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**Language and Power Dynamics: A Critical Policy Analysis of
Racial and Choice Discourses in School Integration Policies**

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Abstract: Although school segregation has been illegal for nearly seven decades, it persists in a public education context increasingly impacted by market-based ideologies. Indeed, many present-day school integration policies are having to negotiate school choice while simultaneously trying to serve the public good. Through a critical policy analysis (CPA) of three policies in school districts with distinct histories of integration efforts, we examine these tensions by exploring how racial discourses are factors in contemporary school integration policies and how discourses of choice

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uphold or disrupt existing racial inequities. In our CPA, we pair Critical Discourse Analysis and interest divergence to better understand power behind and within discourse, and how discourses of race and school choice illustrate new but perhaps reminiscent shifts toward interest divergence. In doing so, we show how policies themselves cannot be disentangled from the rhetoric, power, accountability, and politics surrounding their development and implementation.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; critical policy analysis; educational policy; interest divergence; race; school choice; school integration

Dinámica del lenguaje y el poder: Un análisis político crítico de los discursos sobre la raza y la elección en las políticas de integración escolar

Resumen: Si bien la segregación escolar ha sido ilegal durante casi siete décadas, persiste en un contexto de educación pública cada vez más impactado por ideologías basadas en el mercado. De hecho, muchas políticas actuales de integración escolar deben negociar la elección de la escuela y, al mismo tiempo, intentar servir al bien público. A través de un análisis crítico de políticas (CPA) de tres políticas en distritos escolares con distintas historias de esfuerzos de integración, examinamos estas tensiones al explorar cómo los discursos raciales son factores en las políticas de integración escolar contemporáneas y cómo los discursos de elección defienden o interrumpen las desigualdades raciales existentes. En nuestro CPA, emparejamos el análisis crítico del discurso y la divergencia de intereses para comprender mejor el poder detrás y dentro del discurso, y cómo los discursos de elección de raza y escuela ilustran cambios nuevos pero quizás evocadores hacia la divergencia de intereses. Al hacerlo, mostramos cómo las políticas en sí mismas no pueden desenredarse de la retórica, el poder, la rendición de cuentas y la política que rodea su desarrollo e implementación.

Palabras-clave: análisis crítico del discurso; análisis crítico de políticas; política educativa; divergencia de intereses; raza; elección de escuela; integración escolar

Linguagem e dinâmicas de poder: Uma análise política crítica dos discursos sobre raça e escolha nas políticas de integração escolar

Resumo: Embora a segregação escolar seja ilegal há quase sete décadas, ela persiste em um contexto de educação pública cada vez mais impactado por ideologias baseadas no mercado. De fato, muitas políticas atuais de integração escolar devem negociar a escolha da escola e, ao mesmo tempo, tentar servir ao bem público. Por meio de uma análise crítica de políticas (CPA) de três políticas em distritos escolares com histórias distintas de esforços de integração, examinamos essas tensões explorando como os discursos raciais são fatores nas políticas de integração escolar contemporâneas e como os discursos de escolha sustentam ou interrompem as desigualdades raciais existentes. Em nosso CPA, combinamos a análise crítica do discurso e a divergência de interesses para entender melhor o poder por trás e dentro do discurso, e como os discursos de raça e escolha escolar ilustram mudanças novas, mas talvez remanescentes, em direção à divergência de interesses. Ao fazê-lo, mostramos como as próprias políticas não podem ser desvinculadas da retórica, poder, responsabilidade e política que cercam seu desenvolvimento e implementação.

Palavras-chave: análise crítica do discurso; análise crítica de políticas; política educacional; divergência de interesses; raça; escolha da escola; integração escolar

Language and Power Dynamics: A Critical Policy Analysis of Racial and Choice Discourses in School Integration Policies

Near the end of President Obama's second term in office, school integration proponents were excited about the potential of a new federal grants program, "Opening Doors, Expanding Opportunities," that would assist school districts in increasing socioeconomic diversity in their schools (U.S. DOE, 2016). After years of federal policy agendas that wavered in their support of school integration, this program signaled a sense of new attention placed on what decades of research has long illustrated regarding the myriad benefits associated with school integration (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012; Wells et al., 2016). Although the Trump Administration decided not to fund any of the school districts who applied to the program, there has been growing support for school integration at state and federal levels (Belsha & Darville, 2021; Promoting Racially Integrated Schools Act, 2021; Strength in Diversity Act, 2020). Moreover, there has been an increase in investigative reporting on school segregation and integration across media outlets (e.g., Glass, 2015a, 2015b; Hannah-Jones, 2014; Knight, 2020a). Most importantly, school districts are continuing their pursuit of creating and maintaining diverse and inclusive schools despite the challenges that often thwart such efforts (Potter & Burris, 2020).

These efforts are critical today as U.S. public schools are both more diverse than ever before and increasingly racially and socioeconomically segregated (Orfield et al., 2019). This segregation is largely a result of legal and policy decisions that prevented the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision from being fulfilled, the persistence of residential segregation, and white supremacy and racism that is entrenched in society (Noguera, 2019). Horsford (2019) notes the importance of understanding "the empty promise of *Brown* as experienced by Black students, families, and communities; and the role that White racial policy attitudes and actors played in resisting and resenting desegregation" if we truly want to create school integration plans that work "for the populations it was intended to serve" (p. 258). Likewise, given that market-based approaches such as school choice, which were initially used by some to evade desegregation, are becoming more common in the education landscape yet are not significantly impacting educational outcomes and even increasing existent racial inequities (Horsford et al., 2019), we need to better understand how school districts are considering race and choice in their student assignment policies and the implications of these policies.

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the racial and choice discourses of three districts' school integration policies¹—Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), and St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS)—and how they may play a role in perpetuating racial (in)equities in school districts. Two research questions guided our study: 1) How do racial discourses factor into contemporary school integration policies? 2) How are discourses of choice in school integration policies upholding or disrupting existing racial inequities in school districts? We framed our critical policy analysis (CPA) of the integration policies with critical discourse analysis (CDA) and interest divergence, a key component of critical race theory (CRT), which allows us to pay particular attention to power dynamics behind the discourses, policy rhetoric, and how race continues to be central in guiding policy interests. Across the school districts, the racial and choice discourses varied over time, pointing to the commitment to and divestment in

¹ Desegregation, integration, and student assignment are used interchangeably to describe the policies explored in this article. We intentionally used the terms as they were stated in the documents collected as we felt this provided fidelity to our analysis. We reference the policies collectively throughout the article as school integration policies as they are working to provide racial equity and inclusivity.

integration. We conclude by illustrating how historical and sociopolitical contexts play a key role in shaping school integration policy discourses and the importance of intentionally designing school integration plans that are high-quality and accessible to families.

Critically Exploring School Integration Policies

Scholars who engage in CPA do so because they view traditional approaches to policy analysis limiting. Traditional policy analysis assumes there is a linear approach to the policy process whereby a policy is adopted, implemented, examined, and evaluated, and empirical research is key to understanding and implementing effective policy (Diem et al., 2014; Young & Diem, 2017). Traditional approaches to educational policy also often rely on theoretically narrow, positivist onto-epistemological approaches, which tend to be more descriptive and less concerned with how theory is central in explaining and predicting policymaking (Ball, 1994; Levinson et al., 2009; Nagel, 1984). Alternatively, theory plays a significant role in CPA. CPA scholars draw from several critical perspectives, including critical theories, critical race theories, queer theories, and feminist theories, to name a few, as well as multiple disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Analyzing educational policies through critical theoretical frameworks results in more nuanced policy analyses, specifically when it comes to equity issues in general and racial issues in particular (Diem et al., 2014; Horsford et al., 2019; Ulmer, 2016; Young & Diem, 2018). Additionally, a traditional approach to educational policy analysis is inadequate in redressing racial justice as it fails to address the power imbalances in the policy process, which preserves white interests and dominant political ideals (Diem & Welton, 2021; Horsford et al., 2019).

Those who use CPA as a framework to guide their policy analyses tend to focus on the following concerns: 1) differences between policy rhetoric and practiced reality; 2) how policy came to be, how it has changed over time, and its role in perpetuating the dominant narrative (i.e., policy roots and development); 3) distribution of power, resources, and knowledge; 4) social stratification and its impact on inequality and privilege; and 5) the resistance and engagement in the policy process by marginalized and minoritized individuals and groups (Diem et al., 2014). Critical policy scholars also work to ensure those in power are held responsible for *their* policy outcomes and seek to center the voices and viewpoints of those who are marginalized and minoritized in the policy process as their perspectives are important, valuable, and tend to go unheard (Horsford et al., 2019). As a result, CPA offers a more expansive, complex, and “realist perspective for analyzing policy,” particularly in a time of increasing racial and economic inequality (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 21; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). Indeed, we situate our study within a CPA framework as it helps to illustrate how policy discourses address racial inequities in school communities.

Interrogating policy discourse is an appropriate method employed in CPA as it assists scholars in “unpacking assumptions” and examining ideas “underpinning the policy” and “sense making” of discourses (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1077). Critical policy scholars illustrate how power is (re)inscribed through policy discourses. In their CPA, Koyama and Chang (2019) examined how discourses of belonging and othering impacted the daily schooling of refugee students in two school districts that worked to uphold existing uneven power dynamics and not meet the students’ needs. Carpenter and Diem (2015) examined influential policy documents in shaping the preparation of school leaders to see how issues pertaining to equity were addressed and found a reluctance to explicitly use race and social justice in the texts in lieu of vocabularies such as diversity and equity. Exploring policies as both texts and broader discourses, actual physical documents and what is counted as truth and fact (Ball, 1994), helps us to understand how policies wield power through language. Moreover, *de facto* policies, not actual policies but other documents such as reports,

books, and even media articles, can influence practice in the absence of formal policy (Weaver-Hightower, 2008).

Finally, a central component of CPA includes an understanding of the complex systems in which policy is designed and implemented (Young & Diem, 2017). Ball (1998) argued that “Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-recreation in contexts of practice” (p. 126). Weaver-Hightower (2008) emphasized how policies rest within various, complex political contexts that influence the policymaking process. Policies are not value-free, they serve the interests of particular stakeholders, typically those who are in power, do not follow a standard implementation path, and are influenced by historical and contemporary sociopolitical contexts (Diem, 2012; Prunty, 1985; Taylor et al., 1997). By understanding the contextual and systemic complexities of policy, we can develop a “more inclusive view of what policy is and can be” (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 157). This is particularly important when examining contemporary school integration policies as the historical contexts in which these policies are situated (e.g., desegregation) play key roles in understanding their current iterations in contemporary policy contexts (e.g., school choice). Locating our study within the CPA literature, we explore how racial discourses factor into contemporary school integration policies, and how these policies use discourses of choice to uphold or disrupt existing racial inequities in their school districts.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Interest Divergence as CPA

As we concerned ourselves with “sense making” of discourses (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1077) through an examination of power, critical discourse analysis (CDA) became a natural complementary framework to CPA as both theory and a methodological approach. Those who employ CDA do not follow a step-by-step method but aim to critique the power in individual and interacting discourses to produce transformative work. Moreover, Fairclough’s (2014) application of CDA is fitting given the aforementioned concerns of critical policy scholars, particularly that of policy rhetoric versus practiced reality (Diem et al., 2014; Horsford et al., 2019). Fairclough (2014) views CDA as a method to critique “power *behind* discourse rather than just the power in discourse” (p. 4). In our study, the concern is more on interrogating the normative ideologies that shape any given discourse and social order overall, not just who controls what in a particular interaction or correspondence. Applied to CPA, in order to critically examine a policy and its “underpinning” (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1077), an emphasis must be on who holds power, how it is (re)inscribed, who is coerced or complacent in the power structure, and how this informs the policy rhetoric. Consequently, when reviewing relevant policy documents (e.g., school board minutes, policy briefs), this required a consideration of not just which authoritative figure said what to school families and the overall discursive interplay between the two parties. Rather, a focus must also be on why they are viewed or positioned as authorities in the first place and how that informs how both parties are entering and engaging in the space.

Like CPA, theory plays a significant role in CDA as well (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). To help situate our CPA, we drew from a less widely used tenet of critical race theory (CRT), interest divergence, which at its core illustrates how white supremacy and racism are rooted into the fabric of society. According to Guinier (2004),

race is used to manufacture both convergences and divergences of interest that track class and geographic divisions. The racialized hierarchies that result reinforce divergences of interest among and between groups with varying social status and

privilege, which the ideology of white supremacy converts into rationales for the status quo. (p. 114)

By using race in this way, it prevents many people, low-income white people in particular, from having a clear understanding of how racism also hurts them both financially and psychologically as their whiteness maintains their belief of superiority (Bell, 1980; Guinier, 2004). Indeed, these interest divergences that have been constructed in the US have always existed and are further perpetuated when judicial rulings, legislation, and policies provide racially minoritized communities with some reprieve.

In the context of school desegregation, while the *Brown* decision was a hopeful turning point in the country's battle with school segregation as it declared separate to be inherently unequal in the public education system, it in no way rectified existent interest divergences. In his theory of interest convergence, a more commonly applied tenet of CRT in education research, Bell (1980) famously argued that *Brown* only occurred because the interests of white individuals converged with those of Black individuals. Bell reminded us that to understand *Brown* we had to consider "the decision's value to whites, not simply those concerned about the immorality of racial inequality, but also those whites in policymaking positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation" (p. 524). Conversely, Guinier (2004) contends that *Brown* actually

intensified divergences between northern elites and southern whites, solidified the false interest convergence between southern white elite and southern poor whites, ignored interest divergences between poor and middle-class blacks, and exacerbated the interest divergences between poor and working-class whites and blacks. (p. 102)

Bell (1980) warned us of these potential interest divergences around school desegregation, which we would later witness through school districts' unwillingness to implement desegregation and court rulings that would subsequently dismantle school desegregation (Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

Pairing CDA and interest divergence in our CPA of present-day integration policies allows us to better understand how discourses of race and school choice illustrate new but perhaps reminiscent shifts toward interest divergence like those witnessed during the initial days of desegregation (Thompson Dorsey & Roulhac, 2019). It also aligns with Guinier's (2004) call to be "more literate about the role racism continues to play in structuring and narrating economic and policy opportunity" (p. 117) by paying particular attention to the power behind discourses (Fairclough, 2104). In doing so, we highlight the importance of policy rhetoric and racial discourse in school integration policies.

Collecting and Analyzing Data

Site Selection

For this study, we chose to focus on three U.S. school districts across different regions and with distinct histories of desegregation and integration efforts to help us answer our research questions. Because we were interested in exploring how school integration is unfolding in different parts of the US, three plans were chosen for this study: Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) Diversity Management Plan, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) Student Assignment Policy, and the St. Louis Student Transfer Program. It was important to select school districts that differ in size, demographics, geography, sociopolitical context, as well as policy design so we could draw conclusions about the impact of these factors in integration efforts.

Table 1 shows population trends from 1970 to 2019 for the three school districts as well as the cities in which they are located. In terms of overall population, Nashville-Davidson County and San Francisco have both experienced fairly consistent growth over the last four decades. In St. Louis, the exact opposite is true as the population was over two times smaller in 2019 as compared to 1970. In St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS), the population decrease is even more dramatic as the district served almost six times as many students in 1970 as it did in 2019. In both MNPS and SFUSD the population has been steadily increasing over the last 20 years.

Table 1
Population of City/School District Sites, 1970-2019

City/School District	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2019
Nashville-Davidson County, TN	488,003	477,811	510,784	569,891	626,681	694,144
Metro Nashville Public Schools	90,214	61,638	68,452	67,358	78,436	85,588
San Francisco, CA	715,674	678,974	723,959	776,733	805,235	881,549
San Francisco Unified School District	82,757	57,433	63,506	59,979	55,571	61,031
St. Louis, MO	622,236	435,085	396,685	348,189	319,294	300,576
St. Louis Public Schools	111,233	62,759	43,284*	44,264	22,754	19,054

Note. The data for Nashville-Davidson County, TN are from the U.S. Census (1970-2019). The data for Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) are from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD) (1990-2019), and MNPS 27-year analysis of enrollment patterns, *Kelley*, box 23, file 1996 (revised November 1996). The data for San Francisco, CA are from the Bay Area Census (1970-2010) and the U.S. Census (1970-2019). The data for San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) are from the California Department of Education (1990-2019), SFUSD (2012), and Quinn (2020). The data for St. Louis, MO are from the U.S. Census (1970-2019). The data for St. Louis Public Schools are from Banks (2019, 2020), the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (1991-2019), and Wells & Crain (1997).

*Reflects data reported for the 1991-1992 school year.

Table 2 provides details on the student population by race across each of the school districts. In MNPS, Black or African American students represent 38% of the population, followed by 28.1% Hispanic or Latinx, and 3.9% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander. In SFUSD, 32.4% of its students are Hispanic or Latinx, 29.4% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7.8% Black or African American. The majority of students in SLPS are Black or African American (78.5%), while 5.7% are Hispanic or Latinx, and 2.8% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander. In all three districts, 0.3% or less of students are American Indian and Alaska Native and less than 1% are Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. In all of the districts, white students do not make up the largest percentage of the population. MNPS has the highest percentage of white students (27.4%), followed by SFUSD (14.5%), and SLPS (12.9%).

Table 2*School District Population by Race (percentage), 2019-2020*

	Metro Nashville Public Schools	San Francisco Unified School District	St. Louis Public Schools
% White	27.4	14.5	12.9
% Black or African American	38	7.8	78.5
% American Indian and Alaska Native	0.1	0.3	0.1
% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander	3.9	29.4	2.8
% Hispanic or Latinx	28.1	32.4	5.7
% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.09	0.8	-

Note. The data for Metro Nashville Public Schools are from the U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD) (2019). The data for San Francisco Unified School District are from the California Department of Education (2019). The data for St. Louis Public Schools are from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2019).

We felt it was important to include the city and school district population trends as it helps to better contextualize desegregation efforts over time. Importantly, school districts are operating under a much different context as they were following *Brown*, which can shed light on how context plays a role in the racial discourses in current iterations of school integration policies as well as how discourses of school choice factor into the policies.

Metro Nashville Public Schools

The first school district included in our study is Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) located in Nashville, Tennessee. Since the *Brown* ruling, MNPS has had a long desegregation history. After a district-designed desegregation plan was deemed ineffective by the courts in 1970, a more comprehensive and productive plan, which included busing, was implemented (Erickson, 2016; *Kelley et al. v. Metropolitan Nashville Board of Education*, 1970). The busing plan was then expanded in 1983 to include large swaths of the county, leading Nashville to maintain one of the highest levels of desegregation in the US through the 1990s (Erickson, 2016; Mickelson et al., 2021). In the early 1990s, however, a new superintendent as well as a new mayor spurred the five-year process of ending federal oversight of the desegregation of Nashville public schools, with MNPS officially gaining unitary status in 1998 (Erickson, 2016). Within months, the return to neighborhood attendance areas and shorter bus rides began the resegregation of MNPS (Erickson, 2016; Goldring et al., 2006). Black families and community organizations continued to challenge the resegregation of the school district after attendance rezoning plans in the 2000s arguably worsened the situation, but rulings have yet to side with the local Nashville plaintiffs in addressing this racial and socioeconomic isolation in MNPS (*Spurlock v. Fox*, 2013).

The district's most recent integration plan, the "Diversity Management Plan", was adopted in 2013, and aims to provide diverse learning environments to all students (MNPS, n.d.a, n.d.b). It specifically prioritizes managing and measuring diversity to avoid resegregation and racial isolation

(MNPS, n.d.a; MNPS Board of Education, 2013). It defines “diversity” utilizing four student characteristics: “racial/ethnic”, “free or reduced meals”, “English language service”, and “disability” (MNPS, n.d.a, pp. 2-3). To identify which schools can be deemed “diverse,” a four-part approach is taken (MNPS, n.d.a, pp. 2-3). For part one, when compared to other schools within its tier (e.g., elementary, middle, or high school), it must meet one of three race/ethnicity metrics: no single racial/ethnic group represents more than 50% of school’s enrollment, at least three racial/ethnic groups are enrolled that each represent at least 15% of the school’s population, or at least two racial/ethnic groups are enrolled that each represent at least 30% of the school’s population. For parts two, three, and four, a school must maintain at least two-thirds of its tier’s average for the subsequent student characteristic types: free or reduced meals, English language service, and disability. Yet, they only need to meet metrics for *two* of these three categories. If a school does not achieve the guidelines within this four-part definition, the concerns will be “addressed as practicable by the central office,” and there is no timeline that dictates when all schools must reach an approved amount of student diversity (MNPS, n.d.a, p. 3).

While school zoning and assignment policies influence this initiative, the Diversity Management Plan primarily relies on choice to incentivize and guide families into more diverse school settings (MNPS, n.d.a, n.d.b). Students are assigned to a zoned school based on their address, but they have other choices including charter schools, magnet schools, out-of-zone optional schools, and sometimes within-zone options schools (MNPS, 2016, 2021a, 2021b). There are also often transportation offerings based on student age, free and reduced-price lunch status, school choice location, and school choice type (MNPS, n.d.b). Importantly, the Diversity Management Plan is not a binding document, there is no “calendar end-point” regarding its implementation, and the district is required to hold itself accountable to ensure its success (MNPS, n.d.a, p. 1).

San Francisco Unified School District

San Francisco, California has a diverse population and a complicated history of segregating various racial and ethnic groups (Wollenberg, 1976), which has been impacted by the significant California de/segregation cases that predate *Brown* (e.g., *Mendez v. Westminster*, 1947; *Tape v. Hurley*, 1885)². Despite some initial policy and legal successes toward ending segregation, such as Governor Earl Warren repealing the state’s last school segregation statute in 1947, San Francisco did little to address desegregation in the immediate years following *Brown* (Wollenberg, 1976). The NAACP consequently sued SFUSD, subsequently placing the district under a desegregation order and requiring complete integration by the fall of 1971 (*Johnson v. SFUSD*, 1971; Quinn, 2020). The initial plan, a district-wide busing plan, was met with resistance from various community groups and politicians (Levitt & O’Connell, 2020b; Quinn, 2020). There was particular pushback from Chinese American parents who were concerned that busing would make their after-school language schools impossible and feared losing their children in the complicated transportation system (Wollenberg, 1976). Through ongoing litigation, SFUSD desegregation went through five distinct iterations. However, under the 1983 consent decree (*San Francisco NAACP v. SFUSD*, 1983), the district’s desegregation reached its broadest success of reducing racial identifiability in 1992 (Levitt &

² *Tape v. Hurley* (1885) challenged Chinese segregation and exclusion in SFUSD. The ruling maintained the legality of separate but equal schools but resulted in SFUSD reopening a Chinese school after 15 years of exclusion. The *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947) decision struck down segregation of Mexican and Mexican American children in California public schools and would also set precedent for other state supreme court cases to end school segregation for Mexican American children. Further, the social and educational theory used in the arguments of *Mendez* would go on to influence Chief Justice Warren in the *Brown* decision (Wollenberg, 1976).

O’Connell, 2020b; Quinn, 2020; *San Francisco NAACP v. SFUSD*, 2001). The Court released SFUSD from oversight in 2005, despite noting that resegregation seemed to be occurring, relinquishing local control to educational authorities (*San Francisco NAACP v. SFUSD*, 2005).

The current student assignment policy relies fully on choice and uses a lottery system with the home address as the only self-reporting factor on the student’s application. When there are more student applications than a school has capacity to accept, the lottery uses tiebreakers to assign students. Tiebreakers include sibling preference, living in the school’s attendance area, and living in an area with the lowest average test scores (SFUSD, 2021e). The process has been critiqued for being opaque and stressful, in addition to being inequitable (Schwartz, 2018a). As SFUSD’s student assignment policy became less racially-conscious, resegregation has occurred and continues to be a challenge in a district composed of nine distinct racial/ethnic categories of students (Quinn, 2020; SFUSD, 2021d). Gentrification has also contributed to (re)segregation under the current student assignment policy (Goldstein, 2019; Quinn, 2020; SFUSD, 2021d). In 2020, the SFUSD School Board voted to develop a new elementary student assignment policy with integration as a prioritized goal (SFUSD, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Tucker & Fancher, 2020). The implementation of the plan is set to begin with kindergarteners in the 2023-2024 school year. The new system will use zones, and students will have the opportunity to apply to schools within their zone, though the district does not guarantee choices to any applicant (SFUSD, 2021b). While the plan is still being developed, the policy suggests schools will be socioeconomically diversified by remaining close to the district’s free and reduced-price meal percentage. The zones will also be “conscious of other measurable characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, English proficiency, disability, and student academic performance” (SFUSD, 2020, p. 3). In recent months and years, the school board has made various efforts to address issues of inequity beyond integration, some of which have been more effective than others (Chotiner, 2021; Vainshtein, 2021).

St. Louis Public Schools

As one of the oldest and largest voluntary integration programs in the country (Benchaabane, 2018), the St. Louis Student Transfer Program, which is overseen by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC), continues to serve as a policy example of unrealized potential. Due to the program’s size, age, nuanced evolution, and local relevance for a team of Missouri-based scholars, it was included in the study. After *Brown*, the racial composition of SLPS minimally changed due to the city’s long-withstanding housing practices supporting segregation through redlining and other housing tactics. Even after the Fair Housing Act of 1968, restrictive covenants remained legal until the 1972 *Mayers v. Ridley* case, keeping Black families from entering white communities and Black children from attending white schools. In the same year, Minnie Liddell and other Black St. Louis city parents filed suit against SLPS and the state of Missouri for violating *Brown* (*Liddell v. Board of Education*, 1972) and a series of legal proceedings began that are still ongoing, leading to what is now more commonly referred to as “the VICC program,” named after the governing body that oversees the desegregation plan (VICC, n.d.e).

Since many legal and common practices maintained St. Louis’ racial segregation on a more permanent basis, the best attempt imagined meant integrating schools temporarily through busing. Rather than consolidating all of the metropolitan-area districts, the plan relied on interdistrict cooperation and the maintenance of separate, locally-controlled districts (*Liddell v. Board of Education*, 1983; Wells & Crain, 1997). Originally, 23 suburban districts were required to participate in the desegregation program and SLPS students could choose to attend schools in any of these districts.

SLPS families could apply to the program if their children were African American³ residents of St. Louis City and had no behavioral concerns reported by their school in the past two years. Students were accepted to the program if they met all initial requirements, space permitting. However, shortly thereafter, only 16 districts were involved and zoning areas were established as part of the plan. St. Louis County school districts opted out if their district had an African American student population of 25% or more (FOCUS St. Louis, 1999). By 1999, VICC peaked at over 14,000 students and was the largest desegregation program in the country (VICC, n.d.g). Over time, magnet and charter schools were created and considered a part of St. Louis' larger integration efforts. This quickly shifted the discourse to one of choice where it was an individual family's responsibility to correct racial education inequities as the state of Missouri began backing away from funding and promoting VICC as a racial inequity-based program (VICC, n.d.f; Wolff, 2016). By 2016, VICC received its final extension and will come to an end in the 2023-2024 school year, with the potential option to shift to an income-based program (Taketa, 2016). However, no proposal is being worked on currently. The 3,400 students that remain in the program are mainly siblings of older VICC students (VICC, n.d.g, The State of Integration in St Louis section, para. 4). When they graduate, St. Louis will still be racially segregated along city and county lines.

Data Collection

Once the sites for our study were identified, data was gathered on the school districts and their integration policies. We began by critically investigating the context and history of school (de)segregation for each locale before moving on to the districts' most recently implemented integration policies. Using CDA (Fairclough, 2014), the multimodal components of resources (e.g., pictures, audio, website layout) were considered as data as well as any adjacent or interacting discursive texts to desegregation (e.g., "redlining"). By utilizing the Google search engine along with online library resources, we searched the districts' and cities' names alongside key words such as "segregation," "desegregation," and "integration." As we learned more about each location, we then searched site-specific terms, such as the name of certain policies (e.g., "Diversity Management Plan"), influential policy themes (e.g., "choice"), school zones/types (e.g., "neighborhood"), and key people and moments (e.g., "*Liddell v. Board of Education*"). A variety of documents and other resources were gathered both for future data analysis as well as to help contextualize the policies. These included 31 website pages, eight board meeting minutes, 26 policies/policy reports, 34 academic journal publications, three monographs/dissertations, 52 online newspaper articles, six books, five podcasts/audio recordings, three court cases, and 11 video recordings (see Table 3). To aid in synthesizing our general understanding of each school district as well as begin exploring similarities and differences across the sites, memos were written for each district. These included the history of desegregation in each city/district, what happened during and after desegregation, when resegregation began and what it looked like, and an overview of the current integration policy. Using the specific terminology from the policy documents (e.g., race, ethnicity, etc.) was prioritized during the writing process to most accurately reflect the racial and choice discourses present within each context. Additionally, demographic data was compiled for each city and district to further contextualize the policies.

³ "African-American" is the chosen identifying term for VICC. Other documentation pertaining to this plan uses "Black." Although we are using them interchangeably because of the texts informing this work, we acknowledge they are not interchangeable as a default, including the Black communities of SLPS.

Table 3
Documents and Resources Collected for Analysis

Types of Documents	School Districts			Total
	MNPS	SFUSD	SLPS	
Website pages	8	5	18	31
Board meeting minutes	7	1	0	8
Policies/policy reports	6	4	16	26
Academic journal publications	0	20	14	34
Monographs/dissertations	0	0	3	3
Online newspaper articles	21	19	12	52
Books	1	2	3	6
Podcasts/audio recordings	1	1	3	5
Court cases	1	1	1	3
Video recordings	10	1	0	11
Total	55	54	70	179

Data Analysis

To aid in preliminary data analysis, we created distinct author pairings per district and created a data table to answer our study’s research questions. While filling out the table and engaging with discussions amongst the research team, we realized the initial research questions did not provide the most effective analysis of the districts and their policies, especially regarding school choice. Thus, the initial research questions were reconsidered and ultimately rewritten to form the two questions that are utilized within this article. After this reframing, 28 open codes emphasizing policy word choice regarding population signaling (e.g., urban/suburban), policy goals (e.g., challenge/maintain), and policy methods (e.g., zoning) were identified and compiled to see what potential topics emerged from the documents and resources. These codes were then organized into categories based on how discourses of race and choice were included within the policy documents as well as how the policies either upheld or disrupted the status quo regarding racial inequities in schools. Next, we analyzed the documents using theoretical coding based on the aforementioned tenets of CPA (Diem et al., 2014; Horsford et al., 2019) and interest divergence (Gillborn, 2013; Guinier, 2004), noticing that some of the theoretical tenets related to certain districts more than others. Our fundamental application of Fairclough’s (2014) CDA emphasized the power behind discourse and the roots of (de)segregation around race and racism. This spanned many policies, rhetoric, and decades in our data collection stage. However, select CPA tenets and interest divergence helped us to narrow our scope without dismissing the shaping discourses in which school choice now appears to be at the center. Lastly, overarching themes were constructed by identifying connections between the open and theoretical codes (e.g., choice + policy roots and development). These larger themes provided the primary basis for the findings section as they most

effectively answered the research questions through the combination of both open and bounded analysis approaches. The research team routinely collectively read and discussed each pair's findings to prioritize the documented and discoverable discourses of race and choice in the policies rather than the perceived intents and impacts of the policies. Evidence was often presented in several document formats (e.g., newspaper article, court case, and program webpage) per overarching theme to strengthen the analysis.

Our onto-epistemologies play integral roles in the research we choose to engage in and the ways in which we go about doing our research. Milner (2007) notes,

How education research is conducted may be just as important as *what* is actually discovered in a study. Moreover, who conducts the research, particularly what they know, and the nature of their critical racial and cultural consciousness—their views, perspectives, and biases—may also be essential to how those in education research come to know and know what is known. (p. 397)

We are five women, one of whom is a professor and the rest are doctoral students. One of us is a white woman from the U.S. Southwest whose research experience centers on district politics and policymaking, particularly school desegregation. One of us is a Black woman from St. Louis whose family has a complicated generational student herstory with the St. Louis City/County educational divide, and whose theoretical and methodological interests align with the subject of this study. Two of us are white cisgender women who previously taught in public schools, one in an urban context within a highly segregated metropolitan area and the other in more urban/suburban contexts with various levels of segregation across racial and socioeconomic lines. One of us is a Ghanaian woman who is new to the U.S. public education system and is interested in using CPA as an approach for immigration policy analysis as well as the lived experiences of international students. Collectively, we all have an interest in working toward better understanding how to make school systems more equitable in the United States.

School Integration Across Contexts

The findings of our study point to the various racial and choice discourses school districts used when crafting integration policies and how the local contexts played a role in how these discourses were framed to address existing racial inequities. Specifically, we view the plans in each of the districts as following along a spectrum of explicitly centering race in their efforts with school choice being an integral component in each of the plans. In SFUSD, the district is more intentional about addressing race in their newly adopted, not yet implemented student assignment policy, whereas in MNPS, race is among the many factors included in the district's diversity plan and is used interchangeably with other factors. Finally, in the desegregation plan that includes SLPS, race is still centered but the plan is scheduled to be phased out in the coming years with magnet schools and evolving discourses of choice being more of a key component. In this section, we present findings for each of the districts, focusing on how discourses of race and choice connect to tenets of CPA and interest divergence.

Metro Nashville Public Schools

While Nashville has a long history of desegregation, and more recently resegregation, our focus is on MNPS's current attempt to address these concerns: the Diversity Management Plan. In this section, discourses of race and choice within and surrounding this policy are presented, especially regarding the policy's roots, wordings, and solutions. By including discourses from board

members, guardians, students, and the policy documents themselves, we hope to shed light upon how MNPS attempted to improve, or at least maintain, integration while navigating the politics of race and school choice.

Policy Roots and the Intersection of Race and Choice

Roots of the Diversity Management Plan can be traced back to an August 2012 MNPS board meeting where debate took hold regarding a twice-denied charter school application (MNPS Board of Education, 2012a). Board members shared concerns regarding some of the charter school's policies, primarily focusing on their lack of a diversity plan they feared would likely lead to further racial and socioeconomic isolation within MNPS. Most of the MNPS board felt it was an urgent issue, with member Ed Kindall arguing that "this great city can be a flagship by proactively maintaining and promoting diversity in all of our schools, or we can be the national model for developing tools to destroy it" (MNPS Board of Education, 2012a, p. 17). Yet, the Tennessee State Board of Education was notably less concerned as they pressured the MNPS school board to accept the application, regardless of their hesitations (MNPS Board of Education, 2012a). Resisting the pressure of the State School Board and Tennessee's Education Commissioner, MNPS ultimately rejected the application for a third time, losing \$3.4 million in funding from state retaliation (Strauss, 2012). To provide protection from future racially and socioeconomically isolated charter schools that may attempt to join MNPS, the Diversity Management Plan was developed and ultimately approved by a unanimous 9-0 vote in February 2013 (MNPS Board of Education, 2013).

From its inception, discourses of race and choice have been present within MNPS's integration initiative. While there were board members concerned about the growing racial and socioeconomic isolation within the school district before August 2012, especially regarding an approved 2008 rezoning proposal that increased such isolation (MNPS Board of Education, 2008; *Spurlock v. Fox*, 2013), an integration plan was not proposed until this specific under-regulated choice option threatened to worsen social stratification across schools. Thus, it was not solely racial or choice-based discourses present within these exchanges, it was instead their intersection. For example, in August 2012, board member Anna Shepherd argued that this charter school application, alongside state pressure, was an example of "furthering private-interest, open-enrollment charter schools - or segregation by another name" (MNPS Board of Education, 2012a, p. 13). Board member Ed Kindall stated that, "if approved in its present form, it opens the floodgate for an unlimited number of racially and economically isolated charter schools throughout Nashville" (MNPS Board of Education, 2012a, p. 15). Vice Chair of the board Mark North even articulated concern that two distinct charter "systems" were being created, one "designed to isolate the minority, and the other system for wealthy students, designed for government-funded white-flight" (MNPS Board of Education, 2012a, p. 18). Each of these statements exemplifies how the combination of both race and choice discourses provided the foundation for resisting the admittance of the charter school that, if admitted, was feared to further stratify students across racial and socioeconomic lines.

Problems, Solutions, and their Contradictions in Policy Wording

Looking at the language within the document itself, the MNPS Diversity Management Plan utilizes "diversity" as a primary racial discourse when describing the purpose behind and definitions within the document. "Diversity" is defined using a four-part approach, which includes free or reduced meals, English language service, and disability status, along with student race/ethnicity. This follows the trends identified in the meetings leading to the policy's creation where the term "diversity" was frequently used interchangeably with "race" and "socioeconomic status," as well as

alongside “desegregation” (MNPS Board of Education, 2012a, 2012b). In the policy document, however, race/ethnicity is centered in two primary ways. First, racial/ethnic isolation is specifically described as an “educational disadvantage” when justifying the importance of this document, without mentioning the other three characteristics of diversity that would be included later in the policy (MNPS, n.d.a, p. 1). Second, in the “diverse school” designation process, “diversity” is defined and measured via four parts. Yet the metric for racial/ethnic diversity is the sole characteristic that is included in all diversity designations, while a combination of only two of the other three characteristics is required (MNPS, n.d.a, 2019).

Notable shifts occur, however, when descriptions of the policy’s implementation only utilize “race-neutral” solutions (MNPS, n.d.a, p. 6). Although the now-ended federal guidance on voluntary school integration plans likely influenced the inclusion of race-neutral approaches (U.S. DOJ & U.S. DOE, n.d.), this shift from race-conscious to race-neutral language is notable as it discursively diverges from the initial framing of the plan’s purpose: “reducing racial isolation and promoting diversity” (MNPS, n.d.b, p. 1). From the accessible data, discourses of choice continue to be present in the development of the Diversity Management Plan as well, but instead of primarily being the reason for resegregation concerns, choice options are proposed as the path to achieving integration success (MNPS, n.d.b). According to the Diversity Management Plan, when there are diversity concerns in schools, issues such as cluster configuration, zoning and rezoning, school openings and closings, and transportation services, will be addressed in a “race-neutral” way (MNPS, n.d.a, p. 6). Then “opportunities and incentives made available by the District” will hopefully lead parents to make choices that decrease the concerning school segregation rates (MNPS, n.d.a, p. 6). Thus, we are left to ponder a seemingly contradictory situation: how have the original concerns presented in 2012 regarding a charter school application with little concern for race and diversity been addressed utilizing an integration plan that relies on race-neutral and choice-centered discourses?

Choices and Their Limitations

Since the creation of the Diversity Management Plan, local and state news outlets have illuminated ways that rezoning plans, school accessibility, long bus rides, and disjointed community knowledge about school options have maintained segregation levels in MNPS (Garrison, 2014; Knight, 2020a; Zelinski, 2014). Discourses of race, choice, and their intersections have been central themes throughout these publications. Seventh-grader Brandon Ramsey, whose mother moved to Nashville from the Dominican Republic, was a student who utilized the free transportation offered to low-income middle and high school students participating in choice schools (Zelinski, 2014). When discussing why his mother signed him up for the school district lottery system, Brandon stated, “At the beginning, I didn’t know why she wanted me at this new school [...] Once I realized the opportunities that I’ll be given in the next two years [...] I was like, ‘Oh, all right, this is probably what’s best’” (Zelinski, 2014, para. 77). While choice options gave Brandon the opportunity to enter a new school feeder pattern that his mom had heard provided more academic opportunities to their students, he also had to ride the public bus about 90 minutes each way to access it.

It is important to note that Brandon may not necessarily represent the majority of Black student experiences, as local reporting has outlined the barriers racially marginalized communities in Nashville face accessing even nearby choices due to unequal distribution of knowledge and resources (Knight, 2020a). One Black father was quoted describing the inaccessibility of choice offerings for many Black and other racially minoritized families in MNPS, “I’m 6’2” in height, my daughter is 3-foot. If I put food at the top of the cabinet and say there’s plenty of choices there, why don’t you get some food? She can’t reach the food” (Knight, 2020b, 6:00). The discourses around white middle- and upper-class families, however, indicate that they have significantly easier access to

the choices present within MNPS (Knight, 2020a). MNPS Mom Susan Hawes, a self-described “anti-choice school proponent,” acknowledged that East Nashville has a “racial issue” that “nobody wants to admit,” where white parents take part in the choice system to avoid enrolling their children in predominantly Black- and racially minoritized-zoned schools (Zelinski, 2014, para. 20, 25).

Although she argues, “We have great schools. We’re just so brainwashed into thinking it has to be a choice or it’s not adequate,” she still sends her students to out-of-zone choice schools (Zelinski, 2014, para. 26). Thus, even white families in opposition of the racial stratification perpetuated by the MNPS choice system struggle to resist the allure of options.

According to the 2018-2019 Annual Diversity Report, the percentage of schools that meet all of the criteria for achieving “diversity” has stayed nearly stagnant over the past four years, at around 45% (MNPS, 2019, p. 6). This partially may be due to the reliance on race-neutral choice to incentivize and guide families into more diverse school settings, especially since school choice initiatives have often proven to maintain or increase segregation rates (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Jennings, 2010; Kotok et al., 2017; MNPS, n.d.a, n.d.b; Saporito, 2003). It also may be influenced by the roots of the policy document itself since it was specifically written to protect the district from charter schools without plans to address diversity concerns, as opposed to reverse any segregation rates maintained at the time (MNPS Board of Education, 2012a). Recently, the MNPS Diversity and Equity Office, which publishes the accountability reports, closed due to budget cuts followed by the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Knight, 2019, 2020a). Consequently, integration efforts of MNPS are in an uncertain place. Yet, evolving district leadership, changes in federal incentives/oversight, and COVID-19 consequences have the potential to recenter diversity concerns in the coming years (Bartlett, 2020; Cooper, 2020; Knight, 2019).

San Francisco Unified School District

SFUSD has had five major desegregation plan iterations and is currently creating a new student assignment plan for elementary schools (SFUSD, 2020). In this section, expansion of choice, discursive racial complexity, institutional accountability, and tensions around inclusion of racially minoritized voices are reviewed to explore the new policy’s development and potential implementation. We focused on these findings as they illustrate continuous efforts by SFUSD to be more inclusive and responsive to the diversity of their community, although the outcomes of their efforts are yet to be seen.

Enduring Im/balance of Choice and Integration

Choice has long been a factor in the roots and development of school desegregation in San Francisco. While choice was initially a result of a legal decision establishing bilingual accommodations as a civil rights issue (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974), it has continually been seen as a required mechanism to prevent “flight” and divestment from the public school system, especially by white and Chinese families (SFUSD, 2021d; Wollenberg, 1976).

Choice has evolved into an expansive and overarching component of SFUSD’s current plan. The student assignment policy is described as a full choice system but has abandoned the self-reporting of extensive factors from the prior plans. While the district’s goal relied on the “theory that more choice would result in more integration, the opposite has turned out to be true” (Levitt & O’Connell, 2020b, Current Student Assignment System section). Additionally, for many guardians, the system “is a mixture of overwhelming, stressful and baffling” (Schwartz, 2018a, para. 6). One described the process as “a burden on every parent” (Schwartz, 2018a, para. 10). Even guardians who feel the system advantages their child, due for example to gentrification of neighborhoods with historically low test scores, understand the current system is not equitable. This was the case for

Anne Zimmerman, a white parent who shared, “I feel so very conflicted’ about getting an advantage,” adding that, “The system was developed to equalize the playing field, and I don’t think it really has done it” (Goldstein, 2019, para. 26). The challenges many families face under the current choice system, including inequitable access to choice, has led to broad dissatisfaction (Levitt & O’Connell, 2020a).

To address inequitable access to choice, SFUSD is attempting to seek more community input in the new integration plan (SFUSD, 2021a, 2021b, 2021d). In 2020, the SFUSD School Board approved adopting a new assignment policy in which choice continues to be a factor, although the policy aims at balancing choice with goals of integration (SFUSD, 2020). The district website explains, “While we can’t guarantee that each child will be assigned to their top choice, we can provide families with the knowledge that their child will be assigned to one of the schools in their zone” (SFUSD, 2021b, New Elementary School Assignment Policy section). The discursive limitation on choice here indicates a shift away from the prioritization of choice which had been more beneficial for white and Asian families. While the discourses of choice have been a common thread in SFUSD desegregation policies, the degree to which choice has been prioritized has fluctuated.

Racial Discourses Reflect Multiplicity

Like choice, the discourses of race in SFUSD have been central to understanding its integration efforts. Racial discourses have shifted in SFUSD policies. While they were once explicitly exclusionary, they are now explicitly inclusive. Moreover, the racial discourses reflect the unique demographics of the city’s population, indicating a school integration that is beyond the Black/white dichotomy. The discourses, however, are not beyond critique, as there are places in the policy where the rhetoric does not meet the practiced reality. Race is included yet is not central in the planning of the newest SFUSD student assignment policy (SFUSD 2020, 2021b). The district explains they are trying to zone choices conscious of the complexity of racial and economic diversity, while allowing predictable and reliable choices within such zones (SFUSD 2021b). The new student assignment plan harkens back to the original 1971 mandated desegregation plan using contiguous zones and racial balancing goals. However, this time they purport to implement a more inclusive process (SFUSD, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021d).

Current SFUSD discourses indicate an expansive definition of diversity and equity beyond student assignment policies. Reflecting the multiplicity of racial and ethnic diversity in the district, SFUSD discourses around integration are conscious of racial complexity. For example, SFUSD’s “Vision” defines equity as

The work of eliminating oppression, ending biases, and ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants through the creation of multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial practices and conditions; removing the predictability of success or failure that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor. (SFUSD, 2014, p. 16)

While the definition includes a value of meritocratic outcomes and perpetuates current neoliberal discourse in education, it also frames equity as multi-faceted and pluralistic in its discursive description of diversity. SFUSD has a more racially diverse student demographic than the other school districts analyzed in this study, and the discourses in the policies reflect the multiplicity of this diversity. SFUSD has also conceived an expansive view of integration. In the above definition, SFUSD understands the work of equity to “eliminate oppression” (SFUSD, 2014, p. 16). It does not, however, acknowledge or challenge white supremacy as the structure of racist oppression. The goals of eliminating oppression and ending biases are not possible as absolutes, so this discourse

may be overly optimistic. Moreover, if SFUSD is communicating more inclusivity without centering equitable practices, this would indicate a fracture between rhetoric and reality.

There are discourses to indicate some intended policies that meet the discourses they have set. For example, one of their listed goals is to “make social justice a reality by ensuring every student has access to high-quality teaching and learning” (SFUSD, 2021c, Our Universal Goals section). The robust discourses illustrate beliefs and intentions that integration goes beyond student assignment policies. Indeed, the discourses are pervasive across various policy documents. For example, *SFUSD Vision 2025: Reimagining Public Education in San Francisco for a New Generation* (SFUSD, 2014) directs the district toward “Cultural Competence and Multilingualism” as one of “Ten Big Shifts,” explaining “Students will be globally aware, multilingual and culturally competent, and fluent in a range of ‘second languages’ including sign language and computer coding. Our graduates will see diversity in its many forms as an asset” (p. 7). This shift shows a broad conceptualization of diversity, nuanced with goals toward cultural competence. The discourses throughout SFUSD’s myriad policy documents are in alignment with equitable, integrative, and anti-oppressive values, especially compared to the other districts in this study. Still, it is worth noting, discourses were written and published by those in power. In practice, the policy documents may or may not address those whom the district purports to serve.

Acknowledging Accountability in SFUSD Discourses

In efforts to make the new student assignment plan more transparent and community-serving, SFUSD has created a blog that provides information to constituents and invites community feedback as part of the planning of the new student assignment policy process (SFUSD, 2021d). The content on the blog also appears to reflect an ongoing and self-reflective accountability on the part of SFUSD. For example, the district details the history of desegregation policies in the district, including shortcomings and successes. Addressing SFUSD’s history directly and reflectively illustrates how the district publicly commits to taking accountability for making policies that are more equitable moving forward. In one blog post, the district writes:

Over the past 50 years, SFUSD has maintained a goal to eliminate segregation and deliver an excellent education for every student. But despite our best intentions, our current plan has not worked. Today, we have a unique opportunity to take decisive action to reverse the troubling resegregation of our city’s schools, and ensure equitable educational access for children of all backgrounds. (Levitt & O’Connell, 2020b, Conclusion section)

The district discourse indicates reflection on the ways its past policies have created and sustained inequity. In addition, the district acknowledges its responsibility for creating policies and schools that in fact “reverse” segregation by including its goal of “reversing the trend of racial isolation and the concentration of underserved students in the same school” (SFUSD, 2010, p. 1) into the student assignment policy. Moreover, the district acknowledges the creation of a new student assignment policy is merely “*one part* of creating educational environments in which all students can flourish” (SFUSD, 2010, p. 1, emphasis in original). Although discursively SFUSD is taking steps towards including more voices and involving communities in decision making, a barrier that the district has failed to overcome in the past, balancing the needs of various groups in practice may continue to prove to be a challenge.

Inclusion of Marginalized Voices: Negotiating Power in Policymaking and Choice

SFUSD has an ongoing history of trying to generate change through the creation of policies aimed at integration, often in collaboration with community members (Quinn, 2020; Wollenberg, 1976). Despite aims at being inclusive in the past, SFUSD has struggled to achieve integration while making policies that include the voices of historically marginalized groups (Quinn, 2020; SFUSD 2021d). Through all of SFUSD's desegregation plans, the appeasement of affluent, mostly Chinese, Chinese American, and white families' desire for choice has continued to disempower Black and Latinx students and limit equitable, integrative efforts. In the creation of the most recent assignment policy for elementary schools, the Board of Education seemingly solicited community input in several ways. Their efforts included "12 community workshops to gather public input, 4 virtual community information sessions, [and] dozens of additional conversations with San Francisco families and community groups" before creating a proposal to the Board (SFUSD, 2021b, Background section). Since the policy is still in development, it remains to be seen how effective negotiations will be between those in power and those who have historically and continually been disempowered.

Building on a robust history of grassroots coalitions, many of which represented racially minoritized communities (Quinn, 2020; Wollenberg, 1976), SFUSD has attempted to integrate voices of racially minoritized individuals and groups in decision-making. For example, the SFUSD Office of Access and Equity established the African American Parent Advisory Council (AAPAC) in 2013 (AAPAC, 2017, p. 2). AAPAC's mission is to "provide a forum to hear the ideas of [SFUSD]'s African-American parent community, and respond to those ideas by educating and informing parents of district resources, policies, and programs" (AAPAC, 2017, p. 2). AAPAC seeks to "empower the lives of all African-American children and families" and "lift every parent voice and help less engaged parents find their choice through [AAPAC]" (AAPAC, 2017, p. 2). SFUSD has attempted to incorporate African American voices into their decision-making by making the group an official part of the district organization. Moreover, there is evidence that the district has responded favorably to AAPAC's recommendations. At a March 2017 school board meeting, for example, AAPAC "share[d] Black family concerns and experiences when navigating SFUSD's Student Assignment Process" (p. 3). They also shared recommendations for SFUSD recruitment, placement, and retention (p. 15). Some of the recommendations, including developing high performing schools regardless of location and centering culturally responsive teaching and training, are reflected in other policy documents, not the least of which is the new elementary student assignment policy (SFUSD, 2021b).

In SFUSD, we found discursive evidence that the district aims at being more inclusive and responsive to diverse community input. However, in practice, tensions around decisions in prior policies may impact the implementation of the current plan. Moreover, some of the language used to describe the core values of the "Student-centered, Fearless, United, Social Justice, and Diversity-driven" (SFUSD, 2021c) district have not always been evident in the district's actions. Due to underlying factors such as the power structure and organizational composition of the school governance system, the realities of enforcing those policies may not always align with the district's intended goals (Horsford et al., 2019). This is complicated and challenging work that is still ongoing.

St. Louis Public Schools

St. Louis is one of the most segregated cities in the United States (Comen, 2019). Yet, the metropolitan area's desegregation plan is coming to an end in a couple of years. It is in this context that the VICC program poses an existential question on their website homepage:

How do we continue a program which has proven to be beneficial in light of the legal and financial challenges, given that racial segregation since the inception of the program has certainly not diminished and, in fact, has likely increased in many areas of metropolitan St. Louis? (VICC, n.d.g, The State of Integration in St Louis section, para. 4).

For now, with no replacement on the horizon, there does not seem to be an answer to this question. In this section, we elaborate on three themes in the discourse of SLPS and the St. Louis Student integration plan, the VICC program, including: how the VICC program is discursively racially focused, which has contributed to its ultimate elimination; the discourses indicating (un)accountability of institutions involved in the VICC program; and discourses of choice used as a tool/solution to desegregation in the plan, eventually replacing integration efforts.

Divergences: Racially Focused Yet Divested

Race has been central to the plan to desegregate SLPS since the policy's inception. However, the focus on race has also served as a catalyst for divestment by the various districts that SLPS would rely upon to desegregate its schools and is a primary reason noted as to why the VICC program is ending. In the broader context of St. Louis' residential segregation, enduring divestment from St. Louis City has led to it being geographically surrounded by a predominantly white suburban society, St. Louis County, which created the division (French, 2002; Wells & Crain, 1997). It is important to note the city-county divide in St. Louis, which is the result of a long history of racist residential discrimination (Cambria et al., 2018). Thus, the VICC program was created for the unique geography of St. Louis.

We acknowledge St. Louis' pervasiveness with race-based decision-making provided multiple entry points to VICC's policy roots since *Brown*. The most direct path is reflected in the *Liddell* decisions, which ultimately led to VICC's creation in the 1983 desegregation agreement, a court-led plan providing accountability for the State of Missouri and SLPS's wrongdoings and responsibilities. Because the *Liddell* case was initiated and won on the basis of race-based discrimination, the resulting settlement held race at its center. The plan allowed surrounding county school districts to retain their autonomy and local control of their tax dollars, while financially benefiting through extra funding (*Liddell v. Board of Education*, 1983; Wells & Crain, 1997). City magnet schools were also created and funded by the state to entice white county students to enroll in city schools to disrupt further segregation. Although the program's design involved numerous stakeholders, SLPS and the State of Missouri were not fully supportive of the financial burden placed on their budgets. Ten years later, Missouri Attorney General (later Governor) Jay Nixon asked the court to declare unitary status in SLPS, end state funding, and end the court's supervision of the court-ordered desegregation programs (FOCUS St. Louis, 1999). By 1999, local residents voted to offset the financial burden to the state with a state tax and Missouri legislators approved a bill authorizing the operation of charter schools in St. Louis and Kansas City (*Liddell v. Board of Education*, 1999; S.B. 781).

While the VICC program was explicit about using race as a factor, there has not been an enduring commitment to redress racial inequities. Indeed, the policies pertaining to VICC's design, purpose, and support structures are constantly in flux. The plan was revised and removed from federal oversight in 1999 (*Liddell v. Board of Education*, 1999). By 2016, the VICC governing board had voted to begin eliminating the program, including such measures as decreasing its African American

student acceptance⁴ into participating county/suburban schools. The VICC program is in its final, five-year extension with reduced enrollment following the 2018-2019 school year based on VICC's belief that race-based school desegregation programs are not intended to continue in perpetuity and this one was originally designed to have a finite existence (VICC, 2016, para. 1). The VICC Executive Director said it is a legal requirement that the program have an ending date (Crouch, 2016). One Superintendent of a VICC participating school district mentioned the VICC board needed to do something as a region based on family income because "poverty isn't going away" (Crouch, 2016, Smaller Numbers section, para. 8)⁵. Again, there have been limited, contextual commitments to desegregation in St Louis, especially around the explicitly race-centered policy.

"Downstream" from Power, Who Is Accountable?

Since its inception, the VICC program has been voluntary, putting the onus on individuals' decisions rather than creating systemic education changes. When settlement negotiations stemming from the *Liddell* case were occurring in the mid 1970s, it became clear the districts would either have to consolidate to achieve school desegregation, or another alternative would have to be agreed upon (Wells & Crain, 1997). If SLPS were to remain autonomous, then the desegregation plan would be dependent on the participation of the surrounding predominantly white school districts in St. Louis County (La Pierre, 1987; Wells & Crain, 1997). However, with the consent decree, county school districts felt a sense of victory in that they would be able to remain separate so long as they agreed to accept transfer students from the city (*Liddell v. Board of Education*, 1983; Wells & Crain, 1997). Instead of mandating desegregation of any of the districts, the plan was almost entirely one-directional, placing most of the burden of desegregation on Black students and families of the predominantly Black SLPS district to desegregate the white suburban schools.

Moreover, for the thousands of students who could not or did not participate⁶ in the transfer program, they were left to attend public schools that had little financial or political investments in the city. Prior to 1999, as part of the federal oversight of the VICC plan, the state was providing financial compensation to SLPS for half of the aid of each student who transferred to a participating suburban district (*Liddell v. Board of Education*, 1983; Wells & Crain, 1997). Unfortunately, this accountability was not enduring (Strauss, 2017). Since 1999, SLPS has not received funding from the state for the transfer students leaving its district, nor does it receive any additional funding for improving the quality of its schools. VICC, serving as the financial operations organization for the plan, encountered a financial reduction as well. St. Louis City residents were no longer able to attend any participating county school. Instead, zones were assigned to decrease transportation costs.

⁴ Caps were placed on Black student enrollment from city to county schools, but no cap was placed on white student enrollment from county to city (magnet) schools (Taketa, 2016; VICC, n.d.f).

⁵ "The VICC Board may commission a study in the future to transition over time to a more modern program that would potentially include additional districts and revise the student selection process from race to socio-economic status which will achieve the goals of both racial integration and diversity as well as socio-economic diversity. There will be many issues that will have to be identified, discussed and resolved and, as a result, we do not anticipate any such transition occurring in the immediate future—possibly as late as after the final extension (2023/24) but possibly earlier than that if achievable. The implementation of a program with a revised student selection process would require the unanimous approval of all VICC districts as well as any new districts included in such Program" (VICC, n.d.f).

⁶ "In order to participate in this program, the student applicant must be in good behavior standing in his or her current and/or previous school. If your child has demonstrated disruptive behavior in school during the last two years, as reported by the current or previously attended schools, your child could be turned down for a transfer" (VICC, n.d.b, para. 3).

Additionally, starting in the 2004-2005 school year, the funding received by participating suburban schools was capped to approximately \$7,000. This also meant that “If full pupil cost reimbursement fails, a county district may give a one-year notice to opt out of the program” (VICC, n.d.c, para. 5). The lack of funding caused preventable disruptions to the educational experience of St. Louis City students, regardless of the school district in which they enrolled (Crouch & Moskop, 2014; Strauss, 2017).

Despite the ongoing challenges it faces, “The [VICC] program has a long track record of increasing the graduation rate, attendance rate, and achievement levels of students involved in the program” (VICC, n.d.g, The State of Integration in St. Louis section, para. 3). More than 70,000 students have participated in the program since its inception. Still, it is important to note that there were also real negative consequences for Black students who participated in the program: long travel times on transfer buses as well as difficulties around code switching, social anxieties, feelings of isolation, microaggressions, and “soft racism” (Frenske, 2019; Glass, 2015a, 2015b; Rias, 2018).

As the VICC program winds down, SLPS is having to make difficult decisions about its future. In December 2020, SLPS Superintendent Adams presented to the school board a proposal to close several schools due to budget constraints. During this presentation, Dr. Adams stated, Equity is a long-standing, systemic challenge of this region, and we are addressing it within our own system as one of the five pillars in our Transformation Plan (3.0). Still, there are forces at work that require political and financial investments beyond what the District can afford on its own: We operate downstream from political forces that have divested themselves of our neighborhoods and our children. (Adams & Miller, 2020, p. 3)

Despite accountability on the part of the SLPS, the district is working in a political system that is not accountable to the students and families in the community. SLPS uses discourses that indicate they “own” their past (Adams & Miller, 2020, p. 3). However, the SLPS Superintendent’s statement suggests that it is the larger political forces outside the district that are not committed to integration. Furthermore, the broader systems continue to demonstrate a lack of responsibility to the students of SLPS. Instead, larger institutions outside of SLPS in Missouri have continued to use discourses of choice to evade integrative efforts and shift the blame of racial inequities to families rather than on governmental policies and institutions that created them (FOCUS St. Louis, 1999; IFF 2009).

Choice and Its Contradictions for Desegregation

“Choice” implies the availability (and not restriction of) options, where the limitations are imposed by the chooser, not the chosen. Applied to St. Louis, choice meant Black and white families could choose to integrate if they wanted, but the school districts and state put limits on what choice meant for Black families, while expanding it for everyone else,⁷ particularly white families. In reality, choice for Black families was only available if white families, school districts, and governmental officials chose to grant special, temporary permissions to them. The VICC website states, “This Settlement Agreement allows African-American students residing in the City of St. Louis to attend one of several school districts in St. Louis County provided certain requirements are met” (VICC, n.d.a, para. 1). As VICC references, Black families were “allow[ed]” to participate in the VICC program, showing VICC as inferring there was a larger choice made before choice arrived

⁷ The policy states “non-African American” students, not white students exclusively. However, the origins of the *Brown* violations in the *Liddell* suit, as well as corresponding redlining practices, are an issue of Black and white segregation specifically in the St. Louis context. The largest county participation in magnet schools is from white students and the participating county schools are predominantly white districts (VICC, n.d.d).

“downstream” to them. And in this permission-granting choice, caps were set on Black city student enrollment since inception, with supportive funding decreasing over time, though white county students have choices, too.

Choice was a compromise to maintain the separate school districts throughout the county, yet it has been used to evade school integration in SLPS, as the county school districts’ participation were voluntary and often ended once a district met its racial quota (FOCUS St. Louis, 1999; Wells & Crain, 1997). Further, the new settlement agreement in 1999 limited the full choice of Black students in the city with the addition of attendance zones restricting county school options (*Liddell v. Board of Education*, 1999; VICC, n.d.c). While choice options continued to expand for white county students with the addition of more magnet schools and shrink for Black city students with the zoning of VICC-participating county schools, SLPS was also shifting the ways in which it marketed and structured magnet schools. Additionally, the district restructured its high schools as “comprehensive” and began referring to them as choice schools (SLPS, 2021). This also demonstrates a major shift from racial discourse to choice discourse, as this alters the discourse from being city/county or Black/white to being that of choice and an individual’s responsibility to choose wisely.

Missouri has a history of lacking support for public schools and a desire to eliminate school funding for the sake of lowering taxes (Wells & Crain, 1997). School choice is seen by some as an expression of individual liberty and personal freedom, values that are popular among many Missouri residents. Ironically, when it comes to desegregation in St. Louis, “the transfer of students across districts has been going on...but because it is labeled a desegregation plan and because black students have more choices than white students do, it is not as politically popular” (Wells & Crain, 1997, pp. 74-75). So, school choice remains a value that is most popular when it is specific to white students. In the most recent legislative session, bills are seeking to expand charter schools and create open enrollment in Missouri’s public schools (Weinberg, 2021). With COVID-19 and other political agendas taking center stage in the Missouri legislature, it is uncertain what school segregation/integration will look like moving forward.

Discussion

Discourse matters. The language used in school integration policies conveys meanings for multiple stakeholders, which makes it critically important when what text and words are considered to express even the best intentions. Our use of CPA (Diem et al., 2014; Horsford et al., 2019) and CDA (Fairclough, 2014) illuminates the complex aspects of each district’s approach to integration, including power dynamics, the context of each district, and the tensions between policy rhetoric and practiced reality. Regarding our first research question, various racial discourses were identified that were used within and surrounding the three district integration plans. MNPS consistently used the term “diversity” when discussing and developing their integration plan and their four-part definition of diversity within the policy document weighs race heavily. Yet the color-evasive language used when articulating “race-neutral” solutions potentially undermines their apparent dedication to racial equity, as evidenced by the local reporting of racially minoritized family experiences within MNPS. SFUSD instead focused consistently on racial multiplicity while including race in their student assignment policy as well as throughout district documents. Tensions still arise, however, between racial rhetoric used by SFUSD and their realized outcomes as larger power dynamics, such as state intervention, sometimes limit the district’s decision-making. SLPS centered race in their plan from its conception to directly address school segregation predominantly between African American and white students. Yet, even with this explicit use of racial discourse, the consistent divestment from

surrounding predominantly white districts and communities has left them with an unknown future. The slow dismantling of the VICC program makes it increasingly difficult for school and community leaders to address integration concerns that stem from decades of racialized divestment.

Regarding our second research question, each school district has also relied upon various discourses of school choice to uphold and/or disrupt existing racial inequities in their schools. All three districts operate and rely upon systems of school choice within their most recent policies, yet each district's distinct relationship with school choice influences how the discourses are utilized. In MNPS, concerns about an under-regulated choice charter school actually spurred the creation of the Diversity Management Plan. Choice, however, is still the central method articulated within the plan to ensure that all MNPS students had access to diverse school settings. Choice is interestingly framed as both the problem and the solution in MNPS, yet choice options may be more attainable for white Nashville residents, destabilizing the assumption that choice can help address school diversity concerns. SFUSD proves to be more skeptical of choice as an effective approach to improving school integration. Although they had also historically relied upon choice to integrate schools, they recently acknowledged the ways in which school choice initiatives fall short on this goal. SFUSD has now pivoted away from a heavy reliance on choice to a more balanced approach that aims to more effectively create integrated school settings. Similarly, SLPS relies upon choice to address school segregation within the VICC program, yet their "downstream" position makes choice entirely dependent on white families, other school districts, and government officials. Even with the explicit centering of race in the integration plan, discourses of race appear to be largely supplanted by discourses of choice within the larger policy context. This has arguably given the surrounding predominantly white suburban school districts much more "choice" in the matter, as they can voluntarily leave the VICC program once racial quotas are met.

Interest divergence provides a fresh and meaningful lens to better understand how the use of race- and choice-based discourses influence the integration policies and realities (Gillborn, 2013; Guinier, 2004). The policy discourses in each of the school districts reflect varying degrees of interest divergence, including divestments from and commitments to school integration that have wavered and sometimes strengthened over time. While MNPS's integration plan is not designed to address previous policy changes that perpetuated school resegregation, it was created as direct resistance to state-pressured interest divergence. Importantly, this resistance of interest divergence does not necessarily improve the schooling experiences of racially minoritized students, potentially due to its use of "race-neutral" discourses within the policy's solutions as well as its reliance on school choice to address diversity concerns. SFUSD also makes efforts to resist interest divergence as they designed a new student assignment policy. They specifically acknowledge the failures of previous integration plans and are currently trying to "reverse" their district's resegregation, which includes limiting the reliance on choice to integrate schools. SFUSD's current vision and application reach farther than MNPS's, as it wants to both resist interest divergence and address the ways that it has historically influenced racial stratification in their schools today. This is reflected in the explicit inclusion of racial discourses within its policies as well as its resistance to choice options as the primary integration solution. SLPS, however, is currently in limbo regarding school integration, providing an example of the power of interest divergence when it is left uninhibited. Perpetual divestment of St. Louis from both the predominantly white surrounding St. Louis County as well as larger state political forces has made SLPS's "downstream" situation difficult to navigate. By centering choice as the integration solution and displacing discourses of race, interest divergence reigns supreme as the desires of predominantly white suburban school districts are prioritized over the needs of SLPS students and families.

Analyzing discourses of race and choice through the lens of interest divergence shows how, in the three districts included in this study, policy discourse matters when working to address concerns about integration in schools. Race-centered language appears to be one way to resist interest divergence and ensure that “white power-holders” do not get to solely dictate the primary beneficiaries of an integration policy, as seen in SFUSD and partly in MNPS (Gillborn, 2013, p. 478). Yet, choice programs may undermine even the most race-centered initiatives. Although choice policies are often framed as “creating educational opportunities and access for all students,” Thompson Dorsey and Roulhac (2019) argue they instead are “more about returning to centuries-old laws and policies that racially segregate students, limit equal educational opportunities for low-income students of color, and support White supremacy ideals” (p. 436). As school choice policies continue to permeate the U.S. educational landscape, we must identify how they position (or omit) race within their design and use the lens of interest divergence to identify the likelihood of white powerholders inevitably benefitting from their implementation. We must also acknowledge, however, the historical and political realities of school districts such as SLPS. Districts like these serve as examples of how engulfing interest divergence can be beyond the district’s control, making it a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to overcome.

The three districts included in this study provide evidence that it is critical to look both within and beyond policy documents to understand the creation, implementation, and in some cases, dismantling of district integration initiatives. By utilizing interest divergence, CPA, and CDA in our analysis, we identified specific discourses within each of the policies, while also illuminating their strikingly different influences for each school district’s situated context. Indeed, policies themselves cannot be disentangled from the rhetoric, power, accountability, and politics surrounding their development and implementation.

Implications and Future Research

The research has bearings on implications for policy and practice. First, racial discourses need to be explicitly factored into integration policies if the goal is to seek racial diversity across school districts. Moreover, integration policies must be designed in a way that leads to all schools being racially, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse, as well as high-quality and appealing (Diem, 2012; Horsford, 2019; Parker, 2012; Wells, 2014). This has shifted over time, particularly given the growing popularity of the school choice movement and how these districts have had to navigate choice (Holme & Finnigan, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019). While SFUSD has taken a more holistic approach to looking at integration, hoping to actively manage choices that will lead to diverse schools, in SLPS, choice is overshadowing integration efforts, and the district’s vision of integration is increasingly being relinquished to unchecked choice. Without mitigating factors, choice can exacerbate inequities in a district (Diem & Welton, 2021; Horsford et al., 2019; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). Some have to increasingly market their schools to compete for students, which can have the damaging effect of commodifying student diversity and exploiting students of color rather than serving them (Turner, 2018).

A second implication is the importance of understanding the racial discourses of the current policies and how historical and sociopolitical contexts in each site influence the discourses. Notably, in each of the district’s policies we analyzed, the state had recently undermined local control to encourage charter schools or school choice alternatives. State intervention in each of these districts on behalf of charter schools may speak to the continual evolution nationally towards school choice (Horsford et al., 2019; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013; U.S. DOE, 2019), which some fear may be fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ujifusa, 2021). However, historically, the role of the state in

desegregation efforts has varied across the districts we analyzed. All of these districts have long desegregation histories, but a couple have continued to push for integration intentionally. Meanwhile in St Louis, the future of school integration is still uncertain. If we think of the sociopolitical context as gears that function in a system, when the gears are aligned, there is a cohesive and clear trajectory for districts to create, implement, and sustain integrative and equitable policies. Yet, often, school districts must navigate shifting sociopolitical contexts that are rife with tensions, particularly when it comes to race and addressing racism in public schools. Understanding these complexities, however, may better position us to enact policies that realize racial equity and bring about meaningful change for school communities.

Since our study focuses specifically on discourses of race and choice, there are many other areas of research that can be explored related to school integration policies. Future research could analyze the political landscape beyond and outside of education focusing on who is in office and the local understanding of and engagement with the school system. In addition, researchers might continue to interrogate these districts with a multimodal analysis by which other forms of discourse, especially considering the various stakeholder audiences of the diverse mediums, might expand on our findings. Moreover, researchers might apply this same framework across a variety of school district contexts to examine similar questions around how racial and choice-based discourses are relied upon in these contexts. In particular, it would be compelling to examine school districts that have attempted integration through other approaches, such as the Clinton Public School District in Mississippi, which uses a “community” approach that sorts students between buildings based on grade level instead of neighborhood (Elliot, 2017; Mader, 2016). Future research might also examine political agendas and policy alternatives by interrogating the non-linear historical trajectory of policy conception and implementation. In other words, why does a school integration policy get “momentum” or political will to be pushed through to implementation? Further, how are state-level policymakers prioritizing the needs of local students from racially marginalized communities in school integration policies to mitigate the influence of interest divergence and convergence in policymaking? Finally, what do the policies and discourses look like in our current reality with the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to disrupt educational environments and adversely affecting racially minoritized students at disproportionate rates (U.S. DOE, 2021)? School integration scholars need to critically ask, what needs to (not) happen for race to be centered over socioeconomic status today. Additionally, is interest divergence the normative ideology accepted (or coerced) by all? What coalition (guardians, students, policymakers, etc.) wields the most power in this sort of discourse? It is imperative for integration scholars to examine the “power behind” their own discourse, individually, and as applicable, as a research team, to address the racial imbalances in both the policy and policy analysis.

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