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## Navigating Tensions: A Critical Policy Analysis of Expectations for English Educators in Georgia

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**Abstract:** We compare the institutional standards and expectations for English language arts (ELA) educators from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the leading professional organization in this field, and the state of Georgia. By conducting a critical policy analysis of documents from NCTE and the Georgia Department of Education (GADoE) we sought to understand the tension between standards set for training English education students in institutions of higher education and the standards those teachers would be required to use in Georgia K-12 schools. We analyze these documents through Cooper et al.'s (2004) policy analysis framework, which questions the normative, structural, constituent, and technical dimensions of policy development. We found that the ideological beliefs and values embedded in the policies and documents from NCTE and GADoE have developed divergent sets of expectations for ELA teachers in Georgia, particularly around how teachers respond to oppression in our society; how we understand the overall purpose of ELA instruction; and the scope of responsibilities for educators. We end by presenting implications for educators working among these two sets of policies, in recognizing where these expectations may overlap as well as diverge.

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### **Navegando por las tensiones: Un análisis político crítico de las expectativas de los educadores ingleses en Georgia**

**Resumen:** Comparamos los estándares y expectativas institucionales para los educadores de artes del lenguaje inglés (ELA) del Consejo Nacional de Maestros de Inglés (NCTE), la organización profesional líder en este campo, y el estado de Georgia. Al realizar un análisis político crítico de documentos del NCTE y el Departamento de Educación de Georgia (GADoE), buscamos comprender la tensión entre los estándares establecidos para la formación de estudiantes de educación inglesa en instituciones de educación superior y los estándares que esos profesores deberían utilizar en escuelas K-12. Analizamos estos documentos a través del marco de análisis de políticas de Cooper et al. (2004), que cuestiona las dimensiones normativa, estructural, constitutiva y técnica del desarrollo de políticas. Descubrimos que las creencias y valores ideológicos incorporados en las políticas y documentos del NCTE y GADoE han desarrollado conjuntos divergentes de expectativas para los docentes de ELA en Georgia, particularmente en torno a cómo los docentes responden a la opresión en nuestra sociedad; cómo entendemos el propósito general de la instrucción ELA; y el alcance de las responsabilidades de los educadores. Terminamos presentando implicaciones para los educadores que trabajan entre estos dos conjuntos de políticas, al reconocer dónde estas expectativas pueden superponerse, pero también dónde divergen.

**Palabras-clave:** análisis crítico de políticas; artes del lenguaje inglés; preparación docente; estándares de enseñanza; legislación sobre conceptos divisivos

### **Navegando nas tensões: Uma análise política crítica das expectativas dos educadores de inglês na Geórgia**

**Resumo:** Comparamos os padrões institucionais e as expectativas para educadores de artes da língua inglesa (ELA) do Conselho Nacional de Professores de Inglês (NCTE), a organização profissional líder nesta área, e do estado da Geórgia. Ao realizar uma análise política crítica de documentos do NCTE e do Departamento de Educação da Geórgia (GADoE), procuramos compreender a tensão entre os padrões estabelecidos para a formação de estudantes do ensino de inglês em instituições de ensino superior e os padrões que esses professores seriam obrigados a usar na escolas K-12. Analisamos estes documentos através do quadro de análise de políticas de Cooper et al. (2004), que questiona as dimensões normativas, estruturais, constituintes e técnicas do desenvolvimento de políticas. Descobrimos que as crenças e valores ideológicos incorporados nas políticas e documentos do NCTE e do GADoE desenvolveram conjuntos divergentes de expectativas para os professores de ELA na Geórgia, particularmente em torno de como os professores respondem à opressão na nossa sociedade; como entendemos o propósito geral do ensino ELA; e o âmbito das responsabilidades dos educadores. Terminamos apresentando implicações para os educadores que trabalham entre estes dois conjuntos de políticas, ao reconhecerem onde estas expectativas podem sobrepor-se, mas também onde divergem.

**Palavras-chave:** análise crítica de políticas; artes de língua inglesa; preparação de professores; padrões de ensino; legislação de conceitos divisivos

## **Navigating Tensions: A Critical Policy Analysis of Expectations for English Educators in Georgia**

As teacher education students move from their university preparation courses and into classrooms as practicum and induction year teachers, they often experience a disconnect between the institutional expectations of these two educational spaces (Alsup, 2006). University courses may emphasize a pedagogical approach and theoretical orientation that feels distinctly different from the institutional norms in K-12 schools, and past research has shown that teacher candidates can struggle to develop an effective personal pedagogy as they work to mediate these differing expectations (Alsup, 2006). We address this challenge through this article by considering the role that institutions and policy play in that disconnect. In our role as instructors and supervisors in a secondary English teacher education program, our goal is to better understand this tension and how we might support teacher candidates as they navigate through it.

We also bring our personal commitments into these professional roles, by promoting pedagogies for teaching English language arts (ELA) that emphasize educational equity and diverse representation. This ideological position is backed by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), through their standards for English education teacher development and multiple position statements that speak to the necessity of a pedagogy for ELA that engages with diversity and asset-based teaching practices. In the current educational policy climate, where 44 states, including our home state of Georgia, have passed legislation banning the teaching of “divisive concepts” (PEN America, 2021; Schwartz, 2023), it seems as though these values are being challenged. And yet, we know this work is essential if educational spaces, and ELA classes in particular, are to work toward truly equitable practices that affirm the funds of knowledge of diverse learners (Parker, 2022).

In this project, we consider how the standards for English teacher preparation set forth by NCTE, along with other position statements from this professional organization, align with the content area standards and policies teachers will be held accountable to once they begin their careers teaching secondary ELA in Georgia’s public schools. This is particularly important as our teacher preparation program has been working to design our courses’ instructional activities to meet the teacher preparation standards set forth by NCTE in 2021, during the same instructional year legislation related to divisive concepts was passed by the state of Georgia. We understand that our program’s efforts to emphasize the values and instructional practices forwarded by NCTE, even while teacher candidates prepare to work in Georgia’s public schools, may contribute to the perceived divide between university training and classroom realities. Alsup’s (2006) work has demonstrated that teachers who are not able to effectively bridge the university/school divide are likely to leave the profession. This critical policy analysis is a part of our process to better understand this tension as we work to support our teacher candidates in navigating through it.

The focus of this inquiry was on the explicit and implicit messages communicated through GADoE policies and state legislation, and how these messages compare to the explicit and implicit messages communicated in NCTE’s standards for the preparation of educators. Our research first explores the historical development of English language arts (ELA) teaching and learning standards to consider how the purpose and function of this discipline has been defined through the professional organization NCTE and through state standards. Next, we use Cooper et al.’s (2004) conceptual framework for analyzing education policy making to conduct a critical policy analysis of documents and standards from NCTE and the GADoE. We report findings connected to the structural, normative, constituent, and technical dimensions of these policies, including themes related to social norms and the purposes of schooling, and offer a discussion on how these policies

converge and diverge. We end by offering implications of this analysis for English teachers moving from institutions of higher education into K-12 schools.

## **The Structural Dimension of Standards Development Within NCTE and GADoE**

Before engaging in a critical analysis of the policies and teaching standards, it is important to build an understanding of some of the key political, cultural, and social events that have influenced the development of teaching standards for ELA educators in Georgia. We see this not as a straightforward evolution from one event or policy into the next, but instead draw from Foucault's (1977) insight that to critically interrogate the present, we must understand the past as a network of events working within the present context. In this section, we will briefly outline some of the history behind standards-based accountability in education. We will also outline the role that NCTE has played over the last century in shaping the focus of this discipline. What follows is a partial review of the key movements and influences in education that have helped to shape the development of both GADoE and NCTE standards and policies.

### **The Significance of NCTE**

NCTE originated in 1911, as a professional organization geared toward improving the conditions of English teachers' work (National Council of Teachers of English, n.d.). They launched the publication of the practitioner-focused *English Journal* in 1912, still in publication today. This flagship journal has addressed a wide range of issues in the discipline, including instructional methods that meet the needs of diverse learners. Since its inception, NCTE has been an advocate for teaching that develops content area skills alongside a more holistic attention to the needs and interests of learners. For example, in 1931 *English Journal* published an article related to the importance for ELA teachers to attend to students' "whole personality for a complete and happy life" (Weeks, 1931, p. 10). Later, in 1962, NCTE published a pamphlet intended to aid with book challenges entitled "Students Right to Read," in 1969 they published an annotated bibliography on children's books featuring African American characters to emphasize the need for diverse literature, and in 1971 NCTE's task force on racism and bias published a statement on the criteria for teaching materials. These publications among others demonstrate the long history this organization has in promoting diverse representation and equitable practices for teaching ELA. NCTE currently publishes 11 disciplinary journals, and they continue to produce policy briefs and position statements that support a wide range of ELA teaching practices.

### **ELA and Standards-Based Accountability Reform Efforts in the US**

Though standards-based accountability reform in the US threads through multiple educational movements and historical events, one key moment in this history was the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This report was met with alarm, and created a public perception that American schools were failing America's children. It ultimately "ushered in a standards-based reform movement" (Lavenia et al., 2015, p. 145) that resulted in many professional organizations working in the late 1980s and early 1990s to draft standards for individual content areas. *A Nation at Risk* set several goals for the teaching of English, including preparing students to comprehend and evaluate texts, write effectively, speak and listen intelligently, and understand "our literary heritage" and its place in today's culture (Department of Education, as cited in Faust & Kieffer, 1998, p. 13). In 1990, the National Educational Goals Panel was formed to refine and monitor progress toward a set of educational goals outlined by a group of the nation's governors (Lavenia et al., 2015). The NCTE became involved in response to the federal

government's consideration of using organizations of non-educators, such as the National Governors Association, to write the learning standards for English (Myers, 2011).

The NCTE and the International Reading Association (IRA) teamed up to draft standards with the support of a federal grant, but these were rejected and funding was removed when they did not meet the expectations of the U.S. Department of Education (USDoE). The USDoE found the standards to be too vague and focused on process over content (Ferrero, 1999, p. 23). Ferrero (1999) describes this as an "ideological chasm" (p. 24) between the USDoE and the public on one side, and the NCTE on the other, over what should be taught in ELA.

The NCTE and IRA moved forward with their standards project without funding, publishing them in a book titled *Standards for the English Language Arts* in 1996. The book included "Opportunity to Learn" (OTL) standards that outlined what learning conditions students should have access to (Sanford, 2012) as well as standards for content and processes. These standards provided a expansive definition of literacy that included listening, viewing, and visually representing and promoted including a "broad range" of texts, including digital and media sources, student produced texts, speeches, and newspapers (Chadwick, 2015, p. 14) and emphasized the importance of effective and meaningful language and communication as something that extends beyond classroom learning (Faust & Kieffer, 1998). These standards were not intended as requirements for the content, but as a guide to be adapted at local levels (Suhor, 1994). The focus on both context and content for learning in the standards demonstrates that NCTE saw greater accountability for education as something that necessitated structural and policy changes, whereas the broader reform movement was focused on individual school and teacher accountability (Ferrero, 1999).

Outside of the NCTE/IRA effort to define ELA content standards, broader public pushback to federal learning standards began to brew as it became clear that these would be aligned to policies for testing and instructional practices, with many public interest groups arguing that standardizing an inequitable system would be unfair (Lavenia et al., 2015). The responsibility for standards was eventually turned over to the states, and it was broadly conceived that the national standards movement had failed (Lavenia et al., 2015; Ravitch, 1995).

Despite this failure in the 1990s, national support for learning standards was revived a decade later as a result of several factors: The No Child Left Behind revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, the 2009 Race to the Top initiative, states' membership in various national policy networks, and states' prior policies supporting standards-based reform (Lavenia et al., 2015). In 2010, a draft of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) was presented by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, which were quickly adopted in 45 of the 50 states (Brass, 2015). These standards had been written primarily by David Coleman and Susan Pimenthal based on work previously developed by the American Diploma Project (Brass, 2015; Tampio, 2018). The NCTE was notably not involved with their creation, and in their review, critiqued them for a narrow focus on college and career readiness, stating that "the most important (purpose) perhaps is education for social and civic participation" (as cited in Sanford, 2012, p. 35). The CCSS ELA standards were geared toward improving students' academic achievement (Brass, 2015) and focused on skills such as close reading and text analysis (Tampio, 2018) over the broader range of skills previously promoted in the NCTE/IRA standards. They were also tightly aligned with college readiness exams including the ACT and SAT (Brass, 2015; Tampio, 2018). Georgia's governor, Sonny Purdue, had been involved with the development of the CCSS (Downey, 2019) as co-chair of the National Governors Association, and Georgia adopted the standards in 2010. The standards were revised and renamed as the Georgia Standards of Excellence in 2014, amidst pushback within the Republican party against federal influence in state education policies. Despite the rebranding, the standards remained nearly identical to the CCSS (Gazaway, 2019).

## **Analytical Framework: Critical Policy Analysis**

In this study we leverage critical policy analysis (CPA; Diem et al., 2014; Taylor, 1997) as a tool to analyze the ways in which social practices and power operate within the GADoE and NCTE policy documents. Our goal is to understand how the standards and accompanying legislation affect social structures, including classroom teaching, and impact educational stakeholders. Recognizing that both the GADoE and NCTE operate as social institutions with policies that convey the institutions' respective ideology and goals, our goal was to understand how teachers are expected to take up the teaching of ELA in the context of potentially competing ideological views apparent in the policy documents (Fairclough, 1993). CPA is distinct from traditional methods of policy analyses because it “[emphasizes] the role of power and ideology in the policy process” (Diem et al., 2019, p. 4). We apply this methodological approach by critically analyzing policies and institutional press statements related to the standards and expectations for ELA educators from both the professional organization for ELA teachers, NCTE, and the GADoE. Our work was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the explicit and implicit messages communicated by the Georgia Department of Education (GADoE) and Georgia state legislators through GADoE policies and state legislation?
2. How do these messages from Georgia's legislation and GADoE policies compare to the explicit and implicit messages communicated in NCTE's standards for the preparation of educators and NCTE's related statements on education?

Our methods of analysis draw on Cooper et al.'s (2004) conceptual framework for analyzing education policymaking, which includes four dimensions: 1) normative, 2) structural, 3) constituent, and 4) technical; as well as concepts from interpretive policy analysis by attending to the “values, beliefs, and feelings as a set of meanings” that express human action (Yanow, 2000, p. ix). Cooper et al. explain their conceptual framework for policy analysis as a method for understanding both the intention and the potential impacts of policies. They pose questions for each of these dimensions that researchers and policymakers could consider to adequately assess the potential for policies to improve schools. They further state that this framework is “rooted in a deep concern for ethics and social justice” (Cooper et al., 2004, p. 45), asserting that the confluence of these four dimensions in an analysis of policy can bring to light the policy's implicit and explicit goals, alongside the intended and unintended impacts it may have in an educational setting.

To answer our research questions, we first applied Cooper et al.'s (2004) normative dimension by individually completing a round of coding guided by the questions listed in Table 1. From there, we identified five major codes tied to the ideological beliefs underpinning the documents: 1) scope of responsibility, 2) political nature of education, 3) purpose of schooling, 4) recognition of oppression of minority groups, and 5) responsibilities of educators. We then analyzed the structural dimension of the policies by researching the history and formation of NCTE and its past policy statements, and the development of content area learning standards as presented in the previous section. For the constituent dimension, we analyzed the groups and individuals involved in the creation of each set of policy documents, and we present potential impacts in the discussion of our findings. For the final technical dimension, we outline how these policies are put into practice and in what ways educators are held accountable to them. An overview of Cooper et al.'s framework and the guiding questions for each dimension is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1***Cooper et al.'s (2004) Dimensions and Guiding Questions for Analyzing Policymaking*

Dimension	Defined As	Questions Guiding Analysis
Normative	The beliefs, values, and ideologies that drive societal improvement and change.	What are the values and beliefs embedded in the policy? Whose ideology does the policy reflect?
Structural	The governmental arrangements, institutional structure, systems, and processes that promulgate and support policies.	How did the institutional structure of the process affect the policy, both in its formation and implementation?
Constituent	The beneficiaries who influence, participate in, and benefit from the policymaking process.	Which groups benefit from the policy? Who loses? How did various interest groups shape the content of the policy and its implementation?
Technical	The planning, practice, implementation, and evaluation processes that go into policymaking.	How has the policy been implemented and evaluated? What do we still need to know about the policy to improve schools?

Source: Cooper, B., Fusarelli, L. D., & Randall, E. V. (2004). *Better policies, better schools: Theories and application*. Allyn and Bacon, pp. 43-45.

### Data Collection

To conduct our inquiry, we analyzed documents from NCTE and the GADoE related to standards for ELA content, standards for teacher educators, legislation regarding teaching “divisive” concepts in Georgia, and press statements from NCTE. These documents are listed in Figure 1, along with the abbreviations used to denote each document in this manuscript.

We began by analyzing the teaching and learning standards from both institutions, then added relevant press releases, statements, and legislation from each institution. The documents collected from NCTE included their standards for the preparation for ELA teachers planning to work in Grades 7-12, a document that is aimed at teacher educators in university programs for teacher preparation; and multiple statements released by NCTE related to antiracist pedagogy in ELA classrooms. We chose to include these specific statements because they provided more context for the antiracist/antibias framing of NCTE’s standards for teacher preparation. The documents collected from GADoE included their content area learning standards for ELA classes in Grades 6-12, along with a community review of those standards, and the state’s legislation related to the teaching of divisive concepts (including race and racism). There is not a direct correspondence between the purpose of any of these policy documents, as each is aimed at a different audience and serves a different purpose.

There are also other policy documents that may work into a secondary ELA teachers’ understanding of their work and responsibilities. However, we center on these documents in particular to understand the transition of our university’s teacher education students from our program into Georgia’s secondary (Grades 6-12) schools. Our program’s courses were intentionally designed to meet the requirements of NCTE’s standards for teacher preparation, in addition to the requirements of the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Standards.

**Figure 1***Documents for Analysis***NCTE**

**Title:** NCTE Standards for the Initial Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts 7–12 (Initial licensure)

**Publication date:** November 2021

**Purpose:** To be used by teacher educators and programs for teacher preparation in the instruction of university students who are training to teach secondary ELA courses

**Abbreviated by:** NCTE teacher preparation standards

**Title:** New Standards Released for Educators Preparing to Be English Language Arts Teachers

**Publication date:** November 9, 2021

**Purpose:** Update and inform teacher educators and programs for teacher preparation about the goals of the standards for preparing ELA teacher educators

**Abbreviated by:** NCTE press release

**Title:** ELATE Statement on State-Sanctioned Anti-Black Racism and Violence: A Commitment to Antiracist Instruction in English Language Arts

**Publication date:** June 12, 2020

**Purpose:** Explain the stance of the English language arts teacher educator professional group (a subgroup of NCTE) on antiracist pedagogy

**Abbreviated by:** ELATE antiracism statement

**Title:** Educators' Right and Responsibilities to Engage in Antiracist Teaching

**Publication date:** March 7, 2022

**Purpose:** State support for ELA and literacy teachers in Grades K-12 to engage with antiracist pedagogies

**Abbreviated by:** NCTE statement on antiracist teaching

**GADoE**

**Title:** Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE): Kindergarten – Grade 12

**Publication date:** June 2, 2015

**Purpose:** Set the content area learning standards for K-12 students in all content areas (this analysis focused specifically on ELA learning standards)

**Abbreviated by:** Georgia content standards

**Title:** Georgia K-12 English Language Arts Standards Review Process Citizens Review Committee: Description of Committee Activities and Working Notes from the November 8, 2021 Meeting

**Publication date:** February 9, 2022

**Purpose:** Present findings based on a review of the ELA K-12 learning standards conducted by secondary ELA teachers, parents, and community members

**Abbreviated by:** Committee Review Report

**Title:** A Resolution of the State Board of Education of the State of Georgia

**Publication date:** June 3, 2021

**Purpose:** Explain to the public the State of Georgia's position on teaching related to topics like race/ racism

**Abbreviated by:** GADoE Resolution

**Title:** Protect Students First Act

**Publication date:** April 2022

**Purpose:** Legislation that prohibits the teaching of divisive concepts as they are defined in the act

**Abbreviated by:** Protect Students First Act



There are also other policy documents that may work into a secondary ELA teachers' understanding of their work and responsibilities. However, we center on these documents in particular to understand the transition of our university's teacher education students from our program into Georgia's secondary (Grades 6-12) schools. Our program's courses were intentionally designed to meet the requirements of NCTE's standards for teacher preparation, in addition to the requirements of the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Standards. As teacher candidates move into their careers, they will be beholden to the institutional expectations set for teachers by the GADOE, but they may also continue to be guided by NCTE as the leading professional organization for ELA teachers. Therefore, understanding the compatibility between these two institutions is key to understanding how teachers may experience and navigate a divide between these two institutions, particularly during their practicum teaching assignments and induction year of teaching. Needless to say, teacher educators need to consider the implications of these two groups of standards when preparing secondary ELA teachers.

## Findings

Earlier in our paper, we provided background on the development of standards and NCTE's role in that process to consider how we have arrived at this place where teachers are asked to navigate between potentially conflicting policies for ELA curricula and pedagogy. In that background, we address Cooper et al.'s (2004) questions for analyzing the structural dimension of policy making, by explaining the institutional processes behind the development of the NCTE and GADOE policies. We demonstrate that there has historically been a lack of alignment between NCTE and broader standards-based accountability reform, leading NCTE to develop its own set of learning standards for ELA and to critique the passage of the CCSS, which Georgia adopted. In this findings section, we address the normative dimension of Cooper et al.'s framework, by considering what values and beliefs are embedded in these policies, and the ideologies that each set of policy documents may reflect. We then move into a consideration of the last two dimensions of the framework: the constituent and technical dimensions. These ask us to consider which groups influence and are influenced by each set of policies in how they are implemented, and how they connect to evaluation and accountability. They also bring us to a consideration for how teacher educators might use either of these sets of policies to improve educational practices, which we address in our discussion and implications.

### Normative Dimension

When analyzing the documents for their normative dimensions as guided by the questions in Table 1, we found that each institution made implicit and explicit expectations that convey differing values and beliefs, specifically around their: 1) views on oppression of groups, and 2) the country's scope of responsibility. In these findings, we describe how these ideological beliefs shape each group's interpretation of the purpose of schooling, the political nature of education, and the responsibility of educators as evidenced within the policy documents.

#### *Beliefs Around Oppression in Society*

Each institution had distinct understandings and recognition of the ways in which our country has and continues to oppress minority groups. For instance, the NCTE teacher preparation standards recognize racism and define it as "the systematic mistreatment and disenfranchisement of people of color who currently and historically possess less power and privilege than white Americans" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2021a, p. 4). While Georgia's standards omit direct commentary on racism or oppression, the GADOE Resolution explains that the department

“believes the United States of America is not a racist country, and that the state of Georgia is not a racist state” (State Board of Education of the State of Georgia, 2021, para. 8).

Both groups also name how these outlooks influence English educators broadly in classroom contexts and specifically in the ways that they engage students with content. In the GADoE Resolution it is stated that “all teachers, administrators, other employees, and students in the respective educational system are, and are to be treated as, individuals endowed with equal inalienable rights, without respect to race or sex” (State Board of Education of the State of Georgia, 2021, para. 1). In contrast to the GADoE’s effort to position Georgia as “not a racist state” (State Board of Education of the State of Georgia, 2021, para. 8), NCTE remarks on the pervasive existence of racism: “bigotry, discrimination, oppression, divisiveness, and racism are part of the world in which future teachers of English are working” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2021b, para. 5). These demonstrate the conflicting views on whether racism and oppression are current societal problems that ELA educators may address through their teaching.

### ***Institutional Framing of Teaching Practices***

Despite these differing positions on the current state of racism, the GADoE does explicitly permit educators to discuss oppression within their curriculum. According to the Protect Students First Act, teachers are not prohibited from

the use of curricula that addresses the topics of slavery, racial oppression, racial segregation, or racial discrimination, including topics relating to the enactment and enforcement of laws resulting in racial oppression, segregation, and discrimination in a professionally and academically appropriate manner and without espousing personal political beliefs. (Protect Students First Act, 2022, p. 5)

This allows for teachers to address the topics of racism and oppression, including the laws that have enabled and supported the oppression of marginalized groups, through their curriculum and pedagogy.

The NCTE affiliate group, English Language Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE), calls on teachers to intentionally engage with antiracism in their pedagogy. In a statement on this topic, they argue that teachers must acknowledge the oppression of marginalized groups and the way that their teaching practices will either “maintain the status quo of racism or work to actively dismantle it” (Goering et al., 2020, para. 5), which demonstrates that the organization not only presumes a current reality of racism but also asserts that it is perpetuated through teaching practices. NCTE calls on teachers to address this by engaging with pedagogies that are intentionally antiracist and antibias, for example by identifying and challenging individual and systemic acts of racism and bigotry, and taking an asset-based approach to teaching that promotes cultural diversity (González et al., 2005). NCTE’s position that teachers should advocate for antiracism differs significantly from the GADoE’s position, which simply does not prohibit teachers from discussing topics related to racial discrimination. Also, the language from Georgia’s legislation against teachers “espousing personal political beliefs” (Protect Students First Act, 2022, p. 5) could be construed as prohibiting the advocacy NCTE calls for, a potential contradiction we take up in the discussion.

### ***Scope of Responsibility***

Echoing the above sets of beliefs around oppression in our country, the standards and policy documents associated with NCTE advocate for using schooling as a form of liberation, where people should “[take] action together to bring about social change” (Long et al., 2022, para. 4). The GADoE, in contrast, does not expect teachers or schools to take ownership and action regarding oppression. These stances undergird broader ideological beliefs on whether society should take

responsibility for historical and current mistreatment of minority groups, and what responsibilities educators in particular have to address this mistreatment.

The Protect Students First Act speaks on how schools and those associated with schools should not promote the idea that individuals are “inherently superior” or “inherently or consciously racist or oppressive toward individuals of other races” by virtue of their race (Protect Students First Act, 2022, p. 2). Additionally, the Protect Students First Act explains that educators should not promote the idea that individuals should take responsibility for previous acts of oppression, or that individuals should feel “psychological distress” due to their race (Protect Students First Act, 2022, p. 3). The GADoE Resolution also states that teachers should not believe that the idea of meritocracy can further oppress individuals. The NCTE teacher preparation standards, on the other hand, explicitly state that racism and other forms of discrimination continue to exist in our society, and that these inequities impact students and their education. Beyond recognizing educators’ responsibilities for working against oppression, the ELATE antiracism statement acknowledges the role that schooling has played historically in the US in furthering systemic oppression against marginalized groups. This statement encourages teachers to “demand justice and commit to taking action to create immediate and lasting change” (Goering et al., 2020, para. 2) and “demand that antiracist instruction be integrated into ELA courses” (Goering et al., 2020, para. 3). These documents from the GADoE and NCTE present a divide in how these institutions acknowledge structural inequities that promote white supremacy, particularly in schools. Furthermore, they present contrasting frames of educators’ responsibilities to acknowledge and work against racism through their classroom practices.

The rhetoric of the documents from each institution framed teachers’ responsibilities in terms of rights, responsibilities, and prohibitions. The NCTE documents, both the standards for teacher preparation and the policy statements, directly promoted antiracist instruction. This pedagogical approach requires teachers to “reflect on their own identities and experiences and how they frame their practices” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2021a, p. 4) and requires that teachers “critically incorporate the histories, literate legacies, languages, and texts of Black people in ELA teaching and learning for all students” (Goering et al., 2020, para. 5)<sup>1</sup>. In this instructional approach, teachers are expected to promote cultural and linguistic diversity, challenge racism, promote solidarity, and invite students’ diverse ways of knowing and learning into the classroom. Expectations for teachers in the GADoE documents were framed mostly in terms of what teachers were prohibited from doing. These included prohibiting teachers from discriminating based on race, teaching divisive concepts as defined in the Protect Students First Act, making individual students feel “anguish or any other form of psychological distress” because of their racial identity (Protect Students First Act, 2022, p. 2), or teaching that any individual is inherently more likely to oppress another because of their racial identity. These differences relate to the scope of responsibility for educators, and whether working toward equitable practices and against oppression fits within that professional scope.

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<sup>1</sup> Antiracist instruction is not limited to a focus on Black/White racial binaries—antiracist instruction encompasses affirmations of students from all racial backgrounds. The focus on the Black racial identity in this particular quotation, written in June of 2020, is specifically in response to police brutality against Black Americans.

### ***Purpose of Schooling***

As we analyzed the NCTE and GADoE documents, we found that much of the language centered on the purpose of schooling<sup>2</sup> while also commenting on the social norms described above. The NCTE documents frame the importance of ELA as a space where educators should work to support the development of students' "critical consciousness" (Goering et al., 2020, para. 5) and critical engagement with learning. They also promote instruction that works toward building a more just and equitable society through antiracist and antibias pedagogy that can support the development of "informed citizens" and encourage "community participation and robust civic engagement" (Long et al., 2022, para. 7). These conceptualizations of the purpose of ELA instruction are similar in scope to those advocated by NCTE in the 1990s, in that they promote ELA as a place where teachers can support students in developing as "creative, literate, agentive, compassionate individuals" (NCTE Executive Director Emily Kirkpatrick, as cited in National Council of Teachers of English, 2021b, para. 5). The overarching purpose of ELA instruction as presented in these documents is to prepare students to become civically engaged and responsible members in our democratic society, capable of making informed decisions to advance equity. This is not to say that anything in the documents negates the need for instruction in more traditionally defined literacy skills. Instead, these documents, addressed to a wide audience of educators at every grade level and to those outside of education, frame the purpose of instruction in literacy as a method of developing students who will be ready to engage in a democratic society.

While the GADoE content standards do outline specific expectations for what students will learn in each grade level, there is no rhetoric in any of the documents that addresses the purpose of learning these skills or of schooling more broadly. One exception is a note in the GADoE Resolution, which states that "true civic education is not political action itself but rather preparation for life" (State Board of Education of the State of Georgia, 2021, para. 4). This restriction on political action is a repeated theme in the GADoE documents which is addressed in the next section, but for now we turn to the concept of preparing students for life beyond secondary school. The Committee Review Report, which includes findings developed from a committee of teachers, parents, and other community members, addressed what the standards may be preparing students for, post-secondary schooling. In this document, the committee reviewed survey responses from community members, and found that parents and teachers in every grade level consistently reported that the standards were not preparing students for future careers or life outside of schooling. Community members, including teachers, felt the standards were overly focused on college readiness. This review also found that the standards did not foster creativity or student autonomy. This focus on higher education in the GADoE content standards presents a narrower conceptualization of the purpose for ELA instruction than that presented by the NCTE documents.

### ***The Political Nature of Education***

Whether teaching can or should be a politically neutral act is one that has come up for frequent debate in the media over the past few years (Kumashiro, 2021). In the NCTE and GADoE documents, the language around political advocacy in education as either necessary or prohibited presents a divide in expectations for teachers. The NCTE documents argue that no classroom is a neutral space. The decisions ELA teachers make work to either build up or dismantle the status quo of racism (Goering et al., 2020). In contrast to this, the GADoE Resolution states that "respect for

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<sup>2</sup> We use the term "schooling" rather than "education" intentionally, as schooling refers to a traditional structure replete with implications and expectations for how knowledge is developed and conveyed among members in the institution, while education more broadly encompasses diverse ways of knowing, learning, and developing intellectual traits that may occur within and without schools.

the liberties of students and teachers, the views of a politically diverse citizenry, and the tradition of institutional neutrality that flows from these, means that political activism has no place in education” (State Board of Education of the State of Georgia, 2021, para. 5). Further, the Protect Students First Act (2022) prohibits teachers from “espousing personal political beliefs” (p. 2). This may conflict with the NCTE teacher preparation standards, which call on teachers to support and advocate for antiracist legislation. NCTE documents encourage teachers to challenge systemic racism in our profession, and work toward solidarity with diverse communities (Long et al., 2022). It also guides teachers to “express strong declarations of solidarity with people of diverse human and cultural backgrounds to eradicate forms of racism, bias, and prejudice” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2021a, p. 5). Although the NCTE documents do not place political advocacy specifically within the classroom, this push for advocacy does present a potential conflict with the Protect Students First Act’s prohibition against sharing personal political beliefs.

However, this guidance from NCTE’s policies does not directly contradict the requirements of the Protect Students First Act. This act explicitly prohibits discrimination or judgment on the basis of race, and does not prohibit schools from “promoting concepts such as tolerance, mutual respect, cultural sensitivity, or cultural competency” (Protect Students First Act, 2022, p. 4). The Protect Students First Act (2022) further states that nothing shall “prohibit the discussion of divisive concepts . . . in a professionally and academically appropriate manner and without espousing personal political beliefs” (p. 4). A close look at the language in these documents suggests that teachers could adhere to NCTE’s calls for advocacy, as long as they did not attempt to, in the language of the Protect Students First Act, “indoctrinate” students (p. 3). In the discussion, we consider the opportunity for teachers to align themselves to one institution’s demands while still meeting the demands of the other.

### **Constituent Dimension**

To break down the constituent dimension, it is important to reiterate who had a say in the construction of these policies. We focus primarily on the groups involved in the development of the content area learning standards in this section, to present a clear picture of how each organization solicited input from multiple stakeholders in developing guidance for what teachers in this discipline should focus on in their instruction.

For the GADoE content area standards, in 2014 the GADoE revised the CCSS to develop the remarkably similar Georgia Standards of Excellence (Gazaway, 2019). In preparation for a revision of the ELA standards, the GADoE released a survey to gather input from stakeholders (e.g., teachers, educational leaders, business and industry leaders, and community members), published in the Committee Review Report. From the over 11,000 responses, the GADoE reported some overall trends: 1) parents and teachers felt standards are more geared to college preparation as opposed to career and life readiness; 2) the majority of teachers found the language of the standards to be accessible to them, but not to students and parents; 3) K-8 parents showed more concern than teachers on the majority of the survey questions; and 4) teachers and parents’ main concern were not having enough time to teach the numerous standards and that the standards do not foster creativity and autonomy (University of Georgia Carl Vinson Institute of Government, 2022). After this survey was conducted, the state convened a Citizens Review Committee with 10 members appointed by the governor and 10 appointed by the state school superintendent, a committee of current teachers that represented various grade levels and geographic locations, and finally an academic review committee comprised of representatives from higher education, the State Board of Education, business and industry, the Governor’s office, and other stakeholders (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). These committees worked to provide input on a revision of the content learning standards, and the

new content area standards for ELA were published in 2023. These will be implemented in the 2025-2026 school year.

The current NCTE content area standards for teaching ELA are a revised version of standards published in 2012. The NCTE Steering Committee for the English Language Arts (ELA) 7-12 Preparation Standards, co-chaired by Marshall George, Donna Psternak, and Christian Goering, began the revision process and sought feedback from the ELATE Executive Committee, NCTE/CAEP Volunteer Reviewers, and the ELATE Social Justice Commission before being submitted to the 2019-2020 Executive Committee. This input as well as feedback and commentary from NCTE members, who hold various roles related to literacy education, prompted revisions. Non-NCTE members, including representatives of the Council of Chief State School Officers and other professional associations were also given the opportunity to provide feedback. After additional input from the 2020-2021 NCTE Executive Committee, ELATE Executive Committee, and CAEP, the standards were further revised, particularly those related to digital and media literacies. The new content area standards were accepted in July of 2021 (George et al., 2021).

Both NCTE and the GADoE followed a democratic process of constructing and revising their respective content learning standards with multiple instances of input from relevant stakeholders. However, the Protect Students First Act shifts who has a say in what can and should be taught in ELA classrooms that did not mirror the convergence of perspectives that brought forth the standards. The legislation was written and passed by Georgia state representatives and was signed into law by Georgia Governor Kemp in 2022.

### **Technical Dimension**

The technical dimension addresses the ways in which teachers and schools are held accountable for the standards and policies in place. NCTE released their teacher preparation standards in November of 2021, and the organization expects teacher preparation programs to adopt these standards within two years. Georgia schools currently require teachers to use the GA Standards of Excellence for content area learning standards. Typically, teachers are held accountable to the ELA standards through end-of-grade GA Milestones standardized exams in Grades 3-8 and end-of-course Milestones exams for high school American Literature and Composition courses that determine students' mastery of the content standards. However, students and parents may also have a chance to take on more of an evaluative role regarding teacher's instruction due to the complaint resolution policy recommended in the Protect Students First Act. According to this legislation, students, parents, or community members who feel that a teacher has violated the requirements of the act can file a written complaint to the principal. Once this complaint against a teacher's alleged violation of the act is substantiated, school leaders are required to take remedial steps in response to the violation and to share those steps with the complainant. This system may discourage teachers in Georgia from fully implementing the expectations set forth by NCTE out of fear of repercussions from their school administrators or local communities, a point we elaborate on in the discussion.

## **Discussion and Implications**

In our analysis of the structural, normative, constituent, and technical dimensions of policy documents and legislation put forth by these two institutions, NCTE and the GADoE, we found distinct differences between how each institution developed their policies, how they framed the purpose for ELA instruction and schooling more broadly, and how they conceptualized oppression in our current society along with teachers' imperative to act against it. In our structural analysis on how each institution developed their standards and policies over time, we found that ideological differences between NCTE and GADoE may extend beyond our state, as NCTE's work to develop

ELA content area learning standards in the 1990s did not meet the expectations of the U.S. Department of Education, resulting in the USDoE's decision to remove funding from the project. Our analysis of the normative dimension surfaced ideological differences regarding what ELA content should include and what ELA teachers should be responsible for. We found that NCTE is calling on teachers to actively work against the oppression of social and racial groups by acknowledging marginalizing practices and engaging in activism, whereas the GADoE documents do not acknowledge the ongoing oppression of marginalized groups and prohibit teachers from discussing potentially divisive topics.

In our analysis, we were working to understand how teacher candidates and induction year teachers might navigate between these two sets of policies. Because of the prohibitions in the Protect Students First Act, ELA teachers aiming to align their practice with NCTE statements and policies may feel restricted by this legislation, particularly if their personal pedagogy takes up equity-oriented practices in relation to the purpose of schooling, the political nature of education, and the responsibilities of educators. Through an examination of the implied and explicit messages communicated in each set of documents, we next consider how each institution's expectations for teachers converge and diverge, and what this might mean as teachers put these policies into practice through their daily classroom work.

### **Areas of Convergence**

While the areas of divergence may be of more interest and importance to teachers and teacher educators in Georgia, we would be remiss not to consider the ways in which these two sets of policies outline overlapping expectations for teachers. We found that, within the language of the GADoE policies, opportunities may exist for teachers to meet the expectations of NCTE as their guiding professional organization. For example, the Protect Students First Act stipulates that nothing in the code should be construed to “undermine intellectual freedom and free expression” (p. 4), “prohibit cultural sensitivity, or cultural competency” (p. 4), or “prohibit the use of curricula that addresses the topics of slavery, racial oppression, racial segregation, or racial discrimination . . . in a professionally and academically appropriate manner and without espousing personal beliefs” (p. 5). While it is reasonable to question whether or not it is possible to keep personal beliefs out of such conversations, these provisions do allow for teachers to discuss race, racism, bias, and oppression. Thus, teachers could potentially adhere to NCTE's expectations for implementing antiracist and antibias pedagogy, and building from students' diverse identities and funds of knowledge in order to “foster inclusive learning environments” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2021a, p. 2).

We also did not find anything in the GADoE policies to explicitly prohibit teachers from using texts in ELA that represent a wide variety of lived experiences. NCTE recommends using literature that represents a wide range of identities, and the GADoE Standards for Excellence allowed some room for this, particularly in the standard in Grades 9-10 which requires reading world literature. While it is worth arguing that including a standard for teaching diverse literature and building from diverse perspectives is significantly different from simply not prohibiting this work, it is still important to note that teachers looking to align with NCTE's policies may be able to do so within the policy expectations of the GADoE.

However, despite areas of overlap, the language of the GADoE documents, or even the existence of the Protect Students First Act, may be enough for teachers to hesitate before engaging in this work. The impact of the language of this legislation, such as the prohibition for teachers to cause students to feel “psychological distress” based on their race, may influence teachers to avoid discussing race altogether (Protect Students First Act, 2022, p. 3). The threat of potentially losing one's job is particularly high under the legislation of this bill, which provides guidance for how

parents might choose to file a complaint about teachers' work. As these complaints may lead to strong reactions in the community, administrators may be particularly averse to allowing teachers to engage in the types of antiracist, culturally-sustaining pedagogies emphasized in the NCTE documents. In the next section, we consider these areas of divergence among the documents and how teachers might work through them.

### **Areas of Divergence**

There were certainly some tensions between these two sets of policies, and teachers in the state of Georgia will find it necessary to adroitly navigate between them if they are to meet the demands of both. The themes which we found to be most in conflict were between NCTE's emphasis on valuing diversity in contrast to GADoE's color-evasive language, and NCTE's call for collective solidarity and action against oppression and the GADoE's emphasis on political neutrality in classrooms. These contradictions may present challenges to teachers as they move from institutions of higher education that are guided by NCTE's standards for ELA teacher preparation, and into public schools in Georgia working within the GADoE policies, or from public schools in Georgia into graduate education programs.

Therefore, teacher educators are tasked with navigating these competing sets of standards and are challenged with supporting the teachers who move back and forth between these spaces where standards differ (e.g., public schools and teacher preparation and continuing education programs). For example, teacher educators using the NCTE teacher preparation standards are likely to orient ELA teachers toward pedagogies that specifically engage with student diversity from an asset-based approach that values the unique funds of knowledge that students' racial and cultural backgrounds provide (Moll et al., 1992; Riojas-Cortez, 2001). In fact, NCTE's teacher preparation standards specifically ask that teacher candidates consider students' identities and funds of knowledge to foster "inclusive learning environments" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2021a, p. 2). The GADoE Resolution, in contrast, claims that decisions for education can be made in students' best interests "regardless of their race or sex" (State Board of Education of the State of Georgia, 2021, para. 10). Regard for someone's racial or gender identity is specifically necessary for the asset-based teaching approaches forwarded by NCTE. Moreover, we question what the psychological impact may be for a student who is taught with no regard for their racial or cultural background, particularly if they are from a marginalized group, and whether this may in fact result in the "psychological distress" prohibited by the Protect Students First Act (Protect Students First Act, 2022, p. 3).

As mentioned above, this notion of avoiding psychological distress among students is another potential area of contradiction. While we doubt that teachers intentionally cause their students distress, many topics for classroom conversation might lead to a student feeling psychologically distressed without that being the teacher's intention. Working to avoid this would severely limit the range of topics in ELA curricula, potentially eliminating any conversations on self and identity or on historical harms. Furthermore, many educational scholars write about the necessity and importance of critical self-reflection, particularly when engaging students in conversations about social identity and while developing skills in critical analysis (hooks, 2003; Mentor & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Stevens & Bean, 2007). hooks (2003) reminds readers that "the practice of critical thinking requires that we all engage in some degree of critical evaluation of self and other" (p. 107), and so teachers working to foster critical thinking and critical consciousness (Hinchey, 1998) among students must be ready to support them as they critically self-reflect. Whether or not this will result in feelings of distress is not something teachers can anticipate, and is certainly not something to be entirely avoided. Our analysis describes the cultural-political tensions set forth by these two sets of documents that teacher educators navigate when preparing ELA



teachers for working with students in classrooms. We see these tensions as teachable moments wherein teacher educators can have explicit conversations around how these conflicting standards may result in clashing expectations for ELA teachers. However, making space to think through ways in which these expectations diverge and converge, like we have done here, could offer ELA teachers strategies and community when they find themselves being pulled in conflicting directions. For instance, we have made efforts to do so in our teaching by asking teacher candidates to write rationales for their instructional decisions. Many of our students considered how they could advocate for particular text choices that might initiate conversations aligned with NCTE's antibiased, antiracist teaching pedagogies while also being explicit with how those same texts would allow for the specific skills practice required by Georgia's Standards for Excellence.

## Conclusion

In comparing the sets of documents and policies from these two institutions, we have continuously returned to considerations for the broader purpose of ELA instruction. Why do we teach ELA, and what do we hope students will be able to do with the skills they learn and practice in these classrooms? Should our focus in this content area be on developing students as civically engaged individuals, or to be successful in institutions of higher education, or to develop the critical thinking and literacy skills that might help them in their professional careers? These purposes exist in tandem, each highlighted to a different degree in the distinct setting of different teachers' classrooms. But how they are forwarded by one of ELA's major professional organizations, NCTE, and the state level governance in Georgia, has brought some interesting divisions to light.

In our analysis, we found that the ideological beliefs and values embedded in the policies and documents from NCTE and the GADoE have developed divergent sets of expectations for ELA teachers in Georgia. These policy documents presented different beliefs around how oppression exists, and should be confronted, in our society. The scope of responsibilities for ELA teachers in the NCTE documents broadly encompasses work against racism and oppression, whereas the GADoE documents promote political neutrality. NCTE's position that ELA instruction is a way to prepare students for civic participation and develop their critical consciousness contrasts with the GADoE content area standards' focus on college readiness. We also found that the two institutions positioned teachers and their responsibilities as politically engaged citizens very differently, with NCTE expecting teachers to advocate for equal rights in an act of solidarity against oppression, and the GADoE prohibiting teachers from espousing their personal political beliefs among students.

Some may be inclined to describe these policies as incommensurable, but we have chosen to seek out ways that teachers may work within the demands from each institution. We consider where these demands converge, and how teachers may be able to meet one set of professional expectations while still not directly acting against the other. However, in that strategy, it will inevitably be difficult for teachers to fully embrace the antiracist and antibias teaching pedagogies included in the NCTE teacher preparation standards. For one, this navigation can be a strain on teachers' classroom work on top of the many other strains they already bear. Working to fully embrace diversity and antiracist teaching practices, while also worrying about whether a parent or a community member may choose to file a complaint under the Protect Students First Act, may place a great deal of stress on classroom teachers, especially those just entering the field. These teachers may feel it is imperative to comply with the institutional demands of the GADoE for their own job security, without taking on the potential risk in adhering to NCTE's policies.

We think it is also important, from an institutional perspective, to consider how teacher candidates enrolled in higher education programs implementing NCTE's teacher preparation standards are expected to take up their training within Georgia's K-12 schools. The conflicting

implicit and explicit expectations for ELA teachers' professional practice set forth in these policies may require that teacher candidates navigate those contradictions, even as they work to master the many other skills and strategies required for effective teaching.

In our own role as secondary ELA teacher educators, we have developed personal and professional commitments to the antiracist and antibias goals promoted by NCTE. Because of this commitment, this analysis has led us to reflect on our teaching practices, and how we explicitly address these tensions with our students. In working to implement the NCTE teacher preparation standards, we wonder: Are we promoting affirming and equity-oriented instructional practices among our teacher candidates? Or, are we presenting these novice teachers with conflicting expectations, that they will later need to navigate as they begin their teaching careers? Ultimately, we acknowledge that we may be doing both. We are also aware that these policies will take different shapes as they are taken up in different teaching contexts, which are influenced in substantial ways by colleagues, students, administrators, and community members. These differing sets of institutional expectations may need to be navigated carefully by teachers, especially if they are committed in their personal pedagogies to the practices forwarded by NCTE.

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