

WHITE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE HOARDING IN A SMALL NEW ENGLAND TOWN

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education – Doctor of Philosophy

2025

ABSTRACT

Dominant understandings of “good” schools are strongly associated with the presence of white students. The purpose of this dissertation is to denaturalize the association of goodness and whiteness in U.S. schools, in order to illuminate how this association, which is deeply embedded in understandings of meritocracy and deservedness, perpetuates injustice in and through U.S. schools. For this study, I chose the small, Massachusetts town of Cobblerton (pseudonym), because of its overwhelming whiteness, reputation for excellent schools, proximity to majority Black and Brown Boston Public Schools, and because I grew up in Cobblerton and graduated from its high school. I employ a critical race methodology to build on and extend current research on school segregation and inequality by investigating the causes and consequences of what I call “white educational resource hoarding.” This study asks: How was Cobblerton’s whiteness created and maintained historically? What are the impacts of white educational resource hoarding on Cobblerton and its schools? How do narratives of the “goodness” of Cobblerton and Cobblerton Schools justify and sustain white educational resource hoarding?

Through interviews, both with key town decisionmakers and those impacted by their decisions, as well as historical document analysis, and observations of school committee and strategic planning meetings, I interrogate the historical and contemporary processes by which this small Massachusetts school district created and sustained itself as an overwhelmingly white space and at that same time, developed a reputation for school excellence. I also employ autoethnographic methods to analyze my own experiences as a student in Cobblerton and, later, as a teacher of mostly Black, Brown, and Indigenous students, in the context of white educational resource hoarding.

I find that white educational resource hoarding is the process by which purportedly “good” educational resources, experiences, and outcomes accumulate in educational spaces that are accessible to white students but exclusionary to Students of Color, thereby normalizing and reproducing the deeply held association between good schools and whiteness. While this process involves policies and practices directly related to schooling, it also includes dynamics of infrastructure development, zoning, and town planning. I find that policies in the early 1970s were explicitly created to protect the town’s whiteness, but residents today are unaware of this, which makes the town’s whiteness seem natural, normal, and innocent. As a result, the pedagogy, curriculum, and culture of the “good” school district is white-normed, and Students of Color suffer from a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy, curricular erasure, and racist bullying, which the school is unprepared to respond to or prevent. Further, district leadership pursues white-normed understandings of goodness for their schools that contain no critique of systemic injustice, and so seek to manage rather than abolish inequality.

This research into white educational resource hoarding has implications for educators, including teacher educators, school districts, and education researchers. For educators, this work intensifies the urgency of adopting culturally relevant pedagogy, especially the critical consciousness aspect, in order to disrupt the white ignorance that is otherwise reproduced through schools like Cobblerton’s. School districts can support teacher development as critical educators. In so doing, they will be pushed to reconsider how to define “goodness” within their districts. Finally, education researchers must untangle our understandings of good schools from whiteness, and critically ask and keep asking, what is a good school? What is a good education, under racial capitalism, during a climate crisis and a U.S.-sponsored genocide, on violently stolen land?

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This dissertation is dedicated to Marcy and Bob Brower, and to my parents, Laurie and John Markoff, all of whom taught me to value education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Alex Allweiss, Dr. Sandro Barros, Dr. Terah Chambers, and most especially, Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews. Special thanks also to the So Be It, See To It Writing Collective: Dr. Keavy McFadden, Angelina Momanyi, candace moore, Samuela Mouzaoir, and Sol Rheem.

Thank you to my beloved friends and communities in Massachusetts, New York, Maine, Minnesota, and Michigan, to all the educators I have worked with, and to all the students I have had the honor of teaching and learning from. Thanks also to my family, Neil, Laurie, Noah, and Logan, and my parents, Laurie and John.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: GOOD KIDS, GOOD EDUCATION	7
CHAPTER ONE: UNDERSTANDING WHITE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE HOARDING THROUGH THEORY AND LITERATURE	18
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: BECOMING ABOLITIONIST	52
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY: ANTIRACIST MATERIALISM & CRITICAL RACE METHODS	59
CHAPTER THREE: WHITE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE HOARDING IN COBBLERTON, 1968-1975	91
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: GOOD GIRL	134
CHAPTER FOUR: IMPACTS OF WHITE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE HOARDING ON STUDENTS AND FAMILIES IN COBBLERTON	146
CHAPTER FIVE: PURSUING EQUITY WITHIN THE WHITE HABITUS	201
CONCLUSION	276
REFERENCES.....	285
APPENDIX A: PILOT STUDY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	298
APPENDIX B: SAMPLE ANALYTICAL MEMO	300
APPENDIX C: PHASE 2 CONSENT FORM	304
APPENDIX D: PHASE 2 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	306
APPENDIX E: PHASE 3 FORMS	308
APPENDIX F: PHASE 3 QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW.....	311

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, a petition was circulated in the small town of Cobblerton (pseudonym), Massachusetts, protesting “race theory education programs” and “staffing efforts in connection with any new race, diversity, and or equity curriculum.” When asked why he had written and circulated this petition, a resident said he was targeting the newly hired Director of Equity and Social Emotional Learning “a position ... the district does not need.” He explained, “We don’t have racial strife in [Cobblerton], frankly.” Despite a 2016 civil rights violation at Cobblerton High School, and repeated reports of racist and antisemitic graffiti within the middle and high schools, some Cobblerton residents remained invested in the narrative that their good, safe, overwhelmingly white¹ town, with its excellent schools, was innocent of “racial strife.” Though the Supreme Court, in *Milliken v. Bradley*, determined that white suburban districts were “innocent” in the creation and maintenance of school segregation (Baugh, 2011), in this dissertation I challenge that commonly held understanding, which I hope will disrupt the conflation of “whiteness” with “goodness” and “innocence,” especially when it comes to schooling.

While the purpose of schooling, and therefore what is considered a “good” education, remains contested (Bowles and Gintis, 2011; de Oliveira Andreotti, 2014; Ewing, 2025; Labaree, 1997), in the years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, as money and other resources have been poured into mostly white, suburban school districts and systematically withheld from urban schools serving mostly Students of Color, consensus has grown that overwhelmingly white

¹ I have chosen not to capitalize “white” in this dissertation, despite the APA guidelines, which read, “Racial and ethnic groups are designated by proper nouns and are capitalized. Therefore, use ‘Black’ and ‘White’ instead of ‘black’ and ‘white.’” (APA, 2024). Whiteness, unlike other racial and ethnic designations, does not indicate culture, heritage, or positive group identity; it exists solely as a mechanism of dominance and oppression. In seeking to abolish whiteness, I do not capitalize the word.

schools are better (Rury, 2020; Steffes, 2024). And by many metrics, they are – they spend more money per student, they have more experienced teachers who stay in their districts longer, they have more curricular offerings, higher graduation rates, and send more students on to college and high-paying jobs. All of this is reflected in their higher test scores, which in turn impact their rankings and desirability to those families with the means to move in pursuit of a “good” school district. As a result, property values and property tax revenues around these schools increase steadily, further concentrating resources within these districts (Hasan & Kumar, 2024; Steffes, 2024).

This cycle of compounding resource accumulation within suburban school districts has been racialized since the earliest suburbs were first built as explicitly white enclaves (Glotzer, 2020). After racial covenants were outlawed in 1948, white policymakers, in collaboration with real estate developers and agents, invented land-use zoning as the primary technology of partition (Aggarwal, 2024) – between the “good” urban neighborhood and the “bad,” and between the suburb and the city (Glotzer, 2020; Dain, 2023). This partitioning protected the profits of real estate developers, who understood property values to be heavily impacted by the racial makeup of neighborhoods and towns – and desirable schools became another factor in keeping property values high (Glotzer 2020; Rury, 2020). While large urban high schools had once been considered the “best,” (Tyack, 1974; Rury, 2020), as the suburbs developed as exclusive enclaves of whiteness, policy, public opinion and resources all rapidly shifted to building and protecting the “best” schools in the suburbs (Rury, 2020; Steffes, 2024). And after *Brown*, as courts ordered desegregation across the South and Black northerners sought remedy for segregation in their school districts, whites nationwide fled to the suburbs, where their Black neighbors could not follow (Massey and Denton, 1993) – at least until the Fair Housing Act of

1968, but in some places, in practice, much longer (Rothstein, 2017). Thus, the suburban schools were both the whitest and the best funded. And when Black families in Detroit demanded access to the suburban schools where resources were so heavily concentrated, the Supreme Court denied them, on the grounds that they could not demonstrate that the suburban districts had done intentional harm to Black families beyond their borders (Baugh, 2011). Thus, not only were white schools the best resourced, but they were also innocent – morally good – and the link between whiteness and goodness was further cemented.

In the 1980's, states began releasing school "report cards," so that families could easily compare school quality. This was the beginning of the neoliberalization of education, in which public schools were treated as commodities on a marketplace where informed consumers (that is, families with the desire and means, and of a welcomed race) could shop for the best option (Steffes, 2024). The marketization of schooling accelerated after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, which mandated nationwide, high stakes standardized testing, and made way for aggressive "accountability" measures, including closing schools for not making adequate yearly progress (Ewing, 2018; Steffes, 2024). Also in the late 1970's, and accelerating rapidly through the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal policy pushed manufacturing jobs overseas and broke unions, such that it became harder and harder to find a "good" job without a college degree (Ehrenreich, 2020; Harvey, 2005). As more and more young people needed college to access a middle-class job, Reagan-era policy caused college tuition to skyrocket, leaving college graduates who did not come from wealth with debts that could only be paid off through salaried jobs (Nations, 2021). Taken together, all of this neoliberal policy created intense competition among those with middle-class aspirations by imposing scarcity upon spots at good colleges and access to good jobs (Ehrenreich, 2020). As such, families with the means to do so were highly

incentivized to participate in the competition for access to good schools which would help their children access those good colleges and good jobs. And, as some suburbs diversified, others became all the more determined to protect their good schools and high property values, ensuring their own kids had access while others did not (Frankenberg and Orfield, 2012). Today, competition among fairly similar “good” suburban districts over their place in school rankings is both a reason for white communities to hoard educational resources and a result of them each doing so, without consideration for students and families beyond their particular town’s borders.

As a result, today, dominant understandings of “good” schools are strongly associated with the presence of white students (Evans, 2021; Hagerman, 2018; Holme, 2002; Houston & Henig, 2023; Johnson & Shapiro, 2013; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013; Turner et al., 2021; Wells, 2018). The purpose of this dissertation, following Dumas’ (2015) call for a “materialist antiracist perspective” in education research (p. 306), is to denaturalize the association of goodness and whiteness in U.S. schools, in order to illuminate how this association, which is deeply embedded in understandings of meritocracy and deservedness, perpetuates white supremacy and racial injustice in U.S. schools.

To pursue materialist antiracist education research, Dumas (2015) wrote, researchers must “shift our political gaze from concern about students of color or achieving student diversity toward a concern about how white families and communities hoard educational resources for themselves, and create exclusive educational spaces that limit access to others” (p. 308). Because of Cobblerton’s overwhelming whiteness, reputation for excellent schools, proximity to majority Black and Brown Boston Public Schools, and because I grew up in Cobblerton and graduated from its high school, this dissertation focuses there.

In this dissertation, I ask:

Research Question 1: How was Cobblerton’s whiteness created and maintained historically?

Research Question 2: What are the impacts of white educational resource hoarding on Cobblerton and its schools?

Research Question 3: How do narratives of the “goodness” of Cobblerton and Cobblerton Schools justify and sustain white educational resource hoarding?

To answer these questions, I employ a critical race methodology (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2018) to build on and extend current research on school segregation and inequality by investigating the causes and consequences of white educational resource hoarding in the town of Cobblerton.

Through interviews, both with key town decisionmakers and those impacted by their decisions, as well as historical document analysis, and observations of school committee and strategic planning meetings, I interrogate the historical and contemporary processes by which one small Massachusetts school district created and sustained itself as an overwhelmingly white space and at that same time, developed a reputation for school excellence. I find that white educational resource hoarding is the process by which purportedly "good" educational resources, experiences, and outcomes accumulate in educational spaces that are accessible to white students but exclusionary to Students of Color, thereby normalizing and reproducing the deeply held association between good schools and whiteness. While this process involves policies and practices directly related to schooling, it also includes seemingly unrelated dynamics of infrastructure development, zoning, and city planning. I situate the origins of this process in the years between the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968 and the Boston Busing Crisis in 1974. I consider the consequences of white educational resource hoarding for Students of Color and their families in the town. I also critically examine narratives of the goodness of both the town

and its schools to better understand how the ongoing process of white educational resource hoarding is sustained today, despite purported efforts toward diversity and inclusion within Cobblerton and its schools. Throughout, I engage in autoethnographic research to analyze my own experiences as a student in Cobblerton and, later, as a teacher of mostly Black, Brown, and Indigenous students, in the context of white educational resource hoarding. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to disrupt the reproduction of white supremacy through schooling by illuminating the process and consequences of white educational resource hoarding.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: GOOD KIDS, GOOD EDUCATION

I had a bad habit when I was teaching. I couldn't stop describing my students as good. Especially when they behaved in ways that surprised me, especially at the charter school I taught in for the only year it was open in a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota, where the students' behavior surprised me all the time. When kids were loud, disruptive, oppositional; when they tussled in the hallways or stormed out of class or shouted down a teacher so she couldn't do her lesson, I would always say, "But she's such a good kid!" or, "He really is a good kid, though."

My colleague, Mike, would always remind me, "There's no such thing as a good kid, Bri. All kids are good."

This annoyed me. I knew that all kids were good, that's what I was trying to say.

Now that I'm not teaching middle school anymore, and looking back on the six years I taught, I understand his admonishment differently. I see the problem with the shock I expressed, the big-eyed disappointment, the protesting too much. At a school that started to feel like it was falling apart from the moment it opened, I was struggling to hold on to my belief that all kids were good. Because the school had just opened and the culture was not established, because of our commitment to restorative rather than punitive discipline, and maybe most of all because of how young and inexperienced all of us teachers were, that was the first time I'd had to think through why kids might do things like yell, fight, or even just refuse to settle enough to allow a teacher to teach. It also did not escape anyone's notice that the teaching staff was mostly white, and the student body was mostly Black and Brown. You could call it a cultural mismatch, but then you might miss the ways that the Black and Brown kids who came our way had left their neighborhood schools because of their negative experiences there. I knew that some of my eighth graders had been marked as "bad" in their old schools, and stayed with us throughout our

opening chaos because they didn't have anywhere else to go. I knew because they told me that school had labeled them and traumatized them and they did not feel safe at school and they did not trust it or us.

But still, I wanted so badly for the kids to just be good (to be quiet, to be still, to be kind to each other, to listen, to learn, to work hard, to clean up, to help others, to help me, to get along, to work together, to play nicely, to always try their best, to live up to their potential, to make my job easy, to make their parents and teachers proud.)

Mike was right. I shouldn't have been using "good" and "bad" as a frame for thinking through these difficulties. But I was raised to be good, to be a good girl.

Let me tell you about the town where I grew up, which in this dissertation, I call Cobblerton, because of its nineteenth century history as a shoemaking town. If you're driving in from the east, say from Boston or Wellesley, on Route 16, you'll pass a few strip malls. The only logos you might recognize are Dunkin Donuts and Bertucci's, the rest will all be unfamiliar because they are local, small, quaint. The Corner Market, a craft beer specialty store, an Italian bakery, a specialty dry cleaners called Colonial Cleaners. (This is Massachusetts, not far from Plymouth Plantation; being an "original colony" is our brand). Keep driving and you will pass very old, well-maintained houses, the Cobblerton Historical Society (also a very old, well-maintained house, with a barn where people like to get married), the PVLIC LIBRARY, two huge white churches, one Catholic with a steeple and stained glass and one Congregational with columns, and a huge white town hall, also with columns. On your left a general store that has been there since 1863, on your right, antique stores and a little grocery with a deli in the back. If you make a left at the town's only real restaurant, you'll see a few more small businesses, and the strip will end with a CVS on one side and the town coffee shop and the town bar on the other.

That's it, you've seen it all. When I was a kid, the rest was houses and horses and apple orchards. Now it's houses and bigger houses and some houses so big I find myself hoping when I pass them that they have twelve children living there because otherwise, why? Welcome to Cobblerton.



Figure 1. Cobblerton Congregational Church and Downtown Cobblerton, 2022. By Neil Stolmaker, reproduced with permission.

When asked about Cobblerton and its schools, a family friend told me, “I do think that for the most part, the high school kids here are pretty good kids, and don’t get in too much trouble.” In the pilot study for this dissertation, I asked family friends and neighbors about the town where I grew up, which was 95% white when I was a kid, and the schools I attended. It had always been common sense to me that Cobblerton is a “safe” town, that our schools were “good” schools, but I wanted to figure out how I came to know that.

In *How Race Takes Place*, George Lipsitz (2011) wrote that “The white spatial imaginary portrays the properly gendered prosperous suburban home as the privileged moral geography of the nation” (p. 13). Suburbs like Cobblerton are understood to be imbued with moral goodness. And that goodness is linked, in so many minds, with whiteness. White places like Cobblerton teach the people who grow up in them what it means to be innocent, to be safe, and to be good.

My family is white. We moved to Cobblerton in 1992, the same year Bill Clinton was first elected president. My parents adored the Clintons. Hillary Clinton had graduated from Wellesley College, just twenty minutes down Route 16 from our little town. In 1994, Bill Clinton and Joe Biden passed the landmark crime bill that would exacerbate the crisis of mass incarceration that had been building since Nixon. In 1996, Hillary Clinton gave a speech at Keene State College in New Hampshire in support of her husband's anti-crime efforts, where she described gang-involved children as "superpredators: no conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way," she said, "but first we have to bring them to heel." (C-SPAN, 2016). The implication was that our government was doing everything they could to keep us, the good white citizens of small-town America, safe.

If you think about safety as the protection of private property and protection from bodily harm, Cobblerton in the nineties and early two thousands was very safe. When I was a teenager, my dad was constantly reminding me to close the garage door before bed and I was constantly forgetting, so that anyone could have walked right into our house through an unlocked door – but no one ever did. The superpredators, if they existed, were far away: in Boston (Dorchester, Roxbury), in New York (Brooklyn, the Bronx), in Newark and Philly and Baltimore. And also, of course, they didn't exist. And yet the president and his wife built their careers on keeping us safe from this specter of violence, while simultaneously pursuing the twinned slow violences of cutting welfare and building and filling prisons across the country.

Lipsitz (2011) wrote that, "Today's segregated schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces produce white people who know very little about Blacks and even less about themselves" (p. 15). This misunderstanding is produced in white people partly by offering mediated glimpses into who and what we are not. I don't know where I first got the idea that segregated Black and

Brown schools like those in Boston are violent and unsafe, but Clinton's superpredator comment demonstrates the way that Black places, and the children who inhabit them, are constructed in the white mind as not innocent, not safe, and not good.

Another participant in my pilot study told me about her decision to move to the town. She said it was our particular neighborhood, with the houses built in the sixties that reminded her husband strongly of the house he grew up in, and the sense that it was all enclosed, so you could give your kids a "real 1970's childhood." She meant that kids, like me or like her own two, could run around without much adult supervision, could play in yards and ride bikes and come inside when the streetlights went on, sweaty and dirty, and sleep well. She meant it was safe, in a very particular way that ended in most places, in her imagination, sometime in the 1970's.

The Boston Busing Crisis took place in 1974. After twenty years of organizing by Boston Civil Rights activists trying to desegregate the schools, including a program through which Black families paid for their own buses to drive their kids out of the city into less crowded suburban schools, a court mandate came down that Boston had to desegregate. They would use busing to do it, and those buses full of little children would be accompanied by police on horseback and motorcycle because that was how they would keep the screaming white crowds under control. For some kids in Boston, a seventies childhood meant standing outside of school wearing a sign that read "Please! Don't put us on the bus, Bucky"; for others it meant looking out the window of your school bus and seeing kids holding signs like that, knowing you were the reason they were boycotting their schools.



Figure 2. A school bus with Black children escorted by police officers. Source: Dennehy, J. (1975). A school bus carrying only a few occupants travels along Austin Street in Charlestown on Sept. 9, 1975, during the first week of school [Photograph]. Boston.com.

<https://www.boston.com/community/as-told-to/2024/09/17/busing-in-boston-1974-postive-affect/>



Figure 3. Antibusing signs in South Boston, 1974. Source: Grant, S. (1974). Antibusing signs at St. Patrick's Day Parade, South Boston. [Photograph]. Boston Public Library.

<https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/8p58pd740>

I don't blame my study participant for not considering these events when she desired a "1970's childhood" for her children. Despite growing up in Cobblerton, until recently, I was totally unaware of the Boston Busing Crisis. I never learned about it in school.

My parents moved to Cobblerton in 1992 because of the schools. I was four years old at the time, attending a private Montessori preschool in a neighboring town. When my parents

learned that Cobblerton Schools offered a public, free Montessori program through fourth grade, they started looking for a house and moved us in time for me to start kindergarten. Upon arriving, they learned that lots of other people moved to Cobblerton for the good schools as well.

In school, I learned a lot about goodness. In AP US History or American Literature or maybe both, we read that Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop gave a sermon in 1630 calling for New England to become a “city on a hill,” a shining beacon of morality and goodness that would set an example for the world:

Now the only way to ... provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. ... We shall find that the God of Israel is among us... when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, ‘may the Lord make it like that of New England.’ (Winthrop, 1630/2025)

This, we were taught, was why the Puritans risked everything for religious freedom: because they wanted to establish a new society that was purely and uniquely good. Winthrop – for whose son Cobblerton’s town lake is named – warned the congregation that, if they were not good Christians, then God would punish them and the world would know. It was the Puritan’s goodness that kept them safe and allowed them to prosper; it was New England’s prosperity that demonstrated its goodness. It was through American goodness that we made our destiny manifest, that we freed the slaves and perfected our democracy, and that we rose to power as the world’s protector of freedom. We were not explicitly taught this, but we learned it anyway.

We were taught that New England was a special place within a special country. We learned that the Mayflower Compact was an early example of democracy, that the Pilgrims sat down with the Indians and shared a meal, and that later their descendants fought for

independence from the oppressive British. We learned to be proud that the battles of Lexington and Concord took place so nearby, that the ragtag militia of Minutemen beat the wealthy British army because of their commitment to freedom and representative democracy, that the white men who dressed as Mohawk Indians to dump British tea in nearby Boston harbor were clever and brave. We learned that New England was on the right side of history again and again, first in outlawing slavery, then in fighting and winning the Civil War and restoring the union. We learned American tragedies, like the Trail of Tears and the Jim Crow South, happened far away and did not implicate us, but that American victories like World War II and the Civil Rights Movement were our forefathers' true legacy, and ours to claim.

In *Represent and Destroy*, Jodi Melamed (2015) wrote, "In narrating the heroic white liberal as a privileged national and racial subject, racial-liberal discourse simultaneously recruited whites for nationalist agendas, justified white privilege, and provided a protagonist for narratives that made the case for U.S. global leadership." (p. 23-4). This was my schooling, my good education. The goodness discourse only amplified after September 11, 2001, when I was in seventh grade. George W. Bush and his team of neoconservatives proclaimed (white) American goodness again and again as they justified the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003. We did not discuss these events in school, but American flags and "Support Our Troops" stickers were everywhere in town, and every year at Memorial Day and Veteran's Day, volunteers stapled a poster and American flag to every telephone pole, each with the name of a different soldier who died in a foreign war.



Figure 4. Memorial Day in Cobblerton, 2008. Source: MetroWest Daily News. URL omitted to maintain confidentiality.

The dominating message was that the troops overseas were fighting for our freedom, and that their actions, which I would later learn resulted in the direct deaths of 170,000 Afghans and at least 281,000 Iraqis (Watson Institute, 2025), and millions more indirect deaths and injuries, protected Americans and spread democracy. From my parents and the friends I went to antiwar protests with, I learned this was not true, but it was hard to tell what was. Was this about oil? The military-industrial complex? Despite my good education, I did not know the word “imperialism,” could not apply it to my own country.

In Cobblerton, I was a good student. I took all the AP classes offered in English and history. Senior year, I was accepted to a number of small, private liberal arts colleges in New England and New York – you could tell they were good schools by how few applicants they

accepted, how exclusive they were – and my name was posted on the cafeteria wall next to the name of the college I chose to attend. Almost everyone I graduated with went to college, too. We took our good education, and we went to get more. And yet. Here is a partial list of things I didn't learn in Cobblerton Schools:

- Which Indigenous people's ancestral homelands we occupied
- Who took those lands, and how, and what forms of violence they employed
- The truth about Thanksgiving
- Anything about slavery or segregation in Massachusetts
- That the Boston Busing Crisis happened
- Why my hometown was so overwhelmingly white, or
- How it stayed that way, through my whole childhood and up until today

Charles Mills (1997), a philosopher whose definition of “white supremacy” I will use throughout this dissertation, wrote that white people often do not understand the world that we ourselves have made. He said that this not-knowing is active and must be carefully and constantly maintained. This active not-knowing and misunderstanding is called “white ignorance,” and without it, the strong sense that Lipsitz (2011) described of the inherent goodness of white people and white places would fall apart. Thinking back on the explicit and implicit lessons I learned about history, race, goodness and innocence in Cobblerton, I see this active maintenance of white ignorance everywhere. My friend Sol Rheem points out that, in Cobblerton, white ignorance was a curriculum. I now understand this curriculum as foundational to maintaining the illusion that the town and its schools are good, innocent, and safe.

In retrospect, I believe that my skewed sense of what goodness is, and what safety is, created a major obstacle in my work as a teacher of Black, Brown, and Indigenous children. It

was why I kept insisting that my students were good, even as my own ideas about goodness clouded my sense of who my students were and what they needed from me. Today, about 80% percent of U.S. teachers are white (NCES, 2025). Given this country's history of segregation, it is very likely that many of them grew up in overwhelmingly white places like Cobblerton, and were taught a curriculum of white ignorance. Disrupting this curriculum is critical work for those of us seeking otherwise possibilities for education. In his memoir *Heavy*, a teacher of mine, Kiese Laymon (2018), wrote:

I will accept that black children will not recover from economic inequality, housing discrimination, sexual violence, heteropatriarchy, mass incarceration, mass evictions, and parental abuse. I will accept that black children are all worthy of the most abundant, patient, responsible kind of love and liberation this world has ever created. (p. 240)

The violences that Laymon named here are too often rendered invisible by white ignorance, and the love and liberation he calls for is impossible as long as whiteness and goodness are linked in our educations and imaginations. For me to radically accept this violence, I have to see it, I have to know it. And to radically accept this love and liberation, I have to learn what I was never taught, and learn it well enough to teach it to others like me. To me, this is what constitutes a good education.

CHAPTER ONE: UNDERSTANDING WHITE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE HOARDING THROUGH THEORY AND LITERATURE

In 2006, at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Gloria Ladson-Billings argued that the United States owed an “educational debt” to our Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous children. Because of the histories of African slavery, Indigenous genocide, and exploitation and marginalization of immigrants of Color, the debt was a historic one; because of contemporary racial segregation and funding disparities, it was an economic one; because of the political exclusion of these communities, it was a sociopolitical one; and because of the values of justice and equality that the United States ostensibly holds, it was a moral debt as well. In the years since Ladson-Billings’ (2006) speech, school segregation and the attendant funding disparities have only increased (Frankenberg et al., 2019). For the United States’ education system to be good – in terms of both morality and quality – policy at the federal, state, and local levels must all be oriented toward repaying this debt. Instead, efforts in this direction are continuously stymied by white communities seeking to hoard educational resources for their own children. In this chapter, I attend to the historical, economic, sociopolitical and moral components of white educational resource hoarding, in an effort to build new understandings of the systems of oppression that must be dismantled to achieve educational justice.

To interrogate how places like Cobblerton construct themselves as white “privileged moral geographies,” and how this allows them to hoard educational resources while maintaining their reputations for goodness and veneers of innocence, I first consider how conquerors created “whiteness” and white places (King, 2019; Wynter, 2003). I provide a history of Cobblerton’s conquest, to demonstrate how white supremacy was established in the site of this study (King, 2019). I argue that conquest is a structure of oppression that continues to shape Cobblerton to

this day, and is inextricably linked with racial capitalism (King, 2019; Melamed, 2015). I further argue that these structures cannot be reformed, but must be abolished. (Chua, 2020; Tuck and Yang, 2018). Critical race theory provides some of the theoretical tools that illuminate racial capitalism's workings, including "interest convergence" (Bell, 1980) and "whiteness as property," (Harris, 1993) and I argue that "whiteness as property" considered alongside Moreton-Robinson's (2015) theory of the "white possessive" demonstrates that whiteness is property, and property is whiteness. This becomes especially salient under racial capitalism's current iteration, neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005), which, by imposing austerity, incentivizes competition among individuals and communities which results in the hoarding of resources, including educational resources (Dumas, 2015). Finally, I consider recent scholarship on opportunity hoarding (Cashin, 2021; Diamond and Lewis, 2022), and the cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) that both causes and justifies this practice in white communities. I conclude that, through the white possessive logic of conquest, coupled with white ignorance, white families and communities can participate in white educational resource hoarding while understanding their actions as responsible and therefore, good.

Whiteness as Conquest

In what is now the United States (as well as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), whiteness, white places, and white nations were created through the genocide and systematic dispossession of Indigenous people (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). While many scholars have called this process settler colonialism (e.g. Wolfe, 2006), King (2019) called on scholars to name this process conquest, a name she also gave to the enslavement of African peoples by white colonizers. Arguing that conquest includes but is much more than forced labor and land theft, King cautioned scholars of settler colonialism against "disavow[ing] the gratuitous violence that

is ongoing and, in fact, necessary for the ‘human’ to continue to self-actualize ... as a category of Whiteness.” (p. 20). Thinking with Wynter (2003), who demonstrated that Enlightenment-era philosophers developed the category of “Man” to include European, Christian, “rational” men and justify the mass death that these men pursued through colonialism, King (2019) wrote, “More specifically, the ‘human’ as an exclusive category demands an outside and requires the death of Indigenous and Black people” (p. 20). European conquerors of the Americas established hierarchy and justified their right to rule first through religion – all non-Christians were heathen and therefore subhuman – and later, through racial hierarchy, which was rapidly encoded into law, ideology, and the quotidian “common sense” of the conquerors’ descendants, such that it is a process that is ongoing to this day (Wynter, 2003).

Mills (1997) named the process by which racial hierarchy was codified into law the racial contract. He argued that global white supremacy “is *itself* a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties” (p. 3). He further argued that this system was established in the colonial period through the overwhelming mass death, dehumanization, and dispossession of Black and Indigenous people throughout the Atlantic world. One result of this process was the founding of the United States as a white nation, where, from the beginning, the white male right to possess land and other property was pursued through Indigenous genocide, rapid land theft, and a legal system that codified white possessive logic (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Though Benjamin Franklin changed John Locke’s “life, liberty, and property” to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration of Independence, the Lockean theory that right to land was based on the landowner’s “productive” use of the land – that is, its commodification – was the primary justification for

white conquest of Indigenous lands in the American colonies and was codified in U.S. law from the founding (Van Lier, 2023). Property ownership was also set as a qualification for voting, both in the early United States and later in the Jim Crow South. White men conquered land; white men defended their property from Indigenous resistance, justifying more mass death; white men used their property as the basis of their political and economic power; and white men also classified Black people as property, justifying violent means of dehumanization including not only forced labor but also mass rape, torture, and murder. Considering conquest in this way demonstrates that, as Harris (1993) wrote, whiteness is property, but also, property is whiteness. Whiteness, and white places, were created through the violent appropriation of Indigenous lands and Black bodies, both of which depended on white people declaring themselves, and only themselves, to be human (Wynter, 2003; King, 2019).

Today, the overwhelming whiteness of places like Cobblerton can seem natural. One participant in my pilot study told me she “thought it was just osmosis.” But Cobblerton, like all of the white-possessed land in the United States, was conquered by its earliest colonists, in a process that is ongoing today. In order to understand such white places to be good, it is necessary to create structures of ignorance that erase their violent colonial histories and current realities. In what follows, I detail Cobblerton’s specific history of violent white possession, in order to understand the ongoing conquest there, which is the underlying structure of Cobblerton’s present day whiteness. In so doing, I also seek to call into question the purity and morality of the “city on a hill.”

Conquering Cobblerton

Cobblerton is located on the ancestral homelands of the Nipmuc people. The systematic dispossession of the Nipmuc people of what is now Massachusetts began in 1631, when

Calvinist Reverend John Eliot arrived in the Massachusetts Bay colony. Eliot set out to learn the Algonquian languages spoken by the Indigenous peoples of what is now southern New England, and used that to pursue a mission of conversion across the colony. Eliot aimed not only to inspire individuals to pray to his God, but to radically disrupt indigenous lifeways. Ojibwe historian O'Brien (1997) wrote:

The ideology of conversion John Eliot developed involved fixing Indian candidates for conversion in geographically bounded places called 'Praying Towns' where English ideas about land use and ownership would prevail, gender roles would be transformed, and English institutions would instruct Indians about their place in the social order before extending them full religious rights in formally gathered Indian congregations. He viewed religious conversion as embedded in total cultural transformation. (p. 27)

One of the ideas about land use and ownership that Eliot imposed upon the 'Praying Indians' was the commodification of land as property to be bought and sold, and the adjudication of land boundary disputes through the courts. While later, under United States law, whiteness would become a form of property (Harris, 1993), in this historical moment, participation in property ownership, or the adoption of what Moreton-Robinson (2015) called white possessive logics was a prerequisite of Christianity, rationality, masculinity, and political participation – that is, whiteness.

The first of Eliot's "Praying Towns," established in 1650, was Natick, which in Narragansett means "my land." (O'Brien, 1997). Some of the land that is now Cobblerton was included in the Praying Town of Natick, including a village previously established by Eliot, called Mucksquit, to encourage Nipmuc people to stay in one place rather than travel seasonally (Hulbert, 2021). A path that the English called Pout Lane connected the land that is now

Cobblerton to other seasonal Nipmuc sites. According to Hulbert (2011), Eliot walked Pout Lane seeking Nipmucs to proselytize. O'Brien (1997) argued that, while Eliot described his choice for the site of Natick as ordained by God, the fact that some of the land he included within the boundary was already part of the bounded, English town of Dedham "suggests that Indians forced Eliot to act as their advocates in securing the Native rights to a particular place" (p. 34). Including particular lands, such as Mucksquit and the nearby lake, then Wenakeening, now Winthrop (Hulbert, 2021), within the boundaries of Natick protected them from further English encroachment.

O'Brien (1997) wrote that, while Natick was meant to be an English-style village reserved only for "Praying Indians" – that is, those who had converted to Christianity – Indigenous people of many tribes came to Natick for many reasons, including increased pressure from the expansion of English conquest, and for protection from raiding Mohawk. John Speen, a Nipmuc man for whom a main street in the present-day town of Natick is now named, "said he prayed 'because I saw the English took much ground, and I thought if I prayed, the English would not take away my ground'" (O'Brien, 1997, p. 52-3). O'Brien wrote that "Coming to Natick appealed to some Indians because they saw much to gain, and they viewed the changes expected of them as modifications, not cultural suicide" (p. 63). Nipmuc historian Holley-Sonsksq (2023) demonstrated that Indigenous people in Natick continued to practice traditional lifeways and spirituality, if covertly, and O'Brien (1997) cited examples of resistance to religious conversion within the Praying Town.

In 1675, during the period of Indigenous uprising against the British that they later called "King Philip's War," the colonial government viewed any Native people not residing in Praying Towns as enemy combatants, forcing those who had not already done so to seek refuge in the

Christian villages or risk incarceration, sale into Caribbean slavery, or death (Brooks, 2018; Holley-Sonsksq, 2023). Thus, the Nipmuc people who remained near Natick but had not yet joined were forced off their lands and into the Praying Town. Though the Natick Indians were allied with the British, the colonial government both saw them as a threat, and understood them as vulnerable to attack by non-allied Indians. In October of 1675, all of the Natick Indians were kidnapped by the British in the middle of the night and abandoned on Deer Island in Boston Harbor. They were forced to remain there through the winter with inadequate shelter and little food, and many froze or starved to death. (Holley-Sonsksq, 2023; O'Brien 1997). While in May of 1676, the 210 Natick Indians who survived were returned to Natick, the brutal English backlash to Native resistance was ongoing, and Indigenous people of many tribes remained confined to the Praying Towns as a result (O'Brien, 1997).

After the defeat of Metacom, the Wampanoag leader of the uprising, and the end of King Philip's War, restriction on Indigenous movement was loosened, although it was tightened again in other times of conflict. Natick Indians were deemed "Friend Indians" and confined to Praying Towns ostensibly for their own protection. During the postwar period, the English set about securing "good title" – that is, legitimate legal ownership under the colonial court – to Nipmuc lands beyond the borders of the Praying Towns. Many Nipmuc people, cut off from their traditional lifeways and means of survival by confinement to Praying Towns and suffering from poverty and illness, were willing to sell land to which they could lay individual claim. Some collectively held lands were also sold if the buyer agreed to provide a community benefit such as a sawmill or meetinghouse on the land they purchased. While some English settlers in this period tried to purchase or steal land within the bounds of Natick, Natick Indians defended their rights to these lands in court (O'Brien, 1997).

According to Cobblerton's town historian:

In 1701, a large tract of land that included the west half of [Cobblerton], eastern Milford and parts of Hopkinton and Ashland was given to the local Nipmucs in a land exchange with Sherborn. Their ownership of the tract was brief, as settlers purchased tracts of land there until all traces of Nipmuc presence disappeared. (Hullbert, 2011)

While this paragraph described the material mechanism through which Nipmuc people were dispossessed of claims to land in present-day Cobblerton, the language here – “until all traces of Nipmuc presence disappeared” – reinforces the myth that the Nipmuc people of present-day Cobblerton somehow faded away, rather than white settlers using physical and institutional violence to force them off their own ancestral homeland. And in fact, the same author wrote elsewhere that the “last member of the Nipmuc Owasomaug family ... resided in a campsite near the south end of Lake Winthrop” and died in 1830 (Hullbert, 2022), suggesting that the Nipmuc presence in Cobblerton remained evident to white townspeople for at least another century after their land was sold.

In her book *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England*, O'Brien (2010) demonstrated how local histories of southern New England towns like Cobblerton, which proliferated in the nineteenth century, served to erase histories of colonial violence and replace them with stories of benevolent “first” New Englanders and tragic “last” Indians:

an origin myth that assigns primacy to non-Indians who “settled” the region in a benign process involving righteous relations with Indians and just property transactions that led to an inevitable and (usually, drawing on the Romanticism that conditioned nineteenth-century sensibilities) lamentable Indian extinction. Thus, the ‘first’ New Englanders are

made to disappear, sometimes through precise declarations that the ‘last’ of them has passed, and the colonial regime is constructed as the ‘first’ to bring ‘civilization’ and authentic history to the region. (xv)

For white conquerors and their descendants, it was not enough to possess the land they conquered and the wealth it then brought them. They also needed to see themselves and their forefathers as heroic, righteous, and good. The founding violence of Cobblerton serves as the origin story of its goodness. In a book on Cobblerton’s history, published in 2000 and titled *[Cobblerton]: A Good Town*, the first chapter is called “Out of the Wilderness – A Town.” The Nipmuc people have always already “disappeared,” and in the “wilderness” they left behind, the settlers arrived to bring civilization. From Cobblerton’s earliest days, whiteness and goodness have been inextricably linked there, and that good whiteness is understood to originate with possessing the land and making it property.

Conquest & Racial Capitalism

Bonds and Inwood (2016) argued that “neither white supremacy nor settler colonialism can be relegated to historical contexts. Rather, both inform past, present, and future formations of race” (p. 715). While white conquerors established white supremacy in Cobblerton in the seventeenth century, the conquest of which they were a part is ongoing (King, 2019). Today, white supremacy in Cobblerton is sustained by the same system of civilization that the early conquerors put in place: racial capitalism. Drawing on Robinson (2020), Melamed (2015) defined racial capitalism as integral to the wealth accumulation pursued through conquest:

These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. Most obviously, it does this by displacing the uneven life chances that are

inescapably part of capitalist social relations onto fictions of differing human capacities, historically race. We often associate racial capitalism with the central features of white supremacist capitalist development, including slavery, colonialism, genocide, incarceration regimes, migrant exploitation, and contemporary racial warfare. Yet we also increasingly recognize that contemporary racial capitalism deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders. (p. 77)

Capitalism, an economic system in which the land, labor, and lives of the many are exploited by a powerful few, requires inequality – and not only economic inequality but ideological inequality, what Melamed calls “fictions of differing human capacities,” or a logic by which some are naturally more deserving – smarter, harder working, more rational, more moral – than others. Wynter (2003) showed how race, as well as gender, sexuality, and ability, came, through conquest, to be the dominant “fiction” of difference, which justified conquest to the conquerors even as they engaged in world historical brutality. Today, racism permeates and defines global social and economic relations such that, Gilmore (2007) wrote, “it is impossible to think about any aspect of globalization without focusing on the ‘fatal coupling of power and difference’ signified by racism. Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death” (p.107). U.S. critical race theorist Bell (1980), whose work I discuss in more detail below, wrote that “racism is permanent in this country” (p. 15); analyzing the United States through the lens of racial capitalism explains why. Melamed wrote:

The “state-finance-racial violence nexus” names the inseparable confluence of political/economic governance with racial violence, which enables ongoing accumulation

through dispossession by calling forth the specter of race (as threat) to legitimate state counterviolence in the interest of financial asset owning classes that would otherwise appear to violate social rationality, from the police-killing of immigrants and African American youth (in the name of safety for the white and prosperous), to the letting die of the racialized poor, to the social deaths transited through the precedent of Indigenous dispossession for profit. (p. 78)

Racial capitalism requires inequality, but not merely economic inequality. Racial capitalism requires its participants to accept ongoing mass death – the fast, spectacular state violence (James and Davis, 1996) of police murder and deportation, the slow violence (Penados et al., 2022) of manufactured poverty, hunger, homelessness, and environmental crisis, and the absolute violence that Mbembe (2019) called necropolitics pursued by our military far from the U.S. in the name of American – and, in this moment, Jewish – safety and freedom.

School is one of the places that the state creates consent to, and investment in, racial capitalism (Gerrard et al., 2022). At school, where from a young age we are sorted into ability groups, given tests and grades that measure our intelligence and hard work, and are excluded when we do not participate or are noncompliant, we learn which kinds of knowledge, and which kinds of people, are valuable (Pyscher and Lozenski, 2014; Shalaby, 2017). Gerrard and colleagues (2022) argued that schooling also creates value for some while devaluing others:

Valuing and devaluing human life is arguably the central function of settler colonial education systems: educational credentials are one of the most important social and economic ascribers of worth that also, by implication, devalues what is not included within the credential. This illustrates how racial capitalism's methods of evaluating and extracting value differentiates life itself, dehumanising those who are considered outside

the bounds of social value, whose objectification holds capitalism and racism in place. (p. 436).

Cobblerton has good schools that send kids on to good colleges and give them a competitive edge when they compete for a seemingly ever-shrinking number of good jobs. Through their compulsory participation in this system, students learn their own and each others' relative "merit," and come to understand that those who are not good students, and who do not get good jobs, are less deserving. Racial segregation of both schooling and housing serves this end as well, ensuring that white students know little about their Black, Brown, and Indigenous would-be classmates and contributing to the common sense that it is because these children are concentrated in "bad" schools that they are more likely to experience poverty, incarceration, and premature death. Melamed (2015) wrote that racial capitalism depends on "social separateness – the disjoining or deactivating of relations between human beings" (p. 78). Through the example of "de facto" segregated schooling, and the existence of towns like Cobblerton, we can see how the spatialization of race both supports and, to inhabitants of places like Cobblerton, obscures the workings of racial capitalism, which produces both under-resourced schools and the threat of poverty, incarceration, and premature death for racialized students. This too is a process of conquest, of constructing the "human" – the good kid, the good girl, from the good town and the good schools who got the good job and accessed "the good life" (Berlant, 2011) through intelligence and hard work, against the not-smart, not-hardworking, not-deserving racialized Other, who is therefore not deserving of a good job, and therefore not deserving of housing, healthcare, food, or rest, and may not be deserving of any life at all. To residents of places like Cobblerton, all of this might seem natural, normal, and even inevitable. The rise of neoliberalism, which relies on discourses of individualism to both obscure and justify the

redistribution of wealth toward the wealthiest, has further entrenched the sensibility that white kids who work hard in school going on to top colleges is the natural order of things, one that must be protected from others seeking an unfair advantage in a meritocratic system.

Neoliberalism as Contemporary Conquest

In order for racial capitalism to continue to function, it must manufacture consent through discourse (Harvey, 2005). Melamed (2011) traced the evolution of U.S. racial discourse in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, noting that “official U.S. antiracisms since World War II have disconnected racism from material conditions, even as they have detrimentally limited the horizon for overcoming racism to U.S. global capitalism” (p. 1-2). Even as government policy has pursued antiracism through civil rights legislation, the racialized dispossession and violence of racial capitalism has continued unabated. And since the mid-1970’s, the form this dispossession and violence has taken – the contemporary form of conquest – has been “neoliberalism.” As economic policy, neoliberalism calls for deregulated markets, “free” global trade, austerity measures and the gutting of the welfare state, the redistribution of tax dollars to police, prisons, the military, and the wealthiest individuals and largest corporations (Harvey, 2005). As ideology, neoliberalism lauds the hardworking, enterprising individual and blames poverty on individual or cultural shortcomings, assuming that the opportunity to succeed is always already equal even as neoliberal policy exacerbates unequal access to dignified work and social support.

Arguing that, since the 1980’s, the dominant racial discourse has been “neoliberal multiculturalism,” Melamed (2011) wrote:

As a unifying discourse, neoliberal multiculturalism has disguised the reality that neoliberalism remains a form of racial capitalism. Even as diversity has been cast as the

essence of neoliberal exchange ... updated forms of conventional racial domination have continued, from the catastrophic rates of African American male imprisonment to free trade and export processing zones ... Race has continued to permeate capitalism's economic and social processes ... Yet multiculturalism has portrayed neoliberal policy as the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity. (p. 42)

Although neoliberalism espouses freedom and equality, the freedoms it protects are the freedoms to participate in market economies and pursue profit, and neoliberal equality is individualized such that group-based disparities are invisibilized or misidentified as individual deficiencies.

Dumas (2015) explained that, "because the market is ostensibly colorblind and equally accessible to all, it is regarded as best suited to facilitate racial equality" (p. 238). This, he further argued, opened space for "racism without racists" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022), in which structural inequalities are ignored and allowed to persist because the neoliberal subject is always only the individual actor. And because the neoliberal individual is solely responsible for his success or failure to compete and survive under capitalism, neoliberal ideology casts wealth accumulation as responsible and moral (De Lissoy, 2015). That is, the "good" neoliberal subject actively participates in the market, succeeds at achieving wealth, and protects his own private property. By this white possessive logic, "good" parents and homeowners "support policies that protect their wealth, most often in ways that further segregate themselves off from areas deemed less desirable, and encourage disproportionate public and private spending in their own areas, at the expense of others" (Dumas, 2015, p. 294). In short, the dominance and pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology, the way it has become "common sense" (De Lissoy, 2015), makes accumulative practices such as white educational resource hoarding responsible and morally good, and attempts at redistribution or "leveling the playing field" seem unfair. As De Lissoy

(2015) demonstrated, this logic of equating wealth accumulation with goodness is not new – Weber (2001) famously traced it back to the Puritans – but neoliberal ideology and austerity heightens the drive to compete, threatens those who do not with premature death: “in neoliberalism we are ruled by imperatives of responsibility, competition, and survival ... Because we have not been properly responsible, we must now compete all the more intensely if we are to survive” (p. 20-1).

Berlant (2011) theorized that life under neoliberalism is one of cruel optimism. Cruel optimism occurs when individual and collective attachments to fantasies of “the good life” – including the postwar (white) liberal fantasy of ever-upward social mobility – “no longer make sense, yet remain powerful as they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings” (p. 13). The optimism of white, middle-class parents like those in Cobblerton is a cruel one in the ways it reproduces inequality that schools, in this fantasy, are supposed to combat. Further, Ehrenreich (1989/2020) found, “the barriers erected to exclude intruders from other classes” – erected in the name of optimism for the current and future children of Cobblerton – “also stand in the way of the youth of the middle-class. The barriers ensure that only that only the hardworking, the self-denying, will make it – and not even all of them ... setting us against all those who have not yet made it (the young, the poor) and even against our own desires” (p. 331-332). Berlant’s theory illuminates the cruelty hidden within the oft-repeated myth: that, in a world where middle-class parents are anxiously seeking to guarantee their children access to the increasingly competitive “good” colleges and ever-fewer “good” jobs, they work against any aspiration they hold for a more equal world, in which every child receives a good education and all work is valued and fairly compensated. The reproduction of white supremacy harms all of us, but white ignorance and cruel optimism prevent white people from giving up the property that

comes with whiteness and struggling across lines of race and class to address the root cause of that harm. Instead, the “fear of falling” (Ehrenreich, 1989/2020) leads many to participate in processes of educational resource hoarding. In Cobblerton, where most families’ wealth is secured through homeownership, residents are strongly incentivized to push for policies that will increase their property values in order to ensure that they are able to retire and have something to pass on to their children. And this belief in the American dream for themselves leads to policies, such as rejecting public transit, low-income housing, or even a sewer system, that harm their neighbors and maybe even their future selves. Many retirees in Cobblerton find it difficult to afford their property taxes and just too expensive, if they sell their family home, to buy a smaller place in town. This is just one example of how the optimism that neoliberalism demands – faith in constant growth, belief that you will fare better with self-reliance in lieu of social programs, and hope that, in conditions of manufactured scarcity, your hard work and ingenuity will protect you from being left behind – produces the cruelty of inequality, and the commonsense belief that for some to succeed, others must suffer. In Cobblerton, that suffering is far away and easy to ignore, while prosperity and optimism seem to abound – and this, too, is cruel. White ignorance is the defense mechanism that allows us to participate in this system without understanding it. Reckoning honestly with ongoing conquest demands a different kind of optimism – the determined belief that a better world is possible. For this, I turn to the movement for abolition.

Abolition

For as long as there has been slavery, there have been those seeking to end it, which is another way of saying, for as long as the political, social, and economic world has been defined by ongoing conquest, there have been movements to dismantle this structure and build something else. One name this movement has taken at times in the past, and that it takes still or again today,

is abolition. Tuck and Yang (2018) wrote:

Abolition is a movement to end slavery, to abolish institutions of unfreedom, a movement that has necessarily and repeatedly unsettled the foundations of modern capitalism. ... Abolition is shaking the antiblack institutions that underwrite whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), that sanction murder, captivity, torture, and disposal. (p. 9)

As I have detailed, ending racism means ending capitalism means ending colonialism means ending conquest. Chua (2020) wrote that, “abolition is a horizon, not an event,” (p. S-130) and this dissertation is animated by a careful consideration of how to move education and society toward that horizon, and how to act ethically along the way. This requires sustained collective struggle – the antidote to neoliberal individual striving, and yet another skill that schools like Cobblerton’s do not teach. Many have written of how the logic of unfreedom, of policing and prison, of treating people as disposable and human freedom as a privilege bestowed only on the “good” and “innocent” is learned and reproduced at school (Ewing, 2025; Meiners, 2007; Rodriguez, 2008). As such, Shalaby (2017) suggested that one place the work of abolition can begin is in the classroom:

In schools where teachers feel stuck about how to break the harmful patterns of their classroom management, I often wonder if we might become unstuck by first imagining a world in which police are not necessary, in which prisons are abolished. What are the skills required for *that* world – skills demanded by the need to keep each other safe and free – and how might we teach and learn those skills in school? (p. 174)

Being able to imagine a world in which police and prisons are not necessary requires disrupting the white ignorance that naturalizes and normalizes institutions and conditions of unfreedom, and upon which white supremacy depends. To do so in this dissertation, I turn to critical race theory

as a theoretical framework that can illuminate the workings of white supremacy and illuminate the systems and structures that white ignorance obscures.

Critical Race Theory

Because this dissertation is concerned with educational injustice created by and sustaining ongoing conquest, I use critical race theory throughout as a primary theoretical framework. Critical race theory was first developed by legal scholars, including Derrick Bell (1980, 1992) and Cheryl Harris (1993), and brought into the field of education studies by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995). Frustrated by the failures of the movement for civil rights in education to resolve educational injustice through either school integration or equitable funding and resources for Black students, critical race theorists turned away from liberal conceptions of inclusion toward a more radical and materialist analysis of racial inequality, concluding that “traditional civil rights approaches to solving inequality have depended on the ‘rightness’ of democracy while ignoring the structural inequality of capitalism” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 52), and as such, antiracist analysis must also be anticapitalist. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) also described why U.S. capitalism could never be antiracist: because while the U.S. Constitution was ostensibly written to protect and uphold human rights, in practice, U.S. law serves to protect property rights, which at the time of the founding included the property rights of white men to own enslaved people and stolen Indigenous lands. Though they do not use the phrase “racial capitalism,” the early critical race theorists clearly concluded that U.S. capitalism has always been racial, and understood that race and capitalism cannot be analyzed separately.

Because “the contradiction of a reified symbolic individual juxtaposed to the reality of ‘real estate’ means that emphasis on the centrality of property can be disguised” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 53), critical race theorists developed tenets of critical race theory to

illuminate the disguised workings of race in the U.S. In this dissertation, three of the tenets are especially salient: whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), interest convergence (Bell, 1980), and the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992).

In her seminal article “Whiteness as Property,” Harris (1993) argued that white supremacy was established in the United States by encoding whiteness as a protected form of property under the law. She wrote:

The hyper-exploitation of Black labor was accomplished by treating Black people themselves as objects of property. Race and property were thus conflated by establishing a form of property contingent on race — only Blacks were subjugated as slaves and treated as property. Similarly, the conquest, removal, and extermination of Native American life and culture were ratified by conferring and acknowledging the property rights of whites in Native American land. Only white possession and occupation of land was validated and therefore privileged as a basis for property rights. These distinct forms of exploitation each contributed in varying ways to the construction of whiteness as property. (p.1716).

Harris emphasized that the outcome of conquest was that both Black bodies and Indigenous land became white property, and the laws that were then established were designed to protect white property rights over and above the human rights of non-property owners. As a result, white supremacy was encoded into law, and is now treated as a natural and neutral baseline against which legal fairness is measured. Melamed (2011) wrote that, “the primary function of racialization has been to make structural inequality appear fair” (p. 12); whiteness as property describes how racial inequality is both encoded into law and made to appear fair.

Another tenet of critical race theory is “interest convergence.” Analyzing the material

outcomes of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Bell (1980) found that, while it was in the United States' interest to end "de jure," or legal, school segregation as part of its ideological battle against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the courts would never enforce full racial integration because it would threaten the status of middle- and upper-class whites. From this case of educational injustice, Bell (1980) concluded that racial progress of any kind would be stymied by interest convergence, and thus:

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance. (Bell, 1992, p. 15).

This acknowledgment of the permanence of racism, or what is sometimes called "racial realism," animates all of critical race theory, which begins its analysis from the assumption that racism is foundational to the United States.

Taken together, these tenets of whiteness as property, interest convergence, and the permanence of racism, shed light on the functioning of white supremacy, and explain ongoing educational injustice as the outcome of a structure working as designed, rather than an aberration of an otherwise fair or meritocratic system. Analyzing U.S. schools through the lens of critical race theory, the permanence of racism becomes obvious – as Ewing (2025) argued, racism was built into U.S. schools from the beginning; it is their "original sin." Part of the reason for this is interest convergence – that ongoing efforts toward equality have been, and continue to be, stymied by white families who fear losing their historic advantage in an equitable and integrated system (e.g. McRae, 2017; Steffes, 2024). And as a result, "good education" has become a

property to which white children are entitled and Students of Color, under the law, are not (Bowman, 2015). Though there are, and have always been, resistance efforts, mounted again and again by racialized families and communities seeking fair and equitable access to education (Anderson, 1988; Givens, 2021; Miletsky, 2022), today educational inequality along racial lines is normalized and broadly accepted. Critical race theory can help us to understand this, too, and to seek out counterstories that reveal, make sense of, and denaturalize educational injustice.

School Segregation, Opportunity Hoarding & White Educational Resource Hoarding

Considering my hometown of Cobblerton through the lens of critical race theory led me to denaturalize the town's whiteness and consider its role in educational injustice. To understand how Cobblerton and places like it hoard educational resources and limit access to Students of Color, I turn to educational research on school segregation and its ongoing consequences. In what follows, I review relevant literature on school segregation broadly, consider the history of segregation and attempts at integration in Massachusetts specifically, and explore the link between "good schools" and whiteness, before finally reviewing the emerging concepts of opportunity hoarding and resource hoarding in education. Taking together, these bodies of literature illuminate Diamond and Lewis' claim that "opportunity hoarding ... is a key mechanism of white power" (p. 1474). To this claim, I add that white people and communities hoard not only "opportunity" – which can too easily be interpreted as access to another step on the ladder of social mobility – but a wide array of educational resources, from money and experienced teachers to decisions about what kinds of knowledge matter and what experiences of education are "good." As such, in order to achieve educational justice, educators and policy makers must imagine beyond equal access to opportunity within the current colonial, neoliberal system, and pursue instead an abolitionist horizon of education for a freer, safer world.

School Segregation

Understanding the process of white educational resource hoarding requires analyzing the history of school segregation, which is both perpetuated and justified through this process. Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that educational debt could begin to be repaid through school integration and full and equitable funding (see also, Carter & Welner, 2013). Instead, U.S. schools have grown increasingly segregated, especially since the 1980s when the last Southern integration orders were lifted (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Hannah-Jones, 2017; Orfield, 2015). In Massachusetts, where this study takes place, the number of “intensely segregated non-white schools” increased from 143 in 2008 to 192 in 2020, a 34% increase in just twelve years (Schneider et al, 2020). While Black Educational Spaces (Warren and Coles, 2020) have the potential to be liberatory for Black students (Givens, 2021), schools with the most Black and Latinx students also have the lowest rates of funding, highest teacher turnover, and their students are denied access to many of the resources that white students enjoy (Carter & Welner, 2013; Orfield et al., 2019; Schneider et al. 2020).

Today, residential segregation is the primary driver of school segregation (Monarrez, 2023). Although, as Frankenberg and Orfield (2012) found, the percentage of Families of Color is growing rapidly in suburbs, and, as Rhodes and Warkentien (2017) found, Families of Color are likely to seek out suburban housing in order to access better schools, residential segregation continues despite the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Viewed in the light of Massey and Denton’s (1993) assertion that, “Whites can only avoid co-residence with blacks if mechanisms exist to keep blacks out of most white neighborhoods” (p. 97), research on housing and school segregation today has demonstrated that white residential and educational spaces are being actively maintained. This dissertation builds on that understanding by illuminating more about how that

process takes place, as well as how decisionmakers and other townspeople who actively participate in that process maintain their belief in the goodness and innocence of their town and schools.

School Segregation in Massachusetts

Though school segregation and racial injustice in education are a problem nationwide (Orfield, 2015), this dissertation is set in Massachusetts, where attempts at school integration in the city of Boston drew national attention for the white rage (Anderson, 2016) they provoked. To understand ongoing educational inequality in Massachusetts, I turn to the history of residential and school segregation in my home state, finding that the role of the suburbs in creating and sustaining this inequality is infrequently considered. Perhaps in an echo of *Milliken v. Bradley*, which was decided two years before the Boston Busing Crisis, Boston's suburbs are often left out of the story entirely, as if they are "innocent" of the racial injustice within the state. And yet, they played a major role.

In *Boston Against Busing*, Formisano (2004) wrote:

In 1970 some half a million persons lived in Boston, but another million and a half, perhaps 99 percent white, lived in the metropolitan area. They enjoyed the superior facilities of a cosmopolitan downtown, often held jobs in the city, but had no part in any of its attempts to deal with the burning national issue of racial discrimination.

(Formisano, 2004, p. 13).

He described how, since the 1950s with the completion of Route 128, a highway that curves around Boston from northeast to southeast and was famous for being a corridor of jobs in electronics and computing, Boston's suburbs had been growing disproportionately to the growth of the city. He called Route 128 a "noose," which "ringed" Black, Latinx, and later Asian

residents into the city, keeping them away from the abundant jobs and resources in suburbs where public transit did not reach and housing, for People of Color, was not available. This description echoes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote, “The suburbs are white nooses around the Black necks of cities” (King as quoted in Lipsitz, 2011, p. 17), which Lipsitz argued demonstrated King’s recognition of the violent nature of the white spatial imaginary.

Formisano described the government’s role in maintaining this white space through intense housing segregation in Massachusetts:

The federal government did most to abet suburban residential apartheid. The government provided massive aid to the housing industry, to localities, to banks, and to individuals in the form of mortgage insurance and loans, and subsidized the suburbs further through highway programs. And rural towns ensured their transformations into white enclaves with large-lot zoning, restrictions to multifamily dwellings, the waste of buildable land, and resistance to various social services. (p. 13).

These are all processes of resource hoarding, and Cobblerton was one such rural town. This dissertation’s findings show that Cobblerton’s policy decisions in the early 1970s map almost exactly onto Formisano’s list. Thus, racism and exclusion, in this context, looked different than, for example, the firebombing of homes in white neighborhoods bought by Black families in Chicago or Detroit. Baugh (2011) described how the political violence of suburban policies rendered this more spectacular, individual violence redundant to defending the suburban border: “Public policies and real estate practices that reinforced segregated housing, municipal boundaries that kept services contained within each suburban community, and the refusal of suburban governments to participate in regional/metropolitan government projects made violent attacks less necessary” (p. 38-9). Some of these practices, such as discriminatory lending,

became illegal with the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968. However, as the critical race theory tenets might lead us to predict, this only increased the motivation for white decisionmakers in white towns to shore up the boundary between city and suburb, protecting the property of their whiteness.

Because, as Miletsky (2017) demonstrated, Boston has had a particularly strong Black freedom movement since the nineteenth century, “the superior social status of upper and middle-class whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523) was often threatened within the city’s limits. Therefore, whites in the Boston metropolitan area were strongly incentivized to defend the suburban frontier: it served as a wall behind which middle- and upper-class whites could hide, protected from threats of equity and justice sought by a militant movement within the city. At the same time, the city government, and especially the Boston School Committee, engaged in blatant resource hoarding for as long as they possibly could, maintaining school segregation within Boston for twenty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, as a way to protect the property of whiteness within the city’s borders (Formisano, 2004). Miletsky argued that, “the act of school desegregation in the 1970s was a symptom of the larger difficulty of an intense, historical investment in segregation beginning in the mid-nineteenth century” (Miletsky, 2017, p. 205). This intense investment in segregation never ended, it merely changed forms, as the Boston Busing Crisis and its outcomes demonstrated.

Today, schools in Massachusetts remain racially segregated – both within Boston, and between Boston and its suburban districts (Schneider, 2020). While the city of Boston is 52% white, Boston Public Schools is only 15% white, suggesting that most white families in the city are sending their children to private school. Boston Latin, a public exam high school ranked #1 in the state and #50 in the United States, is 42% white and 9% Black. By contrast, 13 of Boston

Public Schools' 31 high schools are 90-100% minority enrollment, and fall at the bottom of the state's rankings, coming in below #300 out of 348 ranked schools in the state (U.S. News and World Report, 2023). Though it is hard to discern school quality from rankings and available statistics, it is clear that school segregation is still a problem within Boston Public Schools, and likely that access to a "good" education feels, to many families, hard to come by within the urban district.

Beyond the borders of Boston, the racial diversity of the suburbs is increasing. While this had led to a significant increase in racially diverse schools (from 348 in 2009 to 610 today), the number of intensely segregated nonwhite schools has also increased in the same period. Most of the newly segregated nonwhite schools are outside of the urban areas of Boston and Springfield, which Schneider and colleagues (2020) argued demonstrates that some suburban districts are internally segregating as they diversify. In 2020, there were still 192 intensely segregated white districts in Massachusetts – and, by the measure of the state accountability system, these schools are still the "best" reputed in the state (Schneider et al., 2020).

In her study of the METCO program, Eaton (2001) found that Black families who enrolled their students, often signing them up for bus rides of an hour or more each way for their entire high school career, did so seeking a "better education" than what was available to them in Boston. While some alum of the program experienced it as unequivocally helpful, most had mixed feelings about their experiences in the suburban schools, citing racism from peers and staff, the total absence of Black history and culture from their educations, and silence around issues of racial injustice in the schools and communities where they spent so much time. The fact that METCO still exists (and maintains a long waiting list), is evidence enough that many feel that Boston Public Schools are inadequate to meet the educational needs of Black children. And,

as one alumna of METCO said, there remains another problem: “We have another problem, people. This program helps the Black children. Who helps the white children? Who helps the white children be better people?” (Eaton, 2001, p. 193-4). White supremacy, in Boston, in Massachusetts, and across the country, remains in place, and is perpetuated through schools.

“Good Schools”

School segregation is both justified and sustained by the fact that dominant understandings of “good” schools have long been associated with the presence of White students (Evans, 2021; Hagerman, 2018; Holme, 2002; Houston & Henig, 2023; Johnson & Shapiro, 2013; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013; Turner et al., 2021; Wells, 2018). One reason for this is that U.S. schools have long been white-normed, regardless, as Venzant Chambers (2022) argued, of the racial makeup of any particular school (see also, Lewis & Diamond, 2015 and Diamond & Lewis, 2022). So, middle-class white students have the easiest time conforming to these norms, and their schools therefore tend to do best on these measures, whether they are formal, such as standardized testing, or informal, such as student behavior or school reputation. As Houston & Henig (2023) pointed out, “If guided by the official measures, families seeking the highest performing schools for their children would almost invariably be directed toward the Whitest and most affluent schools” (p. 12). Johnson and Shapiro (2013) added that, in the minds of white parents, “whiteness” and “goodness” are often completely conflated:

These families are trying to make “good choices” for their families, but what do these phrases— “good neighborhoods” and “good schools”—mean to them? Inevitably, in explaining their thinking and decision-making, race became an integral part of parents' explanations. Interviews reveal that almost always, in the case of neighborhoods and schools, “good” is woven with ideas about race, and race is clearly a primary dimension

of whites' choices. The specific kind of environment white parents want for their children (or do not want) and attempting to control that environment were integral dimensions of their school and community choices. (Johnson & Shapiro, 2013, p. 176).

White parents tend to believe that good schools are white schools and, as Wells (2018) argued, white parents play an outsized role in defining “good” schooling. White parents have been found to assume that schools with higher proportions of Black and Latinx students are inferior, even when those schools' outcomes are similar to “whiter” schools in the same district (Turner et al., 2021). When choosing schools, white parents rely on reputation as defined by high-status peers (Roda & Wells, 2013; Wells, 2018) and test scores (Houston & Henig, 2023; Schneider, 2017). Too often, education research relies on test scores as well, despite evidence that test scores, like reputation, correlate to students' race and class backgrounds rather than the quality of teaching and learning at any given school (Schneider, 2017). This, in turn, directs parents toward white schools, and supports the maintenance of segregation, or even resegregation in places that briefly integrated:

The evidence suggests two overlapping factors: (i) Resegregation is fostered, supported, and rationalized by racialized perceptions of what constitutes a “good” neighborhood and a “good” school and (ii) The housing and school choices of those with the most status—namely the white and affluent home buyers—both drive the process of resegregation and are most sensitive to these racialized perceptions of what is “good” (Wells, 2018, p. 3).

So, schools that are whiter are perceived to be better, which leads to them becoming increasingly desirable (at least to the families who are white and wealthy), and increasingly white.

While much has been done to reframe deficit-based conceptions of majority Black and Latinx schools (e.g., Ewing, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Stovall, 2016; Warren & Coles, 2020),

and question the benefits of middle-class parents collectively choosing previously low-income schools (Posey-Maddox, 2014), less scholarship has focused on questioning the “goodness” of white, affluent schools – which is necessary to disrupting this cycle of increasing segregation. One exception is Sánchez Lorza (2021), who suggested that “these predominantly White and ‘good’ schools serve the most ‘at risk’ with regard to reproducing White Supremacist ideology” (p. 387). In order to imagine education spaces as free of racial injustice, researchers must attend to these ‘at risk’ white schools.

Sanchez Lorza (2021) added that in white, affluent schools, students experience a “lived civics” that teaches a tacit acceptance of white supremacy. White spaces, such as racially isolated neighborhoods and towns, and especially white schools, can teach white ignorance by obscuring the origins and history of white supremacy and creating narratives of meritocracy and deservedness. For example, Evans (2021) found that White parents who claimed to value diversity but chose to send their children to predominantly white schools justified their decisions with antiblack stereotypes, including by casting themselves as “parents who ‘cared’ rather than people with economic or racial advantages” (p. 20). Evans (2021) argued that, by evading their knowledge of the structural factors that led to unequally resourced schools, these parents created a narrative of individual deservingness that “associates whiteness with good parenting and legitimates white racial dominance” (p. 20). Not only does the desirability of white schools drive segregation, white schools also perpetuate the myth of meritocracy and racist ideologies that justify segregation, adding to the factors creating racial injustice even as they are constantly described as “good.” One of these factors, sometimes called opportunity hoarding, is especially exacerbated by the association of good schools with whiteness.

Opportunity Hoarding & White Educational Resource Hoarding

In this dissertation, I use white educational resource hoarding as the clearest way to understand events in Cobblerton. Drawing on Dumas (2015), I define white educational resource hoarding as the process by which purportedly "good" educational resources, experiences, and outcomes accumulate in educational spaces that are accessible to white students but exclusionary to Students of Color, thereby normalizing and reproducing the deeply held association between good schools and whiteness. However, significant recent scholarship uses "opportunity hoarding," a concept drawn from sociologist Charles Tilly (2009), to describe similar policies and practices. I prefer "resource" rather than "opportunity" because resources can be either material (such as funding, experienced teachers, curricular materials) or more abstract (such as reputation), but "opportunity" is abstract and difficult to describe. The word "opportunity" is also deeply associated with social mobility (e.g. Carter and Welner, 2013), such that the phrase "equal opportunity" implies equal chances at "achieving" and climbing that ladder of socioeconomic hierarchy rather than, for example, equal opportunities to experience the joy of learning and participate in a loving community. In seeking to abolish white supremacy and the myth of meritocracy, and dream of a world in which every person has their needs met regardless of "merit," I prefer to use "white educational resource hoarding." However, in this section I consider research on opportunity hoarding, as that is how it is commonly described. Diamond and Lewis (2022) define opportunity hoarding in education as "practices that result in the unequal allocation of resources across group lines," further adding that, "whites' hoarding of educational opportunities is one of the central themes in the history of U.S. educational systems" (p. 1475).

I find that, while there is some research about opportunity hoarding within schools

(Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Posey-Maddox, 2014), more within districts (Dumas, 2015; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020; Thompson Dorsey & Roulat, 2019), and even some research about educational opportunity hoarding at the national level in Germany (Apple & Debs, 2021) and South Africa (Gruijters et al., 2022), little has been written about how white people enforce borders between districts, with the exceptions of Cashin (2021) and Rury and Rife (2018). The concept is still emerging and there is an urgent need for additional research if we seek to abolish this mechanism of educational injustice.

When families engage in opportunity hoarding within their school district, they seek to gain their children acceptance to the “good” schools, often beginning as young as elementary school. “Advantaged” parents – the term Sattin-Bajaj and Roda (2020) use to describe white, affluent parents who succeed at opportunity hoarding – leverage material and social capital to get their children access, including protesting policies that interfere with their ability to do so. Often, these are the very policies designed to promote desegregation and equity. For example, Dumas (2015) studied the impacts of the Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (commonly referred to as *Parents Involved*). This case, which overturned a district policy in which racial balance was used as a factor in high school assignment, allowed white students easier access to the most desirable high schools in Seattle, which likely sped up the resegregation that was already occurring there after explicit integration policies ended.

Like Dumas (2015), Sattin-Bajaj and Roda (2020) examined opportunity hoarding within a school district in which parents have many options – in this instance, New York City. The authors found that city policy promoted opportunity hoarding, such that advantaged parents all took similar steps toward securing access to gifted and talented programs, and later entrance to

exclusive middle and high schools, without consulting with one another. The incentives to engage in opportunity hoarding were built into city policy. Similarly, Thompson Dorsey and Roulat (2019) considered how policy promotes opportunity hoarding. Considering the entire state of North Carolina, the researchers found that this state's laws followed a cycle that, despite some swings toward more progressive ideals, always ultimately resulted in reinforcing white supremacy and reifying educational injustice. For example, policies around school choice and charter schools, while promoted as progressive, only widened inequality within the state.

Posey-Maddox (2014) and Lewis and Diamond (2015) investigated how opportunity hoarding took place within individual school buildings. Posey-Maddox (2014) studied the impacts of a group of mostly white, middle-class parents choosing to send their children to a low-income school that served mostly Students of Color. Posey-Maddox (2014) found that the increase of white, middle-class students at the school did not necessarily improve learning conditions for all students. Though Posey-Maddox does not leverage the term “opportunity hoarding,” the findings of this study align with and further reinforce those of Lewis and Diamond (2015). Lewis and Diamond (2015) studied achievement gaps within an affluent, racially diverse high school, finding that white parents’ support for tracking policies, which resulted in mostly white honors and AP classes and minoritized students funneled into “basic” classes, was a major factor in creating that gap, “Yet these parents are not just passive recipients of an unjust system. According to many staff members, white parents have actively opposed and even undermined attempts to rethink the current tracking structure, and they continue to campaign against such change” (p. 134). Even within diverse schools, white parents leverage their material and social capital to secure advantages for their kids – even when they are aware that this is harmful to other students or the school community broadly.

While Lewis and Diamond (2015) and Posey-Maddox (2014) studied opportunity hoarding within a school, and Dumas (2015) and Sattin-Bajaj and Roda (2020) examined resource hoarding within a district, Rury and Rife (2018), like this dissertation, considered how a white community, in the 1960s and 70s, engaged in opportunity hoarding by preventing African American families from moving into their school district, which bordered Kansas City, Missouri. Their work in education history builds on previous research by Cashin (2021) and Glotzer (2020), both of which demonstrate that suburbs were largely created to create or maintain housing segregation and thus, as Cashin (2021) goes on to demonstrate, school segregation. Rury and Rife (2018) found that community members in Raytown, Missouri fought explicit integration through redistricting, as well as the construction of multifamily housing, in order to keep their schools and community white. Further:

Raytown exhibited a high degree of consensus and cohesion around the idea of excluding African Americans, who were framed as direct threats to the status and reputes of area schools and, consequently, property values. It benefited from the use of local government power, in the form of police, to make blacks feel unwelcome, and this was reinforced by real estate agents and perhaps even local school personnel. (p. 106)

Of all of the current literature on opportunity and educational resource hoarding, this study describes mechanisms most similar to Cobblerton's, where status and reputes of area schools, property values, and local government power were all leveraged to hoard resources. Rury and Rife (2018) call for further investigation into the mechanisms of this kind of white educational resource hoarding, and in this dissertation I attempt to do just that. Raytown, Missouri and Cobblerton, Massachusetts are very different contexts, and my work builds on and expands understandings of how overwhelmingly white suburbs hoard educational resources, historically

and today.

If *Brown v. Board* and the Fair Housing Act outlawed *de jure* school and housing segregation, how has racial segregation in schools remained so persistent decades later? Understanding how segregation was maintained after *Brown*, with Boston's failed integration attempt as a particular example, shows the key role that the maintenance of suburban boundaries played in this process. Recognizing how this both led to, and is sustained by, the conflation of "good schools" with whiteness, which in turn results in anxious middle-class parents' opportunity hoarding within schools and within districts as well as across district lines, illuminates the key role that white educational resource hoarding plays in ongoing school segregation and racial inequalities in education today.

White educational resource hoarding cannot be entirely attributed to individual racist actors. Although in historical moments like the Boston Busing Crisis, it is easy to lay the blame on overt racists like Louise Day Hicks, as Formisano (2004) argued, liberal suburbanites, not wanting their access to the "good life" to be disrupted, played a role as well. Then as now, it is not merely a matter of removing racist actors from an otherwise equal system. This same pattern continues today, as policymakers and parents across the political spectrum are incentivized to make the most advantageous choices for their town, their schools, or their children within a competitive economic landscape. Analyzing white educational resource hoarding through the lens of critical race theory illuminates a system working as designed, and upholding the larger structures of conquest. While there are actions that everyday people in places like Cobblerton can take to disrupt white ignorance and challenge white supremacist education systems, ultimately, achieving racial justice in education requires abolishing white supremacy, racial capitalism, and colonialism.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: BECOMING ABOLITIONIST

In August, 2014, Just before I began my first year as an eighth-grade teacher, eighteen-year-old Mike Brown was murdered by police. My first groups of students, who were mostly Black students who had recently arrived in the U.S. as refugees and asylum seekers from Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola, and Brown students from Iraq and Syria, had questions for me. They had just fled precarious lives in places ravaged by European and U.S. imperialism, and been promised safety in their cold new home in Maine. Was that promise a lie? Why were the young protesters in Ferguson being treated so badly? Were they, my students, going to be shot by the police in the land of the free? I did my best to reassure them, but what could I really say? Yes, the same tactics developed to control colonized populations and fight the “War on Terror” abroad were coming home. No, this country was neither as safe, nor as free, as they had been promised. I realized that the teaching career I had just begun might not be as straightforward a path to “doing good” as I had hoped. Even if I was able to positively impact the individual lives of (some of) my students, how much good would that do them if the structures that made racial violence inevitable remained in place?

Though I was the sort of kid who was often told I would make a good teacher someday, I never wanted to become one – it seemed like too much coercion, too much telling kids what to do and making them do it whether they wanted to or not. Then I started an AmeriCorps position at Casco Bay High School in Portland, Maine, and I changed my mind. The school, whose motto was “Get Smart to Do Good,” seemed to embody everything I thought education could be, but schooling was not. Learning there was relational and collaborative, and teachers worked hard to create authentic experiences that would be meaningful to students and positively impact the community. I too wanted to get smart to do good, and I thought that, if I became a good enough

teacher, I could do work that made my students' lives and the world better, while also having fun.

I also thought that, if I got my teaching endorsement in English for Speakers of Other Languages, I wouldn't have to worry about the coercive aspects of teaching. Instead of forcing kids to read books they didn't care about, as I'd watched my own English teachers do in school, I would be teaching the fundamentals of a language that every student would need, and therefore want, to learn. I would have this assumption challenged almost immediately, first by a student who told me, in my first year, "Nothing we're doing in this class is helping us at all," and again the following year by a student who flatly refused to learn English and became selectively mute at school. But when I set out to become a teacher, I saw it as a way of making my own life and my students' lives better, and maybe even doing some good in the world.

After my first year of teaching ended, I moved to Minneapolis, where a young Black man, Jamar Clark, had recently been shot by police while handcuffed. Black Lives Matter protests were gaining momentum across the city, culminating in the occupation of the fourth precinct police station by activists demanding justice for Jamar. I started attending protests and dropping off firewood to the encampment outside of the fourth precinct, until it was cleared that winter. At the same time, I was teaching in a suburb forty minutes away, where I worked with a handful of English Learners in each of the two enormous middle schools, alternating between buildings each day. Unlike the kids I had left behind in Portland, my students did not pepper me with questions about police violence and injustice. Mostly they just wanted to pass their classes, which were not set up to support them at all, and I tried to help, mostly unsuccessfully. I was struck by the dissonance between the ordinary operations of school life and the extraordinary events taking place in my city.

By the end of the school year, I was tired of commuting to the suburbs every day. I interviewed for a job at a school that hadn't opened yet. This school would run on project-based learning and use restorative justice to create a truly supportive and antiracist school community. I was so excited, I practiced my demo lesson over and over in the days leading up to the interview. It featured a YouTube video called "How to Change the World (a work in progress)" by the then-popular "Kid President." I hoped that my social justice vocabulary lesson would be enough to include me in this new school which, I thought, might be like the school I left behind in Maine. I got the job, but the school delayed their opening for a year because they couldn't find a building in Minneapolis. While I waited, I took a job at a different charter school that focused on Hmong language and culture, where I would have my own English Language Arts classroom for the first time. I asked the school to order me a student set of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, feeling confident that I could teach my new eighth graders to read this text critically, as I had done in college.

That summer, Philando Castile was shot by the St. Anthony police department, very close to the school where I would be starting in the fall. I was at home in Cobblerton at the time, but I watched protests erupting through livestreams. I learned that Philando Castile worked at an elementary school. I learned that his partner and her four-year-old daughter were in the car when he was shot. I saw photos of his memorial, which was full of cards and gifts clearly created by young children. I remembered a lecture I had attended in college, where Angela Davis read from her new book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* I learned why the protest chant in Minneapolis was "Abolish the Police."

Then I started my new job, and also started attending meetings of the Social Justice Educators Movement in Minneapolis. Then Trump was elected and my Hmong students wanted

to know if they – all born in the U.S. – or their families would be deported. I assured them they would not be, and taught a spontaneous lesson on the balance of powers. I joined a protest that took over a highway, shouting “No walls, no borders, taco trucks on every corner!”

The school year ended. Justine Diamond, a white woman, was murdered by Minneapolis police. I barely had time to think about it, I was too busy making curriculum for my new school, which would open in the fall. I went to a brief training about restorative justice, and I wondered if this would really work with middle schoolers. The next school year began. Everything was chaos. I told my coworker that our kids were too good to be acting like this, and he told me all kids are good. But I knew I wasn’t good, wasn’t a good teacher, and I wanted so badly for our school to be good but it wasn’t, it wasn’t, and most of the kids we started with left, and several of the teachers as well, and even though towards the end there when our classes were tiny it felt like we were starting to finally figure things out, at the end of the year the board decided to close us down. We had run out of money, we had run out of time, and we were all exhausted. Here is an excerpt from a letter I wrote to our instructional coach, sitting in the empty cafeteria on the last day of school:

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the idea of survival. On a plane a few weeks ago, I read *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique Morris, a book heavy with stories told by young Black women who are struggling to remain in school, or who are trying to earn credit while incarcerated. A lot of the stories in the book sounded familiar ... They sounded like children who – as you said during your first presentation in advisory last summer – were suffering. They were suffering because we, the educators, the adults whose job it is to care for and nurture all children, failed to find a place for them. The thesis of the book was that these girls were pushed out of school for,

essentially, no reason – they were too loud, they couldn't or wouldn't follow a dress code, they had too much "attitude," or were too defiant. These infractions, it seems to me, are all behaviors born of the struggle to survive. As my advisory tried to explain to me back in September, raising your voice, demanding respect, not following orders, not being a punk, looking fresh and being willing to fight – all of these are survival strategies.

To me, these strategies make no sense. Growing up, no one ever raised their voice to me, and if I had raised my voice to anyone, I would have lost love and praise that came to me so easily for being a "good girl," and "polite" and "sweet" and "a great student." Not following directions, not following dress code, cursing, or threatening to fight would shock everyone whose opinion I cared about. Not only would I have lost my place among the "good" and the "smart," I would have been violating racialized and classed gender norms so intensely that I can't even quite imagine what would have happened to me. In other words, I come from a completely different world from my students, one where their survival strategies make no sense at all, and as a result, I find myself in no position to accurately judge whether those survival strategies make sense for them, in their world.

What I learned this year was that it was our job, somehow, to make a place where survival could be taken for granted – where no one felt threatened, or like they had to front to stave off threats. It had to be co-created – we couldn't, as teachers, just walk around saying this was a safe space if the kids didn't agree and were always trying to fight. ...

The question I'm left with now – the question I want to keep asking, and asking, and asking – is what does it take to create safety for kids who cannot take their own survival for granted, who receive a constant stream of threats and messages that tell them

that in our society, they are not among the counted – who are taught from a young age that very few people really care whether they live or die? ...

I've been known to go stand in streets, and sometimes even in the middle of highways, and scream into the air that the lives of these kids matter. That Black lives and immigrant lives and Indigenous lives matter. Incredibly, a lot of other people have done the same thing. But it hasn't become true, not yet. Too many kids know themselves to be considered expendable by the rest of the world. Schools can't fix that on their own. But I saw this year that they can be a site of some of the safety, and some of the trust, and some of the positive connection to the bigger world that can begin to provide a counter-narrative.

How can a school teach kids that their lives matter? And, once they've done that much, that their learning matters? How can a school be a place where they can rest from the constant struggle to survive, where they can clear their minds enough of the concerns of the present to actually imagine a future? (personal communication, June 14, 2018)

In Minneapolis, and at that school, I had to reckon with what I really meant by goodness, and what I really meant by safety. I didn't have answers but I had more questions, which I am still asking, here in this dissertation. By the time that school closed, it seemed self-evident that my Black and Brown neighbors were not safe, and none of us were free, as long as the state had the power to deport, kill, assault, maim, incarcerate, and repress protest movements against the violence. It was also self-evident there that a better world was possible, but to achieve it, people needed access to the wealth we had created for the city and the state, who were holding our tax dollars hostage in the name of "fiscal responsibility," or spending them on police instead of the loving and liberating schools, along with the housing and healthcare, that we all so desperately

needed.

Well before George Floyd was murdered, Minneapolis made me a police and prison abolitionist – and my students taught me that more than just the way we do school needs to change. I internalized Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s words, “Abolition is a presence. It is building life-affirming institutions” (Ruth Wilson Gilmore as quoted in Clark, 2019). I tried to bring this ethic into my new classroom in a traditional middle school, continuing to experiment with alternatives to exclusionary discipline and fundraising so I could teach *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. Because of the radical pedagogy of Minneapolis’ activists and organizers, I learned and kept learning. The desire to keep learning, and the tension between what I believed education could be (creative, relational, liberatory) and what was actually taking place in my school building every day (what Dumas (2014) described as Students of Color “suffering doubly in relation to schooling” (p. 8)), drove me out of the K-12 classroom and toward graduate school, which culminates in this dissertation. This dissertation is animated by the abolitionist ethic I learned in Minneapolis and the belief that in order to achieve freedom and justice in this country, we must, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s words, “change everything.”

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY: ANTIRACIST MATERIALISM AND CRITICAL RACE METHODS

In the book chapter where he first called for additional research on the phenomenon of white educational resource hoarding, Dumas (2015) also introduced a new orientation toward education research, which he called “materialist antiracist analysis” or “antiracist materialism.” Drawing on Melamed (2015) and her work on racial capitalism, which in turn drew on Robinson’s (2020) definitive text, *Black Marxism*, Dumas situated his work in the Marxist tradition. Au (2018) wrote that “Marxists ask different kinds of questions than liberals in analyzing educational inequalities” (p. 30), and it is through deep engagement with Marxist and Black radical theories, discussed in the previous chapter, that I turned toward the conception of “resource hoarding” and arrived at this study’s three research questions. In what follows, I describe how my questions emerged directly from Dumas’ (2015) call for antiracist materialism. Then, I briefly outline my methods for answering these questions, including “counter-storytelling” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) and “critical race ethnography,” (Dunca, 2005; Vaught, 2011) situating them within “critical race methodology” (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2018) more broadly. Finally, I consider the role of positionality and “autoethnography” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) which I argue is a research method that is also aligned with critical race methodology (Bhattacharya, 2017). After explaining these methodological decisions and demonstrating how they follow from this study’s theoretical foundations, this chapter details how research was conducted in each phase of the study, including processes of data collection and analysis. Throughout, I seek to demonstrate how this study operationalizes antiracist materialism by building on the foundation of critical race methodology.

In, “Contesting White Accumulation in Seattle: Toward a Materialist Antiracist Analysis

of School Desegregation,” Dumas (2015) wrote:

An antiracist materialism, then, is deeply concerned with countering the maldistribution of economic resources, specifically as these policies and practices are motivated by racism and intentionally or unintentionally lead to racially disparate outcomes. To formulate a materialist racial critique of white advantage, it is first necessary to understand the interconnected cultural and political-economic processes through which white advantage is made to seem normal, even inevitable, and always innocent. (p. 293)

To me, Cobblerton’s whiteness and the “goodness” of its schools had both seemed normal, and even inevitable. Dumas’ (2015) insistence that educational researchers interrogate white advantage *and the processes by which it is made to seem normal*, as well as, as he added later in the article, the impact this advantage and this process have on Students of Color, led me to ask the following research questions about my own hometown:

1. How was Cobblerton’s whiteness created and maintained historically?
2. How do narratives of the “goodness” of Cobblerton and Cobblerton Schools justify and sustain white educational resource hoarding?
3. What are the impacts of white educational resource hoarding on Cobblerton and its schools?

To answer these questions, I turned to critical race methodology. Duncan (2005) wrote that, “Critical race theory makes the once invisible visible” (p. 110). Because, following from Dumas (2015) that is exactly what I intended to do in this study, I employed critical race methodology (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2018) throughout. Critical race methods “investigate educational problems from a critical race theoretical perspective,” (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2018, p. 4), taking the central tenets of critical race theory as their epistemological foundation. In this

study, I began with the tenets that racism is structural and endemic, whiteness is a protected form of property, and meritocracy is a myth that benefits white supremacy and capitalism – and was then able to formulate questions and “see” the constructed nature of what had once seemed natural and normal.

Critical race methodology operationalizes critical race theory, putting it to use to ask and answer empirical questions. Solórzano and Yosso (2001) demonstrated the link between critical race theory as an epistemology and critical race methods, writing: “critical race theory challenges the traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (p. 26). By defining what critical race theory is, they also described what it does: it poses a challenge, or counter, to dominant narratives. As such, “counter-storytelling” or “counterstorying” is a central method within critical race methodology. Solórzano and Yosso (2001) conceptualized counter-storytelling as resistance, writing that it is, “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). The authors emphasized that counterstorying is grounded in critical race theory and literature, centers the voices of the most marginalized, and is understood through the personal and cultural experiences of participants and researchers. In this study, the tenets of critical race theory that provided a foundation led me to interrogate assumptions I had long held about Cobblerton and its schools. From there, I sought out the voices and stories of those who had been excluded and harmed by this “good” town and its “good” schools. These stories provided a counter-story to the dominant narrative of Cobblerton’s goodness, safety, and innocence. Finally, I examined the contradiction in Cobblerton Schools’ majoritarian discourses of “goodness” to understand how

the district could understand itself to be morally “good,” and pursuing equity, while also continuing to engage in practices of white educational resource hoarding.

However, like many studies that employ critical race methods, this study draws on data sources beyond individual interviews. As such, though not a true ethnography, this study hews most closely to the methods of “critical race ethnography” (Duncan, 2005; Vaught, 2011). Bhattacharya (2017) defined ethnography as “the study of people within the context of their culture” (p. 25), and critical ethnography as “a study of culture ... conducted with the intent to interrogate some social structures which lead to experiences of inequity” (p. 25). Bhattacharya also wrote that ethnography requires “the researcher being immersed in the culture that she is studying and situating herself within the cultural context ... for a prolonged period of time, extending well beyond a year.” (p. 25). Though I lived in Cobblerton from age four through 18, I was not able to immerse myself back in the culture for an extended time period during this study. However, I drew heavily from ethnographic methods, using interviews, extensive observations, and documents to interrogate social structures that lead to inequality – in this case, educational inequality, in Cobblerton and beyond.

As Vaught (2011) argued, critical race ethnography is distinct from critical ethnography that attends to race and power because critical race ethnographies “adhere to and develop central conceptual arguments of CRT” (p. 24). As such, critical race ethnography is an appropriate tool for answering the questions above, which both follow from and seek to explain several tenets of critical race theory. In this study, critical race theory not only served as an analytical tool throughout, but also informed many aspects of the research design. Duncan (2005) explained, critical race ethnography:

follows the lead indicated by proponents of CRT to take the words of people of colour

seriously and, instead of stopping there, to allow these voices to inform how we approach our examination of the material conditions that are basic to and inextricably a part of lived experience. (p. 106)

Like Duncan (2005) and Vaught (2011), this study includes not only interview data but also extensive observations and documents, both historical and contemporary, that together build out a fuller picture of the material, ideological, and discursive aspects of Cobblerton's white educational resource hoarding, as well as the relations among these aspects and their development over time. Donnor (2018) called for the inclusion of historical perspectives in critical race methods, writing:

A particularly glaring omission within the current education critical race scholarship is the lack of a theorizing of race that incorporates history and the legal literature, along with a discussion of the legacy effects of White racism on Black people's present-day learning opportunities. (p. 14).

In seeking to avoid this omission in my own work, I turned to historical documents and interviews with those who remembered Cobblerton's recent past, while simultaneously working to understand the impacts of their decisions on Students and Families of Color in the town today. To me, this broad outline of research design – including counter-storytelling as central, but expanding it to include many other data sources including observations and historical documents, and analyzing it all through the lens provided by the tenets of critical race theory – aligns with Dumas' call for antiracist materialism.

Beginning in the spring of 2022, and continuing throughout all three phases of this research, I also engaged in autoethnographic writing, which Bhattacharya (2017) listed as a critical race method. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) described how autoethnography can be

aligned with an “intersectional analytic framework,” writing: “the researcher intentionally examines their own multiple social identities and seeks to understand how race, gender, and other forms of oppression transverse their lives, including those around them, to create barriers and opportunities” (p. 64). As I discuss in more detail later in this chapter, considering my own experiences growing up in Cobblerton through a critical race and decolonial lens both informed how I proceeded through the study and served as additional data that forms the “autoethnographic interlude” portions of this dissertation.

Like many ethnographers, I set out to answer my research questions without knowing exactly how I would do it. I did not know who I should talk to, whether or how I would be able to conduct observations, or whether or how Cobblerton’s history of white educational resource hoarding – if there was one – would be documented. I could not, as Bhattacharya (2017, p. 146) suggested, make a list of all the documents I would need to answer my question, and then collect them. Instead, this study grew and advanced slowly, beginning with a small pilot of just four interviews, conducted via Zoom in the fall of 2021 (See Table 1). This pilot study left me with a series of questions, which together informed what would become Research Question 1 in this study. I consider this pilot study “Phase 1” of this research, and my efforts to answer Research Question 1 “Phase 2.” I collected data, including interviews and some documents, for Phase 2 in the summer of 2022, which was the next opportunity I had to stay in Cobblerton. I returned to Michigan for fall semester 2022, during which I analyzed data, and I wrote up my findings as a stand-alone study in spring, 2023. Only then did I realize that my analysis suggested still more questions, and that, while I had some data that might begin to answer them, there was much more I would need to collect in order to fully illustrate the phenomenon of white educational resource hoarding and its impacts in Cobblerton. I consider the period in which I collected and analyzed

this additional data “Phase 3.” Phase 3 began in the fall of 2023 and continued through May, 2025. During this period, I simultaneously collected and analyzed data to answer Research Question 2 and Research Question 3.

Table 1

Research Phases

Phase	Time	Research
Phase 1	Fall 2021- Spring 2022	Pilot study and formulation of research questions
Phase 2	Summer 2022- Spring 2023	RQ1: How was Cobblerton’s whiteness created and maintained historically?
Phase 3	Fall 2023- Spring 2025	RQ2: How do narratives of the “goodness” of Cobblerton and Cobblerton Schools justify and sustain white educational resource hoarding? RQ3: What are the impacts of white educational resource hoarding on Cobblerton and its schools? Also collected additional data to inform RQ1

In what follows, I begin with a positionality statement, because so much of this work is informed by who I am and my own experiences. Next, I provide some background information about the town of Cobblerton. Then, I describe each research phase in detail, including methods of data collection and analysis. I conclude with a brief reflection on how the methodology and methods this dissertation may inform further research in antiracist materialism and critical race

methodology.

Positionality Statement

My Jewish family became white by moving to the suburbs. My mother grew up in Wantagh, New York, which shared a school district with Levittown, a suburb that, famously, allowed Jews to buy homes but excluded Black families (Rothstein, 2017). My father also attended “de facto” segregated schools in Chicago’s suburbs (see Steffes, 2024, for a history of school segregation in Chicagoland). Both of my parents hold graduate degrees. They raised me in Cobblerton because, my father recently told me, they could tell it was a town that “values education.” Growing up in Cobblerton, attending school there K-12, and then going on to become a teacher of mostly Students of Color showed me that Cobblerton did value education, but also led me to ask, “Education *for whom?*” As a kid, I noticed that, while my high school’s intense focus on college preparation worked well for me, I had classmates for whom it was alienating. While “good” students at our “good” school were rewarded with a sense of belonging, anyone who was nonconforming risked being left behind

In keeping with the values with which my family raised me, I, too, value education. I taught middle school English for six years in diverse school districts in Maine and Minnesota. Many of the students I taught were Black – some African American, some immigrants from East, West or Southern Africa, or the children of immigrants. I had students from Mexico and Central and South America, Hmong and Cambodian students, Native students who were Ojibwe or Dakota. Despite my certification in English for Speakers of Other Languages, courses on diversity and inclusion, and ongoing professional development about working with diverse learners, I found myself largely unprepared to meet the needs of my Black, Brown, and Indigenous students. Remembering back to my education and upbringing in Cobblerton helped

me understand why this was. As Lipsitz (2011) argued, white spaces are pedagogical. I took an interest in Cobblerton's practices of "frontier defense" – that is, how decisionmakers were able to maintain Cobblerton's pre-Fair Housing Act identity as an overwhelmingly white town – because of what they teach people, including me. Coming to the understanding that Cobblerton's whiteness did and does not happen naturally, that it was actively created and maintained, called into question the town's "privileged moral geography," the depth of stated commitments to education, and even the quality of that education. For despite high test scores, statewide rankings, graduation rates, and college acceptances (Public School Review, 2022), there is so much I did not learn in Cobblerton. As a result, every aspect of this study – from its initial design to its final shape in this dissertation – is driven by my personal desire to disrupt my own white ignorance, and make the once invisible – to me – visible.

Context: Cobblerton

Cobblerton, founded in 1724, is part of the ancestral homeland of the Nipmuc people, who were forcibly removed from the land that is now Cobblerton in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Hullbert, 2011; O'Brien, 1997; see Chapter 1). In the nineteenth century, Cobblerton was a factory town, producing shoes and other goods for shipment to Boston via a train line that is now defunct. Many Irish immigrants came to Cobblerton to work the factories and the rail lines, living alongside Protestant farmers. By the 1950's, Cobblerton's small factories were closed, and Cobblerton was a rural town centered on two large churches and a general store, with some suburban-style development just beginning as farmers sold their land to developers. Places like this in Massachusetts "ensured their transformations into white enclaves with large-lot zoning, restrictions to multifamily dwellings, the waste of buildable land, and resistance to various social services" (Formisano, 2004, p. 13). My findings suggest that

Cobblerton's development into an exclusive white enclave followed this pattern closely.

Cobblerton's transformation into a white suburb took place in the late 1960s, after the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, and the early 1970s, in the years leading up to the Boston Busing Crisis. In 1969, Cobblerton Schools appointed a young new superintendent, who would go on to lead the district for 30 years, implementing innovative new programming that led to Cobblerton Schools being nationally recognized for excellence in the 1990s.

Today, of Cobblerton's sixteen thousand residents, over ninety percent are white. When I was a child in the year 2000, the town was ninety-five percent white. Throughout the years, the percentage of Black residents has barely increased, from .9% in 2000 to 1.2% in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Cobblerton is about twenty miles from Boston, and Cobblerton is five miles from Framingham, where the schools are 6% Black and 45% Hispanic (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2022). It was this striking demographic contrast that prompted me to begin asking questions about Cobblerton, its whiteness, and its schools.

Phase 1: Pilot Study, "The Character of the Town"

I first conceived of the pilot study that led to this dissertation in Fall, 2021. Reading the following quote from Massey and Denton (1993), I thought immediately of my hometown, with its award-winning schools:

Whites can only avoid co-residence with blacks if mechanisms exist to keep blacks out of most white neighborhoods. They can only flee a neighborhood where blacks have entered if there are other all-white neighborhoods to go to, and this escape will only be successful if blacks are unlikely to follow. Some method must exist, therefore, to limit black entry to a few neighborhoods and to preserve racial homogeneity in the rest. Although white

prejudice is a necessary precondition for the perpetuation of segregation, it is insufficient to maintain the residential color line; *active discrimination against blacks must occur also.*” (p. 97, emphasis added)

Prior to encountering this quote, I had assumed that Cobblerton’s whiteness was natural; after reading, I set out to denaturalize it. My pilot study had the following research questions:

1. How do residents of Cobblerton describe the “character” of the town?
2. According to residents, what is the relationship between the “character” of Cobblerton and Cobblerton Public Schools?
3. How do residents of Cobblerton describe (or avoid describing) the town’s whiteness when considering its “character”? How might such descriptions and silences reinforce the normalization of racial segregation?

Data Collection

I designed the pilot to be an interview study (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 26), relying wholly on interview data. In the fall of 2021, I informally interviewed each of my parents. Then, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with Cobblerton residents I had known since childhood, including neighbors and close family friends. I chose participants via convenience sampling (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 98) – all of the participants were people I knew well and loved. Though this choice sacrificed any claim I had to “objectivity,” it helped me interrogate my own worldview, which was an important first step in this project. All of these interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, and transcribed using otter.ai.

Interview Protocol

Though my main interest was in understanding the relationship between the town, the schools, and whiteness, my semi-structured interview protocol also included questions about

“good” education and “good” schools (see Appendix A for the full protocol). Early in the interview, I asked participants to consider their own K-12 school experience, and whether they considered those schools to be “good.” Later in the interview, I asked, “When you were choosing schools for your kids, what did you look for? What did you consider a good school?” Finally, at the close of the interview, I asked, “Would you consider Cobblerton residents to ‘value education’? What does it mean to ‘value education?’” This question was prompted by my dad’s statement that he judged Cobblerton to be a town that valued education. I was already thinking about how people understand the “goodness” of schooling, a theme which would grow in importance over the course of the study.

Data Analysis & Findings

Upon completing my interviews, I conducted an analysis of the data using the process described in Merriam and Tisdell (2015). I kept the core tenets of critical race theory in mind as I did so, as well as Dumas’ (2016) framework of antiblackness and Annamma and colleagues’ (2017) “color evasiveness.” Because I was looking for patterns in people’s speech, as well as silences and what remained unsaid, I drew from “discourse analysis” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 227) to guide my work, though I used a less formal process. After each interview, I “jotted” what I noticed; I then reviewed the transcripts for key quotes and ideas, grouped these under categories and sub-categories, and generated codes and possible themes. The themes that emerged were “character,” belonging, resistance to change, schools as a point of pride, and whiteness. I learned that my family friends were well aware of the town’s lack of diversity, but did not know the reason behind it, which led me to ask further questions and prompted the second phase of this research. From one of the participants, who happened to be involved in town politics, I also learned about Cobblerton’s most recent, failed attempt to build a sewer

system. This participant also referred me to Ann (pseudonym), who would become the first participant in the next phase of the research, and would introduce me to most of the other participants in that phase.

Questions

Conducting this preliminary research raised more questions than it answered. In a writeup of the study, I wrote:

This preliminary investigation into the town of Cobblerton's character, its schools, and its whiteness has helped me think through the way that the town, just by existing and maintaining the status quo, contributes to segregation by making exclusive whiteness seem natural and normal to residents. However, I have not yet answered the deeper question at the heart of this investigation, which is, *how* did Cobblerton create its whiteness? Are the town's smallness, insularity, distance from the city, lack of rental properties and multifamily housing, and lack of transportation enough to keep Families of Color from wanting to live there? If so, was there ever awareness, on the part of the town's decision makers, that keeping Cobblerton white meant keeping Cobblerton isolated and small? Was it intentional? Or, did the school's reputation and the promise of college attract Families of Color, and Black families in particular, who were then prevented from accessing housing through housing discrimination, or some other means? This summer, I hope to investigate the material aspects of Cobblerton's whiteness, in order to denaturalize Cobblerton's whiteness and demonstrate Cobblerton's specific role in ongoing residential and educational segregation.

Another question this initial study has led me to ask is, what implicit lessons do white students in Cobblerton Public Schools learn about race? If, as Lipsitz (2012)

argues, white spaces are pedagogical, what does Cobblerton demonstrate to young people about what racism is, how and where it happens, and how it structures our society? What work does Cobblerton do to naturalize racial hierarchy, erase local or national histories of racism, make the U.S. seem like a meritocracy, or otherwise perpetuate harmful myths in the minds of students there?

All of these questions would inform the design of the next phases of research, including my autoethnographic inquiry and the study that grew into this dissertation.

Autoethnography: Writing and Thinking with My Own Experiences

My work in Cobblerton was inspired and informed by my experiences there. Critical race methods value experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), and, as many scholars have argued, critical race autoethnography is one way to examine experiential knowledge, situated in its sociopolitical context and understood through a critical race lens (Camangian et al., 2023; Khalifa, 2015). So, in addition to the experiences of other residents, accessed through interviews and documents, my own memories serve as data to supplement my understandings of the town, its schools, and especially, discourses of goodness, innocence, and safety, that justify and sustain white educational resource hoarding. Following Bochner and Ellis (2016) and the tradition of “evocative autoethnography,” I wrote memories of my childhood in Cobblerton, and my subsequent career as a teacher, finding that “the writing process is part of the inquiry” (p. 56); in this writing were where the themes of goodness, innocence and safety, which I pursued in this dissertation, first emerged.

I began this autoethnographic inquiry in spring 2022, and continued recording and analyzing memories as they came up as part of my analytic memoing (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 107). Appendix B provides an example of an analytic memo that includes some

autoethnographic reflection. In spring 2025, I gathered, re-read, edited, and added to my previous writings, producing the autoethnographic interludes that are included throughout this dissertation. I understand these interludes to be both data and analysis, and they deeply informed the questions I asked and answered throughout the dissertation process.

Phase 2: History of White Educational Resource Hoarding in Cobblerton

With the questions raised by the pilot study and first round of autoethnographic work in mind, I traveled to Cobblerton in the summer of 2022. This phase of the study in particular was informed by racial realism. I did not know how to plan the study or what I would find, but my engagement with critical race theory informed my assumption that structural racism played a role in Cobblerton's whiteness, and I wanted to find out how. I began by visiting Cobblerton's public library, which sits right in the town center, next to the Catholic church and across from the Historical Society building, and has been a familiar and comfortable place for me since childhood. I asked the librarian where I could find information about the relationship between the town and schools, and she pointed me toward a shelf at the back that contained bound copies of the town's Annual Reports dating back to the 1960s. Each of these held an open letter from the district superintendent to the town, providing updates from the year to families and residents. These documents became my first data sources.

The Cobblerton librarian also directed me to a newspaper archive in a neighboring town's library, where I scrolled through microfilm archives of a now-defunct local newspaper, seeking the suburban perspective on the Boston Busing Crisis. I wrote research memos about what I found, trying to build my background knowledge of local history and racial politics in the early 1970s.

At the same time, I emailed Ann, who became my first participant, and began conducting

interviews, either in the conference room of the public library, in participants' homes, or via Zoom.

Data Collection

Interview Protocol

Interviews were semi-structured and typically lasted about ninety minutes. Though topics of discussion varied, they all followed the same basic protocol, in which participants share how they came to live in the town, their experiences with the schools and, if applicable, their memories of town policymaking in the early 1970s. Some participants also shared how they have seen the town and schools change over time, and how they would like to see them change in future (see Appendix C for the consent form and Appendix D for the interview protocol).

Participants

I gave all participants in this study pseudonyms (see Table 2). Four of the participants in this study, Ann, Richard, Robert, and Kathryn, were key decisionmakers in the town in the early 1970s. I met these participants after use of a “snowball sampling” method, in which I asked each participant whether they had ideas for others in the community who might be a good fit for participating in this study (Miriam & Tisdale, 2016). Through Ann, I connected with Charles, a Black town resident in those years who has written about his experiences of racism within the town, and Emily, the widow of the school superintendent from 1969-1990. I also connected with four additional participants through a Facebook group dedicated to issues of diversity in the town. These included a young Black woman, Violet, who recently graduated from Cobblerton High School; her mother, Janice; Brené, a white mother of young children in the schools who was concerned about the lack of diversity in school curriculum and experiences; and Bill, a Black town resident who briefly taught at the high school.

Table 2***Phase 1 Participants***

Pseudonym	Race and Approximate Age	Role in Cobblerton
Ann	White, late 70's	Moved to Cobblerton in 1960's, served in local government and worked as a journalist, well known as a leader in town
Janice	White, 50's	White mother of a biracial Black daughter, from a long line of Cobblerton residents who still live in town, lives in the house she inherited from her mother
Violet	Biracial white & Black, 20	Janice's biracial Black daughter, lived in Cobblerton from a young age, graduated Cobblerton High School in 2020, experienced a civil rights violation at school related to her race, works with Cobblerton preschoolers in the summers
Richard	White, 90	Moved to Cobblerton in 1962, served as a State Representative in the 1970's during the Boston Busing Crisis, and later as a Town Selectman
Robert	White, 80's	Moved to Cobblerton in the 1960's, served as a Town Selectman during the 1970's, married to Kathryn, Cobblerton Schools parent and grandparent

Table 2 (cont'd.)

Kathryn	White, 80's	Moved to Cobblerton in the 1960's, married to Robert, Cobblerton Schools parent and grandparent
Emily	White, 70's	Moved to Cobblerton in the 1980's, married to a school leader, teacher in a nearby district for forty years
Brené	White, late 30's	Moved to Cobblerton six years ago, Cobblerton Schools parent, leader of Diverse Cobblerton, advocate for anti-racist practices in Cobblerton Schools
Bill	Black, 50's or 60's	Moved to Cobblerton in early 2000's, owns one of the oldest houses in town, taught sociology for one year at Cobblerton High School
Charles	Black, 70's	Moved to Cobblerton at age 6 in 1961, remembers housing discrimination and interpersonal racism throughout his childhood there

Data Analysis

Immediately following each interview, I wrote an analytic memo, and I wrote similar memos following each visit to the public library archives. The thinking generated through memoing guided me as I reviewed interview transcripts and pulled out relevant excerpts, which became my primary data set. I began data analysis by re-reading my memos, noting narratives and patterns as they arose. I then listened to the interviews and sorted quotations into the emic categories of “Cobblerton’s Response to the Boston Busing Crisis” and “Resource Hoarding

Policies,” and the etic category, “White Ignorance” as I noticed how commonly white ignorance arose in the data. I then conducted line coding (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022) with the sorted quotations. First, I coded solely for “white ignorance” (Mills, 1997) and “white fear” (Jones, 2022). I then conducted a second round of line coding with an expanded group of codes that emerged during the first round: white fear, white ignorance, diversity, snob zoning/elitism, scarcity, and conservatism/controlling growth. I engaged in further analysis through writing the analytic narrative in which I presented my findings, a revised and expanded version of which can be found in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Phase 3: Contemporary Discourses and Impacts of White Educational Resource Hoarding

In my initial write-up of Phase 2 of this study, I included data from only four participants: Ann, Richard, Robert, and Kathryn. Separately, I wrote a conference paper and presentation about Violet’s experiences in Cobblerton. I saw Violet’s story as a counternarrative to dominant narratives of the goodness and safety of Cobblerton schools, and knew she was not alone in her experiences of racism and exclusion. I began attending Diverse Cobblerton meetings virtually when I could and thinking with participants and members about how my research could benefit them. Membership told me that they needed more information about how Cobblerton Schools excluded and marginalized students through policy, and what impact that had on individual students and families. I submitted a new research protocol to the Internal Review Board that would allow me to interview high school aged students as well as parents and recent graduates, although I did not, in the end, interview anyone under the age of 18 (See Appendix E for a recruitment letter I sent to Diverse Cobblerton and a revised consent form, and Appendix F for sample interview questions).

At the same time, I learned that Cobblerton Schools was conducting an Equity Audit, and

I grew curious about how it would be received, and how its recommendations would be taken up by district leadership. I watched a recording of the October 17, 2024 Cobblerton School Committee meeting where the Equity Audit was first released. As I watched, I realized that this single meeting was just the beginning of a much larger conversation about equity in Cobblerton Schools, and I decided to continue watching meetings with equity-related agenda items over the 2023-4 school year. These meetings became my primary data source for answering Research Question 2. Below, I will describe data collection and analysis for Research Questions 2 and 3 separately, although they occurred more or less simultaneously, beginning in spring, 2024. At the same time, during summer, 2024, I also gathered additional document data to support my understanding of Research Question 1.

Research Question 2: Contemporary Discourses of White Educational Resource Hoarding

Data Collection

My primary data source for answering Research Question 2 was observations of Cobblerton School Committee meetings for the 2023-2024 academic year. I chose which committee meetings to watch by reading the agenda and minutes from each meeting, which were posted on the School Committee website. I watched meetings with agenda items related to equity in some way. Ultimately, I watched 13 of the meetings the School Committee held that year. I also watched one episode of a local Cobblerton television and YouTube show, which was hosted by my participant Ann and featured two members of the Cobblerton School Committee. Finally, I watched a Special Town Meeting, which was held to discuss a potential school funding referendum. My observations totaled over 34 hours. (See Table 3 for a complete list of observations I conducted.)

For each observation, I watched the entire video on youtube.com. I transcribed the

meeting using otter.ai, and made notes on which portions of the meeting were relevant to my research questions. I then re-watched relevant portions of the meeting again, creating corrected transcripts of these portions. I uploaded these transcripts to MAXQDA for coding. Table 4 shows the names, as I refer to them, and titles of Cobblerton Schools leadership quoted or referred to in this dissertation. Every individual listed is white-presenting, with the exception of Mr. V, who is Puerto Rican; Minnie, who is Indian American; and Leena, who is Indian American.

I also collected relevant documents, including the Cobblerton Schools Equity Audit, the current Cobblerton Schools Strategic Plan, and the former Cobblerton Schools Strategic Plan. All of these, as well as copies of presentations given in School Committee meetings, were available through the Cobblerton Schools website.

Table 3

2023-4 School Committee Meetings and Other Observations

Date	Length (Hour: Minute: Second)	
10/17/2023	2:11:02	Equity Audit released
10/19/2023	3:52:05	Presentations from principals
11/2/2023	3:12:16	
11/30/2023	1:05:18	
12/21/2023	2:26:30	Data and rankings presentation
1/4/2024	0:41:42	

Table 3 (cont'd.)

1/18/2024	2:49:54	
2/8/2024	3:00:29	
2/29/2024	3:40:31	
3/14/2024	1:41:54	
5/2/2024	1:37:23	
5/9/2024	2:26:48	
6/6/2024	3:42:35	Equity Audit Steering Committee presentation
6/12/2024	31:37	Local cable television episode
6/20/2024	1:14:40	Special Town Meeting

Table 4

Cobblerton School Leadership

Name	Role in Cobblerton Schools
Dr. K	Superintendent
Dr. M	Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction
Mr. V	Director of Social Emotional Learning and Equity

Table 4 (cont'd.)

Dan	School Committee Chair
Dawn	School Committee Member
Cynthia	School Committee Member
Lisa	School Committee Member
Amanda	School Committee Member
Sarah	School Committee Member
Minnie	School Committee Member
Mr. L	Cobblerton High School Principal
Dr. J	Cobblerton Middle School Principal
Mr. K	Cobblerton Upper Elementary School Principal
Ms. S	Cobblerton Lower Elementary School Principal
Mr. L	STEM Curriculum Coordinator
Mrs. C	Cobblerton High School Math Department Head
Mrs. B	Cobblerton High School Science Department Head
Leena	Student Representative to School Committee (1 of 3)
(pseudonym)	

Data Analysis

After uploading the meeting transcripts to MAXQDA, I read through them again, keeping in mind the tenets of critical race theory and Turner's (2020) concept of "colorblind managerialism." I identified Cobblerton leadership's dominant narrative, that Cobblerton Schools are already good – both in terms of quality, or "excellence," and in terms of morality, or "equity" – while also constantly improving through the work of the superintendent, school committee, and principals. I noticed that most of the time, leadership described themselves as pursuing both of these goals simultaneously, but that in fact, some "tensions" between the two stated goals arose over the course of the year. Excellence, equity, and tensions became three broad categories under which I then created sub-codes. The sub-codes were specific topics of discussion that I saw as related to the broad categories. I also created additional codes that were relevant but did not fit into one of the three broad categories. Some of these additional codes, such as property and race evasion, came from critical race theory or other theory, while others such as goodness were aligned with my own research interests. See Table 5 for a complete list of codes and subcodes.

After coding the data, I analyzed it further by writing an analytic narrative of Cobblerton School leadership's discourse in the 2023-2024 school year, which can be found in Chapter 5 of this dissertation. Although this analysis answers Research Question 2, it occurs chronologically later than – and sometimes is responding to events mentioned in – my data for Research Question 3, so I decided to present it in the last of the three findings chapters.

Table 5***Codes & Sub-codes***

Equity	Excellence	Tensions	Other
Academic support	Teacher contract	Safety and belonging for Students of Color	Property
Curriculum	Algebra	Chronic absenteeism	Goodness
Professional development	Test scores/ achievement	Teachers of Color	Reputation
Course leveling	Competition/ rankings		Safety
Access to Montessori & French			Colorblind managerialism
AP classes			Race evasion
Communication with families			
Hate incident response protocol			
DEI programs			
Equity Committee			

Research Question 3: Contemporary Impacts

Data Collection

To understand the impacts of Cobblerton’s history of white educational resource hoarding on Students and Families of Color in the town today, I turned to Diverse Cobblerton to help me find participants (see Table 6). Brené, a leader in Diverse Cobblerton, introduced me to Raha and Jerry. Scott responded to a post I made on Diverse Cobblerton’s Facebook page. Caroline was introduced to me by another member of Diverse Cobblerton. I met Leena by chance at the Cobblerton Public Library, where I recognized her from video recordings of Cobblerton School Committee meetings (Leena was a student representative to the Cobblerton School Committee in the 2023-2024 School Year). These interviews were all conducted in the summer of 2024, via Zoom or phone. Leena also texted me after the interview to share an additional thought. See Appendix F for the semi-structured interview protocol. I transcribed the interviews using otter.ai.

Table 6

New Participants in Phase 3

Pseudonym	Racial/ethnic identity & relationship to Cobblerton Schools
Raha	Middle Eastern North African (MENA), Iranian; mother of Ava and Shaliz, former Cobblerton students
Jerry	Indian, member of Diverse Cobblerton and Equity Audit Steering Committee; father of George, Cobblerton Elementary student

Table 6 (cont'd.)

Scott	MENA, Egyptian; father of Tim, Cobblerton High School student
Caroline	Black, Jamaican, former 8th grade science teacher at Cobblerton Middle School; mother of Phoebe, student at Cobblerton Elementary School
Leena	Indian American, recent graduate of Cobblerton High School, served as student representative to Cobblerton School Committee 2023-2024

Data Analysis: Counterstorying

Coding

To analyze the data, I first listened to the original recordings to create corrected transcripts. I uploaded these transcripts to MAXQDA. In addition to transcripts of new interviews with Caroline, Jerry, Raha, Scott, and Leena, I also added past interviews with Violet and Janice, Bill, Brené, and Charles, from Phase 2 of this project, because I believed they would be relevant to answering this research question. After reading through the transcripts again, I generated the following codes: gender and sexuality, equity, colorblind managerialism, racism & harassment, potential for change, inclusion or exclusion, interest convergence, success, college, reputation, property, white ignorance, safety, “goodness” of town and/or schools, and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) or absence of CRP. I saw a relationship between the data coded as racism & harassment, inclusion or exclusion, and white ignorance, and these became the bulk of the data included in the counterstory narratives. Because there was a great deal of data coded as

goodness of town and/or schools and potential for change, I chose to write a separate findings section related to my participants' views of "good education," which also included data from all interviews, not only those participants whose individual narratives I chose to write and include.

Writing Counter-stories

The primary method of the resulting dissertation chapter is counter-storytelling, a widely used method within critical race methodology. The counter-stories in this chapter are based on three interviews I did: those with Janice and Violet, Raha, and Caroline. I collected these stories partly at the behest of members of Diverse Cobblerton, who have struggled to convince those in power within the town that racism and other forms of identity-based marginalization are significant problems within the community that need to be addressed.

In choosing what to include in the narratives and in analysis, I tried to follow Dumas' (2014; 2018) call to attend to the suffering of Black and marginalized people within the white supremacist education system. As such, the narratives include detailed descriptions of what happened to each of the girls and the pain that it caused them and their families. I believe this is important to do in order to disrupt the dominant narrative that Cobblerton's schools, and overwhelmingly white schools more generally, are far from the "good," safe places for all students that they claim to be. This has implications for both Cobblerton and the field of education research, which I discuss in Chapter 4. Dumas (2018) also reminded us that this suffering deserves attention in its own right, apart from any plea for repair or work for change, as it is a meaningful aspect of the humanity of marginalized people that is too often elided.

At the same time, and in tension with Dumas and the purpose of counter-storytelling, I hold Tuck's (2009) call to suspend damage-centered research. Tuck (2009) defines damage-centered research as, "research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that

establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (p. 413). Though I am still grappling with the extent to which it is possible to resolve this tension, perhaps one way through is to share counter-stories that also include and take seriously the desires of participants and their vision for their community. I worked to include the “complexity, contradiction, and self-determination of lived lives” (Tuck, 2009, p. 416) of my participants, and articulate their theories of change, which may include, but also extend beyond, demonstrating harm to achieve reparation. While the harm done to Violet, Shaliz, Ava, and Phoebe within Cobblerton was serious and severe, all four girls have now passed “through the storm” (Tuck, 2009, p. 419), which allowed their mothers to describe the damage without understanding it as totalizing. Though I have organized and edited these narratives for clarity, I kept them in participants’ own words as much as possible.

Returning to RQ 1

In the summer of 2024, I visited my parents in Cobblerton and returned to the Cobblerton Public Library with a clearer idea of which documents in that archive might be relevant to this project. I used Adobe Scan to scan and upload those documents, which I later returned to when revising my writeup of Phase 2 into Chapter 3 of this dissertation. I also visited the State Library of Massachusetts, located in the Massachusetts Statehouse in Boston. There, I viewed Cobblerton’s 1976 Local Growth Report, which I learned of through the valuable work of Amy Dain on exclusionary zoning in Massachusetts (Dain, 2023). See Table 7 for a complete list of documents I collected. Unless otherwise noted, each document was archived within Cobblerton’s Annual Report of the year listed.

Table 7***Documents***

Year of Origin	Document
1971	Report of Zoning By-Law Study Committee
1971	Report of the Superintendent of Schools
1972	Report of Sewer Study Committee
1972	Report of the Superintendent of Schools
1973	Report of [Cobblerton] Housing Authority for Persons of Low-Income
1973	Report of Zoning By-Law Study Committee
1973	Report of the Superintendent of Schools
1974	Report of [Cobblerton] Housing Authority
1974	Town Monograph (Massachusetts State Library)
1974	Report of Zoning By-Laws Study Committee
1974	Report of the Superintendent of Schools
1975	Report of [Cobblerton] Land Use Advisory Committee

Table 7 (cont'd.)

1975	Report of Sewer Study Committee
1975	School Committee Member
1975	Town Warrant: Subsection V-G Apartment District Requirements
1975	Report of the Zoning By-Laws Study Committee
1975	Report of the Superintendent of Schools
1976	[Cobblerton] Housing Authority Report
1976	[Cobblerton] Local Growth Policy (Massachusetts State Library)
1976	Report of the Superintendent of Schools
1984	Town Monograph (Massachusetts State Library)

As I reviewed each document, I transcribed relevant excerpts and took notes. I returned to these documents and excerpts in order to write the analytical narrative in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Conclusion

Methodologically, I see this dissertation as a contribution to the ever-growing body of knowledge produced through critical race methods in education research (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2018). By centering counter-stories but also drawing from a variety of other data sources, I seek

to demonstrate the power of critical race methods broadly, and critical race ethnographic methods specifically, to illuminate the invisible, denormalize the taken-for-granted, and disrupt the reproduction of white supremacy through white ignorance.

Through designing and carrying out this study, I have come to understand the power of asking and answering questions that arise from the tenets of critical race theory. I found that beginning with racial realism, whiteness as property, and the myth of meritocracy led me to questions I would not have otherwise asked, and that antiracist materialism allowed me to illuminate the interplay of ideological, discursive, and material factors in the production and maintenance of white educational resource hoarding. This further demonstrates, as many have shown before, the use of critical race theory as an essential tool not only in analysis, but in every aspect of education research. I offer my findings, and the further questions they raise, as evidence of how much can be learned this way, as well as how much more there is to learn in this manner.

One obvious limitation of this study is its focus on one small town. While there are many similar places across the U.S., where white families work hard to concentrate educational resources around their own children and limit access to others, this phenomenon likely looks slightly, or very, different in different communities. I hope to carry this research forward myself, and I also hope that other researchers, in other communities, will take this up as well. Though I do not expect that anyone could replicate this research, step by step, in another place, I do hope that by sharing my methods in this level of detail, I can support future efforts to understand and thereby disrupt this pervasive and harmful phenomenon.

CHAPTER THREE: WHITE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE HOARDING IN COBBLERTON, 1968-1975

Dr. P began working in Cobblerton Schools as an elementary teacher in 1954 – coincidentally, the same year as *Brown v. Board of Education*. He became principal in 1955, and superintendent of the district in 1966. Dr. P served as superintendent in Cobblerton for 26 years, retiring in 1991.

Dr. P is widely remembered in Cobblerton as a beloved and innovative educator. The K-2 elementary school in town is named for him. In 2002, a memorial was installed there in his honor. From the dedication of Dr. P's memorial:

His thirty-seven years of educational leadership provided [Cobblerton] with award-winning models for innovative and progressive programs. For him the schools were the focal point of the community and education was his highest priority. Providing educational choices for students became a hallmark of his philosophy of education. Such programs as foreign language immersion, public school Montessori, and university-high school linked programs were initiated under his leadership.

In 1992, Cobblerton High School was listed in *Redbook Magazine* as one of the 140 best high schools in the U.S. (Weiss, 1992). Also in 1992, my parents moved to Cobblerton from a neighboring town, so that they could send me to the public Montessori program that Dr. P started.

Over the course of Dr. P's career as an educator, Cobblerton transitioned from small rural town to Boston suburb. The construction of two major highways, Route 128 (completed in 1952) and, closer to Cobblerton, Interstate 495 (completed in 1969 and extended in 1975), facilitated the movement of capital, jobs, and people from the city to the suburbs. Route 128, sometimes

called the “golden road,” became a corridor of high-paying jobs in electronics and computing. While today, some Cobblerton residents commute all the way to Boston for their professional jobs, many programmers, engineers, and biotech workers need only go so far as the inner ring suburbs along 128, making Cobblerton a reasonable and relatively affordable choice.

In 1975, the Massachusetts Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (MAC), in partnership with Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD), published a report titled, “Route 128: Boston’s Road to Segregation.” Describing the recent history of the metropolitan region, the authors wrote, “The new housing, jobs, schools, and amenities of suburban life which followed the completion of Route 128 were for whites only” (MAC & MCAD, 1975, p. 13). This report illustrated how suburban town leadership created and maintained the exclusion of the Black and Latine people of Boston from jobs, transportation, and especially, housing, and how federal and state policy systematically failed to intervene. In the introduction, the authors wrote:

[This report] concludes that Federal and State fair housing laws have failed to open the suburbs to minority group citizens. As a result, Boston's black and Puerto Rican populations remain in those sections of the city with the greatest proportion of deteriorating and dilapidated housing. While we conclude that the New England town structure, with its multiplicity of independent and uncoordinated jurisdictions, is a part of the problem, we place the major blame on suburban, public officials and the local residents of suburban towns, who for the most part have sought to maintain the status quo and to preserve the “character” of their communities. We conclude that State housing policies have not effectively challenged the practices of suburban communities and have not resulted in a sound, coordinated land use program. Likewise, the Federal

Government, although providing much of the financial basis for suburban growth, has failed to make real its prohibitions against segregation and discrimination. (MAC & MCAD, 1975, p. iv)

Even as Dr. P's school district was growing and thriving, decisions made in his community ensured that the population of his student body was almost entirely white. This is the origin story of Cobblerton's white educational resource hoarding: even as this district grew into the highly regarded educational institution that it is today, and even as Dr. P leveraged his relationships with other town leaders and his reportedly remarkable power of persuasion to ensure that his schools were as well-resourced as possible, those same leaders were making decisions that would result in an overwhelmingly white student body in those schools.

In addition to explicitly linking poverty and lack of opportunity in the city to the high concentration of wealth and opportunity in the suburbs, the report's authors continuously pointed out how suburban leadership ignored or refused to understand their own role in perpetuating segregation and racial inequality:

Problems of employment, housing, and education in the black community were not unknown to the residents of the suburbs. Yet the suburban white population saw prejudice and discriminatory practices as matters extrinsic to their communities. The absence of racial minorities in the 128 belt was interpreted as something completely fortuitous. A suburban home, it was thought, was the just reward for many years of individual effort. Many suburbanites forgot that Federal assistance facilitated their move from city to suburb. They failed to comprehend that the changing patterns of metropolitan development, which they themselves were influencing, excluded the same routes for blacks. (MCAD & MAC, 1975, p. 16)

What the report's authors are describing here – the naturalization of the suburbs' whiteness, the failure of suburban residents to understand their own role in the region – is what Mills (1997) called “white ignorance.” “White misunderstanding,” Mills wrote, “misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception in matters related to race are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement” (1997, p. 19). Mills emphasized that white ignorance is an active not-knowing, such that “that whites will generally be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (p. 18). In the above quote from 1975, the report's authors explained that white suburban residents actively misunderstood the inequitable society in which they lived, assuming their own success to be the result of merit and hard work – which would imply that those living in poverty were less hardworking and less deserving. This mistaken belief allowed them to abdicate responsibility for the injustice their decisions caused.

In the history of racial injustice in Boston, nowhere is this ignorance and abdication more evident than in Boston's largely failed efforts to desegregate schools, the Boston Busing Crisis. The MAC & MCAD (1975) report described the suburban role in the Boston Busing Crisis:

Housing discrimination in the suburbs has restricted minorities to the inner city. Housing discrimination in the city has limited minorities to certain sections of the city. The discriminatory policies of the Boston School Committee have combined with these factors to produce a segregated school system which now resists reform and redemption. White resistance to court-ordered desegregation of Boston's schools has resulted in the eruption of violence and racial hostility and has brought national disgrace to a city which once prided itself on its leadership in civil and human rights. (p. xi)

Though it was evident to the report's authors, writing just one year after the eruption of violence

they described, that suburban housing policy played a major role in Boston schools' segregation and inequity, Judge Garrity's desegregation plan did not include any suburban districts, so suburbanites largely saw segregation as a Boston problem, rather than a problem of the metropolitan region or the state.

Dr. P, Cobblerton's superintendent, was an example of a suburban leader who held this view. Each year of his superintendency, Dr. P wrote an open letter to the Cobblerton School Committee, which was published in the town's Annual Report. Generally these letters summarized the district's successes, celebrated retiring teachers, and addressed any concerns or obstacles that the superintendent anticipated, which were often related to the budget. However, in 1975, Dr. P's letter ended on a different note than usual. (See Figure 1.) In this letter, Dr. P included the results of a recent Gallup poll on the "top ten (10) problems of the public schools as viewed by the public in 1975." The first two of these problems were "1. Lack of discipline 2. Integration/Segregation/Busing." In his discussion of these poll results, Dr. P wrote, "I feel that we in [Cobblerton] as a community as well as a school system, are fortunate that in the schools in [Cobblerton] we do not have serious problems in the categories mentioned." At the time, Cobblerton schools were likely 99% white. And yet, Dr. P did not see Cobblerton as having a problem with school segregation. He also attributed Cobblerton's freedom from the listed problems to the hard work of the School Committee, staff, and students, writing: "Problems arise, but with the excellent spirit of cooperation between the community and the schools, they are dealt with effectively and constructively. The results have been worth the effort." Just as the authors of the *Route 128* report noted, Dr. P attributes Cobblerton schools' success to goodness and hard work, rather than availability of resources.

Public Attitudes Toward Public Education: For the past seven years George H. Gallup has conducted a poll of public attitudes toward public education. The December issue of the **Phi Delta Kappan Journal** contained the "Seventh Annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes toward Public Education." In this article prepared by George H. Gallup the top ten (10) problems of the public schools as viewed by the public in the year 1975 were listed. The list follows:

1. Lack of discipline
2. Integration/Segregation/Busing
3. Lack of proper financial support
4. Difficulty of getting "good" teachers
5. Size of school/classes
6. Use of drugs
7. Poor curriculum
8. Crime/Vandalism/Stealing
9. Lack of proper facilities
10. Pupils' lack of interest

In view of the Gallup Poll findings, I feel that we in [redacted] as a community as well as a school system, are fortunate in that the schools in [redacted] do not have serious problems in the categories mentioned. Much of the credit for this must go to the School Committee, the school personnel, the students and to the large number of residents, parents and other concerned persons who take an active part in the schools. The volunteers who work with and for the students at all grade levels; the Police Department, particularly through Safety Officer David Moore's special safety programs; the ambulance unit with its presentation of first aid procedures at the Middle School; the Water Department with its special program on our water supply, are examples of efforts, which make our students recognize at an early age that they are part of the community. And the students respond generously through such projects as the Middle School's efforts for the elderly, the High School's annual party for underprivileged children, and the elementary childrens' singing of holiday

Figure 5. Dr. P's 1975 open letter to the Cobblerton School Committee. Source: Cobblerton Public Library.

Cobblerton did not explicitly exclude families from living in town on the basis of race, nor were students excluded on the basis of race – both would have been illegal after *Brown* and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. At the time that Dr. P wrote this letter, there was one Black teacher in Cobblerton. Her two sons graduated from Cobblerton Schools. Charles, a Black participant in this study who graduated in 1972, had one other Black student in his graduating class. So, Cobblerton schools at this time were not explicitly exclusive.

And yet, when I graduated from Cobblerton High School in 2007, there was one Black student in my graduating class. My class had one fewer Black student than Charles'. Violet, a Black Cobblerton alumni who graduated in 2020, had one other Black student in her class. So, between the early 1970's and 2020, Cobblerton's Black population, and Cobblerton schools' number of Black students, stayed stable. In 2000, Cobblerton's Black population was .9%; in 2020, it was 1.2%.

Though many Cobblerton residents, then and now, considered Cobblerton's overwhelming whiteness and its tiny Black population to be natural, the writers of the MAC & MCAD report, and the tenets of critical race theory that form the foundation of this dissertation, demand that I interrogate this assumption. In a historical moment when desirable jobs, housing, and especially, schools were so hard to come by in the city of Boston, and when Cobblerton was rapidly building new housing and had uniquely excellent schools for the region, it was not natural that Cobblerton and its schools stayed so white.

In this chapter, I examine the material and ideological origins of Cobblerton's white educational resource hoarding. Analyzing historical documents, mostly pulled from the town's Annual Reports in the early 1970s, and interviews with town elders who were decisionmakers during this period, I find that Cobblerton's housing policy and zoning decisions, as well as the town's rejection of a state-subsidized sewer system, all limited access to lower-income people who may have otherwise chosen to move to Cobblerton. I further find that some saw these decisions as explicitly racially motivated – such as one participant who told me, “This is a whites-only town.” While others insisted that they merely wanted to protect the town from rapid growth and change, as the authors of the 1975 *Route 128* report pointed out, preserving the status quo at the time meant preserving a town's whiteness – and regardless of intent, that was the

impact. Through white ignorance, though, the town and schools were able to maintain their narratives of goodness and innocence, even as they hoarded educational resources and limited access to Students of Color.

Theory: White Spatial Imaginary, White Ignorance

In 2000, when I was eleven years old, Cobblerton's town historian published a book about the town titled, *[Cobblerton]: A Good Town* (See Figure 6). The text's introduction explained that the title is a quote from a former resident: "Frederick Warfield called [Cobblerton] a good town. Indeed it was to many" (p. v.) The author does not further justify the title, but refers to Cobblerton as "the good town" throughout. Lipsitz' (2011) theory of the white spatial imaginary explained why a town like Cobblerton might be taken for granted as good: "The white spatial imaginary portrays the properly gendered prosperous suburban home as the privileged moral geography of the nation" (p. 13). The story of Cobblerton as a good town both follows from and is reinforced by this image of white spaces as inherently moral, as naturally good.

The title of Chapter 2 of *[Cobblerton]: A Good Town*, "Out of the Wilderness – A Town," implied that Cobblerton naturally emerged from civilization's advancement. While the text acknowledged that there were people living in Cobblerton before it was a town, the forcible removal of the Nipmuc people from that land during King Philip's War (Holley-Sonsksq, 2023), their subsequent internment in nearby Natick, followed by winter imprisonment on Deer Island in Boston Harbor where many froze to death (Holley-Sonsksq, 2023; Brooks, 2018) is left out of this celebration of Cobblerton's history. This elision exemplifies Mills' (1997) white ignorance, and demonstrates why such ignorance is foundational to white supremacy. Mills (1997) wrote, "The founding ideology of the white settler state required the conceptual erasure of those societies that had been there before" (p. 97). He further argued, in a later essay titled "White

Ignorance,” that an aspect of white ignorance is moral ignorance: “not merely ignorance of fact

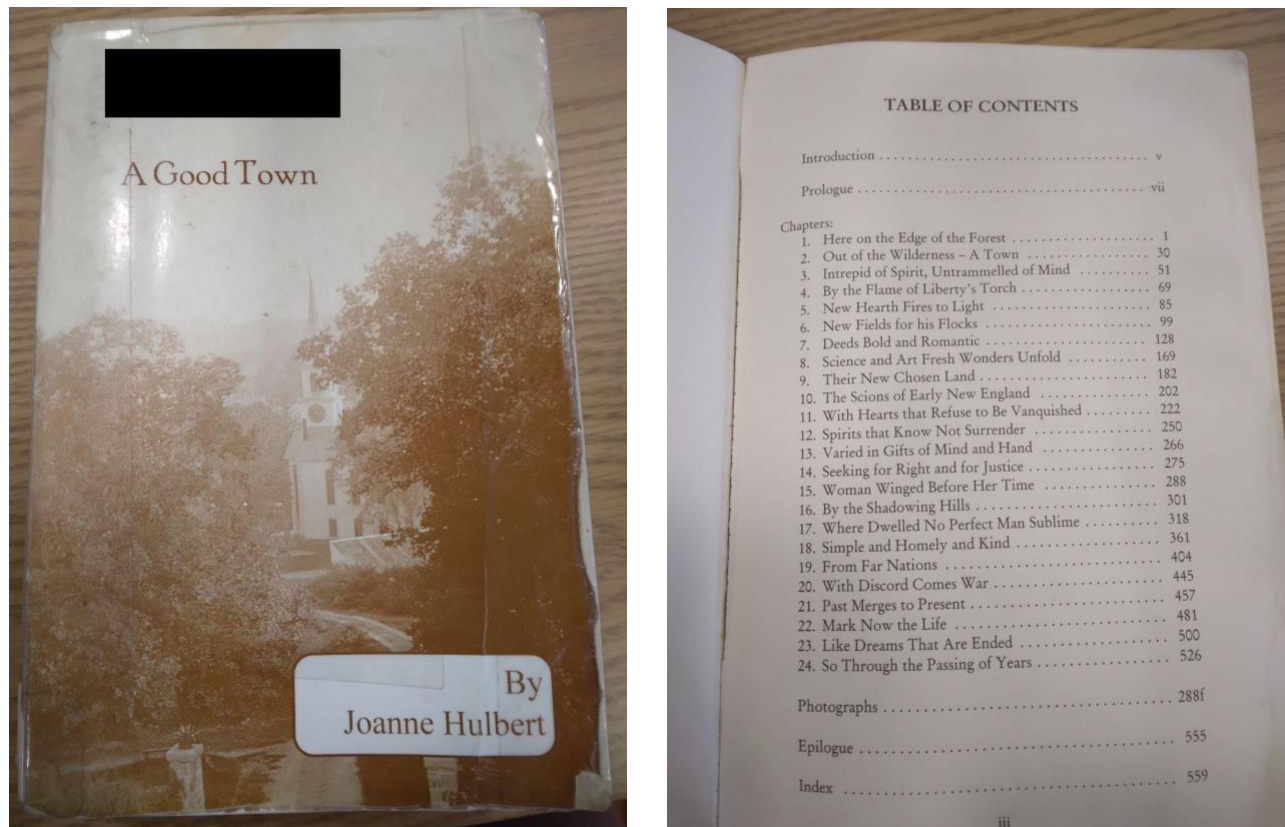


Figure 6. [Cobblerton]: *A Good Town*, cover and table of contents. Source: Cobblerton Public Library.

with moral implications, but moral non-knowings, incorrect judgments about the rights and wrongs of moral situations themselves” (Mills, 2007, p. 22, emphasis in original). If

Cobblerton’s origin is a genocidal act of settler colonialism, how can Cobblerton be a good town? If whiteness is predicated on slavery, genocide, and the extreme violence of colonialism around the world, then how can a place designed to uphold and protect whiteness be good? If the existence of the white suburbs depends on the exploitation and impoverishment of Black and Brown people in the city, then how can the suburb be a “privileged moral geography?” Only through the active not-knowing and mis-understanding that Mills (1997) described.

Literature

The Suburbs and Good Schools

Throughout the *Route 128* report, the authors refer to the white ignorance of the residents of the “privileged moral geography” – that is, the people of the suburbs:

Few of Boston's suburban residents acknowledge that the suburbs themselves constitute a major part of the urban problem or that exclusionary housing and land use policies by suburban towns are significant factors in the decline of urban neighborhoods. Still fewer recognize that suburban towns act as agents of racial discrimination by enforcing exclusionary housing and fiscal policies, magnifying the disallocation of jobs and housing, and increasing the inefficiency and cost of public transportation. Perhaps least of all do suburban residents recognize that their refusal to acknowledge the extent of community interdependence results ultimately in the economic depression of minorities and the maintenance of their second-class status. (MCAD & MAC, 1975, p. 36)

But what exactly were the exclusionary housing and land use policies that were put into place in the suburbs, and what impact did those policies have on school funding or perceived school quality? By zoning for large lots, putting land into conservation, and avoiding dense or multifamily housing or public transportation, suburban governments were able to keep their towns exclusive and their property values high. This in turn led to a concentration of resources in suburban schools, which were mostly funded by local property taxes. Because property values and perceived school quality were both directly tied to race (Glotzer, 2020; Rothstein, 2017; Rury, 2020), part of building a desirable suburb was finding legal, and therefore color-evasive, ways of keeping the town and schools overwhelmingly white.

While suburban development was pursued in different ways in different metropolitan

regions across the country, certain mechanisms were used consistently to create the desirable, exclusive, and therefore very valuable real estate of suburban communities. Glotzer (2020), writing about the development of Baltimore's suburbs in the nineteenth century, described how U.S. suburbs were racialized as white from their earliest origins, and created in some places by the explicit desire for "clean" communities, uncontaminated by "dirty" Black and immigrant residents, which in turn led to the refusal of some communities to be annexed to cities and the privatization of services such as water and waste removal. As developers gleaned how profitable building exclusive suburbs could be, they, in collaboration with the burgeoning professional organization of realtors and local governments, experimented with technologies of segregation such as racial zoning and racial covenants. After both of these practices were outlawed, they arrived at land-use zoning as an effective tool of segregation that could protect white property values and increase the profit extracted from Black renters, while holding up as "color-blind" in court. Describing the work of the Baltimore Zoning Commission in 1921, Glotzer (2020) wrote:

The Zoning Commission put the racial considerations of land-use zoning on full display, even as proponents couched land-use zoning in more color-blind terms. Certain residential neighborhoods that were predominantly native-born and white and otherwise would have been lumped in as industrial were instead carved out of the industrial zone and designated residential. Baltimore's Zoning Commission made these and other decisions on the basis of protecting the property values of what they deemed the most desirable restricted planned suburbs of the new northern and northwestern sections of Baltimore. The Zoning Commission traced these new zones, based on hierarchies of race and property values, onto maps and filed them among Baltimore City's records, making the new hardened boundaries legally binding. (p. 113).

These racialized zoning maps would later serve as models for the “redlining” maps used by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and banks to systematically entrench homeownership as the primary mechanism of wealth accumulation and social mobility for white families while denying access to Black families (Glotzer, 2020; Rothstein, 2017). While fifty years later, suburban leadership implementing zoning for the first time did so without acknowledging the racial implications of their decisions, Glotzer (2020) made clear that land-use zoning originated as a legal mechanism to maintain segregation within the city and exclude anyone racialized as non-white from suburbs.

Writing nearly fifty years after the *Route 128* report, Dain (2023) found that zoning practices in the Boston suburbs were designed to create exclusion from the suburbs on the basis of race, although this was less explicit in the Boston area than it had been in other places:

Zoning policies were developed on a national stage, promoted by the federal government—and promoted by segregationists. Leaders of Massachusetts’ zoning movement learned from other states. That racism fueled the strength of zoning in America is part of zoning’s story everywhere, even where Black populations were small and racism more muted. It is also not as if the Boston area was free of racism; if it had been, property owners would not have been placing racial covenants on properties across numerous suburbs. (p. 21).

She found that, while suburban leadership avoided documenting the racist intent of zoning laws because they were aware that that could result in a lawsuit under the Fair Housing Act of 1968, it was something of an open secret. For example, she stated:

‘No one will say publicly that Blacks must be kept out, or that it’s more desirable to have someone with ‘more money’ move into the neighborhood,’ the *Boston Globe* observed in

1970, about zoning's purposes. Such purposes are not advertised, but there is evidence that they are in effect. (Dain, 2023, p. 9)

She also quoted a congressman who, in 1968, noted the racist intent and impact of suburban zoning laws, and found them to be a barrier in implementing the Fair Housing Act. Though, as the *Route 128* report further shows, zoning's racist impacts were well known at the time, implementing zoning was considered a commonsense practice that was widely taken up by suburban governments in this period.

Across the U.S., suburbs were created for developers and realtors to profit from the investments of white families seeking homes in “clean,” “safe,” and “quiet” towns where property values were likely to endlessly increase. A key aspect of a town's desirability, and thus the value of its property, was the perceived quality of its schools. In *Creating the Suburban School Advantage*, Rury (2020) wrote:

Suburban schools also had a hand in attracting families to particular communities. Many were drawn to districts touting high scholastic standards or a socially appealing clientele. Such attributes were often linked to affluence, but educational institutions also became a way of comparing suburbs irrespective of wealth. These places were hardly all the same, after all, and competition for prestige could have telling consequences, not least regarding property values. Stability in that regard became a highly prized community attribute. (p. 6).

To be a good town – a desirable town, a town that people would be willing to move to and commute from – there had to be good schools. And, as property values increased and the town's wealth grew, there was more to invest in the schools, which were funded largely through local taxes. As the town grew in wealth, the schools would likely grow in quality, which would in turn

increase the town's wealth. This cycle sits at the heart of white educational resource hoarding – it was both an incentive to engage in it, and a mechanism to sustain it. White ignorance and a strong commitment to “home rule,” or as Rury (2020) called it, “localism” – “a foreshortening of interests and concerns to exclude matters that did not directly benefit a particular community” (p. 12) – allowed suburban leadership to engage in this white supremacist policy while denying any racist intent – thus maintaining their sense of their towns as “good.” But the Black and Brown residents of Boston did not see these decisions as race-neutral. The writers of the *Route 128* report made this abundantly clear:

Most blacks live in an area where they are least likely to get a better education. Even if the Boston public schools should make substantial improvements, suburban schools continue to offer better educational opportunities. Relative to the suburban population, black children are conspicuously at a disadvantage. The problems are even more severe for children of Spanish speaking background, who have often not been included in the Boston system. While the Boston School Committee bears much of the blame for the appalling conditions of many of the schools, the financing of education in the Commonwealth contributes heavily toward maintaining unequal educational opportunities. For the immediate future, blacks cannot rely on the educational system to supply a step toward equal status in the Boston metropolitan area. (p. 28)

As I show in the next section, Black families did not sit passively and wait for access to better education for their children. They protested, boycotted, and started a program to bus their own children to suburban schools, which was later funded by the state and continues to this day. However, as a result of suburban policy choices made in the 1970's, Black and Brown families never gained equitable access to suburban housing or suburban schooling – which, by this time,

was largely considered the best available schooling in the U.S. (Rury, 2020). White educational resource hoarding, which I argue was implemented to prevent equitable access, was allowed by local, state, and federal government to continue unabated. The sole attempt to mitigate the harm of segregation and white educational resource hoarding only included the city of Boston, and ultimately resulted in a “crisis” that cemented, rather than disrupted, the starkly segregated and unequal educational landscape of the Boston region that we see today.

Boston Busing Crisis

Organized efforts to desegregate Boston’s schools began in 1963, when Ruth Batson – one of the many contributors to the *Route 128* report cited above – and the Boston Action Group presented to the Boston School Committee (Miletsky, 2017). Their efforts ignored, Black students boycotted school, activists staged sit-ins and demonstrations in front of the School Committee building, and ten thousand people marched in Roxbury to demand representation on the School Committee. A parents organization started Operation Exodus to bus Black students to suburban schools. This program, which was granted state funding in 1968, is now called the Metropolitan Council for Opportunity, or METCO (METCO, 2022). The fact that the METCO program has lasted nearly sixty years demonstrates the extent to which Massachusetts’ integration efforts have failed Black families who still seek educational opportunity beyond the city’s borders.

In 1965, Massachusetts passed the Racial Imbalance Act, making public school segregation illegal in Massachusetts (Formisano, 2004). The School Committee ignored the act, continuing to starve Black schools of resources and hoarding them in white schools, paving the way for Tallulah Morgan and other parents of Black students, working with the NAACP, to sue the Boston School Committee. The case, *Morgan v. Hennigan*, was decided by Judge Wendell

Arthur Garrity in 1972, who ordered that the state board of education create a busing plan for the committee to implement.

Around this time, some white Bostonians publicly decried the way that the suburbs of Boston served to maintain segregation and hoard resources while abdicating responsibility for desegregation. However, because this critique was leveled by Louise Day Hicks, Joe Kerrigan, and other openly racist anti-bussers, it was not meant to be taken seriously as a means to improve educational opportunities for Black students – instead, it was intended to dissuade any integration efforts at all. Formisano (2004) wrote:

In 1972 [Kerrigan] introduced a bill in the legislature calling for the busing of children from the suburban retreat of Dover into an inner-city school. He selected Dover because it was the residence of Governor Sargent ... The suburbs, he never tired of pointing out, refused low-cost housing for the poor and erected barriers against blacks becoming their neighbors while insisting that Bostonians bus their children into black neighborhoods. (p. 56)

Dover is a small town that shares a school district with Sherborn, Cobblerton's neighbor. Today, the Dover-Sherborn school district receives Black students from the METCO program; Cobblerton does not, and never has.

Famously, Boston's desegregation efforts were met with massive white resistance and white rage (Formisano, 2004). While Delmont (2016) argued that the "crisis" was, at least in part, manufactured by television and that some schools were able to successfully integrate, integration in Boston did not last long. Whether white flight was accelerated by the busing plan or not, it was already well under way, from both the city and Boston Schools. In 1988, when the state ceded control of Boston Schools back to the School Committee, the *New York Times*

reported that,

when black parents brought suit in 1972 charging that the School Committee discriminated against their children, the system had 96,000 students, about 60 percent white. Since then, the number of students has dropped to 57,000. In a city where 600,000 residents are white, only 24 percent of public school students are white (Gold, 1988).

This article exemplified Delmont's claim that the media ensured that Boston Public Schools' reputation was destroyed over their attempts to integrate, rather than over the ongoing abandonment of Black schools and students. "Parents in Boston have no confidence in the Boston School Committee," the *Times* quoted "James Kelly, a City Council member who was a leader of the anti-busing movement in the 1970's," as saying (Gold, 1988). No advocate for Black education was quoted in the article.

By this point, white families had left Boston Public Schools – either for private schools or for the suburbs, rendering the question of desegregating Boston Schools largely moot. While it might be easy to attribute this "white flight" to the individual racism of ethnic white families in places South Boston and East Boston, the existence of places where white people could flee, and Black families could not follow, was the result of a concerted effort by government at all levels to build and maintain the white suburbs, even as they disinvested from cities generally and Black neighborhoods specifically in the name of fiscal responsibility and neoliberal austerity. In the Boston area, as in metropolitan regions across the country, federal funding of highway systems and low-interest mortgages allowed people with the means to buy a car and put a downpayment on a home to migrate from city to suburb. Systemic racism meant that most of the people with means were white, and that these federally guaranteed mortgages were only offered to white families.

As the *Route 128* report made clear, this confluence of policies effectively trapped Black and other Families of Color in a few neighborhoods, which were then subjected to some of the most extreme consequences of neoliberal policy. Through the 1970s and 1980s, public housing projects were abandoned, city services like trash pickup were slashed, and spending on the social safety net was replaced with spending on policing and incarceration. This disinvestment is what Gilmore (2022) called “organized abandonment,” but in dominant discourse, blame for “urban decay” was attributed to deficiencies in Black people and Black culture. This strengthened the association between Blackness and the “bad” – poverty, crime, violence – and thereby, between whiteness and goodness as well.

Though some Black families and Families of Color did find their way into the privileged geography of the suburbs, their very presence was understood to threaten property values and school quality – another example of whiteness as property, and property as whiteness. As such, especially in the years after the peak of the civil rights movement and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, suburban leadership, much like the white families in Boston who took to the streets in protest and riot, looked to protect what they saw as rightfully theirs from encroachment. The means – zoning and land use policy – might have been different, and the operation more color-evasive and therefore less visible, but the goal was the same: to protect the property of whiteness. As a result, the suburbs and their schools remained overwhelmingly white, and this was made to seem natural and normal to those who benefited from exclusionary policies – including residents of Cobblerton, then and now.

Findings: “Preserving the ‘Character’ of the Community”

Dain (2023), in her report about exclusionary zoning in the greater Boston area, described the early 1970s as the time of the “Big Downzone” – that is, the moment when most Boston

suburbs implemented new zoning policies to ensure that their towns slowed or stopped growing and stayed low-density. Dain (2023) found this to be a direct response to the white unrest in Boston. “The suburbs raised their walls against change, while Boston moved to desegregate its schools, a moment marked by riots, fighting, property damage, threats, and the feeling that Boston was teetering on the edge of civil war” (p. 27). Though the state government, beginning in the early 1970s, never pursued the robust efforts toward equity in housing, jobs, and transit that the 1975 *Route 128* report recommended, they did make some gestures in this direction – which were largely resisted by local suburban governments, often in the name of localism or “home rule.” Dain (2023) described how, as these efforts failed, the state government attempted a new approach, of, essentially, interest convergence:

What was needed was not confrontation, not state mandates, not lectures, not ad hoc crisis management ... They passed Chapter 807, the Massachusetts Growth Policy Act, to require all Massachusetts municipalities to develop Local Growth Policy Statements that would be a tool for the localities to reflect on their own goals and values, and their relationships with their regions and with state government; the state would then use this information to develop policies responsive to local goals, values, and relationships. (p. 27)

As a result, in 1976, every town in Massachusetts was required to submit a “Local Growth Policy Statement” to the state. Dain (2023) reviewed over a hundred of these, and concluded that zoning was certainly a tool of exclusion and “frontier defense” throughout the Boston suburbs. In what follows, I examine Cobblerton’s 1976 Local Growth Policy Statement, alongside other town documents from the early 1970s and interviews with three town leaders who remember that time. I find that through zoning and housing policy, and – unique to Cobblerton – rejecting a state-

subsidized sewer system, Cobblerton was able to maintain its ‘character’ as an overwhelmingly white community while disavowing any racial motivation for doing so.

Zoning & Sewers

Cobblerton’s 1976 Local Growth Policy Statement opens with a description of Cobblerton’s growth since 1960:

Developers were attracted to [Cobblerton] [during the 1960s] by its character and availability of low cost land and relatively loose zoning laws. ... The rapid growth rate brought in a highly sophisticated and well educated electorate which in turn raised the social-economic factors of the Town. A great import was placed on education, conservation, recreation and cultural activities. The new home buyers were primarily young couples with growing families. (p. 1)

The general sense throughout the report is that, now that the town has achieved this level of sophistication, education, and socio-economic status, their main priority is slowing or stopping the rapid growth that brought them to this point. The authors wrote:

[Cobblerton] has changed from a small agricultural town with blue-collar workers to a white-collar middle class suburban community. The educational level has risen; more churches have been built; there are many more social organizations in the town. Impact on the community has been that the character has changed. (p. 5)

A few pages later, the authors responded to the question, “What have been the major reasons behind what your community has done (and hasn’t done) in the past to control growth and development?” Of the twelve options, the report writers chose only one: “Preserving the ‘character’ of the community.” Maybe the authors have contradicted themselves, or maybe the town’s character has changed despite their best efforts to preserve it, but I interpret this seeming-

contradiction as a statement that, now that the character of the town has progressed to this point, they no longer wish to keep changing. Richard explained: “especially after you get in here, that's another thing you see: last one in always wants to close the door.”

In order for whiteness to function as property, and for the value of that property to continue to rise, it has to be exclusive. Dain (2023) surmised that, in the suburbs, exclusion was part of the point:

Exclusiveness motivates people to bid up property values, and ultimately it benefits local budgets, but exclusiveness can be an end in itself tied up with so many other perks, such as access to jobs, halls of power, top schools, fancy cafes, and pleasing views of nice homes, manicured lawns, and rose bushes. Exclusiveness in geography shields its members from views of poverty. For the in-group, exclusiveness offers social protection, a sense of a social safety net. (p. 41)

In a competitive world, where access to “the good life” was limited – which may have been newly obvious given the conditions of scarcity in Boston – Cobblerton residents clearly wanted to protect what they had by limiting access to others. Running throughout the report was also a strong sense of resentment to any form of state interference, such as the first item listed under “VALUES” being “Home rule (self-determination)” and under “GOALS,” “Strengthen ‘home rule’” (p. 19-A). As Rury (2020) demonstrated, this commitment to “localism” was also a color-evasive way of perpetuating racial exclusion, since it abdicated responsibility to anything or anyone beyond the community’s boundaries. In communities as white as Cobblerton, protecting community members meant protecting whiteness.

Like many neighboring communities, zoning was Cobblerton’s primary tool of exclusion (Dain, 2023). In 1971, Cobblerton’s Zoning By-Law Study Committee, which had been inactive

for two years, was reconvened. In their annual report, they wrote:

In March 1971, our Committee was called back into specific new action by the Selectmen for the particular purpose of giving priority to apartment house zoning study. ...

Emphasis on apartment house zoning and regulations seemed advisable because of legal advice that the courts might force apartments upon us with neither carefully prescribed regulations nor specific areas for their construction unless the Town took appropriate protective action.

The Zoning By-Laws Committee, like the Planning Board and the authors of the Local Growth Policy Report (whose members were likely overlapping), were clear that their aim was “protection” of the town against incursion by the state. Over the next several years they created a set of zoning by-laws for apartments, which were adopted by the town at town meeting in 1974, though the creation of an apartment district was rejected that same year. To comply with new state mandates for affordable housing, the town did build a new multifamily housing complex – but they limited residence to those over fifty-five years of age. Ann said, “if there were any proof positive that what they were looking for was not Black families from inside the city, it would be that the only housing that they managed to build was for seniors who also qualified for low income, low or mod[erate] income housing.”

Also in 1974, lawyers hired by the town to review these by-laws raised concerns that they might be struck down by the state as evidence of “snob zoning.” From a news article sent to me by Ann:

The provisions which Meyer feels are most subject to disapproval ‘would probably be those containing building code provisions... and possibly the provision specifying minimum sizes of apartment units and the maximum number of three bedroom

apartments.’ To that effect he advised ‘... the bylaw might be challenged in court as being too restrictive and as discriminating against large families.’ He continued by citing the ‘legitimate restrictions on density in general’ in the bylaws but added ‘it is equally arguable that they are primarily designed to restrict families with more than one or two children. ... [I]n recent years there has been much criticism of exclusionary zoning in the press and in some court opinions’ ... He explained that the legislature already expressed its concern in this area by enactment of the so-called ‘anti-snob’ zoning act.

Ultimately, the incursion by the state came in a different form. The Local Growth Policy Report made reference to “the building of the Regency Apartments which had been rejected by the town and then approved by the state” as an example of state government overreach and violation of “home rule.”

When I asked Ann about Cobblerton’s reaction to the Boston Busing Crisis, the first thing she mentioned was “a lot of fear” inspired by a new apartment complex that looked, to townspeople, like “towers”:

Ann

If you look at them, you've got two or three different towers. They're not really towers, if you grew up in Boston, but, you know, that's how we saw them out here. It was the time when I'm going to bet ... it was also at the same time when towns were first being told that they needed to start doing low-income housing and that they were setting percentages that you had to achieve, or you weren't going to be eligible for this, that or the other thing. And [Cobblerton] really got very, very scared. ... So by the time all of that gets out here. And I'm not even sure when METCO started in Natick, but I'm going to bet it somewhere in this region of time. ... This is encroachment. Now we're getting a

little bit nervous.

Briana Markoff

Ok, what exactly were people nervous about?

Ann

Those people! Yeah, oh those people, definitely those people. Those people didn't necessarily come, I don't think anyway, but I don't think all of them were Black people. They were just poor people. They were poor people from the city. Maybe Blacks were in there. There were a bunch of Blacks in there. But we just, we just definitely didn't need them. Didn't want them. Turner Road apartments come along. And now, if those aren't towers sitting on top of a hill. I don't know, that's how everybody looked at it. It was like this was the beginning of the end. So there was a huge fight over the zoning to limit the height of buildings to two and a half stories, which is still the case, and yet, you need to remember that downtown stories are three stories high from 1860.

Although the Local Growth Policy Report made no reference to race and only a passing reference to class, focusing more on the 'character' of the town, Ann remembered Cobblerton's decisions around housing and zoning to be motivated by fear of encroachment by "those people" – poor people from the city, many of whom were Black. While she emphasized that there had always been a few Black families in Cobblerton and "it was never an issue," she speculated that "if you had 50 of them, 50 African Americans had showed up and started to settle here, I think it would have been a very different reaction."

Because of the color-evasive nature of the Local Growth Policy Reports – which Dain (2023) argued was likely intentional, as town leadership was very aware that they could be taken to court over explicit racial discrimination – it is hard to determine the racial politics of their

decisions from the documents alone. But Ann was there, and she clearly remembered the “fear” of “encroachment” among townspeople at the time. Richard recalled this too. When I asked him whether Cobblerton ever considered joining the METCO program, he told me, “In those days? No, we weren’t going to rock the boat either. This is a whites-only town too.” I later learned, from Dr. P’s widow, that Dr. P had applied to join the METCO program, and was told that Cobblerton was too far from Boston. But Richard did not know that, or if he did, he did not remember. What he remembered, like his colleague Ann, was that Cobblerton understood itself to be a “whites-only town” and any disruption of that would have “rocked the boat” – which clearly suggests that the town’s whiteness was a major aspect of the ‘character’ that decisionmakers were working to preserve.

As Dain (2023) demonstrated, Cobblerton was not unique in its use of zoning to restrict growth and create barriers for entry for newcomers. But one decision that Cobblerton made that was unusual in the region was to reject a state-subsidized sewer system. The authors of the Local Growth Policy Report make clear that they believed that sewers would lead to rapid growth. In response to the prompt, “General description of expectations for the future: Describe below what appears to you to be most likely to happen to your community over the next twenty years, in terms of growth, development and change,” the authors of the Local Growth Policy Report wrote:

Most people don’t seem to want anything to happen to the town; feeling was that most likely we will continue as we are. Would like to see more open spaces. Town is making a significant move to acquire more open spaces. We might encounter federal restrictions on housing; government might subsidize low income housing. Question of whether there will be any departure from previous growth trends was discussed: an estimate of between

25,000 to 30,000 population growth was predicted in next 20 years but if we go to sewer installations it will probably go as high as 50,000. As of now could not see sewers voted in the town at this stage but probably would be possible in 20 years. Without sewerage, [Cobblerton] in 1990 predicted to grow to 18,000 to 20,000.

Here, as they did throughout the report, the authors reiterated that they did not want the town to change any more. They made clear that their rejection of the sewer system was meant to slow down growth. At the time of the report's writing, Cobblerton had just rejected a state subsidized sewer system, in what Ann described as a "bloody battle." Immediately after telling me that the town was "very, very scared" after the state started mandating low-income housing, she said:

What came sort of in a series of events, we got sewers, people, 1972 ish, there was a big push, federal push, to sewer. And they would pay 90% and the town would pay 10% and [Cobblerton] turned it down, not without a big, big, big fight. I mean, that was a bloody battle. But the argument – I was against the sewers, the argument that I had at the time was, you put in sewers and Route 16, or Route 126, whichever you call it, just becomes like Route 9. It just becomes a throughway, okay? Because it's on the way to something else. It's not a destination. Same thing happened to Medway with Route 109. Today we can look all around us and see that that's exactly what happened. We said no.

Ann compared Cobblerton's main streets, which today have a Dunkin Donuts and a regional chain Italian restaurant but are otherwise limited to small local businesses, to the more developed roads in nearby towns, which are built up with large strip malls, big box stores, and national chains restaurants. Cobblerton did avoid this kind of development by rejecting the sewers, and they certainly slowed growth – even today, Cobblerton's population remains lower than the 18,000 the authors predicted by 1990.

But there were other consequences to rejecting the sewers as well, which are still being felt today. Restaurants in downtown Cobblerton have to keep limited hours, because their septic systems are too small to accommodate wastewater from washing dishes seven days a week. Dense housing, such as apartment complexes, are harder and more expensive to build, because the developer must also include a septic tank that can accommodate all the residents. And finally, lot sizes for single-family homes must be kept large:

Ann

We were accused of snob zoning when we created two and three acre lots out in the western part of town. So the state was mumbling at us that you really can't be doing this so, but there were, unfortunately, with everything, there is some legitimate reason why some of this happens, and there are areas of town where you need to worry about how close your septic tank is to your well, because some of those areas didn't have town water, so it was perfectly legitimate argument to increase the lot size.

Briana Markoff

But it wouldn't have been if they had done the sewers.

Ann

No longer the same. If you've done the sewers right, okay, it would have just totally wiped that up.

Robert, who was chair of the town selectmen at the time of the sewer debate, told me that he had initially supported the sewers but that it turned out to be too expensive and he felt the town would not be able to afford the actual cost. However, he did echo Ann's overall point, which was that policies put in place in the early seventies were designed toward keeping the town the way it was – which, because of the previous history of segregation, meant keeping it

overwhelmingly white. Robert told me, “We want to keep the growth down, slow. In those days, a few people owned most of the land in town. And sooner or later you knew they were going to sell. And we just wanted to slow it down. We changed the zoning, so most of the inbuilt areas required larger lots than the land close to the center of town, just to slow it down.”

While in Robert’s mind, this desire to slow growth down might have had nothing to do with race or even class, Richard, who represented Cobblerton in the state legislature and then as a selectman and member of the Zoning By-Laws Committee, saw a more direct connection:

Richard

Our objective was to keep things as much as they are, were at that time. We didn’t feel like opening the town up to say, everybody come in.

Briana Markoff

What was the fear of what would happen if more people came to town?

Richard

Well you’d have a lot more houses built, a lot more roads, a lot more tax base, but there wasn’t an awful lot of land that was available for that purpose, so by and large, it takes me back to ... If we stay a bedroom town, we wouldn’t have to change much. Any zoning that we changed in those days would have encouraged more housing development, which meant more schools, and more employees in general, so we’d just get bigger. It doesn’t change much, it just makes it more people to collect the dole in the town hall, next thing we’d be needing a town hall, to hold ‘em all. I tended to be conservative in most of those things, I didn’t want to see the town explode.

I noticed that Richard assumed that more people in town would inevitably mean “more people to collect the dole” – meaning, more people on welfare, more people in poverty. He assumed that

growth in Cobblerton would lead to a drain on town resources rather than adding to revenues, and was aware that his decisions would keep the town's wealth and less tangible resources, like its "atmosphere," reserved for residents who were already there. Later in the interview, he told me that he would not have invited the METCO program to Cobblerton, because:

We weren't going to rock the boat either. This is a whites only town too. You could say that and deny it. I don't even deny it that hard. I have a lot of Black friends, in fact my roommate in college was Black, after a while you don't even notice, and it's just, hell, so I have nothing personal against Blacks, but I am aware that I'm white, and much of the advantage I have living here is because I'm in a white community that doesn't have social problems that go with mixed race.

So Richard, like Ann, understood Cobblerton's fundamentally conservative policies to be at least partly about keeping Cobblerton middle class, and definitely about keeping Cobblerton white. He clearly stated that he saw the town's whiteness as an asset – as property – worth protecting and understood that it is in his own interest to keep it that way.

Though Robert did not speak directly about race and class, he referred to the town's "atmosphere," and directly linked his decisions to slowing growth. He said, "the idea was just to kind of control [the town's growth] so we could keep the atmosphere, keep the quality of the schools." This is telling because growth, in general, might have broadened the tax base and increased school funding. Robert's focus on maintaining the quality of the schools by keeping growth slow may demonstrate that, like his colleague Richard, he feared that "opening the town up to say, everybody come in," would have brought people who would have drained, rather than contributed to, the town's resources. In working hard to keep the town as it was – that is, keep it white – the town's decisionmakers worked actively to protect the property of the town's

whiteness and avoid the threat that they saw to the town's – that is, white – interests. They saw themselves as protecting the town's material and more intangible resources, such as the “atmosphere,” and the “quality” of the schools without openly admitting that this work was racially motivated.

White Ignorance

While to Ann it is obvious, in retrospect, that Cobblerton's decisionmakers were driven by fear, to Robert this did not seem obvious at all; nor did the resource-hoarding effects of their decisions. This, I argue, is made possible by white ignorance. Ann, Richard, Robert, and Robert's wife, Kathryn, each demonstrated some aspect of white ignorance, leading me to conclude that, just as policies to protect Cobblerton's whiteness arose in response to the Boston Busing Crisis, white ignorance arose to protect townspeople, especially decisionmakers, from their own awareness of the racist impacts of what they were doing. This is not to implicate any of these individuals as exceptionally or uniquely racist, but instead to note how the material consequences of white resource hoarding both depend on and reinforce a pervasive ideology of whiteness that rests on white ignorance.

Of all my participants, Ann was the most upfront and direct with me about the racist motivations of Cobblerton's policy choices in the early seventies. Her immediate response to my question about the Boston Busing Crisis was, “There was a lot of fear,” and she later reiterated that “[Cobblerton] really got very very scared.” She was aware that racist fears were driving decisions. Nevertheless, she was surprised when I asked why, given how desirable Cobblerton's schools are, there aren't more Black families in town today. She responded, “Why would Black families make their way here?” describing how “remote” and “far” Cobblerton is from the city, and how even white people from Boston were “terrified” to visit her. “One of [my colleagues

from Boston] came into the house and said ... ‘My God, I was waiting for the Indians to come over the hill.’” This comment is striking because of the anti-Native sentiment, with its hint that, whether it’s from urban Blackness or rural Indigeneity, whiteness is always somehow under threat from an Other. It also stands out because of the simple fact that, though Ann herself moved to Cobblerton from Springfield, a smaller city than Boston but just as “urban” in character, it did not occur to her that Black families might want to do the same.

Ann also told me that the single Black family in town was “treated well.” “Everybody loved [their son] ... Nobody thought about [him being Black], he was just a nice guy.” Later, she sent me a link to an essay written by the man who “everybody loved,” Charles, in which he described in detail experiencing racism throughout his time in Cobblerton. She had read this essay, which she interpreted as the author starting to “realize how different his environment had been in this all-white world.” The essay, titled “What I Went Through,” described constant racist bullying in elementary school, being called the n-word at school in sixth grade, and being arrested at gunpoint for being “a passenger in a speeding car” as an adult. While the essay’s author also experienced love and loyalty from some of his classmates and teammates, it is clearly false that “nobody thought about [him being Black].” The contrast between Ann’s memory of Charles’ essay and what it actually describes demonstrates the hard work of not knowing that allows Cobblerton to continue to narrate itself as a “good town.”

Richard, a lifelong Republican, told me that he had distanced himself from the party since Trump’s election, due to their racism. He described how, after World War II, he noticed how, “Blacks and whites did things together. And I said, the war worked. We’re an integrated country,” but later he realized that, “I was always pretty naive about things like that, until Trump came down the stairs and said ‘there are a lot of bad Mexicans,’ I really thought we were no

longer concerned about it. Was I wrong!” Richard seemed to be saying that he spent the years 1945 to 2016 believing that racism was no longer an issue in the United States, despite the fact that he served in the Massachusetts legislature with Billy Bulger, who was nationally known for his racist opposition to integration in Boston (Formisano, 2004). After describing Billy Bulger as a “personal friend,” Richard went on to say:

Of course Billy Bulger was working hard with Louise Day Hicks to prevent integration of the schools. It was the same thing that’s now come out. It’s like gophers, they finally come out of the ground. Really, the Republican party is a “for whites only” party. You can call it anything you want, and that’s what it is. And that’s what these guys were, even though they were all Democrats in Boston. It was for whites only, and they didn’t want to do anything that would rattle the cages, so to speak. Now there were lots of meetings, and lots of talks, and there were some demonstrations, and they finally put enough Black kids on buses and drove them to Wellesley and Winchester and places like that, and it kind of went away.

Though he described the racist elements of his own party as “gophers,” hidden underground, they – including his personal friend, Billy Bulger – could not have been more explicit about their hatred for Black children, even inciting violence against them (Formisano, 2004). At the same time, Richard seemed to willfully misunderstand the crisis itself, even though he served in the legislature in the year immediately prior. He claimed that “it” was resolved through the introduction of the METCO program, which in fact predated the crisis by a decade and did nothing to solve the problem at the heart of the crisis, which was segregation within Boston’s schools. The “it” that “kind of went away” was not segregation, but the racist opposition to integration, because white families fled the school system or the city rather than participate in

integration. How could someone as powerful as Richard have such a limited understanding of the defining issue of his time in government? Only through the active “not-seeing and not-knowing” that Mills described as white ignorance.

Robert and his wife Kathryn described Cobblerton as very welcoming to them when they first moved to town in 1958. “Most New England towns,” Robert said, “and particularly old towns like [Cobblerton], don’t like people coming in ... [Cobblerton] opened its arms.” Kathryn added, “They were welcoming.” And yet, there was only one Black family at the time. To Robert, this was evidence that, “I have never known [Cobblerton] to be adverse [to racial diversity.]” Robert and Kathryn went on to tell me about their efforts to help Robert’s Black coworker and his wife buy a house in Cobblerton:

Before [they bought the house] we figured out who would object and who would accept them, and so forth. First time in my life I’ve ever been 100% wrong. The ones we thought would object were the first ones with open arms. The ones we thought would accept it were miserable. However, that was just within the neighborhood. The two boys were in high school, no problems. The mother was a teacher, she got a job, she taught sixth grade for many years.

Despite their insistence that the town was welcoming, Robert and Kathryn were aware that some of their neighbors were “miserable” to have a Black family move to their neighborhood. They insisted, like Ann did about Charles, that their Black neighbors, Stan and Denise Jackson, experienced “no problems” and, of Denise, went on to insist “everybody loved her, the parents loved her, the kids loved her,” using the same language that Ann used to describe her neighbor who was racially harassed throughout his school and athletic careers.

Kathryn went on to describe how, after the Jacksons moved in, real estate agents tried to

start the process of blockbusting – showing Black families around the neighborhood in order to scare white families into selling their houses at a loss before property values dropped – but Denise drove them off, insisting that “no house on this street, or in the near vicinity, would be sold to a Black person.” So, while Robert and Kathryn experienced the town as welcoming, Denise and her family were greeted by predatory real estate agents trying to use their family’s presence to make a profit. Then, Robert said, “Black people did start coming around town. Individual houses. No problems.” Kathryn added, “I think [Cobblerton] is very diverse. And I think nothing wrong with it at all. I think it’s wonderful. So, I know there are some people who think it’s not quite diverse enough, but you can’t please everybody anyway.” Cobblerton has never been more than 1% Black, and never more than 10% People of Color, but Kathryn experienced it as very diverse. Robert believed that Black families in town experience “no problems.” Again, these understandings of race and diversity align with Mills’ theory of white ignorance, and demonstrate how integral white ignorance is to the process of white resource hoarding. Their belief, like Dr. P’s, that Cobblerton was successfully integrated and free from racism may have justified Robert’s decisions in town leadership, where he focused on keeping the town from growing and changing. To Robert and his wife Kathryn, white dominance in Cobblerton feels natural and normal.

The story of Cobblerton in the early 1970s is a story of white people not understanding the world that they themselves – we, ourselves – have made. Through rejecting sewers, which prevented the construction of dense housing, businesses, or industry; by dodging low-income housing; by symbolically capping the height of buildings; by zoning for large lots; by building senior housing that today, Cobblerton’s own seniors cannot afford, Cobblerton decisionmakers protected its identity as a white enclave and ensured that Cobblerton’s celebrated schools would

only be accessed by a privileged few (white) students. This demonstrates interest convergence, because these decisions allowed for just enough racial diversity in the town that some residents can describe it as “very diverse,” while in no way threatening the privilege that attending schools like Cobblerton’s affords. Whiteness is property in Cobblerton, doubly protected by the policies that make Cobblerton inaccessible and the townspeople’s lack of awareness of such policies or their consequences. As a result, Cobblerton maintains its imagined status within the privileged moral geography of the nation – as a “good town” – while the mechanisms of its boundary maintenance and frontier defense are largely overlooked and ignored. These defenses, however, have implications for Families and Students of Color, within Cobblerton and beyond.

Racism in Cobblerton, Then and Now

One consequence of Cobblerton’s efforts to maintain the status quo of whiteness and exclusion was the creation of a racially homogenous community, where visible difference – especially Blackness – was so rare that residents of Color were widely assumed to be outsiders, and treated as such. The “good town” became the site of racial hostility, which in turn became yet another tool of opportunity hoarding. As the 1975 *Route 128* report noted, Black families who wanted to move to the suburbs (30% in a 1967 survey) were deterred by the fear of how they would be treated there:

The study suggested that few black families wish to be pioneers or to take aggressive action to acquire housing in areas where they have no reason to believe they will be accepted. In addition, many were afraid of the treatment their children would receive in predominantly white schools. (MAC & MCAD, p. 79)

As Rury and Rife (2018) argued, overt and covert racial hostility in white communities functioned as a deterrent to Black families seeking suburban residences in the years following

the Fair Housing Act. Rury & Rife (2018) described opportunity hoarding in suburbs across the country as “white backlash” to the Civil Rights movement. In the early 1970’s, they found, “systemic racism found expression in highly effective formal and informal barriers erected to prevent African-Americans from leaving their historic central city residential areas. These obstacles denied blacks access to the better quality homes and neighbourhoods, as well as the good schools that white suburbanites enjoyed” (p. 92). One of the “informal” barriers that Rury and Rife (2018) identified was racial steering, in which real estate agents directed Black prospective homebuyers toward some neighborhoods and away from others. Another was racial hostility from townspeople, especially local police and local government agents. It is harder to find documented evidence of these informal, and in some cases illegal, practices. However, participants in this study shared counterstories of racial hostility in Cobblerton.

Charles, who I met through Ann, told me the following story of when his family first moved to Cobblerton, in 1963:

We almost, nobody would rent to my parents. They wouldn't rent them a home. In fact, they went to one real estate agency, and it was a young person, my mother told me, and they were really excited. Apparently they didn't get a whole lot of people walking in the door. But my parents said that they were looking to rent a small two-bedroom home, and this realtor looked through a couple of books and said we've got a couple here for you to choose from. Come on in, sit right down. And my mother said he was very excited to help them. But a few minutes later, the owner came in and said that they had no vacancies. And the realtor my parents were talking to said, what are you talking about? There's three of them, right here! And the owner said there's no vacancies. So my parents, rather dejectedly, as you can imagine, walked out. ... So my parents came out rather

dejected and were contemplating what their next move was going to be. And this little Black man pulls up in a truck and he gets out and he says, Oh, you must be new here in town. I know everybody in town, and I ain't ever seen you before, so what's your name? So my father tells him. So he said, So what are you doing here? Are you looking for someone, do you know somebody, are you related to somebody? And my mother said, Well, no, we aren't, we're trying to rent a house here. Because my husband is getting ready to start a job here with the town of [Cobblerton], but nobody, nobody seems to want to rent to us. And this is about the third or fourth realtor that they had seen that day. So this little man says to my parents well, how big a home are you looking for? And my mother says, just a small two bedroom, just enough for us and our son. That's it. And she said he got really excited. He said, Okay, stay right here. ... And my mother said to my father, or my father said to my mother, You think this guy is on the up and up? You think everything's cool here? And my mother said, I don't care if he's crazy as long as he's got a small two-bedroom home. So he comes out, he says, Okay, just follow me, it's like down the street here and they followed him for about a minute drive ... and there were two houses down there. One was Mr. Gomes, his and his wife's house. And then there was like a summer cottage on the edge of the property. And that was a small two-bedroom house that he had. And so he, my parents followed him there and he got out. And he says, just come in here and have a look and he just opened it up. He said, I'm gonna go up to the house. You have a look around this. When you've finished, just close the door and come on up and see me and we'll talk. That's how we moved into [Cobblerton]. If they, five minutes either way, they never would have seen that man and who knows if we would have ever moved there.

Charles' story of obvious housing discrimination took place before 1968, when it was not yet explicitly outlawed for a realtor to discriminate on the basis of race. It is impossible to know how many other families tried to move to Cobblerton before or after 1968 and were turned away by the four or five realtors that Charles's parents visited. Housing discrimination is hard to prove, and it is true, due in part to restrictive zoning laws, that Cobblerton has few rental properties. But given Charles's account, and the shockingly low numbers of Black residents in Cobblerton then and now, it is likely that housing discrimination continued in some form.

A participant in my pilot study told me that, in 1988 or 1989, she overheard two women talking about racial steering in a nearby town: "I was in Needham in a store, and I was in the dressing rooms. Two women were talking about Black people in Needham. And these two women were saying, and I was in shock. They're saying, Oh, no, the realtors really do try to keep them out." She told me this as a way of explaining why she chose Cobblerton over some of the neighboring towns – but I don't see any reason to believe that, if it was happening in Needham, it wasn't happening in Cobblerton as well. Glotzer (2020) demonstrated that, from the origins of the profession, realtors have been highly incentivized to participate in racial steering and maintain housing segregation, in the name of protecting property values. As many researchers have shown, perceived school quality is linked to the whiteness of the student body of any given school or district (Holme, 2002; Johnson & Shapiro, 2013; Wells, 2018). Home values correlate directly to perceived school quality, with the race of the student body sometimes more salient even than test scores (Dougherty, 2009). So, the material incentives for white people, and especially the residents of overwhelmingly white places, to maintain whiteness and segregation remain strong to this day.

In the next chapter, I demonstrate that Black and other Students of Color in Cobblerton

experienced racism, both interpersonal and systemic, in Cobblerton schools in recent years. But as Charles' story indicates, it is not only students in school who are treated with racial hostility in Cobblerton. Bill, a Black resident who moved to Cobblerton in the early 2000s, described being both harassed and profiled by town police, and being refused help when he needed it. He heard rumors that town police made bets about how long he and other Black residents would last in town. This indicates that these officers, employed by the town, understand racial hostility as a way to drive People of Color out, and even deter others from coming in. As Rury and Rife (2018) noted, in their study of Kansas City and its suburbs in the 1960's, racism from real estate agents, police, and schools work together as another mechanism of maintaining segregation, defending the town's borders against "encroachment" and hoarding resources of whiteness – even, or especially, in a "good town."

Discussion

Mills (1997) and Wynter (2003) both demonstrated the process by which white supremacy came to be. Both authors argue that, in order for a group of people to justify their conquest and enslavement of other groups, they had to define those Others as subhuman – and that racial hierarchy arose as the most effective mechanism for establishing, maintaining, and justifying this dominance. While at the time this violence took the form of enslavement and Indigenous genocide, the racial hierarchy established then is maintained now through the "organized abandonment" of Black and Indigenous places and Black and Indigenous lives – and the extraction of their resources by those with power and wealth.

The project of conquest, of colonization and enslavement, depended not only on the material exploitation of Black and Indigenous peoples, but also on the moral justification for doing so. Even as self-identified whites pursued their genocidal project, they also, relying on

Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy, cast themselves as distinctly and uniquely moral. To resolve the contradiction between the extreme violence and brutality required to establish and maintain white supremacy, and the moral philosophy the conquerors espoused, they relied on white ignorance to actively misunderstand their actions and impacts. From the origins of whiteness, then, whiteness has been conflated with, and at times even defined as, goodness. It follows that white places have become “privileged moral geographies” and a white town – whose whiteness depends on active exclusion and racial hostility – styled itself as a good town. Under the logic of white supremacy, the white town is good because it is white. Under the logic of neoliberalism, it is the responsibility of each individual to protect their property and accumulate more, and as such, resource hoarding is also “good.”

Cobblerton’s leadership actively worked to maintain the town’s whiteness – while relying on white ignorance to reflect their own and others’ knowledge that they were doing so. The process of keeping Cobblerton white was not natural, not “just osmosis,” and not the result of preferences of Black Boston residents to “stick to their own kind” (MCAD & MAC, 1975). Instead, the town used zoning to reject apartments, limit rental properties, and keep lot sizes large. They also rejected a state-subsidized sewer system, the absence of which is still felt today, especially by those trying to run businesses in Cobblerton’s small commercial district. All of this was done with the stated intention of slowing the town’s growth and keeping things “the way they were” – meaning the levels of whiteness, wealth, and education that the town had recently achieved, during its period of rapid growth in the 1960s. These efforts to “preserve” the town’s “character” were incentivized and supported by state and federal policy, especially as suburban residents became aware and fearful of “urban blight” created by the same policies that allowed them to protect their town from “encroachment.”

It had the additional effect of ensuring that property values in town have continued to rise, such that it is largely unaffordable for long-time residents, including the elderly, to move within town, and those moving into town today are much wealthier than those who arrived a generation ago. In some ways, then, things have not stayed “the way they were” – new houses in town are bigger and more expensive, and the average income of town residents has risen considerably in recent years. And the schools, as I show in Chapter 5, though not as lauded as they were in Dr. P’s time, continue to draw in families seeking a good education for their children and a good investment in their home purchase.

In other ways, though, things have not changed. Since 1970, the percentage of Black residents in the town has barely risen, and the percentage of non-Black People of Color remains lower than similar, neighboring towns. The decisions made in the 1970s continue to work in the background, slowing growth and maintaining the town’s whiteness, while many townspeople continue to understand the town as warm, welcoming, and even diverse. These largely invisible mechanisms of segregation and hoarding also provide cover for the racial hostility that, then and now, can also function as a deterrent for Families of Color seeking the same education, investment, and opportunities as the town’s white residents. If the town’s whiteness seems natural and normal, then the rare and often unreported instances of racial profiling and harassment that happen in town can seem like aberrations rather than part of a systematic effort to protect the property of whiteness. All of this both depends on and reproduces white ignorance, allowing this white place to understand itself as good, and as innocent – that is, as disconnected from larger issues of inequality or injustice.

Conclusion

In 1975, the authors of the *Route 128* report were already aware of the role that suburban

decisionmakers were playing in sustaining racial injustice. They laid responsibility squarely at the feet of white communities to address the issues that they caused:

Access to suburban housing is not on the same scale of urgency as are some other minority needs. Suburban housing can have little meaning to a minority family unless suburban jobs and improved transportation are also made available. However, the need to change the segregated character of suburban housing is critical to the white community. It is the white community which must change. And it is in the area of housing that whites must directly face the fundamental issues of racial equality. (p. 1-2)

The authors of the report, as advocates of civil rights and racial justice, warned that if the suburbs continued to willfully misunderstand and actively ignore their role in perpetuating injustice, then over time this pattern of racial hierarchy would be cemented. Their report, which seems to have been ignored and then forgotten, proves prophetic today. Although the incoming classes to the elementary school named for Dr. P are more racially and linguistically diverse than any in Cobblerton's history, Cobblerton remains a hostile place for Families of Color, and town and school leadership, even when vocally committed to diversity, struggle to chart a pathway toward meaningful change.

In the early 1970s, Cobblerton leaders worked hard to protect the whiteness of their community, such that as Dr. P grew and developed his innovative, progressive, and increasingly well-reputed school district, few Students of Color would ever access its educational offerings, and those that did would be subjected to racist bullying, exclusion, and curricular erasure. Thus, through zoning, rejecting the sewers, exposing residents of Color to racial hostility – all while maintaining the narrative of the “good town” – Cobblerton built a white community that accumulated educational resources around white students, a process that I call white educational

resource hoarding. In what follows, I discuss the impact of these policies on Students and Families of Color in the town today and consider the opportunities and limitations of Cobblerton Schools to provide a good education for a more inclusive and just future.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INTERLUDE: GOOD GIRL

In the year 2000, I was in sixth grade. It was my first year at Cobblerton Middle School. I didn't like school that much, but I went everyday anyway, and tried to be good. I had Ms. T for math and social studies, Mrs. F for English, and Mrs. D for science. I thought Ms. T was a great math teacher, even though I didn't like math. Ms. T was funny and sarcastic, and the hour with her went by fast. But she had not taught social studies before, so mostly we read aloud out of textbooks about Ancient Greece – pretty boring. In English, I had already read all the books Mrs. F had planned for us, so sometimes I got sent to the library to work on a fantasy novel I was writing for extra credit. Science was okay because we did labs, but there was a boy at my table who listened to music on his Walkman all through class and the teacher didn't do anything about it. This boy, Alberto, explained to me – in English – that this was because he didn't speak English, so there was no point in paying attention. I guess Mrs. D agreed with him.

That fall, George W. Bush was elected president, and he took office in the winter. One thing he talked a lot about during his campaign and early days in office was our nation's failing schools. At the time, I didn't know anything about Ronald Reagan or his *Nation At Risk* report, but I did know that there were some pretty bad schools out there. In 2001, *Save the Last Dance* came out, a movie about a white girl (just a little older than me, and a dancer like me) who transfers to a majority Black high school on the south side of Chicago after her mother's death. The imagined, stereotypical Black school she goes to is crowded and loud, with graffiti in the hallways and rap music blasting. Her new classmates have criminal records, have children before graduation, and, with a few exceptions, don't care about school at all. I knew when Bush was talking about failing schools, he didn't mean mine – he meant schools like the one in the movie, where an innocent white girl like Julia Stiles' character, or like me, so obviously didn't belong.

The legislation that Congress passed and Bush signed in 2002 was called “No Child Left Behind,” and even though Alberto, sitting across from me in science class, was clearly being left behind, the rhetoric around the new law made it clear that, for “good” schools like mine, little would change. We’d have more testing, which was treated as a chore, but we all knew our scores would be fine. It was those other schools, the “failing” schools, that were under threat. And indeed, ten years later, Rahm Emanuel closed 50 Chicago public schools, mostly on the south and west sides, the real, beloved counterparts of the “bad” school from *Save the Last Dance* (Ewing, 2018).

The discourse around the No Child Left Behind act taught us, in Cobblerton, that our schools were good and – or maybe even, because – other schools were bad. And pop culture portrayals of these bad schools like *Save the Last Dance* taught us that the kids in these schools were not good kids. As a teenage moviegoer, I might have been vaguely aware that city schools were underfunded and overcrowded, but the film’s focus is squarely on the Black kids and their “bad” behavior. And while Julia Stiles’ character learns to loosen up and embody her sexuality through hip hop dance, the audience (obviously intended to be white teens) learns that, at urban schools, Black boys are gang-involved, are sexually aggressive and absent fathers, while Black girls are loud, crass, hypersexual, and resent the good white girl in their midst for her goodness, which earns her the love of the most talented Black boy in the school. One of the film’s many lessons was that part of being good – a good student at a good school – was performing your gender role properly. And *Save the Last Dance*, like so many other movies targeting teenagers, showed white girls how to be by showing us how *not* to be, which was like the bad Black girls at the bad school in the city. Those girls were not innocent, and their school was not safe, which was why it was not good, and not like ours.

Attending my good school and striving to be a good student taught me a lot about how to be a good girl. I learned that it was okay to be smart, as long as I wasn't too show-offy about it, but it was more important to be diligent, meticulous, and polite, to have very neat handwriting and be very organized, to complete everything assigned to me and turn it in on time, to be where I was supposed to be, when I was supposed to be there, and keep my eyes on the teacher and nod along as she spoke, no matter what I thought about what she had to say. I was never late. I followed the dress code. I volunteered to help others. Through my good behavior, I made our school good – or was it the other way around? Either way, for me, part of being good, and being a good student, was being properly feminine – sweet and polite, cute and appealing to boys but not sexy, friendly and cheerful but not too loud.

I wasn't naturally good at it. I wanted to be good, but I had trouble keeping my mouth shut and I had no idea how to dress my curvy body to conform to the complex norms that all the girls seemed to already know. Once, in eighth grade, I wore a shirt that I'd outgrown to our class-wide debate. My team of four won the entire competition of one hundred kids, but afterwards we were subjected to a lecture about "professional" dress which, as I stood listening along with my hundred classmates, I slowly and shamefully realized was targeting me and my favorite, cherry red, now too small and too revealing top. But I donated that shirt to Goodwill and went to ballet class and smiled in front of a mirror and learned how to wear makeup so you couldn't tell I was wearing it and when I got my nose pierced for my seventeenth birthday I made sure to pick out the tiniest little diamond that you could barely even see. As a result of my efforts and the efforts of those around me to play our roles properly, if they made a movie about our school, it would have been the opposite of the *Save the Last Dance* school – quiet, orderly, and clean, all of us dressed "preppy," as in preparatory school, which was what this was, since

we were all going to college, and all of this supposedly protected our innocence and safety while preparing us for our bright futures.

On September 11, 2001, I was in seventh grade. At school that day, our teachers shooed us out of their classrooms after each bell, and we saw them pull out their classroom TVs and turn on the news during passing time, but no one told us what was going on. This was typical Cobblerton – the adults understood us as innocent children, and wanted to protect us by keeping us ignorant of this scary world event. As a result, terrifying rumors flew, but it wasn't until we got home from school, six hours after the second plane hit the second tower, that we finally learned what had happened.

After that, the world around us changed rapidly – American flags were suddenly everywhere, and so was the face of the “Afghan girl.” The Afghan girl was Sharbat Gula, a Pashtun refugee whose portrait was taken without her consent and made the cover of *National Geographic* magazine in 1985, and again in 2002 when she was “found” and turned into propaganda a second time, for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. I didn't know her name or her story, but I knew her face, her scared green eyes looking out from below her rust red headscarf. I didn't know what a violation it was for her face to be exposed to the world like that. I just knew that it was for the good of girls like her, and the freedom of girls like me, that our country was going to war.

In 2013, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod wrote, “I am surprised by how easily people presume that Muslim women do not have rights” (p. 4). But as a teenager in the early 2000's, as the Bush Whitehouse scrambled to justify their invasions and prolonged occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, this message – that Muslim women were oppressed and needed saving – was pervasive. My family did not support the War on Terror or any other war, and I didn't see

how dropping bombs on a country could help its women and girls.

In fact, I had heard this logic before, in Hebrew school, which I only attended for a few years. There, I was taught that God gave the Jews – us – the land of Israel, and so it was our moral obligation to occupy that land. When I asked about the Palestinians who lived there and maybe believed that God gave them the land, I was told that our God was real, and theirs was not. That's why the state is called "Is-real," because the Jewish homeland is real – Palestine was a fantasy, invented by a false prophet to justify the further, endless persecution of the Jews. The only way we could really be safe, and really be free, was if that land belonged to us, and only us. Denying all human rights to Palestinians, keeping them in the open-air prison of Gaza, and dropping bombs on their homes and schools was actually making people safer and freer. Further, Israel was the only "democracy" in the Middle East, and so the only country in which women had rights. By this logic, safety and freedom, for the world generally, and for me, a little Jewish girl sitting in a Hebrew school classroom in Massachusetts, depended on occupation and borders defended with extreme violence, and the total dehumanization of the people on the other side. This didn't make sense to me even at age ten, but when a few years later when Muslims became the national enemy, and, at the same time, the freedom of Muslim women was suddenly a U.S. concern, the story was a familiar one. Once again, somehow, little white girls like me were under threat unless the U.S. and our allies bombed Muslim countries far away.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, we learned, U.S. bombs would spread freedom and democracy, and when the Islamist regimes fell and the women of the Middle East were freed, they would throw off the veil – and, for the first time, attend school. All of this was suspect in my mind, and I attended protests just like my parents had done for Vietnam. But, at first anyway, the education part made sense to me. Because to me, education meant access to a good college and a good job

and a good life, and as a budding feminist I wanted those things for all girls, all around the world. Years later, when I was still adamant that I did not want to become a teacher, I would take a job running an after-school program called “Make It Happen!” for immigrant and refugee high school students who wanted to go to college. It was my students there, most of whom were girls, many of whom were Black, many of whom were Muslim and wore headscarves, and their school, with its “Get Smart To Do Good” motto, that would change my mind about teaching. I got my license in English Language Arts and an endorsement in English for Speakers of Other Languages so that I could continue working with these girls, from all around the world, fleeing the very violence being done by my country in my name, who were working so hard, who wanted to fulfill their family’s dream for them to get a good, American education.

Toward the end of the year with Make It Happen!, I brought my students on a campus visit to a local college. I thought the trip went well – the girls were thrilled to be out of school but also were very engaged by the college visit. But at the end of the day, we – my students and I – were all subjected to a lecture by my boss, an older white man, about the girls’ inappropriate behavior on the trip. At first, I had no idea what he was talking about. To my knowledge, none of them had broken any rules or done anything wrong. It turned out, their offending behavior was just that they were too loud. Not during the tours or information sessions, when they needed to be quiet and listen, but while we were outside on our own, or on the bus. The girls’ laughter, singing, and dancing had so offended my boss that he told me unless I could get them under control, we weren’t going on another Make It Happen! trip. He told me it was my job to explicitly instruct the girls in how to act “professionally” on a college campus. This was confusing, since my recent memories of college were mostly of kids running around barefoot and barely dressed, laughing and yelling, blasting music, and using every illicit substance to excess,

but I knew what he meant by “professional.” He wanted my Black and Brown girls performing diligence, meticulousness, and politeness at all times. And I, as his underling and as the only white woman present, was tasked with disciplining them into this properly gendered behavior.

Maria Lugones (2007) explained that our current, rigidly and violently imposed gender system, was developed as a tool of colonialism. In order to keep white women both loyal to and subservient to white men, and to justify the exploitation, rape, and murder of Black and Indigenous women, conquerors imposed a two-sided gender system. The light side, into which I was disciplined through schooling and culture, demands that women be passive and polite, charming and sweet, and sexually pure (innocent) and loyal, and offers in exchange proximity to power, safety, and belonging through marriage and the domestic sphere. White women who reject these gender norms, including heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood, are cast as deviant, unnatural, and even criminal or dangerous – a threat to “family values” and the “natural” hierarchy. While U.S. (mostly white) feminists have sought to combat these gender norms, as Lugones (2007) and many Black and Third World feminists have pointed out, efforts have largely failed because their analysis is incomplete. Combatting patriarchy without combatting colonialism and capitalism gave us “girl power” and “girl bosses,” in which a narrow slice of white, wealthy women aspire to embody and wield the violent, oppressive power of masculinity to exploit and control others – and those others are often the Black and Brown women upon whose labor and lives capitalism depends.

Meanwhile, under the “dark” side of this system, colonized women are always already deviant, unnatural, and dangerous – wild, super strong, and hypersexual – and therefore not worthy of protection and care, infinitely exploitable and disposable. White women teachers and social workers, with their civilizing mission of spreading Christian morality – that is, goodness –

through schooling, were expected to discipline immigrant, Indigenous and Black children into proper, and properly gendered, knowledge and behavior. But this ongoing project is always a failure, and by design. If some Students of Color (who, as Venzant Chambers (2022) demonstrated, often understand this system better than the teachers working within it) can manage to conform well enough and for long enough to be deemed academically successful, then that becomes proof that the others, who don't or can't or won't, are undeserving, and their future exploitation and disposable status within society are therefore justified.

White heterosexual femininity, and its reproduction through schooling, plays a key role in sustaining racial capitalism and the myth of meritocracy. White girls like me learn it at school, and are rewarded if we internalize it well enough – with friends and boyfriends, with acceptance, belonging, and love, with hope for our bright futures. If not, we might be punished, especially in schools like Cobblerton's where, at least when I was a kid, conformity was protection – from bullying, from ostracization, from being labeled a problem. But because whiteness is so intertwined with femininity and both are so integral to dominant understandings of goodness, it is much harder for Girls of Color to reap those rewards, and they are much more likely to receive the punishments – even when their behavior, like the girls I took on the college visit, is the same as that of their white classmates (Carter Andrews, 2019).

As we'll see in the next chapter, Girls of Color in Cobblerton have suffered these punishments in the form of bullying from their peers, and a bewildered, disbelieving response from their school. (Bullying, here? *Racism* here? From these good kids, in our good school? There must be some mistake.) And because education in Cobblerton offers no framework to critique this gender system and the harm it does us all, I was left with the understanding that educating kids, and especially girls, into being successful in this system was a way – maybe the

only way – to protect them. If they could just be good – good readers and writers and thinkers, but also good students with good behavior – then they would be safe from poverty and the attendant suffering, and the violence of dehumanization. And, in an effort to be good and do good (and also have a stable middle class career), like so, so many white women before me, I set out to become a teacher.

Erica Meiners (2007) explained how white women were enlisted into the conquest of the U.S. West through their role as teachers in the nineteenth century, with the explicit role of spreading “civilization,” Christianity, and morality. Grumet (1988) considered why early leaders of U.S. education, such as Horace Mann and Catherine Beecher, wanted common schoolteachers to be women, and how, as a result of so many women taking up this path, U.S. femininity was shaped by teaching, and U.S. schools were shaped by white femininity. And Matias (2016) thought through the impact of this history on her own teacher preparation classrooms today:

Each semester my White teacher candidates [are] ready to sacrifice and give back to disadvantaged students of Color with the intention to change the injustices that pervade urban schools. They are prepared to roll up their sleeves and help close the achievement gaps for urban students of Color, knowing that it is not fair that suburban schools have more resources, better buildings, and more qualified teachers ... my White teacher candidates become the heroic liberal warriors who will save students of Color from failing. (p. 9)

By the time I made it into the classroom, I had read *Snow* by Orhan Pamuk; I no longer believed that Muslim women were oppressed by their headscarves or their religion. I understood U.S. imperialism and no longer believed that educating “the girl child” was the solution to global inequality. I knew about the racial school discipline gap and took this as evidence that U.S.

schools were racist. And yet, I still thought that I, personally, armed with this knowledge, could do good, and be good. And still I wanted my students to be good. I was sure that that was the only thing that would keep them safe in a violent world. And this cruel optimism drove me for years, even as my students patiently taught me all the reasons I was wrong. I just couldn't quite imagine otherwise.

I met Carla Shalaby at the *Free Minds, Free People* conference in Minneapolis in 2019, in the summer before I began my final year of teaching, the year in which I almost couldn't do it anymore, because the contradictions between what I wanted to do and what I was actually doing were becoming too stark. The 2019-2020 school year was the first time I taught in the same school for two years in a row. My curriculum was all made, my forty-three-minute-long lessons were planned down to the second, and I knew before the school year even started which classroom routines would work and how to put them in place so my lessons would run smoothly. And they did, mostly. It helped that, as the seventh-grade teachers had told me they would be, our eighth graders that year were pretty good. Unlike the sixth graders, who loved to stage big dramatic fights that all the kids would run out into the hallways to watch, the eighth graders were orderly, diligent, and even polite. And yet that was the year that I could barely keep going – the year that, when spring break came early due to the COVID-19 pandemic and then was extended and then, though we did run asynchronous online school, it turned out I never had to go back to my classroom again, it felt like I had been granted a wish I'd been trying not to make.

When I read Shalaby's (2017) book *Troublemakers*, and attended her workshop at the conference on abolitionist school discipline, I started to understand why I couldn't stomach teaching any longer. I wanted to be a free person, and I wanted my students to be free people, and I did believe, and still do, that reading and writing well could help us get there. But it was

everything else – the forty-three-minute lesson plans, planned down to the second, the classroom routines, the lurking anxiety that the classroom ceiling would leak again, or I’d have to get into it with some kid I loved about wearing a hat or hood when they weren’t supposed to, or that some sixth grader would jump on another one just to get all their classmates to come running and break up the tedium of those forty-three-minute lessons, back to back to back to back all day – that was causing my burnout. As Shalaby explained, disciplining kids into “goodness” as defined by white supremacy – quiet, polite, compliant – not only robs them of their freedom and autonomy, but also of their power to stand up to injustice and dehumanization. In trying so hard to be a good teacher, and to discipline my kids into goodness to keep them safe, I was reproducing the logic and the violence of schooling in Cobblerton.

Breaking this cycle requires redefining goodness. Shalaby (2017) wrote:

A free person can expect to be seen and treated as a full human being, free from any threats to her identity, to her cultural values and know-how, to her safety and health, and to her language and land. A free person retains her power, her right to self-determination, her opportunity to flourish, her ability to love and to be loved, and her capacity for hope.

A free person recognizes when she or others are being treated as less than fully human.

And a free person embraces both her right and her duty to struggle against such treatment and to organize with others to do the same as a solidary community (p. xvi).

Shalaby (2017) encouraged us, as educators, to see goodness in students who stand up for their own freedom and that of others, even – especially – when this means disrupting the order and calm of the school day. She saw a good classroom as one “in which we practice freedom,” (p. xvi), preparing students not for the world as it is, but for the world as it could be. The abolitionist ethic that animates Shalaby’s work demands not that we be good, but that we “be love” (p. 172).

The love that she asks us to embody in our classrooms is not the kindness and politeness and diligence and meticulousness that I learned when I learned to be good – in fact, quite the opposite:

People misunderstand the meaning of love in public life. ... Public love is confused with things like affection, kindness, politeness. I am talking instead about a love that is fierce, powerful, political, insistent. This kind of love is not easy. Authentic public love necessarily demands conflict, tears, and hurt, because our transition to freedom and to more human ways of being requires ... that we be willing to confront one another, and that we be willing to listen generously when we are being confronted ... Can we imagine our classrooms as a place to practice these revolutionary ways of being? (p. 173)

Neither side of the colonial gender system includes women who are fierce, powerful, political, insistent, revolutionary, and seeking to materially change conditions of our world – because this way of being would threaten the colonial project, and the world as we know it. It is for exactly this reason that, to me, schooling grounded in these principles, in this way of being love, could truly be considered a good education.

CHAPTER FOUR: IMPACTS OF WHITE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE HOARDING ON STUDENTS AND FAMILIES IN COBBLERTON

In 2020, Gemma, a Cobblerton High School senior, addressed the School Committee, protesting the absence of multicultural education in Cobblerton Schools. According to a petition that later circulated, Gemma described “never being assigned a book by a black author, never having a course dedicated to the history of racial injustice, and these holes in her curriculum leading to incidents of bigotry in [C]HS.” Essentially, Gemma argued that the white ignorance perpetuated by Cobblerton Schools’ curriculum led directly to racism within the district. Gemma, and the writers of the petition that quoted her, believed that Cobblerton Schools was harming students, and the remedy they sought was a comprehensive critical, antiracist education. In this chapter, I take up Gemma’s hypothesis, considering the impacts of Cobblerton’s history of white educational resource hoarding on Students and Families of Color in the town today.

Policy choices made in the 1970s protected Cobblerton’s overwhelming whiteness, and Dr. P’s thirty-year tenure as superintendent created a highly regarded school district. As Ann pointed out, Cobblerton has always had a small number of Families of Color; in recent years, that number has slightly increased. Of the current Cobblerton Schools families I spoke to for this study, three – Caroline, Janice, and Brené – chose to move to Cobblerton because of family ties to the town. The other four families – those of Raha, Scott, Jerry, and Leena, all non-Black People of Color – chose Cobblerton specifically for the school district. So, while some choose Cobblerton because of their previous connections to the town, families continue to move there for the schools, as mine did. In this chapter, I consider the impacts of Cobblerton’s historical policies and practices on Students and Families of Color in the town today.

I find that, despite the district’s strong reputation, not every child had access to the good

education that their parents wanted for them. Janice's daughter Violet, Caroline's daughter Phoebe, and Raha's daughters Shaliz and Ava all experienced severe racist bullying. Violet's experience, in 2016, was deemed a civil rights violation, and Raha pulled her daughters from Cobblerton schools in 2017 after the district failed to respond to the bullying of both of her young daughters. Both mothers considered suing the district, but ultimately chose not to, in order to protect their families from backlash. While, in 2020, the schools did try to help Phoebe, who was then in first grade and subjected to similar racist bullying, the school's intervention focused on "difference" rather than race, and was not immediately effective for Phoebe. Phoebe remained in Cobblerton, but her mother continued to worry about how she would experience the schools as she got older, in part due to Caroline's own experiences being pushed out of her teaching role in Cobblerton's middle school.

Scott's son Tim, Jerry's son George, and Leena did not experience racialized bullying in Cobblerton. However, Scott, Jerry, Brené, and Leena all have strong critiques of the education Cobblerton provided. They noticed the absence of Teachers of Color, the white- and Western-centered history courses, and the lack of what I would call culturally relevant and critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995). All of the parents and students I spoke with emphasized that to them, good schooling is not about high test scores but about student wellbeing, identity formation, and critical thought.

In this chapter, I begin with the colonial gender system (Lugones, 2007), to understand the raced and gendered nature of bullying that Violet, Phoebe, Shaliz, and Ava experienced. I then briefly review the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy to consider what "good" schooling might look like for these girls, and for all students in Cobblerton. Next, I share extended narratives from my interviews with Janice and Violet, Raha, and Caroline, which

together form a counter-story to the dominant narrative that Cobblerton schools are good, safe, and striving for equity. I conduct an analysis of these narratives, focusing on the raced and gendered experiences of the four girls, and the white ignorance the schools demonstrated through their responses. Then, I return to the concept of the good school, bringing in perspectives from Scott, Jerry, Brené and Leena as well as Janice, Violet, Raha and Caroline.

Ultimately, I argue that, as a result of Cobblerton's past and present efforts to protect its whiteness and the resulting "white habitus" (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2007) these policies created, Cobblerton schools reproduce a pedagogy of white ignorance. That is, the white space (Lipsitz, 2011), including but not limited to the school system, that Cobblerton created and maintained taught children raised there particular lessons about goodness, normalcy, and safety that all ultimately serve to reproduce and reinforce white supremacy. This harmed and excluded some students, especially Black students, directly, while shielding all students from the knowledge they need to work for societal transformation and meaningfully disrupt global white supremacy. Despite this, there are families within the town who see Cobblerton's potential to become a safe and inclusive space for all students, and are working hard to push for change within the district.

Theory and Literature

White Supremacy and the Colonial Gender System

As I detailed in Chapter 1, with conquest (King, 2019) came the racial hierarchy that justified Indigenous genocide, Black enslavement, and later, the exploitation and exclusion of those racialized as nonwhite.

Lugones (2007) detailed how gender and sexuality function, in concert with race, as axes along which human hierarchy has been created and justified. Building on the work of Crenshaw

(1991), Lugones (2007) argued that race and gender are not only intersecting in people's experiences of oppression, but, historically speaking, "fused," or co-constitutive. Beginning with European conquest of the Black and Indigenous world, she wrote:

gender fuses with race in the operations of colonial power. Colonialism did not impose the precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. (p. 186).

The human hierarchy upon which coloniality and racial capitalism rests depends on women accepting "the subordination of females in every aspect of life" (p. 196) – especially, as Lugones demonstrated, "loss of control over property and other economic domains" (p. 197). Because women-as-subordinate did not arise "naturally" in Europe, and was not the case at all in many of the places that Europeans colonized (for example, see Brooks (2018) for a discussion of Indigenous women's leadership in what is now New England), it had to be violently imposed, and this was accomplished differently for white women than for women who were racialized as nonwhite under this system. Because white women were needed for the reproduction of the white race, conformity to new ideals of femininity, including physical weakness, sexual purity (which might sometimes be described as "innocence"), and confinement to the domestic sphere, was rewarded with some privileges within colonial society – including, in the U.S., ownership of enslaved people (Jones-Rogers, 2019), and control over children in the classroom (Grumet, 1988).

On the "dark side" of the colonial gender system, Lugones (2007) wrote, "Colonized females got the inferior status of gendering as women, without any of the privileges accompanying that status for white bourgeois women" (p. 203). Instead, Black and Indigenous

women were cast in opposition to the feminine ideal – where white women were sexually pure, colonized women were hypersexual, which justified the mass rape and sexual exploitation that was a key tool of colonialism. And where the ideal white woman was physically weak, colonized women were described as supernaturally strong and impervious to pain – which justified their forced labor, even to death. White women were incentivized to conform to standards of femininity in part by the privileges they were offered for doing so, and in part out of fear of losing their privileged position among women and being threatened with the same violence as the women who served them, labored for them, and died doing so. If, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore has said when describing racial capitalism, “capitalism requires inequality, and race enshrines it,” (Card, 2020), the colonial gender system is part of how race enshrines inequality – both the subordination of women to men, and the subordination of Women of Color to white women.

Lugones (2007) explained that the violently imposed gender roles of Women of Color shifted over time “as it fit the process of global, Eurocentric capitalism” (p. 203). However, “there was no extension of the status of white women to colonized women even when they were turned into similes of bourgeois white women” (p. 203). Because white women’s ultimate value to this system was reproducing and naturalizing white supremacy, and Women of Color could not contribute to this effort, they were not eligible for the same privileges even when they conformed to the same standards of femininity as their white counterparts.

Though the colonial gender system, like every aspect of racial capitalism, shifts and changes over time, its core function: to justify the violent exploitation of Women of Color across the colonized world, remains in place. And while it pervades every aspect of our society, one of the first places that young girls experience this system’s violent imposition is at school. Morris (2016) demonstrated that Black girls, in particular, are excluded, punished, and pushed out of

school at extremely disproportionate rates. The participants in Carter Andrews' (2019) study of Black girls at school explained that they found it impossible to be "perfect and white." In their schools, being "good" and more particularly a "lady" meant enacting white femininity, an impossible task for Black girls by definition. As a result, Black girls were surveilled and punished at higher rates, and sometimes for the same, accepted behaviors as their white girl classmates. They were also hypersexualized, adultified, and expected to be less intelligent – all of which disrupted their access to safety and learning, and reinforced the way "innocence" (Annamma, 2015) and "smartness" (Hatt, 2012; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011) were part of the property of whiteness within their schooling environments.

In the narratives that follow, Janice and Violet, Raha, and Caroline tell the stories of how the colonial gender system is imposed in Cobblerton. The ways that Violet, Shaliz, Ava, and Phoebe were bullied by their peers – some as young as kindergarten and first grade – demonstrate the fusion of race and gender in even young children's understandings of who is good, and who is valuable. Further, the schools' responses to each incident, which was also reinforced through pedagogy and curriculum, demonstrate the active white ignorance that is pervasive throughout the district. Finally, Caroline's story of being excluded, ignored, and finally pushed out as the only Black teacher in the district, shows that even as the district announced its commitment to equity, Cobblerton school leadership continued to prioritize the needs and preferences of white children and families. Taken together, their words provide a counter-story to the dominant narrative that Cobblerton schools are good, safe, and free from "racial strife" or violence. These stories clarify the role that white educational resource hoarding plays in creating and protecting schools as sites for the reproduction of white supremacy.

What is a “good” education under white supremacy?

Acknowledging the continued dominance of white supremacy and the modern colonial gender system demonstrates the ongoing need for a de- or anti-colonial education as an essential tool for disrupting and ultimately dismantling these systems of oppression. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1963) delineated the role of education in the liberation of colonized peoples, writing, “As we see it, this program [of education that centers Third World freedom struggles] is necessary for a government that really wants to free the people politically and socially. There must be an economic program [and] there must be an idea of man [sic] and the future of humanity” (p. 203). Freire (1970) took this up in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he argued that the role of the educator who seeks to combat oppressive systems is to help students understand their collective power to transform their world: “[Students] must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (p. 49). So much of my own and my participants’ experiences in Cobblerton did the opposite; part of the pedagogy of white ignorance is understanding white supremacy, to the extent that white people are aware of it at all, as natural and therefore fixed. But Ladson-Billings’ (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which has been widely taken up in the field of education and teacher preparation since its introduction thirty years ago, argued that effective educators must make this critical consciousness a core component of their pedagogy. Many contemporary critical pedagogues have argued that, in addition to understanding the world as transformable, students should be offered experiences of action toward transformation such that the classroom becomes a site of liberatory praxis (e.g. Au, 2017; Camangian, 2015; Love, 2019).

Despite CRP’s popularity within the field, Sleeter (2017) demonstrated that many white educators do not implement it in their classrooms. Sleeter (2017) argued that this was a result of

interest convergence at play in teacher preparation; I would add that university teacher preparation programs are incentivized to reproduce, rather than disrupt, white ignorance (Markoff, 2025). Nevertheless, there is abundant evidence that educators can, and many have, worked with their students to imagine and build toward collective liberation (Givens, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Throughout this dissertation, I argue that Cobblerton has the opportunity to take up this work with its students but largely chooses not to, because the material incentives to compete with neighboring districts, drive up property values, and hoard educational resources rather than redistribute them are stronger than the desire for a safe and inclusive, never mind liberatory, education. Once again, we see interest convergence at work in Cobblerton and the harm it caused to Black and other Students of Color. To overcome this, and provide a good, safe, and ideally, liberatory education to all students, Cobblerton would need to center the needs of the most marginalized students (Wilmot et al., 2023) and their families who, in the data below, clearly articulate the possibilities and limits of “good” education in Cobblerton.

Counter-storying Goodness and Innocence in Cobblerton Schools

In what follows, I share the stories told to me by Janice and Violet, Raha, and Caroline. These stories contain references to racial and sexual violence against children; as such, I urge readers to take care as they read.

Janice and Violet’s Story

Janice is a white woman from a family that has lived in Cobblerton for many generations. She grew up in a neighborhood where nearly everyone was related to her in some way. Janice graduated from Cobblerton High School in 1986, attended college, and moved to New York City. She returned to Cobblerton in the late 1990’s with her daughter, Violet, who she raised in the same neighborhood where she grew up, first in her grandmother’s house, and then, after her

mother's death, in the house she inherited across the street. Violet had a similar experience to her mother, growing up surrounded by many generations of family and family friends. She felt a strong sense of belonging in Cobblerton through elementary and middle school, despite the fact that her father is Black and Violet is biracial. That changed in her freshman year at Cobblerton High School, which she narrated in her college essay.

Excerpt from Violet's college essay, shared with me via email:

I grew up in [Cobblerton] Massachusetts, a predominantly white town, where I am one of three black people in my entire school. As a kid, I never especially thought that people saw me as "black" or "mixed". At the start of high school, I was excited about beginning a new chapter. I had good friends and I played on the volleyball team. Everything began well, but in late September, I had an experience that would forever alter me. A new boy had joined my biology class that year and one day, my teacher was absent and there was a substitute covering. Unprovoked, the new student took his laptop and held it over my head, beginning to yell "This is what we should do to [Violet]! This is all she will ever be good for! Let's hang her like the slave she was born to be"! All I remember is one of my friends saying "Don't look [Violet]!" and I didn't. I later discovered that he had a picture of slaves being hanged on the screen. I wanted to get up and flee the class, but I was unable to move, it felt like I was cemented to my chair. I felt nauseous but he kept yelling. I couldn't understand why nobody was making him stop. I was frightened and humiliated, so I simply bowed my head down and tried not to cry. Even my medical issues had never made me feel this terribly. For the first time in my life, I recognized and felt that I was different. It was my first experience encountering racism and school was no longer a place I felt safe. An investigation was conducted and I was constantly fearful

of retaliation from him or his friends. I was unable to sleep, do my school work, and I felt trapped by my own skin. The realization that I was a black person in a white community was something that I'd never even thought of before and now, it was all I could think about. The incident was deemed a civil rights violation and he was removed from all my classes, but I still faced him in the halls. Afterward, I had a challenging time in school. History and English classes which had once been my favorite classes, now made me feel physically ill. I couldn't bear to sit in a sea of white peers as the only black student while we read "To Kill a Mockingbird" and studied slavery. It felt like all eyes were on me. I felt like an outcast. I retreated into myself and prayed to be invisible.

In one moment, Violet's sense of safety at school was shattered, and as the rest of her story shows, never recovered. Reflecting back on this moment in her interview with me, she kept returning to her disbelief that "no one was making him stop." Neither her teacher nor any of her friends successfully intervened here, and it was this as much as the initial attack that fundamentally disrupted Violet's experience of safety within Cobblerton High School.

Civil Rights Violation

Simon (pseudonym), the boy who targeted Violet, moved to Cobblerton from Georgia in August 2015. By late September, when he attacked Violet, he was already on his way to being suspended for sexual harassment: "He made a video called Ass the Movie and he just ... went around smacking girls on the ass and sticking [his] hands down their shirts and grabbing their bras, and in the middle of the hallway. He sent this out to the football team." Later in the school year, Violet witnessed his racism again, this time targeting a Brazilian friend:

Violet

He would always make cleaning jokes. I remember once at lunch, he spilled something

on her and was like, ‘Clean it up.’ So it was a lot. And to Jewish kids, too. He made comments about them going into gas chambers, and posted [that] on Snapchat.

After his attack on Violet, Janice and other parents called the school, and the next morning, Janice met with the school principal, assistant principal, and one of Violet’s teachers. They were told there would be an investigation under Title V, Section 504 and that the process would be time consuming and confidential. Meanwhile, Violet was experiencing anxiety and panic attacks at school. At first, the school offered to rearrange her schedule so that she would no longer have classes with Simon; then, she was offered a one-on-one aid. Janice felt that both of these solutions targeted Violet, when Simon was the one causing harm to the school. After Janice threatened to bring in the Attorney General’s office, with whom she was already in touch, they rearranged Simon’s schedule instead of Violet’s, and made a policy that he could not be within 100 feet of her – which was difficult to enforce in the small high school and often, according to Violet, ignored. At the change of the semester, Violet found that her new teachers had not been made aware of this policy, and, after a teacher announced that Simon was transferring into one of Violet’s classes, Janice – again threatening with action from the Attorney General – had to insist on signed evidence from every one of Violet’s teachers that they had been made aware of the policy. Violet was given a special pass to leave class and go to the guidance office or the nurse if she was experiencing intense anxiety, but some teachers seemed reluctant to let her go. Eventually, a doctor diagnosed Violet with PTSD from the attack and its aftermath. What Violet feared were allergic reactions were, in fact, panic attacks, which were occurring regularly during the school day.

Meanwhile, Janice was in touch with the state Attorney General’s office. She found the school to be unresponsive to Violet’s needs unless she was constantly threatening legal action.

Eventually, she tried to get the district to pay for an out-of-district placement for Violet, but they refused. She considered following through on her threats to sue the district, but chose not to in order to protect Violet from increased attention:

Janice

It was hard for [Violet] because it was brought up to me from several venues to sue the [Cobblerton] public school system. I thought about it. She did not want me to because she did not want to go through this. Then the Department of Ed said that they would send a team to retrain the [Cobblerton] teachers on how to deal. Did we want to do that? [Violet] did not want to do that. Because she's like, the training is going to be about how to deal with People of Color ... they're gonna know it was me. She didn't want any attention drawn to her. Hindsight, I wish I had.

Violet

Sometimes I kind of wish I had done that too.

Briana Markoff

You wish you had let the teachers get some training?

Janice and Violet

Yes.

Janice

And I wish I had sued [Cobblerton.]

Violet

I don't want you to do that.

Simon's attack on Violet was racist. He attacked other students for their ethnicities and religions. He also used sexual assault as a tactic of dominance. He sent videos of himself assaulting girls to

the high school football team, as if to gain acceptance with those at the top of the high school's hierarchy, the most masculine. Simon's violent bullying both revealed and reinforced the raced and gendered hierarchy of Cobblerton High. And even though he got in trouble for these attacks, he kept doing them, and kept posting about them. For Violet, it was the ongoing nature of Simon's raced and gendered harassment that kept her in fear at school – and the school was never able to successfully intervene. Violet's experience demonstrated that the district did not value her safety enough to devote adequate resources to protecting her. This aligns with Lugones' (2007) insight into the disposability and dehumanization of Women of Color under the colonial gender system.

Pedagogy and Curriculum

As she mentioned in her college essay, Violet's anxiety and panic attacks were not only brought on by fear of Simon. She began to dread English and history classes, where she knew that class readings and conversations were likely to address race. Part of her accommodation was to receive advanced warning anytime class content was going to touch on slavery or Jim Crow, but the problem for Violet was not *that* race and racism were discussed in school, but how. Violet's freshman year, her English teacher pulled her aside and told her that it was important for her to read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a book that in many ways reifies the colonial gender system, especially through the patriarchal heroism of Atticus. Her teacher compared the need for students to learn about the consequences of Jim Crow to the need to learn about the Holocaust.

Violet

I chose to read the book. I would just sit out sometimes. ... Some of the heavier chapters I would sit out or I would go for a walk because I didn't want to read it with the class, but I've read the entire book by myself.

Briana Markoff

How did you feel having to be like alone, handling all of that stuff? Like was that better than being with the rest of the class?

Violet

It was better than being with the rest of my class. But if my class had looked different then maybe I would feel better. Because I know, I would talk to some other Black kids at school and they kind of felt the same way. So, I think it was more just being surrounded by white peers. While I was reading this book, that didn't make me feel great.

Briana Markoff

You think in the hands of a different teacher, it could have been, like, a more okay experience, or it's just like the makeup of the room? There was just no way it was gonna be okay?

Violet

Um, it definitely could have been, I remember that teacher, I did like her. But she did say the n-word when she read the book.

Briana Markoff

She said it out loud?

Violet

Yeah. So I didn't love that. And it kind of made me uncomfortable. So I would leave when I saw that word come up a lot in chapters. So that's when I would like, step out of the class. But I had another English teacher and he gave, Mr. B—, he gave a long talk about how he doesn't say that word.

Mr. B assigned Violet, along with the rest of the class, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Violet's white classmates were given copies of the original text, which contains the n-word over 200 times. Violet alone was given a printed-out version of the text with the n-word edited out.

A history teacher gave an assignment to write a letter from the point of view of an enslaved person, asking their enslaver for release. And a film teacher showed clips of *Birth of a Nation*, which depicts white actors in blackface and glorifies the Ku Klux Klan.

Violet

I want to feel like normal, and I think that should be their number one priority is making sure that all kids feel the same. Because I always felt singled out, even, I feel like even if they didn't try to, it was really easy to get singled out. Also, I don't think a lot of the stuff we learned about in school, like *Birth of a Nation*, I don't think like the other kids in class are like, mature enough, or I don't know, to handle it. And so, they would just be making jokes about slavery. I don't think they understand the group of people that they're talking to is suburban white kids with upper class homes. And I don't know, it's not like, it would be different if it was a class of all People of Color, I think we could understand it more deeply, but they just kind of saw it as a joke all the time, which felt really uncomfortable. And the teachers never really got that.

When I asked Violet and Janice if they thought the district had learned anything or would change as a result of Violet's experience, they both immediately answered no, with Janice adding that Simon's behavior did not change over his four years in Cobblerton. She also made reference to the racist graffiti that had been found in the middle school bathroom that year, and townspeople's general ignorance of racism in their own community:

Janice

So I had posted on [the Diverse Cobblerton Facebook page] because it was like oh well,

that stuff doesn't happen in [Cobblerton], and somebody wrote that. And I'm like, yeah, it does, you know. And then I asked [Violet] if I could post, and I posted [Violet's essay] on the [Cobblerton] Diverse page, talking about what happened to my daughter, and people were shocked, you know? And it's because people have got the blinders on.

In discussing the pedagogy and curriculum of Cobblerton High School, and the community response to Violet's essay, their story reveals pervasive white ignorance in Cobblerton. The school did not know how to "deal," in Janice's words, with Students of Color, nor teach about race appropriately. Further, the community response, even among Diverse Cobblerton members, was shock that "stuff like that" could happen in their town. Janice's assessment, that "people have got the blinders on," showed her awareness of the white ignorance that surrounded her.

Violet, the Educator

Despite Cobblerton High School never really meeting Violet's need for a safe and supportive learning environment, she graduated in May 2020 and attended a prestigious university as an education major, focused in special education. To earn money in the summer, Violet worked in Cobblerton Schools' Pre-K program as a teacher's aide. She noted that the preschool classes were noticeably more diverse than her high school class had been, and made a special connection with a Black student in her class:

Violet

There was a little girl and she, I've seen her parents. So she's mixed. She's half white, half Black, like me. And she ran up to me on the first day that I was there and she was like, your skin looks like mine! You look just like me.

Yet there, too, Violet encountered racism:

Violet

There was a kid in my Pre-K class. Yeah, Pre-K. So, preschool. And he has a lot of issues going on at home. But to make a long story short, he will use a lot of insults, when people try to discipline him, when he's mad. He called me the n-word, this four-year-old.

Janice

This four-year-old! Four-year-old called her the n-word. And was yelling at her. ...

Violet

So I took a minute, and I cried a little bit. And then I went back and he gave me a hug afterward. He was like, I'm sorry, I made you sad. But it just makes me sad to think about because it must be his parents. ... The principal came and talked to me ... And I said I wanted to stay in the same class because I did like that class. And I liked him.

Despite this experience, Violet stayed with the class and with the student. Despite all that she went through in Cobblerton, Violet liked the idea of returning to Cobblerton to teach one day, and being the Black teacher that she had needed but never had.

Raha's Story

Raha is a forty-year-old woman who works as a statistician and business consultant. Originally from Iran, Raha speaks Farsi and practices the Baha'i faith. She has been living in Cobblerton with her husband, two daughters, Shaliz and Ava, and two mini-poodles since 2016. Though originally drawn to Cobblerton by the public Montessori program, neither of her daughters attended Cobblerton schools beyond the first grade.

Shaliz**Raha**

We had multiple incidents of bullying, but it was racial, and I brought it to the principal's

office attention. I had a chat, I made an appointment and bought a book that we're the same. I never complained in the beginning. What I did instead, I said, this is a learning opportunity. This happened. Somebody spit into my daughter's eyes and say, 'Hey, you have devil eyes. You gotta go change your skin color. Michael Jackson did it, you could do it.' A kid in kindergarten. ... She was crying every single day. My neighbors were telling me, 'why is [Shaliz] crying? Going to school, being picked up by the bus?' She was boarding the bus. There was one time that the bus driver stopped, came down and said, 'You need to go talk to the principal or somebody. They are bullying your daughter in the bus,' to the point that they had to put a camera in the bus. I had to push for it, go to the Department of Education to talk to somebody, but, you know, they kept brushing it off: 'We don't have any issues. We don't have diversity problems. We are diverse, we're good. ...'

Listen, these are kids. They make mistakes. They're not exposed to so many kids that are different colors. And my younger one had dark, she's tanner than me. You know, if they're not exposed to it, somebody had to bring the education. So can we bring this book? And I offered to come in with a book and do some arts and crafts activity that we're just doing with our hands together. I'm the same, so I can actually show my skin color and read the book and talk about the book, and for this to be a library time, right? No, that was not accepted. They were not at all budging. They weren't welcoming the idea. At the same time, when I put it in writing, asked them, 'Is there anything then you would offer, any solution you would offer, because she doesn't want to come to school, I can't just take days off, and she's crying, with teary eyes.'

I made an appointment with my husband, both of us took away time from work.

Went to the principal office hoping that maybe it's more powerful if it's both of us. What we heard is that anybody who doesn't like the way the school system is in town, they can leave. Just like this, is this the last thing we heard. ...

Kindergarten, it happened last in first grade, and then the last thing that we heard was three months past [the beginning of] second grade. I immediately had to take her out, because she came home one day and she said, 'Mommy, I feel like a mouse trapped in a cage.' That it's, I never forget. And that night, it was in October, and I said, I didn't know nothing. I remember. I – [Raha starts crying.] My job was not settled, my husband, he just bought his business, he didn't know, we just bought a house. It was, it would have been a big stretch at the time, but I remember I was not thinking at the time, and I didn't want to put her through this. I said, it was before bedtime. I remember exactly. She was lying down with her blanket with Eiffel Towers on it because she loved Paris. She always wanted to go to Paris. So I said to her, I said, 'Listen, Shaliz, we're not going to school anymore, we'll find a different school for you.' That was over. Because I tried. I exhausted my effort for two and a half years. How many times should I approach you, talk about it, right? And then I went back to my room and I told my husband, 'Listen, this is what I told [Shaliz], and we're going to send an email right now to send all the transcripts to us. We're not going there anymore,' and he was in the bed on his phone.

He said, 'What do you mean? What are you going to do?'

I said, 'if I have to sit home and home school, I will do that, but she's not going back to the same school.' ...

I spoke to a few attorneys, and I could have made a huge deal and had the public education pay for my kids' tuition in private. We gave it some thought. We said, this is

not, we're not that. We're not going to do that. We're, you know, which is really unfair that I had to pay \$12,000 taxes every year, and my kids are not going and you didn't even try to listen to my child, accommodate her, educate the kids in the classroom and now it's big inconvenience, financially, travel time, all of that, right? But at the same time, we just could not live in a town and sue the town. It was just not us. So I'm sorry, every time I talk about this it's just, you know, it's still a big burden on my shoulders just thinking about it.

Shaliz experienced racist bullying in Cobblerton Schools beginning in kindergarten. The only intervention the school made was to install a camera on the bus. When her mother offered to bring in a book and do an activity to teach Shaliz's classmates about racial difference, her offer was refused. Raha recalled being told, "We don't have any issues ... We are diverse, we're good," dismissing Shaliz's experience and defending the schools' goodness. Eventually the family was told, "Anybody who doesn't like the way the school system is in town, they can leave." So they pulled Shaliz from Cobblerton Schools, despite the financial burden of private school. While allowing a Middle Eastern child to be bullied to the point that school was intolerable for her, Cobblerton School leadership insisted that their schools were good and in need of no intervention, protecting their reputation and reserving resources for the white children who remained in the district.

Ava

Early in their time at Cobblerton Public Schools, Raha believed that only her older daughter, Shaliz, was experiencing bullying. However, shortly after pulling Shaliz out of the district, the family decided to move their younger daughter, Ava, to private school as well, for similar reasons.

Raha

[Ava] attended, she was in kindergarten, and then first grade. And mid-year first grade we moved her, right after we moved [Shaliz]. Yeah, it was through mid-year, the second year, mid-year, that we decided to move her as well.

Briana Markoff

And did she have similar experiences with bullying as your older daughter?

Raha

Mmhmm, yeah. ... And it was mainly about your hair and your arms ... Yeah, and she would come, and I remember she wanted to shave her brow and I, my older one was yelling mom and screaming, screaming, and half of [her eyebrow] was almost gone, and I came and she was crying. My younger one. Like, what happened? What are we doing? I was terrified, and we had to go to therapy sessions. And it was because, you know, a group of kids, first grade! First grade! Were talking about, telling her she's hairy. She needs to shave her face. If she shaves her arm, she can come be part of their group. So she was isolated, they would, if she would go to sit with somebody at one table in the cafeteria, she hated cafeteria. She hated it! She was just crying...

Kindergarten was fine, but it was the first grade that became an issue with a few kids so but that for her it was the skin color and the eyes, you have devil eyes, and all of that. Those comments, spitting into her eyes, punching her in the bus ... threatening her. And if you say anything to the principal, they will do so and so and so. People tell, they will make the stories up, if you tell your principal office, we'll tell that you punched us in the face. You're in trouble, you're going to be expelled. So she was afraid to even do anything about it, and she told [Shaliz] all of these stories, I have to hear – she's an

introvert, so it's hard ... My feeling, my intuition, was telling me something is wrong.

Because you know your kids, she's not talking, she's not eating well. She's bringing food and snacks home. I'm like hm, something strange is happening. What's going on?

And I really thought for her, okay, maybe [Shaliz] has an issue, but [Ava] is fine, but, she opened up finally, and she said, Can I also go to my sister's school? And we had to talk to her, we said talk to us, what's going on? And my older one came, we had a family meeting, and [Shaliz] talked on her behalf, and she nodded, she said, Yes. She told her sister, although the stories and those are true, she's being trapped and she doesn't want to go to school.

And one time she brought it to the teacher's attention. Teacher told the principal, the principal came to the room, grabbed her, and she told me that, my husband and I, that the principal comes to the classroom, grabs her and takes her to a corner and says, 'You need to tell your parents that you are settling in.' ... That was unbelievable! We made another appointment, went there, and of course they're gonna say, oh, you can't believe a seven-year-old telling you the truth. Half of it may be true, maybe half, no I never said that. I just asked her if she's happy. For me, I was like, 'settling in' is not a word a first grader would choose! Why would she lie about it? That she's been taken from the classroom. And you know [sighs].

Briana Markoff

Did you get the sense that they didn't believe her? And they did believe the white children when they asked them what happened?

Raha

Probably was, you know, all of that too. And they wanted to make sure, because they had

the situation with [Shaliz], and we took [Shaliz], so they, they went to her class and took her out and say, hey, just be chill, don't complain, that type of thing. How can you do that? Why would you? She should be complaining, that's the whole purpose of going to school, feeling comfortable in your environment, in the educational environment. I don't care about how much ABC she's gonna learn if she's not emotionally, you know, hurt, that's huge for me. If the hierarchy of the school is putting in the time, dragging her from the classroom, telling her 'ssh, don't make a big deal,' that's not okay. So you're teaching a seven-year-old girl, especially for me, with a huge matter, doesn't matter Black and white or Brown color, don't teach a little girl that way for them to grow up, thinking that it's okay to be hushed, they have to always keep it quiet. Why? Especially a woman in power, a forty-year-old woman in power is telling a seven-year-old to, you know. ... We had no place there so, and it's to the point that sometimes you talk about it, because my older one is going to be in high school next year, so this is going to be her last year of middle school in private, and we talk about it, and she has hesitation to go back to the public school.

In telling Ava's story, Raha emphasized that while Ava's bullying was racial, it was also gendered. Her bullies focused on her hair, telling her that she needed to shave her arms and eyebrows in order to be included. Lugones (2007) noted that colonized women were often compared to, and even treated as, animals, through the dehumanization of the colonial gender system. The other first graders were policing Ava's femininity, telling her that her body hair, combined with her darker skin color, made her different, excludable, "less than," and the comment about her "devil eyes" was also dehumanizing. Raha was also shocked that Ava was told not to complain, but to be quiet and "settle in," and this too, she noted, was gendered:

“Don’t teach a little girl that ... it’s okay to be hushed, they have to always keep it quiet.” Raha saw Cobblerton leadership as depriving Ava of her voice and power, exacerbating her vulnerability, and concluded that that was why “we had no place there.” With all of their extensive resources, this “good” school district could not find a way to help two little girls belong within their district – or else they chose not to, preferring to serve those who were quiet, polite, and willing to “settle in.”

Cobblerton

Although neither of their daughters attended school in Cobblerton, Raha and her husband decided to move to a different neighborhood in town rather than moving elsewhere. Raha told me that this was based on their daughters’ preference for staying in a familiar place. But Raha struggled to feel a sense of belonging in Cobblerton. She had few friends in town, which she attributed primarily to its lack of diversity. Though she was heartened to see that the town was changing somewhat, she had recently experienced a microaggression that left her wondering about the impact of the town’s racism on Shaliz.

Raha

I really love to go to the cafe in town and sit down and talk right? But even I would say a few weeks ago, which I thought after covid, it's much better, because I see some diversity compared to the time that I moved. At least I see different colors in town, but still, last time I went with [Shaliz], we were talking some Farsi, we speak in a different language at home, and I don't see anything to be a problem, but it seems to be still not, I can't stay accepted, but when I get the eye turning around and looking as if, who's here, like they haven't seen anybody talking besides English. To me, it's uncomfortable. I'm not being harassed, but it's uncomfortable, you know what I mean? So should I change it? It just

gets to that, you know. And I need to sometimes pause myself and say, 'Hey, don't overthink it. Keep going, do it. You're not doing anything illegal. You're just talking.' But sometimes it, you know, it has been affecting [Shaliz] because she discovered. 'Mommy stop, like, can we speak English, they're looking.' I don't want her to be uncomfortable, so we change to English. I get that. But when I go to Boston, like, this morning, I was in Boston, I had a meeting, I had to be in an office to interview a doctor, and I had my daughters at my sister's, picked them up, took them to a cafe before I come back. You talk, everybody speaks different languages. No big deal. No big deal. And I'm like, Should I move to Boston?

And yet, Raha is hopeful that her daughters can return to Cobblerton Schools for high school.

Raha

Shaliz doesn't want to [attend Cobblerton High School.] ... The last conversation we had about that is just at least give it a try, see if it's working or not. The kids are older, you are more articulate, you can talk about, you can stand up for your rights. And if it doesn't work and it's the same thing, then we'll do something about it. But we want you to go back. And it's just not making sense financially to keep going, going and paying for all of this. We need to save up for years of college, but it's, honestly, it's been such a trauma. We're still not sure if coming back to the [Cobblerton] school system is good option for us, but we're considering it. We want to give it a try. We want to change the whole picture. Hopefully it will be a new beginning in the new chapter. And I think for them it would be good, especially living here and graduating from this, at least they have something positive to think about this town, and that's my hope. I'm really hoping that things are going to shift, that the administration in high school are open, that there is

enough education in the class, in history and in different aspects. So it's going to be a prosperous four years for them and emotionally would be enriching too, because it does matter that these kids are being hurt. You know, at least be them, be accepted as who they are. We don't want them to be framed and you know, they, you know, we're different! No! But we are a human being, just like anybody else. And, you know, please don't judge us.

At the time of our interview, Raha was tentatively hopeful about her daughters' future at Cobblerton Schools. Though she knew it might require that they "stand up for your rights," she still saw a possibility of "a new beginning." This would require an "open" administration and a strong education in history, but she thought it was possible. She maintained the fear, however, of continued dehumanization, asserting again that her daughters are human beings, just like anybody else. Reading Violet, Ava, Shaliz, and Phoebe's stories through the lens Lugones (2007) provided, it is clear that, as Girls of Color, they are relegated to the bottom rungs of the human hierarchy. Though it may seem extreme that Raha has to beg for her daughters' humanity to be recognized, within the context of the colonial gender system, her plea is a logical one – though not one that an institution like Cobblerton Schools is designed to hear.

Caroline's Story

Caroline moved to Cobblerton for the first time in 2018. She came with her preschool-aged daughter, Phoebe, temporarily leaving her husband behind in Jamaica so that the family could have an income while she looked for work in the U.S. They chose Cobblerton because Caroline's aunt and cousins lived there, and it was close to where their son was starting college in Cambridge.

Upon arriving, Caroline found that she was unable to enroll Phoebe in Cobblerton's

public Pre-K program. She was told that Phoebe would be added to a waiting list, but never received a call. Phoebe saw her cousins going to school and wanted to go too, and they both wanted to be reunited with Caroline's husband, so they returned to Jamaica for a year.

Caroline and Phoebe came back to Cobblerton in the summer of 2019. Caroline successfully enrolled Phoebe in Montessori kindergarten and began looking for work herself. Although Caroline held a Masters degree and had completed most of a PhD in public health, most workplaces rejected her Jamaican credentials. Finally, she applied to work as a substitute teacher at Cobblerton High School (CHS). The principal suggested that she apply for a paraprofessional position instead, because it was full time work with benefits.

Caroline worked as a paraprofessional at CHS for two years, while simultaneously working toward her Massachusetts teaching license. She found CHS to be a welcoming environment, and she received support from the teachers there. One teacher, Mrs. B, invited her to teach some chemistry lessons. When she experienced racism from a CHS student, a teacher was quick to intervene:

Caroline

He told me, he says, 'Don't talk to me. I don't want you to talk to me.' And the special education teacher asked him, 'Why don't you want her to talk to you?' And he said, 'Because she's Black.' And the teacher said, 'No, no, no, no, no, you don't say that in this place at all. You don't say that.' So once I recognized that, I did not go in [the student's] path.

When a CHS science teacher retired, Caroline applied for the job. Another teacher from the middle school applied as well. When the middle school teacher was offered the high school job, Caroline was offered the newly opened middle school position, which she accepted. She

taught eighth grade science in Cobblerton for three academic years, from 2021 through 2024. At the end of the 2024 school year, she would have been up for tenure; instead, her contract was not renewed.

Caroline began her teaching at CMS feeling that she had not been provided with the resources she needed to be successful.

Caroline

The most challenging part for me, though, was ... I couldn't get a current curriculum map to have myself prepared. So when I went to the school on the first day of school, I was still getting information to prepare for classes. For me, that's not my style. I like to have all that I need prior, if I need supplementary, then I will do the supplementary stuff, but I like to be prepared ... And the other thing was, teaching two honors science classes.

There was no honors science curriculum in place, none at all. It was being developed as we went along. And so there was one teacher who was developing the curriculum. And so I had to wait on her to develop whatever she was developing, teach it to her students, iron out the kinks, then she would share it with me, for me to teach it to the kids. And that slowed down my pace with the students, because I had to be waiting on her to provide content, and so I had to find things to do with the kids while I waited on her just so that the students would be getting information that is on par with the other students who were doing honors.

Adding to her frustration, she was not provided with the equipment she needed to conduct labs, and her requests to purchase new equipment were ignored. When she called the principal, he never picked up, leaving her to conclude that he “did not want to deal with me”:

Caroline

Whenever I reached out to admin, whether by call or by text or by email, the responses would come a week or two after that. If I needed something urgently, like I needed to call and just deal with something in the moment, there was no response. To the point where I asked the principal one day, when I saw him in the corridor, ‘Sir, I’ve been calling you on numerous occasions, and you’ve not answered my calls.’ He said, ‘Maybe I don’t have your numbers stored in my phone.’ I said, ‘Well, you need to take it now,’ when I gave it to him, he said, ‘Oh, but it is here.’ But I knew he had it. Anyhow, there was a particular day where I needed to get through to him, and I was with one of the special ed teachers who was a long-time staff member, and she said, ‘Call [the principal].’ I said, ‘It doesn’t make sense I call him because he’s not going to answer.’ But she said, ‘Call him.’ So I called, and it rang and went to voicemail, and she said, ‘All right, I’ll call him.’ And she called him, and he picked up right away.

Which students are “good”?

Despite these frustrations, Caroline felt that her teaching at CMS was impactful, and she got positive feedback from both students and teachers:

Caroline

The students were responsive. And I heard from parents too. ... They would say, the kids would come home and talk about science and what they did, and some parents would say, it’s the first that they have seen their child succeed in science, you know. But if you look at my yearbook and all the positives that the students wrote, one student, even I didn’t even know I was making such an impact for this one student.

But her unique success with certain students, such as the one mentioned here, who was also one

of the only Black students in the class, drove her out of the community of the eighth-grade team:

Caroline

There's one student who everybody was just down on, I mean, he was really a troublemaker. But, I mean, you're always going to find troublemakers. ... So you don't give up on a student. You work with the students, you know, and I kept pushing him, pushing him, pushing him. I would separate him from the rest of the class, put him in the teacher's prep room, and have him work in there, set different work for him, and so on. And you know, I mean, I didn't think he was realizing what I was doing for him, but when I asked him to sign my yearbook, he made tears come to my eyes. He said, Mrs. –, I want to thank you for not giving up on me, for believing in me.

And trust me, I felt it because these teachers – We had Student of the Week, Student of the Month, and this student was selected as Student of the Week for a week. And so, the student for last week, is named in this current week on the Thursday, and he did something like on the Tuesday, and he was named as a Student of the Week. And, you know, they took it from him and gave it to somebody else, and I'm saying to them, but he's not been Student of the Week for this current week. It's for last week. And if he did well last week, there's no reason why you should take that award away from him, that would probably give him encouragement, and you would never know what that would have done for him. They didn't give it to him and to me, those things are very subjective, of course, and you can't do that to a kid. You need to find ways of encouraging them. That's what it was. ... I think it is so unfair. But I guess the world that we are living in is not very fair.

Briana Markoff

Do you feel like in your observations, did the teachers favor students or prefer to give you know, accolades to students who came from certain backgrounds over others?

Caroline

I think when you look at it, that's what it came out to be ... So there aren't many Students of Color in Cobblerston schools. So there are one or two at most, probably five in any grade level. And I remember we had one student on our team, and he used to refuse to do work. He had the ability, though, because, like, when we do games, like Kahoot... he's the one that is coming out on top. If you sit with him one-on-one and go through the questions with him individually, he answers them and he does the work. But if you leave him by himself, he's not doing any work. And the teachers would [say], they don't have time to sit with him to do that, he needs to be in a special classroom by himself. And they went on and on, and yet, he was a Student of Color. And then there are other students who, not necessarily refused to do work, but who also needed one-to-one attention, and they had no problems with sitting with those kids and going through one-[on]-one. These were students who their parents would either email them or they would talk with them, they had a relationship with, and so I would look at those things. I would even say to the kid, I said, Look, we are already, and I identified with him. I said, we are already at a disadvantage. You can't add fuel to their fire, so you need to sit down and do some work. So and then he would do, he would do some work ... They would easily give up on students who they think were not 'worth' working with because 'they are not going anywhere.' Those were their comments: 'Not going anywhere.' 'Student not going anywhere.' Yeah, and I didn't like that at all, because their parents didn't have money to

make them go anywhere. So they are not going anywhere.

Briana Markoff

Do you feel like that was reflective of a larger attitude that you saw from teachers? Can you tell me, how would you describe that? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I'm getting a sense that it seems like maybe there was a sense that some kids are more valuable or more ...?

Caroline

Yes, I did get that, that some kids were more recognized than others based on, I don't know, maybe, work ethics, or so on, but yes, you're gonna give credit where credit is due. But if you see a kid who is trying, you know, trying to improve, trying to do their best, you know, who needs a little more work than the other person who is self-motivated, that doesn't mean that that student is not worthy of being recognized, and that's what I got from my colleagues. You know, they would want to recognize only the ones that were self-motivated or doing what in their mind's eye was like doing what was expected, and we didn't see eye to eye in those things. ... So like any student that I had recommended, they never, ever took any of my recommendations, because they just didn't agree with me. They don't see that with that student in their class. ... To the extent I can tell you, the eighth-grade teachers would have lunch together in one teacher's classroom, and lunchtime was the time when they would discuss all the students, and I stopped having lunch with them, because I felt very uncomfortable with the things they would say about the kids. And I mean, the kids could be walking by and hearing them discuss them, or their friends in those ways, I didn't want to be a part of it at all. Very negative. Yeah, so I stayed by myself.

The eighth-grade teachers with whom Caroline worked valued a certain kind of student, who Caroline described as “self-motivated” with a “work ethic,” who were “doing what was expected” – those who came into school already embodying the hardworking, individual ethic of capitalism and the ideal of the “good,” compliant student. Others, they dismissed as “not going anywhere.” Caroline recognized the classed dimension of this judgment, noting, “their parents didn’t have money to make them go anywhere.” She also pointed out that teachers were willing to work harder for students who came from families with whom they had relationships. But for the “troublemaker,” in whom Caroline saw so much potential, they didn’t want to put the work in, because that student wasn’t “worth it.” When she resisted the harmful value judgments that her colleagues placed on their students, she was excluded from the camaraderie of the eighth-grade team – which may have been a factor in her ultimately being pushed out.

Which teachers are “good”?

Because she was the only Teacher of Color at CMS, when racist graffiti appeared in the bathrooms, her students assumed that it was targeting her, adding to her sense that she did not belong at CMS. Finally, in her third year, she began receiving negative teacher evaluations, which seemed to be a concerted effort to push her out:

Caroline

I left because I well, I guess there are multiple reasons. I think they didn't want me there, and it was very obvious, because when I started the year and I got the first assessment, the first assessment was okay, all right, and then after that, they all started being negative. And I'm like, no, no, this looks like a witch hunt, like they are searching for negative. I mean, every little thing that they could find negative, they were writing it... even things that have nothing to do with the lesson, they were writing down.

She gave me an example of an inquiry-based genetics lesson, where the students were flipping coins to make Punnett squares of dominant and recessive traits, and then drawing the corresponding phenotypes based on their results. The observer only saw the part of the lesson where the students were doing the coin tosses, and concluded that Caroline's instruction was insufficiently "rigorous," and was not aligned with the state science standards. Caroline had no opportunity to meet with the observer prior to the lesson, and when she requested a meeting afterward, she was not offered any suggestions for how to improve her teaching. Instead, she continued to receive negative evaluations, and her contract was not renewed at the end of the year. Caroline was aware that the district was in a budget crisis: "The school's budget was reduced, so they had to get rid of some of the staff. I was not tenured, so it was easy to get rid of me." She added, "There are other teachers of science who are not tenured, but who were more valuable to them." One served on numerous committees, and another was a coach. Despite the district's stated commitment to hiring Teachers of Color, Caroline left at the end of the school year knowing she would not be invited to return.

In Chapter 5, Caroline's principal – the same one who would not answer her calls, even though he answered the calls of her colleagues – boasts to the Cobblerton School Committee about how Cobblerton Schools has increased their numbers of Teachers and Staff of Color in recent years. The value of Teachers of Color was widely recognized within the district (see Chapter 5). And yet, Caroline understood that her superiors were doing everything they could to devalue her – from providing her with curriculum late, to ignoring her calls, to giving her negative evaluations and refusing her the opportunity to meet and discuss improvements. Meanwhile, teachers who were also coaches, or teachers who served on more committees, were seen as more valuable. This reveals a tension between the district's stated commitments and their

actions and also shows once again how white supremacy dictated “goodness” and value among both teachers and students within the district.

Housing

Shortly after the end of the school year, Caroline’s family was evicted from their housing in Cobblerton and forced to move out of town, despite their wish to stay in order to keep Phoebe in the district. Caroline and her family spent the last three years renting a one room in-law apartment from a member of their church. As Phoebe grew older and they needed more space, they looked for two-bedroom apartments, but couldn’t find anything affordable in Cobblerton, despite Caroline’s job in the district as a licensed teacher, and her husband working full time as well.

In June 2024, there was an expensive plumbing problem in their apartment. The landlady insisted that Caroline’s family pay for the repairs, which they agreed to do, but they did not have the money on hand. As soon as they said they could not pay right away, the landlady served them with an eviction notice, giving them only three days to vacate the apartment.

As it turned out, she was renting to them illegally – Cobblerton’s restrictive zoning laws banned this style of rental to non-family members – and when they couldn’t pay for the plumbing repairs, she decided to get insurance to pay for it. However, her insurers believed that her son was renting the in-law apartment, so she needed Caroline’s family off the premises before the insurance company inspector arrived. The landlady turned suddenly hostile toward the family, yelling at Caroline in front of Phoebe and doing everything she could to drive them out.

Caroline

She was really very nasty to me. She hurled some very demeaning and degrading statements to me in the presence of my daughter. At the top of her voice, so that her

guests at her house would hear her, and I'm sure they knew she was speaking to me. She basically called me worthless because she told me I couldn't keep a job. I can't take care of my daughter. Yes, I live in a slum. I've turned her place into a slum. These are terms that she was using. ... I don't know that I can forgive her for using those words to me in the presence of my daughter, and then telling my daughter that she's going to have to change her school, and it's her parents' fault. ... I think it may have been partly due to race or that we were Black, because I think she was also surprised that we got a lawyer, because she didn't think we could get a lawyer. And I think the mere fact that she was telling me you can't even hold a job was, she was being demeaning because I was Black, and she thought we didn't come from anywhere, and we didn't have any status, and we were just Black, this poor black family coming from Jamaica. Because when I said to her, I said, you can't be calling me all these names. And you know nothing about me, you know nothing about me, because she knows nothing about me. I've never told her anything about myself ... And [she was] doing all sorts of not only yelling, she would turn on her television at the highest volume at 5 a.m. every morning. There was an adjoining door, and we are sure that she placed a speaker right by the door, or she was blasting her radio there. So we could hear the TV and the radio at the highest volume, so we had no peace.

Caroline and her family hastily moved into the home of some friends. Because of Cobblerton's restrictive zoning laws, which were still in place from the 1970s, they had no other option – there were no affordable rentals in the town, even for a small family with two parents working full time. In this moment, Caroline and her family experienced the interplay of systemic and interpersonal racism within the white habitus of Cobblerton.

By the end of the month, they found a two-bedroom apartment in a neighboring town, and Caroline had secured a job teaching biology and chemistry at the regional technical high school in the area. But they still had one more thing to worry about. After five difficult years in Cobblerton schools, Phoebe had finally made friends and felt a new sense of belonging in Cobblerton. Caroline and her husband did not want her to have to start over in another district.

Phoebe

Caroline's daughter Phoebe experienced racialized bullying on the school bus in first grade.

Caroline

When she was in first grade, she was riding the school bus, and she came home crying that evening, and I asked her what was wrong. And she said, a kid, a boy on the bus, told her that she's different, and she's to go back where she's coming from. And so I reached out to her classroom teacher, and it had gone to her principal, and they had a whole intervention for the first graders. They showed them the movie with some pumpkin that was square. The square pumpkin is a pumpkin that was different ... That square pumpkin was the only one who could stand firm or sit firm because it was square, and I think they show the thing about the ugly duckling as well. And they were showing a lot of that over a period of a week ...

[Phoebe] didn't point out the student [who bullied her.] She was afraid, so she didn't point out who the student was, didn't tell them the name, didn't point them out. ... And so she had a rough time because now she was different, so that didn't make it any better for her. So now she doesn't want to be different. She wants her hair to be like their hair. She doesn't want, she doesn't like herself anymore. She wants to be like them. She

wants her hair to be like theirs. She wants skin to be like theirs. She wants to be like them. So I had to buy her a lot of books that were just speaking to her. *You Are Enough*, just a lot of those type of books. And I had to talk to her about her hair, and I said, Look, their hair can only comb one way. Look at the many different ways that I can comb your hair. Your hair is nice and thick, and theirs is thin. I was just trying to make her see that there is value in what she is, and for her not to put herself down, but it bothered her a lot that there was difference. ...

It has changed. I think it started to change about when she was in third going on fourth grade, that was when it changed, and that was when she started settling down and started improving in her work, because she had to have counseling services at school. She was very angry, was a really angry child, and I was telling the teachers that that's not my child, I had a very loving child. She was tossing things. She would get angry, she would cry, she would storm out of her classrooms and slam doors. That was not my child. ...

[But, at the end of third grade] I think that was when she started having, well, she was more mature and she was having a small circle of friends, and I say friends because these kids were her real friends. I'm thinking some of them were with her since kindergarten, so she had them, and they were consistent in her space around her. So she was with them all the time.

Though Caroline and her family are moving out of the Cobblerton school district, they want Phoebe to stay in Cobblerton schools:

Caroline

Because of her friends, I didn't want to have to make her go through that again, because I don't know the structure of the schools in [our new town] and I really didn't want to put

her through that again, the whole process of trying to make new friends and trying to feed a sense of belonging again, because it took us so many years just get settled in that one place.

At the time of this writing, Phoebe had begun her fifth-grade year in Cobblerton as a school-of-choice student, with a special accommodation to ride the school bus with her cousins from their bus stop in town. Caroline was looking forward to Phoebe's middle school years with some apprehension, but believed that, even if the environment is not friendly to Phoebe, at least she will have her friends around her to help her maintain her sense of belonging at school.

Analysis

The narratives above reveal a great deal about the impacts of Cobblerton's history of white educational resource hoarding on People of Color in the town today. Janice and Violet, Raha, and Caroline, all told me that Cobblerton schools were not safe places for Students of Color to learn, that the school administration was unprepared to prevent racism or respond to it, and that some Cobblerton teachers perpetuated, rather than disrupted, white supremacy in their classrooms. And yet, in different ways, Janice and Violet, Raha, and the many of the other parents and students in this study expressed hope that Cobblerton could change, and that in future it could be a place where Students of Color had access to a good – that is, safe, supportive, and critical – education. Caroline alone – the only Black parent in this study – expressed pessimism about Cobblerton's ability to change, which suggests the structural limitations of “good,” or liberatory, education for Black students within a district designed to hoard resources for white students and families.

Safety

Violet, Shaliz, Ava, and Phoebe all experienced racist bullying and harassment severe

enough that it impacted their ability to learn and even, in Phoebe's case, her ability to love and accept herself. Each of their stories show how the safety that Cobblerton schools offer is contingent rather than guaranteed. Physical, psychological and emotional safety is a requirement for learning, and can therefore be considered a precious resource: one that Violet, Shaliz, Ava, and Phoebe, all girls of color, could not access due to the racism of their peers and the schools' failure to intervene effectively.

Caroline's observation that the teachers on her team were willing to go above and beyond for students whose families they knew and connected with, but not for Students of Color who they had decided were "not going anywhere," provided insight into how this resource was inequitably distributed in Cobblerton. While this likely impacted students' learning directly, it may have also affected their sense of safety and belonging at school. Caroline noted that it was possible for students walking by to overhear how their teachers spoke about them and their friends. In addition to being rejected and threatened by their peers, Cobblerton's Students of Color were at risk of having teachers who explicitly valued them less than their white classmates. This created additional conditions of unsafety for Students of Color, especially those who also struggled academically or behaviorally. Shalaby (2017) demonstrated that often, students who are considered "troublemakers" are actively seeking belonging to their learning community, but are met instead with rejection and exclusion, which exacerbates, instead of addressing, the root cause of their misbehavior. When seven-year-old Phoebe slammed doors and threw things, she may have been reacting to her experience of being "different," and not experiencing belonging in Cobblerton the way she had in Jamaica. Once she had a group of real friends she trusted, she was able to settle into learning. Phoebe, ten years old at the time I interviewed her mother, still felt that some teachers discriminated against her, but knowing she had friends she could trust made

her want to stay in Cobblerton. Ava and Shaliz, by contrast, were reluctant to return to Cobblerton for high school – they did not know if they would be accepted. In other words, their access to a safe learning environment was uncertain.

This is not to imply that all white students experienced safety and belonging in Cobblerton, while all Students of Color experienced harassment and exclusion. Rather, race was one factor of group-differentiated vulnerability to harm at school. The bullying that Shaliz, Ava, and Phoebe were subject to was also gendered, demonstrating the “fusion” of race and gender in Cobblerton such that girls who did not or could not conform to norms of white bourgeois femininity were especially vulnerable to exclusion and harassment (Lugones, 2007). But Cobblerton Schools’ stated mission is to create a “safe, inclusive environment that empowers all learners,” and one of their core values is “an emotionally and physically supportive, safe, and equitable school environment.” While safety for all may be aspirational, Violet, Shaliz, Ava and Phoebe’s stories show that safety is a resource that is not distributed equitably at Cobblerton Schools, and overall, Cobblerton Schools seemed to reinforce rather than disrupt the human hierarchy established and sustained through coloniality.

White Ignorance

Racist bullying was an ongoing problem within the Cobblerton Schools – Simon attacked Violet in 2016, Raha pulled her girls from Cobblerton in 2017, and Phoebe started first grade in 2020, the same year that Violet graduated from CHS. Racist graffiti was found in the middle and high school bathrooms in fall of 2021. And yet, Janice, Raha, and Caroline all found that Cobblerton Schools’ response to their daughters’ experiences was inadequate. In Janice and Raha’s cases, the schools’ responses exacerbated the harm that Violet, Shaliz, and Ava experienced at school.

Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2007) argued that segregation creates a “white habitus,” in which white people live isolated from People of Color and unaware of the role race and racism plays in all of our lives. One consequence of living and learning within the “white habitus” like Cobblerton is that white ignorance is so prevalent that even the town’s lauded educators were unprepared to prevent, intervene in, or meaningfully repair the harm that resulted from racial violence at school. Violet emphasized that neither her peers, nor the adults around her, were able to intervene effectively in the moment when Simon attacked her. She was shocked, in the aftermath, that “nobody told him to stop.” In the days, weeks, and years following his attack on Violet, Simon continued his abuse of girls, Jewish students, and Brazilian students at school, and though he was suspended for some individual incidents, the school was unable to prevent it from happening again. Janice had to continuously threaten lawsuits to convince the school to make a plan to protect Violet, and no one made any effort to repair the harm done to her. Violet’s story reveals the danger of white ignorance, of white people not understanding the world that we ourselves have made, such that in a school district designed to protect white racial dominance, no one anticipates, or knows how to repair, racial harm done at school. In Violet’s case, it seemed that a great deal of resources were being used to protect Simon’s privacy and safety, given that he never, to Janice and Violet’s knowledge, experienced repercussions beyond school suspension. However, little thought or attention was given to protecting Violet or keep her safe from further harm.

Like Janice, Raha tried to push the school to intervene to stop further racialized bullying against her daughter. She selected a book about racial equality and offered to come in herself to read it and do an activity with Shaliz’s class, or donate it to the school library so that a librarian or teacher could read it. But the school refused, willfully ignoring Shaliz’s experience. Instead of

protecting Shaliz, they protected the white ignorance of her classmates. When Ava, in first grade, experienced similar bullying to her sister and was afraid to tell adults, the school principal came to her class, not to help, but to advise her to tell her parents that she was “settling in” and everything was fine at school. Again, school officials refused to see and understand what was happening in their school, and instead worked hard to sustain the narrative that racism was not a problem and everything was fine. To do this, an adult was willing to intimidate a young child and then first ignore, then actively refute, her parents’ requests for help and support, finally telling them that if they didn’t like it, they could leave the district. While Shaliz and Ava were able to find belonging at private school, the root cause of the racism that pushed them out remained unaddressed, and Cobblerton could continue calling itself a good, safe district without accountability to the students harmed there.

In Phoebe’s case, the school responded differently than they did to Violet or Shaliz and Ava. Instead of deflecting or denying that children were engaging in racialized bullying in Cobblerton, they showed videos with the message that it’s okay to be different. From Caroline’s point of view, these were not effective – Phoebe still felt that it was wrong to be different, and Caroline tried to do her own intervention at home, reading Phoebe books like *You Are Enough* and pointing out the beauty of Phoebe’s hair texture. Ultimately, it took two more academic years before Phoebe felt a sense of belonging at Cobblerton, and this had more to do with finding “real friends” than with the school’s intervention in first grade.

Phoebe’s story demonstrates the prevalence of color-evasiveness within the district. Unlike with Shaliz and Ava, perhaps having learned the consequences of totally ignoring racist bullying, Cobblerton’s lower elementary school did respond to Caroline’s report. However, the response dealt with difference in general, rather than race in particular. Children as young as

three months old can recognize race, and are likely to prefer members of their own race if they have not been exposed to faces of people racialized differently (Waxman, 2021). The bullying that the girls experienced was clearly racialized and gendered, not merely based on difference. Shaliz, Ava, and Phoebe were all subjected to degrading comments about their dark skin and hair from children younger than eight years old, which shows how Cobblerton's whiteness was also pedagogical – it taught white children racism, and catered to the needs of those who reproduced, rather than disrupted, white supremacy and the colonial gender system that upholds it.

Reimagining Good Education in Cobblerton

The counter-stories of Janice and Violet, Raha, and Caroline all call into question the “goodness” of education in Cobblerton, in terms of morality – Cobblerton Schools’ ability to keep students’ safe and foster their belonging. All of the parents and students I interviewed also expressed concerns about the “goodness” of Cobblerton’s education in terms of quality. Caroline wanted to teach rigorous, inquiry-based science lessons but did not have the support of the school to do so; Raha was concerned that her daughters would not be taught critical historical perspectives and felt she needed to provide that on her own; and Violet thought that, just by the nature of the schools’ overwhelming whiteness – both of teachers and students – attempts to teach students about racial injustice were stymied and lessons fell flat.

Parents Brené, Scott, and Jerry, and recent CHS alum Leena, also identified issues of educational quality in Cobblerton, including the absence of Teachers of Color, lack of diverse and critical historical perspectives, and limited opportunities to interact with and learn from peers from backgrounds that were not white, middle or upper-middle class, and Christian. In other words, though Cobblerton was generally meeting the “academic rigor” criteria of CRP, it fell short of the other two criteria: cultural competence and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings,

1995). Jerry described how these shortcomings within the curriculum, pedagogy, and leadership of the school was harmful to all Cobblerton students:

Every year, we are producing at least 100 kids that have been disabled in that badly set up educational system. Like, who knows it might take a decade, 15 years, 20 years, and so multiply that by 100 and that's how many students we have ill-prepared to the real world where they will be in a diverse and very radically wide spectrum of personalities and people with varied backgrounds and stuff, and they are not prepared to be good citizens in that society, because they've been cocooned in like that frog in a well kind of mentality.

Though he acknowledged the importance of curricular representation and was very concerned about the lack of visible diversity in teachers, school administrators, and school and town leadership, he was adamant that Cobblerton needed to do more than read books about diversity, or even hire Teachers of Color. What he described above is Cobblerton students' lack of cultural competence – that is, their schools' failure to prepare them to work with others across difference. But he goes even further, referring not just to the lack of racial diversity of the schools but the “frog in the well mentality” (a reference to the fable about the frog who does not notice that the water around it is slowly coming to a boil) that Cobblerton schools produces, which leads to students who are “not prepared to be good citizens.” Here, Jerry is describing how white ignorance – the willful, widespread, not-knowing and not-understanding of white supremacy upon which white supremacy depends – is produced and sustained through Cobblerton Schools. To him, this limits the goodness, or quality, of the schools that he moved to Cobblerton to access.

Leena told me that at least one of her teachers was resistant to changing the mentality that

Jerry described: “Teachers had to do a training on how to combat [racism.] My math teacher told me she didn’t care about learning about microaggressions and would rather just attend trainings about ‘the subject she was paid to teach.’” Again, despite top-down efforts to mitigate the harm of the white habitus on Students of Color, white ignorance won out, and this teacher worked hard to not understand her role in either perpetuating or disrupting white supremacy— and told one of her few Students of Color she was doing so. Leena, too, expressed doubt about Cobblerton Schools’ ability to meaningfully disrupt white ignorance in students, given the lack of diversity within the schools.

Brené, a white woman with two white children in Cobblerton’s elementary school, was fearful of the consequences if this white ignorance being constantly reproduced through schooling:

It’s dehumanizing not to learn [the deep pain of slavery and colonization, because] when you experience people that don’t look like you, then you don’t see them as human like you. As capable of feeling the same pain. So that’s why it’s dangerous for People of Color.

And for her own children, she wanted to “protect them” – not from the pain or guilt of understanding whiteness, but from that dehumanization. “I want to protect my kids and not recreate this in them ... I don’t want them to be bad humans.” But Cobblerton schools did not offer this protection, so Brené had to fill in the gaps in her children’s “good” education at home, in order to ensure that they grew up be good by her definition – that is, empathetic, critically conscious, and aware of their shared humanity with People of Color.

Taken together, Cobblerton parents’ and students’ critique of Cobblerton Schools’ “goodness,” and their understanding of what really makes a school good were so much richer

than the dominant narrative of high test scores and good reputation. Scott said he desired a school that:

give[s] [my child] the tools to think critically and to value learning. Education separates us from what I call just ignorance of anybody out there who's going to take advantage of you, whether that's a society thing, whether that's a corporate thing, your education gives you a defense against marketing as an example, gives you a sense of pride and purpose in knowing things about the world that you would never know anywhere else, and understanding your value to the world. So it's all about confidence, and setting yourself up for any kind of success, no matter what you study.

Cobblerton parents wished for an educational environment in which student safety and wellbeing were paramount, where students could learn to work across differences of culture and life experience and develop empathy for others, especially those who have been historically oppressed. Because of Cobblerton's long history of white educational resource hoarding, which sustained Cobblerton's white habitus and protected and reproduced widespread white ignorance, Cobblerton could not provide the educational environment that parents desired for their children, and students desired for themselves. And yet, parents like Brené and Jerry continued to work for change within the town and district, and even Violet and Raha saw potential for the district to move in the direction of inclusive, humanizing education.

Potential for Change

When I asked study participants about Cobblerton Schools' potential to change in the future, I received a wide range of answers, but most saw themselves as having some agency in improving Cobblerton Schools. For example, when I asked Violet and Janice if they thought Cobblerton Schools have changed as a result of what Violet went through, and would possibly

handle a similar situation better in the future, they both immediately responded, in unison, “No.” And yet, later in our interview, Violet did seem hopeful, especially when discussing the increased diversity among Cobblerton’s preschoolers and the student who told her, “You look just like me!” I interpret Violet’s willingness to stay with the student who called her the n-word, and even her idea of coming back to teach in Cobblerton, as a belief that Cobblerton Schools can change.

Even Raha, who pulled her children out of Cobblerton Schools because their experiences there were so dehumanizing, expressed cautious optimism. When I interviewed Raha, her older daughter, Ava, was entering her final year at her private school, and Raha was hoping Ava could return to Cobblerton for high school and have a better experience than she had in elementary. Even as Raha expressed hope that the high school would be a better place than the elementary school was for Ava and Shaliz, she was also worried that students were still being harmed in Cobblerton Schools and that her daughters would not experience belonging there.

Leena, Brené, and Jerry all demonstrated their belief that Cobblerton schools could be pushed toward equity through their activism. Leena worked hard to get student representation onto the Cobblerton School Committee. “They did not want students to have a seat at the table,” she told me. “We really had to push them.” She said that she and the other two student representatives felt it was important that student voices be represented. “We didn’t want to be passive ... Instead of just sitting in the public comment section and coming up when it’s our turn to speak, we just want a seat at the table so we can participate in your conversation.” Though they were initially turned away, the three students persisted, and ultimately were able to secure a non-voting seat and a shared microphone. Leena was initially motivated by the superintendent’s firing of the popular high school principal – the same one who hired Caroline and advocated for

her to be hired in the middle school – but she later became concerned about the low numbers of Teachers of Color and very Western-centered history curriculum within the district. Having experienced one social justice-oriented educator in her time in Cobblerton (though the teacher left the district right after Leena took her class), she believed that much more was possible there. She did see the whiteness of the student body as an obstacle, saying, “If your student body is primarily white and lives in an isolated little bubble, there’s not a whole lot you can do to increase cultural awareness.” Nevertheless, she dedicated an enormous amount of time and energy in her junior and senior year of high school working to make Cobblerton Schools more responsive to student needs and concerns.

Brené cofounded Diverse Cobblerton with similar goals, wanting to see hiring and retention of Teachers of Color, a more critical and culturally responsive curriculum, and stronger responses to incidents of racism. She joined the emerging group after hearing a story much like Phoebe’s, about a very young Black girl who was being bullied for her hair texture and skin color. Having had some success at her children’s preschool – “They are definitely moving in the right direction, I feel good about that, I feel like I was part of that” – she was committed to working for similar change within Cobblerton Schools. She saw the hiring of the Director of Social Emotional Learning and Equity as an important first step, though she would have liked to see him furnished with a budget and additional support. “He’s got to work on building a structure, a system, and there’s still fires to put out. There’s kids that are suffering now, and we’re like, how can we help with that, let’s come up with ways that maybe we can help.” She saw Diverse Cobblerton as a critical partner to the schools in moving in the direction of equity.

Jerry was a very active member of Diverse Cobblerton, who frequently spoke at School Committee meetings and later joined the Equity Audit Steering Committee. Despite his stated

mistrust of Cobblerton Schools leadership, his actions demonstrated that he believed change was possible. The first step, he said, was acknowledging and documenting Cobblerton's oppressive practices and their consequences:

Acknowledge and realize that there are problems and start writing them down. I think there's a gross disregard or ignorance, willful ignorance, on acting like [Cobblerton] is a happy town and a great town, and everybody's doing great and succeeding well, and there's no racism or systemic issues. There are no systemic issues in [Cobblerton.] I think that's the one thing I would like to change, is for people to recognize and acknowledge that [Cobblerton] is not great. There are real issues that people who are not in the majority and like not presenting as the majority folks experience on a day-to-day basis that are significantly worse than many other towns like [Cobblerton.] And I think if I could make that happen, then I think there's more commitment from people to recognize there's an issue, we'll start looking at solutions. Right now, it's just like, there's a wall for people to even recognize there's an issue, and when there's no recognition there's an issue, it's very hard to fight that uphill battle, because you're seen as a negative impact and a discontented person.

Jerry spoke about combating the town's white ignorance. He clarified how effectively white ignorance protected the status quo in town, and reinforced the narrative that everyone was "happy" and the town was "great" – that the town and the schools were always already good. Jerry told me that the schools could be surveying and collecting data beyond just test scores to better understand student and family experiences of exclusion and harm, and using that data to plan future action. He saw Diverse Cobblerton's success in getting equity goals included in the town's strategic plan, and was dedicated to their ongoing work of holding the town and schools

accountable to their stated commitments.

Despite the obstacles presented by Cobblerton's white habitus and entrenched white ignorance, Violet, Leena, Brené and Jerry were all actively working to make Cobblerton schools more inclusive and improve the experiences of minoritized students there. Even Raha was cautiously optimistic. But Caroline was more circumspect. Though she planned to keep Phoebe in Cobblerton and trusted some of her former colleagues to be good teachers for her, she did not see a clear pathway to progress for the district as a whole. "They would just have to change their mindsets," she said. "I mean, it would have to be, they have to want to change. Yes, they have to want. I don't think there's anything that anybody can do to make them change. They have to want to make that change." Caroline, having an intimate knowledge of Cobblerton Schools' from having worked in two buildings over five years, recognized how highly incentivized the district was to maintain the status quo. Her words reminded me of Berlant's (2011) theory of cruel optimism, and particularly how deeply attached people can be to the fantasy of "the good life," even when it no longer makes sense: "The fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals" (p. 3). In Cobblerton, this fantasy remained alive to so many, and because of that, they had little wish or incentive to change. As Jerry pointed out, when he and other members of Diverse Cobblerton worked to shatter the fantasy and show their neighbors their reality, they were often dismissed as "discontented," which demonstrated the cruelty of the optimism: by rejecting any understanding of how their fantasy is just a fantasy, they also rejected opportunities to work for the world they might actually desire.

Implications & Limitations

Parents of Color, and other justice-minded parents and students in Cobblerton, wanted their children to be safe from harm at school. Cobblerton was not able to offer that, especially not to Girls of Color. Parents wanted all students to develop cultural competence at school. Cobblerton was not able to offer that. Parents wanted to see People of Color represented in the teachers and leadership of Cobblerton Schools. Cobblerton did not offer that, and in fact, pushed out the only Teacher of Color in the middle school. Some parents also wanted a critical education that would prepare their students to challenge injustice in the world. Cobblerton did not offer that. Taken together, these findings call into question the “goodness,” or quality, of education in Cobblerton, as well as the “goodness,” or morality, of education in Cobblerton. If a school district, through curriculum, pedagogy, hiring practices, and policy, reproduces white ignorance instead of disrupting it; and if, as a result, Students of Color are harmed and excluded; and if the district cannot effectively intervene in racial harm and violence that occurs as a result of the white ignorance there, what does it mean – to children, to families, to the field of education, to call that district good?

For Cobblerton, the implications of these findings are that the district must center the needs of the most marginalized within the community in order to create the schools they say they want. Parents are clear, in my interviews and in their interactions with the school leadership and School Committee, that they want diverse and critical curricular resources, diverse and critical educators, and clear pathways to repair when harm does occur. As we will see in the next chapter, school leaders would struggle to balance these demands with those of the white majority within the town and schools. As a result, Cobblerton continued to be impacted by past policies of white educational resource hoarding. Even with a clearly articulated desire to promote diversity,

inclusion, and equity within the school, Parents and Students of Color still struggled, suffered, and doubted the quality of the education they received. They experienced the most direct impacts of ongoing coloniality, white supremacy, and the colonial gender system – but their experiences also call into question the “goodness” of Cobblerton Schools for all students, as they revealed the way these schools reproduced white ignorance.

For the field of education and education research, the implications of these findings are that we must unlearn the dominant narrative that white, well-funded schools represent the best schools in the United States – even if they remain the most desirable to wealthy white parents. This requires a deep and critical look at the ongoing intellectual, political, and material struggles over the purpose of schooling. De Oliveira Andreotti (2014) described three dominant narratives about the purpose of schooling: the technicist-instrumentalist, the liberal humanist, and the critical/post-critical. As is implied here and will be shown in the next chapter, Cobblerton schools did an excellent job at the technicist-instrumentalist work – that is, preparing most students for higher education and traditional middle and upper-middle class jobs. This function of schooling is sustaining to racial capitalism, and depends upon the reproduction of human hierarchy to justify capitalism’s necessary inequalities.

Parents in this study noted the lack of liberal humanism that they might have expected: students learned little about cultures other than the dominant one, and did not really understand themselves in a global context. To me, the absence of critical and postcritical narrative was most striking – though Brené, Raha and Scott all specifically mentioned wanting their students to develop critical consciousness and empathy across difference, none expected their children to learn those skills at school, and other parents did not mention this as a goal. Though the work of critical and transformational pedagogy is alive and urgent in many educational spaces around the

country, in Cobblerton Schools it seems to lie beyond the scope of possibility or imagination – another indicator of the harm of white educational resource hoarding. I believe that without this kind of education, cruel optimism will continue to dominate, limiting life possibilities for Cobblerton children to individual competition and advancement into a social world of increasing scarcity, such that even some graduates of these well-resourced schools will not access the “good life” that their education promised. We can treat this as inevitable, or we can ask what education is required to school children into a society that seeks to repair past violence, restore broken relationships among people and with the planet, and build a just future in which a good life – a life of wellness and wholeness and abundant love – is freely offered to all.

Finally, de Oliveira Andreotti (2014) offered a fourth narrative of education that is so far from dominant that she describes it as totally absent from educational discourse. Unlike the other three, it is not rooted in Western thought. She wrote:

All these narratives can be traced to common roots in the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, the Reformation, European colonialism and resistance to colonialism, and, particularly, the European enlightenment. However, since these cultural, social, and economic transitions have framed our idea of what is good, ideal, and normal, it is important to acknowledge our constitutive blindness to other forms of seeing, knowing, and being in the world that do not fit what we can recognize (p. 45).

Thinking with de Oliveira Andreotti, I acknowledge my own education in Cobblerton, in English, and in Western epistemologies as a limitation of this study. It is hard to imagine possibilities for our children, our society, and our planet beyond what we have seen and known – but in considering what a “good” education might mean – one that is good for all children, and, de Oliveira Andreotti suggested, all generations and all beings – maybe require epistemological

shifts beyond what I can offer here. Cobblerton is the ancestral home of the Nipmuc people.

What is a good education on stolen land?

CHAPTER FIVE: PURSUING EQUITY WITHIN THE WHITE HABITUS

In the years following 2020, when Diverse Cobblerton first presented their petition demanding a focus on equity within Cobblerton Schools, Cobblerton Schools leadership actively pursued an equity-oriented agenda. The new superintendent, Dr. K, hired the district's first Director for Social Emotional Learning and Equity, Mr. V – who stayed on despite vocal objections, threats, and harassment by a small but active conservative contingent within the town. Dr. K also commissioned an Equity Audit, which was conducted over the 2022-2023 school year and published in October of 2023. As the schools reopened from COVID-19 pandemic closures, principals introduced new programming focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and worked hard to meet students' increased need for mental health support. At the same time, Dr. K hired three new curriculum directors to oversee the horizontal and vertical alignment of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), Humanities, and Unified Arts curriculum across the district. Each new director, over the course of the 2023-2024 school year, would mention the importance of equity to the district curriculum review. Perhaps as a result of their initial work, the Equity Audit found that the high school English department had “retired” *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* – one of the books that caused Violet so much discomfort to read with her white peers because of the use of the n-word throughout – and adopted a few titles by notable authors of Color. Students graduating after Violet would no longer need to plead with the School Committee, as Gemma had done, to be assigned books by Black writers.

And yet, going into the 2023-2024 school year, Dr. K and the School Committee had their work cut out for them. Racist graffiti continued to appear on school property, and the district had not yet found a way to effectively respond, or to prevent future incidents. The release

of the Equity Audit provoked a defensive response from some teachers, including the high school department heads of Math and Science, both of whom had been in the district for longer than Dr. K or anyone on the School Committee. (I had both teachers, for ninth grade Geometry and ninth grade Forces, Motion, and Energy, in the 2003-4 school year). Teachers were already mistrustful of Dr. K – their union held a no-confidence vote the previous school year over her choice not to renew the contract of the popular high school principal and to hire the expensive curriculum directors, taking curriculum development out of teachers’ direct control. Unexpected cost increases in special education and transportation, and a lower-than-expected allocation from the state, meant that Cobblerton Schools had an anticipated budget shortfall of a million dollars for 2024-2025, unless leadership undertook drastic cuts. Finally, the Cobblerton Federation of Teachers (CFT) was bargaining for a new contract, demanding cost of living adjustments (COLA) to meet rapidly rising inflation. Over the course of the school year, district leadership needed to find ways to continue moving their equity work forward while simultaneously cutting costs and rebuilding their relationships with the teaching force.

Overshadowing all of this was a sense that Cobblerton Schools were “slipping” in quality – that Cobblerton was no longer the “destination district” that Dr P. had built. The perception was based on Cobblerton Schools’ rankings against other districts on websites such as Niche.com. For example, according to *Boston Magazine*’s rankings, in 2012 Cobblerton High was ranked 18th in the state, while in 2023, it dropped to 40th. This narrative of Cobblerton Schools’ decline came up in a parent survey related to the 2022 Strategic Plan, and was mentioned again and again over the course of the 2023-2024 year by School Committee members, teachers, and public commenters at School Committee meetings. Even Leena, the student representative to the School Committee, brought it up in my interview with her, entirely

unprompted. Because there was so much speculation as to the cause of this slip (and at least one narrative blamed the superintendent), Dr. K put together a detailed presentation about each of the ranking sites and the data behind the rankings, to which the School Committee dedicated several hours of a meeting in December. Throughout this presentation, and throughout the school year, Dr. K emphasized that, prior to her arrival in the district, district leadership had not done enough to track data, including test scores and the relative academic performances of different “subgroups” – that is, historically marginalized students such as multilingual students, Students of Color, and those that qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. She diligently promoted the idea that data tracking was the key to equity, while making an interest convergence argument that through greater attention to data, Cobblerton Schools could both attend the needs of historically marginalized students and improve their reputation in comparison to surrounding towns. In this way, the district’s ability to understand itself as equitable, while also competitive and high-achieving, became the center of Cobblerton Schools’ narrative of goodness. Cobblerton leadership was striving for a district that was good in the sense of quality and good in the sense of morality as well.

How did this narrative of goodness – what “good” education is, and how district leadership might pursue or achieve it – relate to white educational resource hoarding? The following quote, from a teacher at a School Committee meeting where she was protesting a proposed cut of the district’s librarian, demonstrated what I understand as the primary connection:

The one common interest we all share as [Cobblerton] residents, whether or not [we have children in] the schools, are our property values. There's a direct relationship in this state between the quality of the school district and home values. It's not that complicated. So a

district that eliminates the library program is clearly not a district that is striving for high student achievement. It's a district in which students' [test scores] ... are likely to drop and they'll ultimately sink in rankings. Okay, that's not the qualities that will put [Cobblerton] on the top of the list when people are choosing where to live. And so we do not have restaurants, we do not have easy access to public transportation. We don't even have public sewers. Okay? What we have is this, our schools. That's why I moved here. I'm sure that's why many of you moved here. Okay, so why would we intentionally, why would the town intentionally devalue our primary asset? Makes no sense. So lower student achievement, lower rankings, lower property values.

This impassioned comment, which was met with huge applause from a large audience of teachers and townspeople, revealed several things. First, it harkened back to decisions made in the 1970s as a result of Cobblerton's desire to remain exclusive, especially to People of Color. Today, Cobblerton feels the consequences of those decisions, as explained by the teacher above, in few town amenities or attractions beyond the schools. Second, this comment highlighted the material incentive, created in part by Cobblerton's history of white educational resource hoarding, for district leadership to pursue high student achievement, mostly measured by scores on statewide standardized tests and Advanced Placement (AP) tests, in order to raise their rankings. Over the course of the 2023-2024 school year, School Committee members, teachers, and townspeople all referred directly and indirectly to property values in Cobblerton as a primary, if not *the* primary, factor in decision making, whether the decision regarded teacher pay, the middle school math curriculum, or adding Eid al-Fitr as a holiday on the school calendar. While at times, such as in the Eid discussion, an equity-oriented policy was deemed to increase Cobblerton's competitiveness with surrounding districts (in this case, the student presenter made

the argument that adding Eid as a holiday would attract Muslim families to the district, thus making it more desirable and competitive), there were also times when the goals of equity and competition were perceived to be in conflict.

The most significant of these conflicts, in terms of time spent discussing it at School Committee meetings, was over eighth grade algebra. In brief, the Equity Audit recommended deleveling middle school math – that is, eliminating any honors or accelerated math courses before ninth grade. But the head of the high school math department, Mrs. C, along with several members of the School Committee, wanted to add an eighth-grade algebra course to the middle school math curriculum, which would require a return to the pre-pandemic accelerated math option for seventh graders, and a new, even more rigorous eighth grade honors option. Proponents of this plan argued that it would be more equitable than deleveling, despite the fact that 28% of respondents to a town survey said they were paying for outside math tutoring. While the Equity Audit recommended fewer leveled math courses, many district leaders were avidly pushing for more.

While Dr. K, Assistant Superintendent Dr. M, and STEM Curriculum Director Mr. L all warned that increasing math leveling in middle school could lead to tracking, or stratification by perceived ability, within the high school, School Committee Members Amanda, Dawn, and Lisa, and math department head Mrs. C, all argued that eighth grade algebra was a necessity, and access to this opportunity was, in fact, a move toward equity – which would also increase test scores, “rigor,” and Cobblerton’s competitive ranking. At the end of the year, the School Committee voted to work toward implementing “full” eighth grade algebra in the 2025-2026 school year, while Dr. M volunteered to create a committee to study possibilities for implementation to minimize tracking. The year-long debate over this one course, eighth grade

algebra, revealed Cobblerton Schools’ unresolved tension around the district’s “goodness” – did “goodness” mean equity, as described in the audit, or did it mean “quality” or “excellence” as measured by school rankings?

This tension is demonstrated in the following exchange between Dr. K and School Committee member Dan:

Dr. K

I think, I think this community has to decide, what does the community want? If you want the high rankings then you have to decide what's gonna get you there? If you want something different than that's really the driving force. Ultimately, our students are competing with the world when they get out of here. So you have to decide what educational value are you giving to them so that when they leave here, they get the best opportunities? I can't tell you. I don't have a magic –

Dan

And they’re the best humans.

Dr. K

All of that.

In this chapter, I analyze Cobblerton Schools’ narratives of “goodness” over the course of the 2023-2024 school year, drawing on data from observations of School Committee meetings, as well as the district’s Strategic Plan, the Equity Audit, and the appearance of two School Committee members on a local cable television episode. To understand these narratives and their relationship to white educational resource hoarding, I consider Cobblerton as a “partitioned public” (Aggarwal, 2024), artificially isolated from Boston and separated from surrounding districts with which it competes, with a leadership exercising “colorblind managerialism”

(Turner, 2020) that, despite oft-stated commitments to equity, does not meaningfully disrupt white supremacy. As a result, white educational resource hoarding can be justified and continue uninterrupted even as the district continues to understand itself as “good.” This allows for the perpetuation of whiteness as property, reifying white supremacy even as the district pursues equity. I further argue that the white space of Cobblerton is pedagogical. That is, this town and school district, created by white educational resource hoarding, *teaches* townspeople to pursue a narrowly defined and heavily bordered vision of equity, and protects white ignorance of larger social inequality and injustice.

Theory and Literature

In *Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race and Inequality*, Erica Turner (2020) described the inherent contradiction at the heart of public schools:

To carry out the obligation of public schools to foster equality and democracy requires challenging inequities in the status quo. However, the public schools—like other institutions of government—are typically dependent upon and limited by dominant groups that want to maintain their advantages. These contradictions are inherent in US public schools, which espouse democratic and emancipatory ideals (and occasional fulfillment of these ideals) and a system that is nonetheless developed in and reflective of the intertwined capitalism and white supremacy that advantage those already advantaged under those systems. (p. 3-4)

Because school board members are elected, and superintendents are chosen by school boards, district leadership is strongly incentivized to act in accordance with the demands of their most powerful constituents – that is white, affluent parents. Often, school board members are themselves these parents, as was the case in Cobblerton. While they may hold a stated

commitment to equity within the district they lead, as Turner (2020) demonstrated, the approach they take often seeks to manage, rather than abolish, racial and economic inequality, which allows district leaders to main reputations as “good people actively confronting racism or other inequalities” (p. 12) without losing support of the powerful white majority – or sacrificing advantages for their children. Turner (2020) called the resulting approach to leadership “colorblind managerialism,” which she defined as follows:

Hallmark practices of color-blind managerialism include the use of performance metrics for monitoring, the setting up of markets and positioning of one’s organization favorably in competition ... Advocates of color-blind managerialism articulate a commitment to (racial) equity, but equity is understood in individualized terms: as raising achievement for a child or classroom of children, rather than as transforming structures, policies, or practices that systematically marginalize children and communities of color ... Thus, this racial project reflects a color-blind stance on race and racial inequity. (p. 24-25)

As the data in this chapter shows, Cobblerton district leadership’s practices, decisions, and stated motivations mapped directly onto Turner’s (2020) description, especially when it came to how their pursuit of equity was constrained by the desires of high-status parents and the strong incentive to compete with neighboring districts.

In order to better understand the complex interplay of factors that incentivized and sustained Cobblerton district leadership’s colorblind managerialism, and consider the relation between colorblind managerialism and white educational resource hoarding, I next briefly review “partitioned publics” (Aggarwal, 2024), including mechanisms of partition within a single school building (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Venzant Chambers, 2022). I also consider white educational spaces (Diamond & Lewis, 2022) and school reputation, and how the concept of “school quality

capitalization” reinforces whiteness as property within the educational landscape. I close this literature review by theorizing the pedagogy of the white habitus, drawing on Lipsitz (2011) and Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2007) to consider how white educational resource hoarding teaches residents of the white habitus to pursue a narrow, individualized, and bordered vision of equity that elides and replaces possibilities of societal transformation toward global justice.

Partitioned Publics

As demonstrated in Chapter 3, Cobblerton and Cobblerton Schools were framed as totally separate from Boston and Boston Public Schools, despite a mere twenty miles between Cobblerton and downtown Boston. These districts, like every other in the state, were created by the Massachusetts state government, and are administered and overseen by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). And yet, through the 34 hours of School Committee meetings I observed, Boston schools were never mentioned. This sense of total separation was demonstrated in Dr. P’s 1976 expression of gratitude that “we in [Cobblerton] as a community as well as a school system, are fortunate that the schools in [Cobblerton] do not have serious problems in the categories mentioned,” when the second category mentioned was “Integration/Segregation/Busing.” At the time, Cobblerton would have been close to 100% white, but Dr. P did not understand Cobblerton as having a problem with integration or segregation, because the Black children of Boston did not fall under his purview.

As Steffes (2024) detailed, much of the responsibility for separation and competition among school districts lies with state governments, which set policies such as funding schools through local property taxes. Some responsibility lies with the Supreme Court as well, which foreclosed the possibility of court-mandated metropolitan remedies to northern school segregation by declaring the suburbs “innocent” in *Milliken v. Bradley* (Baugh, 2011). As

Aggarwal (2024) argued, socially constructed but materially consequential borders, like those between school districts, carry more weight than simply delineating where one district ends and another begins. After all, Cobblerton Schools were not only imagined to be entirely separate from Boston Public Schools – on every ranking list, they were also better. Aggarwal (2024) explained how partitions function to create hierarchy and exclusion:

By partition (Gilmore 2012, 2017) I mean a set of political and social processes through which the social separateness, devolution, and hierarchical group differentiation integral to racial capitalism are articulated, naturalized, and reproduced (Gilmore 2012, 2017; Melamed 2015). Understood as such, partition signals an active and ongoing separation, one that is relational and contingent, ideological and material, and never quite complete. (p. 9)

Aggarwal (2024) highlighted how partition naturalizes both separation and hierarchy, and that those hierarchies are “group differentiated.” In the case of partition between Cobblerton and Boston, the “group” in question – the reason that Cobblerton district leadership compared their schools to certain schools and not others, and especially not to Boston – were the co-constructed categories of race and class. I argue that the ideological and material border between Cobblerton and its neighbor districts, and between all those districts, the suburbs, and the city of Boston, functioned as a partition as Aggarwal described, such that those in Cobblerton rarely thought beyond the borders of their district except to compare and compete with other (mostly white, similarly classed) suburbs. As such, when district leadership sought to pursue “equity,” it was strictly for the children within their district. At Cobblerton High School in the 2022-2023 school year, there were 158 Students of Color (out of 814 total), 6 of whom were Black.

Such a partition, of social separateness and hierarchical group differentiation, existed

within Cobblerton schools as well, particularly within the high school. There, partition was formalized through course leveling. For each subject, students could take College Preparatory II (CP II), the lowest level; College Preparatory I (CP I), Honors, or, for most but not all subjects, Advanced Placement (AP). Cobblerton High was not (yet) racially diverse enough for this partition to reflect racial hierarchy within the school, but Dr. K and other district leaders alluded to the fact that course leveling could lead to tracking (creating totally separate groups of students who rarely or never interact with those outside of their “track”), and that tracking often reflects racial hierarchy in more diverse districts. As Venzant Chambers (2022) explained, “Even within schools without formal tracking, students who take one or more upper-level class may find themselves completely cut off from students who do not” (p. 33). This is consistent with my own experience at Cobblerton High school, where I rarely had classes with anyone but the “honors kids.” Both Lewis and Diamond (2015) and Venzant Chambers (2022) demonstrated that students taking upper-level courses have access to more rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum and teachers that were more experienced and seemed to care more about their students. Venzant Chambers (2022) also noted that, due to white-normed definitions of “smartness” (Hatt, 2012) and success, most Students of Color were tracked toward “regular,” non-advanced classes. Diamond and Lewis (2015) found that white parents would leverage their power to get their children into higher level classes, overriding teacher recommendation, while Parents of Color were less likely to do so, or even to know how to do so. White parents in their study also objected to proposed measures to eliminate tracking, or even to making the process for entering advanced classes more transparent. As a result, both studies found Students of Color were underrepresented in higher level courses. Venzant Chambers (2022) argued that choosing, or being chosen for, the advanced track thus came at a cost to Black and Latine students, because it

would separate them from the majority of their racial or ethnic peers. I add that access to, and representation within the curriculum of, the highest level and most prestigious courses within a school is one example of how whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) was sustained in Cobblerton.

The many partitions within and around Cobblerton – within the schools, between Cobblerton and neighboring districts, between the suburbs and the city – all served to protect and sustain the exclusive white educational space (Diamond & Lewis, 2022) and whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) that Cobblerton’s history of white educational resource hoarding created. But the boundaries it placed around Cobblerton’s “goodness” – that is, the “good” classes and programs within the schools, and the relative goodness of Cobblerton’s reputation compared to other districts – also created conditions in which access to good education was understood to be limited. This sense of scarcity both reflects and contributes to a sense of educational scarcity nationally, the origins of which Aggarwal (2024) described, writing, “Choice, a key principle of reform and management in education that emerged in the post-*Brown* period, ensured a public that anticipated and ensured exclusion, scarcity, competition, and inequality” (p. 11). In alignment with Aggarwal’s argument, Cobblerton residents “anticipated and ensured exclusion,” and as such, their decision-making was driven largely by a sense of scarcity in educational resources, which drove both resource hoarding and “consumer citizenship” (Aggarwal, 2024, p. 11) – the sense that Cobblerton’s schools were an “asset” worthy (or not) of “investment” for which families should expect the return of “educational value” and property value.

All of this incentivized them to actively compete with neighboring districts, and to be both exclusive and desirable to drive up demand for Cobblerton homes and thereby property value. To do so, Cobblerton needed to maintain a strong reputation, which, as the next section shows, was intimately linked with whiteness.

Whiteness as Property & School Reputation

As I argued in Chapter 1, school reputation, or how “good” a school is perceived to be, is both directly and indirectly related to the school or district’s whiteness (Johnson & Shapiro, 2013; Rhodes & Warkentien, 2017; Wells, 2018). As Diamond and Lewis (2022) pointed out, whiteness in schooling includes, but also extends beyond, the number or proportion of white students within a school or district. They wrote, “When we ask ourselves whether schools (or other organizations) are ‘white spaces’ the metrics should go far beyond demographics to examine questions of resource distribution, power, culture, climate, and mission” (p. 1473). In Cobblerton, whiteness is built into town structures and pervasive within and beyond the schools.

Cobblerton’s efforts to maintain and improve their schools’ reputation necessitated and normalized the colorblind managerialism that Turner (2020) described. Because, as Diamond and Lewis (2022) further argue, “abundant research demonstrates how schools continue to value and reward white history, white knowledge, and white bodies,” (p. 1472), radical moves toward justice-oriented schooling – for example, implementing a Teaching Mathematics for Social Justice (TMSJ) (Harper & Kudaisi, 2023) approach across the curriculum – were totally absent from School Committee discussions. School rankings and reputation were based almost entirely on student mastery of white knowledge, as enshrined in statewide standardized tests and the prestigious AP curriculum. As a result, Cobblerton district leadership’s commitment to competing with neighboring (also overwhelmingly white) districts in ranking and reputation further entrenched white supremacy through curriculum and policy even as efforts were made toward inclusion and equity. Cobblerton Schools’ material and political incentives to compete in the marketplace of Massachusetts districts limited definitions of equity to access to white knowledge and white, middle-class definitions of opportunity and success.

These incentives to excel and compete within white-normed structures also limited who equity was imagined to be for. Just as Turner (2020) described, Cobblerton district leadership “articulate[d] a commitment to (racial) equity, but equity is understood in individualized terms: as raising achievement for a child or classroom of children, rather than as transforming structures, policies, or practices that systematically marginalize children and communities of color” (p. 25). This vision of equity – of equal access to opportunities to individually compete and succeed – converged with Cobblerton’s interest in high rankings, while also protecting Cobblerton as a fundamentally white educational space. As such, it also reproduced the “white habitus” (Bonilla Silva & Embrick, 2007) and protected the white ignorance of Cobblerton residents such that they need never consider injustice beyond the borders of their small town.

School Quality Capitalization

Cobblerton’s efforts to literally raise property values through school reputation, while also defining academic success as mastery of white knowledge, cemented and perpetuated whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) within and beyond the town. On schools and whiteness as property, Steffes (2024) wrote that, during the development of the suburbs, “this defense of inequality was driven at least in part by the recognition of the material benefits they [white people] received from inequality, including the economic value of differentiated public goods like schools and the ways in which Whiteness had been written into property value” (p. 17). She found that this was exacerbated in Illinois when, beginning in 1986, the state began releasing school report cards that allowed families to easily compare schools and districts. Steffes (2024) wrote:

After the first report cards were released, realtors and developers began using them to market communities to homeseekers and predicted (accurately) that they would influence

property values. ... Aided by these new metrics, realtors claimed by the mid-1990s that the relationship between good schools and high property value was growing stronger. The director of School Match, a company that helped relocating corporate executives navigate a new metropolitan area, noted that school data was sought ‘not only by parents, but childless home buyers who recognize the correlation between quality schools and property values.’ (p. 262-263)

Economists have named individual homeowner’s ability to profit from metrics of school quality, such as test scores and rankings, “school quality capitalization” (Nguyen-Hoang & Yinger, 2011). Though there is significant disagreement over how to measure the link between, for example, test scores and home values in a given school attendance area or district, researchers have found a consistent link. In a 2011 metanalysis, Nguyen-Hoang and Yinger found:

Almost all of the reviewed studies find evidence that school quality, especially as measured by test scores, is capitalized into house values. ... Moreover, despite different data and fixed effects strategies, these studies provide remarkably similar results, namely that house values rise by 14% for a one-standard-deviation increase in student test scores. (p. 46)

As test scores increase, so do home values – and, though school rankings are a fairly recent phenomenon and have therefore been studied less, homebuyers’ belief in the authority of these rankings will likely produce the same effect.

There is one factor, however, that can weaken the link between increased test scores and property value, and that is the racial makeup of the district or school in question. Turnbull and Zheng (2022) found that, in districts with a history of desegregation litigation, rising test scores do not correlate with rising property values. In these districts, “school performance measures

may no longer correlate with parents' perception of school quality" (p. 223). The authors speculated that perhaps court takeovers and "forced busing" reduced parents' trust in district quality measures, but they did not consider the power that antiblackness has to skew perception of a school's "goodness." Dougherty and colleagues (2009), taking a more racial realist analysis of school quality capitalization in West Hartford, Connecticut (which is not far from Cobblerton), found that, just as homebuyers were willing to pay more to live near a school with high test scores, they were also – and over time, increasingly – willing to pay more to live near a whiter school. The authors concluded, "Although test scores matter, their power has diminished over time, and the racial composition of the school has played a dramatically more influential role in determining housing prices in West Hartford in recent years" (p. 524). In other words, when homeowners are capitalizing off school rankings in white places like Cobblerton, they are also capitalizing off the district's whiteness. This is an obvious indicator of how whiteness as property has become a major incentive for districts to continue white educational resource hoarding.

School rankings also exacerbate white educational resource hoarding, as families with the ability to do so migrate to districts with higher rankings. Hasan and Kumar (2024), who studied the impact of school ratings released through the website GreatSchools.org, found that, as these ratings took hold as a popular metric of school quality, the concentration of white, Asian, and affluent families in the highly ranked districts increased, suggesting that merely the existence of online school rankings exacerbate white educational resource hoarding. McArthur & Reeves (2022), conducting similar long term geographical research in the UK (where school rankings are released nationally as "league tables"), found a similar outcome. They argued, "One problem with school league tables in particular is that measures of quality often merely reflect the social

origins of those who attend a particular school. As a result, the act of measuring school quality has the potential to deepen the residential segregation of advantage and disadvantage” (p. 517). Relying on school rankings, and linking them to property values, as Cobblerton leadership did, exacerbates the already deep investment in whiteness as property and white educational resource hoarding there. I argue that the close tie, in Cobblerton residents’ discourse and policy, between property value and the perceived “rigor” and success of Cobblerton’s schools is a legacy of white educational resource hoarding and a factor in its perpetuation.

Pedagogy of the White Spatial Imaginary

In Chapter 3, I turned to Lipsitz’s (2011) concept of the “white spatial imaginary” to consider how white ignorance is protected and reproduced through the creation and maintenance of white space via segregation. In alignment with Aggarwal’s (2024) concept of partition, the white spatial imaginary is not only separate from spaces imagined to be Black or Brown, but also understood to be superior, or as Lipsitz wrote, morally privileged:

The white spatial imaginary portrays the properly gendered prosperous suburban home as the privileged moral geography of the nation ... [This emerges] from public policies that place the acquisitive consumer at the center of the social world, that promote hostile privitism and defensive localism as suburban structures of feeling. They encourage homeowners to band together to capture amenities and advantages for themselves while outsourcing responsibilities and burdens to less powerful communities (p. 13).

In other words, the white spatial imaginary draws a border around which people and places are “good,” and incentivizes those within the boundary to defend themselves from encroachment – just as Cobblerton residents did in the 1970s. As Lipsitz (2011) and Bonilla Silva & Embrick (2007) each point out, this results in white spaces that produce particular racial meanings.

Bonilla Silva and Embrick (2007) call these white spaces the “white habitus.” Lipsitz (2011) wrote, “segregated schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces [that] produce white people who know very little about Blacks and even less about themselves” (p. 15) – in other words, the white habitus maintains white ignorance. But Lipsitz goes even further, describing the white habitus as pedagogical: “These spaces make racial segregation seem desirable, natural, necessary, and inevitable. Even more important, they enact a public pedagogy about who belongs where and what makes certain spaces desirable” (p. 15). The white spaces produced by partitioned publics teach white people about goodness, including both what is desirable and what is moral. If white spaces are good, in the moral sense, such that they are worthy of protection and border defense, then it follows that actions toward equity, or even towards justice, would do nothing to threaten that border, or the systems that create and maintain those borders. So, a good education, good work, and “the good life” (Berlant, 2011), in the white spatial imaginary, upholds, protects, serves, and never disrupts the border – or the system of white supremacy that produced it. As such, when district leadership in Cobblerton pursue equity, it is always already bounded by the white habitus they occupy – which taught them what is natural, and what is good.

Pursuing Excellence and Equity in Cobblerton

I entered into collecting the data for this chapter in the fall of 2023, expecting to see Cobblerton leadership defending the status quo and resisting change on the grounds that the district was already “good.” That is not what I found – instead, I observed leadership striving to move the district toward equity while also reassuring the community that their schools remained high quality and were continuously working to improve. To grapple with the tensions that arose between those two goals, they turned again and again to colorblind managerialism, a strategy which also allowed them to discuss within-district equity without considering their schools’ or

students' roles in sustaining or disrupting social inequality broadly.

District leadership spoke about “excellence,” or the district’s ability to offer an educational program that was perceived as high quality and rigorous, such that families would choose Cobblerton over neighboring school districts. In these conversations, School Committee members, teachers, and town residents all perpetuated the narrative that Cobblerton’s place in statewide school rankings directly impacted property values in the town. This narrative provided a strong incentive for leaders to make choices that would elevate Cobblerton’s place in the rankings, which emerged in the data as the primary way that townspeople understood the “goodness,” or quality, of the schools.

I consider how district leadership understood equity, which was mostly about providing opportunity for students to access Cobblerton’s programs and course offerings, and reducing barriers to academic success. School principals also discussed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) oriented programming, and significant time was devoted to debating how to create a protocol to respond to incidents of hate and bias. These aspects of equity played a major role in how Cobblerton understood its “goodness” – both in terms of quality, and in terms of morality. Clearly, Cobblerton saw equity as integral to a good school district, and excellence and equity were sometimes discussed as co-constitutive, such as when the middle school principal, Dr. J, presented on student data, arguing that Cobblerton’s middle school was one of the best in the state because students showed greater growth than wealthier districts, even if their absolute scores were not as high. In 2024, Cobblerton Middle School would win a Blue Ribbon Award from the Department of Education, and would be the only middle school in the state to do so, validating Dr. J’s claim.

However, in key moments, district leadership’s discourse showed tensions between the

stated goals of equity and excellence, especially in initial responses to the Equity Audit, and in the eighth-grade algebra debate. These moments of tension reveal a great deal about the impact of white educational resource hoarding on Cobblerton. There were also striking absences from district-level conversations – most notably, the schools’ role in promoting equity, or justice, beyond the town’s borders.

Cobblerton Schools’ Strategic Plan

Cobblerton Schools’ internal guiding documents demonstrated commitments to equity and excellence. In 2022, Cobblerton Schools released a new Strategic Plan, which included the following mission and vision statements:

Mission

To collaboratively create a safe, inclusive environment that empowers all learners, through innovative teaching and learning, to be lifelong, active, global citizens.

Vision

If we foster a safe and supportive learning environment; ensure consistent and effective communication among all constituents; provide rigorous opportunities for innovative teaching and learning; and attract and retain talent, then we will have an inclusive environment which empowers all learners to be lifelong, active, global citizens

These were updated from the 2017-2022 mission statement, which read: “Deliver challenging, comprehensive, standards-based educational programs that support each student’s academic, social and emotional growth to prepare each to be civic-minded citizens who are college, career, and life ready.” Notable additions include the words “collaboratively create,” “safe and inclusive environment,” “empowers,” and “global;” removed are “deliver,” “standards-based,” “college,” and “career.” This may be reflective of a shift in leadership – Dr. K arrived in the district in July

2020 – and also a shift in focus in the years immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 racial uprising.

There is further evidence for this shift in the introductions to each Strategic Plan. While the 2017 plan focuses on “what it means to be a high-performing school system,” Dr. K’s introduction made a clear commitment to equity. She described the challenge of leading the district through school reopening, and closed the letter with, “Ultimately, this work should lead to improved academic and social-emotional learning outcomes for [C]PS Students, with a lens on equity.” These words appear in the Strategic Plan next to a photo of a Black student in a graduation gown, standing up and waving through the moonroof of a car, in what is probably the socially distanced car parade that served as a graduation ceremony in 2020. The student shown is not Violet; according to Violet, there was only one other Black student in her graduating class.

By contrast, the 2017 introduction is accompanied by this word cloud:

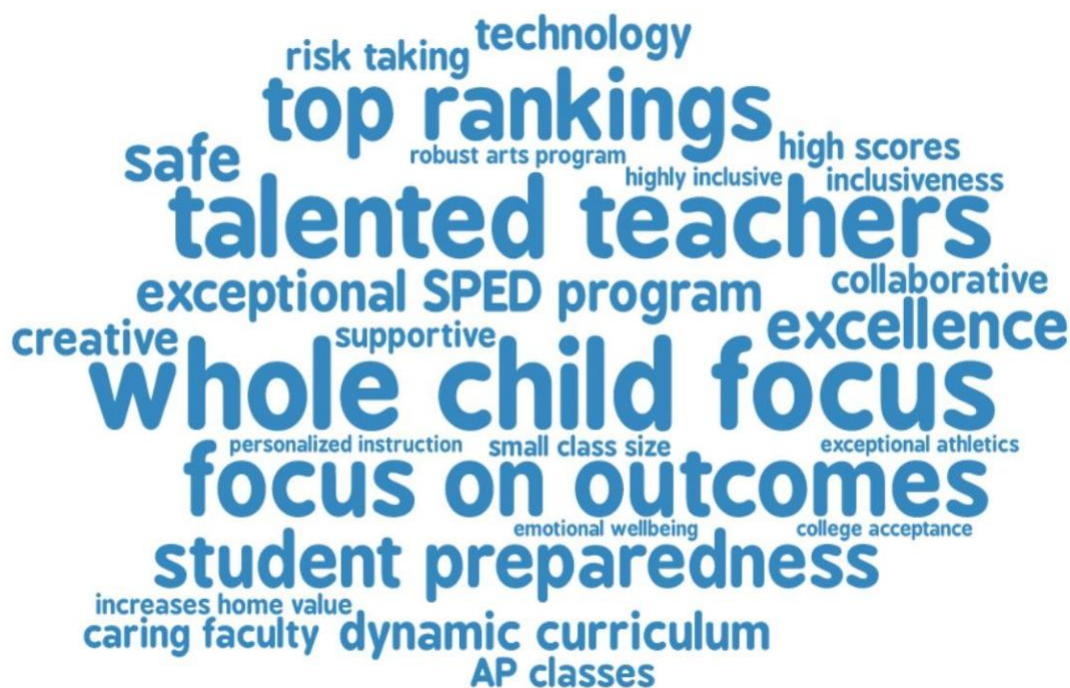


Figure 7. Word cloud from Cobblerton Schools 2017-2022 Strategic Plan.

While no mention is made of equity in the 2017-2022 plan, “excellence” was clearly valued at the time, and was tied to “top rankings” and “increases home value” in the minds of those who participated in the strategic planning process. In what follows, Dr. K attempted to center equity in her leadership, but was frequently met by School Committee members, teachers, and townspeople for whom excellence – and thereby “top rankings” and increased property values – were the highest priority.

Pursuing Excellence

On December 21, 2023, just a few days before winter break began for Cobblerton students, the School Committee dedicated nearly two hours to a presentation and discussion about Cobblerton’s place in statewide rankings. Dr. K introduced her presentation by explaining their motivation for doing so:

Dr. K

Okay, so I know this has come up during the Strategic Planning process, when we surveyed the community and had about over 1000 responses. One of the things that we heard was that parents and community members felt that our rigor and curriculum need to improve. There was a concern brought forward in some of the survey results about our rankings having slipped in recent years, pre-COVID, and what are we doing about it? What should we do about it? So, recently as well at one of our School Committee meetings, I know that the School Committee also brought up, can we talk about the data, and what our data looks like in [Cobblerton], comparative to some of our neighboring districts.

Clear in both her explanation, and the time and attention to detail that School Committee members dedicated to this presentation, was the perceived importance of Cobblerton’s place in

the rankings as a measure of both school quality and desirability. Cobblerton's ranking was a key aspect of the "goodness" of the district.

Dr. K's presentation showed the importance of statewide standardized test (MCAS) scores, graduation rates, and rates of college acceptance to Cobblerton's rankings on the different sites, but emphasized one factor above all: Advanced Placement (AP) tests – both how many students took them each year, and how well AP test-taking students scored. It was Cobblerton's lower rate of AP test taking that put it behind Hopkinton, Cobblerton's biggest rival, in the *U.S. News and World Report* ranking. This revelation immediately began a conversation about how Cobblerton could boost the number of students taking AP courses and tests, including whether it would be feasible to require students taking AP courses to take AP tests:

Dr. K

Many districts if they are offering AP classes also require students to take AP. So that is impactful. So if it's voluntary for students to take AP, then less will take the test. So, it goes by how many are enrolled, and then how many take the test, and then how many pass the test, so the less taking obviously impacts and brings the number down.

Dan

Do districts that require that require students to take the test –

Dr. K

If they take the AP, yes.

Dan

If they require it, do they also have funds to provide for students who can't afford it?

Dawn

It's a hundred dollars!

Amid several other simultaneous conversations about why students might or might not take the exams, and what factors might impact their scores on those exams, Principal L interjected that yes, there was funding available through the College Board, the company that administers the AP test, for students who could not afford the exam fee. Dr. K pointed out that, when students take the AP courses but not the exam, “It doesn’t mean our kids aren’t getting the education.” Nevertheless, at the end of Dr. K’s presentation, she made the recommendation that Cobblerton High encourage or require students in AP courses to take AP tests. When the presentation ended, the School Committee immediately returned to discussing AP classes and tests:

Dawn

I see the recommendation about encouraging kids to take the AP test or requiring rather for them to take the AP test. My only hesitation on that is 242 students took at least 1 AP. And we have some students that took 5, some that took 4, some that took 3, some that took 2 – 242 times a hundred dollars, right, so either we’d be asking some families to pay 4 or 5 hundred dollars per child, and that is absolutely an equity issue. And then I’m not sure that the budget, I mean, we’re talking about a significant amount of money.

Dr. K

It may be that we put a different emphasis or encouragement on it versus any kind of requisite, this would be something that the school would consider and –

Amanda

And fee waivers are available, right? Fee waivers are available?

Dr. K

Yes.

Dan

But if you're looking at what they're looking at, they want a percentage of students who took at least one exam, so the requirement could be, you need to take at least one AP exam if you're taking APs. You could be limiting it, and not saying that if you take an AP that you need to take that AP exam, and that's kind of low hanging fruit, not to say that the 100 dollars could still not be something that –

Dr. K

We're not even saying you should do this, we're, just, these are some of the things that –

Dan

No, these seem like kind of low hanging fruit, as long as we can ensure that there's equitable access to being able to take the exams and we're not putting anyone in a position to –

Dawn

At least one seems very reasonable.

Leena

Yeah I would not have a requirement, or at least like a very minimal one, just because I think that would deter people from taking AP classes in the first place, because a lot of people are very intimidated by the exam and just want to take maybe a slightly harder class in a subject that they're interested in and aren't really, don't really care about getting college credit. So I think enforcing it, taking the AP exam, is going to kind of –

Dan

But you understand, you know, if you are going to take any AP classes, you have to take at least one AP exam, so that way if you take five, you only have to take one?

Leena

I think that's fine, but just making sure it's not –

Amanda

A hard requirement for everyone in the class would deter.

Leena

Yeah, absolutely.

Dan

No, I don't think –

Susan

That was just a suggestion that maybe that minimal requirement would be that they do the minimum one, if you're taking five, that you try it in one.

Cynthia

That being said, a lot of other districts require, if you take AP, you take the exam, it's just standard practice, it's a cultural practice.

Here, Dr. K and the committee members grapple with the tension between the policy that would raise Cobblerton in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings – requiring that students who take AP classes take AP exams – and the more equity-oriented policy, already in place, that those exams are optional. As Leena explained, keeping the exam optional made CHS' highest level and most prestigious courses more accessible to students who might feel “intimidated” by the exam requirement but want to try the harder course.

There was also the cost. The College Board reduces but does not eliminate the exam fee for students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In Massachusetts, the state supplements the College Board's fee reduction for these students, but it is still not free – each exam costs a

low-income family \$22 (College Board, 2024). There are also likely many families in Cobblerton who do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch but for whom one hundred dollars per exam would still be a stretch.

Nevertheless, the school committee is eager to take up this “low hanging fruit” as an opportunity to rise in the rankings – and maybe also an opportunity to raise the reputation for “rigor” if AP test-taking becomes “a standard practice ... a cultural practice.” Standardizing the practice of requiring students in high level courses to take prestigious, exclusive, and expensive exams would indeed further entrench a particular culture – I would argue, one of white knowledge and white norms of success. As Leena explained in her interview with me, Cobblerton does not offer courses in every AP subject:

Leena

I would say, there's definitely, I don't know if you noticed this during your time there, but there's a huge emphasis on STEM, which is fine. I mean, I'm studying STEM in college, but I definitely think we, all of us, would have benefited had we had more access to, like, maybe more history courses or things like that. Like, we have some great electives, but we only offer AP European [History], AP U.S. [History] and AP [U.S.] Gov[ernment], and those are all very Western. And so I wish we had other options as well, like we do for science, because I think we offer literally every science AP.

Leena noticed that all of the AP Social Studies courses offered covered only the U.S. and Europe, although the College Board offered courses such as Modern World History and African American Studies. She also speculated that this STEM focus might be why “the rankings were so good a few years ago,” when her family chose Cobblerton on the basis of its Niche.com ranking. But in her view, this also limited Cobblerton students’ exposure to nonwhite, non-Western

perspectives in the curriculum. As such, encouraging students to take more AP classes and requiring AP tests – both of which would raise Cobblerton’s rankings – would also further entrench the white, middle-class norms of Cobblerton High School.

School Committee members also made a strong connection between the standardized testing data in the rankings presentation, and their desire for leveled math and eighth grade algebra:

Dawn

This is the MCAS MAP historical data, and I find this really interesting, especially because it’s reflective of grade 10. Because I just want to talk about the difference between where our kiddos were, say 2019 at 83%, to 73% in ‘23, right, a ten percent drop. I just want to reflect on the fact that those 2019 10th graders, we had leveled math at [Cobblerton Middle School]. We had an accelerated math program in 7th grade. We were covering all of algebra in 8th grade. And then most kids moved into 10th grade, and we saw a score of 83%. Now I just want to look at 2023, because those are our current juniors. So those were the kids, during COVID, they were seventh graders. So they were in accelerated math, but it stopped as of March 13, they were put back into remote classrooms with 80 kids and it no longer became – accelerated math stopped for them. They also had a very different algebra experience, right, they did not cover all of algebra, and I just want to make sure – is this something we’re talking about within the math review committee? Because as the recommendations I saw, and I absolutely think it’s important, to utilize the Equity Audit to examine curricular offerings, absolutely, but are we also utilizing our math review or English review or whatever review to examine curriculum offerings relative to rigor, right? So I just want to make sure we’re looking at

this very important historical data on 10th grade MCAS results and look back to what those kids had that got them there, that got them to the 83%. Because when we scroll down and look at the map to comparative districts, for those 10th graders, I want to look at us and I see where we fell in, and we can look at the 10th graders in surrounding districts like Dover-Sherborn or Hopkinton or Ashland that still do offer that leveled curriculum in the school –

Amanda

Full algebra in 8th grade.

Dawn

And algebra in 8th grade. So I just want to make sure. And I guess that's also reflective of ... we come in at about 73%, and we're looking at districts like Ashland that has them at 77, and Hopkinton at 88 and Dover-Sherborn at 89. So is this part of something the math review committee is reflecting on? While they look at middle school math offerings?

Dr. K

So they have talked about it. I sat in for a little bit of their discussion too – yesterday, it was just yesterday – to have this conversation. I think what's very challenging right now is you've got all these things happening simultaneously. We've got new math curriculum coming into place and want to spend a lot of energy building up the rigor and the instructional practices of our teachers which is going to be a big focus next year. At the same time you've got an Equity Steering Committee that's going to look at any recommendations that they're going to make. Now I don't think our Equity Steering Committee is looking to weigh in on leveling or not leveling. I don't think they'll get

there because they have so many recommendations, they'll talk about some focus areas. I also think that there's a lot of challenges with a math review committee in isolation making a recommendation, because it doesn't just impact math, it impacts all subjects, and the reason it does is because when you track students in general, whatever grade it is, you end up tracking them for most of the rest of the day. So it's also going to impact science and ELA and all of those things, and we also need to look at, from an equity lens, at the data that's showing that some of our lower offering levels are disproportionately showing numbers of special needs and ELL students.

The standardized test score data, showing both trends over time and comparison to Cobblerton's competing districts, was used to demonstrate a need for more leveling, in the interest of competition and "rigor." This ran directly counter to what Dr. K understood as equitable, but not so much that she took a stand against it. Instead, she continued to state her neutrality on the issue of eighth grade algebra throughout the school year. As shown below, at the end of the school year when the School Committee voted to implement eighth grade algebra in 2025-2026, Dr. K and Dr. M took on the work of trying to mitigate and manage, rather than abolish, the internal inequality that this would likely create within the middle and high schools.

Throughout the school year, School Committee members demonstrated their awareness of parent and community attention to Cobblerton's rankings. But the reason for the strong, community-wide desire to climb in the rankings, and the material incentive behind it, did not become clear to me until the end of the school year. In May, the School Committee announced that they had successfully reached a tentative agreement with the CFT, but to fund it would require a referendum to override the statewide 2 ½ percent cap on property tax increases. At the next School Committee meeting, a community member asked, in the public comment portion,

why she should “invest” in the schools through voting for a tax override, and what “return on investment” she should expect:

Sarah

You know there seems to be a lot of misinformation and not accurate information that has been put out through social media. And just speaking amongst the public, I just have a couple questions. Are [Cobblerton] Public School salaries compared by all towns in Massachusetts, by all towns in MetroWest County, all surrounding towns, or all towns of similar district population? But how are you comparing that? Please explain how and why you use this method to compare?

I hear the phrase ‘competitive wage,’ yet I don't understand who you are actually comparing [Cobblerton] against. So we can, you know, are we talking about just MetroWest, other public school districts? Are you comparing us against all districts that are similar as far as the district size? But how do you come to that number? How do you come to that by that calculation?

Then two, are teachers in [Cobblerton] Public Schools currently receiving competitive wages, and if not, then how much less are [Cobblerton] teachers receiving amongst the peers that you're comparing us to? What ranking system does the [Cobblerton] School Committee believe is the valid source to determine the success of the district?

I often hear that people don't want to use the various ranking systems like Niche or *Boston Magazine* to compare districts. But I will say that [like] a lot of towns, we have a young couple or young family moving into a new town. The public schools is something that they definitely consider. And they do look at where public schools are

ranked to kind of make those determinations of where they want to live with their family, if they are seeking a public education. So I'm curious to know, over the last decade now, [Cobblerton] has continuously dropped in our public school ranking. So what system, what ranking system do you believe as a School Committee is a valid source to determine the actual success of the district? So people can understand, you know, how did we go in 2013 when I moved to this community, we were 14, and we've significantly dropped in the ratings over the last decade. So, why is that? How come? What has happened over the last decade that [Cobblerton] has continuously dropped in the rankings?

And then my last question will be, would it be reasonable to expect that with higher wages, if this override does pass, and additional learning time that our district will perform at higher levels moving forward? You know when, when you're investing, there's always an expectation. So if you invest money, you expect a profit, if you invest time, you expect success or satisfaction. So I'm wondering, so what would be the draw for the taxpayers to approve this override? Giving teachers more money doesn't give the elderly or lowest income voters any incentive to vote for an override. What is the added benefit for us as taxpayers, to invest into our school system, where we continuously see rankings drop? As a parent now with a school-aged child who's lived in this community for over a decade, but has not sent my child to public school until this year, I am very curious to know what the return of this investment is. I'm not necessarily opposed to paying teachers more money, but I want to know how this will help us. Among the comparable districts that are competing again, what is the added value since we already pay a high amount of tax?

Dan

So we don't normally necessarily respond to these things. But given the situation, the fact that discussions of the overhead are on the agenda, I will address a few, there was a lot there, I may not be able to get to all of them. In the presentation that's on the school department's website, under the override, there's a listing of a group of different towns, some surrounding, some sort of comparable versus in different collaboratives and whatnot. And so that's the general grouping of towns that we look at to compare ourselves. You know, in general, I think that [Cobblerton] schools, personally, have been relatively competitive, but we've certainly not kept up over time. I think if you look at some data from 12 or 14 years ago, we've fallen back relatively slightly in our competitiveness. But one thing, I think is very important, because you are talking about return on investment is a couple things. First of all, of the comparable school districts, we pay less per pupil than any other district that we compare ourselves to. Secondly, this contract is not just about paying teachers. It is about increasing instructional time for students. I think it is very important that we do not lose sight of that when we're talking about money, we're talking about working to increase the education opportunities and time on learning for our students, it is 15 minutes of increased instructional time per day for grades three through 12, and 10 minutes for K through two, that's 540 hours of increased instructional time over students' K through 12 education, which equates to more than half a year of increased education. So it's not just looking at the dollars and cents that a teacher makes versus another district. It's the fact that we are increasing our opportunities for students, and I think that that is incredibly important, something that we absolutely cannot lose sight of when we're looking at that, when we're looking at this

contract. There was one other point, but the other point, I would just simply say, is that there have been a number of recently settled contracts that are in the same neighborhood as the contracts that we were settled. ...So we are, we have the contract that we are proceeding with is an incredibly good contract for [Cobblerton]. It's good for our students, it's good for our teachers, good for the district, and ultimately, it will be good for your property values.

Here, Sarah made explicit the connection she, and presumably many others, saw between rankings, competition, and property – and Dan jumped at the chance to elaborate on this and reassure her that Cobblerton Public Schools were worth her investment, that they were appropriately keeping up with competing towns, and she would see the return not only in her child's education, but in her property values.

Shortly after this School Committee meeting, Dan and fellow School Committee member Lisa made an appearance on a local cable show, to explain the tax override vote and persuade townspeople to vote for it. The show was hosted by Ann, the study participant I interviewed in Chapter 3. Again, the perceived connection between competition and property value was made explicit.

Ann

So I'm thinking, as I'm listening to you, so the public probably is wondering, well, that's kind of a kick in the chops, and that must be why the schools have, you know, declined. And I would, I'm just going to do a public service announcement. When we say declined, we're still in the B plus, A minus kind of category, and so I do get a little freaked out, but

—

Lisa

Yeah, so I wanted to go back to this idea of how good of an education are your children getting?

Ann

[Laughing] How bad are we?

Lisa

Because I think we lose – I'm from Texas. I'm from South Texas, where education is not quite what it is in Massachusetts. So I think it's really important to keep perspective that Massachusetts has some of the best public schools in the country, if not the best. And [Cobblerton] ranks very high when you look at Massachusetts. I mean, you can, we can say, you know, in this ranking list, we were above Hopkinton. On this one, we were below Hopkinton, but we're still at the top. And I want people to remember that you're getting that excellent education for way less than the state average per pupil.

[Cobblerton], I looked up numbers right off, just off DESE and you probably have more recent numbers off the top of your head, but just bear with me – so the state average is 20,000, a little over 20,000 per pupil. We are spending 16,300 per pupil. That's a 20% difference. That's huge. People in [Cobblerton] are getting a bargain. This is a really good, strong school district. And you know, we're paying less for people than Milford, Medway, Franklin, most of the towns around us, most of the towns in MetroWest. So I think it's really important to keep that in mind. ...

Dan

But you know, I think there has been some discussion I've seen about comparable towns, and you know, how we want to be, and it's one of those things that I've sort of struggled

with. And I think it's important, though, to talk about as a community, because when we're trying to attract and retain the best teachers. We're not just competing with the districts that we view ourselves as comparable to, right? We live right next to Sherborn. We're not that far from Wellesley, from Wayland, from when teachers are looking at employment opportunities, they have a choice, right? And so we're not beholden by, just because we think that Hopkinton is a peer, Ashland's peer, Medway, they have a choice from anywhere within the distance that they want to drive. And so when we're looking at being competitive and ensuring that we're hiring and retaining the best teachers, we need to keep that in mind, not to say we're going to try to go and be Wellesley, but we need to at least be cognizant of that and try to keep our wages up with those towns ...

Ann

And I think, I think the other piece, looking at it from someone who used to be in the real estate business isn't any longer, but still have friends in real estate, when the schools suffer, when there's public discord about, oh, they're not doing well, or, oh, you know, whatever, it affects our tax, our assessments, and what happens is that people just don't want to come to a town where the schools look like they're rocky, and they are not going to buy. So from talking to my friends, they say, you know, [Cobblerton] used to be at the top of the list. Now it's kind of like after Ashland, after Hopkinton, after Medway, after Millis. Okay, that's scary, because that is the first time in all the time I've lived here that that's been the case. Okay, so put that one out there.

Dan, Lisa, and Ann were all in agreement – Cobblerton residents should vote for the tax override. Lisa argued that Cobblerton schools were already good – in fact, some of the best schools, in the best state for education, and that Cobblerton residents were getting a “bargain,”

implying that it was not too big of an ask for residents to pitch in a little more. Dan emphasized the importance of teacher pay to retention, especially when Cobblerton was driving distance from so many “better” – and wealthier – districts that would pay teachers much more. But Ann, to close out the show, made the argument that might persuade even those without students in the schools. It was “scary,” she said, to think about how Cobblerton’s “decline” would impact the perceptions of potential homebuyers. Echoing the words of the teacher quoted in the introduction to this chapter, and the town resident Sarah, Ann promoted the idea that the schools’ reputation was a key factor in town property values and, as such, a worthy investment for all residents.

Here, “whiteness as property” (Harris, 1993), functions doubly, through the literal property of Cobblerton homes, and the metaphorical property of school reputation, which depends upon a partitioned public and that naturalizes the association between whiteness and “goodness.” By broadcasting this message through public School Committee meetings and the local access television show, both also available on YouTube, the School Committee and Ann are also teaching the public about how to understand their schools. Viewers, including students like Leena, learn to assess their schools’ value as an investment, rather than as a public good or site for social change. This exacerbates the already dominant, neoliberal ideology of “good schools” as a limited resource that must be competed over, protected, and defended.

Pursuing Equity

In the introduction to the 2023 Cobblerton Public Schools Equity Audit Report, “systemic equity” is defined as follows:

the intentional approach to which systems and individuals consistently operate, through a lens that ensures every scholar – regardless of their learning profile, culture, race, and other identities – is respected, recognized and valued, ultimately providing each scholar

the same opportunity and access to achieve academic excellence. L&P Educational Services defines educational equity as the necessary instruction that reduces the predictability of who succeeds and who fails, interrupting the policies and practices that negatively impact student performance, which limits their success.

Key words here are “opportunity” and “access” – this definition considers equity to be “leveling the playing field” in the competition for academic success, without calling into question normative definitions of success or failure. It does not mention educators or schools playing an active role in understanding and combating societal injustice – as such, it is a narrow definition of equity that may be pursued or even achieved through colorblind managerialism.

During the 2023-2024 school year, Cobblerton High School also participated in an accreditation process through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). The initial NEASC evaluation flagged “equity” as a category in which Cobblerton had room for improvement. The principal of CHS, Mr. L, explained to the School Committee:

Mr. L

So the priority area one it says, ‘the school will identify and eliminate barriers preventing students from showcasing proficiency in the “vision of the graduate’s” transferable skills, knowledge, understandings, and dispositions necessary for future success. The school will ensure an equitable school experience for all students, including challenging learning experiences and inclusive opportunities that will serve as the impetus for programs, policies, regulations, practices and other school decisions.’

So what I look at with highlighting that that's very sort of up here now, what does that actually mean for all of our schools? And so when you actually look at what that means, and so that's reviewing all policies, protocols and procedures across the board.

That's from our Student Handbook, our program of studies, our override process, our leveling process, our recommendation for every policy procedure that's telling us we need to make sure that we are using a lens of equity when we are working with those that we are there that there are no barriers for students in accessing what's happening in the school.

Again, access to opportunity and the elimination of barriers to academic and “future” success dominate the definition, and Mr. L’s explanation of how to apply this definition to school practices aligns with colorblind managerialism, emphasizing technical fixes through policy review. Mr. L may have listed particular processes, such as the “override process” – that is, how a student or their parent could “override” a teacher’s recommendation for a student to be placed in a certain course level – because this process was much discussed in the School Committee meeting when the Equity Audit was released.

District leadership grappled with understanding equity and pursuing equitable policy over the course of the school year. While at times they were able to find interest convergence between their understanding of equity and their desire to rise in the rankings and be perceived as “excellent,” at other times, tensions arose between goals of equity and excellence, and never did they implement, or even suggest, policy that might meaningfully disrupt white supremacy within the district, or beyond it.

The Equity Audit: Contested Definitions of “Equity” & The Logics of Colorblind Managerialism

Although the definition of equity used by L&P, the company that conducted Cobblerton’s Equity Audit, was a narrow one, the report nevertheless found many areas where Cobblerton could improve, from recruiting more students from historically marginalized groups into the

elementary school's French Immersion and Montessori programs, to hiring more Teachers of Color, to diversifying the curriculum. However, at the School Committee meeting where the Equity Audit was first discussed, one topic dominated the conversation: math leveling.

In the years prior to the pandemic, Cobblerton Middle School (CMS) had offered accelerated math in seventh grade, and algebra in eighth grade (although there was some debate as to whether this was “full” algebra – whether it covered all the standards that a high school algebra course would.) During the pandemic, the seventh grade accelerated class was eliminated. The eighth grade accelerated option remained, but it was no longer “algebra” because there was no seventh-grade option meant to prepare students for algebra. Several School Committee members and Mrs. C, Math Department head, desired a return to pre-pandemic leveling and an even more rigorous “full” algebra in eighth grade. But the Equity Audit recommended eliminating all leveled math classes in middle school. When Mindy, the representative of L&P who came to present the Equity Audit findings, finished her presentation, the School Committee immediately began raising questions about this particular recommendation:

Lisa

Can you explain a little bit about leveling and equity? Because I'm coming from a place where, just in my own life experience, I know that it can be very frustrating for a high performing kid to feel like the class is moving slowly but I've also seen how damaging it can be to self-esteem when they're in a class where a lot of the kids are going a lot faster than they do and they don't understand. So, I feel like deleveling has a lot of issues. And I want to better understand why it's considered more equitable, because from my own personal experience, I am not, I see the idea of giving kids enough of a chance to see if they can excel but I don't understand in general how deleveling, why so many

recommendations about deleveling seem to be equated with equity. I'm not quite getting that.

Mindy (L&P)

Right, so I would simply say it's about access and opportunity. Right? So giving all students the opportunity, all students are getting access to high level rigorous math for example, math instruction, math content. When we have tasks that are high cognitive demand we have to put some of those differentiation scaffolds in place, that will fall on the teacher to be able to do that. But it doesn't mean that those students should not have opportunity to be able to access those high cognitive demanding tasks and see what it is that they are able to do. In addition to that, we want all students to be able to analyze case by solutions, for example, with one another. We're sure that students have opportunities to draw on multiple sources of knowledge information, whether that's through peer-to-peer interaction, or exposure to different levels of the content that might be covered in that curriculum. So the idea with deleveling is not to bring down the rigor in the curriculum. It's to help elevate all students so that they can access a high level and that's done through some differentiation and scaffolding so that all students have an equitable entry point.

Lisa

I want to push back on that because I feel like we put a lot of pressure on teachers, and we say as a district that we want to meet students where they are, I think it is a much bigger ask to put a teacher in charge of a group of kids who instead of being in this range [holds hands close together] are in this range of ability [moving hands farther apart], and say to that same teacher, no, you need to still meet each and every kid where they are. I

don't understand how they can be expected to do that. That's the first part of my question. Second part of my question is, why can't you do all of those things and still have leveling? Why can't you still promote access to opportunity, and promote kids to reach higher within each group without deleveling?

Lisa was grappling with how to apply her definition of equity, revealing a contradiction within the definition. If equity was about giving every individual student, regardless of background, the opportunity to demonstrate traditional (that is, white-normed) academic success, then shouldn't there be as many chances to compete and succeed as possible? Wouldn't having certain classes designated more prestigious actually provide *more* opportunities for individual students to "achieve academic excellence" or "showcase proficiency"? Within this neoliberal framework of individual achievement, the Equity Audit's recommendation made little sense to her. Mindy tried to explain that those opportunities would still exist, and be accessible to more students, if classes were not leveled. But Lisa, still thinking in terms of individual students (and teachers) rather than taking a more structural perspective, was not convinced. Mindy went on to explain that leveling might also lead to tracking, but this too was unconvincing to the committee. Amanda, a School Committee member who was a math teacher in a different district, explained:

Amanda

Because unfortunately, I think research will show this, to be able to differentiate to that wide of a range for five different classes and say at the middle school or high school level is simply not possible. It seems on paper like it's a possible good idea, like, just differentiate! But it never in practice comes out that way. I'm a high school math teacher. And moreover, in [Cobblerton], what ends up happening a lot, if students aren't offered that curriculum or they're having trouble, many families hire private out-of-school

tutoring, which is expensive and this creates an even worse, very, very large equity issue. Whereas only families that can afford that expensive tutoring can be successful in these classes that aren't meeting the students where they are. But I also think that there are many ways – and I've done this work a lot – to ensure that that tracking is not as rigid to allow for that flexibility between levels. And there are many ways to do that as far as like content stranding, additional supports, as Dawn mentioned, so that it's not as rigid. There's also many ways and I've done this work as well, to be mindful of the recruitment and retention of BIPOC students, students with disabilities, English language learners, girls, into higher level classes.

Amanda, seeking to reconcile the excellence goal of leveled math with the equity goal of avoiding tracking, opened the possibility of leveled classes that reflect the diversity of the student body. When, several months later, the committee voted to move the district toward implementing a “full” eighth grade algebra course, Dr. M, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, would form a committee to study how to do so in a way that would minimize tracking. But at the Equity Audit meeting, held in October, the discussion continued. Two teachers, Mrs. C, the Math Department head, and Mrs. B, the Science Department head, put forward critiques of the Equity Audit itself, in a clear attempt to defend Cobblerton from what they saw as an attack on its good reputation:

Mrs. C

So as a math teacher in the district for 25 years, I've listened to what Amanda's saying, what Dawn is saying, what Dan's saying, and I think sometimes we talk so much about equity, and we talk about it's not equitable for the, for the, I want to make sure I'm saying the right term, I didn't sleep well last night because I read this report and I was

thinking a lot about it, so anyways we have students that are, I'm just going to use the CP, maybe in the CP II level we talk about equity for those students, but we don't ever really talk about equity for the students that are up here [raises hand above head to indicate "high level"]. And I just think sometimes – and I totally agree with, you know, we could unlevel, but you can't, like Amanda said, you can't just – in your report I didn't notice anywhere where we need to add in differentiation instruction and professional development for teachers, because you can't just say to a teacher oh you have to differentiate and you're going to go differentiate, we need to learn, we need smaller class sizes, we need co-teaching, there's so much more that goes into it, and I along with many of my teachers really do try to do that type of stuff, but it's very time consuming, but I also think we have to really think about those students that are ready to move on, and is it equitable for them not to give them those opportunities. So I do think that we need to figure out solutions, so like in the middle school where, I want to make sure, we have unlevelled classes up until 8th grade, do we offer, for those students that want to move, can we somehow figure out getting Title I tutors in or something like that that can help move these students into the places that they want to be. And then also you don't want to just have these students move up if they're just going to continually get frustrated, and I worry about their, I have a lot of empathy for students that really want to try to be at the honors level or move up to that next level and they really try they try so hard, and it just takes them longer, and then their self-esteem is lowered, and it's hard to witness that as a teacher, so I just think all those things need to be thought about and talked about. I'm just going to make one more comment, and then I'll give it to [Mrs. B], ... We do offer students tons of opportunities to move along [between math levels] at the high school, but

we don't have those supports that we need and I really think *that's* what we need to be focusing on, is what supports do we need to put in place for those students that really want to try it, and I think it was Lisa that talked about, I forget what you said Lisa but you said something about how do we get these students the opportunity to move. And then to also what you had asked Lisa about, you're doing this at the lower levels, you're differentiating at the lower levels, but we – do we know that? Do we know that every student in K to 5 is being challenged to their potential? I think sometimes it seems like they are, right, but I can use my daughter as an example, she doesn't always come home challenged because we don't speak up, so I think we have to be careful, I don't know if I'm right or wrong with that, not to say that teachers aren't doing that but we don't have enough data to say that every student's being challenged.

Mrs. C made the argument that equity for “the students that are up here” demanded leveled courses, because otherwise, the district would run the risk that not “every student's being challenged.” If equity is “access to achieve academic excellence” and “showcase proficiency,” then Mrs. C's argument makes sense. If achieving academic excellence in mathematics is mastering a linear series of standards, and some students move faster and therefore master more, then ensuring that “every student ... is being challenged to their potential” could be understood as equitable. Within the narrow definition of equity of access and opportunity, which does not challenge white-normed standards of “academic excellence” or neoliberal, individualized measures of “proficiency,” the colorblind managerialism that Lisa, Amanda, and Mrs. C was advocating for is logical.

After Mrs. C, Mrs. B spoke on many of the issues the report brought up, including hiring Teachers of Color, which I will return to later in this chapter. She then noted that the way the

Equity Audit Report described the process for overriding a teacher recommendation for a particular course level was incorrect. According to the report, parents needed to meet with teachers to get a recommendation changed. But Mrs. B wanted Mindy to know that it was as simple as filling out a Google Form. This came as a surprise to some in the room, including School Committee member, Cynthia:

Mrs. B

I'm [Mrs. B], I've been teaching here for 30 years, and the most important thing I want to say is that this is an amazing community, and I've loved all thirty of my years, and I love what all of you just said about the leveling because I do think that's an issue. ... At the bottom of 28, "Appeals Process," that I fully don't understand. So a few years ago in the high school, we do not meet with parents and students to override anymore, anyone can override, okay, anyone. They don't have to talk to anybody, it is completely equitable, you can be in level 2 and you can take AP chemistry and we absolutely support that. If a student wants to try, we want them to try, we have filled AP Chemistry sections because people want to try, because we've supported that, we've given them that opportunity. Anybody can override, just through a digital, I don't know what it's called –

Mrs. C

A Google Form.

Mrs. B

A Google Form. It's not this appeal thing.

Mindy

This is not accurate?

Mrs. B

Not accurate. ...

Mrs. C

Four years?

Cynthia

I don't know, I had a freshman that wasn't able to get into AP Physics because he didn't get the um, whatever the grade they expected.

Mrs. B

But you could just put them in.

Mrs. C

We haven't had override meeting in a while.

Cynthia

I didn't process why, if he wasn't recommended for it then I wasn't going to override the teacher. So that was my mistake I guess? I'm just saying that if the teacher said not to do it then I didn't do it. That was two years ago. That was not a long time ago, that was two years ago.

School Board Member

And to be clear you guys are just talking about math and science, right?

Mrs. B

No, overall.

Mrs. C

We got rid of override meetings at least four years ago. It's just a form. ...

Mrs. B

Ok thank you, sorry if I sounded a little –

Mindy

No!

Mrs. B

It's just, this is personal for me because I love it here, I've been doing it for 30 years, I think this district is amazing, I really, I really do, I think we offer a great variety of courses, I think we try to support and students and I think, you know, we're not always successful.

Mrs. B insists that the process for “appeal,” or overriding a teacher’s recommendation for a leveled course, is “completely equitable,” because “anyone can override.” As such, every student should, at least in theory, have access to the opportunity to take the most challenging courses at CHS, even if teacher or testing bias (recommendations were based partly on teacher assessment and partly on an internal standardized test called STAR) initially discouraged them from doing so. But as this conversation reveals, most people were not aware of this, including those interviewed for the Equity Audit and at least one member of the School Committee. Though to Mrs. B the process seemed “completely equitable,” others did not see it the same way.

Mrs. B began and ended her comments to the School Committee by describing her love of Cobblerton’s “amazing” school district. Throughout, she insisted that the district was both already excellent and already equitable, and took a defensive stance against the Equity Audit to protect the district’s reputation, and the status quo of her good school.

Several members of Diverse Cobblerton spoke in the public comment portion of the Equity Audit meeting, including participants of this study Brené and Jerry. Another Diverse

Cobblerton member, Mr. P, critiqued district leadership's response to the Equity Audit, stating:

I know from my own experience as a white guy thinking about equity stuff that I need to pay attention to voices unheard. That means those that are *not* succeeding in our spaces. More, much more, than those that are frustrated because it's a challenge for them to excel. This is part of the problem with equity work. We're protecting spaces. We're not opening spaces.

Mr. P, like the others who spoke at this meeting, was grappling with what "equity" really meant. Maybe in response to Mrs. C's comment that "we don't ever really talk about equity for the students that are up here," he expressed concern that the response to the Equity Audit would be to protect Cobblerton's unequal status quo, rather than attend to the needs of the most marginalized within the district. Mr. P believed these students would benefit from "opening up spaces," which could be read as another call to remove barriers to individual achievement, but might also be understood as the desire to end the internal partitioning of Cobblerton schools altogether.

Brené also pointed out the limitations of the Committee's response, stating, "I've seen our district be obsessed with achievement. And that definitely was borne out tonight when we, before having people from the town who had signed in come to speak, we invited two teachers to come up and speak, and essentially defend themselves and how they felt offended by this." She also described what she thought was missing from the Equity Audit itself:

Brené

I would have liked to have seen also data gathered on mental health outcomes, in disparities, people's children, and families in the district experiences with racism, prejudice, transphobia, homophobia, and then how did the school, how does the school,

each school, each building the district as a whole, respond to that? And I would have liked to have seen you look at their processes. I would have liked to have seen you consider measuring the attrition of Families of Color in the district because different people anecdotally are leaving the district and moving to other towns or if they can afford it [or] sending their kids to private schools, because they're continuing to not feel comfortable and safe in our district.

Brené, who introduced me to Raha, understood equity as the need to combat larger systems of oppression – something outside the purview of colorblind managerialism. I include Mr. P's and Brené's comments here to note that, even within the white habitus of Cobblerton, some community members were able to advance a different, more expansive idea of equity. But their vision of justice was largely ignored, at least in the official discourse. Brené's observation about the obsession with "achievement" offered a clue as to why, in this and future meetings, discussions about course leveling would continue to take precedence over the schools' role in disrupting racism, transphobia, and homophobia, or creating meaningful safety for marginalized students at school.

At the next meeting of the School Committee, just two days later, Ms. S, the principal of Cobblerton's lower elementary school, responded to Brené's comment and the comment of another Diverse Cobblerton member regarding high rates of chronic absenteeism for Students of Color and others from historically marginalized groups. Ms. S said:

Ms. S

I do think it's really important, I mean that data was alarming for all of us to be honest with you. I think that when we look, we often look at students versus subgroups, it was really eye-opening to be able to kind of look through that lens. Additionally, I think it's

important that it's not just about getting a child to school for the point of getting them to school. It's looking at our social emotional piece. Like are we having school refusal because of anxiety, our safe and supportive schools, do our children feel safe in our schools? How we're looking at teaching and learning? Do they feel that they can access? Do they feel like they see themselves in the classroom? Do they see that they are heard and valued? So that goes to the relationship piece. So a lot of what you heard tonight is addressing that. And it's an important lens that I know all for of us were like, woah. That was data that we haven't looked at that in that lens before. We've looked at individuals, but not cohorts.

Ms. S hinted at a greater need to attend to students' school experiences, and the reasons behind some students' inability or reluctance to come to school regularly. This was one of the only times that I heard Cobblerton Schools leadership question, as Mr. P and Brené did, the "goodness" of Cobblerton Schools for all students – and the School Committee did not revisit her questions at any point in this school year.

Interest Convergence: When "Excellence" and "Equity" Come Together

After the meeting in which the Equity Audit was officially released and discussed, the School Committee met again, just two days later. At that meeting, each high school principal reported their work on each of the "Arches," or categories, within the district's strategic plan. Dr. J, the middle school principal (the same principal who did not pick up the phone to Caroline in the last chapter) stated:

Dr. J

Alright, so I do want to talk about equity. I do want to talk about privilege. I do want to talk about fragility. If we can jump to slide 3 or Arch 3 for me first. So I am very proud

of the [Cobblerton] Middle School. I've been there for eleven years. So I'm very proud of the results. I'm very proud of the performance of the teachers and what they've been able to accomplish. [Cobblerton] Middle School is the highest performing school of any middle school that I've looked at in this past year with a low-income rate of greater than 11%. You rate yourself against any middle school in the area. Anyone that's performing higher in proficiency, they have an [low] income rate less than 11%. And I would argue that because we also look at Hopkinton oftentimes as a measure that we sometimes measure ourselves against is that our SGP as a middle school for ELA is higher than Hopkinton, it is as high – no, it is higher – in math, for all students in SGP. It is higher in low-income students, it is much higher for our EL population, and it is higher for our students with disabilities as well. It is in my opinion, based on any metric anyone wants to ask or look at, is one of the best performing middle schools in the state of Massachusetts.

A school committee member jumped in to ask him to explain SGP, which stands for Student Growth Percentile. Dr. J and Dr. K gave the following, highly technical, explanation for how they use test score data to compare their schools against other districts:

Dr. J

SGP? SGP is Student Growth Percentile. So for a general rule of thumb, if you are in a high-income community, you see high proficiency just like the total score. If you, typically, you take a look at lower-income school, you see a lower proficiency. But where you can measure a lower-income community against the higher income community is in the SGP, meaning the growth that they can make with the students they have. And I think that this community should be within the middle school should be very proud of the SGP,

they sort of show and in many times it's unfair to compare yourself to a Weston or Winchester when you're looking at proficiency, but I would encourage you to look at SGP in any of those communities that that exist.

Dr. K

And can I just add before we go on though, so the SGP is a three-year data source. You take the trend data from the students and relate them to their peers within the community and within the state and it's a three-year data source. So when you're looking at what they have today, it's going back the previous two years.

Dawn

So it's comparing them to their past years or to each other to their own growth?

Dr. K

Both. It's a combination of both.

Here and throughout his presentation, Dr. J demonstrated a mastery of colorblind managerialism, describing his schools' success in terms of technical, quantitative measures of achievement based on test score data. He also found a way to bring together the district's goal of excellence and competition with the goal of equity, highlighting that historically marginalized subgroups in Cobblerton perform better on standardized tests than those groups in Cobblerton's rival district. He then launched into an explanation of all the DEI programming at his school:

Dr. J

That's the norm against how the whole assessment progresses and where that middle ground is too. The other piece, I'm proud of, while we've seen academic and performance, we've also quadrupled our Staff of Color in the last five years. And that's something I'm incredibly proud of. Additionally, if you're looking at our social emotional

wellbeing, we're in year two, working with the ADL and their peer leadership program. They've already been in our building this year twice, to work with 20 of our students, student leaders who are implementing change across our building and have been essential participants in creating our Safe and Supportive Schools lessons over the last two years. We have 10 educators in our building that participate in the Department Heads CRE Academy, Culturally Responsive Education Academy. We are in partnership with the high school going to be participating in the Challenge Day at the end of the year, in combination with Medway as well. We're continuing with Project 351 Celtics Playbook, which had great success and are really working hard at the implementation of tier two and tier three SEL supports for students that are indicated there.

One of the Staff of Color mentioned here is Caroline, the only licensed Teacher of Color in the school, who would be let go at the end of the year. Dr. J also mentioned partnering with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) for the peer leadership program, an organization that has historically conflated anti-Zionism – or work toward human rights for the Palestinian people and against their ethnic cleansing and genocide– with antisemitism. As Leifer (2022) argued, the ADL stifles free speech and Palestine solidarity work, thus promoting bullying even as they claim to oppose it. Partnering with the ADL protects and promotes whiteness and coloniality. This conversation took place on October 19, 2023, just weeks after Israel began its genocidal campaign against people of Gaza that continues to the time of this writing.

Nevertheless, Dr. J proudly highlighted his DEI efforts in conjunction with his school's test scores as a way of demonstrating how he was able to pursue goals of both equity and excellence within his school. He explained that the DEI programming was meant to “confront bias and confront the fragility and privilege that exists within [Cobblerton] and as a student, that

you oftentimes, you know, at 12 through 14 years old, are just [beginning] to be open[ing] your eyes to a lot of that.” At the end of this school year, Cobblerton Middle School would be awarded a national Blue Ribbon Award from the United States Department of Education, confirming that Dr. J’s definition of “goodness” was aligned with dominant understandings of such. Dr. J would also be promoted to Assistant Superintendent shortly after declining to renew Caroline’s teaching contract. Here and throughout the school year, Dr. J and the rest of the Cobblerton leadership demonstrated their technical skill in managing, rather than combatting, inequality (Turner, 2020) while graduating, as Dr. J put it, the “personal, local, global type of citizen that we’re trying to produce.”

In addition to addressing test score disparities and “privilege and fragility,” another problem the district leadership needed to manage was the repeated “incidents of hate and bias” – that is, racist graffiti in school bathrooms and, once, a town park – that had been recurring since 2021. The Equity Audit authors asked students about the district’s response, finding:

Communication between students and administrators about incidents of hate is one-way from administration to students. Communication between students and guidance counselors about incidents of hate is opt-in. A high school student said, ‘Hate speech emails make me feel like they don’t care.’ The high school student group described the message of the emails as, ‘You can see your guidance counselor if you want to’ rather than an invitation to seek support from guidance counselors.

They also found that students said school-wide assemblies on these incidents were largely treated as a joke, and some students thought they felt like they were being “punished” for the bad behavior of one individual – which may demonstrate Cobblerton’s received understanding of racism as individual rather than structural. The audit recommended that the district “ensure that

responses to incidents of hate allow for dialogue between administrators, teachers, student support personnel, and students, instead of the one-way communication that students describe.”

District leadership assumed that these incidents would keep occurring, and wanted to create a protocol for how to respond appropriately. Dr. K and the School Committee had some conflict over this at the October 19 meeting. Dr. K wanted to create a coalition with members of town leadership, such as the town administrator, while some members of the School Committee felt that this work should be done in a School Committee subcommittee to ensure accountability. While ultimately, they did neither, instead joining a county-wide initiative to combat identity-based bullying that met a handful of times over the school year, their conversation demonstrated their thinking about the district’s – and their own – goodness:

Cynthia

Can I just push back on that a little bit, Amanda? Because if you look at the trajectory of where we've come in the last several years, I know that you know, everything seems like it works at a snail's pace. But we went from we looked at a need or concern that we had in the district to deciding we were going to put budget into having a position such as [Mr. V's], hired him, brought him in, immediately started doing all these different steps. There's things like full day kindergarten that we got done in the last couple of years. So there are things that are happening. I just know that it feels at times it feels like we're moving really slowly. But there is progress being made on these goals that we've had. ...

Amanda

I know. I mean, I just feel like with DEI work, and with like, you know, the thing we've negative things we've been seeing in our community over the past several years, there is an urgency.

Cynthia

But I guess what I appreciate is that without talking about it, because I gotta say, like, my kids have said there's things that they've seen for years that we just never talked about.

There were things that were said to them in the hallways or things that they read, but we never called attention to it. And now we're calling it out for what it is saying we're not doing that anymore. So I think that's an important step. And it's building capacity.

Susan

There's an assumption that because we're reporting and being trying to be as transparent as possible, that it's, it's increasing and so, and recent events that *have* caused increases, but this is stuff that was happening when I was a child and we just didn't go home and tell our parents, nobody talked about it. I was talking to an administrator recently that was interviewing in a different district at one point and they left that district and did not accept the position because they saw very graphic n-words in the bathroom and nothing was being done about it. So yes, we can always do better. We're always trying to improve. But it doesn't mean it didn't exist. It just started since we've been doing this there and we need to do better. We need to keep calling it out. And we need to be as transparent as possible. That it exists.

Maybe it goes without saying that the district leadership sought to prevent these incidents through furthering their DEI work, but this conversation about how to respond to them demonstrated the aspect of colorblind managerialism that Turner (2020) described as maintaining the appearance of being “good people actively confronting racism” (p. 12) without threatening the status quo by treating racism as individual, aberrant acts rather than a structure. They did not, in this or any other conversation this school year, seek to interrogate the underlying

causes of these incidents, or make meaning from their recurring nature. They also did not refer to other, arguably much more serious, incidents of interpersonal racism such as those described in the previous chapter. All of this is ongoing evidence of white ignorance as foundational to their decision-making. Instead of seeking structural change, they argued about procedure and protocol, competing to demonstrate their commitment to addressing the issue while also reassuring the community that they are already doing a lot. At the end of the above excerpt, Dr. K made an explicit interest convergence argument – failing to get this problem under control might drive highly qualified potential employees to other districts. As such, it was in their own and the district’s interest to have a correct or appropriate response protocol in place. To my knowledge, by the end of the school year, they had not done so, as it was one of the recommendations made by the Equity Audit Steering Committee in June.

A final example of the district’s goals of equity and excellence converging was in their decision to add the Muslim holiday Eid al-Fitr as a day off in the school calendar. In his presentation to the School Committee, the high school student who initially raised the issue and made the appeal argued that designating Eid as a holiday would draw Muslim families to the district, making it more desirable: “If we consider Muslim holidays similar to these neighboring towns, this could be a positive for our public school system and also our community. It would attract more Muslims to [Cobblerton], and diversify our demographics.” Ali, the student presenter, conscientiously compared Cobblerton to peer towns: “An important consideration is the ways other schools view Eid as an official holiday, compared to [Cobblerton]. Schools surrounding [Cobblerton] ... offer Eid as a holiday.” When the School Committee showed initial hesitation, Jerry spoke up in public comment:

Our neighboring schools have figured this out already on how to solve for this. So it's not

a unique problem that nobody else has solved. So that puts pressure on us to figure out: we're either an inclusive school system or not, as simple as that, and other schools are telling us they're more inclusive than us right now. That's a challenge we need to take up as a community and show that [Cobblerton] is no less inclusive than any of our neighboring towns.

These comments show that the district leadership has taught students and community members how to advance an interest convergence argument by demonstrating that an equity goal would also make Cobblerton Schools more desirable and competitive. And in this instance, it worked – the School Committee voted to add Eid to the calendar as a holiday, despite concerns that the school year would then end after Juneteenth, a federal holiday.

The conversations around student growth percentiles, DEI programming, hate and bias incident response, and Eid all demonstrate that, when possible, district leadership were eager to pursue interest convergence – that is, to advance the district's reputation as equitable as a way of making it more desirable and competitive with neighboring districts. This allowed leadership to project confidence and show progress toward both aspects of “goodness” – school quality, and morality. All of this harkens back to Dr. K and Dan's comments, shared at the beginning of this section, about producing students who are both competitive in a global career marketplace *and* “the best humans.”

Tensions

Bell (1980) wrote that interest convergence occurs when the powerful can advance an agenda that appears antiracist without meaningfully threatening the entrenched superiority of middle- and upper-class whites. For the most part, Cobblerton's equity agenda fit comfortably within this definition. However, there were a few moments in the school year that revealed a

tension between Cobblerton's desire to compete and raise property values, and their equity goals. In what follows, I discuss two such moments of tension, one around hiring Teachers of Color within the district, and the other around the ongoing eighth grade algebra debate. Each example demonstrates the limitations of Cobblerton's definition of equity, and highlights the absence of any sensibility that educators or schools could or should play a role in combating inequality or advancing justice beyond the town's borders.

Teachers of Color

The Equity Audit repeatedly mentioned the need for more Teachers of Color within the district, and made a recommendation that the district be more intentional in its hiring:

A lack of staff and faculty diversity remains a concern that elicits strong feelings of frustration, resentment, and despair. Administrators and members of the School Committee expressed strong feelings ranging from despair to resignation to defensiveness. One administrator said about the resignation of a person of color they had hired, 'I don't know if [they] ever felt comfortable here. I feel like I failed. It's got to be tough.' Another district administrator said, 'We require new staff to adjust to existing structures, 'We do it this way.' A building administrator said, '[Cobblerton] is trying to figure that (staff diversity) out along with everyone else.' A School Committee member said, 'We've been accused of not hiring minorities. I get defensive about this. [We've] joined associations.' Another School Committee member said in response, 'This is not just our problem.'

Mrs. B, the head of the CHS science department, spoke in response to this at the October meeting where the Equity Audit was released and discussed:

[The audit said that] the hiring process at the high school is conducted by department

leaders who might not necessarily prioritize interviewing and hiring diverse candidates. I, for one, feel *offended* by that, we always have admin sitting on our hiring committee, we reach out as best we can, two years ago we hired three new fabulous science teachers, we had almost no applicants, certainly none of Color, the three we ended up hiring, we had to reach out to different places to find. I don't know if you understand how difficult it is to find some of these people, we want to keep these people, so we want people to be aware that we certainly look at all candidates.

It was two years prior to this that Caroline applied to teach science at Cobblerton High School, and was rejected. With the help of the CHS principal at the time, who had since been let go by Dr. K, Caroline was able to secure a position at the middle school instead – from which she would be let go at the end of the 2023-2024 school year. Perhaps Mrs. B has already forgotten that Caroline applied for the position. Caroline described Mrs. B as an ally, mentioning that Mrs. B allowed her to do some practice teaching in her class as Caroline was working toward her teaching license. But regardless, Mrs. B's response to the Equity Audit – that she was offended by the suggestion that the district could work harder to hire Teachers of Color – revealed a similar defensiveness to what the Equity Audit described. And the fact that Caroline had such a negative experience at CMS and was then let go speaks to the real ways Cobblerton would need to change in order to meaningfully address this issue – none of which would be discussed at this or later School Committee meetings, except by Diverse Cobblerton members in public comment. At this meeting, a Diverse Cobblerton member asked:

I appreciated when I, at the beginning of this year, I heard Dr. K talk about more diverse hires. I know we have actually lost some of those people. And so it can't be just you know, your recommendation is about having more diverse candidates. I would love to see

a recommendation about retention. How do you retain a diverse workforce because we managed to get some. And then we're not supporting them right or I don't know what, they don't feel safe in our system?

The questions raised here, especially in light of Caroline's experience, would not be taken up again by the School Committee again in the 2023-2024 school year, until the Equity Audit Steering Committee report in June, which would simply reiterate the need to hire and retain Teachers of Color. Though I can't know why this issue would go unaddressed, my observations and analysis led me to wonder whether doing so would meaningfully damage Cobblerton's reputation, by revealing the racism and exclusion that teachers like Caroline faced there, such that it was not in the district's interest to raise or try to address it. Or, perhaps it is as simple as the School Committee member quoted in the Equity Audit said – that Cobblerton leadership believed that “that is not just our problem.”

Eighth Grade Algebra

In contrast to the time and attention devoted to hiring and retaining Teachers of Color, which was only discussed at the Equity Audit meeting, eighth grade algebra was raised at three separate meetings: the Equity Audit meeting, in October; the Data & Rankings meeting, in December; and again, for a full hour, at a meeting in mid-March. Mrs. C, head of the CHS math department, opened that portion of the meeting with a long comment, excerpted here:

Mrs. C

And I have to say it, and I feel like if I don't report this out, I'm not doing service to my career that I've had here, the time I've spent on the Math Curriculum Review Committee, and how strongly I feel about what I'm going to say for the opportunity for my child and for other students in the community. ... I wear two hats, I actually wear three hats, I'm a

community member, a teacher, and most importantly, I'm a mother of a child who excels in mathematics and loves mathematics. She's currently in fourth grade. She's going to be 10, planning a big Taylor Swift party for Saturday, so. But she's going to be in sixth grade before you know it right. And I just worry that we're just going to continue talking about the question of do we offer a full year algebra course in eighth grade?

The conversation has been going on and on and on. It goes around in circles. No decisions are made. And it's not okay. Somebody has to make this decision. ... I was wanting to come and say this since December, but I just haven't had a chance to, is that, Do we want students to have access, I ask the community, I ask the school committee members, I ask the powers that be, Do we want students, all students to have access to algebra in eighth grade?

If we do – I'm not saying all students are going to be able to take it. Like it's just, it's a reality, right? It's a reality of, of like, I'm not good at everything I do right? And I think that if we want to have students have an opportunity ... if we want students to have access to Algebra One in eighth grade, DESE puts out an accelerated pathway. And I have it here for you, I will share it with you. ...

And maybe as a parent, I know more. But I know more. When we had that meeting, a month or two ago, when we were reporting out on the curriculum review council, I talked to other parents that are teachers and other schools. And they were even saying the same thing, like their algebra in eighth grade isn't like a full algebra course. But it gives enough of the standards. So right now, in eighth grade, we're saying we have an algebra course. But we don't, we don't have an algebra course. And I think somebody needs to make the decision, are we going to have algebra? If we're going to have algebra,

we have to have accelerated, and we have to teach the standards. If we're not going to have algebra, we don't have algebra. And we don't call it algebra. ... Currently, 100% of our eighth graders have to come in [to the high school] and take an algebra course. And if you look around at other communities, [they] don't have that. ...

So I really think we have to, somebody has to make that decision, because I've been on this math curriculum review now for two years. ... I want my daughter to have an opportunity to have algebra in eighth grade. And I know there's probably a lot of other people out there. I also think that when we hear people talking about the equity, and we talk about it's a [Cobblerton] problem, it's not just a [Cobblerton] problem, it's everywhere. And it's how we teach mathematics in the United States of America, that is really the driving force. And I think we really have to think about that. And I also think we have to think about meeting kids where they're at, and bringing them where they can go, and that is a good teacher, right? Like, you can have all these plans in the world. But if your kids can't do this stuff, you can't go forward with it. ...

But I do hope that somebody can make that decision for us because I think the Math Curriculum Review Committee is sorta like we just want a decision, we just need a decision. And I think the community needs a decision and I think putting another committee together, delaying it another year, is just gonna delay another year, in another year. And that's all I have to say. And obviously, I'm very passionate about math, and I'm passionate about my daughter having experiences that I want her to have. So I think you and I will forward you my notes, so you can see the progression and things like that.

Thank you.

Mrs. C made an impassioned plea, for the sake of her ten-year-old daughter, that the School

Committee decide, urgently and immediately, to implement the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s model for math course sequencing, which included an accelerated seventh grade course and “full” algebra in eighth grade. As she had in previous meetings, she spoke the language of opportunity and equity, arguing that leveling courses is okay, that “I’m not good at everything I do,” and “it’s just reality” that this is how mathematics is taught in the United States of America. She positions herself as an expert, a pragmatist, and a caring and passionate parent and teacher. She is showing the committee that her idea is good because she is good, and her plea is successful – mostly. In this meeting, after an hour of discussion, the committee passed a resolution to implement eighth grade algebra in the 2025-2026 school year, giving them a year to study the impacts of leveling middle school math courses.

One of the concerns they raised was that, according to a recent survey of Cobblerton families, 28% of respondents were paying for math tutoring outside of school. As Amanda, the School Committee member who was a math teacher in another district, pointed out back in October, leveling courses could alleviate the need for this, as students would have access to lower-level courses taught at a slower pace. On the other hand, the opposite could also be true – as stratification increased, students and families might feel more pressure to keep up in higher level courses in order to avoid being in the less prestigious “low” track, thus incentivizing those who could afford it to pay for outside tutoring and leaving those who could not afford it to struggle. Either way, this statistic forced the committee to acknowledge that there was already inequity in Cobblerton’s math program, and by committing to implementing eighth grade algebra, they were heading in the direction of more leveling, more stratification, more partitioning. Though Dr. K seemed hopeful that somehow this could be done without increased leveling, through differentiation and co-teaching, for the most part, School Committee members

seemed comfortable with adding math levels in middle school, in direct opposition to the recommendations of the Equity Audit, because it did not really conflict with their definition of equity, and it advanced their definition of excellence, which included “rigor,” competition, and favorable comparison to surrounding districts.

Possibilities and Limitations of the Equity Steering Committee

In response to the Equity Audit, Dr. K and Mr. V created the Equity Audit Steering Committee, which made formal recommendations to the School Committee at the end of the school year. The Equity Audit Steering Committee was made up of a diverse group of educators, parents, and students, very intentionally recruited by Mr. V to represent those so obviously unrepresented in Cobblerton’s official leadership and “amplify marginalized voices.” Their recommendations opened possibilities for Cobblerton to pursue equity beyond interest convergence, by actually attending to the needs of those who the district had historically marginalized – and because their work only began halfway through the school year and is ongoing, has great potential to meaningfully “open spaces” and redefine what equity means within Cobblerton Schools.

On June 6, 2024, Mr. V opened his comments to the School Committee as follows:

Mr. V

So I wanted to share some guiding questions for anyone listening at home, for us listening here today, when I asked this question to the room on Monday, and I said, if we move up to the recommendations we're sharing today, will the [Cobblerton] public schools be more equitable than where we are today? And the answer was a resounding yes. I asked another question, have we created structures and processes that move us closer to equity and that support the sustainability of our recommendations? One thing is

to make recommendations, but another thing is, are we building structures that can live past a year? And the answer was yes.

Here and throughout his committee's presentation, he emphasized his hope that the Equity Audit Steering Committee (which, after this presentation, would be renamed the Equity Steering Committee, as a nod to its endurance beyond a response to the audit) could create structural change within the district. Mr. V explained that the committee's recommendations would be incorporated into the district's strategic planning over the summer, so all administrators would be responsible for following through on them.

Some of the recommendations the committee made included ongoing professional development in culturally responsive teaching – and Mr. V gave the example of specifically, culturally responsive teaching in math. They recommended creating a proactive protocol designed to both prevent and effectively respond to “incidents of bias.” Most striking to me, the committee's recommendations re-opened the question of the hiring and retention of Teachers of Color and Jerry, a Diverse Cobblerton member who knew Caroline, specifically mentioned her contract's non-renewal as he presented this recommendation:

Jerry

I'll start by reiterating something that the first slide says, ‘equity is not a destination,’ so I hope we all understand this is work that's never going to be done. We need to continuously work on making those changes. So with that background, and also, I'd like to add some additional color on the surveys that have been down across done in [Cobblerton] on multiple times, and a general survey of all the parents that did send their kids to the [Cobblerton] public system, it's this has been one of the biggest things that have, that they have highlighted, that the school system needs to work on, which is

comprehensive recruiting and retention plan that's representative in diversity. One only needs to look at our current teacher population to see where we're failing in that. An additional fact that I came to know recently, one of the two diverse folks in the – visibly diverse folks in the force is actually, their contract is not being renewed, which means we've lost 50% of the diverse representation in the school system. This is something to look at like, not only are we failing to attract diverse teachers into our workforce, we're actually losing the ones we actually managed to get for whatever reason. So is that so important? One only needs to look at our middle school and elementary school and look at how the classes are populated today. The demographics are changing. These kids need to see leaders, teachers who look like them, who talk like them, who feel like them. That's the most important part for them to see. Look up to leadership. The other aspect is it's not only for the diverse kids, right, like it's for all the other kids as well that will tomorrow graduate into a workforce that looks a lot more diverse than what [Cobblerton] looks like today. They need to understand how that works. They need to know what it means to work across those visible differences. And that's the most important aspect. And I think the only way to teach them to do that is to have leaders who model that behavior in schools. And how do we do that like we are still that's the piece that we need to focus on, is how do we put in structured processes that enable recruitment? We need to think creatively and innovatively, because whatever we've been trying so far, we've been failing. That's visible in how many diverse teachers we've been able to recruit. And that's the reality. I'm not saying it to throw it back in somebody's face. I'm just observing facts. So we need to relook at our process and see what we can do differently, what we can do creatively to attract teachers. So that's something I think that really, really needs to

change.

Jerry, knowing his audience, made an interest convergence argument for why the district should hire more Teachers of Color. He explained that Cobblerton graduates would not be successful in a “diverse workforce” if they did not learn from a diverse workforce of educators. He did not mention possibilities for Teachers of Color to reduce Students’ of Color experiences of racism, or to bring a critical, antiracist perspective to Cobblerton Schools. And yet, by including the recommendation to make an official plan for hiring and retaining Teachers of Color, the Equity Steering Committee set in motion a change that *could* begin the work of reorienting Cobblerton Schools toward antiracism.

The Equity Steering Committee pointedly did not make a recommendation about eighth grade algebra or course level. Mr. V explained that “we are not the experts,” and believed that decision should be left to educators. However, they did create a list of questions for decisionmakers to take into consideration, hoping to guide them toward an equity orientation. Mr. V gave the example of one of the questions on the list:

Mr. V

They're asking these questions as a parent or as an educator, right or as a student, and I just read one example, what concrete steps will be taken to address any potential implicit bias and recommendations and placement processes for level classes and ensuring equitable access to honors and AP courses. That's a great question, right? What do we have in place to make sure that there's no bias in place as to how kids get recommended? Another question on the list, the final one, read “do we think equity means equal for all, or equal access?”

Though Mr. V and his committee sought to guide the district toward “transparent and

equity-minded decisions,” a perspective that had historically been left out and was clearly needed, the definition of equity remained ambiguous. Certainly, the Equity Steering Committee called attention to important issues within the district that would otherwise be ignored. Nevertheless, they were still a long way from critically questioning white supremacy and meritocracy and the district’s role and perpetuating those systems of injustice. While they may have opened the door to slow progress toward an antiracist future for the district, they did not – and, as a newly created committee of twelve tasked with steering the whole district toward equity, could not – address the root causes of injustice with which Cobblerton remained complicit.

Discussion

The guiding question of this chapter is, How did narratives of goodness justify and sustain Cobblerton’s white educational resource hoarding? Cobblerton district leadership understood their district to be good, in terms of both quality and morality – but also in need of growth in both areas. As a result, they pursued an agenda to advance both excellence – which they understood to be measured by quantitative data and statewide rankings – and equity – equal opportunity for individual students to access Cobblerton’s educational program and succeed to the best of their ability. When possible, district leadership pursued interest convergence: that is, they sought solutions that would advance their idea of equity while also improving their reputation and perceived excellence. But at times, tensions arose between the desire of excellence and the desire for equity, and these instances revealed that educational resource hoarding was ongoing within Cobblerton, as the decisions made by leadership – such as pursuing more math leveling, or letting go the only Teacher of Color at one of the four schools – ultimately strengthened, rather than diminishing or abolishing, Cobblerton’s internal partitions

and the resulting hierarchies.

As in the previous chapter, one of the most striking aspects of this data is what is absent from it. Despite Dr. J's brief mention of teachers participating in the Culturally Responsive Education Academy, and the bullet point in Cobblerton's "Vision of a Graduate," that described a global citizen as someone who is "inspired to work for social equity," at no point did the district leadership refer to the critical consciousness aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), or indicate that Cobblerton leadership, teachers, or students could or should play an active role in understanding and working against injustice. This, I argue, is both a result and perpetuator of white ignorance. Pursuing an equity agenda as Cobblerton did, which focused on individual students rising in the ranks of meritocracy rather than critically questioning meritocracy and its underlying white supremacist and capitalist nature, curtailed any possibility of working toward a justice-oriented school district. This, in turn, justified and sustained white educational resource hoarding, while protecting and even raising the relative value of, the literal and metaphorical property that whiteness afforded the community. The structures created by a history of white educational resource hoarding incentivized residents to compete with neighboring districts to be both more desirable and more exclusive, while normalizing this form of consumer citizenship and obscuring the role it played in larger educational, racial, and economic inequality beyond the town's borders.

As shown throughout this chapter, Cobblerton leaderships were able to navigate the contradiction between strong incentives to hoard educational resources, on the one hand, and the be perceived as pursuing equity, on the other, by adopting Turner's (2020) concept of "colorblind managerialism." Aggarwal (2024) was clear about the limitations and hidden harms of this approach to managing inequality:

Yet approaching race and class as elements that can only be better managed ... rather than redistributing resources ... might facilitate proximity to whiteness and economic capital rather than their abolition. In doing so, it reifies not only race but also the bounded scale of the neighborhood ... As such, the political and social processes through which places are made and fought over—and also might be changed—are rendered invisible, and the logic of partition is fortified. (p. 14)

This is what a “good” school district like Cobblerton does. For students within its borders, it may facilitate proximity to whiteness – through a white-normed, “rigorous” curriculum, and discipline into white norms of behavior, including racism, white gender norms, and white ignorance – and economic capital through access to college and middle-class work. But it neither acknowledges nor teaches responsibility to those excluded by the partition around the town. Further, it does this by designating itself, its teachers, its students, its curriculum, its discipline, its norms and policies and practices, as “good,” thereby naturalizing, normalizing, and reinforcing whiteness and capitalism – while driving out teachers like Caroline, parents like Raha, and students like Ava and Shaliz. And rather than teaching, explicitly and implicitly, that the historical decisions to steal land and extract its resources, to enslave people and extract their labor, to participate in genocide, profit from slavery, uphold segregation, and hoard resources, have brought us to this moment and built systems that must be interrogated and abolished for justice to be possible, it instead erases all of this, and leaves leaders and teachers and students to wonder why every year like clockwork, the n-word appears mysteriously in a middle school bathroom.

Further, Cobblerton leadership’s wholehearted adoption of, and participation in, the competition with other districts over schoolwide rankings both justified moves toward white

educational resource hoarding, and increased residents' ability to literally profit from their whiteness and the reputation of their school district. By adopting and repeating the assumption that school ranking directly impacts property value, and actively participating in the competition over school rankings, Cobblerton Schools teach townspeople that this association is natural rather than constructed, and that inequality is inevitable rather than transformable. While pursuing equity within the district, they are actively preserving and even exacerbating inequality and incentivizing resource hoarding.

In so doing, Cobblerton School leadership teaches the pedagogy of the white space that was created and sustained through white educational resource hoarding. First, they teach the listening public what kinds of knowledge are valuable: the high-level, exclusive, expensive AP courses, which in Cobblerton focus on science, mathematics, and Eurocentric history, and the high-level, exclusive algebra course that will get kids to calculus by graduation and accelerate their pathways to high-paying careers in STEM. Then, through reinforcing the association between school rankings and property values, and describing schools as an “investment” that will provide a “return,” these leaders teach consumer citizenship (Aggarwal, 2024) and commodify Cobblerton Schools on the basis of their measurable “goodness.” Finally, all of this rhetoric justifies and reinforces partitioning – both within Cobblerton Schools, and between Cobblerton and its neighbors, lending credence to the market-based logic of “good” schooling as a limited resource over which responsible individuals will compete. Cobblerton School leadership demonstrates how colorblind managerialism, even when it includes and genuinely pursues equity goals, nevertheless serves to reproduce whiteness as property and does not meaningfully disrupt white supremacy.

This is not to lay blame on these particular School Committee members or other district

leadership portrayed in this chapter. Instead, I wish to show how these well-regarded and capable individuals— these good leaders, good public servants, and good educators – are highly incentivized to pursue these outcomes within a competitive neoliberal system undergirded by racial capitalism. Dan and Lisa went on Ann’s show and marketed the schools as a “good investment” because they needed to fill a budget shortfall created by the state government’s austerity policies, and this was their best shot at raising much-needed funds. Similarly, the teachers’ union representative quoted at the beginning of this chapter was arguing to save the school librarian position that came under threat due to the same budget “crisis.” Throughout, we see educators trying to act in the best interests of their schools and their students, most of whom, while white and fairly well off, will nevertheless graduate into a job market more competitive than any of the adults in their lives ever experienced – and, with a social safety net slashed down to the bone, more severe consequences for those who don’t “make the cut.” In a world where there is not enough to go around, trying to protect what’s yours, for your own family and community, makes sense. But the problem with the white habitus, and the pedagogy of white ignorance enacted through these spaces, is that they forestall most people from imagining a different world, and from understanding the vital roles schools could play in moving us toward it.

For Cobblerton to truly pursue equity, leadership must look beyond their own borders and consider their role in the larger system of education. As the U.S. education system currently stands, they are highly incentivized to compete, and have little incentive to participate in resource redistribution of any kind. And yet, I can imagine a Cobblerton where critical educators teach students about systems of injustice from young ages. I can imagine a curriculum that supports students in understanding the history that has built the town and world around them, and

invites them to critically question how it might be otherwise; that turns science and math teaching toward complex problems of how justice and right relation with the Earth might be pursued; in which older students are invited into understanding and weighing in on policy that will impact not only their town, but their region, and their role in either reproducing or disrupting inequality and injustice. I would argue that this is the bare minimum of what a good school would do, constrained as all schools are by ongoing and rapidly accelerating neoliberalism. But, within the white habitus of Cobblerton, enshrouded by white ignorance, these possibilities, this understanding of goodness, is entirely absent. And this is both consequence of, and contributor to, ongoing white educational resource hoarding.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I define white educational resource hoarding as policies and processes that concentrate “good” educational experiences and outcomes in educational spaces that are accessible to white students but systematically exclude Students of Color, thereby reinforcing and normalizing the deeply held association between good schools and whiteness. While the purpose of schooling, and therefore what is considered a “good” education, remains contested, in the years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, as money and other resources have been poured into mostly white, suburban school districts and systematically withheld from urban schools with minoritized student bodies, consensus has grown that overwhelmingly white schools are better. And by many metrics, they are. They spend more money per student; they have more experienced teachers who stay in their districts longer; they have more curricular offerings, higher graduation rates, and send more kids on to college and high-paying jobs. All of this is reflected in their higher test scores, which in turn impact their rankings and desirability to those families with the means to move in pursuit of a “good” school district. As a result, property values and property tax revenues around these schools increase steadily, further concentrating resources within these districts.

White suburbs and their schools play a key role in reproducing the structures of conquest, including racial capitalism. They hoard opportunities, as access to these schools is the clearest path – though still no guarantee – to a good college and a good job. But by concentrating educational resources around white students and protecting their parents’ property values, these schools do more than offer opportunities to some while limiting access to others. They also reproduce and even increase the value of whiteness as property, which reverberates both within the schools – through pedagogy, curriculum, and school culture – and beyond, as they launder

the myth of meritocracy by strengthening the commonsense link between whiteness and goodness. If white schools are always already good, then they set the bar for what goodness is – what it means to be a good teacher, a good student, even a good boy or girl. And those who do not conform to notions of goodness or do not succeed in this environment are interpellated as bad, as failures, as undeserving. Thus, Students of Color within the white district, if they are not tokenized as “model minorities” or similar, as well as the (far more numerous) minoritized children beyond the town’s borders, are marked by their failure at school or their “bad” educations as always already undeserving of a good job or a good life – leaving them uniquely vulnerable, in a neoliberal society with almost no safety net, to homelessness, incarceration, and premature death.

White educational resource hoarding results in schools that actively racialize students – as white or not, as good or not, as deserving or not – and this racialization justifies the hierarchy upon which racial capitalism depends. In addition, these schools violently impose the colonial gender system on all students, further reinforcing the fusion of race and gender in hierarchies of merit and deservingness. Finally, these schools raise property values on land stolen from Indigenous people and from which minoritized people have historically been excluded, thus redistributing wealth upward and toward whiteness. As such, white educational resource hoarding sustains the colonial, racial, gendered, and capitalist aspects of conquest.

In this dissertation, I chose to research white educational resource hoarding because I understand it to be a historical and contemporary mechanism of reproducing white supremacy through schooling. However, I found that theories of white supremacy, and even global white supremacy, were not broad enough to fully encompass the root cause of the phenomenon, so I turned to King’s (2019) theory of conquest, which illuminates the co-constitutive nature of

colonialism, including ongoing settler colonialism, and racial capitalism. Lugones' (2007) theory of the colonial gender system deepened my understanding of the gendered nature of colonialism, further illuminating aspects of conquest at work. Although this dissertation focuses on one small town, situating the town and school district within global systems of injustice clarified the role that the "privileged moral geography of the nation" plays within worldwide structures of violence. There is a great deal of further work to be done on the role of schools and schooling within the structure of conquest, and I hope future education researchers will consider drawing on these theories.

White educational resource hoarding is a powerful but often invisible tool for sustaining conquest, and particularly whiteness as property, through education. Interrogating practices of white educational resource hoarding can inform local action toward disrupting conquest by calling into question the "goodness," in terms of both quality and morality, of white educational spaces. In order for schools to be oriented toward justice, they must be stripped of their functions of reproducing white ignorance, white property values, and the association of whiteness with goodness.

White educational resource hoarding is also personal to me because I grew up and graduated from high school in a town that prides itself on its good schools, such that many families, including mine, move there specifically to send their kids to school there – but it is also overwhelmingly white. And not only is the town overwhelmingly white, but its whiteness is treated as natural and normal, such that growing up there, I had no sense of how my hometown, once Nipmuc land, got so white or stayed so white. But I learned, first through my teaching experience and later through research, that Families of Color will go to great lengths to send their kids to good schools – and once I knew that, my hometown's whiteness no longer seemed like

common sense. If so many families were moving to Cobblerton to send their kids to school there, why were those families, in the early 1990s and even today, overwhelmingly white? In this dissertation, I asked the following questions:

1. How was Cobblerton's whiteness created and maintained historically?
2. What are the impacts of white educational resource hoarding on Cobblerton and its schools?
3. How do narratives of the "goodness" of Cobblerton and Cobblerton Schools justify and sustain white educational resource hoarding?

To answer these questions, I employed critical race methodology. The tenets of critical race theory, including racial realism, whiteness as property, and the myth of meritocracy, provided the lens through which I formulated questions, pursued and analyzed data sources, and came to understand my findings. In addition, drawing on autoethnography allowed me to interrogate my own complicity in the systems that I was analyzing and critiquing – an important practice for all of us engaged in critical research. I hope that, in the future, education researchers will continue to employ critical race methodology in every aspect of research, and in so doing see themselves as implicated by global structures of conquest and responsible for taking on the work of disruption, both within our field, and within the educational contexts and communities to which we are accountable.

In pursuing these questions, in brief, I found that policies in the early 1970s were explicitly created to protect the town's whiteness, but residents today are unaware of this, which makes the town's whiteness seem natural, normal, and innocent. As a result, the pedagogy, curriculum, and culture of the "good" school district is white-normed, and Students of Color suffer from a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy, curricular erasure, and racist bullying,

which the school is unprepared to respond to or prevent. Further, district leadership pursues white-normed understandings of goodness for their schools that contain no critique of systemic injustice, and so seek to manage rather than abolish inequality.

In answering Research Question 1, I found that, although there have been one or two Black families in Cobblerton since the nineteenth century, housing discrimination did occur there before 1968, and the town's overwhelming whiteness was largely protected in this way. After 1968, town leadership made decisions such as zoning for large lots, rejecting apartment districts, and rejecting a state-subsidized sewer system, all of which was justified as keeping the town small and slowing down growth – which also protected the status quo of overwhelming whiteness. I further found that, through white ignorance, some of these decision makers were able to simultaneously understand and ignore the racist intent of these decisions, and then misunderstand or divert attention from their impacts, such that the town's whiteness seems natural to most residents today. This allows for white educational resource hoarding to continue unabated without tarnishing the town's good reputation. Further research is needed on the impacts of 1970s policy on contemporary schooling contexts beyond Cobblerton, as well as on the pervasive nature of white ignorance in various structures of governance and meaningful strategies for disruption.

Because of these past decisions and the racist structures they put in place that maintain the town's whiteness, Cobblerton today fits the definition of a white habitus, where racism persists without racists and is largely invisible to most residents. In answering Research Question 2, I found that, in the schools that these structures produce, whiteness is the standard of “goodness” for teachers and students, and for proper gender performance. As such the colonial gender system undergirds school culture, and Students of Color are vulnerable to severe racist

bullying, racialized teachers are pushed out, and white ignorance and color-evasiveness prevent the district from effectively responding to racism. As a result, despite their concentration of resources, white schools like those in Cobblerton are not safe for Students of Color, which calls into question their “goodness” and innocence, given the institutional and interpersonal violence they perpetuate. These findings implicate predominantly white suburban districts, and strongly suggest that teachers and school leadership must center the needs of the most marginalized students in everyday decision-making and larger policy changes in order to create the safe schools they claim to want. This might mean sacrificing their places in the rankings or other dominant metrics of “goodness,” but it is necessary for creating schools that are truly good for all students. To do this effectively, educators must be able to examine pedagogy, curriculum, and policy through a critical lens – all of which can be taught in teacher preparation programs. Even as equity-oriented education comes under attack from a racist, authoritarian U.S. government bent on pushing the country toward white nationalism, educators can and must continue to resist – as we have always done.

Today, in pursuing “goodness,” Cobblerton’s district leadership seeks to achieve both excellence – goodness in quality – and equity – goodness in morality – and this pursuit sustains white educational resource hoarding. Excellence is measured by school rankings, which depend on test scores and prestigious, exclusive AP classes – which center white knowledge and are discussed as white spaces into which Students of Color students must be explicitly invited. Thus, the school curriculum upon which the rankings depend reinforces whiteness as property, which is further sustained by the commonsense understanding that these rankings directly impact residents’ property values. At the same time as they pursue this excellence, district leadership also pursues equity, which they define as individualized access to opportunities for success

within a white-normed environment. Because this definition contains no critique of meritocracy, how Cobblerton schools define success, or the larger systems of injustice of which they are a part, pursuit of equity aims to manage, rather than abolish, inequality, and is therefore a mechanism of interest convergence rather than a meaningful threat to white supremacy. Though because of these definitions of excellence and equity, they are often in alignment, when they do conflict, the district is structured and incentivized to prioritize the demands of high-status parents to increase property values over the needs of marginalized families, who have little leverage or meaningful say in district policy. I found that this resulted in further partitioning within the schools, and a greater concentration of resources around high level, “rigorous” courses which are designed for white students and reify white knowledge. Even language around recruiting Students of Color into these courses reinforced the idea that they naturally belong to white students and are white property. This teaches Cobblerton students to value white knowledge and proximity to whiteness, which is part of the pedagogy of white spaces. Another aspect of this pedagogy is how the district leadership markets their schools to the community as an investment in their property values, which teaches the community to value their school district as a commodity from which they should expect a return on investment. As a result, the demand for excellence increases, and the cycle of white educational resource hoarding is reinforced – and meanwhile, the district can continue to understand itself as innocent of harm and morally good, because of its work on (individualized) equity. Toward the end of the 2023-2024 school year, Mr. V, the Director for Social Emotional Learning and Equity, convened Cobblerton’s first Equity Steering Committee. While this committee holds promise for disrupting some aspects of white educational resource hoarding within the district, more research is needed on effective strategies for disrupting “colorblind managerialism” and neoliberal school governance.

This research into white educational resource hoarding has implications for educators (including teacher educators), school districts, and education researchers. For educators, this work intensifies the urgency of adopting culturally relevant pedagogy, especially the critical consciousness aspect, in order to disrupt the white ignorance that is otherwise reproduced through schools like Cobblerton's. Educators can work with students, including preservice teachers, to understand the history of conquest in their local communities, from the violence of the initial land seizure to all of the structures that perpetuate coloniality and racial capitalism. Educators can also work with students, especially those who will become teachers, to identify, critique, and resist neoliberal policies, which accelerate racial and economic inequality. School districts can support teacher development as critical educators. In so doing, they will be pushed to reconsider how to define "goodness" within their districts. School leadership can also work with the municipal government to increase access to the town and its schools for those who have been historically excluded. Finally, education researchers must untangle our understandings of good schools from whiteness, and critically ask and keep asking, what is a good school? What is a good education, under racial capitalism, during a climate crisis and a U.S.-sponsored genocide, on violently stolen land? In the future, education researchers should strive to deepen understandings of how conquest is reproduced through schooling, including by expanding understanding of white educational resource hoarding to other places like and unlike Cobblerton. However, the most urgent work ahead of us is determining effective strategies for organizing against the reproduction of conquest through education.

It is heartening to remember that critical educators in the U.S. and beyond have been doing this work for centuries. Today, as public schools and universities come under attack from a fascist federal government that seeks to quell any instance of critical or resistant education, and

even defund public schools altogether, teachers in Chicago are demonstrating that it is possible to both defend and reimagine U.S. public schools at the same time. Through over a decade of organizing, striking, and even electing one of their own as mayor, the Chicago Teachers Union has recently won a contract that protects teachers' rights to teach Black and Indigenous histories, keeps immigration enforcement out of their schools, and will even provide housing assistance to families of Chicago Public Schools students who are at risk of homelessness. I see their tactic of "bargaining for the common good" as the opposite of and antidote to white educational resource hoarding. By leveraging their labor power, building strong relationships with families and communities, and centering the needs of their most marginalized students, the Chicago Teachers Union charts one path toward the horizon of abolition. I hope that all educators, in solidarity with students, families, and communities, understand that we too have the power to imagine and fight for the schools we need to free ourselves and each other. For white schools and those of us who are the products of them, this begins with rejecting white ignorance, divesting from the property of whiteness and the partitions that protect it, and understanding our "interests" not as maintaining our race and class status, or even "leveling the playing field" for those closest to us, but as justice for all who have been impacted by centuries of colonialism and racial capitalism.

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APPENDIX A: PILOT STUDY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant

1. Tell me a little about yourself. (Gender, approximate age, race, family size, anything else you want me to know?)
2. Can you tell me about your K-12 school experience?
 - a. Where did you go to school?
 - b. Were you satisfied with the schools you attended?
 - c. Overall, were they good schools?
 - d. (If they didn't already say) What were the demographics of your K-12 schools?
3. What do you do (or did you do, if retired) for work?
 - a. Do you commute to work? If so, how far?
4. Have you always lived in Cobblerton? If not, where did you move here from?
 - a. How long have you lived here?
 - b. What did you know about Cobblerton before you moved here?
 - c. Why did you decide to move here?
 - d. Have you ever considered living in Boston? Which other towns did you look at?

Town of Cobblerton

5. Why do you think people choose to live in Cobblerton?
6. How do you think people would describe Cobblerton? What is its reputation?
7. Do you agree with what others have said? How would you describe the character of the town?
8. What changes have you noticed in the town of Cobblerton in the time that you've lived here?

9. In what ways has the town stayed the same (maintained its identity or character)?
10. What direction do you see the town headed in next? What role might the schools play in that?
11. At the 2000 Census, Cobblerton was 97% white, with a median income of about \$78,000. Now, Cobblerton is only 85% white (with the biggest demographic increase among Asians, and a smaller one among Latinx residents), but the median income is \$135,000. Do you have any insight as to what is causing these changes?
12. Are you aware of any recent attempts to make Cobblerton a more racially or economically diverse place? (For example, through affordable or low-income housing, taxation, other avenues)? What happened?

Cobblerton Public Schools

13. What has been your relationship to Cobblerton Public schools (I attended them, I had a child who attended them, PTO, school board, other)?
14. (If a parent) When you were choosing schools for your kids, what did you look for? What did you consider a good school?
15. (If moved here) What did you know about Cobblerton Public Schools before you moved here?
16. How would you describe Cobblerton Public Schools?
17. In your opinion, what role do the schools play in Cobblerton's identity as a town?
18. Would you consider Cobblerton residents to "value education"? What does it mean to "value education"?
19. I'm interested in learning more about the recent history of Cobblerton Public Schools. Do you know anyone I should talk to who might know more?

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE ANALYTIC MEMO

June 7, 2023

Today I finished reading *Fear of Falling* by Barbara Ehrenreich and, as I was typing up my notes on the book, I had a brainwave about my dissertation. ...

Here's the quote that inspired this brainwave:

So the nervous, uphill financial climb of the professional middle class accelerates the downward spiral of society as a whole: toward cruelly widening inequalities, toward heightened estrangement along lines of class and race, and toward the moral anesthesia that estrangement requires. (Ehrenreich, 1989/2020, p. 316).

Ehrenreich's analysis, from the left, of the material and cultural impacts of the middle class (including both teachers and academics) who seek to, on the one hand, secure an elite and protected status (through the requirement, for entry, of ever more expensive and specialized degrees) and on the other hand ensure that their children have access to the careers that they value so highly, illuminates so much for me about white educational resource hoarding: what it is, why it happens, how it works, and how it impacts education and society.

One of the many topics she covers is the impact of this situation on middle class parenting. In a section called "Middle-Class Childraising: Ambivalence and Anxiety," she writes:

Middle class parents face a particular dilemma. On the one hand, they must encourage their children to be innovative and to 'express themselves,' for these traits are usually valued in the professions. But the child will never gain entry to a profession in the first place without developing a quite different set of traits, centered on self-discipline and control. The challenge of middle-class childraising – almost the entire point of it, in fact –

is to inculcate what the reader will recognize as the deferred gratification pattern. It is this habit of mind that supposedly distinguishes the middle class from the poor; and it is this talent for deferral that a middle-class child actually needs in order to endure his or her long period of education and apprenticeship. (p. 91).

This helped me understand so much of what happens at school, especially when it comes to what we consider “merit” in meritocracy – so much of it is about delayed gratification and self-control (in addition to mastery of specialized knowledge and skills that, as kids constantly point out, most people will never use.) It also helped me understand why middle-class parents might be so intent on finding “good schools” for their kids, and what the “good” is doing there. “Fear of falling” includes the fear that one’s child might not develop creativity and self-expression, on the one hand (this was something my parents particularly wanted for me because they hadn’t had much of it as kids) and that she might not develop self-discipline and control on the other (hence obsessions with exclusionary school discipline, governmentality, and acquiescence to pretty terrible learning conditions even at “good” schools).

The self-discipline part is of interest to me because, even though that’s not the language they would use, it’s something my parents praised me for. I was frequently told a story about a time when, as a very young kid, I was given a lollipop and I put it in my pocket, declaring that I would save it for dessert. That was me passing the marshmallow test, and my parents were clearly proud of me, especially in the retelling. I had correctly internalized what they wanted to teach me, about moderation and self-control, and they wanted me to know that even though if you asked them about their values, those probably wouldn’t be on the top of the list.

It also makes me think of an instructional coach I had, who I admired enormously at the time. (This is the same person who told me I should “use their dreams against them”). He used to

teach a whole series of lessons about the marshmallow test, and then ask kids to figure out what “their marshmallow” was and make plans for delaying gratification. After our school shut down, I sent him [this article](#) about how delayed gratification is actually not a good survival strategy for people living in poverty and encouraged him to rethink that particular lesson. But what I didn’t see at the time was how aligned it was with his whole project – which I didn’t question at all – of social mobility. He was trying to teach kids middle class values and behaviors so that they could successfully join the middle class. Some kids wanted to do that, but some didn’t, and resisted. Interestingly, many/most of the kids who were on board with those middle-class aspirations left our school, going back to public school despite (as one of my few white students told me early on) how “loud” and “crowded” they were. The ones who stayed with us were the ones who didn’t want to go back, or couldn’t because they’d been too close to expulsion when they left. So then we had this ragtag group of kiddos and a totally baffled staff. In the end, it actually worked out okay, because our school shrank so much that we were able to work with kids in tiny groups and respond to them very individually. Of course, the funders didn’t want to keep us open like that, so we closed anyway. The money people didn’t want to delay their own gratification – for which I’m ultimately grateful, as I don’t think I could’ve made it another year there.

This sparked another thought for me, about gender. One thing I thought a lot about, as a teacher, was the way that “good behavior” at school was so misaligned with what boys are taught about masculinity. Now, I’m thinking about how self-control and discipline are so aligned with the gender performance that I was taught. Messages that white, middle-class girls like me receive around food, fitness, sex, emotion, and school are all so saturated with these messages about control and self-discipline, even self-policing. Everyone did some activity – mine was dance – that took up a ton of time and energy, and was cramming in hours and hours of homework

around long school days and everything else we were responsible for. Yes, we did these activities for fun and social connection, and yes, they padded out our college applications, but this schedule that made us “well-rounded” and provided “leadership opportunities” also required – and taught us – an enormous amount of discipline. This was a big part of our merit – not just what we did, but how much of it, how we juggled it all. In ballet class I learned to stand up in my pointe shoes and smile and smile while in pain. I became aware of every muscle in my body, and how to control them all. Meanwhile, my athlete friends were running laps until they threw up, and my drama friends were rehearsing plays until late at night, trying to get their homework done between scenes, controlling their bodies and voices and images, running it again and again until they got it right.

So this is useful because it clarifies some of the “why” behind white educational resource hoarding. Middle class parents feel that middle class jobs are scarce because they are – that’s on purpose, and the gatekeeping is intense – and there is a narrow and particular skillset kids have to cultivate from very young to get through those gates, and not all schools are going to “prepare them,” meaning discipline them, to the degree that they will need. So the obsession with creating these enclaves, whether suburban towns or higher tracks within diverse schools, is motivated very much by parents’ “fear of falling,” for their kids. Their kids are always already deserving because they come from middle class homes, but they will also need to spend their childhoods cultivating an enormous amount of self-discipline and control (while smiling and “thinking critically” and engaging in approved forms of creativity that actually aren’t very creative at all) and to keep proving that merit, to demonstrate that they have not “fallen,” and they need to be in the right schools, with the right classmates, to do that.

APPENDIX C: PHASE 2 CONSENT FORM

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

1. EXPLANATION OF THE RESEARCH and WHAT YOU WILL DO:

You are being asked to participate in a research study of the impacts of educational policy and practices on students and families in [redacted] schools. You will be asked to participate in a 45-60 minute interview at a date and time of your choosing.

2. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW:

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

3. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY:

There is no cost to being in this study. There is no compensation for being in this study.

4. CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS:

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the researcher: Briana Markoff, markoffb@msu.edu, or her research sponsor, Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews, dcarter@msu.edu, Department of Teacher Education, 620 Farm Lane, East Lansing, MI 48824.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

5. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT:

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX D: PHASE 2 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant

1. Tell me a little about yourself. (Gender, approximate age, race, family size, anything else you want me to know?)
2. Have you always lived in [Cobblerton]? If not, where did you move here from? If so, how did your family come here?
3. Can you tell me about your K-12 school experience?
 - a. Where did you go to school?
 - b. (If [Cobblerton]) Do you have a particular memory of [Cobblerton] schools from when you attended? A story you'd like to share?
 - c. How do you think [Cobblerton] schools have changed in the time since you've attended them? How have they stayed the same?
4. What do you do (or did you do, if retired) for work?
 - a. Do you commute to work? If so, how far?

Town of [Cobblerton]

5. How would you describe "the character of the town"?
6. What changes have you noticed in the town of [Cobblerton] in the time that you've lived here?
7. I'm going to ask you about a couple of people and past events and I'd just love to hear any memories you have of that time and how you or people you knew in [Cobblerton] may have responded.
 - a. Did you know Sam Placentino? What was his vision for [Cobblerton] Public Schools?

- b. 1974-76: The Boston Busing Crisis. Do you have any memory of how [Cobblerton] responded to what was going on in Boston?
 - c. 1980: Proposition 2 ½
 - d. Do you have a memory of other major events from outside the town that impacted life here in the past fifty years or so?
- 8. Overall, how have you seen the town change over the course of your life?
 - 9. In what ways has the town stayed the same (maintained its identity or character)?
 - 10. Has [Cobblerton]'s relationship to Boston changed in the time you've lived here?
 - 11. What direction do you see the town headed in next? What role might the schools play in that?
 - 12. At the 2000 Census, [Cobblerton] had a median income of about \$78,000. Now, the median income is \$135,000. Do you have any insight as to what is causing these changes?
 - 13. Are you aware of any attempts, past or present, to make [Cobblerton] a more racially or economically diverse place? (For example, through affordable or low-income housing, taxation, other avenues)? What happened?
 - 14. I'm looking to gather other memories of [Cobblerton] over the past fifty years, with a particular focus on education. Do you know anyone you think I should speak with?

APPENDIX E: PHASE 3 FORMS

Recruitment Letter

Dear Diverse [Cobblerton],

My name is Bri Markoff, and I am a doctoral student in an education program at Michigan State University. I also lived and attended school in [Cobblerton] from ages 4-18, and am the daughter of Laurie Markoff, a member of your organization. I am writing in the hope of being connected to [Cobblerton] community members who might be interested in participating in my doctoral research about how [Cobblerton]'s historical and contemporary policies and practices impact students and families of color in the town today.

I am seeking to meet up to ten [Cobblerton] High School students, recent grads, parents of elementary and middle school students, or other community members with connections to the schools. Though I am focusing on people of color, I would also be interested in connecting with queer, disabled, multilingual, or low-income students and families, or anyone who has had difficulty accessing [Cobblerton]'s educational resources, or experienced marginalization or discrimination at school. Participants would be asked to meet via Zoom for about 60 minutes. All interview data would be anonymized, so that no one will be identifiable in my dissertation or any publications that come out of it. If you're interested, please email me at markoffb@msu.edu. I'm also happy to answer any questions before folks agree to participate!

I would love it if Diverse [Cobblerton] members would pass this on to anyone they know who they think might be interested. In exchange, I'd be happy to support Diverse [Cobblerton] in any way I can, including by providing educational or academic resources for your website, for use on

committees, etc. Thank you so much for your consideration, and for all you do to make [Cobblerton] a better place for everyone!

Sincerely,

Bri Markoff

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

1. EXPLANATION OF THE RESEARCH and WHAT YOU WILL DO:

You are being asked to participate in a research study of the impacts of educational policy and practices on students and families in [Cobblerton] schools. You will be asked to participate in a 45-60 minute interview at a date and time of your choosing.

2. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW:

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

3. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY:

There is no cost to being in this study. There is no compensation for being in this study.

4. CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS:

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the researcher: Briana Markoff, markoffb@msu.edu, or her research sponsor, Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews, dcarter@msu.edu, Department of Teacher Education, 620 Farm Lane, East Lansing, MI 48824.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

5. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT:

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX F: PHASE 3 QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

1. Tell me a little about yourself. (Prompt for approximate age, gender, race, language(s) spoken).
2. How long have you lived in [Cobblerton]?
3. Have you always lived in [Cobblerton]?
 - a. (If moved) Why did you choose to move here? OR
 - b. Do you know why your family chose to move here?
 - c. What did you know about [Cobblerton] schools before you moved here?
4. How long have you (or your child) attended [Cobblerton] schools?
5. Generally speaking, do you (or your child) feel that you belong in [Cobblerton]? In [Cobblerton] schools?
6. What does “getting a good education” mean to you?
7. Overall, do you think you (or your child) have been “getting a good education” in [Cobblerton]? Why or why not?
8. Have you (or your child) ever been marginalized or discriminated against in [Cobblerton] schools? If so, please tell me about what happened in as much detail as you feel comfortable sharing.
9. Do you have ideas or suggestions about how [Cobblerton] schools could be a better place for all students to learn?