating narratives. These tactics steer the public down algorithm-led pathways, isolating individuals into distinct ideological silos to deliberately manufacture an atmosphere of distrust, fear, and paranoia.

News Media

Edwards (2006) offers a poignant critique of the news media, arguing that when journalism is driven by profit, the makeup, character, and tone of the news fundamentally change. We currently live in an age where the trustworthiness of consumed information is at the

forefront of public discourse. The era of public service broadcasting, which prioritized creating informative documentaries, has been replaced by a profit-driven model where crime, celebrity gossip, and sensationalism are prioritized to maximize viewership. Consequently, modern news functions more as entertainment than as a method for cultivating an informed citizenry.

Increasingly, politicians claim that fake news is actively deceiving the public across nearly every available cable news network. These claims elevate concerns regarding propaganda and information manipulation, ultimately fostering a culture of fear and paranoia. Grassian (2018) suggests that this near-constant inundation of sensibility-shocking media occurs largely because the public is confined within ideological news silos, such as exclusively consuming either Fox News or CNN. The counterpart to this phenomenon is the algorithmic personalization of news delivered via computers and smartphones, which only deepens this silo effect.

These dynamics play a significant role in the erosion of trust in public schools. As Shine and Rogers (2021) suggest, the media exerts a substantial influence over the political discourse surrounding public education. It sways the decisions of local stakeholders, directly shaping the operational realities within school districts. When compounded by issues of information manipulation, misinformation, and disinformation, the conditions are perfectly set for the further erosion of confidence in public schools. This environment culminates in what I term analysis paralysis, a state in which media consumers find it exceedingly difficult to determine the reliability of the information they encounter. Due to various cognitive biases, this paralysis often drives individuals deeper into their respective ideological silos.

From a psychological perspective, cognitive biases severely exacerbate these issues. In an age where news is instantly accessible, public perception is heavily influenced by the availability heuristic. Furthermore, the anchoring bias causes individuals to rely disproportionately on the

initial piece of information they encounter, resulting in a distorted and inaccurate understanding of the topic at hand (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). By exploiting these cognitive vulnerabilities, media outlets wield significant influence in shaping both consumer opinions and educational policies (Mockler, 2022).

The impact of these phenomena was starkly evident during the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the realm of education, the public experienced massive confusion and widespread misconceptions, largely driven by media reporting during a highly volatile period (Romo, 2025). During this crisis, emotional biases became a prominent factor in shaping public opinion. Emotional biases impair judgment and heavily influence decision-making, often resulting in outcomes that do not serve the best interests of all parties, particularly children (Goleman, 1995). For instance, public schools were forced to rapidly transition to remote instruction. Parents, observing isolated snippets of this remote curriculum, reacted with alarm, even though these snippets rarely represented standard pedagogical norms. The media amplified these reactions, creating a feedback loop of anxiety. The inherent fear and uncertainty of the pandemic collided with the specific anxieties of educational stakeholders, leading to the severe exploitation of emotional biases. Ultimately, society witnessed a perfect storm of systemic distrust.

As Romo (2025) notes, the widespread doubts regarding public education that surfaced during the pandemic, coupled with the logistical challenges of remote learning, significantly damaged public trust in schools. However, the news media was merely one catalyst in this dissolution of trust. The misconceptions fueled by traditional news reporting represent only one piece of the puzzle. The other critical component is the transformation of localized word-of-mouth communication into the globalized phenomenon of social media discourse.

Social Media

Digital spaces such as Facebook, X, Reddit, and numerous others have profoundly impacted how we perceive the world. We now possess nearly instantaneous contact with individuals across the country and around the globe. Prior to the advent of social media, peer-driven opinions were largely relegated to word-of-mouth exchanges, such as public meetings or telephone conversations. This drastic shift in communication has heavily influenced the current flow of misconceptions and misinformation (Romo, 2025).

With global opinions readily available at our fingertips, the developers who design social media algorithms possess the ability to tilt the scales of public perception. Their platforms exert immediate global influence. For instance, viral posts and online threads can disproportionately shape public opinion, easily overshadowing official reports or firsthand observations of public schools (Clark, 2013).

This manipulation occurs primarily through platform algorithms, which are designed to magnify emotionally charged content by rewarding it with increased visibility. This creates what Pariser (2011) terms an echo chamber, constructed by algorithms that meticulously track and cater to user interests. Consequently, individuals who source their news exclusively from social media, or from like-minded networks on these platforms, experience a constant reinforcement of their existing beliefs. This cycle entrenches the misinformation and disinformation present within these digital channels.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of these algorithms is their exploitation of known cognitive biases to maximize user retention. The primary mechanism utilized is the negativity bias, a psychological phenomenon that tricks individuals into believing that negative events or information are more significant and widespread than reality reflects. Consequently, isolated

incidents are perceived as national crises, escalating existing levels of fear, paranoia, and systemic distrust (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017).

When compounded by contemporary political polarization, this media environment functions as an apparatus ingeniously constructed to intensify the impacts of misinformation and disinformation. For example, positive narratives regarding public schools are vastly overshadowed by reports of failure or controversy. This disproportionate exposure conditions users to prioritize perceived threats over objective reality. Ultimately, this skews how parents and other stakeholders view public education, fostering mistrust and driving families away from the public school system (Romo, 2025).

According to Hill (2023), parents who utilize social media for school-related discourse are significantly more likely to develop misconceptions about public education. Parents who base their educational decisions on anecdotal online experiences rather than objective data are disproportionately shaped by incomplete and inaccurate information (Hwang & Jeong, 2023). Consequently, social media-driven decisions regarding public schools are more frequently influenced by perceived reality rather than actual conditions. These misconceptions exacerbate systemic inequalities, polarize policy debates, and worsen negative perceptions of public schools (Koljatic, Silva, & Sireci, 2021).

Driven by these dynamics, social media platforms and their engagement-focused algorithms continuously reinforce negative stereotypes surrounding public education (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2023). Individuals, politicians, and special interest groups leverage these platforms to wield impressive power over consumers. By altering perceived reality to fit specific narratives, these actors promote preferred ideologies and actively shape mass public opinion. The following

section examines the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of the public regarding media manipulation, misinformation, and propaganda.

Digital Discourse Analysis Standpoint

The news media profoundly impacts its consumers, shaping the choices individuals make daily, for better or worse. Whether highlighting failures and conflicts within public schools across the nation or through partisan outlets pushing polarizing frames to erode remaining institutional trust, the news invariably influences the public. The same holds true for social media, where engagement-driven algorithms amplify worst-case scenarios and drive alarmism. The following section presents an investigation spanning various Reddit threads. It examines exactly what individuals are thinking, feeling, and expressing regarding the impact of news and social media on consumer beliefs, as well as the ongoing polarization that continues to erode trust in public institutions, particularly public schools.

Perspectives on News Media

A thread initiated by holmess2013 (2026) regarding news literacy courses in public education and the propensity of U.S. political parties to disseminate fake news served as an entry point for this Digital Discourse Analysis. The original poster initiated the conversation by addressing misinformation, asserting that Republicans engage in deceptive messaging more frequently than Democrats. Specifically, holmess2013 (2026) suggested that approximately 30% of Fox News content constitutes misinformation, prompting other users to evaluate the validity of this claim.

The first respondent, buddhafig (2026), noted that when teaching media literacy, they consciously practice pedagogical restraint rather than overtly stating what they consider factual: that conservative outlets serve as primary vectors for misinformation and disinformation. To

support this assertion, buddhafig (2026) cited Ad Fontes media charts, which illustrate that conservative sources frequently fall into categories of lower reliability. They also recommended utilizing fact-checking repositories such as PolitiFact and Snopes. To illustrate these biases to students, this user utilizes visual evidence, such as the conflicting reports surrounding the attendance size of President Trump's inauguration and his contradictory characterizations of *The New York Times.* The user concluded that these pedagogical examples of right-wing misinformation are essential means to cultivate critical thinking skills among students.

The discourse continued along this trajectory until prag513 (2026), a self-identified independent and former moderate GOP councilman from Connecticut, contributed an alternative perspective. This user argued that mainstream media, political commentary programs, and social media platforms are fundamentally structured to manufacture controversy to maximize newsworthiness. According to prag513 (2026), this relentless focus on conflict deepens national polarization, thereby creating ideological conditions ripe for democratic erosion. Furthermore, they highlighted aggregated Gallup Poll data indicating that roughly 28% of both Republicans and Democrats admit to believing fabricated news stories if the narrative benefits their respective political factions.

The thread concluded with commentary from MonoBlancoATX (2026), who argued that a singular focus on political parties obscures a critical dimension of the misinformation crisis: the historical role of corporate propaganda driven by profit motives and late-stage capitalism. This user framed pervasive consumerism as an insidious form of propaganda. Additionally, MonoBlancoATX (2026) challenged the objectivity of the discourse by questioning whether an article previously linked by buddhafig might itself contain misinformation, highlighting a potential blind spot in the initial user's critique.

Cumulatively, these user perspectives illustrate that the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation stems from a multitude of institutional culprits. Both political factions and corporate entities actively construct narratives tailored to appease their respective constituents and consumer bases. This dynamic fosters a highly polarized, us-versus-them political climate characterized by widespread fear and a systemic erosion of trust in any institution or narrative that challenges a user's established worldview.

This analysis is expanded by a separate thread initiated by Key_Pattern3226 (2026), which directly investigated public perceptions of educational institutions. The original poster asked the community if they had noticed a pervasive decline in public confidence in American schools. The resulting discourse yielded several critical insights from various users.

The initial respondent, rock-paper-o (2026), noted that Key_Pattern3226's observations likely stem from their professional environment within a private school. This user attributed the broad decline in institutional confidence to a systemic breakdown of localized community relationships, a fracturing they blamed on social media dynamics. Similarly, elraymonds (2026) agreed that systemic distrust is highly visible, arguing that public anxieties regarding public schools often center on material challenges such as overcrowding, underfunding, and safety concerns, all of which are heavily amplified by media sensationalism and political rhetoric.

LevelingWithAI (2026) expanded on this by suggesting that public schools are currently being pushed to an institutional breaking point. This user argued that algorithmic echo chambers intentionally propel negative narratives because reports of crisis generate higher engagement than accounts of institutional stability. Veftable_Quote_4807 (2026) shifted responsibility to state and federal legislators, arguing that restrictive statutory mandates complicate the professional realities of classroom teachers. Furthermore, Firm_Baseball_37 (2026) asserted that

the public has been subjected to anti-public-school propaganda for decades, blaming the expansion of regulatory frameworks for rendering public schools structurally vulnerable. Finally, sunitamehra (2026) reinforced the consensus that media narratives and partisan politics drive public skepticism, noting that alarmist headlines paint isolated negative incidents as systemic norms, which does not reflect the lived reality within most public schools.

In a related, complementary thread, Key_Pattern3226 (2026) sought deeper qualitative insights into why this skepticism persists, questioning if under-resourced environments, a structural reality analyzed in depth in Chapter 4, serve as the primary driver. Responding to this prompt, elraymonds (2026) reiterated that public anxiety is largely manufactured by traditional news reporting, noting that politicians actively exacerbate fears surrounding safety, funding, and overcrowding to score partisan points. This user emphasized a vital structural distinction: public schools are legally mandated to universally serve all students regardless of socioeconomic status, unlike private alternatives, which inherently complicates their operational landscape. This perspective was seconded by sunitamehra (2026), who maintained that public distrust is a product of media-driven talking points rather than direct, personal experiences with public school systems.

Ultimately, these digital spaces function as critical repositories for understanding the multi-layered nature of public skepticism toward education. The consensus among users indicates that individual educators are not the source of this crisis; rather, institutional distrust is fueled by a combination of media sensationalism, political polarization, structural underfunding, bureaucratic over-regulation, and material anxieties regarding safety and class size. Throughout these discussions, traditional media was overwhelmingly characterized as an institutional bane that undermines confidence in public education by prioritizing engagement-driven alarmism over

objective reporting. The following section shifts the analytical focus to explore how social media platforms uniquely exacerbate this erosion of trust.

A Look at Social Media via Social Media

While examining Reddit to locate discourse regarding the impact of social media on public school trust, I identified a relevant thread within the r/AskTeachers subreddit. In this post, user Holiday-Proof9819 (2025) questioned whether there are any remaining justifications for sending children to American public schools. The initial post provided insight into the original poster's skepticism, which was heavily influenced by narratives they encountered on social media. This user observed frequent online claims that public schools are neither safe nor productive, though they notably refrained from blaming teachers. They elaborated that their chief concerns include bullying, violence, underfunded and overcrowded classrooms, declining student attention spans due to electronics, and systemic literacy issues. The user concluded by posing the titular question, inviting the community to respond.

Pielorinho (2025) initiated the chain of responses by asserting that a robust public school system is critical to a functioning democratic society. This user argued that as more individuals abandon the public school system, the weaker the institutions become. Conversely, they claimed that increased community participation generates more resources, thereby strengthening both schools and society at large. Emphasizing that schools rely on active family involvement, Pielorinho (2025) directly challenged the original poster's reliance on social media. They pointed out that social media algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy, wisdom, or thoughtfulness. By promoting hyperbolic, anecdotal claims about failing schools, these platforms artificially inflate views and generate revenue for their corporate owners at the expense of public trust.

Another user, diagwina (2025), advised the original poster to bypass internet hyperbole and engage directly with community members, a sentiment echoed by several other participants in the thread. By interacting with actual stakeholders within the school system, diagwina (2025) suggested the original poster would discover that the reality is far less severe than the internet portrays. Patentattorney (2025) subsequently argued that trusting social media platforms designed solely to generate clicks is a flawed approach to understanding education. Aesthetic_donkey_573 (2025) also pushed back against digital narratives, expressing disbelief that internet algorithms successfully convince the public to view education negatively and noting that Reddit itself frequently amplifies this pessimism. Finally, DarkHorseAsh111 (2025) argued that the content the original poster viewed on social media is inherently unreliable, urging individuals to stop relying on engagement-driven platforms to comprehend the actual realities of public education.

Overall, the majority of participants in this thread argued that social media exerts a highly negative impact on trust in public schools. An overwhelming number of users advised the original poster to conduct qualitative research by speaking directly with local community members and school attendees, rather than relying on algorithmic curation for usable information. Although participants readily acknowledged that public schools face systemic issues, many maintained that high-quality public schools exist and that supporting them remains civically vital.

Locating additional threads discussing the specific intersection of social media and public school trust proved difficult. However, I identified one other relevant thread that provided further qualitative insight. This subsequent post appeared on r/TheDaily, initiated by user kitkid (2025), who asked why a growing number of parents are opting out of the public school system. Similar

to the previous thread, initial responses frequently cited politics, funding, regulations, class size, and safety as the primary drivers of distrust. The conversation did not shift toward social media until a post by ladyluck754 (2025). This user observed that their online experience was saturated with unsolicited negative content covering a wide array of topics, from IVF and anti-working mother rhetoric to daycare horror stories and anti-public-school narratives. They expressed profound frustration at how aggressively this content was served to them.

PressPausePlay (2025) provided insight into why ladyluck754 was subjected to this influx of negativity. They explained that algorithmic curation dictates the content in these digital spaces, heavily favoring hyperbolic material. This user argued that these algorithms manufacture a delusion that societal conditions are significantly worse than they are in reality, citing Facebook parenting groups as prime examples of algorithmic negativity. Following this exchange, several users expressed a strong desire to abandon social media entirely.

This thread represented the extent of the relevant data uncovered on Reddit regarding social media's direct impact on public school trust. Overall, the second thread reinforced the primary themes of the first. Users collectively viewed social media as a network of platforms utilizing curation algorithms designed to maximize engagement, almost exclusively by elevating negative content. Participants concluded that this hyperbolic content continuously alienates parents and students from the public school system, with hyperbole emerging as a recurring descriptor for social media narratives.

Theme 5

Over the past 50 years, efforts to censor, silence, and alter public school curricula have intensified, transforming education into a significant ideological battleground. The purpose of this section is to explore this conflict in two distinct ways. First, through a Content Analysis of

the primary data corpus, I examine the prevalent themes of censorship, silencing, and curricular alteration. Second, through an analysis of digital discourse, I explore how Reddit users conceptualize and discuss these exact same topics.

Content Analysis Viewpoint

Censorship and silencing are not new to the realm of education, nor are the ongoing battles over public school curricula. In recent years, however, divisiveness within the educational sphere has increased significantly. Spurred by the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic, parents' rights movements have gained substantial traction.

Parents' Rights Groups, Censorship, and Curriculum

Driven by conspiracy theories suggesting that educators and administrators are attempting to excise parents from their children's education, an aura of fear and paranoia has resurfaced. Conservative parents' rights groups began to attribute the perceived failings of public schools to the political left, LGBTQ+ movements, and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Capitalizing on this highly primed atmosphere, these groups have utilized scare tactics and misinformation to erode trust in public schools and advance a narrative of widespread indoctrination (Stewart, 2023).

One prominent organization in this movement is Moms for Liberty. Their primary objective has been to eradicate the teaching of topics related to LGBTQ+ issues, CRT, and systemic racism. Researchers note that groups like Moms for Liberty manipulate parents by leveraging fear and media attention. These organizations assert that subjects such as CRT are explicitly taught in classrooms, subsequently causing students to develop negative perspectives regarding their country, their peers, and themselves (Schwartz, 2021). Furthermore, they argue that contemporary public school curricula are filtered entirely through the lens of race, thereby

weaponizing and politicizing education so that anyone who denies systemic racism is labeled an enemy (Alvarez, 2023).

Moms for Liberty employs a variety of tactics to sow distrust in public education. Utilizing strategic social media campaigns, they repeatedly question the legitimacy of school curricula. They frequently characterize public schools as deceptive entities intent on harming children and dismantling the nuclear family. To achieve this, they often draw upon historical conservative ideology, specifically echoing the political playbook of the 1970s by casting LGBTQ+ individuals as groomers and pedophiles, equating queerness with communism, and provoking moral panic among Christian parents (Duncan, 2025).

Driven by the efforts of these advocacy groups and aligned politicians, several states have passed legislation severely limiting what can be taught in public schools. For example, the passage of Senate Bill 3 in Texas and the Parental Rights in Education Act in Florida between 2021 and 2022 prohibited discussions of sexuality, systemic racism, implicit bias, and specific historical realities regarding the founding of the United States (Ates & Brooks, 2023; Goldberg & Abreau, 2022). Consequently, this legislative wave has generated heightened fear and paranoia among students, educators, and school districts, leading to widespread preemptive censorship as educators attempt to avoid backlash from parents, the media, and politicians (LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Lockard, 2022; Maloney, 2023).

A primary complication of curricular censorship is that, while it appeases one ideological faction, it inherently alienates another. Many parents strongly object to their children being denied education on racism, LGBTQ+ rights, or critical historical perspectives. By legislating one narrative over another, schools and political entities marginalize specific student populations, deepening societal divides, and further eroding trust in the educational system.

Furthermore, dictating educational content through a strictly partisan lens risks signaling to students that they are not trusted to think critically or form their own conclusions (Roberts, 2023).

An additional consequence is the erosion of a teacher's ability to present a comprehensive historical narrative that reflects all students and encourages critical evaluation of the past. Many educators feel a professional mandate to teach students how to apply critical thinking to history. They strive to provide an honest perspective, understanding that teaching factual, unvarnished history is essential for students to develop informed, empathetic, and inclusive views of society (Samuels et al., 2023). Unfortunately, many teachers are now fearful of addressing topics such as racism or LGBTQ+ issues due to a lack of institutional support and the high risk of political or community backlash. The fear generated by this restrictive environment dictates pedagogical choices, fostering a pervasive atmosphere of self-censorship (Shoka, 2025). Regrettably, this environment of fear and paranoia dictates not only what is spoken but also what is heard, resulting in a chilling suppression of critical thought and diverse ideas.

Silencing

The silencing of diverse perspectives is a core factor in the erosion of trust within any institution. The ongoing push to limit educational content regarding race, racism, gender identity, and LGBTQ+ issues has been largely driven by political and social tactics aimed at consolidating and preserving a more Eurocentric version of power (Giroux, 2023; Grice, 2022; Rogers et al., 2022). Since 2021, the suppression of critical perspectives on United States history, particularly its racial history, has resulted in the banning of K-12 curricula that emphasize the foundational role of slavery and its legacy of continued inequality (Hannah-Jones, 2019; Hornbeck & Malin, 2023). Quantitatively, nearly one-third of all U.S. states have enacted bans on such curricula

(Waxman, 2023). More significantly, 40 states have introduced a total of 200 bills designed to control and penalize educators who teach topics related to race, diversity, gender, sexuality, and oppression. Among these, 16 Republican-controlled states have leveraged their legislative power to restrict critical perspectives in public schools, arguing that such instruction induces feelings of shame or guilt among students (Hornbeck & Malin, 2023).

Several legislative examples illustrate this trend. In 2021, Idaho became the first state in the nation to explicitly prohibit public schools from teaching the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Miller et al., 2022). Less than two months later, Iowa became the second state to ban CRT curricula. Shortly thereafter, Florida passed House Bill 7 in 2022, which legally suppressed the teaching of CRT. However, these bills extend beyond suppressing critiques of systemic racism; states like Iowa and Florida have also severely limited critical discussions surrounding gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ+ identities. These restrictions limit student self-expression and foster environments that actively undermine safety and inclusion (Shoka, 2025).

According to Hornbeck and Malin (2023), the deliberate misrepresentation of public school curricula is utilized to bolster Republican politicians by securing votes from conservative constituencies, specifically White parents (Kaerwer & Prichett, 2023; LoBue & Douglass, 2023). This ideologically motivated politicking is designed to manufacture grassroots support for limiting or banning educational content related to race, racism, and equity (Morgan, 2022).

The strategy frequently employed by conservative politicians to restrict critical topics is fourfold. First, they leverage their legislative power to pass state laws controlling educational content. Second, they utilize the executive powers of state governors to enact restrictive mandates. Third, they exploit their control over state boards of education to implement curricular bans, effectively demobilizing critical perspectives across Republican-dominated states

(Hornbeck & Malin, 2023). Fourth, politicians have successfully constructed a narrative that weaponizes the term CRT, using it as a catch-all label for any instruction related to race, systemic racism, social inequality, slavery, and mass incarceration. By accusing educators and administrators of covertly using CRT to indoctrinate children, these actors sow deep distrust between parents and school leadership. Cultivating the belief that schools are actively hiding information from parents creates a highly destructive public narrative (Duncan, 2025).

Politicians and parents' rights organizations are not the only actors attempting to dictate public school curricula; activists across the political spectrum are also highly involved. A primary architect of the movement to ban CRT is Christopher Rufo. Rufo's strategy centers on altering the public discourse surrounding race by framing proponents of Critical Race Theory as ideological cultists. Leveraging his political connections, he has successfully lobbied officials to ban the teaching of CRT in federal agencies and public schools. This strategy relies heavily on the broader conservative narrative that conflates CRT with any discussion of race, social inequality, or slavery, rendering all such topics targets for censorship. One prominent example of political action stemming from Rufo's influence was President Donald Trump's Executive Order 13950, which prohibited federal agencies, contractors, and grant recipients from conducting training related to race or sex stereotyping and scapegoating (Miller et al., 2023).

Miller et al. (2023) observe that Rufo continues to play a pivotal role in shaping the anti-CRT narrative, amplified by influential entities such as Tucker Carlson, Donald Trump, The Heritage Foundation, and Fox News. Rufo has been instrumental in manufacturing right-wing panic regarding the discussion of racism in public education. This manufactured crisis has emboldened challengers of CRT and reinforced the narrative that schools should not teach that

racism is systemic or that historical oppression continues to impact minorities in the United States.

As demonstrated by Rufo's influence, corporate elites and well-funded organizations also play a crucial role in these censorship efforts. For example, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and the Goldwater Institute have aggressively pushed legislation to alter campus speech policies. Furthermore, they have funneled tens of millions of dollars into student organizations such as the College Republicans, Turning Point USA, and Young Americans for Liberty to cultivate support for conservative ideals. The ultimate goal of these investments is to promote a narrative that preserves existing hierarchical privileges while silencing speech that contests those established norms (Kamola, 2025).

Consequently, the methodologies employed by these various entities exert a substantial influence over public school curricula. The resulting silencing of critical perspectives produces several significant effects. First, suppressing discussions on race, gender, and LGBTQ+ issues denies students access to vital historical and socio-political truths, which are essential for fostering an equitable society (Giroux, 2023; Morgan, 2022). Second, restricting education on race and racism sustains racial dominance and reinforces White supremacy within schools and broader society by perpetuating White hegemonic ideologies and marginalizing diverse perspectives (Jayakumar, 2016; Kaerwer & Prichett, 2023; LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Miller et al., 2023; Samuels et al., 2023; Welton et al., 2023). Third, silencing critical discourse regarding systemic racism and anti-CRT policies buttresses misconceptions about racial equality. This creates an educational environment conducive to unchallenged systemic racism, effectively marginalizing students of color and eliminating critical perspectives from the classroom (Shoka, 2025).

Digital Discourse Analysis Viewpoint

Perspectives and discussions regarding censorship and silencing have permeated numerous Reddit deliberations. Individuals from across the political spectrum frequently debate their views on what constitutes appropriate educational content in public schools. This section examines two specific discussions concerning censorship, silencing, and curricular changes driven by politics, corporate influence, and elite interests.

Silencing and CRT

The first relevant discussion was initiated by the user zsreport (2022). This thread centered on an opinion piece published in *The Washington Post*, which featured an anecdote from a Brooklyn student discussing Critical Race Theory (CRT). The original poster aimed to stimulate a dialogue regarding politics and educational policy, specifically focusing on the legislative battles over teaching CRT in public schools. Consequently, much of the initial discourse revolved around the active suppression of speech concerning systemic racism.

Subsequently, a user named ShivasRightFoot (2022) analyzed the opinion piece to clarify foundational CRT concepts and dispel widespread confusion. They referenced recent state-level legislation designed to ban discussions of CRT, pointing out that these anti-CRT bills are fundamentally attempting to enforce a colorblind narrative. To underscore the significance of this connection, the user invoked Delgado and Stefancic to explain the negative sociological impacts of color blindness. Their primary argument was that ideological color blindness is detrimental to combatting racism and effectively functions to keep minority populations in subordinate societal positions. The user provided several additional examples to support this claim before the thread introduced another significant perspective.

User Zachmorris4186 (2022) shifted the dialogue to discuss the perceived theoretical shortcomings of CRT by introducing the concept of Intersectionality. They argued that focusing exclusively on race hinders social progression, noting that it is crucial to understand how race intersects with other oppressive structures, such as classism. They posited that ignoring the intersection of race and class will inevitably lead to systemic failure. From this point, the thread devolved into a direct political debate.

As the conversation shifted toward arguments accusing both the political left and right of harboring inherent racism, miparasito (2022) attempted to steer the dialogue back to the core tenets of CRT. This user explained that CRT does not inherently label Republicans as racist or Democrats as non-racist; rather, it posits that American institutions are built upon structural racial discrimination. They noted that White Democrats benefit from these racist institutions just as much as Republicans do, clarifying the actual scope of CRT. Following this, digidoggie18 (2022) asserted that United States history must be taught accurately, regardless of the political or social costs.

The conversation concluded with a post by Antideology650 (2022) regarding broader Critical Theory and its relationship to CRT. This user expressed concern that the public is missing the fundamental purpose of critical pedagogy. They warned that control over the educational system will continually be ceded to the political right because leftist factions are often overly divisive rather than pragmatically progressive. They argued that without cohesive collaboration, the legislative push to ban accurate historical instruction will prevail, ultimately depriving children of a truthful historical education. Overall, despite the ideological differences displayed throughout the thread, the participating users demonstrated a shared, profound concern

for improving K-12 education; they simply lacked consensus on the appropriate methodology to achieve that goal.

Censorship Through Politics

The second Reddit thread analyzed was initiated by Another_Opinion_1 (2026) and focused on a nationwide K-12 book ban proposed in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2026. This user noted that the legislation aimed to modify the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to prohibit federal funding for schools that provide or promote materials containing sexually oriented content to children under 18. The original poster argued this would effectively defund LGBTQ+ literature and educational materials while severely limiting classroom discussions regarding gender dysphoria and transgender identities. Finally, they posited that the legislation would restrict access to classic works of art and literature, limiting curricula to a pre-approved list generated by the bill's authors.

The discourse temporarily shifted into a harsh critique of conservative politics before returning to the legislative text. Oldcreaker (2026) expressed concern that restricting sexually oriented material would severely damage sexual education programs in public schools. Variant_Xero (2026) expanded upon this, asserting that the political right has spent decades attempting to eliminate public sexual education in an effort to shift all such discussions exclusively to parents. Far-Difficulty-9297 (2026) further argued that the vague statutory definition of sexually oriented material would force the cancellation of most Advanced Placement (AP) literature classes due to the mature themes inherently present in the curriculum's canonical texts. This user also criticized the legislation's definition of classic literature, noting it was sourced from a 1990 publication and various homeschooling articles. Consequently, of the

130 books included on the approved list, the overwhelming majority were authored by White men, featuring only three female authors.

Jffdougan (2026) introduced an important caveat, pointing out that the legislation contains an explicit exemption allowing science and health classes to continue teaching sexual education. This user contextualized the bill by arguing it represents an attempt to federalize Florida's Parental Rights in Education Act (HB 1557), a law designed to restrict classroom instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity through the third grade and regulate it heavily thereafter. Another user, MinuteAd3759 (2026), argued that a uniform ban on sexually oriented material would necessitate banning the Bible. In response, paperd (2026) noted that a specific clause within the proposed legislation explicitly protects the teaching of major world religious texts from funding prohibitions.

Overall, the majority of the participants in this thread appeared to be educators writing from a liberal perspective, though a few individuals with conservative leanings also contributed. The prevailing concern was that, if enacted, this legislation would systematically silence the perspectives of marginalized groups, particularly racial minorities and LGBTQ+ individuals. Even if the proposal never becomes law, the discourse illustrates the profound fear and anxiety shared across the political spectrum regarding educational censorship, underscoring the deep polarization surrounding what constitutes appropriate public school curricula.

Theme 6

Racism, classism, and marginalization are foundational components of the systemic inequality pervading public education, each contributing, both individually and concurrently, to the ongoing erosion of institutional trust. This section examines these systemic inequities through a dual-perspective framework. First, I utilize Content Analysis to delineate how these

themes are represented within the primary data corpus. Subsequently, I present a Digital Discourse Analysis of Reddit discussions to illustrate how the public conceptualizes and engages with these exact issues.

Content Analysis Stance

Public schools maintain a dualistic role. One perspective positions public education as a mechanism through which individuals can improve their social standing and achieve upward economic mobility. Conversely, another perspective views public schools as a platform capable of challenging the status quo regarding systemic oppression, racism, and social inequality (De Saxe et al., 2020). This section examines the latter perspective, focusing specifically on the manifestation and impact of racism within public school systems.

Racism

To reiterate the discussion in Chapter 2, Grosfoguel (2011) posits that racism is a political, cultural, and economically based hierarchy of superiority and inferiority that has been produced and reproduced for centuries in various forms. Fanon (2008), conversely, argues that racism entails placing certain populations below the threshold of humanity, effectively categorizing them as subhuman or nonhuman; consequently, they are systematically denied human rights, material resources, and the validation of their identities and epistemologies. Furthermore, DiAngelo (2018) defines racism as a mechanism of oppression wherein one racial group dominates others. Specifically, within the context of the United States, she characterizes it as an intricate system controlled by White individuals that inherently advantages the White collective.

Although numerous definitions of racism exist alongside various examples of how it erodes trust in public schools, this analysis begins by examining the effects of racial hierarchy

and stratification on public education. According to Swartz (2009), the United States is fundamentally composed of diverse cultures and groups. However, mechanisms of violence and exclusion, particularly racism, continuously restrict and marginalize this diverse population, a dynamic driven by powerful elites. This diverse nation remains stratified and controlled by these elite factions, forcibly categorized into hierarchies of race, class, gender, and other group identities. This hierarchical structuring generates profound disparities in privilege between groups, ultimately fostering systemic alienation and fragmentation. Swartz (2009) further contends that standardized assessments, such as the SAT or IQ tests, track differing demographic groups and are utilized to predict academic trajectories, sorting students based on test results that ostensibly demonstrate intellectual differences. These sorting mechanisms result in an inequitable distribution of educational benefits, which further reproduces the racist inequalities embedded within the system.

It is also critical to consider how an individual's worldview is formed. Swartz (2009) notes that a worldview is constructed from learned beliefs, values, and practices, meaning public schools play a pivotal role in this developmental process. Consequently, school practices, policies, and curricula significantly shape a student's eventual worldview. Expanding upon the aforementioned concepts of fragmentation and stratification, these structural biases are implicitly taught to educators, students, their families, and the broader community. Groups that deviate from the standards established by the elite are invariably viewed as othered or deficient. This aligns with Boykin (1994) and Delpit (1988), who equated these dynamics to a saturating cultural character and a culture of power that marginalizes groups failing to meet Eurocentric standards. According to King (2004), failing to acknowledge non-Eurocentric worldviews precludes the creation of inclusive and responsive learning environments. Continuing to

invisibilize non-Eurocentric bodies of knowledge essential for a comprehensive education will only perpetuate the current state of institutional decay. Swartz (2009) posits that the gatekeeping required to maintain a Eurocentric worldview justifies and normalizes colonization and patriarchy. These methods of domination, control, and exploitation sustain modern oppression across the United States, severely restricting progress toward equitable public education.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier regarding censorship, contemporary backlash movements targeting Critical Race Theory continue to divert focus from civil rights advancement, a phenomenon that predates the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Bell (2004) and Guinier (2003), despite the social, political, and economic strides made during the civil rights era, persistent efforts seek to undermine these gains. Bonilla-Silva (2001) argues that some White individuals maintain a vested personal interest in preserving racial hierarchies to secure ongoing economic, social, and political benefits, subsequently hindering people of color from accessing equitable opportunities. As a recent example, Baldwin-Clark (2023) observes that the initiatives championed by various parents' rights groups during the pandemic were not aimed at improving education for all students; rather, they focused heavily on protecting and preserving Whiteness by aggressively censoring and controlling public school curricula.

Due to the concerted efforts of these parental rights organizations, educating students about the darker realities of United States history has increasingly been framed as unpatriotic and anti-American. Gearheart (2024) asserts that these silencing efforts prevent students from engaging critically with lessons on racism, limit cross-racial connections, and hamstring the potential to cultivate a more unified future generation. These reactionary movements have spurred legislation designed to restrict discourse on divisive topics. Consequently, this legislation

silences marginalized communities, promotes a distorted historical narrative, and further oppresses these groups (Samuels et al., 2023).

In essence, racism functions as a systemic, dehumanizing hierarchy deeply embedded within public school systems. The current educational structure actively reproduces inequalities through stratification tactics, such as standardized testing and Eurocentric curricula that marginalize diverse perspectives. Additionally, specific parental rights groups continue working to preserve White privilege through censorship, gatekeeping, and silencing. These actions distort history and prevent students from engaging with the reality that racism is an ongoing, systemic issue that must be reckoned with to forge a more unified nation.

Classism

According to Brady and Kent (2022), class plays a fundamental role in contemporary economic inequality. As economic disparity continues to increase, the top one percent currently holds nearly 40 percent of all global wealth. The divides produced by this profound inequality cultivate a sense of isolation, which subsequently diminishes social cohesion and systemic trust.

Regarding institutional trust, rather than leveraging the wealth and power associated with elevated socioeconomic status, individuals in lower classes possess significantly fewer resources to secure a high-quality education (Miller, 2017). This lack of advantage necessitates immense struggle to achieve the same educational quality effortlessly accessed by upper-class families in wealthy school districts. These systemic struggles foster profound frustration with the United States education system, ultimately breeding mistrust in public institutions. As affluent students receive premium education while marginalized students struggle for basic resources, the achievement gap widens, leading to vastly disparate socioeconomic outcomes (Miller, 2017).

Furthermore, low-income parents are structurally hindered from investing the same degree of cultural and social capital into their children as affluent parents. This creates distinct disadvantages for low-income children both at home and in the classroom. Due to economic constraints, low-income parents often must leave their children to manage themselves, whereas higher-income parents possess the time and resources to actively foster and assess their children's talents, opinions, and skills, thereby preparing them for upward mobility (Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Lareau, 2011; Mayer, 1997; Roksa & Potter, 2011). Compounding this issue is the reality that economically marginalized students are disproportionately relegated to high-poverty schools. These institutions frequently fail to provide the rigorous college preparatory instruction accessible to affluent students, resulting in a severe lack of academic preparation, limited advanced course options, and an inability to meet competitive collegiate admissions criteria.

The school choice movement further exacerbates these disparities. According to Gutmann (1997), parents from lower socioeconomic classes routinely lack the financial resources necessary to opt their children out of underfunded urban districts and into private schools that might better accommodate their needs. Consequently, these families are forced to rely on schools plagued by safety concerns, chronic underperformance, low teacher and student morale, inadequate resourcing, and run-down facilities. Ultimately, the school choice paradigm serves to increase segregation along both racial and socioeconomic lines (Lambrecht, 2025).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that these disparities stem primarily from institutional and structural racism; however, classism and neoliberalism function as intersecting mechanisms within this systemic framework. According to De Saxe et al. (2020), race and class are deeply intertwined with the neoliberal reform movement that gained momentum in the late 1970s. Educational policies stemming from the publication of *A Nation at Risk* drove the

implementation of high-stakes standardized testing and a militarized pedagogical approach designed to maximize economic output. Students confronting intersecting race and class barriers face compounded difficulties competing in society, which perpetuates their systemic distrust. Harvey (2005) further contends that neoliberalism has facilitated a significant restoration of class power. When combined with neoconservative ideologies, this dynamic results in a consolidation of absolute class dominance not seen since before President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s.

Synthesizing these perspectives reveals that classism heavily dictates public faith in educational institutions. An individual's socioeconomic status fundamentally shapes their trust or distrust in public schools. Well-funded schools feature robust support structures designed to prepare students for higher education, offer expansive curricula, and facilitate long-term adult success. Conversely, students in economically marginalized regions are relegated to underfunded institutions, drastically inhibiting their future socio-economic mobility. Naturally, these divergent educational realities determine whether communities ultimately trust or reject the public school system.

Digital Discourse Analysis Stance

Racism and classism function as components of a broader systemic framework designed to maintain disadvantaged populations in marginalized states. This includes rural families, low-income urban communities, and individuals from less privileged backgrounds, all of whom face significant barriers to socioeconomic mobility. Manifestations of these barriers, such as limited access to high-speed internet, a lack of college preparatory programming, and restricted course offerings, contribute to a pervasive distrust in a system that ultimately perpetuates structural inequality. The following sections explore how Reddit users conceptualize the impacts of racism

and classism within public schools and examine how these perceptions bolster the ongoing erosion of institutional trust.

Perspectives on Racism

Experiences of racism within public schools can significantly erode the trust of parents and students. Based on Reddit discourse, this loss of trust manifests in various ways, including the consideration of alternative educational models, heightened skepticism regarding curricula, and pervasive cynicism regarding institutional equity. The following excerpts highlight community perspectives regarding the prevalence and impact of racism in public education.

The first relevant thread analyzed was initiated by bostonglobe (2026), regarding a lawsuit in Massachusetts concerning racial disparities within the public school system. The initial response, provided by josephkambourakis (2026), argued that public school systems are fundamentally biased and racist. This user contended that these systemic issues are exacerbated by school funding models rooted in local property taxes, which inherently privilege affluent districts. They posited that achieving equal funding across all school districts would be a necessary condition for meaningful progress. Conversely, outside-the-window (2026) countered this argument, noting that Boston's per-pupil expenditure often exceeds that of the wealthiest suburbs in the region. This triggered a prolonged debate regarding school funding before the conversation shifted to the intersection of racism and economic policy.

PhysicalAttitude6631 (2026) examined the coupling of economic segregation and racial discrimination, warning that equating the two may create unproductive animosity. While acknowledging that systemic racism has historically relegated minority populations to under-resourced districts, they argued that racial segregation is not the sole variable, noting that predominantly White schools in impoverished areas also face systemic challenges.

Flamethrower2 (2026) suggested that the persistent conflation of economic and racial segregation exists because racial segregation is legally prohibited, whereas economic segregation is not; thus, linking the two provides a stronger rhetorical framework for advocating legislative change. Following a tangent on funding, WindowsFistaWzMyIdea (2026) asserted that economic segregation is effectively racial segregation, arguing that systemic solutions for Black students would necessarily benefit all students, provided the focus remains holistic rather than narrowly centered on White outcomes.

Contextual clarity was provided by h2g2Ben (2026), who noted that racial disparities within a municipality constitute a legal injury under U.S. law. They argued that the plaintiffs in the Massachusetts lawsuit are highlighting how the partitioning of educational systems along administrative lines functions as a mechanism of discrimination. According to this user, current school assignment policies systematically deprive students of educational opportunities by concentrating them in predominantly White districts.

The second thread centered on the instruction of anti-racist curricula in public schools, initiated by a since-deleted user. The discourse initially favored the integration of anti-racist education. User a_duck_in_past_life (2022) shared their personal trajectory, noting that their K-12 education in Alabama presented a revisionist history of the Civil War, framing it through the lens of states' rights, that was sharply contradicted by their subsequent college-level history courses. They posited that anti-racist pedagogy should be introduced before high school to counteract these early influences. Thinkingpains (2022) supported this, arguing that curricula should extend beyond the history of slavery to include Jim Crow, systemic segregation, and redlining, emphasizing that these remain contemporary issues rather than relics of the distant past.

Conversely, HeronIndividual1118 (2022) argued that anti-racist education may inflame racial tensions and called for a reevaluation of pedagogical strategies, suggesting that increased school integration and ethnic studies might prove more effective. This user expressed skepticism regarding the sincerity of political efforts to combat racism, characterizing them as largely performative. EBDude (2022) advocated for an approach that emphasizes the systemic effects of racism as a core educational component.

A final, distinct perspective was offered by ManBearScientist (2022), who supported structured anti-racist education to prevent adult ignorance regarding systemic racial realities. They argued that the current education system fails to adequately address the historical realities of Black experiences post-slavery, noting that forms of systemic disenfranchisement continued well into the 20th century. This user challenged the assumption that racial equity was achieved with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, emphasizing the persistence of structural barriers.

Synthesizing these digital conversations, it is evident that experiences of racism in public schools are significantly eroding public trust. This disillusionment is increasingly reflected in parental decision-making regarding systemic inequality and curricular content. Many users argued that the intersection of economic and racial segregation actively deprives minority students of equitable educational opportunities. Ultimately, the consensus among participants was that historically accurate, anti-racist curricula are necessary to address racial tensions, contrasting this with the continued use of Whitewashed narratives that obscure the contemporary impacts of systemic racism.

Thoughts on Classism

As discussed in the previous section, classism is fundamentally driven by socioeconomic disparities and possesses the capacity to erode institutional trust beyond the sphere of public

education. Classism creates a stark divide in educational quality and opportunity between families capable of funding private education and those reliant upon underfunded public systems, particularly in urban and rural environments. This marginalization fosters deep-seated distrust in educational institutions perceived as inherently inequitable. This section synthesizes Reddit discourse regarding the effects of classism on public schools, examining perspectives on quality disparities, socioeconomic segregation, and the relative merits of public versus private schooling.

The initial thread identified in this analysis, located within the r/AskPolitics subreddit, was initiated by a user who has since deleted their account. The original poster sought to solicit conservative perspectives regarding systemic inequalities in the United States, specifically inviting discourse on race, racism, classism, affirmative action, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The post generated substantial dialogue among participants representing diverse political affiliations.

Kman17 (2024), identifying as right-leaning, argued that the term systemic is frequently misapplied. They posited that systemic conditions should denote phenomena explicitly codified in law or policy. They argued that contemporary activism surrounding systemic inequality often misidentifies racism or sexism as the root cause, whereas the fundamental issue is economic inequity and cultural divergence. They attributed primary national challenges to the economy, asserting that impoverished communities suffer from substandard school systems, inadequate community support, and limited employment prospects. They further cited monopolistic corporate practices, surplus immigration impacting labor costs, and labor legislation that protects current employment status at the expense of job seekers as primary systemic drivers. Regarding education, they contended that increased fiscal allocations do not inherently resolve institutional deficiencies and may, in certain contexts, exacerbate them.

Liljoker30 (2024), a progressive participant, offered an alternative analysis of the challenges facing public education. They argued that school funding remains an enduring structural concern due to the reliance on local property taxes. Furthermore, they suggested that the conservative objective to dismantle the Department of Education would eliminate necessary support staff and destabilize educational delivery. Additionally, they criticized the conservative advocacy for school choice, arguing that financial barriers effectively prevent low-income and rural populations from accessing private alternatives, a luxury accessible primarily to affluent families.

An additional user, whose account is now deleted, argued that prioritizing college preparation and the adequate funding of instructional staff, rather than administrative overhead, would yield better outcomes. They advocated for a shift toward national-level funding to mitigate the inequities inherent in local property tax-based systems, which inherently disadvantage impoverished municipalities. Finally, they argued for broader strategies to enhance socioeconomic mobility beyond a singular focus on college attendance. Bama-1970 (2024) echoed the necessity of educational reform but criticized current curricula for failing to prioritize essential social competencies. They expressed concern that contemporary graduates lack fundamental language and mathematical proficiency and possess limited understanding of history and governance, which they contend renders the workforce unemployable.

A second, abbreviated thread within the r/TrueAskReddit subreddit examined educational inequality. The original poster, The_Movie_Kid (2014), questioned whether redistributing school funding to prioritize impoverished districts would mitigate inequality. Stanislawiii (2014) argued that the current system inherently favors the affluent due to the reliance on local property taxes. They contended that wealthy schools benefit from technological advancements, modern

infrastructure, and superior instructional materials, whereas disadvantaged schools are frequently forced to utilize outdated resources and operate in facilities that barely meet safety codes.

In summary, the themes identified across these Reddit discussions demonstrate that classism and socioeconomic stratification play pivotal roles in shaping public perceptions of educational institutions. Affluent schools are consistently perceived as having superior support structures, modern facilities, and enhanced learning environments, whereas schools in economically marginalized areas are characterized by inadequate support, deteriorating infrastructure, and restricted educational quality. This perceived disparity fosters a class-based divide that exacerbates negative institutional perceptions and drives the ongoing erosion of trust in public education.

Theme 7

The seventh theme was positioned around the impacts of power and hegemonic control and covers two distinct perspectives. The first perspective was constructed from a Content Analysis oriented interpretation of various books, journals, and articles regarding power and hegemonic control in public schools. The second perspective was derived from a Digital Discourse Analysis of the opinions of Reddit users regarding power and hegemonic control.

Content Analysis Interpretation

Power and Hegemonic Control

As established in Chapter 2, the works of Michel Foucault provide a robust theoretical framework for understanding power dynamics. Foucault (1997) argued that power is not a static resource to be possessed but a fluid, omnipresent force that constantly reconstitutes itself through various forms, including identity-based power and the capacity to exert influence over others. Foucault posited that power structures dictate discourse, determining what is articulated, by

whom, and within which contexts (Foucault, 1997). Consequently, power is an all-encompassing mechanism through which dominant actors shape the social fabric.

Power also encompasses the authority to govern the boundaries of discourse, mandate silence, and determine the allocation of resources (Gutting & Oksala, 2003). Gutting and Oksala (2003) characterize power as a system of control rooted in surveillance, where those in authority monitor and regulate the behavior of the populace to maintain institutional dominance. This system functions through a hierarchy of enforcement designed to preserve power within existing structures.

Applied to public education, this framework suggests that institutional power dictates the boundaries of acceptable classroom discourse and justifies the marginalization of specific individuals (Foucault, 1997). When institutional power is intersected with systemic sexism or classism, authorities may leverage their influence to silence marginalized groups, thereby fostering profound distrust within those communities (Gutting & Oksala, 2003).

Furthermore, the control of resource allocation is a critical manifestation of power that profoundly impacts educational equity (Foucault, 1997). Decision makers in positions of influence determine the flow of fiscal resources, often resulting in funding disparities that disadvantage schools in less affluent regions compared to those in wealthier districts. These inequities inevitably shape the lived experiences and perceptions of the communities served by these institutions (Gutting & Oksala, 2003).

In recent decades, these power dynamics have been weaponized to silence and oppress diverse populations. There has been a deliberate, escalating effort to curtail curricular discussions regarding race, gender identity, and LGBTQ+ issues (Giroux, 2023; Grice, 2022; Rogers et al., 2022). According to data from Ferrante (2025), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

tracked over 560 anti-LGBTQ+ legislative proposals as of April 2025, nearly doubling the volume observed the previous year. This trajectory is largely driven by political agendas, particularly within conservative factions, aimed at solidifying traditional ideological hegemony and advancing platforms often associated with White Christian Nationalism (Gaddini, 2023; Stein, 2023).

The cumulative pressure exerted by politicians, religious organizations, media outlets, and advocacy groups has placed immense strain on educational leadership. Districts are increasingly coerced into abandoning initiatives centered on equity and inclusion in favor of maintaining a status quo that privileges non-inclusive norms (Pollock et al., 2022). This constitutes the weaponization of silence, reinforcing Ladson-Billings's (1996) assertion that silence functions as an instrument to perpetuate systems of oppression.

Economic inequality also serves as a potent vehicle for the consolidation of power. As Brady and Kent (2022) noted, the last half-century has seen a significant concentration of wealth, with approximately 40 percent of total assets shifting to the top one percent of the population. These wealthy stakeholders exert substantial influence over media narratives, shifting the focus from public service toward models driven by profitability, fear, and paranoia (Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007). Furthermore, this wealth is leveraged to influence political spheres and reshape educational policy, with billions of dollars directed toward agendas that redefine how public schools operate (Hursh & Martina, 2016; Shoka, 2025).

The privatization of public education, often operating through less visible channels than traditional charter or private school expansion. is increasingly driven by corporate interests. Non-profit and for-profit corporations exert significant control over curriculum, standardized assessments, and pedagogy (Hursh & Martina, 2016). The implementation of initiatives such as

the Common Core State Standards was significantly bolstered by foundational support, including substantial contributions from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This era of corporate reform emphasizes data-driven instruction and standardized proficiency metrics, which often diminishes the professional autonomy of educators, administrators, and local governance.

Furthermore, economic disparities exacerbate the vulnerability of marginalized populations. Recent research by Marek et al. (2026) indicates that childhood socioeconomic circumstances significantly impact neurobiological development. As wealth concentrates, marginalized children are increasingly subjected to environmental stressors, including sleep deprivation and chronic stress, that undermine their long-term developmental and educational opportunities.

In conclusion, systemic power is frequently weaponized to marginalize vulnerable groups. From the political promotion of anti-LGBTQ+ agendas to the suppression of critical discourse regarding race and gender, the pressure on educational leaders to abandon inclusive practices is palpable. Those who wield power possess the capacity to shape knowledge, regulate pedagogical practices, and stifle dissenting perspectives. Ultimately, the fusion of political and financial influence exacerbates systemic inequality, deepening the divide between the affluent and the marginalized.

Digital Discourse Analysis Interpretation

Power and Hegemonic Control

Regarding power dynamics and hegemonic control, consistent with findings derived from textual and journalistic analysis, Reddit users across various threads offered significant commentary. To examine the underlying beliefs of this demographic, I utilized Reddit’s search features to conduct a Digital Discourse Analysis. Several threads provided insight into how users

perceive the role of power and hegemony in the erosion of institutional trust within public education.

The first thread identified, initiated by Key_Pattern3226 (2026), focused on the discourse surrounding public school trust. The original poster sought community input regarding prevalent anxieties and a noted lack of confidence in the public education system. The initial response came from Firm_Baseball_37 (2026), who argued that the spread of anti-public school propaganda over the past 45 years has successfully eroded institutional trust. Furthermore, they identified the scarcity of resources and restrictive regulatory frameworks as compounding factors that exacerbate these issues.

The subsequent response from Elraymonds (2026) addressed the intersection of power and hegemony, positing that individuals in positions of media and political influence deliberately cultivate fear by characterizing public schools as overcrowded, underfunded, and unsafe. Additionally, they critiqued the imposition of a one-size-fits-all pedagogical approach, arguing that it fails to adequately support the diverse student populations that public schools are mandated to serve. Veftable_Quote_4807 (2026) redirected this critique toward legislators, arguing that restrictive statutory mandates place undue pressure on educators, forcing them to bear the brunt of public frustration regarding the systemic failures of public schools.

Following an exchange of anecdotal accounts regarding public versus private education, Sunitamehra (2026) refocused the dialogue on political and media influence. They argued that public skepticism is largely a product of sensationalist media narratives and political rhetoric designed to maximize engagement and achieve political objectives. They asserted that these headlines create a false perception of systemic failure, obscuring the reality of dedicated educators. Furthermore, Sunitamehra (2026) differentiated between the bureaucratic

inadequacies of the institutional system and the supportive nature of the individual educators working within it.

A second relevant thread, initiated by Happy_In_PDX (2021), examined perceptions of indoctrination in government-run schools. The original poster questioned whether public education serves as a conduit for political propaganda. In response, CarltheWellEndowed (2021) argued that the brainwashing experienced by students relates to the sanitized, Whitewashed historical narratives of American atrocities, rather than liberal ideologies. VexedCoffee (2021) concluded the discussion by suggesting that public education inherently involves a degree of indoctrination, as schools are designed to reflect the values of the local community. They further noted that while the professional experience of educators historically mitigated this influence, the rise of standardized curriculum has diminished the autonomy of professional educators.

These discourse analyses demonstrate that Reddit users perceive power dynamics and hegemonic control as primary drivers of declining public confidence. The collective sentiment suggests that the interplay of power and hegemony fosters perceptions of institutional deterioration, undermines professional teacher authority, and generates skepticism regarding the integrity of public institutions. Ultimately, this distrust is multifaceted, rooted in both structural deficiencies within the school system and broader, transformative societal shifts.

Theme 8

As with many contemporary institutional challenges, multiple pathways exist to restore trust in public education. As Ladson-Billings (1996) asserts, choosing silence constitutes an implied endorsement of the status quo, effectively suppressing diverse perspectives and sentiments. Consequently, inaction proves as detrimental as active efforts to dismantle institutional trust. To address the erosion of confidence, this section outlines two discrete

approaches for restoration. First, I employ Content Analysis to delineate potential pathways for trust restoration. Subsequently, I analyze Reddit discourse to provide unique insights into strategies the public believes would be effective in restoring institutional confidence.

Content Analysis Position

The erosion of trust in public education is not inevitable. My research identifies critical strategies to mitigate this decline and potentially reverse the trend. Initially, I examine how community building, collaboration, and strategic partnerships facilitate the restoration of institutional trust. Subsequently, I analyze how stakeholder training programs foster more robust relationships between public schools and the communities they serve. Finally, I demonstrate that the implementation of enhanced communication, transparency, and accountability measures is essential to restoring faith in the public school system.

Community Building, Collaboration, and Partnerships

McNeil (2002) contends that the nature of public participation in education has significantly contributed to the erosion of institutional trust, largely due to misunderstandings regarding policy implementation. To address this participation deficit, schools must proactively engage their communities through strategic collaboration and partnerships. Building relationships and fostering community partnerships are critical imperatives for restoring institutional confidence. Given the current divisiveness surrounding standardized testing, curricular content, and LGBTQ+ rights, there is an urgent need to cultivate relationships among all educational stakeholders.

Although contentious issues often exacerbate tension and division, integrating parents and community stakeholders into the decision-making process is vital for building trust. Schools must facilitate well-structured deliberations that bring community members together, encourage

innovative problem-solving, and increase stakeholder investment (Poynton et al., 2018). To cultivate trust, Romo (2025) argues that school districts and policymakers must adopt a more proactive stance toward external partnerships. Specifically, establishing robust connections between districts, policymakers, and mothers is paramount. Initiatives such as parent-focused workshops, community-building events, and targeted social media content that addresses prevalent concerns can significantly enhance institutional trust. Recognizing that emotional connection is a fundamental driver of school choice, educational institutions must develop messaging that emphasizes support systems, highlights nurturing environments, and aligns with family values.

Furthermore, the influence of pastors, community leaders, and grassroots organizations is instrumental in either fostering or undermining institutional trust. Schools must serve an integral role within the community by seeking partnerships with faith leaders, civic organizations, and respected community members. Such partnerships are essential to building trust, bolstering engagement, and countering misinformation. By establishing these community linkages, schools can better support the specific needs of the populations they serve (Romo, 2025). Moreover, transparent communication within these partnerships facilitates a sense of shared ownership, thereby ensuring stakeholder accountability. Partnerships foster a collective sense of responsibility, enabling diverse groups to develop unified solutions to systemic challenges (Hutchinson, 2025). Ultimately, strong partnerships provide the necessary accountability, communication, and shared mission required to restore public trust.

Implementing these strategies allows for more effective resolutions to educational challenges. Increased stakeholder participation consistently correlates with higher levels of consensus and trust (Fung, 2004; Langsdorf, 2004). Regardless of the specific methodology

employed, building relational trust requires an ongoing commitment from all actors, particularly school administrators and community leaders. Consistent collaboration with the broader community yields tangible improvements in daily school operations (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Van Maele, Forsyth, & Van Houtte, 2014). The following section examines how training initiatives can serve as a mechanism for sustained, collaborative engagement between schools and their communities.

Stakeholder Training

Training functions as a mechanism for developing subject-matter expertise while facilitating relationship-building among participants. Poynton (2012) examined stakeholder training across five domains: knowledge, relationships, willingness, efficacy, and action. The study demonstrated that targeted training increases stakeholder trust and enhances the capacity for participation across each domain. The underlying hypothesis suggests that when stakeholders are provided with operational knowledge and opportunities to strengthen social connections, they become more willing, capable, and effective participants in school district affairs. Expanding upon this, Poynton et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal follow-up that yielded further insights. Their findings indicate that training across these domains significantly impacts trust levels and increases the likelihood that stakeholders will engage in district-related activities.

Instruction regarding the budgetary processes and financial constraints of school districts is particularly transformative. Providing training on district policy, legislative mandates, curriculum development, support services, and governance allows stakeholders to understand the operational realities and external constraints faced by educational institutions. This foundational knowledge informs stakeholders, enabling them to engage constructively regarding issues that affect students and their families (Poynton et al., 2018).

Furthermore, training facilitates relationship-building by introducing stakeholders to key decision makers. Such interactions create opportunities to foster connections between district leadership, faculty, parents, and the broader community. By observing the decision-making processes of school leadership, stakeholders can cultivate trust in district administration. Additionally, these connections empower individuals by providing direct access to administrators who can address specific stakeholder concerns (Poynton et al., 2018). Training also enhances participant willingness to engage in district activities. By providing a structure for interaction, training encourages parents and community members to collaborate with school leaders and one another. These opportunities are essential for integrating diverse community members into the district's operational life.

In terms of efficacy, stakeholders trained in the inner workings of public school districts and deliberative problem-solving gain a clearer understanding of the importance of collaboration. This capacity for engagement in productive dialogue, even among those with differing perspectives, helps bridge the gaps caused by societal divisiveness. Providing stakeholders with accurate data empowers them with the confidence to navigate complex situations and perform more effectively. Complementary training in the theory and practice of public participation, information sharing, active listening, and decision-making is also essential. Developing stakeholder proficiency in these areas builds tolerance for ambiguity and provides the means necessary to navigate conflict constructively (Poynton et al., 2018).

Institutional success also necessitates that teachers, school leaders, and local officials receive training to ensure their efficacy. Educators and administrators must be trained in public participation methods to effectively implement training programs and facilitate deliberative forums. Reputable organizations, such as the International Association for Public Participation or

the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University, serve as primary sources for such professional development.

In summary, equipping public school stakeholders with the capacity to communicate effectively, solve problems, and understand institutional operations facilitates community building, partnerships, and collaboration. Training instills the confidence required to take action, share information, advocate for change, and address challenges in a civil manner. Ultimately, training connects participants with the information necessary to become productive community members and fosters trust among all parties. The following section examines how individual actions and grassroots movements contribute to rebuilding trust in public schools.

Communication, Transparency, and Accountability

According to Romo (2025), educational institutions must implement deliberate strategies to modify public perceptions and eradicate misconceptions. Enhancing communication is the primary mechanism for achieving this, as it affords schools the opportunity to offer transparency, verify safety information, and clarify student well-being outcomes. By proactively sharing positive narratives, through student success stories, open house events, and school tours, institutions allow parents to observe the learning environment firsthand. This fosters direct, authentic connections between families and schools, thereby mitigating misunderstandings driven by external hearsay.

To effectively address misinformation, educational leaders must leverage the digital platforms prevalent within their communities. Recognizing that the public frequently relies on social media for information, schools must utilize these spaces to disseminate verified data, eyewitness accounts, and interactive content (Hill, 2023). Fact-based digital narratives are

essential for counteracting pervasive inaccuracies regarding curriculum, safety, and educational quality (Romo, 2025).

Furthermore, Romo (2025) underscores the significance of the teacher narrative, noting its profound influence on parental perspectives. When educators articulate negative accounts of their working conditions, it significantly impacts the institution's reputation. Indeed, teacher testimonials are often viewed as more credible than media reports or standardized testing outcomes because they are perceived as direct, lived experiences. Consequently, educational leaders must prioritize the cultivation of a positive internal culture. Valuing teacher input, investing in professional development, and ensuring educators are supported by leadership are critical strategies for enhancing morale and professional identity (Peltier, Edwards, & Sweeney, 2024).

The imperative for transparency extends to policymakers as well. To establish institutional trust, officials must provide clear, localized data to constituents. Misinformation frequently spreads because of the erroneous assumption that public school curricula are uniform across the United States. Policymakers can rectify this by offering granular, state-specific curricular transparency and clearly articulating how local standards are enacted. By providing this clarity, officials enable parents to make informed educational decisions based on local context rather than generalized, inaccurate narratives.

Digital Discourse Analysis Position

Reddit users engage in a broad spectrum of discourse; among these exchanges, many participants offer constructive suggestions for reversing the erosion of institutional trust in public education. Through a thematic analysis of Reddit discussions, I identified three primary areas of focus that users emphasize as crucial for restoring public confidence. First, participants propose

strategies to counter the influence of social media, which is frequently cited as a primary catalyst for declining trust. Second, users advocate for measures to address the detrimental impact of mass media narratives. Finally, users emphasize the necessity of systemic reforms regarding political influence, corruption, and institutional accountability as essential components for rebuilding faith in public school systems.

Countering Social Media

The initial thread regarding strategies to mitigate the influence of social media was initiated by Holiday-Proof9819 (2025). They began by questioning the efficacy of public education in the United States. The original poster noted that the prevalent criticism of public schools on social media platforms had engendered significant anxiety, prompting a search for community perspectives to determine the validity of these concerns.

One of the first to respond cautioned against relying exclusively on social media for information, arguing that while public schools face systemic challenges, the internet disproportionately sensationalizes these issues. They proposed an alternative approach, direct community engagement. They advised parents to converse with neighbors and other community members who have direct experience with local schools (Digawina, 2025).

Additional participants, including patentattorney (2025) and Aesthetic_donkey_573 (2025), corroborated this perspective, noting that social media algorithms are curated based on engagement metrics. They posited that these algorithms prioritize sensationalized content because it generates higher traffic, which ultimately influences public perception regarding the quality of public education. Pielorinho (2025) furthered this analysis by arguing that social media platforms prioritize engagement over accuracy or thoughtful discourse, as alarmist narratives directly correlate with increased viewership and advertising revenue.

A second discussion, initiated by No_Skin868 (2026), addressed the perceived negative impact of technological integration on student development. The original poster expressed a desire for a return to traditional pedagogical methods that do not rely on digital implements such as tablets, computers, or artificial intelligence. They inquired about the broader public interest in schools that prioritize traditional instruction.

In response, agentG91 (2026) suggested that rather than attempting to establish alternative educational models, it is more effective to advocate for schools to limit technology integration. Pastesale (2026) subsequently recommended that parents increase their involvement by attending school board meetings and engaging directly with district leadership. A consensus emerged among numerous users that implementing bans on cellular devices within schools could alleviate many of the challenges currently faced by students, parents, and educators. The following section examines suggestions regarding strategies to mitigate the corrosive impact of mass media narratives on institutional trust.

Countering Mass Media

The initial discussion identified regarding the impact of mass media on institutional trust was initiated by holmess2013 (2026), focusing on the necessity of news literacy curricula in public education. This thread served as the first installment of a two-part series intended to solicit community perspectives on the current landscape of misinformation and its political origins. Buddhafig (2026) provided early contributions, offering pedagogical recommendations for integrating media literacy into the classroom. As an educator teaching 11th-grade students, this user noted a higher frequency of misinformation from conservative sources, while maintaining a commitment to pedagogical neutrality. They recommended resources such as the Ad Fontes

Media Bias Chart, Media Bias/Fact Check, Politifact, and Snopes as essential methods for identifying bias, misinformation, and disinformation.

The subsequent discourse examined the potential for mandating news literacy curricula. While there was a consensus regarding the social necessity of such instruction, healthisourwealth (2026) argued that traditional literacy and history education might suffice. Buddhafig (2026) contested this, asserting that conventional curricula are insufficient to foster critical media consumption. Instead, they advocated for explicit instruction in skills such as identifying unreliable sources, detecting biased language, and conducting effective cross-referencing. The user emphasized that students must learn to apply these skills to think critically about digital and traditional media consumption. Furthermore, they suggested that instruction should encompass the mechanics of algorithms, the nature of filter bubbles, the prevalence of bots, the recognition of dog whistles, and the proficient use of fact-checking and bias-assessment methods.

Returning to the perspective of Holiday-Proof9819 (2025), who questioned the efficacy of public education in the United States, I reexamine the contribution of digawina (2025) regarding media consumption. Their recommendation centers on direct community engagement, advising individuals to bypass internet and news-based narratives in favor of firsthand dialogue with neighbors and families who have direct experience with local schools. As other participants noted, direct communication with community members who possess authentic, firsthand experience allows individuals to circumvent the hyperbolic claims frequently employed by media outlets to drive engagement. Having established the role of mass media in eroding institutional confidence, the following section examines how political influence, corruption, and institutional accountability contribute to this phenomenon.

Addressing Politics, Corruption and Accountability

The initial thread identified regarding corruption and the push for institutional accountability was initiated by texaselegantclearning (2026), who inquired how political actors might restore trust in government institutions. In response, Made_Human_Music (2026) argued for stringent punitive measures against corruption, contending that nominal fines and lenient sentencing are insufficient. This user posited that political leaders should face significant consequences for corrupt behavior that prioritizes wealth accumulation over the needs of the average citizen. Stealthrazor (2026) expanded upon this, advocating for the rigorous prosecution of wealthy individuals who commit serious offenses and for strict limits on the influence of private capital within government structures. Golden_grace88 (2026) offered an alternative perspective, emphasizing the necessity of leadership humility. This user suggested that leaders who publicly acknowledge and rectify mistakes demonstrate strength and foster a culture of transparency, which is foundational to building institutional trust.

Discussions concerning school corruption primarily centered on salary disparities, particularly the significant compensation gap between administrative staff and instructional personnel. A contributor, garylapointe (2026), proposed a structural solution to executive compensation: linking administrative pay directly to teacher salary scales. By making directors' compensation contingent upon teacher salaries, the school board bypassed the need for separate executive pay votes, thereby prioritizing instructional funding.

In a separate discussion initiated by amandaparent15 (2025), users suggested leveraging public records laws to monitor school operations. Lab_Geek_1 (2025) advised stakeholders to utilize Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to examine internal communications and documentation for evidence of corruption. This transparency-focused approach empowers

stakeholders to file formal complaints with oversight agencies when they suspect administrative misconduct.

Regarding the perceived lack of institutional accountability, a discussion initiated by Love_Peace93 (2026) reflected broad community frustration. Participants argued that students are frequently inadequately prepared for post-graduation success. The prevailing consensus was that systemic policy reform is required to restore accountability and improve student outcomes, although the discourse lacked specific, actionable policy proposals.

Furthermore, accountability discussions extended to student conduct. An anonymous contributor questioned the perceived decline in student accountability. Braindump4 (2019) offered a framework for addressing student behavior, prioritizing the cultivation of teacher-student relationships as a prerequisite for skill development. This user emphasized the need for administrative support of instructional staff, consistent documentation of behavioral referrals, and collaborative problem-solving between stakeholders. While many users identified restorative justice as a viable strategy, they noted its efficacy depends entirely on consistent implementation, specifically linking consequences to behaviors to foster student development. Participants concluded that by effectively addressing behavioral disruptions, educators can reclaim instructional time and enhance the overall educational environment.

This study concludes that the restoration of institutional trust is achievable through proactive, multi-faceted interventions. Rebuilding confidence requires a transition from passive observation to deliberate community-building, wherein schools cultivate authentic partnerships with families and local stakeholders to mitigate the impact of external misinformation. Through the implementation of robust stakeholder training, the integration of media literacy curricula to address algorithmic bias, and a commitment to genuine institutional transparency, the

educational system can begin to remediate its fractured foundation. Ultimately, the reconstruction of trust necessitates a definitive shift away from the commodification of education toward a model centered on democratic participation, inclusivity, and shared public responsibility, constituting what I like to call, an ensemble of perspectives.

Summary

This analysis demonstrates that trust serves as a foundational element of public education, operating through both institutional structures and interpersonal relationships. Since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, this foundation has undergone significant erosion. Public education has been framed as a failing system, precipitating over four decades of market-driven reform. These initiatives, rooted in neoliberal and neoconservative ideology, have commodified education, characterizing schools as monopolies necessitating structural change. This framework has fostered intense political polarization, where distrust is leveraged through culture war rhetoric. Debates concerning curriculum, race, gender, and equity have been instrumentalized to consolidate political power, often at the expense of pedagogical freedom and the inclusion of diverse perspectives.

Compounding these political pressures is a dysfunctional information ecosystem that exacerbates public anxiety. Mass media and social media algorithms prioritize sensationalist narratives, confining stakeholders within ideological silos and obscuring the complexities of classroom environments. This environment is further complicated by systemic inequalities, where racism and classism persistently influence student experiences and resource allocation. This research argues that these conditions are the result of deliberate hegemonic control, wherein dominant actors manipulate media narratives and policy mandates to preserve established privileges, thereby alienating marginalized communities from the public system.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter's purpose is to provide an in-depth discussion which aims to answer a series of questions. First, what has this study contributed to the knowledge base regarding the erosion of trust in public schools? Second, how might this study be improved in the future? Third, what questions or surprises were found in the data? Fourth, how does the literature agree or disagree with the data collected? Fifth, using what was learned from this study, what should future research examine?

Contributions

This study contributes to the current knowledge base by providing a comprehensive analysis of how trust has been systematically eroded in public schools since the late 1970s. This study does not merely repeat or summarize what was shown in the literature review, it expands upon the literature by testing perspectives, updating what is known about the trust erosion in public schools, and it expands upon what was already known. Specifically, this study bolsters what is known by providing a look at the available literature and voices surrounding the subject through the lens of Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis.

First, this study introduces Digital Discourse Analysis of an online community as a primary data source. Moving beyond established academic literature and theoretical texts, this study seeks to show something different. More to the point, it captured unfiltered, real-time peer-to-peer discussions, moving beyond more traditional and formal academic theory to document how everyday stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and citizens actively conceptualize and argue about trust erosion in public schools in digital public squares.

Second, the findings suggest that there is a more nuanced attribution of political blame to be had. This study uncovers a complex, bipartisan attribution of blame within the public. The data shows that while citizens criticize the political right for defunding schools and driving privatization, they are also critical of the political left for introducing unproven pedagogical reforms, failing to enforce behavioral standards, and marginalizing conservative perspectives. To sum it up, this study provides a unique perspective of data which shows that public frustration transcends simple partisan lines.

The third, and perhaps most interesting contribution, is the exposing of a perception verses lived reality paradox. The identification of a sharp disconnect between manufactured news media and social media panic and the localized lived experiences is on display. National news and social media algorithms have helped to create a false reality, one that pushes a delusion of crisis in public schools. Nevertheless, by looking at the content and actual lived experiences, we see a picture that shows when stakeholders engage directly with their local schools and educators have higher levels of trust and satisfaction. Thus, the contribution is one that shifts the focus from structural school failure to the role that media and social media play in promoting misinformation and disinformation.

This analysis also exposes the algorithmic mechanics of truth decay. The findings suggest specific algorithmic mechanisms such as engagement metrics, filter bubbles, and negativity bias are all being used to exploit human cognitive biases. The data in this work helps to illustrate how digital platforms are rewarding hyperbolic, anecdotal claims over objective reality, which leads to analysis paralysis and drives families away from choosing to put their children in public schools.

Next, the results help to broaden the perspective on technology saturation and concerns over Artificial Intelligence usage in public schools. The findings suggest that Artificial Intelligence is something that parents are worried about, it is just not where the broader concern is primarily focused. The use of everyday technology in public schools is of more importance. The data exposes that stakeholders are less panicked about Artificial Intelligence and more concerned with schools over-relying on electronic devices, the use of smartphones in schools, as well as social media usage and the impact that it has on school age children.

The final contribution is an expanded, actionable set of suggestions for the restoration of trust in public schools. Not only does this study showcase avenues for trust restoration in the literature review, it provides a digital discourse based perspective on ways to rebuild trust in public schools. Through focusing on community building and partnerships, we can move past passive observation to active engagement. By training stakeholders on school governance and providing news literacy training, we can equip communities to combat algorithmic bias and navigate school governance. By promoting radical transparency and institutional accountability, we can address pay disparities, administrative corruption, and allow for transparent communication. Lastly, the study shows that through embracing open dialogue, we can recenter public schools as a democratic public good rather than a privatized commodity.

Improvements

The way Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis were employed was remote in nature, which constrained the depths from which this study was able to descend into the data. Furthermore, there are only so many insights that can be gleaned from pouring over various forms of content and through a singular social media platform. As such, the conclusions drawn suggest that there are at least five ways that this study might be improved in the future.

First, seeking out a broader and more balanced social media dataset. In this study, the focus was on the views of various Reddit users regarding the erosion of trust in public schools, which constrained the dataset which was derived from the platform. Moving forward, expanding the data collection to other platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, or any other social media platform might allow for the creation of a richer dataset.

Second, conducting direct research with local stakeholders throughout the United States. Much of the data collected in this study was pulled from various content-based sources and Reddit, which limited the scope to data that others had uncovered in previous texts and discussions on forum threads. By developing interview questions, surveys, and conducting interviews and taking field observations directly with parents, teachers, administrators, and students across the country, I could further ground the findings in the lived experiences of stakeholders, in a more focused manner.

Lastly, much of this study provided only a granular look at the United States, geographically. Furthermore, this granular look also limited demographic representation in the data. Future iterations of this study could look at the erosion of trust in public schools throughout each of the states to determine how state-level legislation as well as federal legislation is altering trust in public schools more regionally. This would help to incorporate a much broader look at trust erosion across the nation and bring in more perspective from the many differences in demographics, adding to the ensemble perspective regarding trust erosion in public schools.

Revelations

With any study, there are additional questions that arise from the findings and surprises that a researcher might not have originally accounted for or even imagined. Transparency about the curiosities discovered during the research and analysis process only helps to put the reader

into the mindset of the researcher. This section showcases an assortment of revelations made apparent during the research and analysis process.

The first of the revelations identified from this study centers on the historical longevity of proposed solutions. Specifically, there have been many interventions designed to mitigate the erosion of trust in public schools which have been documented in academic and policy literature since at least the 1980s. What is notable is that despite decades of ideas and advocacy, the implementation of these strategic measures has remained largely fragmented, localized, or entirely unfulfilled. While the findings of this study bring to light several systemic barriers, such as institutional inertia, political polarization, and resource constraints, that contribute to this implementation gap, the persistent stagnation between policy formulation and sustained execution represents a critical avenue of opportunity.

A second revelation that emerged far more prominently than expected was why resistance persists against educational curricula that evoke discomfort, particularly regarding historical and social topics. Hornbeck and Malin (2023) highlight the heightened political polarization surrounding race, gender, and sexuality in public education. Their work underscores a fundamental tension between fostering social-emotional learning, such as empathy and historical awareness, and public pushback against controversial topics like race, gender, and sexuality. Most surprising, however, were the real-world consequences of this resistance. A widespread silencing effect and climate of fear have emerged around topics such as Critical Race Theory and LGBTQ+ rights. Advocacy groups like Moms for Liberty called for ending instruction on these topics, even offering financial bounties for identifying teachers who taught them. Additionally, hostile and threatening emails sent to teachers and administrators became commonplace, particularly in the latter stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The third revelation was the extent to which both political parties were to blame for the erosion of trust in public schools. Often, conservatives are blamed from their efforts to defund public schools, but it is also the more liberal side of the spectrum that is also contributing to the decline in trust. Both political parties have bought into the market logic of neoliberalism, and the many market-based reforms that have been enacted by them have been altering public schools since at least the release of *A Nation at Risk*. No longer are public schools meant to serve the public and democracy, they are meant to serve the economy, to make students more competitive, to make our nation more competitive. Both sides, following the Reagan administration, have been pushing reform after reform. They have been altering the way their constituents view public education, shifting the needle ever closer towards privatization. Schooling is now seen as a way of getting ahead rather than a way to help the public. This hints that credentials and economic competitiveness might mean more to the public than actually learning something, and that could be troubling.

The fourth revelation was the long historical continuum of elite power dynamics, connecting events from just after the *New Deal* era, to the Powell Memo in the 1970s, to the contemporary strategies of both political parties. The push towards private education brings with it a change in opportunity. As the elite ensure their children get the best education, and those in power continue to degrade public schools, there will grow an education gap so vast between the rich and poor. The uneducated masses will grow as the gap widens, creating an uneducated mass that is much easier to control, especially with what is now known about social media algorithms and dataveillance across the nation. Fear and paranoia will only worsen if this trend continues. The fact that this has been happening for some time, and so few seem to see it, is quite a disquieting discovery.

The fifth and final revelation was the extent to which Christopher Rufo held influence over the erosion of trust in public schools. Much of the backlash over Critical Race Theory and the push to silence discussion of race, slavery, and social inequality could all be traced back to him. He was able to use Critical Race Theory as a catch-all label to rally parents and pass legislation, showcasing Mr. Rufo's unique talents. His use of think tanks, media campaigns, and public messaging were a masterclass in reshaping public perception and attacking institutional trust, helping to erode trust in public schools. Mr. Rufo's efforts have given conservatives an effective blueprint for pushing for and enacting conservative education policy. The reality of the situation is that a person with enough skill, influence, and political connections can have a profound impact on society for better or worse.

Cohesion

The research conducted helps to validate and expand upon the frameworks introduced in Chapter 2, showing that what was uncovered during the literature review accurately correlates with what was discovered during the analysis process, and perhaps differs in some respects. This section's aim is to look back at Chapters 2 and 4 to discuss how the data may converge and diverge from one another. Applying a critical lens, what follows will help to reinforce the purpose for this study.

The first aspect of the literature review and the research to overlap are tied to political weaponization and culture wars. The data from both confirm that legislative actions by politicians are leading to the weaponization of public schools for partisan capital. Themes uncovered in the content and discourse analysis show that political elites have used legislative bans on books, gender identity, and race discussions to foster an environment of fear and paranoia. Together they show that the culture wars did not begin due to grassroot disagreements,

but rather a top-down, highly coordinated political process designed to delegitimize and deprofessionalize public education and educators. The result has been the creation of an atmosphere that exacerbates self-censorship among teachers, alienates marginalized student groups, and degrades institutional transparency, all of which has a profoundly negative impact on trust in public schools (democracys_sisyphus, 2023; LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Shoka, 2025; Schneider & Berkshire, 2024; Walker, 2023)

The second area where the literature review and findings overlap is neoliberal marketization of public schools as well as privatization efforts. Through the writings of Saltman (2021) and the historical perspective of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the literature paints a picture showing that neoliberal ideology is aiming to treat education as a private, consumable commodity rather than a public good and that our nation is falling behind others regarding competitiveness. Themes expressed in the findings corroborate this by divulging how political actors have framed public schools in a negative light, often as monopolies. The framing being leveraged to justify school voucher programs, tax credits, and charter school expansions that further marketize and privatize schooling at the expense of deteriorating public schools (Friedman, 1962; Hursh & Martina, 2016; Professional-Dot3734, 2026; Zenkov, 2000).

The third area of agreement lies in the concept of media and information manipulation. Both Pennycook and Rand (2018) and Kavanagh and Rich (2018) point to the news media and social media as catalysts for the widespread spreading of misinformation, propaganda, and disinformation across the country. The findings also suggest that the media, be it social or news, is at least partially to blame for the degradation of trust in public schools. The literature review showed that media has been an avenue for the delivery of bad information, and the findings corroborate and expand upon the literature by exposing more detail regarding the flow of

information (Pennycook & Rand, 2018). The findings help to show that social media algorithms designed to exploit human cognitive biases, for example the negativity bias, and anchoring effect, have helped to sensationalize and spread fear and paranoia (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017; Mockler, 2022). They also show that the extremes, the posts that generate the most clicks, overpower the more objective, localized school realities, imprisoning users in echo chambers of outrage (Bachmann, 2018; Grassian, 2018; Shoka, 2025; Sutton & King, 2011).

Another key area where the literature review and the findings overlapped centered on corporatization. Prior research indicated that corporate influence over education has grown substantially, particularly as major technology firms like Google and Meta expand their reach by introducing Artificial Intelligence, adaptive learning technologies, and performance tracking into public schools (Saltman, 2021). Findings from the Digital Discourse Analysis of Reddit posts regarding the widespread corporatization of American public schools tied directly into this literature. In these forums, users debated whether corporations were harming public schools and potentially violating laws in the process. Many highlighted how corporate power allows these entities to bypass local government oversight and implement changes much faster than traditional public school systems can. Additionally, users emphasized that dataveillance is being leveraged not only by corporations, but also by neoliberal proponents to further erode trust in public education and shift public narrative toward privatization and marketization (Cherry-care-bear, 2026; Professional-Dot3734, 2026; TheGoshDarnedBatman, 2026).

The next significant overlap was in the solutions and pathways to restoration of trust in public schools. Many of those showcased in the literature, specifically Poynton et al (2018), Davidson and Hughes (2019) and Saltman (2021) advocated for the enhancement of stakeholder knowledge, as well as open dialogue, agnostic politics, and institutional benevolence when

discussing potential fix actions that might reverse the erosion of trust in public schools. The eighth and final theme from the findings helped to validate what was discussed in the literature review by showing that community building, structure stakeholder training, administrative transparency, and news and social media literacy could help to rebuild trust in public schools (Poynton et al., 2018). Both the literature review and the findings suggest that trust is difficult to restore but not impossible (Tschannen-Moran 2014). Rather than focusing on a top-down approach, rebuilding trust requires deliberate, participatory practices that do their best to strip away corporate and partisan influence to focus on the needs of all stakeholders.

Nevertheless, the literature review and findings did not always agree with each other. The first of the disagreements was where political blame should be cast. The literature review was primarily focused on the critique of neoliberal and neoconservative policies, corporate deregulation, and the architects of the culture war such as Christopher Rufo, whereas the findings began to show that the public more often assigns bipartisan blame (Kamola, 2025; Miller et al., 2023). The literature review did not include the perspectives of Reddit users, but the findings did include them. As such, they helped to not only condemn the political right for their efforts to silence, stoke fear and paranoia, and to defund public schools to advance marketization and privatization agendas but also to cast blame on the political left for implementing continuous, unproven pedagogical reforms, failing to enforce student behavioral accountability, and creating environments where more conservative stakeholders might feel marginalized (Firm_Baseball_37, 2026; Haunting-Ad-9790, 2026).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic represented another point of departure between the existing literature and the findings. The literature review generally framed the pandemic as an overwhelmingly devastating disruption for public schools and their stakeholders. Prior

scholarship highlighted how remote learning offered parents unprecedented visibility into daily instruction, a perspective often amplified or distorted by polarized political rhetoric, which destabilized traditional expectations of public schooling. Furthermore, much of the literature portrayed institutional responses negatively, contending that prolonged school closures and remote instruction generated harms that rivaled or exceeded the public health risks of in-person attendance (Ahmed Siddiqui et al., 2020; Brady & Kent, 2022; Gross et al., 2021; Hess & Sanon, 2022; Pondiscio, 2022; Saad, 2022). While the Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis reflected elements of these concerns, the severity and orientation of this sentiment differed markedly. Rather than attributing trust erosion primarily to remote instruction or administrative decision-making, the empirical data assigned greater responsibility to the mobilization of parents' rights groups in response to remote learning content. This mobilization subsequently fueled curriculum bans, educator self-censorship, and a broader institutional climate marked by paranoia and distrust (Alvarez, 2023; Baldwin-Clark, 2023; Schwartz, 2021; Stewart, 2023).

The next area of divergence was centered on what was causing fear and paranoia. The literature review often focused on the political side of the influence, suggesting that legislative battles and polling declines were driving much of the negative sentiment regarding public schools, eroding the public's trust (Kamola, 2025; Saltman, 2021). Nevertheless, the findings not only suggested that politics were at play, but they also provided a lived reality through the posts on Reddit forums. The findings uncovered a paradox, showing that what the news media and social media painted as the reality in public schools, a picture of disarray and total collapse was in fact vastly different from what stakeholders in the local communities were reporting of their own public schools. The findings helped to show that social media algorithms and news media sensationalization helped to bolster the environment of fear and paranoia (Clark, 2013; Romo,

2025). The data showed that when stakeholders interact with one another, trust stabilizes, and the reality that the crisis in public education is largely driven by the media rather than mass public school collapse becomes apparent. This is not to say that all public schools are without issue, only that the media plays a role in creating headlines and echo chambers to publicize and reinforce the worst cases (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Fung, 2004; Hutchinson, 2025; Langsdorf, 2004; Poynton et al., 2018; Romo 2025, Van Maele, Forsyth, & Van Houtte, 2014).

Religion was another area where the literature review and the findings diverged. Prior scholarship indicates that religious beliefs significantly impact institutional trust (Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2011). Most notably, when public school policies conflict with stakeholders' religious values, both institutional and social trust tend to decline. Similarly, non-religious stakeholders often express increased distrust when religious entities attempt to push their beliefs onto public institutions such as schools (Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2011). In contrast, the current findings did not show a major religious impact on the erosion of trust in public schools, except within themes addressing parents' rights groups, censorship, and curriculum changes, some of which carried explicit religious undertones.

Institutional sexism played a larger role in the literature review than it did in the findings. The literature review indicated that institutional sexism contributes to the erosion of trust in public schools, as gender-based inequities remain embedded within educational systems (Allan er al., 2023; Miller, 2017; Poynton et al., 2018; Tschannen-Moran, 2017) Specifically, prior research highlighted how school leadership, policies, and curriculum selection often lack female perspectives, while also pointing to demographic disparities in leadership where women hold significantly fewer executive positions than men (Polka & Litchka, 2008; Slovska, 2022). Although evidence of institutional sexism was present in the data analysis, it was largely eclipsed

by the overwhelming volume of data supporting other major themes. This is not to suggest that institutional sexism does not contribute to declining trust in public education, but rather that it did not emerge as one of the most prominent factors in this study.

The next area where the literature and findings diverged is student indoctrination. Throughout the literature review, direct references to fears of indoctrination were sparse, though underlying political polarization strongly implied its presence (Grice, 2022; Pollock et al., 2025). In contrast, indoctrination emerged as a major theme during the Content Analysis of various data and the Digital Discourse Analysis of Reddit discussions. The data indicated that political rhetoric frequently emphasized fears of woke indoctrination in public schools, contributing to a chilling effect on educators and curriculum bans across more than 40 percent of states (Shoka, 2025). Conservative Reddit users argued that secular and liberal institutions were fostering ideological indoctrination (LucidNytemare, 2024; phantomthief_phoenix, 2024), while others argued that conservative policies enacted their own form of indoctrination by suppressing non-White voices and imposing Whitewashed curricula (CarltheWellEndowed, 2021). Ultimately, these findings reveal that indoctrination concerns are bipartisan, a key trend not explicitly reflected in what was originally discovered during the literature review.

The final main area of diffluence was centered on the various forms of technology that are currently impacting public schools. The literature review focused more on how technology such as Artificial Intelligence was a primary threat to academic integrity, critical thinking, and ethical truth (Cochran, 2025; Gioia, 2025; Hanlon, 2024). This is not to say that the findings did not find this aspect of technology troubling, they just expanded into a broader critique of how technology saturation was impacting public schools. The findings indicated that the public was not only frustrated by Artificial Intelligence, but also the overreliance on computers, tablets, and

applications. The data and responses from actual stakeholders suggested that there should be immediate, practical interventions to combat the negative impacts of educational technology, specifically bans on smart phones in classrooms and the use of social media, and limitations on the use of Artificial Intelligence (agentG91, 2026; Aestheticdonkey573; No_Skin868, 2026; patentattorney, 2025; Pastesale, 2026; Pielorinho, 2025).

Overall, the findings helped to translate and expand upon some of the information and arguments made throughout the literature review process into more concrete social realities by incorporating the perspectives of Reddit users. Chapter 2 provided a framework which identified the socio-political, economic, and historical forces that have helped to destabilize trust in public schools, and Chapter 4 helped to supply findings that demonstrated how the structural forces from Chapter 2 have manifest in the daily lives, fears, and conversations of the stakeholders. Ultimately, by comparing the two chapters, it becomes clear that the process of reversing the erosion of trust in public schools will require transparent, community-driven engagement, not neoliberal marketization or political intervention.

Recommendations

Based on this study's conclusions, future research could explore a multitude of avenues. The first would be a study on the efficacy of stakeholder training programs in a more inclusive manner throughout the United States. A longitudinal study investigating whether formal training for parents and community members, based on school budgets, policies, and governance, might measurably increase local trust and reduce the susceptibility to misinformation.

The second recommendation would be centered on the potential impact of media literacy curricula on students. The study could focus on examining how teaching public school students media literacy, algorithmic awareness, and fact-checking methods might impact long-term

critical thinking. Such a study could also be used to examine how such curricula might impact resistance to political propaganda.

The third recommendation, one that is fitting regarding recent legislation in the United Kingdom and Australia, would be study on the long-term effects of cell phone and social media bans in public schools. This study showed how these social media and technology have affected the public-school landscape, but what might be discovered if schools restricted digital devices and social media access. Might such bans improve student mental health, academic performance, parental confidence in school safety, or possibly trust in public schools? Such a study could prove vastly beneficial.

The fourth recommendation for future research could be focused on the restorative frameworks and local deliberation processes. The research could delve into specific, actionable models for transparent communication between stakeholders, and investigate how they might be used to improve trust in public schools. Such a study could also provide schools with the means to improve relationships between stakeholders without capitulating to political intimidation, potentially decreasing the polarization seen in schools across the country.

The fifth recommendation for future research could be focused on assessing educator self-censorship. Because of the legislative bans regarding the teaching more controversial subjects in many states across the United States, the study could investigate how the bans impact daily instructional choices, teacher morale, and even turnover rates across different subject areas. This study could be conducted using field studies that measure the degree of pedagogical self-censoring among classroom teachers in states that have and have not enacted restrictive curricular legislation such as anti-CRT or those centered on parents' rights to discern if political intervention is making an impact for better or worse.

Sixth, this study was structured around a Qualitative Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis perspective, which provides a limited subset of what might be gleaned from the data. The proposition of using other forms of analysis and even venturing into mixed or quantitative methods could yield different results. As an example, longitudinal statistical surveys measuring trust indices over time or correlation analyses between local property-tax funding models and parent satisfaction scores might be another avenue. Furthermore, enrollment tracking following the expansion of voucher programs could prove important. There are endless ways one might examine the erosion of trust in public schools, and the more perspectives found, the closer we get to finding solutions to the problem.

The seventh recommendation would be a more robust evaluation of the proposed restoration frameworks. The study showed that stakeholder training, community partnerships, media literacy curricula, and transparency could all help to reverse the erosion of trust in public schools, but this study only scratched at the surface of what was possible. Taking the time to design action-research or even a longitudinal study that might pilot each of the restoration frameworks in school districts across the country could prove beneficial. This would allow for measurements regarding whether implementing specific frameworks over others might produce statistically significant increases in trust over time.

The final recommendation for future research is centered on the influence of algorithmic curation on parental school choice decisions. This study could aim to investigate the psychological and behavioral pathways through which social media algorithms employed by Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, and other social media platforms are influencing parents' decisions to opt out of public-school systems. Furthermore, this study could investigate how exposure to engagement-driven, negative online content might correlate with a parent's decision to choose

charter, private, or homeschool alternatives for their children, independent of school performance metrics.

Conclusion

As this study suggests, public education in the United States stands at a critical historical juncture, positioned squarely in the middle of an intense political, cultural, and economic ideological battleground. As demonstrated throughout this study, the widespread erosion of trust in K-12 public schools is neither an accidental phenomenon nor an inevitability brought about by institution aging. What this study represents is the cumulative outcome of over four decades of deliberate market-driven reforms, political weaponization, and systemic commodification. Beginning with the crisis-driven narrative made popular by *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and continuing through the punitive accountability frameworks of legislation such as No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act, public education has been systematically reframed. Refashioned from a vital public good, established to foster democratic citizenship and to invest in the future of our nation, to a failing monopoly that requires market intervention and private oversight.

The primary contribution of this study lies in how it exposes the historical and structural forces that exist within the modern digital and social landscape. Through the fusion of formal literature, news media, books, and other data gathered through Content Analysis and Digital Discourse Analysis of Reddit forums, this research uncovers a paradox of sorts. The disconnect lies in the dueling perspectives of first a group of national media outlets, partisan political actors, and engagement-driven social media algorithms which construct a delusion of crisis, and second, the lived experiences of individual stakeholders, who often tell a vastly different story. The profit-centric, algorithmic platforms, that reward outrage, hyperbole, and views, systematically

exploit human cognitive biases. More specifically, they take aim at our negativity bias and the anchoring effect, to trap us within outrage-driven echo chambers. All of this leads to a pervasive, generalized cynicism that obscures the authentic, localized work happening in public school classrooms each day. From this, non-partisan public frustration has been revealed. Stakeholders across the political spectrum have expressed deep dissatisfaction with both major parties, rejecting right-wing and the left-wing efforts to alter our public schools.

To counteract the erosion of trust in public schools, a decisive rejection of marketization and algorithmic panic is a necessity. Restoration through superficial public relations campaigns, high-stakes standardized testing, or legislative censorship is not the way forward. What is needed are school leaders, policymakers, and community members committed to building what this study terms an ensemble of perspectives, a participatory, democratic framework based on open communication, institutional transparency, and authentic community partnerships.

As the research has shown, to move forward, educational leaders must reclaim the narrative. To do this, they must prioritize direct engagement with local stakeholders over passive forms of digital consumption or a hands-off approach. By creating opportunities for community participation, providing training opportunities to show how public schools function and how to safely consume current forms of media, supporting the professional autonomy of educators, and enforcing boundaries for the use of some forms of technology in classrooms, stakeholders can dismantle the fear and paranoia and end the erosion of trust in public schools. Rebuilding trust in K-12 public schools is more than an administrative challenge for local school boards to solve; it is a vital imperative for the survival of a healthy, inclusive, and democratic society.

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