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"We Shall Take Their Children Away and Rear Them to the Fatherland": A Critical Discourse Analysis of a "Parent Advocacy" Group

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Abstract: The rise of right-wing populism, embodied in the figure of Donald Trump, has been characterized by conspiracy theories, "fake news," and other forms of mis- and disinformation in what has been described as a "post-truth" era. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this problem, and national conflicts around appropriate content, methods, and modes of schooling often involved disinformation circulated in school board meetings and other local contexts during the 2021-2022 school year. In this study, we adopt a critical literacy lens and take up the tools of discourse analysis to examine the rhetoric of post-truth, conspiracy-oriented groups opposed to public health mandates, critical race theory (CRT), and social emotional learning (SEL) in public schools. Our discourse analysis of Purple for Parents Indiana (P4PI), a local advocacy group, suggests that P4PI and similar groups are engaging in "cosmetic criticality," a project superficially resembling critical literacy that poses a unique challenge to public education—a challenge literacy scholars and teacher educators must confront.

Keywords: discourse analysis, mis- and disinformation, critical literacy, post-truth

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Conspiracy theories, "fake news," and other forms of mis- and disinformation have exploded in the years following the U.S. presidential election of 2016, leading some to suggest that we have entered a "post-truth" era in which appeals to emotion and belief are more influential than objective facts (Sismondo, 2017). In this context, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021-2022 school year brought a renewed sense of danger, urgency, and conflict to decisions around content, methods, and modes of schooling. Parent frustration erupted into name-calling, shouting, and threats during local school board meetings, prompting the National School Board group to request federal intervention and local school boards to limit public comment and in-person meeting contact (Thompson, 2021). In this study, we investigate these divisions through a critical literacy lens (Lewison, et al., 2002; Luke, 2012; McDaniel, 2004), using tools of discourse analysis (Gee, 2011b) to examine the rhetoric of post-truth, conspiracy-oriented groups opposed to public health mandates, critical race theory (CRT), and social emotional learning (SEL) in public schools. Specifically, we focus our analysis on the parent advocacy organization Purple for Parents Indiana (P4PI), using data derived from its website, local school board meetings, social media interactions, and local news accounts in the suburbs surrounding urban centers of Indiana where P4PI is most active. We argue that P4PI and similar groups are engaged in "cosmetic criticality" (Bacon, 2018, p. 4), a project superficially resembling critical literacy that takes advantage of the "popularization of critical literacies" (p. 6) and the democratization of knowledge to advance disinformation through alternative sources, crowdsourced texts, and curated social networks, resulting in an unprecedented challenge to public education that literacy scholars and teacher educators have an obligation to address.

Although both authors work in a field centered on teacher education and PK-12 literacy development, we see an urgent need for literacy work in educational spaces involving adults, particularly caretakers and decision-makers participating in public schools. We argue that conspiracy-oriented groups engaged in post-truth discourse are co-opting some of the methods and language of critical literacy while opposing its goal, the liberation of marginalized populations (Luke, 2012; Freire, 1970/2000; Shor & Freire, 1987). By positioning themselves as oppressed, these groups appear to challenge institutional power, even as their policies champion the re-ascendancy of historically dominant groups. Scholars and teachers engaged in critical literacy work must be able to identify and respond effectively to this challenge. Understanding post-truth discourse, particularly around local educational policy, is foundational to a critical analysis of these parent advocacy groups and organizations. Our analysis of these D/discourses, then, sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What does an analysis of the D/discourse of P4PI around COVID-19 precautions, CRT, and SEL reveal about the values, goals, methods, and power dynamics of P4PI and similar groups engaged in "post-truth" D/discourses on education?

2. What does an analysis of the D/discourse of P4PI around COVID-19 precautions, CRT, and SEL reveal about the epistemic beliefs (beliefs about knowledge and knowing) of P4PI and similar groups engaged in "post-truth" D/discourses on education?

First, therefore, we review some of the emerging educational literature on the post-truth phenomenon and provide an overview of our theoretical framework. We then describe our research method, rooted in theoretical tools outlined in Gee's (2011b) discourse analysis framework. Next, we present our findings as they pertain to post-truth discourses around school-based COVID-19 precautions, CRT controversies, and SEL concerns. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for literacy scholars, teacher educators, and those concerned about the future of public education and discourse.

Background and Relevant Literature

Educational Discourse on the Post-Truth Condition

The Oxford Dictionaries chose "post-truth" as 2016's word of the year (Oxford Languages, 2021). The post-truth phenomenon is characterized by "mistrust in established institutions, including government, academia, and scientific consensus" (Bacon, 2018, p. 3). A growing body of educational research grapples with this phenomenon. In 2018, a search of three popular online periodicals (*Education Week*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Edutopia*) and two literacy practitioner websites (the *National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE]* and the *International Literacy Association [ILA]*) for "post-truth," "fake news," and "alternative facts," narrowed down to articles published between 2015 and 2018 that focused on how the literacy community should address post-truth problems, yielded 73 results (Bacon, 2018). More writing on the issue has emerged since then; for example, our search for the same three terms in just one literacy journal (*Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy*) elicited 12 articles written between 2018 and 2021.

Discussing the importance of identity to the practice of critical literacy in a post-truth world, Janks (2018) cites Foucault, who believed "discourses are regimes of truth, and texts are instantiations of discourse(s)," adding that "our identities are formed by the communities we inhabit and the discourses they use;" therefore, "the discourses we inhabit affect what we do (what texts we choose to read) and how our beliefs and values affect what positions we take up in the texts we encounter" (p. 96). Combining these ideas with Bacon's (2018) observation that post-truth is characterized by "mistrust in established

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institutions" (p. 3) and the Oxford Dictionary's definition of post-truth as "denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Languages, 2021), we define "post-truth D/discourse(s)" as language enacted in the service of beliefs, attitudes, and social identities that seeks to maintain or reassert power by obscuring fact through appeals to emotion, personal belief, and mistrust in institutions.

One important framework in considering post-truth discourses relates to epistemic beliefs, or "ways of knowing." Introducing a special issue of *Educational Psychologist* addressing post-truth, Barzilai and Chinn (2020) define the post-truth condition as "a range of current threats to people's abilities to know what is true or most accurate in media- and information-rich societies" (p. 107). They offer a "roadmap of educational discourse about post-truth problems" that includes four lenses: "not knowing how to know, fallible ways of knowing, not caring about truth (enough), and disagreeing about how to know" (p. 108). These four lenses represent different ways educational researchers have framed the post-truth problem and ways educators might both aggravate and mitigate the problem. In a similar vein, Bacon (2018) analyzes educational discourse on post-truth among literacy scholars and identifies three broad categories of "first wave" responses to the post-truth problem, each of which constructs the problem differently and proposes different kinds of solutions and implications for policy and methodology: "critical reading" (evaluation of content or author credibility), "critical consumerism" (evaluation of source validity), and "critical empathy" (engagement with opposing ideas to understand both sides) (p. 6). He argues that while these responses

have strengths, they insufficiently recognize the power dynamics of the post-truth condition, and he suggests that because literacy is political, "a renewed emphasis on power, dominance, and liberation is imperative to 'reading' post-truth, and necessary for any methodology that seeks to address it" (Bacon, 2018, p. 10).

Indeed, the exercise of political power is a major factor contributing to the post-truth phenomenon. As Barzilai and Chinn (2020) note, "The information landscape is increasingly dominated by politically partisan websites that cater to political agendas and identities and provide content that confirms these identities" (p. 109). In discussing the importance of truth, they point out that "people's capabilities to find out the truth underlie the capacity for social critique and the ability to stand up to ideas" (p. 109), adding that for many people, accuracy is a less important goal than approval, belonging, or partisanship. Any analysis of post-truth texts and discourses, then, must move beyond an evaluation of the accuracy of factual statements and of source credibility, and beyond an attempt to understand different points of view; it must also interrogate the power dynamics inherent in texts and discourses. As Janks (2018) argues, texts are never neutral but rather work to position their consumers; therefore, considering "underlying discourses, assumptions, and omissions" is important for a critical analysis, which "combines text analysis with an analysis of power" (p. 96). An analysis of post-truth texts and discourses, therefore, must interrogate underlying power dynamics. In the next section, we provide a broad overview of the theoretical framework through which we are considering these dynamics, critical literacy.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on critical literacy as a theoretical lens through which to approach these conflicts and discourses. Critical literacy framing demands that we adopt a "questioning stance" (McDaniel, 2004) that disrupts the status quo, focuses on sociopolitical issues, interrogates multiple viewpoints, and encourages action to promote social justice (Lewison et al., 2002). Importantly, critical literacy centers justice by offering questions like, "What is 'truth'? How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interests? . . . For what purposes?" (Luke, 2012, p. 4). Rooted in a tradition with an "explicit aim of the critique and transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, and institutions and political systems" (Luke, 2012, p. 5), critical literacy is an appropriate theoretical lens through which to read and interrogate power dynamics inherent in post-truth discourses.

We acknowledge that post-truth discourses appear to share some features with the practice of critical literacy (Bacon, 2018). One could argue, for example, that P4PI activists engage in a form of critical literacy when they critique scientific consensus regarding mask mandates and vaccines, or when they challenge CRT or SEL in spaces where educators influenced by these approaches maintain power. This is an issue with which scholars and teachers who embrace critical literacy must grapple. We agree with Bacon (2018) that post-truth discourses employ "cosmetic criticality" (p. 4), a reactionary skepticism toward institutions that is "unmoored from explicit discussions of power, domination, and liberation" and therefore "easily appropriated by post-truth discourses to maintain rather than to disrupt existing power hierarchies" (p. 4). However, while our analysis offers one possible approach for responding to this issue, we recognize the need for further work on the problem, especially when it comes to addressing the epistemic foundations of critical literacy that present obstacles to an epistemological critique of post-truth discourses.

We now turn to our methodology, discourse analysis (DA). After providing an overview of DA and identifying our positionality, we introduce the focal parent group Purple for Parents Indiana (P4PI). Then, we describe our procedures, which include the use of five specific DA tools (Gee 2011b) to closely analyze three discursively representative "texts" produced by P4PI.

Method: Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis (DA) is a broad field born out of linguistics, primarily focused on analyzing spoken language in units larger than words or sentences (Harris, 1952), but it has grown and been taken up by other fields to analyze language-based social practices (Bloome et al., 2005; Johnstone, 2008; Schiffrin, et al., 2001) and critical inquiry (Blommaert, 2009; Fairclough, 2010; Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Here we follow James Gee's (2011a, 2011b) approach to DA because our data reflects his conceptualization of D/discourse as an identity kit, described below.

DA may be seen as both a method and a theory, which are, as Gee (1999) points out, inseparable. Gee's method is rooted in a theory of language that sees language as having "*meaning only in and through social practices*, practices which often leave us morally complicit with harm and injustice unless we attempt to transform them" and adapts "tools of inquiry" in service of methods whose goals are elucidating the theory and contributing to solving important problems (Gee, 2011a, p. 12). While this underlying theory of language informs our DA and aligns philosophically with the theoretical framework we have chosen, a critical literacy lens enables us to apply the tools of DA with a special focus on the literacy problem at the heart of the discourse we examine. Indeed, as Luke (2012)

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points out in an article tracing critical literacy's lineage, DA has arisen as one of several broad approaches among literacy scholars and teachers with a critical orientation. Within a critical literacy framework, DA facilitates focus on words and syntax—on how these and other communication choices influence communities, power dynamics and the use of texts (Luke, 2012; Janks, 2009). This makes DA a fitting method for an analysis of a movement that is using a wide variety of texts and discourses to attempt to influence power dynamics in school communities.

Positionality

It is important to identify our positionality, or who we are in relation to the texts we analyze here (Preissle, 2008). Ben's (first author) two decades of experience as a literacy educator and his background in and current (uneasy) relationship with White evangelical Christianity give him both an insider's and an outsider's perspective on groups engaged in post-truth discourse on education, particular insofar as those groups adopt a Discourse we have identified with contemporary White Christian nationalism (Gorski & Perry, 2022), a sociopolitical movement within segments of White American evangelicalism. Ben's orientation toward such groups is neither objective nor neutral, but rather subjective and critical, rooted in a concern not only for literacy education but also for theological and personal integrity. Christy (second author), similarly, grew up in a rural, conservative community, and her upbringing was shaped by her family's Catholic faith. Her interest in groups such as the one we analyze here is both professional and personal, as she is a former elementary school teacher, and these groups

have been active at school board meetings in her own children's school district.

Both of us are White and recognize that in focusing on the discourse of these (predominantly White) groups, we may be amplifying voices that are harmful to marginalized communities; however, if we are doing so, it is with a view toward both understanding and critiquing those voices. We also acknowledge that our analysis comes from a position of privilege, and that while we care deeply about addressing these issues, their implications are far less serious for those of us with privilege than they are for others; we admit that our academic, tempered approach is itself a matter of privilege.

Focal Parent Group: Purple for Parents of Indiana

Purple for Parents of Indiana (P4PI) is one of several local parent advocacy groups in our state that have used social media and disrupted school board meetings to protest COVID-19 safety measures along with the integration of CRT and SEL in public schools. Of these groups, we chose P4PI as the focus of analysis because it enjoyed mainstream media coverage, boasted a robust social media following compared with other nearby groups, and dialogued publicly with legislators during the legislative session (DeMentri, 2022). While the group is not explicitly religious, one of its core beliefs is that "the responsibility of teaching morals and values to children are the parents/caregivers and NOT a government institution" (P4PI, n.d.-b.). The organization's Facebook page says it is "dedicated to exposing the indoctrination & Sexualization of children in the public education system" (P4PI, n.d.-a), and its website identifies SEL and CRT as two of its major issues and offers tools for parents who wish to challenge mask mandates.

P4PI is connected with a national politicized movement. In 2018, Forest Moriarty founded Purple for Parents in Arizona in response to the pro-teachers' union "Red for Ed" movement, which he saw as promoting "anti-capitalist, anti-American" ideas such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies (Herold, 2021, para. 4). According to reporting by *AZ Central*, Moriarty, who made an unsuccessful bid for the Arizona state legislature in 2020, had been active in a closed Facebook group called Patriot Movement AZ, where "posts contained Islamophobic and racist rhetoric, and followers traded in conspiracies and false information"—including a supposed liberal, LGBTQ-aided plot to normalize pedophilia (O'Dell & Ruelas, 2020, para. 10). The rhetoric of Patriot Movement AZ and its successors, including Purple for Parents, now active in multiple states, exemplifies "post-truth" Discourses because, as we show, these Discourses employ some of the language of criticality to maintain or regain power by obscuring facts—facts based in established scientific consensus about masks and vaccines, facts about the influence and goals of CRT and SEL in public schools—through appeals to fear (conspiracy-oriented Discourses), personal belief (Christian nationalist Discourses), and skepticism of institutions (cosmetically critical Discourses).

Focal Text Selection

For our critical literacy-informed analysis of post-truth discourse around education, we chose, through an iterative process, three "texts" produced by P4PI, as robust and discursively representative of the group's public engagement with their self-proclaimed prioritized educational issues during the 2021-22 school year, specifically: (1) a short video documentary about the dangers of SEL, (2) a parent testimony against mask mandates at a school board meeting, and (3) a set of social media posts about "CRT" in K-12 schools. Our selection of each text as representative of typical P4PI discourse is rooted in our lives as educators and parents engaging with

educational topics and policy news via journalistic reports, personal and public Facebook and Twitter feeds, discussion with peers, and activity at school board meetings for our children's school districts and in nearby districts. We were ethnographically embedded in the context of P4PI public discourse over 12 months, from June 2021-May 2022, gathering field notes, collecting and comparing digital artifacts, and monitoring public comments at monthly school board meetings. Although we do not present an ethnographic analysis here, we pull from that ethnographic understanding to warrant claims of each text's discursive representationality.

Much of the discourse informing our analysis has occurred on social media, a platform notorious for proliferating fake news and creating echo chambers that shape worldviews through algorithms that may further divide us (Spohr, 2017; Sumpter, 2018; Zimmer et al., 2019). Literacy education scholars have advocated that new literacies in schools and beyond include a critical interrogation of digital texts in our rapidly changing world (Crockett, et al., 2011; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Thomas, 2018) to help readers identify and critically engage with disinformation (Farmer, 2019; Greenhow & Lewin, 2015; Passe, et al., 2018; Smith & Parker, 2021). Similarly, Alvermann and Harrison (2017) argue for the importance of "critical inquiry" in a "post-factual era," defining critical inquiry as:

> [I]nstruction aimed at disrupting myths and distortions in social media texts by accounting for the intersection of politically infused cultural practices (e.g., online networking) with the social and economic realities that regulate flows of information on the internet. (p. 335)

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Disinformation in the service of political agendas is nothing new; what is relatively new is the amplification of disinformation through the technology of social media (Barton, 2019). The texts we have chosen, therefore, exist in or have some relationship to social media platforms. Additionally, the discourse we analyze centers on issues at least partly within the purview of school boards, bodies of locally elected officials empowered by the public to make decisions about education. As *Education Week* points out, conflict surrounding school boards is hardly a new phenomenon:

> School board meetings have historically been the locus of intense cultural debates, like the teaching of evolution, the removal of offensive sports mascots, or the requirement, in the 1950s, for educators to take 'loyalty oaths.' The difference is that . . . the issues the public brings to school boards are increasingly refracted through the lens of national political discourse—especially for issues like masking, school reopening, and race that are now as much about political identity as they are about keeping students safe and engaged. (Sawchuk, 2021)

Discourse Analysis Procedures

After choosing the three representative texts, Ben (first author) transcribed each text. Then, both authors analyzed the texts independently by grouping and categorizing language phrase-by-phrase in each text, using five guiding questions as analytical tools (outlined in detail below), labeling and describing situated meanings, social languages, intertextuality, figured worlds, and "big D" Discourses" (Gee, 2011b, pp. 150-151). Gee suggests these five "big picture" tools, which draw on theories

about the relationship between language and culture, as a good starting place for a DA (2011b, p. x). Since critical literacy focuses on the interplay between texts and "the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life" (Luke, 2012, p. 5), this set of tools fits well within a critical literacy framework. Moreover, the discourses we analyze use language to engage in what are frequently called "culture wars" (Hunter, 1991) over issues such as personal freedom, race, and sexuality, making a focus on the language-culture relationship especially relevant. The five tools prompt us to ask the following questions of each text we analyze (Gee, 2011b):

1. What specific meanings do words and phrases have in this context (*situated meaning*)?
2. How does the text use language and syntax to enact a *social language*?
3. How does the text use language and syntax to position itself in relation to other "texts" (*intertextuality*)?
4. What are the text's underlying narratives *(figured worlds)*—the stories the text constructs—and what do they reveal?
5. How do the "speakers" in the text use language along with "ways of acting, interacting, believing, valuing, dressing, and using various objects, tools, and technologies . . to enact a specific socially recognizable identity" *(Big "D" Discourse)*? (Gee, 2011b, p. 181)

After labeling, describing, and categorizing phrases using these guiding questions, we met to discuss, compare notes, and integrate our analyses before proceeding to the next text.

Once categorized, phrases hung together to suggest broader Discourses that reveal how P4PI members construct their advocate identity in terms of values, goals, methods, and power dynamics. Following Gee (1989), we define "Discourse" with a big 'D' as distinct

"ways of being in the world [that] integrat[e] words, acts, beliefs, attitudes and social identities" (pp. 6-7). Big-D Discourses can be thought of as overarching "identity kits" (p. 7) instructing people how to act, talk, and write in ways that are socially and historically recognizable as a 'type of person' (like a teacher, mother, politician, activist, or psychologist). <u>D</u>iscourses are comprised of and enacted through "little d" <u>d</u>iscourses, defined as everyday language used among people (Gee, 2015).

Now we turn to the texts themselves. Following a summary of our findings (Table 1), we present the analysis of each text separately before discussing themes that emerged from all three.

Findings

Text 1 (Video): Dangers of Social Emotional Learning

The first text we chose to analyze, "Dangers of Social Emotional Learning" (P4PI, 2021) is a six-minute amateur documentary featured on P4PI's home page. It consists of clips from multiple unidentified "talking heads" interspersed with images of the brain, photos of SEL-related documents, bits of what appear to be SEL webinars, and audio clips of Hitler speeches, with ominous music playing in the background throughout. Based on these features, the video seemingly aims to evoke fear in viewers, especially parents of children in public schools, about schools' use of SEL to purportedly "indoctrinate" children. Because of this apparent appeal to fear, of the three Discourses we identified as characteristic of the post-truth orientation (conspiratorial, Christian conspiratorial Discourse: a psychoeducational discourse, an "expert" discourse, an authoritarian discourse, and a discourse of resistance. The psychoeducational discourse is enacted in clips from teachers and other professional educators who use *social languages* that could be characterized as "eduspeak" and "psychobabble" and whose voices are

Table 1

Summary of Findings

	Text 1, Video: Dangers of Social Emotional Learning	Text 2, Speech: School Board Parent Testimony Against Masking	Text 3, Connected Facebook Posts: Criticism of Government for CRT
Key Situated Meanings	Various speakers' voices are contextualized to convey specific *situated meanings* that are likely different from the speakers' original intent.	The children the speaker purports to represent are suffering victims of an oppressive government body (i.e., the school board and the larger forces of government it represents).	"Marxist ideology" means any "divisive concept" the group opposes; "CRT" means any DEI-related theories or initiatives the group opposes.
Key Social Languages	Eduspeak, psychobabble	Civil rights activism, pseudo-legal social language	Political punditry
Key Uses of Intertextuality	Five Hitler quotations	References to "Parents' Bill of Rights," U.S. Constitution, MLK and other speeches	References to writings of Karl Marx, Indiana H.B. 1134
Key Figured World	A hostile, intrusive state is using SEL as a cover for indoctrination of children with the goal of separating them from their families.	A hostile, intrusive state is using its money and power to control citizens through mask mandates.	The hostile state is a ship whose captain has been leading the crew into dangerous waters, and who cannot be trusted to turn the ship around. Conditions are ripe for mutiny.

contextualized to convey specific *situated meanings* that are likely different from the speakers' original intent—meanings about the scope of SEL, its relationship to gender inclusivity, and its overarching goals and purposes. For example, one speaker featured early in the video, an unidentified Black woman (a cut-in of a local school district's web page seems to imply she is a district employee), asks, "How does LGBTQ advocacy, and allyship, and awareness, how does that overlap with social emotional learning and equity?" The words "advocacy," "allyship," and "equity" are all buzzwords associated with modern psychoeducational discourse (Case & Meier, 2014). The clip is thus given a situated meaning that reinforces a connection among SEL, equity, and LGBTQ issues—a pervasive theme throughout the

video and P4PI's materials generally. Another such clip features a White woman declaring that "we can't be silent bystanders, we have to be vocal upstanders." The words "bystander" and "upstander" are also associated with modern psychoeducational discourse (Sugimoto & Carter, 2021). The inclusion of this video here gives it a situated meaning intended to emphasize the idea that public school employees are not "neutral" in the culture wars—that they are, in fact, complicit in the movement to indoctrinate children.

The voices enacting this psychoeducational discourse are interspersed with voices and images enacting an "expert" discourse. These "experts," whose credentials are not provided and who do not cite any academic or scientific studies, use pseudo-academic and pseudo-scientific social languages, along with images of the brain, to promote a counternarrative to the psychoeducational discourse around SEL. For example, immediately after another unidentified educator suggests favorably that the use of the non-binary, gender-inclusive language associated throughout the video with SEL "starts to rewire" the brain, the video cuts to a White woman sitting in front of an official-looking backdrop with images of a Capitol building (zooming in reveals this to be the logo of the Family Research Council, a conservative Christian research organization). This woman speaks of the "destabilization of the entire structure of our means of communicating with each other," using a pseudo-academic social language to introduce an analogy comparing communication to an edifice whose foundations are being destabilized by the use of gender-inclusive language. A segment featuring clips from an instructional video about an SEL assessment website is interrupted by a clip featuring a White woman explaining that "these amateur evaluations will presumably be included in the student's school data file." Her use of words like "amateur," "presumably," and "data file" signal an "expert" discourse in which she positions herself in

contrast to "amateurs" evaluating students' social emotional learning.

All of these clips are interspersed with an authoritarian discourse, enacted through five Hitler quotations in the form of all-caps writing and audio featuring the voice of Hitler. Through these quotations, the video's creators use the tool of *intertextuality* to create a link for viewers between the authoritarian and psychoeducational discourses. For example, the video opens with this quotation, as ominous music plays in the background: "IF THE OLDER GENERATION CANNOT GET ACCUSTOMED TO US, WE SHALL TAKE THEIR CHILDREN AWAY AND REAR THEM TO THE FATHERLAND." This phrase evokes images of Nazis storming homes and separating children from parents, suggesting the threat of a big, all-powerful government acting *in loco parentis*. The video immediately cuts to two clips of speakers (presumably educators), the first discussing "children as young as five or six" who "notice that they feel different," and the second discussing how "taking out that binary [gender language]" starts to "rewire" the brain. A second Hitler quotation, "HOW FORTUNATE FOR GOVERNMENTS THAT PEOPLE THEY ADMINISTER DON'T THINK," which immediately follows the discussion and images of brain rewiring, implies that this "brainwashing" empowers an already powerful government, suggesting that those who buy into SEL are doing so mindlessly. It also echoes an earlier clip of an educator talking about children "parroting" their teacher.

This use of intertextuality, together with the social languages employed by the "experts," contributes to the *figured world*, or overarching narrative, the video's creators are building, a story about state intrusion into the family, in which SEL is a covert means by which an authoritarian government seeks to separate children from their parents by

indoctrinating them with propaganda about gender identity and social justice and gathering personal data about them, thereby rewiring their brains and enlisting them into the service of the state, which can track and control them for life. This sets the stage for a discourse of resistance, in which viewers are called to reject the psychoeducational discourse surrounding SEL and join a movement to preserve morality and save families. For example, the (now former) "CEO" of P4PI argues in the video that there is a "push to change school culture through social emotional learning programs . . . It is used to educate what they call 'the whole child' through language manipulation, role playing, and influence of morals and values." Her use of the word "push" assumes a figured world in which SEL represents state intrusion. Her use of "they" positions advocates of SEL as "other," and along with her air quotes around "the whole child" and her use of the word "manipulation," also contributes to the figured world about SEL representing state intrusion. At the end of the video, this speaker returns to call viewers to action: "Please share this video, and hopefully we can bring some much-needed light to the attention of the indoctrination going on in our school system." The use of the word "indoctrination" underscores the figured world the video has been building, and the call to action enacts the discourse of resistance.

Text 2 (Speech): School Board Parent Testimony

The second text we analyzed is a parent testimony at a school board meeting held in a suburb of Fort Wayne, Indiana, on Feb. 21, 2022, and livestreamed on P4PI's Facebook page (P4PI, 2022a). After the school board invites public comment, the parent, a White woman, reads from her phone. She begins with a phrase whose *intertextuality* evokes many political speeches: "I stand before you today." She then depicts the children of the school district as "suffering" because of mandates that require "wearing a mask for eight hours per day while trying to concentrate and

get an education." She accuses the school board of lying and hypocrisy, observing that mask mandates were not enforced during sports activities and blaming the board for the "mental, social, and psychological damage [that] has been caused for years" by the mandates. In context, her words carry a *situated meaning* whereby, it seems, listeners are meant to construe the children she purports to represent as suffering victims of an oppressive government body (i.e., the school board and the larger forces of government it represents).

This sets the stage for the main *social language* the speaker adopts, that of civil rights activism. "We've sat back for two years while you have put unauthorized masks on our children," she alleges, "and deprived them of their civil liberties, to free them of such devices." Her use of "unauthorized," "civil liberties," and "free them" all suggest this civil rights social language, as does her assertion that "this whole *illegal mask mandate* has been a complete false narrative since day one," a phrase with an intertextual echo of King's (1968) declaration that "we're going into court tomorrow morning to fight this *illegal, unconstitutional injunction*." She also uses pseudoscientific social language when she claims, contrary to overwhelming scientific evidence (CDC, 2021) that "none of these mandates or quarantine measures have ever had scientific backing."

Framing her cause as a civil rights issue and the school board as an oppressive regime enables the speaker to begin building a *figured world* about, as in the video, state intrusion. She tells the school board, "You've allowed our school to push your COVID ideologies on our kids and collect money from the state and other funding to restrain our kids." The phrase "our kids" ("our kids" or "our children" is used 12 times in this short speech) is repeated two more times in the next sentence: "This was not about safety for our kids, a decision you do not have a right to make about our kids." This contributes to the figured

Figure 1

Historical Events Promoting Assimilation
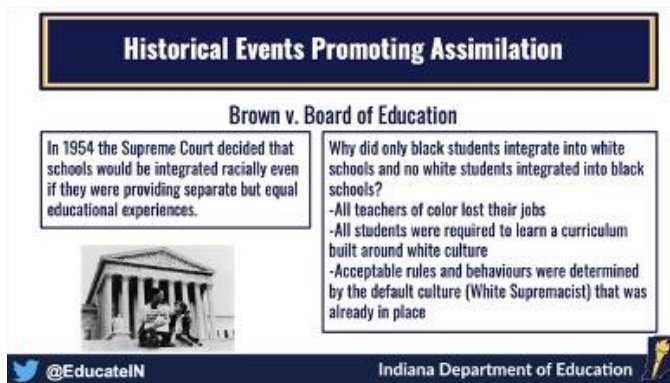
world about state intrusion, emphasizing that the kids belong to "us," not to the state that wishes to co-opt them. The speaker also repeatedly comes back to the role of money in the story she is telling. "This was about money and power over us," she alleges. The school board members she is addressing, in this story, are agents in the government's service, imposing the government's ideology in exchange for money and power over "us," the victims of an intrusive state that wants to "push a narrative." She contrasts this school board with those that supposedly stood up to state intrusion: "Other school boards and administrators did not accept this, and they did not put these tactics on our children."

In this figured world, the state is not, however, just intruding on personal liberty. It has a much more sinister agenda. The parent addressing the school board continues:

> Those of you who do not understand where we're coming from, let me express to you what we've seen and heard happening in our very own school. Hundreds of cases of bullying, from verbal to physical abuse. We've been told to move on, that these were made-up accusations. Do you think that child that is being tormented day after day feels like this

is made up? Also, your children are being taught pornography, sexually graphic content, and [that] they are privileged. That is your right as a parent to decide if you want to teach those types of topics to your kids. CRT and SEL and other pornographic material are being taught in this school, and I have the proof.

Not only is the state intruding to push ideologies about mask mandates; it is also letting "verbal [and] physical abuse" go unchecked, allowing children to be "tormented," and promoting "pornography, sexually graphic content" and theories acknowledging White privilege, such as "CRT and SEL and other pornographic material" (a false equivalence). Addressing these topics, the speaker suggests, is up to parents, but the government has intruded. Here the speaker, in a talk focused mainly on mask mandates, raises the issue of CRT and connects it with the topic of the previous text, SEL.

In connecting SEL, CRT, and mask mandates through a figured world about state intrusion into the most intimate details of individual and family life, P4PI, embodied here by one parent, again enacts a conspiratorial Discourse that seeks to be recognized as a discourse of resistance. With its moralistic and religious overtones (later, the parent refers to "God-given rights"), the language also takes on elements of White Christian nationalist Discourse (Gorski & Perry, 2022). Like the anti-SEL video, the speech ends with a call to action, addressed first to the school board, and then to parents in the audience:

> Action must be taken immediately, or we will take additional steps to request more information, to get all of the curriculum . . . We the people have the power to be heard . . . These rights are also laid out in the Indiana Parenting Bill of Rights, and if you haven't read them, I would encourage you to do so, as

Figure 2

Assimilation in Societal Norms
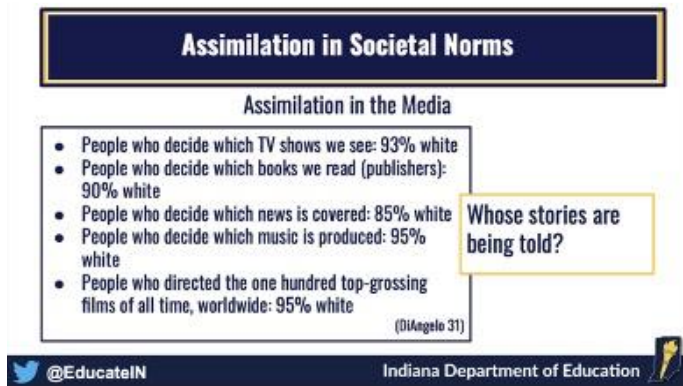
well as the Constitution. And these rights have been violated illegally. Our founding fathers put certain things in place so that elected officials could never overstep their oath and take away our rights as citizens of the United States. It's time as a parent, a citizen of the United States, to stand up for our freedoms and our God-given rights. You now have all been served the federal letters of intent, and you have 72 hours to meet our demands. [This school] belongs to this community, and we're taking it back.

Building on the social language of civil rights activism (and adding a pseudo-legal social language with the redundant allegation of rights "violated illegally"), the speaker here concludes the talk by reasserting parents' rights, claiming a violation of those rights, and demanding redress of those violations with reference to the U.S. Constitution ("We the people have the power to be heard"), the "Parent's Bill of Rights" (a 2021 document created by Republican Indiana Attorney General Todd Rokita), the Constitution, and possible court action ("You now have all been served the federal letters of intent"). These are all further examples of intertextuality that contribute to the figured world the speaker is building. In short, these conspiratorial and White

Christian nationalist Discourses seek to be recognized as discourses of resistance in the tradition of civil rights activists.

Text 3 (Facebook Posts): Government Criticism

The third text we analyzed is a set of P4PI Facebook posts from Feb. 28, 2022, the day that the Indiana Senate killed H.B. 1134, one of various CRT-inspired bills nationwide. The first reposts an unsourced infographic (Figure 1) credited to the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE).

Commenting on the infographic, the P4PI poster writes:

> The Indiana Department of Education, controlled by Governor Eric Holcomb, promotes divisive concepts into [sic] our state's classrooms. Hoosier children deserve better than Marxist ideologies backed by a Communist ideologue at the helm.
>
> Was there ever really going to be any serious effort to stop Marxism in our classrooms this legislative session? Not likely! (P4PI, 2022b)

The "divisive concept" (a phrase borrowed from H.B. 1134) here refers to the idea that Brown v. Board worked more to promote the assimilation of Black students into majority-White culture than to benefit those students. In the next sentence, this "divisive concept" becomes a "Marxist ideology" backed by a "Communist ideologue" (Eric Holcomb, the Republican governor of Indiana), giving the phrase a new *situated meaning*.

The second post, timestamped 15 minutes after the first, shares another unsourced infographic (Figure 2) attributed to the IDOE.

Commenting on this post, the P4PI poster writes:

> The Marxist ideology playing out in Indiana schools comes right from the Indiana Department of Education. Hoosiers no longer have a say at the helm of the IDOE as the Governor now controls this appointed position.

> There was no serious attempt at eliminating the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) being taught in our schools. Nor will there be with these individuals leading at the helm. (P4PI, 2022c)

How these infographics promote "Marxist ideology" is not explained, but the audience is primed to understand the phrase negatively. In this second infographic, in a clear reference to the defeat of H.B. 1134, "CRT" is identified as "Culturally Responsive Teaching," a teaching framework that shares some principles with, but is different from, critical race theory, giving the term "CRT" a new situated meaning. The conflation of various theories related to DEI is not unprecedented: according to the Indianapolis Star, "[H.B. 1134] was inspired by the opposition nationwide of primarily [W]hite, suburban parents to what was called 'critical race theory' but was more often about social emotional learning and diversity, equity and inclusion work" (Herron, 2022).

In both these posts, phrases such as "divisive concepts," "Marxist ideology," and "Communist ideologue" signal a *social language* of political punditry, characterized by outrage (Henry, 2021). The situated meaning given to these phrases work together with the posts' use of that social language and of *intertextuality* (in their allusions to H.B. 1134 and the writings of Karl Marx) to build a *figured world* about the leadership of the IDOE, a stand-in here for the hostile, intrusive government that emerges in the previous texts. The metaphorical phrase "at the helm"

is used three times across the two posts to refer to that leadership; this phrase suggests a figured world in which the hostile state is a ship whose captain has been leading the crew into dangerous waters, and who cannot be trusted to turn the ship around. Conditions are ripe for mutiny. As with the previous texts, the idea that the Republican governor of Indiana is a "Marxist ideologue," with its implication that he is part of a secret liberal plot, exemplifies conspiratorial Discourse. In addition, the "critical" reading of the two state infographics, with its reactionary skepticism of claims that seek to amplify the voices of the marginalized and the absence of evidence challenging those claims, suggests a cosmetically critical Discourse, while the figured world about a ship, with its implicit call for mutiny, seeks to be recognized as a discourse of resistance.

Three Texts, One Figured World

The set of Facebook posts we analyzed above are two of many—P4PI often posts multiple times daily—and scrolling through these posts provides helpful context. Issues related to SEL, and to a lesser extent CRT and public health mandates, arise frequently in the feed, and the poster(s) and commenters clearly see a connection among these issues, as illustrated by the following infographic (Figure 3), posted on April 21, 2022. The infographic suggests that the organization behind CRT, SEL, and CSE (comprehensive sex education) is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the main institution also responsible for mask mandates. The infographic is instructive because it demonstrates the conspiratorial thinking and Discourse at the heart of P4PI and similar organizations. While the CDC is hardly a secret organization, its alleged mission to indoctrinate public school children through SEL, CRT, and CSE (an allegation for which no credible evidence is provided) is not widely acknowledged and therefore suggests a covert operation. One of the key findings that emerged from our DA of the video,

Figure 3

The Triangle of SEL, CSE, and CRT
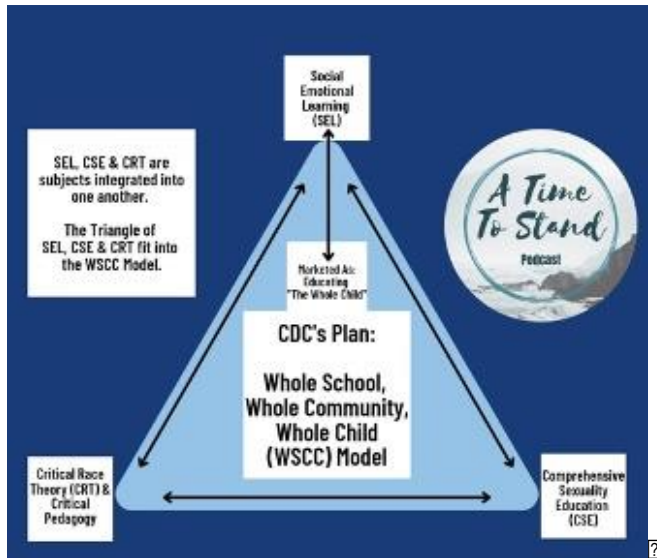
speech, and Facebook posts is a compelling master narrative, a *figured world* about state intrusion in which SEL, CRT, and mask mandates represent strands of a web woven by a powerful government that has gained control of public schooling, a web of ideologies related to race, gender/sexuality, and mind/body control that threatens to endanger, entrap and even "groom" (to use a term that occurs frequently throughout P4PI's Facebook posts) "our children." This figured world reveals much about the values, goals, methods, and power dynamics of P4PI and similar groups. In the next section, we discuss common themes that emerged from all three texts in our second pass-through of the data.

Discussion

Given the conspiratorial, Christian nationalist, and cosmetically critical Discourses connecting SEL, CRT, and public health mandates within the figured world P4PI has constructed, here we revisit our research questions to identify what our critical analysis of P4PI discourse in all three texts reveals about the group's values, goals, methods, and power dynamics (RQ1). Then we consider the epistemic beliefs of P4PI and

similar groups engaged in "post-truth" discourse on education (RQ2).

P4PI's Values

The discourse seeking to be recognized as a discourse of resistance in these texts (which emerges from the figured world about a hostile, powerful state) reveals, through what it opposes, many of the group's values. Its opposition to SEL, which it sees as pushing a dangerous gender ideology and acting *in loco parentis* to indoctrinate children about sex, suggests a commitment to the "family values" long associated with traditional religious expression and, more recently, with the religious right: heteronormativity, gender binarism, abstinence outside of marriage, and the importance of the traditional nuclear family as a fundamental building block of society. Its anti-mask stance implies a strong belief in the value of personal liberty over and above collective cooperation, another value associated with the political (and, more recently, religious) right (Gorski & Perry, 2022). Finally, the group's rejection of CRT as a "Marxist ideology" reveals a value system that dismisses notions of systemic racism and White power and privilege as anti-capitalist and therefore anti-American. This value system, too, is associated with the political and, increasingly, religious right (Gorski & Perry, 2022).

P4PI's Goals

While P4PI and groups like it may have broader goals not explicitly identified in their materials (including, perhaps, weakening or abolishing public education, or establishing a religious state), certain goals are explicitly stated or implied in the calls to action emerging from their discourse. According to its stated mission, the group "informs, advocates, and engages Hoosiers to protect children from harmful agendas saturating the education system" (P4PI, n.d.-a). Its stated goals also include "work[ing] to bring awareness of and stop the conditioning/grooming of

vulnerable children from all programs including Comprehensive Sexual Education and Social Emotional Learning," and "stand[ing] up against the overwhelming leverage the teacher's unions have over policies and procedures in the schools" (P4PI, n.d.-b). Our DA suggests that additional goals, implied in the calls to action in each text and rooted in the figured world of state intrusion, include ending now relatively commonplace public school practices such as (1) giving SEL surveys, (2) providing instruction on gender and sexuality, (3) critically examining issues of race and White privilege in the curriculum, and (4) requiring students to wear masks to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

P4PI's Methods

Our analysis reveals various methods P4PI uses to accomplish these goals. Clearly, the group uses a variety of media, including video, social media, infographics, and public forums. The group also shows an ability to adopt various social languages—eduspeak, pseudo-academic language, pseudo-scientific language, the language of civil rights activism, and the language of political punditry—and adapt them to their purposes. The group's use of these social languages, along with its explicit and implicit intertextual references to Hitler, Marx, King Jr., the Constitution, and various legal documents, contributes to what is arguably its most successful strategy: the creation of a figured world of state intrusion, a compelling master narrative. It is a story that offers its listeners a sense of purpose: their history, culture, values, beliefs, and children are under attack by a hostile, godless state, whose agents are everywhere from the CDC to the school board, from the state DOE to the neighborhood school. The government's goal, in this narrative, is separation through indoctrination: it seeks to control children through data collection and propaganda disguised as benevolent educational theory, through "grooming" (using sexual and even "pornographic" material to

make children vulnerable to transgressive sexual behavior and predation), and through the kind of social control exemplified by mask mandates. By controlling children in these ways, the state can separate them from their parents in order to enlist them in its services and win the culture war. Those who hear this story are challenged to stand up against the oppressive state, to fight for their children and their country before both are taken away from them.

P4PI's Power Dynamics

Undoubtedly, part of what makes this narrative compelling to its listeners is its positioning of them in opposition to "power": in this case, the alleged power of the intrusive state. It does this, as our analysis shows, by adopting a civil rights social language—the organization explicitly identifies itself as engaging "the civil rights issue of our time" (P4PI, n.d.-b)—and a discourse of resistance. The group's "cosmetic criticality" (Bacon, 2018, p. 4) also emerges here: it uses the language of criticality, urging its listeners to challenge the perceived power of the state embodied in school programs, officials, and teachers. Our analysis has focused on the group's appeals to fear (conspiratorial Discourses), but P4PI also appeals to its listeners' skepticism of institutions and their personal beliefs, appeals that echo cosmetically critical Discourses and Christian nationalist Discourses. A cosmetically critical Discourse emerges, for example, in the set of Facebook posts that provide a "critical" reading of the IDOE infographics—a sort of "reading against the text" (Janks, 2019, p. 561)—partly by calling attention to the power of the institution (the IDOE) purportedly responsible for the text and raising skepticism about that institution (suggesting it is under the control of a "communist ideologue"). A Discourse of White Christian Nationalism—defined by Gorski and Perry (2022) as a "constellation of beliefs" that "reflect a desire to restore and privilege the mythos, values, identity, and authority of a particular ethnocentric

tribe [of White Christians]" (p. 14)—emerges implicitly throughout the texts we analyzed: for example, in the video clip of the woman from the conservative Christian Family Research Council discussing the destabilization of language, in the call to parents at a school board meeting to "stand up for our freedoms and our God-given rights," and in the accusations of "Marxism"—code for "Godlessness" (Aiello, 2005)—in the Facebook posts. A key belief of White Christian nationalism is that "[W]hites and Christians are the most persecuted groups in America" (Gorski & Perry, 2022, p.8). This "siege mentality" is reflected in the way P4PI positions itself and its audience in relationship to power through its use of a civil rights social language and a discourse of resistance.

P4PI's Epistemic Beliefs

One framing of "post-truth" defines the phenomenon as "the popular and often right-wing embracing of (and misunderstanding [of]) post-modernism's challenge to the objective nature of truth/Truth" (Thomas, 2018, p. 7). In this framing, post-truth "is more akin to 'the truth is whatever I say it is regardless of any evidence or the credibility of evidence'" (Thomas, 2018, p. 8). While this may be an oversimplification, the absence of credible evidence supporting the claims made in the P4PI texts we analyzed does offer insight into the group's epistemic beliefs. These claims, as our analysis has shown, include the following: (1) SEL is a covert tool of the state designed to "groom," collect data on, and indoctrinate children with the goal of separating them from their parents; (2) mask mandates have no scientific value but rather represent a deliberate government effort to control and oppress ordinary people, including children; (3) "CRT"—used by the group to refer to critical race

> **"Many of these groups are well-funded and politically influential and have sought, with varying levels of success, to shape the agendas of representative bodies from school boards to state and even federal legislatures."**

theory, culturally responsive teaching, and other DEI efforts—is a Marxist ideology that has infiltrated public schools with the goal of undermining capitalism and patriotism; and (4) SEL, mask mandates, and CRT are all integral components of the CDC's "Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child" (WSCC) model, which actually represents a covert, coordinated effort to separate children from their parents by indoctrinating them into liberal ideologies. In the texts we examined, no credible evidence or logical arguments are offered to support any of these claims. Instead, the claims emerge in figured worlds built through the association of words, images, and ideas.

The absence of evidence and logical argumentation suggests that the epistemic beliefs of P4PI, groups like it, and adherents of these groups have little in common with empiricism or rationalism, the ways of knowing underlying western science and philosophy throughout the modern era. Indeed, with its skepticism of institutions and its challenge of the perceived power of the intrusive state, the group seems, on the surface, to share more with postmodern and critical epistemologies than it does with modern ones. The general consensus of educators and psychologists on the value of SEL (Durlak et al., 2011), the broad consensus of scientists on the efficacy of masks in slowing the spread of COVID-19 (Feng et al., 2020), the growing consensus of many sociologists and historians on the central role of systemic racism in America's history and contemporary culture (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2013)—all are rejected, not on the basis of evidence or argumentation, but on the basis of power and group identity. These consensus views are held by the "elite," those perceived by P4PI and other groups like it to have ascended to cultural and

institutional power in the academy, the media, and government. And like teachers and scholars trained in critical literacy, P4PI asks its audience—its students, so to speak—to adopt a highly skeptical stance toward these views and those who hold them, to challenge their authority, and to work to return power—and truth—to "ordinary people," i.e., to the White, culturally Christian men and their families who see cultural and institutional power as a God-given right that has been taken from them.

In the final section, we discuss the implications of our analysis for critical scholars, teacher educators, and those concerned about the future of public education and discourse, while exploring this cosmetic affinity between post-truth and critical epistemologies in a little more detail.

Implications and Conclusions

Implications for Critical Scholars

Given the challenge these post-truth discourses pose to institutions such as academia and public education, it is enormously important for scholars, particularly those in the critical literacy community, to be aware of the values, goals, methods, power dynamics, and epistemic beliefs of P4PI and the many like-minded post-truth groups currently active in communities across the United States. Many of these groups are well-funded and politically influential and have sought, with varying levels of success, to shape the agendas of representative bodies from school boards to state and even federal legislatures (Oliphant, 2022). Since "critical literacies are acts of political praxis that lead to material improvements among those marginalized by systems of dominance" (Bacon, 2018, p. 12), scholars and practitioners of critical literacy must take note of and formulate a response to groups like P4PI whose agendas threaten to further marginalize the historically marginalized—students of color, gay and transgender students, immunocompromised students, etc.

However, as Bacon's (2018) analysis shows, it is not enough for the critical literacy community to critique groups like P4PI. Critical scholars must also "critique the field of critical literacies, the ends it aims to achieve, and the goals it has achieved through its popularization" (p. 13). In other words, the post-truth challenge presents an opportunity for the field of critical literacy to adopt a critical stance toward itself. Bacon (2018) suggests several starting places for this self-critique, including what he sees as the movement's loss of focus on the liberatory goals of critical literacy, its absence of nuance in the framing of oppressor-oppressed dichotomies, its tendency to inadvertently promote deficit narratives through an excessive focus on oppression, and its insufficient attention to systems and institutions. We would add to these the need for a re-examination and clarification of the postmodern epistemologies that inform much of contemporary critical literacy, which render a philosophical critique of post-truth epistemic beliefs difficult at best and hypocritical or incoherent at worst. Freire (1970/2000), to whom many critical scholars trace their academic lineage, called for "the objective transformation of reality," warning of the danger of "subjective immobility" and arguing that "the denial of objectivity in analysis or action, resulting in a subjectivism which leads to solipsistic positions, denies action itself by denying objective reality" (p. 50). While critical scholars may be loath to speak in terms of "objectivity," the question of a shared understanding of reality and its relationship to epistemology must be grappled with in an effort to meet the post-truth challenge.

Implications for Teacher Educators

We are both literacy educators who are preparing future literacy educators to work with students in PK-12 public schools. We have witnessed the impact of the discourse of groups like P4PI on our students. For example, while P4PI was testifying on H.B. 1134 at the

Indiana legislature about the dangers of SEL and CRT, one of the student teachers under Ben's (first author) supervision was pressured to write an apologetic email to a parent for daring to have students read a short story narrated by a possibly gay character, while another hesitated to implement a unit critically examining race because of all the parents who have demanded that teachers at the school "will not teach CRT." Two student teachers from that program quit during the course of the semester, and others started rethinking their future professions. Still others are proceeding with caution. New teachers are entering an environment that is often fraught with political and even sometimes physical peril. Teacher educators must find ways to address the post-truth challenge and prepare preservice teachers to meet it.

In literacy education, preparing preservice teachers might mean a greater focus on critical media literacy and digital literacies, perhaps even the creation of new courses that deal specifically with issues related to the post-truth condition, epistemology, social media, disinformation, and political polarization in their future classrooms (Crockett, et al., 2011; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Passe, et al., 2018; Smith & Parker, 2021; Thomas, 2018). The problem is so complex that it will require a multidisciplinary approach involving teacher educators and researchers across subject areas, as well as other stakeholders such journalists, community activists, medical professionals, and religious leaders concerned about the issue. An approach involving such a broad coalition will require a stance of epistemic humility. In critical theory, this usually refers to the acknowledgement that our ways of knowing are not universally normative (Allen, 2017). It may even require, as Haidt (2022) suggests, "building trust and friendship across the political divide" (para. 86)—reaching out to work with people, especially in our own communities, with whom we have deep political, philosophical, and moral disagreements but who share a concern for equity, truth, and freedom. More immediately, teacher educators across disciplines should work together to design lessons that engage students with these issues.

Concluding Thoughts

A growing number of Americans have lost trust in the stories told by the academy and the American public education system and are placing their trust in a competing story, a dark tale about the intrusion of a powerful and hostile state, its grooming and sexualization of children, its oppression of ordinary people, its destabilization of language, and the resulting decline of freedom. Educators, including literacy scholars and teachers, must work with a broad coalition of stakeholders to shape a narrative that is more compelling and more hopeful. The future of public education depends upon it.

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