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## **Erasure, Expert/ise, and Educational “Choice”: A Poststructuralist Perspective of Kansas Education Bills in 2023**

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**Abstract:** This paper utilizes a conceptual framework uniting neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and poststructuralism to examine four education bills from the Kansas state legislature proposed in 2023. Utilizing critical discourse analysis to frame policy documents as forms of text and discourse, this paper unpacks language-in-use, structures of power, and hegemony to investigate the overarching educational policy d/Discourses and how these position teachers, teaching, and public education. The proposed Kansas bills highlight hegemonic d/Discourses of teacher erasure, skepticism of expertise, and value-free language masking value-laden policy outcomes to illustrate policymakers’ attempts to politically redefine Kansas educational conditions to reflect neoliberal and neoconservative orientations. This paper highlights the critical task for teacher educators and educational researchers to engage with practitioner-inclusive methodologies and policy analysis opportunities to position critical discourse analysis as a fruitful methodological vehicle through which to reclaim educational narratives.

**Keywords:** poststructuralism; critical discourse analysis; critical policy analysis; discourse; hegemony

### **Borrado, experto/experiencia, y “elección” educativa: Una perspectiva posestructuralista de las políticas educativas de Kansas en 2023**

**Resumen:** Este artículo utiliza un marco conceptual que une el neoliberalismo, el neoconservadurismo y el posestructuralismo para examinar cuatro proyectos de ley de educación de la legislatura del estado de Kansas propuestos en 2023. Utilizando un análisis crítico del discurso para enmarcar los documentos de políticas como formas de texto y discurso, este artículo analiza el lenguaje en uso, estructuras de poder y hegemonía para investigar la política educativa global d/Discursos y cómo estos posicionan a los docentes, la enseñanza y la educación pública. Los proyectos de ley propuestos en Kansas destacan los discursos hegemónicos de eliminación de docentes, el escepticismo ante la experiencia y el lenguaje libre de valores que enmascara resultados cargados de valores en las políticas para ilustrar los intentos de los formuladores de políticas de redefinir políticamente las condiciones educativas de Kansas para reflejar las orientaciones neoliberales y neoconservadoras. Este artículo destaca la tarea crítica para los formadores de docentes y los investigadores educativos de involucrarse con los profesionales, incluyendo metodologías y oportunidades de análisis de políticas para posicionar el análisis crítico del discurso como un vehículo metodológico a través del cual recuperar narrativas educativas.

**Palabras-clave:** postestructuralismo; análisis crítico del discurso; análisis crítico de políticas; discurso; hegemonía

### **Apagamento, experto/experiencia, e “escolha” educacional: Uma perspectiva pós-estruturalista das políticas educacionais do Kansas em 2023**

**Resumo:** Este artigo usa uma estrutura conceitual que une neoliberalismo, neoconservadorismo e pós-estruturalismo para examinar quatro projetos de lei de educação da legislatura do estado do Kansas propostos em 2023. Utilizando análise crítica do discurso para enquadrar documentos políticos como formas de texto e discurso, este artigo desvenda a linguagem em uso, estruturas de poder e hegemonia para investigar a política educacional abrangente d/Discursos e como estes posicionam os professores, o ensino e a educação pública. Os projetos de lei propostos no Kansas destacam os discursos hegemônicos sobre o apagamento dos professores, o ceticismo em relação aos conhecimentos especializados e a linguagem isenta de valores que mascaram resultados carregados de valor nas políticas para ilustrar as tentativas dos decisores políticos de redefinir politicamente as condições educativas do Kansas para refletir as orientações neoliberais e neoconservadoras. Este artigo destaca a tarefa crítica dos formadores de professores e pesquisadores educacionais de se envolverem com metodologias inclusivas para os profissionais e oportunidades de análise de políticas para posicionar a análise crítica do discurso como um veículo metodológico através do qual recuperar narrativas educacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** pós-estruturalismo; análise crítica do discurso; análise política crítica; discurso; hegemonia

## **Erasure, Expert/ise, and Educational “Choice”: A Poststructuralist Perspective of Kansas Education Bills in 2023**

As politicians, the media, and the general public continue to shape political and public discourse and perceptions around teachers, teaching, and public education (Giroux, 2014; Larsen, 2010), such discursive turns highlight the growing need for critically scrutinizing language-in use and its underlying taken-for-granted assumptions (Gee, 1996), particularly as it pertains to how the public conceptualizes the teaching profession and public education writ large. While language functions differently at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Lester et al., 2016), this paper highlights the importance of understanding hegemonic education policy d/Discourses and their implications at the state level (McIntyre et al., 2019), interrogating how these redefine identities, pedagogies, and agentive actors within the educational landscape. Therefore, this paper operates from the belief that it is integral that all stakeholders—particularly preservice and current practitioners—engage with educational policy to understand its purposes and aims (Cardno, 2019), underlying political whims, and how these coalesce to establish seemingly unequivocal “truths” about teachers, teaching, and public education (Ball, 2016; Foucault, 1982).

This paper draws upon a conceptual framework that unites neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and poststructuralism to interrogate the ways in which policy functions as text and discourse to (re)produce particular hegemonies about teachers, teaching, and public schools. Utilizing critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 2003; Gee, 1996), this paper examines four education bills aiming to become policies that emerged from the Kansas state legislature in 2023 that perpetuate larger messages of teacher erasure from the educational space, skepticism of teachers’ intellectual expertise, and masking value-laden policy outcomes through seemingly value-free policy language. Because preservice teachers are rarely required—or are rarely offered—to take educational policy course(s) as part of their licensure programs (Hara, 2017), this research consequently highlights the critical importance of teacher education’s incorporation of opportunities for practitioners to interrogate the hegemonic policy discourses shaping their work and subjectivities. Therefore, this paper reaffirms critical discourse analysis as a methodological avenue for practitioners and teacher education programs to unpack political efforts to (re)create hegemonies that restrict teachers and education (Foucault, 1982; Gramsci, 1971). Therefore, it is work examining the fundamental political undercurrents of these policies.

### **(Re)Creating Educational Hegemonies: The Neoliberal and Neoconservative Approaches**

Neoliberalism coalesces values of institutional privatization, consumerism, meritocracy, and instrumentality to broadly shape public institutions, public discourse, policy, and individual identities (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism and the technocratic elite that adopt its principles have gradually augmented social and economic inequity by increasingly decentralizing the state and individualizing more significant social issues (Aydarova, 2021; Nordin, 2014). Neoliberal practices and policies have similarly reshaped public education by applying economic understandings to teaching, learning, and schools as social institutions (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018), positioning the broader neoliberal ethos as unequivocal and objective. Nevertheless, neoliberal notions of competition, meritocracy, privatization, and quantitative efficacy measures in education policy often mask systemic educational inequality (Fairclough, 2003; McIntyre et al., 2019), mute the contextual complexities of teaching and teachers’ autonomy, and redefine educational stakeholders into educational consumers (Ball, 2003; MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020). As such, neoliberal education policies increasingly decenter

teachers and educational institutions while bolstering the power of politicians, private entities, and venture philanthropists as active and informed educational stakeholders (Kraemer-Holland & Cruz, 2022).

Similarly, the neoconservative ethos aims to influence institutions, policies, discourses, and identities. Alongside anti-establishment platforms, declarations to preserve “traditional American values” (Giroux, 2014), and factions encompassing the religious Right, the neoconservative ethos represents a collective identity that champions individualism, American exceptionalism, and advocates for “freedom” and “free speech” that simultaneously legitimizes opinion and ideology alongside act and expertise (Shahvisi, 2021). Consequently, in education, neoconservatism’s historical skepticism of educational institutions undergirds both past and present efforts to reshape institutions and practitioners’ pedagogies and subjectivities that often positions teachers and schools as obstacles rather than agents toward social progress (Giroux, 2014; Larsen, 2010). As a result, neoconservatism complicates the notion of “expertise” and agency in educational decision-making, enacting policies that increasingly diminish the knowledge and autonomy of educational practitioners while augmenting the presence and power of political entities in the realm of educational oversight (Aydarova, 2021; PEN America, 2022). Therefore, unpacking the language and language contexts in educational policy documents is helpful to understand how seemingly divergent approaches like neoliberalism and neoconservatism conjoin their policy aims to contour education on a broader scale.

### **A Poststructuralist Perspective of d/discourse and Hegemony**

A poststructuralist orientation reflects a pertinent approach for this paper, as it unites language, hegemony, and power from a critical perspective (Larsen, 2010), acknowledging how these coalesce to form broader d/Discourses that shape ways of knowing and being within individual and collective identities (Foucault, 1982; McIntyre et al., 2019). Poststructuralism engages with notions of representation, complicating broader notions of truth—and how these truths are communicated—as subjective and partial (Lather, 1993). Consequently, language utilized to communicate alleged truths reflect individualized, and often fragmented, contextual understandings. Although no single definition of discourse exists (Lester et al., 2016), I utilize Gee’s (1996) framing of “discourse” (lowercase “d”) as a system of *linguistic* representation (emphasis added) employing language, as a mode of representation, to construct and enact our identities, and to disseminate the interpretations we make about our environment (Olsen, 2006).

Nevertheless, language-in-use represents a small part of discourse, increasingly shaped by and implicated within social interaction, interpretation, and power structures embedded in “Discourse” (capital “D”). Discourses encompass more than just language. Discourses form their subjects through language, the broader speech and social context, and shared—or oppositional—sociocultural and linguistic knowledge (Anderson & Holloway, 2020; Gee, 1996). Anderson and Holloway (2020) distinguish how language-in-use reflects discourse’s interactional properties from Discourse’s institutional properties that shape knowledge and behavior and its broader social properties that sustain larger regimes of truth. For Gee (1996), Discourse encompasses and enacts dominant, influential meanings through language by amplifying and legitimating certain ways of knowing and being over others (Ziskin, 2019). Doing so creates and sustains often oppressive conditions and broader hegemonies that individuals choose to enact or challenge (Ball et al., 2012), illustrating the constant tension between internal Discourses and official, hegemonic ones (Hong et al., 2017; Larsen, 2010).

However, a poststructuralist approach to d/Discourse acknowledges that language and hegemony are always partial yet contingent upon broader social context (Lather, 1993). From a

poststructuralist perspective, d/Discourse embeds notions of power and ideological and political orientations to reflect a value-laden enterprise (Anderson & Holloway, 2020; Foucault, 1977). Consequently, it is integral to interrogate how particular D/discourses become valued and seemingly irrefutable (Ball, 2016; McIntyre et al., 2019), reflecting deeply entrenched regimes of truth (Foucault, 1982). Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony highlights how regimes of "truth" become normalized through pervasive institutional and government entrenchment, amounting to maintaining particular beliefs, ideas, and values as unequivocal, necessary, and common sense (Foucault, 1982). However, truth regimes can conflict with or enhance broad skepticism toward fact and scholarly expertise (Wescott, 2022). While forced consensus-building around educational hegemonies that privilege certainty remains high, irrefutability exists around more restrictive policies and hegemonies that lack facts or evidence (Lather, 1993; Wescott, 2022). In this way, governing bodies—or the loudest and most influential voices—remain strategically positioned to establish these uncontested truth regimes (Aydarova, 2021).

### **Conceptualizing [Educational] Policy through Poststructuralism**

To that end, hegemony's undercurrent of coercion sustains these seemingly unequivocal truth regimes and erodes possibilities for other ways of knowing to emerge (Lester et al., 2016). Hegemonic d/Discourses consequently seem normal and irrefutable, complicating potential challenges and augmenting possibilities for constraint (Larsen, 2010; Ziskin, 2019). Such a process becomes particularly salient through policy, used to conceal more egregious aims and inequities through broad, more seemingly unifying and acceptable discourse. Despite their often-reactive enterprises to social and political phenomena (Nordin, 2014; Wescott, 2022), policies signify combination and compromise, reflecting complex and widespread ideological agendas, influence, and dissemination (McIntyre et al., 2019). Policy-as-text broadly appeals to and cultivates action from various audiences and stakeholders (Winton, 2013); however, policy-as-discourse shapes our thinking, notions of common sense, and limits the conjuring of other alternatives (Ball et al., 2012). In this way, policies literally and figuratively build worlds along the un/said and the degrees to which individuals enact or are captured by those policies (Aydarova, 2021; Kraemer-Holland, 2022).

Nordin (2014) notes that education policymaking transcends state and national borders, illuminating the complex exchange of ideas and discourses, and aims to address normalized "problems" in education. Policy "problems" are often politically and discursively constructed as part of broader educational and social aims and debates (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018), often employing crisis discourse and its persuasive power to reshape hegemony (Nordin, 2014). Analyzing educational policy "problem" discourse involves examining the policies' ontological assumptions, beliefs, and values about education; and how such policies create and maintain officially sanctioned d/Discourses around education (Anderson & Holloway, 2020). Therefore, examining how policy "problems" frame educational entities and stakeholders, how this framing bolsters or stifles these stakeholders, and how such policies remake educational conditions—in this case, in Kansas—is integral.

### **Research Design**

Because no single definition of discourse exists (Lester et al., 2016), those enacting discourse analysis do so from several approaches. Representing various interdisciplinary approaches to studying language, critical discourse analysis (CDA) includes a theoretical orientation that examines and critiques structures of power and dominance, social inequality, and identity formation through policy (Johnson, 2014; Lester et al., 2016). Uniting social and linguistic analysis (Taylor, 2004), CDA aims to uncover language patterns that reflect broader, socially embedded meaning, representations,

and hegemonic truth regimes (Foucault, 1982; McGarr & Emstad, 2022). The textual dimension describes how individual language choices and textual in/exclusions embed particular meanings, social practices, and beliefs (Johnson, 2014). Further, CDA situates power and ideology in discourse and language to highlight how these inform social context and notions of truth (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1996). Critical discourse analysis recognizes the intertwining of text, discursive practice, and social practice and context (Fairclough, 1992), interrogating how power structures shape these aspects (Cardno, 2019; Winton, 2013). Consequently, it is worth employing CDA to examine the socio-political and ideological factors shaping education policy's creation, enactment, and influence and the hegemonies that inspire them (Aydarova, 2021; Gee, 2014). By framing policies from a poststructuralist orientation, policies then exist as agentive text or content and inclusive of particular values, beliefs, and ideologies (Cardno, 2019; Winton, 2013), demonstrating their capacity to create and sustain particular regimes of truth that subsequently transform the educational landscape and the distribution of power within it (Foucault, 1982; Wescott, 2022).

This research examines how language-in-use (discourse) in policy reflects broader educational hegemonies (Discourses) meant to redefine educational conditions and stakeholder agency in Kansas. While some approaches to CDA more closely examine linguistic features (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 2003), poststructural approaches focus more closely on the text's broader historical and social context (Foucault, 1982; Taylor, 2004). These latter approaches, taken up in this paper, interrogate discursive struggles for power to examine how [patterns in] discourse (re)produce hegemony to shape individuals and relationships (Nordin, 2014; Wescott, 2022). Pairing poststructuralism and CDA demonstrates a valuable framework for scrutinizing hegemonic discourses and how they shape everyday beliefs of and about teachers, teaching, and public education (Larsen, 2010; Ziskin, 2019). Moreover, these approaches interrogate the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in hegemonic discourses that underscore education policy's "transformative potential" over the education landscape (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 3).

## Data Analysis

Analyzing policy documents within the broader social context of their creation illuminates other contextual aspects implicated in the policy's enactment (Ziskin, 2019) and inevitable tensions related to struggles for power and agency (Hong et al., 2017). Therefore, analyzing policy documents from one state allows for tracing discursive shifts in how these policies position teachers and teaching and sideline pedagogical autonomy and expertise (see Taylor, 2004). I examined four education bills aiming to become policies that were introduced in 2023 in the Kansas state legislature (see Table 1). I operated from the belief that policymakers' words in bills reflected their thoughts on the topic within the broader social context (Olsen, 2006). To begin data analysis, I drew upon Gee's (1996, 2014) language tasks involving politics, significance, and activities and created holistic document summaries for each bill (see Miles & Huberman, 1994), that engaged with the following questions about how language is being used to present:

1. What is expected and acceptable;
2. What is necessary and therefore, significant; and
3. How this policy would be manifested in the educational landscape on-the-ground.

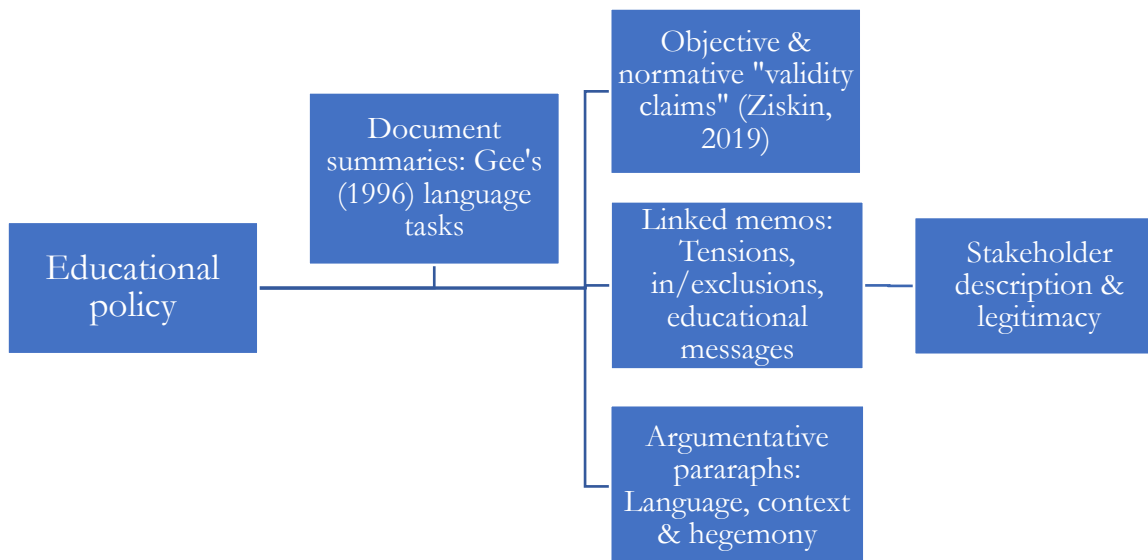
**Table 1*****Education Bills (2023)***

Bill <sup>1</sup>	Bill Topic	Status
House Bill (HB) 2236	“Parents’ Rights” to direct education	Introduced March 1, 2023; Vetoed April 24, 2023; Failed veto override April 27, 2023
House Bill (HB) 2218	“Sunflower Education Equity Act” – parental retrieval of public school funding toward non-public school tuition or homeschooling	Introduced Jan. 30, 2023; Referred to K-12 Education Committee March 1, 2023
House Bill (HB) 2248	“Policies and procedures” for parental review of “educational materials	Introduced Feb. 1, 2023
[Amended] Senate Bill (SB) 128	“Ad Astra <sup>2</sup> Opportunity” tax credit to non-public school enrolled students and families	Introduced Jan. 31, 2023; Recommended passing from Committee on Assessment and Taxation March 24, 2023

Within the document summaries, I drew upon Ziskin’s (2019) work that unpacks discursive “validity claims” (p. 611), uniting language, policy context, and educational norms that reflect everyday ex/implicit common sense “truths” that policy stakeholders enact or challenge. I focused specifically on policies’ objective and normative claims (see Figure 1.). Premised on Fairclough’s (1989, 1992, 2003) methodological theories that investigate how systems of power shape everyday communications—and how ideologies inform both communication and consequently sustain hegemonies—this critical approach acknowledges how education policy debates silence particular voices and perspectives to influence public beliefs and public discourse about education by examining im/explicit validity claims. Objective claims leave room for challenges to the topic under scrutiny based on tacit social norms. Normative claims posit morality—what should or ought to be designated socially expected or desired. From there, I drafted “linked memos” (Ziskin, 2019, p. 616) of bill excerpts that identified and unpacked the objective and normative validity claims made in each policy, looking for the following: tensions, exclusions, and explicit and implicit messages about teachers, teaching, and public education. I scrutinized diction, syntax, and patterns between these throughout and across bills as part of the analysis. I included how different educational stakeholders were described through positive/negative attributes associated with each group and whether/how these groups were de/legitimized in the text. I then crafted argumentative paragraphs from these meaning-making memos, leading to an increased understanding of each bill’s language patterns, the context for production, and what hegemonic d/Discourses emerged to inform a broader understanding of a particular educational topic (Anderson & Holloway, 2020; Aydarova, 2021).

<sup>1</sup> H.R. 2218, 2023d Leg. (Kan.), H.R. 2236, 2023d Leg. (Kan.); H.R. 2248, 2023d Leg. (Kan.); S. 128, 2023d Leg. (Kan.).

<sup>2</sup> “Ad Astra per Aspera” is the Kansas motto, which means, “Through difficulties, to the stars.”

**Figure 1***Analysis Process***Researcher Positionality**

As a scholar of education, I should acknowledge that not all educational stakeholders operate from similar assumptions about language, power, and policy and the subsequent implications of these intersections (Olsen, 2006). My experience as a white teacher and teacher educator in Chicago resistant to the city's racialized neoliberal project (see Lipman, 2011) informs my positionality and educational assumptions that likely are not shared by all Kansans; despite the ways in which educational policies reflect racial and social endeavors (Gillborn, 2005). Because I currently work and reside in Kansas, this policy analysis occurs while I am positioned within the policy context and the D/discourses critiqued (Lester et al., 2016). For the sake of reflexivity, it is worth questioning how teacher educators and educational stakeholders, broadly, have been complicit in perpetuating these hegemonic policy discourses (McIntyre et al., 2019) and how I/we conceptualize what "critical" means and looks like in discursive policy analysis and whether this resonates with students (Paugh & Robinson, 2011). While space exists to potentially overstate discursive domination (Taylor, 2004), critically identifying and unpacking hegemonic discourses illuminates space to contest and resist those policies and discourses that diminish teachers' autonomy and agency (Johnson, 2014; Larsen, 2010; Taylor, 2004).

**Findings****Policy Language Classifying the Educational Context*****Establishing and Opaqing Discursive Boundaries***

Findings from the analysis of four education bills expose how language either explicitly defines or nebulously references educational concepts, placing limits and specificity around particular educational terms while omitting others entirely. For example, operationalized words and phrases include "educational materials" in HBs 2236 and 2248, defined as "curriculum, textbooks, reading materials, videos, digital materials, websites, online applications and any other material given



or provided to a student for student instruction;” as well as “parent,” and “activities”—the latter of which specifically excludes “student presentations” from school or school district-facilitated “presentation, assembly, lecture or other event.” Similarly, HB 2248 explicitly outlines parameters surrounding parental “inspect[ion] and review” of “any educational or health records pertinent to their child” when discussing the extent of parents’ oversight of the educational process. While 2248 outlines parents’ oversight of educational materials and records, HB 2218 offers explicit guidelines around scholarship funds and homeschooling, noting that homeschooled students are ineligible for these funds if homeschooling is “provided by an immediate family member.” To that end, 2218 also explicitly restricts “control or supervision over any nonpublic school or home school,” stating these entities are not “agent[s] of this state.” In these ways, the Kansas House Bills overtly define educational concepts to similarly delineate instructional responsibilities of educational environments.

However, other terms and phrases remain nebulous until later in the document or are ill-defined or omitted entirely. For example, in HB 2218, a “qualified school” is defined as “any school located in Kansas that is: (A) A nonpublic elementary or secondary school that has made application [sic] and received approval according to this act, or (B) a preschool serving students with disabilities.” While “nonpublic” signifies a qualified school as not a public school, the bill fails to note these “qualified” schools are consequently private schools or home schools. Further, the bill does not mention that certain charter schools would be considered public schools—as they receive public and private funds—and, therefore, would not be considered qualified schools. Finally, although operationalizing this term occurs on the second page of 2218, the complexity of the “qualified school” emerges again on page 7, where the bill argues that “qualified student[s] shall not enroll full-time in a school of a school district.” While this might initially seem self-explanatory, members of the general public attempting to make sense of this distinction might find differentiating “qualified school” and “school of a school district” challenging. In sum, although some bill language lends itself to clear definitions of terms; other instances within the Kansas education bills expose gray areas in how educational environments are defined for the purposes of funding or oversight.

### ***Stakeholder Substitutions and Omissions***

Finally, SB 128 and HBs 2218 and 2236 make apparent substitutions and omissions for educational terminology that redefine the prominence (or absence) of certain groups of educational stakeholders. For example, SB 128 refers to legal guardians as “taxpayers” and a student as a “dependent child [of the taxpayer].” In the amended version of 2218, “reading” and “grammar” replaced “English Language Arts” and “English Language proficiency” in the context of outlining a caveat for “qualified schools” that must teach core subjects such as social studies, mathematics, science, and “reading” and “grammar,” a more general distinction employed the remainder of the policy. Additionally, 2218 utilizes “the program,” “savings accounts,” and “scholarship” to describe the funds “qualified students” would receive if the student chooses not to attend a public school. However, the bill does not mention that these funds deposited into the student's “savings account” under the proposed policy would come directly from public school funding.

Another omission from HB 2218 and 2236 is the word and role of “teacher,” only mentioned once in 2248 (e.g., declaring that school districts adopt policies “in consultation with parents, teachers, and school administrators” that ensure parental access to education materials.) The word and role of teacher rarely appears in policy language as part of a larger group of educational stakeholders. Proposed policies list stakeholders as “the board,” “parents,” “taxpayers,” “student,” “treasurer,” and “school district” more than once but omit the word “teacher.” Instead, HB 2218 proposes execution through an elected board. These members include the board's treasurer, two state House members and two state Senators (one from each political party), the chair of the Education or Education Budget committee, a representative from a “qualified school,” a parent of a

“qualified student,” and a non-voting member from the Kansas Department of Education. As listed, no teachers will occupy any board position. In the context of instruction, 2218 lists both a “tutor seeking to provide tutoring services” and an “instructor” or “competent instructor” as one “capable of performing competently” the duties associated with working in a designated “qualified school.” Some of these duties include “keep[ing] complete records” and “supervision.” HB 2236 similarly omits the occurrence and presence of the teacher through explicit declarations that parents possess the “right to direct” their child’s education, similarly stating that “no student’s academic records shall be adversely affected” by withdrawing from educational programs, topics, or classes. While 2236 notes that consequently, “educational alternatives” in these cases “shall be utilized,” the omission of the teacher from this clause—opting instead for passive voice—marks an additional example of teacher omission. Because the Kansas bills’ language omits or substitutes some stakeholders for others, these discursive turns consequently reposition educational stakeholders as more—or less—prominent regarding educational oversight.

### **Policy Declarations of “Parents’ Rights”**

To that end, while policy language omitted explicit discussion of “teacher(s)”, policy language instead named “parents” and syntactically positioned them as active subjects. Each House Bill (2218, 2236, and 2248) explicitly references parents, whether through noting their “rights,” “beliefs” and “values” or their capacity to “inspect” and “review” educational materials, respectively. HB 2218 specifically positions “the rights of parents” as the catalyst for broadening opportunities to choose a school that “best aligns with the student’s...needs.” Further, HB 2218 gives parents the power to “supervis[e]” projects “in agriculture and homemaking, work-study programs” and “correspondence courses” from accredited home study schools. Similarly, while parents who execute homeschooling would not be required to register with the state of Kansas, parents could appeal “any administrative decision made by the board” (in the case of application denial, for example) and subsequently represent themselves in appeals hearings.

Similarly, other House Bills’ language explicitly names “parents” as active educational stakeholders through curricular review and decision-making. As a precursor to 2236, HB 2248 establishes guidelines that permit parents to review educational materials taught in schools in Kansas. 2248 “ensure[s] parental review of educational materials and records pertinent to their child.” Consequently, 2248 allows parents to “be informed of and have the ability to inspect any...other educational materials or activities provided to their child,” including but not limited to handouts, curricula, and course syllabi, and to “inspect and review any [district] educational or health records” pertinent to their child. Further, such materials and records “shall be made available... upon request during regular school hours.” While 2248 expressly excludes “student presentations” from parental review, the bill explicitly states that such procedures be outlined “in consultation with parents, teachers, and school administrators,” with parents listed first. Designated as a bill outlining “parents’ rights to direct education,” HB 2236 focuses explicitly on prioritizing parents’ values and beliefs as undergirding their “right to direct the education, upbringing, and moral or religious training” of their student. This proposition “guarantees the free exercise of the rights” established in the policy to parents of students within any school district. 2236 gives parents within “any school district... to object to any educational materials or activities” if these are not included in the district-approved curriculum or state standards or “impairs” their “sincerely held beliefs, values or principles.” As a result, 2236 declares that “an agreed upon alternative activity or resource shall be utilized.” Because these House Bills plainly name parents as operational educational decision-makers by outlining specific “rights” to them, doing so positions parents and their students as primary recipients of policy aims premised on educational sovereignty.

## **Policy Aims of Freedom, Choice, and Equity**

Finally, findings illustrated how HB 2236, HB 2218, and SB 128 linked concepts of educational choice, equity, and freedom to documented declarations of parents' "rights." Each of these proposed policies covers the K-12 spectrum, and two House Bills specifically reference "free exercise" (2236) or "freedom" (2218) in the text. While 2236 focuses on parents' "free exercise of the rights" to object to educational materials or topics that infringe on their beliefs or values, 2218 (the "Sunflower Education Equity Act") purports to preserve "meaningful educational freedom while simultaneously protecting the freedom of parents to direct the education of their children." More specifically, 2218 operationalizes this "educational freedom" based on parental school choice. As the premise of 2218 rests in funding parental choice to enroll students in "nonpublic" schools, the bill outlines explicitly how "educational freedom" manifests through "parental choice" of a school or "learning environment that best aligns with the student's academic, socio-emotional and spiritual needs" that would foster "life success." This level of school choice also includes possible exemption from compulsory education for 16-17-year-old students. For example, enrollment in an early college program (e.g., Kansas Academy of Mathematics and Science partnering with Fort Hays State University), "alternative educational program" enrollment, or parental written consent each excuse the student's compulsory attendance requirement. In sum, by declaring "the right of parents to choose the educational environment that best serves their children," 2218 alludes to educational freedom and choice within the context of parents' [documented] rights.

Consequently, HB 2218 and SB 128 couple parents' sovereignty for school and educational choice by outlining financial incentives for families enrolling students outside of public schools. SB 128 would incentivize parental educational choice through an "ad astra opportunity tax credit" for "children not enrolled in public school," which parents can claim yearly. Eligibility for this tax credit rests in the student's enrollment at an "accredited nonpublic school or nonaccredited private or elementary or secondary school." In addition, SB 128 includes a continuous tax credit by stating such applies in "2023, and all tax years thereafter" for Kansas students enrolled in public schools the tax year prior. Further incentivizing parental choice to dis-enroll from public schools, SB 128 states that if the tax credit amount exceeds the parent's Kansas income tax liability, the excess funds can be carried over to the subsequent year or years until the amount has been deducted from tax liability.

HB 2218 similarly discusses financial incentives to parents for dis-enrolling students from public schools to advance parents' educational freedom and choice. Called the "Sunflower Education Equity Act," 2218 proposes establishing individual student "savings accounts" to house funds for enrolling in a "nonpublic school," funding that can also be applied for and renewed—or carried over—yearly. Grounded on preserving "the right of parents to choose the educational environment that best serves their children," 2218 also includes stipulations that permit students enrolled in nonpublic schools to engage in district programs or take state tests in the public school district of residence. "Qualified expenses" from a student's "savings account" including but not limited to "tuition or fees charged by a qualified school," as well as "contracted services from a public school." Although "part-time" is not clearly defined—excluding partial enrollment at a "qualified school—the school district must permit part-time enrolled students to "attend any courses, programs or services offered by the school district." Therefore, students enrolled at "qualified" or "nonpublic" schools are both incentivized by HB 2218 for this enrollment, but also would retain engagement within the district.

Finally, HB 2218, 2236, and SB 128 either explicitly employ the word "equity" or references principles of non-discrimination to illustrate policy aims of linking students' educational attainment with social mobility. For example, HB 2236 not only addresses parental capacity to "direct the education" of their student but also shields students from "advers[e] affect[s]" resulting from course

or program withdrawal based on objected material. Consequently, remaining in the classroom or an alternative placement should be offered “to give the student instructional support.” Similarly, HB 2218—the “Sunflower Education Equity Act” distinctly employs the word “equity” in the bill name to align with additional examples of student-first language. Grounded on beliefs that “quality, individualized education” fosters an “essential pathway to success” for students and “the stability of the state,” the proposed policy draws upon principles of equity, particularly on its first page:

Every child in Kansas is unique with diverse learning needs and thus shall be granted educational freedom... ‘The Sunflower Education Equity Act’ affirms that equity in education means that all children shall receive what they need educationally regardless of their socioeconomic, racial or cultural status. The act affirms and promotes that all children, without preference or bias, are uniquely capable and worthy of meeting and exceeding the highest caliber of expectations in an environment that best promotes their unique qualities, abilities, needs and goals... (p. 1)

Adhering to its declaration that “all children” should have educational needs met “regardless of their socioeconomic, racial or cultural status,” the bill permits families whose income equals or is less than “300% of the federal poverty guidelines” to apply for the “scholarship fund” to be deposited in the “education savings account,” even if they do not meet other stated requirements. Nevertheless, other policies include stipulations that exclude students of particular backgrounds, namely, undocumented students. For example, while SB 128 classifies possible tax credits for students attending nonpublic schools as an “opportunity” and the subsequent account as a “scholarship account,” the bill notes that “a valid social security number” for the student-applicant is required, which renders undocumented students as ineligible from claiming these credits. Therefore, to varying degrees, three of the four proposed education policies discuss principles of freedom, choice, and equity as these relate to parents’ rights as stakeholders, financial incentives for exercising school choice, and student educational attainment and social mobility.

### **Discussion: The Struggle for Representation and [Educational] Agency**

Despite privileging the sayable and the paradox between policy aims and policy outcomes (Nudzor, 2012; Rogers et al., 2016), poststructural critical discourse analysis still provides a methodological opportunity to interrogate hegemonic d/Discourses and embedded meaning-systems that shape teachers, teaching, and the ongoing power struggles within the educational policy landscape (Olsen, 2006). Further, as Discourses of manufactured crisis or fear historically precede and consequently normalize educational policy reforms and enactments (Nordin, 2014), policies function as ideological and political tools to remake educational conditions through specific ideologies and truth regimes. Since policy language can appeal to various audiences while simultaneously shaping our notion of common sense and stifling other possibilities (Ball et al., 2012; Winton, 2013), from a poststructural perspective, educational policies coalesce micro, meso, and macro-level properties to inform language-in-use, what is worth knowing, and what we consider to be true and right in education. In this way, broad, simple policy language might seem harmless, but such language also enables widespread forms of educational and pedagogical control through politically motivated, partial, and subjective “truths” (Nordin, 2014). Although none have passed (yet), the policies’ language-in-use expose Discourses of teacher erasure, redefining what is considered “expertise,” and the subjective nature of “value-free” language that complicate the notion of representation on micro, meso, and macro levels (Anderson & Holloway, 2020; Lather,

1993). While Right-wing politicians have proposed the Kansas policies under study, these policies bridge ideological boundaries between neoliberalism and neoconservatism to capture and redefine educational conditions, mirroring broader nationwide struggles for educational agency between politicians and educational stakeholders (Giroux, 2014).

### **Under/Representing the Educated and their “Expertise”**

The language utilized in the Kansas policies fosters emergent Discourses of teacher erasure and skepticism of expertise, illustrating a neoliberal and neoconservative practice that seeks to mute and erode practitioner autonomy and agency within the educational landscape (Aydarova, 2021). Such discursive omissions highlight politically oriented skepticism of public intellectuals and expertise by muting the qualifications and presence of teachers and amplifying the overseeing power of parents and policymakers (McIntyre et al., 2019; Wescott, 2022). Neoliberal and neoconservative policy language often distinguishes policymakers from teachers, which positions the former as innovators of reform and the latter as adverse obstacles preserving the status quo (Anderson et al., 2015; Aydarova, 2021). This separation consequently informs how teachers and teaching are represented discursively, institutionally, and socially (Anderson & Holloway, 2020). Illuminating neoliberal and neoconservative efforts to frame teachers passively and with skepticism (Ball et al., 2012; Giroux, 2014), policies often substituted other stakeholders—namely “parents”—as more agentive educational stakeholders and overseers. This discursive turn consequently situates teachers as passive subjects captured by—but responsible for enacting—neoliberal and neoconservative policies shaping their work (Ball et al., 2012; Kraemer-Holland, 2022). The clear omission of teachers from the bills’ language-in-use (save for a single occurrence couched within “collaboration”) suggests a shift in linguistic and physical, agentive representation of teachers within the educational policy space, while simultaneously illustrating the power of policymakers to reframe the definition of educational “expertise.”

Since teachers historically face minimal representation in educational policy debates (McIntyre et al., 2019), neoliberal and neoconservative policy Discourses inform the educational conditions in which teachers work (Anderson et al., 2015), as well as how teachers are (or in this case, are not) represented on a broader scale. In this way, the issue of teacher representation—from a poststructural perspective—illustrates policymakers’ efforts to maintain partial and subjective hegemonies about teachers and their roles. Neoliberal and neoconservative education policy language shapes both public sentiment and seemingly unequivocal “truths” around practitioners’ roles, their knowledge, and pedagogical autonomy (Wescott, 2022); often calling these into question while simultaneously amplifying the decision-making power of venture philanthropists, policymakers, and other external educational “experts” (Aydarova, 2021; Kraemer-Holland, 2021; 2022). By discursively re-positioning policymakers and parents as educational overseers, the policies under study consequently privilege politically subjective “truths” about teachers as less-than-agentive experts as seemingly common sense, redefining what educational “expertise” means and looks like and who holds it. As a result, neoliberal and neoconservative policymakers cultivate latent skepticism of teacher expertise to build an educational world in which outside “experts” retain discursive and political power and presence. Therefore, as teachers might find themselves trapped between consciously “playing the [policy] game” (MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020, p. 308) or unconscious policy entrapment, the Kansas policies’ emergent Discourse of teacher erasure contribute to maintaining subjective truth regimes about teachers’ expertise and representation as passive educational stakeholders.

## The “Value-Free” Representing the Value-Laden

Finally, while each proposed policy purports to prioritize parents’ educational rights, choices, or freedoms by appealing to morality, “traditional American values” (Giroux, 2014), and free speech; such policy language aligns with neoliberal and neoconservative practices of utilizing seemingly “value-free” language signaling principles of educational equity to mask value-laden desires to shape educational and pedagogical conditions that deepens educational *inequity* in Kansas (Kraemer-Holland & Cruz, 2022; PEN America, 2022). Seemingly “value-free” language (Aydarova, 2021, p. 673) and “colormute” discourse of “all students” (Ziskin, 2019, p. 610) romanticizes allegedly shared values of “educational freedom” and educational “equity,” yet encourages forms of educational exclusion (e.g., requiring social security numbers for student funding eligibility). Superficially, policies’ use of “all students,” “equity,” and “educational freedom” seem unequivocal and common sense, yet mask political efforts to divert funding from public schools by rewarding enrollment in “nonpublic” schools (Kraemer-Holland & Cruz, 2022; Lipman, 2011). Policy language coalesces school districts, politically affiliated boards, financial actors (e.g., the board “treasurer” as policies list), and private entities to incentivize parents’ participation in the educational marketplace that political policymakers create, rewarding certain educational choices over others and diminishing constituents’ agency in shaping those educational conditions (Lipman, 2011).

From a poststructural perspective, “value-free” language and seemingly unequivocal truth regimes are always value-laden (Lather, 1993), underscoring the ways in which linguistic representation signifies partial, subjective truths about what forms of schooling should be valued and privileged. Language of parental school choice and freedom aligns with the neoliberal ethos of individual consumerism, privatization, and competition (MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020); while incentivizing private school choice aligns with the growing neoconservative embrace of moral and religious education and their efforts to blur church and state (Giroux, 2014). To that end, bolstering and rewarding school choice—for some, at least—not only highlights the power of policymakers to create educational conditions for all stakeholders but also positions alternative “choices” as more lucrative and desirable to “failing” public schools (Lipman, 2011). In alignment with the entrenched belief of schools as institutions to alleviate social ills (Larsen, 2010), politicians justify practices of privatization and oversight to create a competitive educational marketplace of school choices as necessary for educational efficiency and “equity” of opportunities (Aydarova, 2021). Such contradictions consequently contribute to the complexity teachers and public schools must navigate in challenging such policy discourses (MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020). Hegemonic policy discourses utilizing value-free language reflect value-laden efforts to mask neoliberal and neoconservative aims to establish school competition and defund public education.

## Suggestions for Future Research

This paper’s purpose was to utilize a poststructural approach to unpack the language-in-use from four state-level educational policies in Kansas, and how micro-level discourse contributes to meso and macro-level neoliberal and neoconservative Discourses that complicate educational “truths” through partial and subjective representations of stakeholders and educational principles. Drawing upon poststructuralism and critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper unpacks how policies’ language-in-use demonstrate discursive substitutions and omissions of stakeholders, alongside “value-free” appeals to educational equity, choice, and freedom to entrench hegemonic Discourses of teacher erasure, skepticism of expertise, and value-laden policy outcomes to remake the Kansas educational landscape. Although these policies in Kansas reflect seemingly official and unequivocal modes of textual representation, policies can agentively build worlds around beliefs,

values (Cardno, 2019; Winton, 2013), and the un/said to sustain particular subjective truth regimes and inequitable structures of power (Foucault, 1982; Wescott, 2022).

Adherence to the relationship between the linguistic and social context demonstrate CDA's importance as a tool for educational policy analysis (Anderson & Holloway, 2020; Taylor, 2004), and for inspiring “policy activism” (Yeatman, 1990, p. 159) that encourages joint researcher and stakeholder interrogation and interpretation of discursive policy turns (Lester et al., 2016; Taylor, 2004). Nevertheless, it is worth discussing how teacher educators can continue to foster critical discussion of educational policies and the dangers behind unconscious policy enactment (MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020), particularly since many teacher education programs do not require an educational policy course for teacher licensure (Hara, 2017). Because teachers exist within multilayered pedagogical tensions (Hong et al., 2017), theoretical knowledge and critical sociopolitical consciousness are necessary for teachers to unpack how policy language can foster negative implications on the work and on public education (Larsen, 2010; Wescott, 2022). Therefore, teacher educators have a responsibility to integrate coursework that focuses on policy discourse to understand its persuasive potential and subsequent Discursive implications (Anderson & Holloway, 2020; Lester et al., 2016); where teachers actively engage with the seemingly common-sense and unequivocal truth regimes maintained through local, state, and federal policy and public discourse. Because it can often be difficult to name the d/Discourses in which we are embedded, the hope is to cultivate an “intra-personal epistemic process” leading to ah-ha moments of “get[ting]” what policies tell us (Jones, 2017, p. 2), and resisting those policy hegemonies accordingly.

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