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A Word of Warning: Educational Activists And Public Instruction Conspiracy Theories

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A WORD OF WARNING: EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISTS AND
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION CONSPIRACY THEORIES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

David Philip San Juan

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
School of Teacher Education
Educational Studies

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This Dissertation by: David Philip San Juan

Entitled: *A Word of Warning: Educational Activists and Public Instruction Conspiracy Theories*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in School of Teacher Education, Program of Educational Studies

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ABSTRACT

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By utilizing a qualitative approach of educational criticism and connoisseurship, the purpose of this study was to explore the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of educational activists that work to expose and/or debunk a public instruction conspiracy theory. Data were collected through the interviews and observations of four participants that were educational activists that had worked to expose and/or debunk a public instruction conspiracy theory. Their related literature and artifacts such as various online and traditional publications, social media posts, and audiovisual materials were also collected and transcribed. Data were analyzed with numerous rounds of coding, annotating, diagramming, and memoing. Although the participants of this study varied in their perspectives and intentions, several themes emerged in regards to their hopes for the future of education, how to engage with the public and spread their message, and the overall influence their activism has had on American public schools. Findings from this research explore the differences and similarities between these unique educational activists, their approach to activism, and the impact their activism has had. In addition, this research suggests a need for more exploration into the topic of public instruction conspiracy theories and the educational activists that work to expose and/or debunk them.

Keywords: educational activist, public instruction, conspiracy theory, educational criticism and connoisseurship

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

Critical Prologue

In early 2013, I had my initial introduction and distinct reaction to what I perceived as a potentially hidden agenda within the education industry. As an elementary school teacher I was using testing software in the classroom produced by billionaire Rupert Murdoch's company Amplify (formerly Wireless Generation). When I discovered that Murdoch was the owner of Amplify I wanted to do some digging. A controversial figure, Murdoch's political agenda was well understood as right-leaning as demonstrated through his media outlets such as *Fox News* and the *Wall Street Journal* and Republican party political donations. I was curious, was this educational venture purely financial, were politics involved, or was there possibly a hidden agenda in the works? I decided to do some research. Some interesting critiques I came across while investigating Murdoch and Amplify were questions surrounding privacy and student data. Multiple news articles covering the topic mentioned concerns regarding Murdoch's ethics and what kind of data his company could access (Andrews, 2013; Rotella, 2013; Shapiro, 2013). How would this data be stored and kept safe? Would student data be used for something else and/or possibly sold to another corporate entity? I did some research online, but nothing exhaustive, and in response created a Facebook page with links and direct quotes from articles related to the topic. At its peak, my page had roughly 100 followers and corresponding *likes*. I'm not sure what I really expected to happen, however, I definitely felt the need to share my

thoughts. I stopped updating the page after less than a year, as life, work, and other educational curiosities shifted my priorities and focus.

Although I did not pursue the matter further at the time, upon later reflection I began to understand how a conspiracy theory tied to education might develop and motivate one to action. I wanted to investigate. Something didn't seem right and I felt the need to speak out, to say something on a public platform to bring more attention to the topic. Conspiratorial elements tied to dark money, political donations, and favoritism regarding educational software appeared to be present, but I felt it more appropriate at the time to investigate only and not form any assumptions. I didn't want to go down a rabbit hole of conspiratorial thinking and kept my biases in check due to what I considered a lack of sufficient evidence. As time went on, and my mind and career went other directions, my concerns regarding Murdoch faded.

Five Years Later

In October 2018, I happened upon an interview between well-known conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, and retired public school teacher and author John Talyor Gatto (Gatto, 2015). As I listened carefully to their conversation I was a bit stunned by what they were breaking down in conspiratorial detail. Never had I thought of public schools quite in this regard. As Gatto and Jones would have had you believe, through a form of *classic conspiracism* (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019), which has been defined as having intricate connections and threads from one point to another, public schools were dumbing down and indoctrinating students as a means of social control. And, they had been doing so from the beginning. At the time, this was in stark contrast to my more mainstream educator perspective that the problem instead was poor school leadership disconnected from the classroom and focused solely on accountability and improving test scores (Walsh, 2017). As I saw it, public schools weren't the enemy, but rather an institution

similar to others with a number of critical and systemic issues still left to be addressed. Was I missing something?

Through his work, Gatto (2015) was fighting to expose a conspiracy tied to public education, with elements of both open and hidden agendas that utilized public schools to ensure the status quo and benefit those with nefarious intentions. After his resignation after 26 years as a public school teacher, Gatto, now deceased (1935-2018), worked to inform the public of the harmful influence such a conspiracy had on public schools by tracing historical threads to the Prussian and factory model of education to Horace Mann, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie (Gatto, 2003). Gatto (2015) outlined their involvement in an intricate conspiracy of influential elitists that mandated public schools and their attendance through compulsory schooling in order to create manageable, easily manipulated workers and consumers incapable of critical thinking, and most importantly, social upheaval. Gatto was similar in some aspects to the participants investigated in this study, and yet also very different. Some, like Gatto, have worked to expose what they perceived as a conspiracy of indoctrination perpetuated by the public education system. Others feared a hidden agenda of corporate greed focused only on the profit that can be siphoned off from schools through methods such as high stakes testing and publications, data management, and school privatization (Ravitch, 2020).

Introduction

Should we save schools and continue to reform, or in fact engage in the process of dismantling public education? Educational activists with varying perspectives all along the ideological spectrum spanning from concerns regarding privatization to indoctrination, if working in good faith, have advocated for a quality education for all. Some activists such as Gatto (2002), had worked to expose indoctrination and believed there was no hope for public

schools. Others have wanted to expose an agenda of privatization that would segregate students and perpetuate economic, cultural, and social divisions (Gillborn, 2008; Ravitch, 2020). Whatever the perception, their activism to expose a public instruction conspiracy theory (PICT) rather than market an innovation or policy was what made them distinct and worth investigating further. For the purposes of my study, I defined a PICT as any conspiracy theory connected to public education and further expanded on this definition in Chapter Two. These were individual activists who were fighting for what they believed to be true, and I suspected that there were nuances and connections that would be beneficial to a variety of educational stakeholders. Research that has explored activists exposing and/or debunking PICTs, their messaging and motivations, and their processes and implications, offers a unique look at these individuals that could help us to better understand society's perception of public education, the negative impact that policies and practices may have, and how we can have constructive conversions to prioritize and resolve the true issues facing public schools.

PICT activists are those individuals that have worked to expose and/or debunk a conspiracy targeting public education. They may have exposed a conspiracy perceived as true, exposed a conspiracy as false in an attempt to debunk it, or any variation thereof usually best defined by the individual activist. Their messages of warning resonate with those that fear public schools have not fulfilled their duty to provide all students with a quality education. Many of these activists have been affiliated with groups tied to political, religious, and other ideological agendas (Spring, 2014a). Much of the research regarding education activism was specific to these particular activist groups, some formed in response to local policies being implemented, concerns of corporate interests, and grassroots community push back against school closures and funding (Ewing, 2018; Ravitch, 2020; Rooks, 2017). Political rhetoric has reignited the culture

war in the United States with a focus on public education. Politicians have cited increasingly divisive claims and utilized charged rhetoric with regards to public education and the direction it should take. PICTS, and those educational activists that confront them, have been a consequential component within our polarized dialogue surrounding public education and required further research.

One major difference among PICT activists and public discourse has been a move toward or away from public schooling. While many have wanted to protect and revitalize public schooling, others believe that privatization, school choice, charter and online schools, and other alternatives to public education were in the best interest of society. In addition, historically marginalized communities and parents of special needs students have wanted better than their public schools had to offer. In contrast, there were many activists that had made it their mission to expose this agenda as harmful to those students served by public schools due to public funds being diverted to alternatives such as private and charter schools with limited government oversight. Fear mounted that as federal and state money was awarded to alternatives, public schools would lose their funding and those historically marginalized would suffer even more in an economically and racially segregated system of education (Gillborn, 2008; Rooks, 2017).

Those educational activists who believed that public schools were essential to a free and democratic society argued that public schools, developed from the efforts of the most historically marginalized (Hannah-Jones, 2021; Rooks, 2017), were necessary to ensuring that a quality education for all was attainable and recognized the inequity and systemic changes that must occur. Increased efforts to promote diversification in schools, the practice of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), and community input and the teaching of critical issues could help to create a more equitable and sustainable version of public schooling. However, there have been

PICT activists that proposed public schools were instead indoctrinating students through these very same efforts of social emotional learning (SEL) and critical race theory (CRT) (Feingold, 2022; Ferlazzo, 2022).

The perception of indoctrination and its intended outcome were usually dependent upon the experiences and perspective of the PICT activist. A more politically right-leaning individual believed that indoctrination was happening in the form of socialism, Marxism, and gender identity, while someone more left-leaning cautioned that indoctrination could be identified as the *whitestream*, Eurocentric version of schooling being perpetuated to continue a cycle of white supremacy and systemic racism. As demonstrated by the participants of this study, a left-leaning activist perspective advocated for more inclusion and acceptance of transgender individuals, while a right-leaning narrative suggested that public school curriculums and teachers were encouraging transgender surgeries. There have also been PICT activists that point to the indoctrination of students as workers into a capitalist worker-consumer cycle that eliminates their critical thinking and instead rewards efficient work habits and the accumulation of wealth.

Problem Statement

Throughout history conspiracy theories surrounding public schooling have been a part of American political, religious, cultural, and social discourse. Often a word of warning, educational activists that attempted to expose such conspiracies hoped to make others aware of these nefarious and well-calculated hidden agendas targeting public education. However, although much has been known regarding various political and ideological educational agendas (Spring, 2014a), limited research has been done regarding PICTs and the individuals that hope to expose and/or debunk them through their activism. Educational activism alone has had limited research (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018) let alone research specific to activists who either work to

make others aware of and/or debunk PICTs for the benefit of others. Educational activism has been on the rise (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018), as have conspiracy theories (Hobbs, 2017) and the implications of this combination on the American education system should be explored. Education policy tied to school privatization such as vouchers, corporate charters schools, and digital alternatives (Ravitch, 2020; Rooks, 2017), as well as policy concerning indoctrination (Ferlazzo, 2022; Joyce, 2022; Niemczyk, 2022), have all been an element of recent public discourse and political action. With this study I provide a highly descriptive picture of four individual activists who engaged with PICTs in some form. Through interviews, observations, and artifact analysis from educational activists of this type, I have interpreted and evaluated the motivating factors that drove their activism, what their intentions were, and what strategies they used to promote their word of warning. In addition, I have considered the potential implications of such activism on both a community and national level.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of my study was to explore the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of educational activists that work to expose and/or debunk a public instruction conspiracy theory (PICT). Similar to a teacher developing a lesson plan or curriculum, a PICT activist has also gone through a process of researching, writing, and then sharing their work with others to teach, create awareness, and potentially change a perspective. A PICT activist has developed a curriculum crafted out of their in-depth research. Extensively written and planned out, they have presented it on a platform meant to amplify and effectively educate those unaware of the dangers facing public education. Their intentions were often clear, however, their outcomes and implications could be left open to interpretation. Similar to the *instructional arc*, which examines the intended, operational, and received curriculum

(Uhrmacher et al., 2017), my research questions allowed for segmenting the rhetoric and activities of the PICT activists into what their intentions were, what the activism looked like in its actionable form, and evaluating the outcomes of said activism. This model was appropriate for my study as it helped to create a cohesive yet distinct category for each of the three research questions:

Q1   What are the intentions and motivations of educational activists who work to expose and/or debunk a PICT?

Q2   What processes and strategies do such activists utilize for the promotion of their ideas and concerns regarding a PICT?

Q3   What are the implications and outcomes of PICT activism for public education, teachers and students, and our greater society?

Rationale

Exploring those activists invested in exposing and/or debunking a PICT was significant because there had been limited research into educational activists (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018), and conspiracies were considered both a trendy yet harmful attribute of our society (Hobbs, 2017; Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019). Research regarding PICT activists could provide insight into the individual and their communities, their messaging and tactics to promote their message, and the potential influence their efforts may have had on school boards, policy, politics, and public perception. This type of research could help contribute to better understanding PICT rhetoric and those that wish to inform the public of conspiracies specifically targeting public schools. This research could be useful to teacher preparation instructors confronted with a PICT in class (King, 2015, 2018), for schools, school systems, and school boards when addressing public concern regarding a PICT, and for educators, politicians, and the general public that find value in understanding conspiracies in their various forms to help them remain critical of popular rhetoric (Hobbs, 2017).

The PICT activists I researched were not necessarily promoting a new curriculum or demanding accountability as their top priority, but instead focused on public schooling itself and what they perceived as powerful forces at work to promote agendas that may be beneficial to the adults involved (financial, political gain, social control) but were detrimental to students, and by default harmful to our society. This study explored the individual educational activist, their messaging and motivations, and their intended outcomes for public schools. Some PICT activists have perceived what they consider as an openly flagrant agenda and/or hidden agenda with conspiratorial connotations causing harm to our children and country, and felt compelled to advocate against it and expose it in an effort to make substantial change to our public education system. Others have worked to debunk conspiracies and perceived conspiratorial rhetoric surrounding public education as detrimental to students, teachers, and school funding.

As Noddings (2016) stated, "One of the tasks of philosophy of education is to analyze the language used in arguments and to offer alternative language that draws attention to other perspectives and possibilities" (p. 3). It is important to understand the intentions and motivations, the actions and methods, and real-life outcomes of those working with PICTs. In doing so, we can analyze where the "language used in arguments" intersects between educational activists, their activism, and their intentions and implications.

Even as a staunch public school advocate, I had also become disenfranchised with the public education system. I had suspected the solution was based on addressing many of the systemic issues found within the education system, identifying the real problems, and expertly prioritizing what needs to be advocated for to create positive change. Teachers have been quitting the profession for a number of reasons, districts have adopted prescribed curriculums, and public schools have once again been swept up in our latest iteration of the culture wars (Ravitch, 2020).

By exploring the intentions and motivations of PICT activists, educators focused on making positive change could have a better understanding of the priorities and messaging of such activists, and therefore be able to constructively dialogue and more effectively reform public education and address any public concerns.

The aims and actions of PICT activists was an emerging topic with limited research that described, explored, and analyzed the individuals working to expose educational conspiracies. In addition, because of more recent polarizing political rhetoric regarding critical race theory (CRT) and other perceived forms of indoctrination, it was important to understand what agendas PICT activists perceived as harmful, and essentially the most feared, that prompted them to promote a message of warning versus other forms of educational activism. The anti-CRT movement was just one example of educational activists warning the public. Other such forms of fear-based rhetoric could be found concerning student data (Krutka et al., 2021), standardized testing (Schroeder et al., 2020), and also in regards to literacy instruction and the Science of Reading (SoR) (Schwartz, 2021). This type of exploration not only provided context for current PICTs, but also an analysis in regards to both the content and effectiveness of their messaging. Through educational criticism and connoisseurship (Ed Crit) (Eisner, 2002), I had the flexibility and creativity necessary to bring my research together and present it in a way that was comprehensive and easily digestible. As Eisner (2002) stated:

> The existence of disagreement about educational practices should not be conceived of as a liability. It would be a serious liability indeed if a subject so important as education were not a matter of concern and dispute. The resolution of these views, even a temporary one, can be treated on two levels: through accommodation and compromise

and through encouraging the contending parties to penetrate more deeply into the values

    that animate the controversy. (p. 374)

It is critical that we are knowledgeable of the topics surrounding education, and can

communicate them effectively through constructive dialogue that encourages positive resolution

concerning these topics for the benefit of students and their quality of education.

Overview of Methodology

This qualitative study took the approach of Ed Crit. By utilizing this approach I was able

to investigate those educational activists that worked to expose and/or debunk PICTs through

their activism. A PICT activist might hope to promote a conspiracy, expose a conspiracy, and/or

debunk a conspiracy. However, how this was determined was relative to personal perspective and

identity. Data were collected by interviewing four educational activists that were found via the

social media platform Twitter/X. Although there were many educational activists on Twitter/X,

the activists chosen for my study utilized some form of a PICT either with their Twitter/X posts,

replies, or likes. It was important to note that for the sake of this study, although I referred to

participants as PICT activists, they may not have personally identified in this way. I later discuss

this in Chapter Four where I have provided a more in-depth description and interpretation of the

data. In addition to participant interviews, data were collected through digital observations by

observing two participants' social media interactions similar to the research of Schroeder et al.

(2020), one participant's podcast preparation and run through, and one participant's abbreviated

formal presentation. Additional data were collected through document analysis of the

participant's books and online publications such as websites, blogs, and social media posts.

Digital artifacts such as audio content from podcasts and videos from YouTube were also

analyzed. Through the use of *in vivo* as well as *descriptive* and *values coding* (Saldaña, 2021),

the data produced themes relevant to providing a thorough description, interpretation, and evaluation of educational activism and the various conspiracy theories surrounding public schools. The approach of Ed Crit was indispensable in helping to explore the individual activists and their many nuances, and being able to present the data in a way that leaves open the possibility of multiple interpretations (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). This idea was rooted in constructivism and the experiences that inform our perceptions of the world. Not only did this help to inform the motivations and intentions of a PICT activist, it was also part of their process and strategy as they attempted to inform others and promote their activism.

<div align="center">**Significance**</div>

Although there has been much reported in the literature about political agendas and their associated groups (Spring, 2014a), this study explored the individual PICT activist. Pizmony-Levy et al. (2018) stated, "there has been a resurgence of education activism in the United States" (p. 2) and that "more research on this topic is needed" (p. 7). I was interested in the educational activists that perceived harmful forces moving against public education and were motivated to act, and to expose this PICT to the public so American education would be safe. What could we learn from their voices and experiences? Current research has been limited in this regard, but it is important for all educational stakeholders to better understand PICT activists and their rhetoric to help determine how best to respond, address any community concerns, and when necessary to communicate with and inform the public regarding this particular educational topic. PICTs were both a current and historical trend worth investigating as they have often connected to political and ideological rhetoric that informs public perception and educational policy.

Researcher Stance

I believe that I made a good critic and connoisseur regarding PICT activists as I had been researching the topic for roughly four years, and had been a professional educator in a variety of roles for over 20 years. I had taught in various Title One public schools with a majority of students on free or reduced lunch, and I had also worked overseas at various private international schools where families paid thousands of dollars in tuition yearly. At the time of the study, I worked at a public charter school which received public money but did not have to adhere to many of the overbearing standardizations of the county and city schools in the area. I have been both an advocate for public schools and simultaneously disenfranchised by them, and believed that if they continued on their current trajectory they would eventually fail and/or radically transform into something that no longer benefits our students, but instead outside interests. With a background in educational psychology, I have considered myself a pragmatic constructivist that has found it beneficial to examine closely the experiences I've had, how the experiences of others shape their perspective, and the experiences that can be prompted by educators and educational activists. I approached this study with an open mind and suspended any biases I had to instead focus on the individual activists and their personal perspectives versus attempting to examine any one group or educational movement. According to Uhrmacher et al. (2017), "It is important to note that the educational criticism is not a "truth" in the sense that it is the only way to account for or to interpret a situation" (p. 53). As I explain more thoroughly in Chapters Two and Three, Ed Crit encourages the researcher to draw upon their own perspectives and experiences to help inform interpretations and evaluations.

Definitions of Key Terminology

Accountability Movement. Associated with the education reform movement that prioritizes

    public accountability and high stakes testing to determine if schools are failing or

    succeeding. Accountability practices have been utilized to determine funding, transfer of

    school management, hiring and firing practices, and school closures (Ravitch, 2020;

    Spring, 2014a).

Conspiracy Theory (CT). The assertion that there are influential forces collaborating behind the

    scenes to promote misinformation and false narratives to accomplish nefarious outcomes

    (Wood & Gray, 2019).

Curriculum. Focused on the broad concepts of *experiences* and *situations*, curriculum is

    anything experienced by an individual within a given situation. It can be something the

    individual proactively investigates and/or something one is exposed to in their

    environment (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

Dark Money. Funding associated with nefarious and hidden backroom deals meant to make

    money through negative/devious actions. Money from anonymous donors associated with

    the promotion of the privatization movement and other for profit interests (Cunningham,

    2021; Ravitch, 2020).

Educational Activist. An individual who conducts some form of *social* and/or *political* action

    focused on education. This can take many forms from simply signing a petition to more

    involved work and overall investment of time and money (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018).

Educational Agenda. A political, religious, financial, and/or other ideological intent to reform

    the landscape of public education (Spring, 2014b).

Indoctrination. An instructional approach that results in closed mindedness versus open

mindedness. A definitive closing off of ideas and possibilities supported and reinforced

by authority figures with specific ideological motivations, intentions, and desired

outcomes (Taylor, 2017).

School Privatization. A reform movement meant to privatize education through various forms

such as vouchers, corporate charters, and government funding for private schools. The

privatization movement believed that an open market on education would create

competition and therefore better schools (Ravitch, 2020; Spring, 2014a).

Transformative Experience. A learning experience and/or series of experiences principal to a

shift in perception. After a transformative experience one sees the world in a different

way whether significant or slight (Brophy, 2010).

Summary

In the Critical Prologue it was my intent to introduce the topic of PICTs through my

initial experiences and direct response. Further background information and context was

included in the introduction to highlight educational activists that were connected to PICTs in

some form. For the purposes of this study these individuals were referred to as PICT activists,

however, how they identified as activists, the terminology they preferred, and their connection to

PICTs varied with the exact sort of nuance that was explored when utilizing an Ed Crit approach.

In addition to stating the problem and purpose of the study, the research questions were formed

with an activist's curriculum in mind and modeled after the instructional arc (Uhrmacher et al.,

2017). A brief overview of the methodology was given citing how data were collected and

analyzed in order to effectively answer each of the research questions. A rationale for the study

and its significance was also stated to help support the need for such investigation, and a

researcher stance helped to justify both the approach of Ed Crit and my expertise regarding the topic.

Chapter Two consists of a literature review highlighting both major components of the study: educational activists and PICTs. Research pertaining to educational activists and their use of social media were useful when navigating the world of online educational activism. Research related to educational agendas and PICTs was found in both historical and recent literature in a variety of forms. However, even though PICTs were throughout social media, school board meetings, and politics, there was limited research specifically citing PICTs and how educational activists approach them. An in-depth description of the methodology is outlined in Chapter Three with additional information and rationale regarding the approach of Ed Crit and other particulars concerning data collection and analysis. Interviews and observations were the main sources of data, followed by analysis of published work and online audiovisual materials.

Description and interpretation direct Chapter Four and give a behind the scenes look at these unique educational activists. By utilizing an Ed Crit approach, I investigated the small details curious for the unexpected. This in turn transferred to my lens when crafting interview questions and attending to details that may have been overlooked. To conclude, Chapter Five provides a summary of the major themes that emerged during data analysis and an evaluation of what can be gained from similar research moving forward. I believe that PICTs have been a major influence on public perception, and to help find the truth we must also understand the conspiracies that power the agendas meant to sway our opinion of public education.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

"Schooling is essentially a quest for the realization of the intentions of parents, society, and reformers" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 106). My study explored the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of those activists that have worked to expose and/or debunk a public instruction conspiracy theory (PICT). A number of rationales were provided regarding my research and why it was significant. As discussed in the following literature review, there has been limited research regarding modern educational activism (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018), let alone activism that revolves around the world of PICTs. Additionally, by exploring the PICT activist we can gain insight into the nuances surrounding PICTs, the activists that address them in some manner, their use of social media to promote their activism, and the potential implications that PICT rhetoric and activism has had on public education. This research should prove valuable to educational stakeholders that truly want what is best for students and public education, and are willing to take a critical look at PICTs and their influence on public perception and education policy.

The literature review is organized to support my rationale for the study by first defining a PICT, and then defining a PICT activist. This helps to provide context in Chapters Three and Four regarding parameters for participant selection, and when describing the individual identities of the participants. It is important to note again that not all participants identified as a PICT activist as is discussed in more descriptive detail later in Chapter Four. My literature review

argues that PICTs were not only a relevant and important part of our society to investigate, but also that it was important to begin with the activists that have incorporated a PICT into their educational activism. In addition, educational activism on social media was examined not only because social media was utilized to identify study participants, it was also a requirement that participants have a social media presence (ex. Twitter/X, YouTube, blogs, podcasts). The social media engagements of two of the participants were collected and analyzed to observe their interactions and activism amplification. Social media had been utilized for educational activism purposes, had also been under-researched (Hogan, 2018), and was directly connected to the processes and strategies that PICT activists used to warn others. To help provide background and context for the study, and to address the implications and outcomes of PICT activism, the topics of educational agendas and public perception were also explored as they relate to PICTs.

Regarding key terminology, it is important to note that PICTs were not new in educational literature, but defining them as such has been part of my research process over the past four years. It was important to begin by defining both a PICT and a PICT activist. These definitions were created by me for the purpose of this study, and future research to more effectively communicate data and promote more awareness of PICTs. The definition of a PICT was built off of literature that defines a conspiracy theory, while defining a PICT activist was built off of establishing what constitutes educational activism. By combining the two I define a PICT activist as someone who works to expose and/or debunk a PICT. However, although the participants of the study might have fit the definition by my standards their own interpretations did differ. In Chapter Four I discuss each participant's reflections on the terminology surrounding PICTs with their answers to my final follow up email. Answers varied greatly, and in true Ed Crit

form it was important to provide a detailed description and interpretation of what each participant had to share.

The process I utilized to collect research initially relied heavily on accessing university databases and Google Scholar to find journal articles and books that related to PICTs. During my doctoral studies over the past four years, I had collected relevant literature that connected in some way to either PICTs and/or the methods I utilized for data collection and analysis. However, for the purposes of my dissertation, it was important to expand my research into the areas of educational activism and the use of social media for activism amplification and engagement. In addition, because research regarding PICTs has been limited, it was important to also incorporate pertinent news articles and online platforms/media to help establish context and interpretations of potential implications and outcomes of PICT activism.

The purpose of my literature review was to help define a PICT, provide examples, and define those activists that worked to expose and/or debunk a PICT they perceived as detrimental to public schools. In addition, as it relates to the strategies and processes of these activists, the literature review explored educational activists' use of social media, conspiracy theories, and those niche activists that have identified a PICT and their utilization of social media. As it relates to the implications of PICT activists, it was also important to explore the influence of social media and other forms of media on public perception and the ideological agendas that may or may not benefit from rhetoric concerning a PICT. To conclude, the literature review provided a brief overview of educational criticism and connoisseurship (Ed Crit) and clearly defined a rationale for the use of this approach when investigating educational activists that have worked to expose and/or debunk a PICT.

Public Instruction Conspiracy Theories

Wood and Gray (2019) provided me with a clear and accepted definition of a conspiracy theory as "allegations regarding collusion among powerful actors to achieve sinister ends through deception" (p. 163) and included the use of the initials CT for *conspiracy theory* throughout their study which corresponded to other literature on the topic. With the addition of PI (public instruction), a conspiratorial umbrella encompassing all threads related to public schooling PreK through university should be considered. I defined a PICT as a conspiracy theory that asserts that either public education and/or some component thereof is in place to "achieve sinister ends through deception."

Wood and Gray (2019) also explored the nuances between *pro-establishment* and *anti-establishment* conspiracies to conclude that conspiracies that target the government may do so because the government is perceived to have been undermined or infiltrated by outside groups. Depending on ideological perspective, this could be indicative of both pro-establishment and anti-establishment conspiracy theories or some blending of the two. This was important to note when considering conspiracies that involve public instruction as public schools are a government institution that historically and currently have been the subject of both conspiracy types. When discerning what type of PICT an activist was hoping to expose and/or debunk, it was important to differentiate between those conspiracies that act against public education and those that may consider public schools at the heart of the conspiracy itself.

It was also important to define classic conspiracism versus *new conspiracism* as they relate to PICTs. A classic form of conspiracy requires deep investigation, perceives dire consequences at stake, has numerous connections and historical threads, and works through a series of explanations leading towards a potential transformative revelation (Muirhead &

Rosenblum, 2019). "Sometimes far-fetched, sometimes accurate, and sometimes a vexing mix of the two, classic conspiracism tries to make sense of a disorderly and complicated world by insisting that powerful people control the course of events" (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, p. 2). For my study, the PICTs, and the activists I recruited as participants utilized a form of classic conspiracism. Yes, there were PICTs that did meet the criteria of new conspiracism with "no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern, no close examination of the operators plotting in the shadows" (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, p. 3). A recent example was the repeated assertions yet lack of evidence surrounding the conspiracy of litter boxes being installed in public high schools to accommodate the furry community (Associated Press, 2022).

For the purposes of this study a PICT, as defined, could be either anti, pro-establishment, or some variation thereof, but must also meet the criteria of a classic form of conspiracy. My initial exposure to John Taylor Gatto and his work to expose a conspiracy of compulsory schooling systematically *dumbing down* society is one such example (Gatto, 2002, 2015). Gatto's conspiratorial dive took the form of classic conspiracism tracing historical roots to Horace Mann, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie (Gatto, 2003). In contrast, when I first began investigating PICTs in the literature I found *The Great Conspiracy Against Our American Public Schools* a collection of sermons by the Reverend Richard Harcourt (1890) meant to expose a PICT orchestrated by the Catholic Church. Also referenced in numerous *New York Times* articles of the era ("Fanatics and the schools", 1891; "Warm defense of public schools", 1894), the rhetoric to expose this PICT was largely supported by the media and public perception regarding the separation of Church and State and the use of public funds for private religious schools. The literature found in academic journals directly addressing PICTs was lacking, however, King

(2015, 2018) investigated a PICT concerning John Dewey when prompted by a discussion in her Foundations of Education class. King (2015) began an online analysis of 31 blog posts and articles posted by neo-conservative outlets, and concluded that the sources did not correctly or adequately represent Dewey. King's (2018) later and more thorough analysis summarized that many of the sites provided gross misrepresentations of Dewey's work, thinking, and general positions regarding education. Many of the websites reviewed displayed Dewey quotes that were taken out of context or misinterpreted when compared to his complete works. King (2018) concluded that it was important for teacher educators, especially those who routinely reference Dewey, to be aware of such rhetoric as it might become part of classroom discourse. I agree with King, and believe the research needs to be expanded upon to incorporate more conspiratorial threads both connected and independent of Dewey. In addition, the messaging and promoters of PICTs need to be investigated more comprehensively to fully understand the implications of such conspiracies on public education and society.

Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorists

It is important to take a moment to address the research done regarding conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists. Although there has been very little research discussing conspiracy theories connected to public education, there was a wealth of research discussing their prevalence, variations, and their impact on individuals and society. Exploring conspiracy theories can be a daunting task, and as we enter into exploration of one conspiracy it can be difficult not to jump from one to the other. There are a wide variety of conspiracies available, and a diverse group of individuals that believe in conspiracies. A rational argument can be provided for the benefits of conspiracy theorists as there is usually an element of truth to a conspiracy, and when a conspiracy is exposed it makes major news.

In their study, Enders and Smallpage (2019) attempted to answer the question "Who are conspiracy theorists?" and postulated that knowing more about conspiracies and conspiracy theorists can prove beneficial in a number of ways. In today's world, conspiracy theories have been in a golden age (Hobbs, 2017). They have had major exposure through a variety of online platforms such as YouTube, Twitter/X, Reddit, Facebook, and a number of websites devoted explicitly to conspiracy theories. Without a doubt, conspiracy theories have made a social and cultural impact on how we live our lives.

Enders and Smallpage (2019) asserted that conspiracy theories can have a harmful effect. Both individuals and the greater society can suffer as conspiracy theories may lead individuals and/or groups towards a climate of distrust. One could argue that not trusting things at first glance can be a positive attribute, and that we should be skeptical of the world around us. However, there is an impact on our society at large when a conspiracy theorist opts to vote, or not vote, and how engaged they choose to become when they may not trust government institutions. Again, this may be a good thing if the government in question is in fact corrupt, but not necessarily a good thing when attempting to promote government programs and services.

In their study, Enders and Smallpage (2019) surveyed a sample of 560 participants in regards to conspiracies most familiar to the general public such as JFK's assasination, the moon landing, Barack Obama's birthplace, and Donald Trump's collusion with Russia. In addition, the authors tracked a variety of complex connections between conspiracies and defining attributes of conspiracy theorists. Although they utilized a large sample of participants, the authors noted that their results may not be the best representation of the general population as the majority of participants were white, young, and liberal leaning. I agree with the authors on this point as certain groups can prove to be more susceptible to conspiracy theories, and other groups may

even be the specific target of a conspiracy theory (Davis et al., 2018). The general perception of conspiracy theories can change from individual to individual, and group to group. One may invest their attention towards those conspiracies that are pro-establishment and seek to dismantle the current social order, while others may turn their attention to anti-establishment conspiracies that seek to expose a corrupt and dominant hierarchy (Wood & Gray, 2019).

Enders and Smallpage (2019) concluded with their research that those individuals with an inclination toward political conspiracies demonstrated political partisanship, and were more apt to believe the conspiracy aligned with their politics. In addition, those conspiracies that contain no political rhetoric were attributed to those individuals with a disposition towards paranormal beliefs and conspiratorial thinking. This prompted the authors to suggest a good diversity of both political and nonpartisan conspiracy theories for future studies to help gather valuable data when confronted with a particular type of political climate or demographic being studied.

The Public Instruction Conspiracy Theory Activist

To help define an activist wanting to expose and/or debunk a PICT, and essentially the participants of my study, it was important to first explain what has been considered educational activism. *Edu-Activism in the United States: Civic Participation on Educational Issues* (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018) provided a clear definition of *education activism* "as behaviors that are intended to create change in the educational sphere; it includes both individual and collective behaviors that often seek to challenge or defend extant school and/or educational authorities" (p. 2). Recent studies regarding educational activism were reflective of the "collective behaviors" attributed to various activist groups such as Opt Out Florida, grassroots movements, and teacher activism (Picower, 2012; Ramos, 2022; Schroeder et al., 2020). In contrast, for this study I investigated the individual activists and their more nuanced intentions. Fortunately,

Pizmony-Levy et al. (2018) distinguished five "forms of political and social action that people can take regarding education and schools" which included the individual activist actions that created the framework for their participant survey and statistical results:

a. Participated in a group whose main focus is education

b. Signed a petition about an educational issue

c. Donated money or raised funds for an educational group/educational issue

d. Took part in a protest or demonstration about an education issue

e. Contacted, or attempted to contact a politician to express your views on an education issue. (p. 8)

Based on the results of their survey, Pizmony-Levy, et al. (2018) concluded that "Education activism is most common among women, people of color, young adults, parents, urban communities, the well-educated and financially well-off, and liberals" (p. 7). In addition, the authors provided statistical breakdowns and numerous bar charts representative of activist actions and corresponding demographics. For example, those individuals who wanted to spend more on education were also more likely to have participated in a form of educational activism (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018). One particular insight from their research that I found relevant to my study was that "People who trust the education system are more likely to take part in education activism than those who do not trust the system" (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018, p. 6). Essentially, if you value public education you want to fight for its survival and warn others of its potential demise reminiscent of PICTs focused on school privatization that have perpetuated since the early years of public schooling (Harcourt, 1890). However, this does not explain the considerable number of activists and parents looking for alternatives to government education such as homeschooling (Gatto, 2002; Rooks, 2017). Similar to the anti versus pro-establishment

orientation regarding various conspiratorial driven rhetoric (Wood & Gray, 2019), recent education activism movements that warn of critical race theory (CRT) and LGBTQIA+ education cited a distrust in the institution of schooling and perceived harm to students in the form of indoctrination (Ferlazzo, 2022; Joyce, 2022; Niemczyk, 2022).

Since the Pizmony-Levy et al. (2018) definition of educational activism was quite broad it was important to identify other attributes that could distinguish a PICT activist from other educational activists. In addition to engaging in any number of activist actions as outlined by Pizmony-Levy et al. (2018), a PICT activist was one that has been focused on exposing and/or debunking a conspiracy they deemed detrimental to public education. Their rhetoric referring directly to a conspiracy and/or hidden agenda that meets the definition of a conspiracy theory previously mentioned (Wood & Gray, 2019). In addition, the conspiracy the PICT activist hoped to expose and/or debunk was a form of classic conspiracism (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019). This PICT activist attribute was identifiable by their extensive investment and research which "undertakes painstaking detective work" (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, p. 20). The PICT activist also had an intense sense of purpose attributed to classic conspiracism that "offers hopeful–sometimes utopian–accounts of what exposing the conspiracy can accomplish" (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, p. 30). These specific characteristics have been found both in recent days and historically with educational activists that have worked to expose and/or debunk PICTs.

"My job as I see it, is to provoke you into seeing that tacit complicity in serving this scheme is complicity nonetheless" (Gatto, 2014). As a PICT activist, as previously defined, Gatto believed that there were good educators and parents trying their best, but limited awareness of the indoctrinating system that feeds into the interests of the state and corporate

elites. Throughout his book *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (Gatto, 2002) and his interviews and presentations, Gatto maintained that within the system of public schools a student receives a *schooling* not an education. An education to Gatto was about addressing individual interests and needs, not by acquiescing to the needs of the state and/or corporations. Gatto maintained that by requiring schooling within the current model we were systematically dumbing ourselves down for ease of control by the state and corporations. By indoctrinating and dumbing down students the elite hoped to achieve their goals of controlling society and phasing out free thinkers. This was Gatto's (2015) PICT he hoped to expose whereas other PICT activists that I have researched had privatization or religious motivations, Gatto instead advocated more for *deschooling* (Illich, 1972), homeschooling, or really any alternative to the institution of public schools. To help communicate his message, he even turned his name into a type of promotional acronym: Get All The Thinkers Out (GATTO). Gatto took aim at the institution of schooling and connected historical documentation, anecdotal stories, and the current state of our modern society to justify his rationales.

Public Instruction Conspiracy Theory Activists and Social Media

Another defining factor for my study participants was their use of social media to amplify their reach to expose PICTs. Since research on PICTs has been limited, it was important to examine the use of social media by other educational activists. As emphasized in Schroeder et al.'s (2020) analysis of Florida's Opt Out movement which "credits social media for expanding its numbers" (p. 145), educational movements and activists have been utilizing and benefiting from social media as a powerful tool to promote their messaging and build support (Hogan, 2018; Supovitz et al., 2018; Thapliyal, 2018). Hogan's (2018) study, for example, examined the #tellPearson Twitter/X campaign intended to create greater awareness and warn the public of a

form of for-profit education (Ravitch, 2020). As Hogan (2018) summarized, "The aim of this paper is to critically examine how some educational activists have come together in a collective project against the increasing commercialization of education, and specifically, the activities of Pearson" (p. 378). Hogan (2018), like Pizmony-Levy et al. (2018) posited that more research was necessary regarding education activism, and more precisely the individual activists involved.

Although specific to education commercialization, Hogan (2018) did explore the possible implications of the #tellPearson movement and the social media strategies employed to create increased attention. Memes meant to "heighten people's interest in reading a post" and tweets considered a "call to action" or "a contribution to dialogue" were examples of Hogan's (2018) categorization of activist strategies (p. 389). This was relevant to my research as I analyzed how my participants communicated via social media their warning of PICTs meant to do harm to public education. However, Hogan (2018) was unable to draw any definitive conclusions regarding the implications of the #tellPearson campaign but did note that at the time of the study's publication both Pearson's share prices were down, and thousands of employees had been laid off due to fewer contracts being secured. To help answer my research question regarding PICT activists: What are the implications and outcomes of such activism for public education, teachers and students, politics, and our greater society? I believed that insight could be found in both the individual's personal perspective on the implications of their actions, and by assessing if their affiliated movements had created any verifiable shift in public opinion and/or policy changes directly tied to their form of PICT activism.

The authors of *The Common Core Debate on Twitter and the Rise of the Activist Public* (Supovitz et al., 2018), like Hogan (2018), investigated the role Twitter/X plays regarding educational activism. However, veering from education commercialization, Supovitz et al.

(2018) explored the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) debate that took place on Twitter/X

from September 2013 to February 2014 by gathering data from 189,658 tweets with

#commoncore, and implementing an "open-source software program for network analysis and

visualization of large datasets to understand the inner structure and clustering of the interactions

within the #commoncore network" (p. 425). Supovitz et al. (2018) found that most of the

conversations within the collected tweets contained emotionally charged language often specific

to the various factions within the debate, and that the content of the tweets would often not

directly relate to the CCSS but instead to some other political or education related topic.

Supovitz et al. (2018) stated that "factions employed different linguistic approaches that drew

upon different syntax—either rational or emotive—to move their messages" (p. 435). This

connected with my research into the processes of educational activists and the promotion of their

rhetoric. In addition, the authors differentiated in their findings between more "neutral"

policyspeak versus *politicalspeak* tweets which they stated:

> Made use of capital letters, denoting a form of urgency or a raising of the voice. They
>
> emphasized provocative terms like "racist," "indoctrination," "hate," "hypocrisy," and
>
> "bribery." This kind of language is intended to appeal to peoples' passions by provoking
>
> emotional connections to ideas and issues. In doing so, it evokes the more colorful
>
> rhetoric of political campaigning. (Supovitz et al., 2018, p. 434)

Unlike Supovitz et al. (2018), I did not use a mixed methods approach, nor was my

research focused on any one activist group, educational movement, or debate. Such research was

valuable when determining the demographic breakdown, opinions, and attributes of a particular

set of educational activists, but not as helpful when establishing personal motivators and

intentions. Instead, I examined the individual and reserved quantitative statistics for enriching the

context of my study when assessing potential implications of participants' PICT activism. Like Hogan (2018), I was not able to make any definitive conclusions regarding the implications of the activism of my individual participants. However, studies such as Supovitz et al.'s (2018) that have investigated activists, their specific educational issues and use of social media, can offer some interesting insight. For example, as part of their findings, Supovitz et al. (2018) discovered that most of those engaged in the CCSS debate "were tweeting as individuals, rather than as representatives of groups" (p. 431). This speaks to the need for research like my study that looked more in-depth at the individual versus groups and larger movements. As Supovitz et al. (2018) concluded, with the amplification and interaction tools that social media provide, "The heavy involvement of individuals, as opposed to the mouthpieces of more traditional education advocacy groups, provided strong evidence for greater involvement of active individuals in education debates" (p. 437). The PICT activists I studied were also active on social media which helped to answer my research question regarding the processes and strategies of a PICT activist and illuminated my observations of their online engagements.

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**Educational Agendas, Public Perception, and
Public Instruction Conspiracy Theories**

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It is important to take a moment to discuss several current educational debates and the agendas that various activists may have perceived as harmful, hidden, and conspiratorial to provide a bit of context and background for a PICT. At the time of this study, dominating the political right was a narrative of indoctrination in public schools in the form of CRT and LGBTQIA+ education. This resulted in such educational activism as the anti CRT movement which led to new education policy, revised curriculums, and fearful teachers uncertain about their instruction and career choice (Ferlazzo, 2022; Joyce, 2022; Niemczyk, 2022). On the political left, an alternative narrative warned of privatization and the redirection of public funds

to private, charter, and religious schools (Ravitch, 2020; Rooks, 2017). A recent ruling by the

Supreme Court "further breaches the separation between church and state by requiring states to

fund private religious schools if they fund any other private schools, even if those religious

schools would use public funds for religious instruction and worship" (Graham, 2022). In

addition, there was quite a bit of nuance and overlap between these polarizing political agendas

and debates surrounding education resulting in other concerns that spanned the political spectrum

such as high stakes testing and the handling of student data (Krutka et al., 2021; Schroeder et al.,

2020). From the research I had conducted in this area thus far, these agendas appeared of greatest

concern to educational activists working to expose and/or debunk a PICT, however, that should

not discount other activists that may have warned against other concerns such as the harmful

impact of education for profit or which side of the current reading wars to side with (Schwartz,

2021; Spring, 2014b). These educational topics have also had conspiratorial threads and were

included in the rhetoric of PICT activists, but the most common PICT threads historically and

recently were reflective of indoctrination and privatization.

Indoctrination

Although the most amplified claims of indoctrination were recently focused on CRT and

LGBTQIA+ education, indoctrination was also viewed by some activists as a form of dumbing

down to produce docile and obedient workers and consumers considered human capital

beneficial to perpetuating the uber wealth of billionaires (Gatto, 2002; Spring, 2014a). Because

of this variation, and any other alternative warnings of indoctrination that may be made by

educational activists, it was important to define indoctrination. For this purpose, I appreciated

Taylor's (2017) concise definition of "indoctrination as *a complex system of teaching in which*

actors with authority contribute to the production or reinforcement of closed mindedness," and

that with an open system-based approach social, cultural, and environmental factors also had to be considered when assessing the contributing factors of indoctrination and a closed-minded outcome (p. 40). This concept benefited my study when discussing indoctrination and the interpretations of educational activists and what they perceived as those factors contributing to closed-mindedness and in what regard.

John Dewey's own words have often been cited as a warning of indoctrinating forces by those activists that appreciated a more traditional versus progressive approach to education (Blumenfeld & Newman, 2015). As proof of Dewey's agenda, his work *The Primary Education Fetich* (1898) is cited by his detractors who have created an alternative narrative of Dewey that frames him as a reformer more focused on social control than educational progress. The often-cited passage by educational activists refers to the shift from *Old Education* to *New Education* and stated, "Change must come gradually. To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction" (Dewey, 1898, p. 327). Activists that disagreed with Dewey's progressive education agenda perceived this as proof of intent to indoctrinate the population "gradually" as to avoid a "violent reaction" in opposition. However, in stark contrast, Dewey emphasized that "there is a great deal of indoctrination now going on in the schools, especially with reference to narrow nationalism under the name of patriotism, and with reference to the dominant economic régime" (Dewey, 1937, p. 472).

Privatization

Regarding privatization, Chubb and Moe's (2011) book *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* "concluded that schools controlled by competition in a free market have less bureaucracy and consequently, promote student achievement" (as cited in Spring, 2014a, p. 433). The argument might make sense through a lens of capitalism and the best rising to the top,

however, there have been mixed reviews regarding the privatization of schools and their overall performance. Even with public funding, private and charter schools had still routinely performed at the same level as their public school counterparts. Many educational activists had warned of the harmful impact such funding could have on public schools and especially historically marginalized groups. In 2014, the League of Women Voters performed a yearlong study in Florida and "reported that the state's charter schools had a high teacher turnover rate, low salaries, high levels of racial segregation, and a high rate of closures. In addition, 50 percent of the state's F-rated schools in 2011 were charters, and some charters were operated by religious groups" (Ravitch, 2020, p. 334). However, school choice in the form of vouchers and charter schools have been an appealing alternative to activists and parents across the political spectrum for many reasons. As Spring (2014a) emphasized:

> Choice, privatization, and charter schools held out the promise to conservatives and the religious right of allowing the creation of schools that would reflect their traditional values. Of course, these same educational innovations allowed dominant cultures to send their children to schools reflecting their cultural backgrounds. In contrast, liberals could jump on the bandwagon of choice, privatization, and charter schools because of the possibility of having public schools serve the interests of children from low-income groups. (p. 434)

Government funding whether at the state or federal level has been an invaluable resource for any school or district and numerous activists have warned against any decrease in funds due to their negative impact on students, schools, and communities. If funds shift away from the public to private sector those students that rely the most on public schools could pay the price. Efforts to privatize schools and create options of student choice often took advantage of these

same communities as described by Rooks (2017) in her book *Cutting School: The Segrenomics of American Education*. Government funds could be diverted to private and charter schools, and any number of schooling alternatives that some activists perceived as a necessary solution to failing public schools. However, as Ravitch (2010) stressed, "Education is too important to relinquish to the vagaries of the market and the good intentions of amateurs" (p. 222).

Shared Concerns

In the article *Don't Be Evil: Should We Use Google in Schools?* (Krutka et al., 2021), the authors explored the case of Google's involvement in education by organizing a *technoethical* audit. Krutka et al. (2021) noted that Google was "the most visited website" and that they had created a new economic model of surveillance capitalism that benefited from utilizing behavioral data, and they asked us to consider: *Should we use Google in Schools?* and *Is Google ethical?* (pp. 421-422). Concerning Google's ethical design and use, the article cited that Google committed several student privacy violations, had a lack of transparency, manipulated, and sometimes ignored their Terms of Service (ToS) agreements with users. It was also important to note that regarding democracy and justice for all people and groups, "Google has a spotted record when it comes to the equitable treatment of marginalized groups" and both its search engine and YouTube platform prioritized more extreme content as it was deemed more engaging and hence more profitable (Krutka et al., 2021, p. 425). Educational activists of varying political ideologies have shared concerns regarding student data, privacy, and corporate interests. Parents had also taken notice and action as Ravitch (2020) described:

> Haimson and her ally Rachael Stickland of Colorado organized the successful fight to block inBloom, a massive data-collection effort funded with $100 million from the Bill &

Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. InBloom planned

to partner with nine states and school districts to collect personally identifiable student

data, including names, addresses, family relationships, race, behavior, "character

strengths (such as 'actively participates,' 'shows enthusiasm,' 'resists distractions')),"

economic status, test scores, grades, disability status, and disciplinary records. This

information was to be collected in a database system designed by technology company

Amplify (formerly Wireless Generation, a division of Rupert Murdoch's News

Corporation), stored on the cloud by Amazon, and made available to third-party vendors.

What could possibly go wrong? The backers of inBloom said that this massive collection

of personally identifiable student data would enable the development and marketing of

effective online learning tools. Haimson, Stickland, and other concerned parents,

however, saw inBloom as a dangerous threat to student privacy, for the benefit of

commercial interests. (pp. 248-249)

Data and privacy have been a concern across the political spectrum when exposing harmful

educational agendas. Using students and schools for their data may be justifiable to tech

companies to better serve students and improve quality, but what if money is made from their

misuse of data? Would this equate to a form of virtual human capital? The educational activists

that have been trying to warn us of such data collection believe this has indeed been a problem

worth conveying to the public.

The Activist Curriculum

To examine the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and

outcomes of PICT activists, it was important to consider their *activist curriculum*. For the

purposes of this study an activist curriculum, like my research questions, was reflective of the

instructional arc focusing on the intended, operational, and received curricula (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 52). The PICT activists chosen to participate in this study had developed a number of written works that could fill books, had created online content, and engaged with the public both in person and via social media. They had developed a curriculum of advocacy that they chose to share with society. Their words of warning were focused on exposing and/or debunking some form of a PICT. "The word *curriculum* is Latin for a *race-course*, or the *race* itself—a place of deeds, or a series of deeds" (Flinders & Thornton, 2017, p. 13). When considering conspiracies connected to public education, the race-course can be observed in the information the PICT activist decides to share, and the race how they communicate and amplify their message. The curriculum content was built from their intentions and motivations, and then delivered in a unique manner employing a number of processes and strategies. Simply stated, "curriculum encompasses a body of content knowledge to be learned in some way, shape, or form" (Flinders & Thornton, 2017, p. 295). However, there is additional nuance to be explored when analyzing curriculum, and as Eisner (2017) reflected, curriculum choices can also communicate to students what an instructor finds of value.

To help with this nuance and variation, I believed it was appropriate to adopt a broad definition of curriculum. To create this wider scope and complement my Ed Crit approach, I tried to look at "it all by stressing the very general terms "experience" and "situation." The general idea is that curriculum is something experienced in situations. People have experiences. Situations are made up of people and their surrounding environment" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 6). I believed this approach to analyzing an activist's curriculum would allow for the discovery of unexpected findings and the connection of emergent themes.

Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship

With an approach of Ed Crit I utilized my expertise in education to critically examine the intentions, actions, and implications of activists that worked to expose and/or debunk a PICT. Ed Crit allowed for an in-depth exploration into the individual activist, the many nuances of their messaging and motivations, and ultimately assessing the significance of what value this understanding brings to the field of education. Ed Crit outlines the aspects of DIET (Description, Interpretation, Evaluation, Thematics) prompting rich descriptions open to multiple interpretations, and a thorough evaluation lending itself to new and interesting insights. With an intent to get a "behind-the-scenes perspective" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 5), Ed Crit was ideal when investigating educational activists that wanted to expose and/or debunk a PICT. In addition, my research questions were reflective of the instructional arc, which examines the intended, operational, and received curriculum (Uhrmacher et al., 2017) of an activist as they navigate the advancement of their messaging and intended outcomes.

The participants I studied had created a curriculum that they shared with the public. The PICT activist has researched heavily and developed a form of messaging that aids in their ability to expose and/or debunk a conspiracy involving public schools. In addition, it is important to note that the Ed Crit approach has been utilized by other researchers outside of a classroom or school-based setting. One such example is Nordin and Wahlström's (2019) analysis of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and European Union (EU) policy documents concerning teacher quality. The authors maintained that Ed Crit was an ideal approach for such research and could "contribute to policy research by demonstrating the importance of a multidimensional understanding of teacher quality to capture the complex nature of education" (Nordin & Wahlström, 2019, p. 451).

With my study's focus on the experiences and perspectives of PICT activists, and the experiences they hoped to create in order to promote their activism and change perspectives, an approach such as Ed Crit that is reflective of Deweyan and Eisnerian philosophy, pragmatism, and constructivism was appropriate. Constructivism, with an emphasis on social constructivism provided a conceptual framework for my study. As outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), social constructivism recognizes that "Multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others" (p. 35). In addition, Vygotsky's second wave constructivism maintains "A focus on the social and cultural sources of knowing" (Woolfolk, 2011, p. 377). Social experiences influence our perception. That does not mean that our perception cannot drastically change. Assimilation is the process of taking in new experiences and information that agree with your current perception, however, accommodation occurs when new or contradictory information and experiences are processed, and your perception shifts and a transformative experience can occur. Embedded in Deweyan and constructivist philosophy, "Transformative experiences occur when we learn something that enables us to see some aspect of the world in a new way, such that we find new meaning in it and value the experience," and that "transformative experiences are the ultimate manifestations of intrinsically motivated application of ideas" (Brophy, 2010, pp. 226-227).

Conclusion

Educational researchers have not conducted studies like mine, so in order to organize research into PICT activists it was important to initially define what a PICT is and some defining factors of those activists that have attempted to expose and/or debunk them. These definitions were rooted in relevant literature, but were my own attempt to define the phenomenon of PICTs and the activism that surrounds a PICT. My definitions were very specific and worked to define a

PICT as a form of classical conspiracism tied to public education, and hence those activists defined as PICT activists were educational activists that exposed and/or debunked a PICT as I had it defined. In addition, it was important to look at how social media has been utilized by educational activists, as this use was one of the defining attributes of a PICT activist for my study, and relevant to modern educational activism. Educational agendas and public perception as they connect to PICTs were also explored in historical and recent context as they relate to the potential implications of PICT activism. It was also important to further define my research approach of Ed Crit to help support my rationale for its use when investigating PICT activists, the activist curriculum they constructed to promote their message, and their processes and intended outcomes. In Chapter Three I discuss the methods I utilized to address my research questions, how data were collected and analyzed, the relevance and importance of my study, and how I considered participant selection, trustworthiness, and additional rationale for an Ed Crit approach.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of my research was to explore the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of educational activists that work to expose and/or debunk a public instruction conspiracy theory (PICT). My purpose was derived from a primary focus to investigate the individual activist, however, due to the popularity of conspiracy theories, political rhetoric fueling a culture war aimed at public schools, educational policy shifts, and funding diverted to public schooling alternatives, there was much connected and influenced by PICTs. Because there was value in exploring individual experiences and perspectives, I have rooted the purpose of my study in the individual versus that of any one activist group or movement. The participants did have their particular affiliations, however, as discussed in Chapter Four these connections were also reflective of individual processes and strategies, motivations and intentions.

In this chapter I provide a summary of the qualitative approach of educational criticism and connoisseurship (Ed Crit) and my rationale for adopting this research lens and process. An overview of the research design is provided along with a description of the participants and how they were recruited for the study. Described in detail, data collection methods consisting of interviews, online observations, and the gathering of published works and audiovisual artifacts provided an in-depth investigation of participants. The data analysis procedures are outlined as to the various forms of in vivo, descriptive and values coding (Saldaña, 2021), as well as my

process of annotating, memoing, and diagramming. The parameters of trustworthiness, validity, and limitations are also discussed, and Table One provides a quick reference connecting research questions, participants, and the corresponding data collection methods followed by a summary of the methods chapter.

Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship

Developed by Elliot Eisner (2002), Ed Crit was a well suited approach to investigating the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes regarding PICT activists working to expose and/or debunk conspiracies as they relate to public education. As Eisner (1976) stated, "educational criticism represents an effort to understand the meaning and significance that various forms of action have for those in a social setting" (p. 145). By investigating the intentions and processes of these unique activists I was able to more effectively evaluate the "meaning and significance" they perceived in their activism and its potential societal implications. Additionally, employing an Ed Crit lens provided insight into the various patterns and connections that emerged between activists of differing ideologies, how these activists communicate their messaging, the rationales they provide, and the outcomes of their activism. Common motivating factors among participants included wanting to protect students, the integrity of public education, democracy, and influencing the general public to become more aware of these concerns. In addition, their processes and strategies incorporated the use of social media platforms, in person activism at formal school board and legislative proceedings, and a considerable amount of online content, research, and written work to promote their activism.

With similar methods to a qualitative collective case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), Ed Crit allowed me a "behind-the-scenes" look at PICT activists (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 5).

Political and ideological agendas centered on education certainly have had their intended outcomes that motivated many educational activists (Spring, 2014a), however, generalizing in such a way limits the discussion and potential for multiple nuances to materialize when examining the individual activist versus a group or educational movement. Instead, with an Ed Crit perspective, framework, and methods I was able to discover what could be gained by investigating those individual activists that in some form attempted to warn and/or educate the public of a PICT. As Uhrmacher et al. (2017) stated:

> The educational critic does not let description alone tell the story. The critic uses ideas, models, and theories from the arts, humanities, or social sciences to provide the reader with means for understanding what has been described. Moreover, there is no one "true" interpretation. Rather, each interpretation uses different kinds of evidence to secure a valid reason why conditions may be significant. (p. 3)

This statement helps illuminate the idea that with Ed Crit it was not only possible for multiple data points and ideas to be accessed for added context, but also that with rich in-depth description the possibility for a variety of interpretations can be left open. Educational and social theory, the arts, digital content and platforms, and historical context all assisted in producing a well developed picture of those activists who worked with educational conspiracies in some form. By conducting interviews, observing participants, and analyzing their published literature and artifacts, the methods of Ed Crit contributed added depth and opportunity for unexpected discovery.

Rationale for Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship

Ed Crit was the appropriate approach when investigating PICT activists and getting to better understand their intentions and motivations. Each of the participants in my study had put

together an activist curriculum that took a considerable amount of research and time, and the

production of written work and online content. Through the use of traditional publications (books

and articles), social media and other online platforms, participants were able to amplify and share

their message with the public. The outcomes of the participants' activism was evaluated through

their own perspectives, and contrasted with recent media articles and educational policy shifts

that also helped to evaluate the potential implications of their advocacy. This form of

investigation was reflective of both my research questions and the instructional arc tied to

Eisner's ecology of schooling (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 24-25) with a focus on intentions,

execution, and outcomes similar to an educator creating a lesson plan or curriculum.

Q1   What are the intentions and motivations of educational activists who work to expose and/or debunk a PICT?

Q2   What processes and strategies do such activists utilize for the promotion of their ideas and concerns regarding a PICT?

Q3   What are the implications and outcomes of PICT activism for public education, teachers and students, and our greater society?

With over 20 years of experience as an educator I have developed and contributed to

numerous lesson plans and curriculums, and understand the process of refinement and reflection

necessary when asking what do I want them to learn, how best can I help them learn it, and did

they learn what I wanted them to? Supporting my educational critique/connoisseurship

development in this regard, I have researched PICTs for the past four years during my doctoral

studies and my previous graduate degree was in educational psychology with a focus on

constructivism and transformative experiences. Additionally, I have worked at

constructivist-based schools and do so currently. This placed me in a position to effectively

critique a PICT activist and the curriculum they produced to inform the public for the benefit of

students and schools.

Ed Crit recognizes the value of a qualitative study with a small number of participants, attention to nuance, and an open-minded approach allowing for multiple interpretations. Past experiences inform perspective and how we see the world around us. Rooted in Eisnerian and Deweyan constructivist philosophy (Uhrmacher et al., 2017), Ed Crit values the individual experience when evaluating the instructional arc and the intent behind the experience being prompted. What type of experience was the curriculum attempting to create, what experience was actually created, and what did the experience create in the individuals involved? Was the new information simply assimilated into previous understanding, or were mental accommodations made prompting a transformative experience and the way a PICT was received and perceived? Afterall, at the root of each participant's activism was a desire to make others aware and effectively change perspectives in regards to a PICT. Although I could have conducted this study as an ethnography or multi-case study, I instead felt Ed Crit was the appropriate approach. My study's focus wasn't a deep investigation of a particular individual, group or shared experience, but instead an exploration of the work and perspectives of educational activists that expose and/or debunk PICTs. Although background, culture, and experiences were shared, they were not the main focus but rather how they merged together to inform a participant's activist curriculum. This more broad association when viewed through a lens of Ed Crit helped me to address each of my research questions, discern appropriately, and determine "what is of value" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 50).

As Eisner (1976) stated, "Educational connoisseurship and educational criticism represent two modes through which we come to understand and express what we come to know" (p. 149). With this in mind, it was important to maintain a researcher's perspective that was both critical when taking a deeper dive into a subject, but also open enough to "The ability to see, to

perceive what is subtle, complex, and important" (Eisner, 2002, p. 215). My study encompassed a national setting in regards to educational activism and those working to expose and/or debunk a PICT targeting public education. By utilizing an approach of Ed Crit, I was able to effectively explore the subtleties of the participants I identified as PICT activists. As reflected upon more in Chapter Five, increased understanding of these individual activists should prove valuable to educational stakeholders who find it beneficial to recognize the intentions and actions of activists that explicitly want to warn the public of what they perceive as an imminent threat to education. Ed Crit was an authentic and useful way to better understand and explore not only PICT activists but also the larger topic of PICTs and their influence on public perception.

Research Design

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A), data collection began in early May 2023 lasting for three months into early August 2023. Participants were identified via the social media platform Twitter/X and then contacted via email (Appendix B), and if interest was shown a followup email with Consent Form (Appendix C) was then sent. Interestingly, several potential participants did end up opting out after receiving the Consent Form after initially showing positive interest in participating. After consent was obtained an initial interview was scheduled with the intent to cover the intentions and motivations questions (Appendix D) and establish a way to observe the participant's activism in action. The second interview covered the processes and strategies each activist utilized with their activism, and how they perceived the outcomes and implications of their activism. In the case of the participants Natalie and Clifford (pseudonyms) I had to conduct a third interview. Both of these participants had a lengthy background in education and were able to speak to multiple topics related to PICTs, and were thankfully available and willing to give an extra interview.

After interviews were conducted observations were set up with the participants Logan (pseudonym) and Clifford. Logan previewed his podcast for me which has since been published online. The observation was via Zoom and lasted 40 minutes, and was later transcribed and analyzed. Clifford gave an abbreviated slideshow presentation via Zoom that he usually presented in public. Transcripts were also made for analysis and notes were taken during both observations. To observe the interactions of the participants Natalie and Felicia (pseudonym) I took screenshots of Twitter/X posts, *replies*, and likes relevant to PICTs. During the three month data collection span I took approximately 100 screenshots of Twitter/X engagements for each of the participants for observation analysis. Only Twitter/X engagements between early May and early August 2023 related to PICT content were considered for the study.

Online content and other publications were also analyzed. Logan and Clifford's publications were purchased and reviewed, and the online blogs, articles, and other relevant writings of all the participants were also analyzed. Additionally, all participants had either YouTube videos, podcasts, and/or other online content collected for data analysis.

In late July towards the conclusion of data collection, all of the participants were sent a follow up email (Appendix E) to help clarify how they regard the term PICT and how it informs their activism. Participants were given two weeks to respond via email. Fortunately, all participants responded with three sending email responses except for Natalie who instead asked to talk through her response via Zoom which was also transcribed for analysis (15 minutes). After receiving their responses, participants were sent all of their interview and observation transcripts for their review and given an additional two weeks to send me any necessary edits (Appendix F).

Participants

For the purposes of my study I recruited four participants as I agreed that "a large population is not necessarily required in order to discern significant qualities of the situation," (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 28). All participants were educational activists I identified as working to expose and/or debunk a conspiracy directed at the United States public education system. A public instruction conspiracy theory (PICT) was what these activists sought to investigate and disclose for the benefit of our society. To specify even further, the four participants I recruited had gathered research and outlined historical connections categorizing the PICT they hoped to expose and/or debunk as a form of classic conspiracism (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019), which they shared with the public via social media and other online platforms. Through their activism, it was their intent to inform the general public of a PICT they perceived as detrimental to American public schools.

To select participants for my study, I contacted educational activists I identified by both their online rhetoric and agency focused on a particular PICT. Participants all had an active presence on social media platforms such as Twitter/X and YouTube and/or other online formats such as blogs, websites, and podcasts which I utilized for contact information, and to aid in *snowball sampling* (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to round out the selection of participants (ex. who they were *following*, *replying* to, and comments they would like). In fact, all participants were found in some variation of social media snowball sampling as both Logan and Natalie commented on the posts of other potential participants, and Clifford recommended Felicia. During the interview process I asked participants about other PICT activists either similar in nature with their concerns and activism, and/or those activists they may be aware of but instead had chosen to highlight a different PICT with their work. Although I had originally planned on

three participants for the study, Clifford suggested Felicia. Although similar in ideology and

activism as Clifford, I felt her participation could offer a different nuanced perspective and that it

would be beneficial to evaluate where the differences resided between the two activists.

Convenience sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was applied as participants were found via

convenience of the popular social media sites Twitter/X and YouTube which have recently

appeared in other research involving educational activists and their employment of social media

to connect and amplify their message (Hogan, 2018; Supovitz et al., 2018). Participants were

identified by their social media usage which consisted of postings, likes, *retweets*, and a variety

of publicly available social media engagements such as following, subscribing, and other

interactions. This then snowballed into other online platforms such as blogs and websites that

directly connect to the rhetoric, activists, and activist communities exposing/debunking a

particular PICT (DeCook, 2018; King, 2015, 2018). Convenience sampling also factored into my

ability to observe participants in person, and instead I had to rely on digital platforms such as

Zoom presentations, previously recorded podcasts, YouTube videos, observations of social media

engagements, and online endorsements of similar PICT activism. Since I wanted to recruit

participants with varying perspectives, I had to find participants who had the ability to interview

via Zoom and could provide a format for digital observation. This was established during both

email interactions before the first interview and finalized at the end of the first or second

interview. For Logan, because he was on a number of podcasts and wanted to start his own, we

felt it would be a good observation to run through his initial podcast via Zoom. A similar

situation worked for Clifford who gave in person presentations and provided me with an

abbreviated presentation via Zoom. Because both Natalie and Felicia were quite prolific at the

time with their Twitter/X accounts I determined it was best to observe their online engagements

via Twitter/X. All participants were active in their communities with their activism, but due to their locations across the United States it would have been very difficult to travel due to expenses and duration of travel.

The participants who were recruited for this study utilized language and information that involved a conspiracy reflective of how a conspiracy was defined as a hidden agenda, involving dark money, and of nefarious intent (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019; Wood & Gray, 2019). In addition, participants were educational activists that had produced books and articles (publications), presentations, podcasts, and other online literature to introduce and share their message of warning with the public. Participant presentations and other content was posted to online media platforms and/or also presented in person at conferences, schools, and other media outlets in order to promote their activism. This attribute helped to narrow the pool of participants by focusing on those activists that had essentially put together a curriculum to inform the public of their concerns regarding public schools. Their curriculum delivery took the form of YouTube videos, Twitter/X threads and retweets, podcasts, blogs, books, and articles. Participants varied in how they identified as a conspiracy theorist, conspiracy exposer, and/or conspiracy debunker. This question of the participant's identity in relation to PICT terminology was explored in a final follow up question sent via email (Appendix E). However, regardless of how they identified, which is covered in Chapter Four, I had identified their activism as PICT related (as a PICT was defined). Additionally, it was important to note the nuance between activists' beliefs that the conspiracy in question was either anti or pro-establishment identifying forces working within, outside, or some combination thereof regarding government institutions (Wood & Gray, 2019). To specify a bit more, the PICT activists selected as participants wished to expose and/or debunk a form of classic conspiracism which typically involved intricate historical threads, wealthy

elites and politicians, and tactics regarded as nefarious and hidden from the public (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019). This trait narrowed the participant pool by focusing on those activists that had invested in a conspiracy that was well defined versus that of an educational activist promoting new conspiracism which "dispenses with the burden of explanation. There is no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots taken as signs that reveal a pattern" (Muirhead et al., 2020, p. 143). Instead, participants had essentially created a curriculum to teach others and share with the masses via social media platforms and speaking events. Their presentations had been well developed and refined in an effort to effectively promote their message. This demonstrated increased investment and effort on the part of the activist, which was rooted in their intentions and motivations towards generating greater support and awareness regarding a PICT. Participants who hoped to expose a PICT measured their success by their reach and following, influence on public opinion and policy, and their ability to effectively and efficiently expose/debunk a PICT to their intended audience.

The social media sites mentioned were used to find relevant contact information and participants were contacted via email to assess their interest in the study (Appendix B). None of the participants included in the study were from a vulnerable population. Positive responses were followed by scheduling logistics, a consent form (Appendix C), and any additional information or documentation necessary. This study was Exempt status as the subjects participating were adults who consented, were at no risk of harm, and the participants' identities were kept confidential with the use of pseudonyms. In addition, all analyzed documentation and artifacts, both private and public, was only utilized in a way that maintains complete confidentiality.

Data Collection

As Uhrmacher et al. (2017) emphasized, it was important "to consider the interaction between your observations, interviews, and artifact collection, as each informs and is informed by the others. Not only does such comparison enhance trustworthiness of the study, it guides your discernment of the qualities, priorities, values, and practices you are noticing" (p. 29).

Interviews

I interviewed all participants at least twice between early May and early August 2023. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to address each of my research questions by dividing my interview questions into categories of Intentions and Motivations, Processes and Strategies, and Implications and Outcomes (Appendix D). The initial interview focused on intentions and motivations with the addition of introductory and background questions. If time allowed, questions regarding processes and strategies were also included. The second interview more explicitly addressed questions of processes and strategies, and the participant's perspective regarding the outcomes and implications of their educational activism. Second and third interviews were intentionally responsive and included questions reflective of the previous interview, other participant interviews, and the analysis of transcripts and online content. Each interview was recorded via Zoom with the appropriate consent of the participant and lasted roughly 40 minutes. The participant's time was honored and the participant could decide to end the interview at any time if necessary without explanation. I took notes during the interview and the audio recordings were transcribed afterwards using Otter.ai transcribing software.

Online Observations

The observations, also conducted between early May to early August 2023, varied in form based on what the participant and I thought was their most utilized and accessible form of

activism for online observation. Logan and I agreed that it would make sense for me to observe him run through his initial podcast preparation (40 minutes). As part of his activism he was starting a podcast and believed this was a positive way to amplify his message. In addition, at the time of the study he had already participated in a number of online podcasts, of which I transcribed three (approximately 120 minutes) and then coded for analysis. Similar to Logan, Clifford agreed that an online observation of his abbreviated slideshow presentation would be appropriate. Clifford had already shared a number of his slides during previous interviews, which had resulted in the need for a third interview as his interviews were rich with description and the additional visuals. The observation of Clifford's abbreviated presentation (40 minutes) was contrasted with several minutes of his testimonies contesting educational policies in front of a government body, a YouTube video version of his presentation (60 minutes) , and a podcast (30 minutes) all of which were transcribed for analysis.

Natalie and Felicia, although both having podcast experience and additional online content, were good candidates for social media engagement observations due to their volume of Twitter/X interactions and unique style of engagement with their online community. Both participants had approximately 100 Twitter/X posts collected and analyzed with a focus on observing their processes and strategies of engagement and promotion of their message. In these instances, conversations between the participant, their online audience, and all related content was subject to collection for further analysis. Similar to the observations conducted by Schroeder et al. (2020) who observed the Opt Out movement's Facebook interactions, I focused on their Twitter/X interactions associated with PICTs during the three month data collection period. In addition, Natalie had a third interview as her explanations were often full of detail, and Felicia also had a podcast (30 minutes) transcribed for contrasting analysis.

Publications

A thorough exploration of the activists' online and traditionally published materials, comparable to Ramos' (2022) study was conducted to examine the processes and rationales behind the participants' activism. By analyzing participant websites and blogs, social media posts and comments, their books and articles, and any other relevant documentation, a well-developed picture of the activist began to take form. In addition, when assessing the outcomes and implications of their advocacy, it was important to consider documents they cited related to educational policy (ex. NCLB, *A Nation at Risk*), current news articles, and the engagement from their online audience in the form of retweets, replies and likes. For the purposes of organization and efficiency, publications were simply defined as any information available for analysis in written form. With my process of keeping notes, diagraming, annotating, and memoing, these documents were important to maintain for cyclical analysis as themes and connections effectively emerged.

Audiovisual Materials

As previously mentioned, videos posted by the participants were also transcribed and analyzed. Those videos classified as audiovisual materials were some form of video recording publicly accessible either produced by the participant or possibly another source (ex. online forum, interview). The bulk of the audiovisual materials analyzed were in the form of Twitter/X tweets, YouTube videos, memes, and online comments. Special attention was given to visuals such as memes and political cartoons utilized for messaging amplification and engagement.

Data Analysis

Coding

As Uhrmacher et al. (2017) stated, "Naming and categorizing types of data and ideas as they are collected gives the researcher a way to see the priorities and emergent patterns. Codes may be adapted and subdivided as more data are collected" (p. 56). I appreciated this approach and analyzed my data through a variety of techniques that complemented each other well. For example, I utilized a combination of in vivo coding which was "rooted in the participant's own language", and descriptive coding and values coding that helped to create categories related to societal issues and personal perspectives (Saldaña, 2021, p. 11). These three types of coding were effective with my research as they got to the heart of an individual's motivations and intended outcomes, while also focusing on rich description in line with Ed Crit, and the use of a participant's own words. PICTs and how individual activists relate to them was difficult to define as ideologies and perspectives often run contrary to each other. I may have identified a participant as a PICT activist because of my analysis of their online content and rhetoric, however, because of our current societal context *conspiracy* can be a loaded term that many want to distance themselves from, or a term that meets approval as defined by someone who debunks PICTs. I also utilized in vivo coding and direct quotes to help inform and characterize participant pseudonyms and several subtitles for Chapter Four. As Saldaña (2021) stated, "coding is a heuristic—a method of discovery that hopefully stimulates your *thinking* about the data you have been given and have collected" (p. 23). The reviewing of transcripts and other content occurred with multiple stages of coding as outlined by Lofland and Lofland (1995) beginning with my initial coding, followed by more focused coding and then spiraling back again multiple times until I felt that I had sufficiently categorized each code into emergent themes. I also made sure to

pre-code and include jottings that informed future cycles with the use of color-coded highlights and margin notes all over the data (Saldaña, 2021, pp. 30-31). From there on more organization and categorization refinement happened as the analysis process progressed.

Annotating, Memoing, and Diagramming

In contrast to the structured order of coding, annotation offered an open approach and adaptability when analyzing data. Rather than utilizing annotation instead of coding I used them in cooperation. This cohesion enhanced my ability to draw out patterns and connections with the addition of my own reflections and questions within the margins of transcripts and other materials collected for analysis. After cycles of coding and numerous annotations that focused on the "complete picture," my annotations were then "refined and moved toward anticipatory frameworks and themes, just as is done through the coding process" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 57). I also coded my annotations and the notes I took while conducting analysis. Well organized memoing and the use of dialogic memo writing (Stewart, 2011, p. 291) worked well in conjunction with in vivo coding. In addition, I incorporated diagramming (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 197) into my analysis repertoire. Diagramming was a natural tendency for me and prior to this research I had already created a number of diagrams to help represent various aspects of my PICT research and thinking process. I also found aesthetic value with the diagramming I had done by finding a unique way to demonstrate connections that also had a visual appeal while conveying the information.

Table 1

Participants and Data Collection Methods

Participants	Data Collection Methods
Logan	- Individual Interviews (2, 80 minutes) - Observation (podcast prep, 40 minutes) - Artifacts: online content (website, blog, Twitter/X account), podcasts (3, 120 minutes), multiple publications
Natalie	- Individual Interviews (3, 120 minutes) - Observation (approximately 100 Twitter/X engagements) - Artifacts: online content (website, blog, Twitter/X account), podcast (1, 20 minutes)
Clifford	- Individual Interviews (3, 120 minutes) - Observation (abbreviated presentation, 40 minutes) - Artifacts: YouTube video presentation (60 minutes), podcast (1, 30 minutes), multiple publications
Felicia	- Individual Interviews (2, 80 minutes) - Observation (approximately 100 Twitter/X engagements) - Artifacts: YouTube videos, podcasts (4, 150 minutes)

Trustworthiness

As Glesne (2016) stated, "Trustworthiness is about alertness to the quality and rigor of a study, about what sorts of criteria can be used to assess how well the research was carried out" (p. 53). To help ensure trustworthiness I utilized triangulation by accessing multiple points of data (interviews, observations, published documents and audiovisual materials). With multiple data points for triangulation, transparency, depth of description, and good organization my study had the necessary ingredients for validation. As Eisner (2017) noted, "For a study to be structurally corroborated, one needs to put together a constellation of bits and pieces of evidence that substantiate the conclusions one wants to draw" (p. 55).

Validity

Concerning validity, Eisner (2017) stated "We must consider the evidentiary bases of our judgments; whatever they are, they will always be fallible. It is reasonable to expect that we have good grounds for the judgments we make, but not that our judgments are certain" (p. 109). It really comes down to the evidence you are presenting to validate your conclusions. I approached my study with an open mind and knowing that although I may have biases regarding certain topics, I could set those aside in an effort to find out what may emerge. Evidence in no way should be chosen as it relates to some predetermined conclusion a researcher has already formed. Instead the evidence should help to inform the conclusion, and it was important to be highly critical of all evidence as credible and not some form of compromised evidence possibly taken out of context and/or some other form of injecting bias into the investigation. "Validity is a judgment you make *after considering evidence from all relevant areas*. Until you have collected, reviewed, weighed, and combined all relevant evidence, your evaluation of the validity of the results is incomplete" (Nitko & Brookhart, 2011, p. 35).

Limitations

There were many nuances to the various PICTs targeting public schools, how students and schools were impacted, historical background and significance, the perception of teachers and public education, and much more. This study focused on those educational activists that have worked to expose and/or debunk conspiracies related to our public schools. This study explored the individual motivations and intentions of the activist, not the groups or ideologies they were necessarily associated with. I do not doubt that connections and parallels could be drawn between the individual participants, activist groups and our greater society, however, to form conclusions applicable on a large scale based on my study would not be proper. However, I hope my study will spark the interests of others that want to investigate some facet of PICTs further. My study was also limited due to the small size, lack of diversity in the participant pool, and short timeline.

Summary

In my methods chapter I expanded upon Ed Crit and why I think it was a positive approach as I researched educational activists that exposed and/or debunked PICTs. After revisiting my research questions and providing a breakdown of the research design, I provided an outline of how I recruited participants and what I qualified as defining characteristics of a PICT activist (ex. Twitter/X profile, online content, extensive research). Ethical considerations regarding participants were also addressed. Data collection and analysis were described in detail to help provide a picture of the process I developed to effectively answer my research questions, and take an in-depth Ed Crit approach when critiquing the instructional arc and curriculum of a PICT activist. Trustworthiness, validity, and limitations were also reviewed and Table One provided a direct reference regarding participants and the corresponding data collection methods.

In Chapter Four, I provide a rich description of the participants combined with various interpretations based on the synthesized data.

CHAPTER IV

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to explore the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of educational activists that work to expose and/or debunk a public instruction conspiracy theory (PICT). The study was designed with an educational criticism and connoisseurship (Ed Crit) approach to take a deep dive into the work of educational activism with a desire to focus on those individuals that revolved around the world of PICTs. "Critics seek to describe what surprises them as well as what they anticipate. Moreover, it is rare for description, if done well, to fully support any single interpretation. Ideally, the critic is able to provide a rich or "thick" enough description for the reader to reasonably disagree with the critic's interpretations" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 39). When considering the topic of PICTs and what the terminology may imply about an individual and their activism, the approach of Ed Crit was extremely useful. A plethora of nuances surrounded how participants identified and how they defined a PICT. I believed these ideas had to remain open to interpretation, and throughout the chapter I have utilized the participant's own words and summarized their activism accordingly in order to address my research questions. In addition, by utilizing an Ed Crit lens I based my interpretations on "relevance and conceptual power" to help organize my analysis (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 45). Each research question was explored through the intermingling of participant perspectives, relevant current and historical trends in education, and a constructivist view when examining attitudes and experiences prompted through

activism involving PICTs. With an Ed Crit approach I focused my attention on discerning what was meaningful, developing an appreciation for deeper understanding, and essentially determining what was of value in regards to my research topic (Uhrmacher et al., 2017).

In Chapter Four, I provide descriptions and interpretations based on data analysis of participant interviews, online observations, and each of the participant's relevant publications and audiovisual materials as outlined in Chapter Three. The primary source for each of the research questions were the participant's interviews where each was asked about their intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and the implications and outcomes of their activism. Online observations were utilized primarily to address the processes and strategies of each activist, and the participant's audiovisual and published materials were used as secondary sources of analysis.

Chapter One introduced the topic of PICTs and the activists that have worked to expose and/or debunk them. I had studied PICTs for roughly four years and was initially interested in not only the conspiracies surrounding public schools, but also those educational activists that in some form encountered PICTs within their activism. Chapter Two provided a literature review that helped to define a PICT, a PICT activist, their use of social media, and the various agendas and potential implications of PICTs. Chapter Three outlined the methods used to conduct my study with an Ed Crit approach, and the use of multiple data points to sufficiently answer my research questions reflective of an activist's curriculum and their instructional arc (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, pp. 24-25). By exploring the instructional arc of each PICT activist I believed we could gain insight into modern day educational activism and PICTs. "Working with the intentional, operational, and/or received curricula provides an arc for exploration without unnecessary restraints on what one might discover" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 27).

In Chapter Five, I provide a summary of the themes that emerged, my critical evaluations, suggestions for further research, and concluding thoughts. As an educational critic, it was important to consider "what is of value here, both for those involved and for the educational enterprise generally speaking?" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 50). I believe my research will help to define PICTs and those activists that work to expose and/or debunk them through their activism. I believe there is great value in my research for a number of educational stakeholders that find it important to better understand this topic. In addition, there is much more to explore surrounding the world of PICTs and their impact on American public schools.

Organization of Chapter

The majority of Chapter Four is organized by research questions reflective of the instructional arc (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). To begin, participants are introduced and relevant information is provided regarding their background, how they were recruited, and how their activism relates to a PICT. The motivations and intentions of each activist are then explored and outlined in detail to provide the starting point of the arc and their activist curriculum. Essentially asking: What are you warning us about and why? Next, the processes and strategies of the PICT activists are investigated through their online observations and interviews. Social media was looked at in particular due to the nature of its modern day use to engage with educational activism, and for its ease of access to publications and audiovisual content produced by participants. To conclude, the implications and outcomes of each participant's activism is presented in regards to their impact and influence, successes, and failures. A summary is provided at the end of the chapter and a brief overview of what to expect in Chapter Five is discussed.

Meet the Public Instruction Conspiracy
Theory Activists

Although I refer to participants as PICT activists, not all participants identified as PICT activists, and if they did, there were usually several caveats that needed consideration in order to agree to the terminology. This is discussed in more detail as each participant is introduced throughout the chapter. The participant pool for my study was small, yet appropriate for Ed Crit with a total of four participants. The two male and two female participants were all heterosexual, white, middle to upper middle class socioeconomic level, married, and between the ages of 35 and 75. Three out of the four participants identified as more politically conservative, leaving the remaining participant identifying as more progressive. Although the participant pool lacked social and cultural diversity, it was my hope to find diversity regarding their perspectives on public education and PICTs.

The Long Game - Logan

"Whatever the particular thing is I'm doing I definitely will put in a lot of effort and time." Cleancut and athletic, Logan had a tremendous amount of self discipline and determination. He had a deep commitment to anything he would do, and friends described him as having "endless energy". As Logan commented, "Whatever it is that I'm getting into I usually go pretty hard." Although he did not have a background in education, he did have a college degree and considered himself "self educated" in regards to how he acquired the relevant knowledge related to his educational activism. Curious to know how I had come across his work, I mentioned how he had replied to several other individuals I had been following on Twitter/X for research purposes. This came to my attention, and after doing more investigation I found his website, blog, and other online content and extensive publications. Similar to his Twitter/X

postings, his other online content and publications were what I considered the PICT of Marxist indoctrination in our public schools. Logan's activism and literature was similar in content to the work of James Lindsay. Lindsay, author of *Race Marxism: The Truth About Critical Race Theory and Praxis* (2022), and a leader in the anti critical race theory (CRT) movement, perceived a form of Marxist indoctrination taking place in the form of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and antiracist education. Regarding Lindsay, Logan stated, "I think he's been a maverick in the same kind of stuff I'm dealing with. Our biggest difference is that I'm a Christian and so I deal a lot more with Nietzsche."

Logan did not view the Marxist indoctrination he opposed as conspiratorial, but instead as morally misguided. As someone who considered himself "logically oriented" and wanting to know the objective truth, he viewed his opposition as "trying to achieve a good" but "that they are wrong about what good is" when considering progressive pedagogists. He did not believe sinister ends were the goal but that "the fault that seems to be inherent in all this, is this actual utopian belief that you can transform, to use Frierien terminology, transform society into this kind of perfected world, and that is the error."

In addition to Friere, Marx, and Nietzsche, Logan researched and read the works of many other educational theorists and philosophers targeting those primary sources with the belief that "you get a lot more out when you go to the older texts and study them in a more intricate manner." In addition to warning the public about a Marxist agenda infiltrating public schools, Logan was also concerned with LGBTQIA+ education, sex education, and social emotional learning (SEL). As he stated, "the scariest thing is this SEL, social emotional learning, and its orientation of directing us towards this globalized world." During our conversations, Logan mentioned how the standards for sex education were developed by UNESCO to help achieve

their "17 sustainable development goals" (SDGs), and although this was more sinister with ties to

theosophy and the occult, it was still *not* what he would have considered conspiratorial but

instead an open agenda publicly stating intended outcomes. However, it was often implied by

Logan that the general public was unaware of what was happening, and that his work would help

to better inform. When asked about the terminology of PICTs and how he identifies with his

activism, Logan stated that he did not "see anything conspiratorial" and would only accept

calling himself a PICT activist if conspiracy was defined by *Merriam-Webster's* second

definition as he shared, "to act in harmony toward a common end." Logan stated that, "the

secrecy part is my big hold-up with regard to the word conspiracy and the term conspiracy theory

as they are commonly used today." Logan perceived his activism as part of a "slow process" and

that he was "playing the long game" to help inform the public regarding the negative impact of

Marxism, socialism, LGBTQIA+ education, sex education, and SEL in our public schools.

Logan was very generous with his time, and in addition to letting me observe him prepare and

run through his first podcast, he also emailed me several links to a number of online shows and

podcasts he had recently appeared on.

Nothing to Lose - Natalie

"I think the whole gender ideology is a conspiracy from right wing people who are saying

teachers are teaching gender ideology, and no, I don't think that's the case at all." Natalie was

very generous with her time as well and spent an extra 40 minutes with me to help cover all of

my interview questions. Natalie had a degree in education, and many of her interview answers

were substantial and often led to other connections, book suggestions, and sharing her overall

educational philosophy. Like Logan, Natalie was interested in how I found her so I discussed

how I had been following the work of Moms for Liberty (M4L) on Twitter/X and noticed some

of her posts pushing back on the group's narrative of indoctrination. This then led me to her online content where she mentioned several other topics related to PICTs such as the factory model of education. Natalie considered herself a "podcast junky" and appreciated the work of educational historians Jennifer Berkshire and Jack Schneider. In their book *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door: The Dismantling of Public Education and the Future of School*, Schneider and Berkshire (2020) provided historical context regarding education for profit and school privatization meant to dismantle American public schools. She was agnostic, progressive, and politically active. She was highly active on Twitter/X, which I focused on for her observation, but also very active in person at meetings that not only promoted her message but also attended those where she confronted opposing activists.

Natalie considered herself as someone who had "nothing to lose" and as she stated, was "very well positioned for a bunch of different reasons, and I think it would be irresponsible of me not to push back more." Although she did not initially see herself as someone who pushed back and debunked PICTs, after talking briefly with me it became more obvious to her that she indeed did know a lot about PICTs, and had come across them in various forms throughout her research. She was able to recommend activists and books that she thought were conspiratorial in nature and tied to public education. She was also familiar with the work of John Taylor Gatto stating "I do not like that man one shred," and felt it necessary to push back against the factory model narrative promoted in his book *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (2002). She also designated other educational authors she had read and researched as "the children of Gatto," who shared such beliefs about the failures of public schools and offered up alternatives such as school choice and homeschooling. As part of her activism, Natalie advocated for the rights of transgender students and teachers, and was a "strong believer that

public education belongs to all of us." She believed in "walking the walk, talking the talk" and did not back down when it came to arguing against an opposing viewpoint. In order to be a healthy activist Natalie believed that "you can't just be fighting against, you have to be fighting for something."

Conspiracy Fact - Clifford

"This is an agenda to create a crisis in public education so that they will agree to anything in order to get out of the mandates of No Child Left Behind. The squeeze was so tight that everybody accepted what was given to them as a way out." When we started our initial interview, Clifford did not ask about how I had discovered him online, but instead was interested in my study and the research questions I would be addressing. I promptly shared them with him and the interview then began. His curiosity, I imagined, came from his own educational research. Clifford was well educated, older, and had worked in education for over 30 years. He described himself as "a person of faith" who tried to stay healthy by being active and staying in shape. Similar to Natalie, he had done extensive research in the area of education and had made education his career. I first came across Clifford when he retweeted a Twitter/X post related to UNESCO and SEL similar to some of the social media engagements of Logan. However, Clifford differed from Logan in that he valued public education, but had seen it vier off course due to a "dual party agenda" focused on "money and control they're not going to give up."

Clifford did not view himself as a conspiracy theorist but instead as a whistleblower and stated that, "What is happening in education, meaning the progression of events that have given the government absolute control over the standards and curriculum being taught to the students, is not a conspiracy theory. It is a conspiracy fact. Conspiracies do happen; they happen all the time." Clifford shared his own experiences of having to succumb to the pressures of No Child

Left Behind (NCLB) and that he "got totally immersed in the system and fell victim to 'this is what we have to do' not really understanding what the implications and consequences were." Clifford was opposed to the accountability movement that came from *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and NCLB, and believed that this had not only led to school privatization and school choice, but had also opened the door for a mandated "woke agenda" that allowed for inappropriate books in school libraries and classrooms, LGBTQIA+ education, sex education, and SEL. According to Clifford, the accountability movement ushered in high stakes testing and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) tied to federal funding. Schools started failing and were labeled as such which caused repercussions like school privatization and loss of funding. Schools were offered a way out if they accepted CCSS and certain high stakes testing measures which aided in the federal government taking control of the K-12 curriculum. Clifford stated that what had happened was a:

> Movement towards the globalist agenda for education. And that sounds like a conspiracy theory, but it's not. It's what every district is going through. It's why we're having these difficulties because parents can't wrap their brain around why a book that could be rated x is being taught, and why are books that could be rated x in the school library? And this is part of the woke agenda. It's also what is wanted from UNESCO filtering down to the US Department of Education, and then going all the way down to the local school district.

Clifford was extremely gracious with his time as he not only shared for an extra 40 minutes to complete all the interview questions, but I was also able to watch him give an abbreviated presentation similar to those he did in public and available on YouTube.

Facts and Evidence - Felicia

"When I report the findings of my research and 'follow the money' I get called a conspiracy theorist by those who have ties to the education ecosystem that feeds off the problem. They also have ties to the synthetic solutions. It's a means to discredit and ascribe a label so people will look the other way." Felicia came to my attention on Twitter/X around the same time as Clifford and for the same PICT connection, so I reached out to them both. Before I could confirm Felicia as a possible participant, Clifford had already recommended her during our first interview. This indicated that a lot of their activism was similar in nature, but from what I had gathered from my investigations online, Felicia had a different career background and how she chose to promote her message was also very different. I thought it would be important to explore the nuances that could be found between the two. Felicia, like Logan and Natalie, was also interested in how I came to find out about her activism. A conservative Christian, Felicia shared that she was a Trump voter that aligned "more with the old school principles, old school more traditional model, and by that I mean a classical model." Similar to Clifford she opposed high stakes testing, school privatization and tech billionaires like Bill Gates and Rupert Murdoch. She was politically active and showed up in person to share what she believed was a "unique perspective" as "public school proponents are generally on the left."

Felicia did not consider herself a conspiracy theorist at all which she more commonly associated with being a loner, isolated, and within one's own echochamber. None of these attributes described Felicia who was out in the world with her activism, and was set on her activist's path due to the way her child suffered under the "high stakes testing culture at his public school" which prompted her to go "down the rabbit hole trying to figure out where does all this testing come from?"

When Felicia was in action she always made sure that her facts and evidence were in place so she could take on opposing viewpoints, and prided herself on knowing her stuff when it came to connecting the dots and recognizing patterns within her research. As Felicia stated, "I have to have my facts airtight. I do go on intuition and hunches and I see patterns or maybe the same agenda popping up over and over again, so I do follow my instincts there, but I have to have the evidence to back it up, so I go and do a great amount of research." When asked about her thoughts regarding PICT terminology and how it relates to her activism, Felicia shared a quote from Gore Vidal implying, "I'm not a conspiracy theorist–I'm a conspiracy analyst."

Intentions and Motivations

To address my first research question, *What are the intentions and motivations of educational activists who work to expose and/or debunk a PICT?*, I relied primarily on participant interviews and utilized their publications, audiovisual materials, and online observations as a secondary source. The intentions of the activists were important to identify as they were essentially the desired outcomes of their activism, and what they intended to have happen based on their actions. These intentions were powered by motivating factors that influenced each activist into action to share and promote their message. Intentions and motivations helped to establish the *what* and *why* regarding the context of an activist's curriculum, what they were hoping to educate others about, and what it was motivating them to do so. In addition, intentions were not always "stated or obvious," and could even be "unknown, or not fully conscious, to the teachers" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 25). Applying this insight was helpful when analyzing data and providing relevant examples within this chapter.

Logan

        "I don't really think people are aware of this." Logan perceived himself as someone who could help people understand how progressive education has transformed public schools for the worse. The warning he felt compelled to share was one of Marxist indoctrination through a series of progressive education reforms covertly introduced into public schools through instruction and curriculum such as SEL, CRT, and sex education. Logan was motivated to help fix education for future generations. He did not like what he saw happening in public education, viewed it as morally atrocious, and felt it important to act. Logan was motivated to share his research of primary sources tied to educational theorists and philosophers because he felt the public was for the most part unaware of the historical roots and individuals responsible for modern public education. Logan wanted to "get to the point for the common people" who may have no interest and/or difficulty reading these particular primary sources and lengthy texts. "I thought there was such a need for it," Logan stated, "I wanted to essentially share what I had discovered."

        Logan's intentions were to get American education back on track and promote a classical education model "to point out what proper education looks like." This was in contrast to what he saw as our current progressive model pushing a Marxist ideology into public schools and was "more about the vocational style." Marxism aside, Logan had a point as "human capital economics now dominates discussions of school reform. The promise of human capital economics is that investment in schools will result in better workers who will ensure economic growth" (Spring, 2014a, p. 5). Not only had schools prioritized the educating of good workers, they had become a place to educate future consumers. In 1993, "The Scottsdale initiative officially recognized students as consumers to be trained for future consumption" and Home

Economics became "Family and Consumer Sciences" with an emphasis in preparing students to be both contributing producers and consumers (Spring, 2014a, p. 436).

Logan also contended that SEL was negatively guiding our society towards a more globalized world. Even though Logan did not perceive any secrecy, he maintained that progressive education was introducing SEL and essentially opening a gateway of indoctrination in the form of vocational schooling, CRT, and gender ideology. Logan researched the primary sources of progressive educators and stated that "I was reading this stuff and I thought, I don't really think people are aware of this, and I wanted to essentially share what I had discovered." Interestingly, I had come across several other PICT activists that similarly cited Dewey's *The Primary Education Fetich* (1898) as an origin point of progressive indoctrination. However, Dewey (1897) directly stated that "The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences" (para. 20).

Logan wanted "to be a part of that process of helping to get information in the hands of parents who can then make a change for their own kids, and then the idea being that it's a ripple effect." Logan was in it for the long game, and wanted to educate all those he could concerning what he perceived as morally beneficial for children, public schools, and the future of society. Logan's perspective was rooted in his Christian faith and conservative political view that valued a more traditional and nationalistic approach versus that of progressivism and multicultural education. Logan was part of a renaissance to replace what he perceived as the negative impact of LGBTQIA+ education, CRT, and SEL with a more classical model of education. As outlined by Spring (2014b):

The period from the 1980s to the present day has been marked by attempts to counter negative interpretations and emphasis in writing American history. Republicans wanted a celebratory history that promoted patriotic emotions in contrast to histories that focus on enslaved Africans, the genocide and deculturalization of Native Americans, the injustices of some wars (such as the Mexican, Spanish American , and Vietnam Wars), lynchings and segregation, oppression of cultural and linguistic minorities and violations of civil rights. (p. 103)

Natalie

Natalie was motivated to take action when action was needed, and believed that "If you can speak up, speak up. If you see something happening you can interrupt the flow." In addition to her educational activism, she was very active in other areas of political, social, and cultural activism at the local and national level. Natalie made it a point to use her voice and stand up for the rights of historically marginalized communities. Natalie stated, "I think trans teachers need to know that there are cis people in the world standing up for them. I think trans kids and parents deserve to know and see that there are people who are standing up for them." Natalie perceived a need to confront the narrative that indoctrination was happening in public schools in the form of LGBTQIA+ education and gender identity. Both online and in her local community Natalie pushed back on conservative individuals and groups by debunking their narrative that there was a conspiracy to corrupt America's youth through more progressive, multicultural education. Natalie instead advocated for a more accepting approach similar to Noddings (2005) in that "What children need to learn is how to sympathize and empathize with other people and to understand their own inclinations toward cruelty and violence" (p. 55).

Natalie was a big believer in public education and was intent that "It's public education, it's not private, it's not a purchasable good." In addition, Natalie wanted for groups such as M4L to come to an end as she viewed their attempts to control curriculum and books in schools as an abuse of power and an infringement on civil rights. As Natalie shared, "I think the biggest threat to public education remains, and has been for generations, white women with social capital to manipulate the system to privilege their own kids." Her long term goal for public education was to move it more towards a "progressive education, student-centered education, where kids aren't feeling as much pressure at school to get grades" and all feel welcome and accepted.

Natalie's motivation was reminiscent of Dewey's regarding the value of public schools to ensure democratic ideals. "Dewey poses the question, What kind of political arrangement will best draw out individual capacities for growth, while at the same time drawing individuals into the life of their society?" (Hansen, 2007, p. 27). Democracy as Dewey considered it was an invaluable tool to prompt engagement in society. Dewey believed that democracy was something to be taught and experienced throughout the school environment. "I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform" (Dewey, 1897). However, "Dewey harbored no illusions about how difficult it is to cultivate and sustain democratic life. Nonetheless, he pushed his idealistic vision to the limit and in so doing invited others to articulate their hopes as fully as possible" (Hansen, 2007, p. 29). Similar to Natalie, public schools to Dewey were considered instrumental in ensuring a more democratic and free society through a model of acceptance and experience-based education focused on positive outcomes for students.

As a progressive agnostic, Natalie was not motivated by religious faith but instead a desire to advocate for those in the educational community that were under attack by conservative policies outlawing books, LGBTQIA+ education, sex education, and SEL. She perceived this

threat as an attack on public schools that were intended for all and essential to maintaining our democracy. In addition, Natalie was motivated to push back against the narrative that the factory model was pervasive in modern American public schools. I believed she was correct that this narrative has often been pushed to extremes with images of children in rows losing their creativity, reciting facts, and then being fed onto a conveyor belt leading directly to menial factory work. However, this had not been my experience as an educator, and instead I tended to find more fault in the accountability movement and the types of conformity it had encouraged. As Porter (2012) stated, "Standardized measurement has been a key ally of industrialization and mass production and, with statistics, of the great cultural shift from wisdom to information. One preeminent virtue of a uniform world is that it can more readily be grasped thinly" (p. 219).

Clifford

Clifford stated that he was not motivated by money. His activism was based on his intent "to get the information out." Some of the more popular PICT activists such as James Lindsay (2022) and Christpher Rufo (2021), who claimed socialist Marxist indoctrination was happening in schools in the form of CRT and SEL, had increased their wealth through their books, speaking engagements, and online content. Although he could have profited from the literature he produced, he often sold it at cost or gave it away. Clifford was known for being highly knowledgeable in his community regarding educational topics, and supported parents, school administrators, and lawmakers by sharing his concerns regarding accountability and technology in the classroom. Clifford was motivated by his community and the families he was able to help. His career in education brought him close to students and parents, and although he was no longer in the profession his investment in public education continued. Similar to Nalalie and Felicia, Clifford found value in public schools and worked to improve them for the benefit of students

and society. During his interviews and throughout his publications and research, Clifford recognized the same disparity between student demographics as Rooks (2017) when considering the accountability movement, school takeovers and closures, and the requirements tied to school funding. Government funding whether at the state or federal level was an invaluable resource for any school or district. If funds shifted away from the public to private sector those students that relied the most on public schools would pay the price. Efforts to privatize schools and create options of student choice often took advantage of these same historically marginalized communities, as Rooks (2017) noted, "The privatization of public education is a big business, especially in communities where residents are poor and lack the resources to hire the types of D.C. lobbyists so necessary to effecting governmental change" (p. 16).

Because of his previous work experience and research, Clifford could effectively communicate his concerns and be taken seriously by his community. Initially motivated by the negative impact of the accountability movement, high stakes testing, and national standards, Clifford had shifted his focus more recently to getting rid of the "woke agenda" in public schools. The woke agenda as described by Clifford was a form of indoctrination through SEL in line with the PICT described by Logan and the work of James Lindsay (2022) among others. Clifford shared how the accountability movement enabled the woke agenda to come into schools as the federal government created mandates for failing schools, and to get relief from such mandates and continue to receive federal funds, schools would need to institute certain testing practices, standards, and curriculums. As Clifford asserted:

> Nothing woke up parents more than the woke agenda and bringing in the LGBTQ in
> books, questionable books, downright dirty books that were coming into the library.
> Nothing got them motivated more than that. They didn't get motivated by Common Core.

All the academic reasons didn't motivate parents to a great extent, very little. But because

they had taken over the curriculum by that time, they were able to bring in the wokeness,

and that really got parents going.

That being said, Clifford was also opposed to school choice too "because it is a trap. It's a trap

for parents because where the money goes the accountability goes, you got that public money,

that tax money going into private schools, there is going to be an accounting for that. They give

nothing away for free." As Clifford noted, accountability measures were placed predominantly

on high stakes test scores which we have continued to utilize as a measure of learning even

though they have been highly unpopular among educators and parents. As Hutt and Schneider

(2018) asked "Why is it that tests persist and proliferate when students dislike taking tests,

educators believe that tests distort the learning process, and experts challenge the validity of test

results?" (p. 4). State and Common Core standards were intended to be aligned with the high

stakes assessments in order to provide an accurate measure of student achievement. The overall

intent being to pass the test, generate the highest scores, and secure future school funding and

success. As Ravitch (2010) emphasized, this then creates a cycle of standardization.

Standardized curriculums and textbooks have been created and marketed as a means to address

both standards and ensure improved test scores, all of which your average public school has been

striving for and held accountable.

However, it is important to keep in mind that "Assessing schools by the numbers has

yielded not only an epidemic of sly statistical manipulations, but a reorientation of teaching

around what can conveniently be tested and scored, efficiently and without "bias"" (Porter, 2012,

p. 225). Schools that did not perform well on high stakes tests could be penalized with a loss of

funding and school closures which benefit privatizers financially as they operate schools through

corporate entities with charter or private status and limited oversight (Ewing, 2018; Ravitch, 2020; Rooks, 2017). However, many private and charter schools have not suffered the same consequences nor have strict accountability measures regarding teaching practices and testing. This differs from Clifford's claim of accountability following the money to private and charter schools, however, he did concede that it has not yet fully taken hold and as privatization continues the accountability will shift and resume mirroring that of public schools. As Eisner (1992) noted, "Unfortunately, the effects of efforts at school reform are based on the results of standardized achievement testing and the results of such testing say little about the processes that lead to them. We cannot know much about the educational quality of schools simply by examining test scores" (p. 619).

Felicia

Felicia was initially motivated by what she saw happening in public schools and how it was affecting teachers and students. Teachers she knew had to take on additional jobs and felt burnt out, and her child was subjected to the negative effects of high stakes testing. Felicia was motivated by the people she saw being harmed by the "corporate reform agenda" and did not "want to view it like the data driven reformers do. It's a numbers game for them. It's a game. And for me, it's not a game." Similar to other participants, she felt the need to share the information she had and use her voice. As Felicia commented, "I do feel I am called to do this. I have to do it because I see it. I can't unsee it, I must then share it with people."

Through her activism, Felicia drew attention towards billionaire education reformers such as Bill Gates, Mark Zukerberg, and Rupert Murdoch. Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, two of the most prominent, had both put forward education initiatives supported by federal funding. In 2010, Mark Zuckerberg promised a "$100 million matching gift" to schools in Newark that

"urged the district to shrink the number of traditional public schools and expand the footprint of public charter schools" (Rooks, 2017, p. 25). With the money invested, the solution to suffering schools was not so much reform from within, but instead replacement or quite possibly something else. As Ravitch (2020) described, "The Corporate Disrupters want to blow up the public schools and start from scratch. Bill Gates says that they are obsolete; Laurene Powell Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Charles Koch want to reinvent them, as do other billionaires, despite their lack of experience in the field of education" (p. 16).

Felicia also pushed back against Rupert Murdoch, another billionaire with investments in education and owner of Amplify. She believed that the introduction of Amplify software into the classroom brought with it a number of concerns regarding technology, curriculum, and data handling. This may indeed become more of a concern as technology advances and data continues to be a viable revenue stream, and we may find an increase in technologies that assess beyond academics. While teaching in public schools between 2019-2021, I was required to administer an online survey to students in order to gauge their social emotional health produced by Panorama Education (n.d.). I later received a link to review the data. Helpful as it was, I could understand a parent's concern. What if this form of social emotional data collection, as mentioned by Ravitch (2020), is not so much informative as it is biometric measures with intentions similar to those outlined in Kenneth Saltman's (2017) chapter, "Biometric Analytic Pedagogy: Control of Students and Teachers, and the Assault on Thinking", in his book *Scripted Bodies: Corporate Power, Smart Technologies, and the Undoing of Public Education*. This particular chapter described biometric control and the research into this area funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. One such biometric measure that had been utilized in research were biometric bracelets meant to sense "excitement, stress, fear, engagement, boredom, and relaxation through

the skin" (Saltman, 2017, p. 55). Another measure explored in the chapter was facial recognition with programs such as Affectiva's Affdex which "claims to measure" valence, expressiveness, and attention based on facial movements and expressions (Saltman, 2017, p. 56). As Saltman (2017) emphasized, such biometric data collection which gauges student reactions to teachers lessons feeds into a modern form of "behaviorism, Taylorism, and scientific management" (p. 59).

Not only was Felicia concerned about a technological takeover of education, she was also intent on rooting out corruption and was not afraid to face it head on and name names when appropriate. When she felt she had sufficient evidence such as kickbacks, bribes, nepotism, and other nefarious actions Felicia would call out those who had done wrong. She was "hoping to eliminate some of the fraud, waste, and abuse that I see." In addition, Felicia was similar to Clifford in that she was concerned about school choice, technology in the classroom, and the effects of the accountability system. Felicia agreed with Clifford that accountability had ushered indoctrinating forces into public schools in the form of LGBTQIA+ education, sex education, and SEL. Like Logan and Clifford, as a conservative Christian Felicia advocated for a return to a more traditional, classical model of schooling. She reinforced that, "we have to try" and believed in "speaking from the heart with evidence" when taking on powerful billionaires, politicians, and the accelerating dependence on technology in the classroom.

Processes and Strategies

To address my second research question, *What processes and strategies do such activists utilize for the promotion of their ideas and concerns regarding a PICT?*, data were collected from both interviews and online observations of their activism in action. Publications and audiovisual materials were also taken into consideration as they provided both the content and

means to communicate the educational activist's message. The processes and strategies were defined by the activist's actions taken to package their message and share it with the public. This included what participants did to prepare their message and how they went about sharing and promoting. This was reflective of the operational curriculum that looks towards the experiences generated between teacher and student (Eisner, 2002; Uhrmacher et al., 2017). It was important to consider the specific content chosen, the method of delivery, and the overall experience created in hopes to prompt a learning outcome. With an Ed Crit approach, influenced by Deweyan and Eisnerian philosophies focused on experience, the processes and strategies spoke to Dewey's emphasis on the continuity and interaction during the process of learning. "Continuity refers to the qualities of an experience that meaningfully connect to students' lives and which lead toward growth. Interaction refers to the balance between student's internal conditions with the external conditions of the situation or content" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 51). When applied to my study of PICT activists, I investigated how each went about preparing and delivering their curriculum with a focus on the experiences they created in order to connect with others through their chosen content and form of engagement.

Logan

Logan liked to write and was always reading and researching. He focused his attention on primary sources and the works of progressive pedagogists such as Paulo Freire and Michael Apple. Additionally, Logan reflected upon and synthesized classical works of fiction that he felt were applicable to our modern day problems tied to societal issues, and more directly, education. Logan read a lot of literature that he did not agree with to help bring awareness to others, as he stated "typically I think people they read the stuff that is what they would agree with." I have found this approach to researching and referencing before in my investigations regarding PICT

activism. Oftentimes, the primary sources of progressive educators, and individual educational philosophers were referenced by more conservative PICT activists.

Similar to Logan, many gravitated towards Dewey's *The Primary Education Fetich* (1898) as proof of such nefarious actions and evidenced the work to craft an alternative narrative regarding Dewey's educational intentions (King, 2018). In doing so, the PICT was supported by historical roots and references to powerful figures commonly associated with forms of classic conspiracism (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019). However, I have also found that Dewey can often be difficult to decipher and usually takes several readings that can result in being open to multiple interpretations. With this in mind, I did find it difficult to place Dewey at the heart of any PICT proposing a progressive agenda of socialist, communist, and Marxist indoctrination in our public schools. In direct contrast, Dewey (1937) argued that indoctrination in schools was instead taking the form of "narrow nationalism" (p. 472). Dewey's solution to such indoctrination was a unified frame of democracy and proposed that "The idea and ideal involve at least the necessity of personal and voluntary participation in reaching decisions and executing them—in so far it is the contrary of the idea of indoctrination" (Dewey, 1937, p. 473). Dewey perceived indoctrination as something that could in fact perpetuate in our schools, but by placing onus on the individual and stepping aside this could be avoided as students began to form their own conclusions. This concept is reflective of Taylor's (2017) definition of indoctrination being compared to an open or closed system. If the conclusions are predetermined, then the system is closed and the potential for indoctrination increases. However, if conclusions are left open to the individual the likelihood of indoctrination decreases. In addition, Dewey was more interested in the experience of learning and finding meaningful ways to communicate knowledge and understanding. As Noddings (2016) highlighted:

An experience for Dewey is not a mere exposure or passive undergoing; it has to mean something to the one undergoing it. Second, experience for Dewey is social and cultural. Indeed, he once remarked that he should have called his major work on experience *Culture and Nature* rather than *Experience and Nature*. Thus, when Dewey talks about experience in the context of education, we expect to find an emphasis on personal meaning and social interaction. (p. 31)

As a writer, Logan hoped to create more publications and online content to share his concerns regarding public education. Publications that would sum up his research for the average individual who either doesn't have the time and/or knowledge to unpack the more complex primary sources he dove into. In addition to producing more publications, Logan wanted to start his own podcast. I was fortunate to be able to observe his initial run through and podcast preparation. Logan believed that podcasts were a "more widespread medium today for reaching people" and a good way to amplify his message, get noticed, and create a greater impact. Logan also shared several links to podcasts that he had been on to promote his work which I later transcribed and analyzed. During each of these podcast appearances, Logan dominated the airtime by speaking approximately 90 percent of the time effectively communicating his message and promoting his publications. This was evident by his ability to stay focused on his messaging and speak well in a public forum. He was extremely focused and needed minimal prompting from the podcast hosts. In addition to being on the podcasts of others and creating his own podcast, Logan might also start doing some in person presentations and spoke about some upcoming work he had planned with a conservative group, touring with them, and speaking at their events. However, at the time of this study he had not done much outside of producing publications, online content, and appearing on podcasts.

Natalie

Similar to Logan, Natalie was an avid reader. In addition to reading many works that she enjoys she did admit to reading a number of books that she hates. Like Logan she read literature in opposition to her educational philosophy. Natalie engaged with her activism in a variety of ways. She was active in person on the local level and attended school board meetings, educator meetings, and the meetings of those activist groups she disagreed with stating she was "there to speak up for and defend trans children and their families, and that public education belongs to the public." Natalie stated that her "target for activism is my fellow white woman. I have no qualms about snipping at them and being snipped at by them." Through her reading and research Natalie was "very familiar with the origins of public education" and a variety of other educational topics which enabled her to speak to a number of education related issues when advocating and speaking in public and/or with media outlets. In addition to showing her support surrounding a number of educational issues, Natalie had no problem confronting an opposing activist in person and attempting to dialogue out what was at the root of the problem. Natalie took a consent based approach and asked, "Are you open to changing your mind?" when initiating a conversation both in person and online. Natalie utilized her white womanhood to provide an alternative narrative to the one perpetuated by groups like M4L who advocated for an agenda of parental control. Natilie's concern was reflective of Schneider and Berkshire (2020) who contended that, "What is gaining traction is the even more radical notion that parents, not the state should control their children's education. The insistence that the history of public education in the United States is one of government overreach is no longer relegated to the libertarian fringe; it is now shaping education policy in a growing number of states" (p. 11).

Natalie did say that, "I'll occasionally fight with my fellow progressives." She believed that there could be positive and negative ways to go about one's activism. For example, she found it inappropriate when opposing activists attack each other with how they talk about others and attack their livelihoods. Natalie believed it was important to leave space for people to change their minds, and how some attacks on others negate or limit that possibility. When it comes to her social media activism, Natalie had a similar yet more structured approach to her Twitter/X engagements. She was very active on Twitter/X which I solely based her observation on although she was also on a variety of other social media platforms. Natalie had a number of "rules" that she employed on Twitter/X and did not hesitate to *block* someone if a rule was broken. Natalie believed she had a "particularly annoying sort of relentless approach to Twitter" where she would do her best to have the last word, and as she said, "If you show up in my mentions and tweet at me, I will tweet at you, I will respond." In addition to discussing whether or not to *tag* an opposing activist in a tweet, Natalie mentioned that there were "solid arguments for not signal boosting, not giving attention." She reflected on a time that she had debated with some of her fellow activists if they should continue to push back against an opposing activist stating, "The fear began that the more we engaged with him, the more he used our arguments to refine his arguments." Although highly adept on social media, Natalie did concede that "One on one is much easier than the social media chatter."

Clifford

Similar to Logan and Natalie, a big part of Clifford's process was reading and researching. He was very familiar with education law, policy, and dealt directly with primary sources. A lot of Clifford's activism was in person where he had testified in front of lawmakers, school boards, and gave presentations. During Clifford's initial interview I was able to share the

Zoom screen with him so he could walk me through several documents he had created to help parents oppose high stakes testing. Clifford said that, "What I do with parents is I support them in their efforts." In addition to sharing documents, Clifford partially shared some of his presentation regarding the accountability movement and high stakes testing. For Clifford's observation, he shared his Powerpoint presentation with me that he also used while presenting in person. A very direct and to the point presentation, Clifford utilized his well cited research and a number of data sets tied to high stakes testing and school failures to demonstrate his opposition.

Clifford asserted that, "Once you become aware of what's happening then you have two choices. Sit on it, don't do anything for fear of being labeled a kook or somebody who didn't appreciate where he came from, or actually speaking out and trying to make a difference." Clifford's highly structured and academic research into the accountability movement and previous experience as an educator, positioned him as an educational authority within his community. Clifford utilized his platform to advocate against high stakes testing and mentioned several times to me the frustration he felt with the ranking and labeling of schools. This reminded me of my own experiences as a teacher and the numerous banners I've seen over the years publicly advertising a school's status and academic achievements. In regards to Clifford's activism, he appealed to those individuals that supported public schools, however found fault in the loss of teacher, school, district, and state autonomy when making decisions that directly impacted students. I agreed with Clifford's assessment in this regard, and have also experienced the negative impact of high stakes testing and prescribed curriculums during my years of teaching. In addition, Clifford pushed back on the narrative that privatization would be a better alternative to public schools believing that the accountability system would eventually follow the funding. In interesting contrast, Spring (2014a) acknowledged how, "It is argued that a for-profit

school will be more attuned to balancing costs with quality school instruction while trying to please parents. A for-profit education institution will want to market a good product to attract customers and control costs to ensure a profit" (p. 68). This form of economically induced accountability (ex. "quality instruction", "pleasing parents") is meant to both justify and ensure that quality can be achieved by privatizing education and let customers essentially determine quality control. Clifford was all about helping parents directly and wanted public schools to survive, but recognized a number of problems that public education had to address relevant to high stakes testing, technology in the classroom, and indoctrination via the woke agenda.

To help promote his activism, Clifford had posted his presentation on YouTube and had also appeared on several podcasts. Clifford believed that "We've got a war taking place between parents who are awake, I won't call them woke, parents who are awake and aware and fighting back with school boards." The role that Clifford's activism plays in all of this, was as he put it, "I create awareness." To do so, Clifford had found value in creating audiovisual materials that he posted on YouTube. Much of the videos were reflective of his Powerpoint presentation citing the same research and similarly advocating against the accountability system. As Clifford justified, "People don't like to read a whole lot. They'd much rather watch a video." I believed Clifford's assessment was correct and that audiovisual materials did lend themselves to reaching a wider audience. In addition, by posting his videos on YouTube Clifford had access to a worldwide audience and the opportunity to cultivate an online community. However, Clifford did declare how he lacked a number of tech skills and continued to believe that his activism was more productive in person.

Felicia

For the most part Felicia focused her activism at the state level but recognized a national problem within public education. She did her best to "try and take an objective approach" when analyzing a situation, and similar to Clifford was unique in that she was conservative, but was concerned with privatization and technology in the classroom which she considered more of a bipartisan issue. As part of her activism Felica educated "parents on how to advocate for their children, and how to get the resources that they are afforded under the law." Felicia had joined a variety of activist groups, testified in person, and called out those she saw as doing harm to public schools. She had a lot of online content to promote her message including a number of podcasts and YouTube videos. Similar to Natalie, I chose to observe Felicia's Twitter/X engagements as she utilized Twitter/X quite a bit to help promote her activism and had a substantial number of *followers*. Similar to her approach in person, Felicia posted or reposted links, documents, and articles substantiating her claims. This was different from Natalie's approach of more direct engagement with other Twitter/X users to both support and debate an educational topic. Felicia's postings were more passive and prompted other users to engage with her post.

Felicia emphasized that, "I have to have the evidence to back it up. So I go and do a great amount of research." In addition, Felicia followed other activist researchers that did similar work related to technology, testing, and a "shift away from academic knowledge to more technology and more behavioral and social engineering." Felicia also took a close look at those educators with corporate ties that appeared to be working against what teachers, parents, and students wanted. As Felicia discussed, she made it a point to "study what they say they are doing and then I try and figure out who's funding it." Whether it was online or in person, a major part of

Felicia's strategy was to do the research and gather her evidence before moving forward. This very calculated move was intentional as she described, "I have the evidence. I have the facts to back up what I say and so when they argue with me I'm ready with a response."

Felicia feared that public schools were evolving to more virtual learning formats and in turn opening the door to a number of negative drawbacks. For instance, virtual school programs can have low attendance and participation, prescribed curriculums and automated evaluations, and yet maintain a high margin of profitability (Ravitch, 2020). Virtual schools are only one example of a number of alternatives to traditional public schools. Apprenticeships, vocational schooling and other forms of schooling that allow for diverse learner outcomes, options and opportunities are out there for those that have the financial means, but what about those less fortunate? What sort of alternative education will they receive? As Rooks (2017) determined:

> Students in foster care and Native Americans schooled on their tribal homelands are two categories of students targeted by virtual school providers in Florida. Targeting the most economically vulnerable students ultimately yields cyber education businesses increased profits resulting from the segrenomics of apartheid schools. The undereducation of the poor and people of color is a business opportunity that generates great profit for businesses but provides little in the way of quality instruction. (p. 159)

Felecia, like Clifford and Natalie, wanted public education to succeed but acknowledged that it was under threat from those with financial interests, and if things didn't change in regards to poorly implemented policy then schools would be taken over by privatizers. Similar to Clifford, she believed parents had been sold a false narrative when it came to school choice, and that the accountability system would simply follow the money. When it came to her process of packaging her activist curriculum, Felicia considered herself a creator more than a consumer of information.

She enjoyed producing online content that would hopefully engage with others and amplify her message.

Implications and Outcomes

To address my third research question, *What are the implications and outcomes of PICT activism for public education, teachers and students, and our greater society?*, I utilized participant interviews as the main source of data. In addition, I investigated their online presence and overall messaging and message promotion. In Chapter Five, I contrast this with current trends in education and education policy that have been and may continue to be influenced by PICTs. The participants were asked about the ideal outcomes they hoped to achieve with their activism, and what sort of impact they believed they have had so far. Their responses were their own, and not necessarily substantiated. For example, if a participant stated they were able to overturn a policy with their activism, I did not investigate further but instead noted the occurrence as what they perceived as a success. The outcomes and implications that resulted because of a participant's activism were reflective of the instructional arc's received curriculum (Uhrmacher et al., 2017), and what their target audience learned from the experience whether intentional or not. When applied to PICT activists and their overall effectiveness, it was important to initially investigate their own perceptions of their successes and failures.

Logan

Logan believed that his activism thus far had very little influence, but he did "think there is an impact taking place, just not so much from me." Some of the successes Logan noted were a rise in classical schools, increased parent awareness, and an exodus from public schools. Logan did not focus on educational policy much and said that he was "focused in on trying to educate the common man." It was hard to calculate Logan's online influence and reach as he was just

getting going at the time of this study. However, Logan had already produced a number of publications and appeared on several established podcasts. He also mentioned numerous times that he was hoping to amplify his message and get noticed, but that it had not yet happened. Logan perceived public schools as irredeemable, and instead believed that a classical model of education was the solution. Logan maintained that the intent of progressive educators was to control public education in order to indoctrinate, and stated that they wanted "to infiltrate the institutes of learning because that's how they can capture the kids and then transform them into what they want the new society to look like." Logan stated that:

> My greatest concern would be that we continue headed down the route we are right now, the initial thing from the progressives of kind of moving us to more of this idea of education as purely vocational, was kind of, I think, step one of a mistake. And then step two, would be going even further to the critical pedagogist thing where you're actually educating to try and be this little change agent who is going to transform the world into this utopia that I think is just a, you know, it's a pipe dream. So continuing to head down that I think will just unfortunately, create children who are no longer able to think well and think clearly and to be able to live as virtuous people. Instead, they'll be just kind of manipulated drones.

Much of Logan's activism was warning of a dystopian future brought on by an agenda of progressive education. He feared that if we did not heed the warning as outlined in the classical texts he commonly referenced, then there was little hope for the future. Although this outlook appeared a bit bleak, Logan did look at what he could do personally in regards to the future of education and shared, "I would describe my goals as playing the long game, just trying to help in the little ways I can. In a way, if I did have some sort of bigger platform and became known then

I'd be able to reach more parents and impact more classical schools and teachers and whatnot, but I'm definitely looking at it in the long term."

In addition to the classical model, there have been a number of other alternatives that advocates against public schools have promoted such as homeschooling and deschooling. Ivan Illich (1972), in his book *Deschooling Society*, highlighted a number of negative traits in regards to his perception of public education. Among his critiques of public schools were forms of dumbed down rote learning, standardization, the non-transference of learning to real life skills, and most notably the element of social control and how it should not be tied to schooling (Illich, 1972). Illich's work has often been cited by activists as an alternative to public schools and their numerous educational shortcomings. However, what often seems absent from the conversation to deschool was Illich's call for the elimination of social rank and "a guarantee of the right of each citizen to an equal share of tax derived educational resources" (as cited in Arum et al., 2010, p. 528).

Homeschooling has also become a common alternative for those disenfranchised by public schools. Many parents see this as a physically and mentally healthier alternative even though they must take on added burdens to provide an education for their children. It is important to note, as Rooks (2017) established, more members from historically marginalized communities have been looking to homeschooling as a possibility. "Black families are one of the fastest-growing demographics in homeschooling, with—according to the National Center for Education Statistics—Black students making up an estimated 10 percent of the total homeschooling population. At present, that group makes up only 16 percent of all public school students nationwide" (Rooks, 2017, pp. 216-217). Homeschooling has also been touted by some activists as the only way to avoid indoctrination. However, this does raise the question of an

alternative form of home indoctrination done in isolation, and/or possibly in coordination with an accredited homeschooling curriculum that does not challenge the predetermined ideas of the adults in control. Regardless, Logan wanted to empower parents and help them learn more so they were informed and confident to act when challenging the institute of public schooling. Logan emphasized:

> I'm more interested in focusing in on trying to educate the common man, ordinary people as I call us, and I think that's really the solution. Changing the common person to make it so they're knowledgeable and then courageous and able to act upon that knowledge. Not so much this idea of you have to fix things by government policy. To me that's not going to actually fix anything in the end because they'll just get changed at some point. The only way things will actually get changed for the better in the long run will be a change of the people themselves who are returning to the idea of being virtuous.

Natalie

Natalie believed that she had an impact locally when she shared with me that "people did not get elected to my local school board because of activism I was part of." She also mentioned that she had changed some minds on Twitter/X and stated, "I do think I have changed some perspectives on Twitter about some things. I like to think I have. Some people have told me I have but whether or not that has any meaningful impact in your day to day school it's hard to say." Natalie did not want groups like M4L to get bigger in her area and would see their proliferation as a failure and detrimental to student inclusivity. Natalie pushed back against the narrative of activists like Logan, Clifford, and Felicia that LGBTQIA+ education and SEL were instruments of indoctrination corrupting public school students. Instead, Natalie advocated for equity and believed that it was our diversity and acceptance that defined us. This was in contrast

to opposing activists who believed it important to maintain an unwavering view of American exceptionalism. As Banks (2007) stressed in this regard, "blind nationalism will prevent students from developing reflective and positive global identifications" and that "educators often try to help students develop strong national identifications by eradicating their ethnic and community cultures and making students ashamed of their families, community beliefs, languages, and behaviors" (pp. 24-25), but also concluded that "individuals are capable of having multiple identifications. It is not necessary to alienate individuals from their cultures, neighborhoods, and communities in order to help them develop strong national loyalties" (p. 131). Banks (2007) emphasized the importance of accepting other cultures and perspectives as equally American, and that a strong national identity doesn't need to be cultivated in our schools.

Natalie was a strong public school advocate and feared that if we do not take the struggle of public education seriously that "it's just going to dissolve." However, she did not blindly defend public schools and kept a balanced approach when she stated that "we have to constantly recognize that there are some serious flaws in public education but public education is an amazing idea so we have to defend the idea." Natalie also shared that before talking to me she never thought of herself "as trying to interrupt a conspiracy theory or conspiracy theorists. I'm just pushing, I just want to push back against people who want to make life harder for trans kids." Natalie believed there was hope for public schools on the local level and noted that:

> The good news though is I think that the overwhelming majority of schools, as long as the school board remains constant and the superintendent remains calm and isn't right wing, I think the majority of teachers are just continuing doing what they were doing. They are protected, but as soon as a layer of protection between teacher and the general

public gets stripped away, the superintendent makes bad decisions, the school board

candidates lose, and that's when it starts to impact teachers' daily lives.

Clifford

Clifford believed that his activism and those he worked with was "having tremendous

influence" in a "David and Goliath type situation." He noted some policy wins and some losses

while advocating for making the accountability system illegal. As Clifford stated:

We're in this system called education reform, and education reform has been the plan for

40 years and are we any better? Has it been a success? I would say no, I'd say it's been an

abject failure. And so we need to return to the teacher being the primary purveyor of

knowledge. And we need to allow the states and the local districts to manage their own

curriculum, and determine what's best for their kids and get away from school labels.

And if we can do that then we've got our education system back.

Clifford also feared the use of technology in the classroom and the "injection of the Chromebook

as the teacher" stating that, "It takes away from the teacher being the teacher and she is now a

facilitator of information through the Chromebook or whatever device you're using." Clifford,

similar to Logan and Felicia, advocated for a traditional, classical model of education in a

nostalgic return to the basics. Clifford reminisced that, "When we had textbooks, a textbook went

home with the kid and the parent could see what was in the textbook, the parent could see what

the kids are learning. The tablets do not go home with the kid. They don't go home because

they're afraid they won't come back." Clifford was also concerned about the content that could

be uploaded and taken from the educational devices students used. This was similar to the

concern of a misuse of student data like that of Google (Krutka et al., 2021), but also infused

with a fear that curriculum and content could be manipulated without parents knowledge and potentially lead to further indoctrination.

Clifford, similar to Logan, also saw an exodus from public schools stating that "You see a real exit now from the public school system and that's part of the agenda as well." According to Clifford, even though students may move to private schools, the accountability system follows them in the form of federal dollars which then allows for the same government agenda of indoctrination to take root. Also like Logan, Clifford believed that he was morally correct, had the "moral high ground" and explained that, "I have to believe that God does not want us to be on this path. This is disruptive to his children and there's got to be a way out. It may not be until Jesus comes back but there's got to be a way of fighting, this is so disruptive and the agenda is so evil."

Felicia

Similar to Clifford's assessment, Felicia saw some wins at the local level but also some disappointments especially when it came to pushing back on technology in the classroom, the bringing in of more virtual education, and the use of Rupert Murdoch's Amplify for Science of Reading (SoR) indorsed reading instruction. Felicia stated, "I think if you look at how children learn and what's best for them and their brains and their development, we can actually prove that the technology is not only harmful it's *not* resulting in better performance and academic knowledge." Felicia touched on the element of misinformation regarding educational topics and the differing perspectives regarding content and instruction. As Spring (2014b) noted, "It is important to emphasize that a conscious effort is being made to disseminate ideas and influence public opinion by conservative think tanks, such as the Manhattan Institute, The Heritage Foundation, The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the AEI. Their influence is the result of

calculated planning by conservative intellectuals and business people" (p. 90). Although Felicia was conservative, she valued public education and believed this was a bipartisan issue rooted in dark money, politics, and the intentions of billionaire reformers.

The ideal outcome that Felecia wanted "is just for kids to get a proper education and I don't think they're getting that right now because so many who are conspiring behind the scenes to not only capture the money but also the data that's produced by the children, their data is a hot commodity." Felicia targeted those who wished to profit off of the public education system with her activism by researching their backgrounds and making connections that develop a narrative of grifting profiteers not interested in student success. As Spring (2014b) stated, "Limited school experience seems to be a characteristic of those in the for-profit education industry" (p. 42). Afterall, there are a plethora of areas in education where money can be made. One of the most profitable being the publishing of curriculums, textbooks, and high stakes testing materials. As Ravitch (2010) illustrated, the industry of education has been primed for this type of profiteering while public schools flounder with difficulties establishing what policies and practices to put in place to ensure student success. Felicia emphasized that a lot of the issues being faced in education were bipartisan, and when referring to those corrupt politicians and billionaires, stated that "They keep us mired in a lot of the culture wars and so we fight each other, and I think when all is said and done most people want their kids to have a good education."

Summary

All of the activists I was fortunate to interview and observe were extremely generous with their time and openness. The discussions surrounding public schools and the conspiracies attached to such an institution can be fascinating yet difficult to have. In a politically and culturally divided America the term conspiracy can mean many different things to many different

people. For some, it is a point of pride to be a conspiracy theorist and not buy into the

mainstream noise. However, for others the term is loaded with negative attributes and harmful

outcomes. To expose a conspiracy may mean to prove it either as true or as false, but it must also

be considered that a PICT may be used as a form of motivational rhetoric, or as a point for

activists to push back on when confronting opposing ideologies. I chose to include in this chapter

what I thought was most applicable to address each of my research questions and could best

describe each participant's answers with relevant interpretations. In Chapter Five, I provide an

overview of the themes that emerged, my critical evaluation, major findings, and conclusions.

CHAPTER V

EVALUATION AND THEMATICS

Critical Prologue

When I look back on my four year journey into the world of public instruction conspiracy

theories (PICTs) I am often filled with both amazement and exhaustion. Amazed that what was

an initial fascination, a phenomenon in public education worth investigating, would later become

a point of ongoing doctoral research leading up to this study. In addition, I have been amazed at

how PICTs have evolved throughout the educational landscape and have influenced recent

education policy. My initial interest involved the conspiracy to dumb down Americans through

the public education system most prominently exposed by John Taylor Gatto (2002). Over the

course of my research the political landscape has evolved and the culture wars reignited. PICTs

of indoctrination through social emotional learning (SEL) and sex education, as well as those of

dark money and billionaire reformers, are prevalent and a major point of focus when discussing

the future of public education.

I have also been exhausted by the content I have ingested due to PICT research. I'm

referring to the numerous conspiratorial threads I have found that targeted educational

philosophers, painted teachers as gullible pawns, maintained that students were being

brainwashed, and made reform seem impossible when working against a rigged accountability

system. I have felt a desire to move onto other topics that instead more directly impact the

students I work with on a daily basis. Don't get me wrong, I strongly believe that more PICT

research is necessary. I just don't know if I'm the one to pursue it further. Perhaps, just like the

participants from this study and other educational activists in the world of PICTs, I too just needed a moment to express a bit of interest, a modicum of concern, and a word of warning.

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to explore the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of educational activists that work to expose and/or debunk a public instruction conspiracy theory (PICT). I also wanted to find a participant pool that could help provide perspectives from a variety of points along the left-right political spectrum. I was fortunate to find four participants that were gracious with their time by giving multiple interviews, observations, providing resources, and being open and willing to share their voices. Participants provided numerous insights into both educational activism, PICTs, and the intermingling of the two. Each participant was selected based on their social media presence and investment of time and energy into their activism evidenced by their extensive publications and online resources. Each participant had developed, in some form, an activist curriculum which they shared with the public. Reflective of the instructional arc, and much of the work I have done as an educator, I wanted to analyze what each participant wanted to teach and why, how they go about their instruction, and what happens as a result (Uhrmacher et al., 2017).

By looking closely at the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of each PICT activist, I was able to identify a variety of themes that demonstrated shared concerns and shared approaches in regards to educational activism. In contrast, I was also able to gain insight into differing perspectives regarding PICTs. Numerous nuances and connections were made throughout my analysis provided in Chapter Four's descriptions and interpretations, which I also demonstrate in this chapter's thematics and evaluations. Simply stated, educational activists have wanted to educate others, promote their

activism, and have a real impact on society, and more specifically as it relates to this study, public schools. However, with an approach such as educational criticism and connoisseurship (Ed Crit), there was always more to be uncovered and discovered.

"The educational critic asks what is of value here, both for those involved and for the educational enterprise generally speaking?" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 50). The themes and evaluations outlined in this chapter are structured around my research questions:

Q1   What are the intentions and motivations of educational activists who work to expose and/or debunk a PICT?

Q2   What processes and strategies do such activists utilize for the promotion of their ideas and concerns regarding a PICT?

Q3   What are the implications and outcomes of PICT activism for public education, teachers and students, and our greater society?

The data utilized to answer my research questions were derived from participant interviews, online observations, and analysis of participant publications and online audiovisual materials. As outlined in Chapter Three, I utilized a combination of in vivo, descriptive, and values coding throughout my analysis (Saldaña, 2021). This provided me with the opportunity to highlight the voices of the participants and explicitly focus on their unique perspectives in relation to PICTs. In addition, at the end of this chapter I provide a discussion regarding the importance of PICT research and my concluding thoughts.

Overview of the Study

For this study I utilized an approach of Ed Crit to explore the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of those educational activists that worked to expose and/or debunk a PICT. I wanted to get to the heart of what the individual activist was hoping to achieve through their activism. I wanted to examine their message, how they go about promoting their message, and what happens as a result. It was my hope to get a

"behind-the-scenes perspective" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 5) of those activists that have essentially constructed a curriculum to share with the public. Researched, developed, and extensively written out, each activist's curriculum addressed the instructional arc through the content they chose to share, the way they shared it, and the outcomes achieved (Uhrmacher et al., 2017).

I was fortunate to recruit four participants that I identified as associated with PICTs in some form through their activism. Each were identified as heavy researchers and writers, having a social media presence, and each representing a different perspective regarding PICTs. I wanted to cover the span of the left-right political spectrum and I believed I successfully did that with Natalie on the left, Logan on the right, and although right-leaning, both Clifford and Felicia advocated for/against both traditionally conservative and progressive reform agendas (anti indoctrination and anti privatization).

Participants were interviewed two or three times and also observed online. Logan and Clifford were observed via Zoom where Clifford gave an abbreviated version of his public presentation, and Logan ran through his initial podcast and podcast preparation. Felicia and Natalie were observed on Twitter/X with a specific focus on their content and interactions. In addition, participants' publications and audiovisual materials were analyzed as a secondary source when addressing my research questions.

In vivo, descriptive, and values coding (Saldaña, 2021) were utilized to place emphasis on the participant's voices. Annotating, diagraming, and memoing were also employed to help organize my thoughts and discover connections and patterns of emerging themes. Although diverse in their perspectives regarding PICTs, there were a number of overlapping themes that surfaced in relation to each participant's intentions, processes, and outcomes.

**Discussion of Themes and Response
to Research Questions**

Chapter Five is organized similar to Chapter Four and reflective of the instructional arc. While addressing each of the research questions through interviews, online observations, publications, and audiovisual materials I provide a summary of the themes that emerged during my study. Interviews provided a direct line of questioning regarding the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of educational activists that worked to expose and/or debunk a PICT. In addition, online observations provided insight into the processes and strategies participants utilized to develop their activist curriculum and engage with a public audience. Additional analysis of participant's publications and audiovisual materials was also considered when addressing each research question as they were also reflective of intended outcomes and methods of messaging. With an Ed Crit approach to evaluating each participant's responses to the research questions, I analyzed my descriptions and interpretations to assess their instructional arcs and the various themes that emerged throughout my investigation. In doing so, I found what I believed to be of value and worth sharing with a broader audience. In this chapter I present "one way to look at and understand the educational situation. It may be that another critic would appraise the situation quite differently" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 53).

Intentions and Motivations

I appreciated how Brophy (2010) recognized, "*Motives* are hypothetical constructs used to explain why people do what they do. Motives are distinguished from related *goals* (the immediate objectives of action sequences) and *strategies* (the methods used to achieve goals and thus to satisfy motives)" (p. 3). For this study, I also separated motivation from processes and outcomes. When addressing my first research question, *What are the intentions and motivations*

of educational activists who work to expose and/or debunk a PICT?, several themes began to emerge. Participants were genuinely motivated to do what they believed was best for children, tried to educate others, and through their work hoped to get to the truth and promote change. Where they differed was in the ideology each prescribed to and what they decided to share through their activism. Their intentions instead rooted in what they "formally or informally determined (by a teacher or other authority) to be taught" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 52).

For the Children

All of the participants stated at several points during our conversations that children, their education, and their future were top motivators in their activism. I believed them all to be sincere in this, and as an educator it has also been at the heart of my priorities. Not all participants had children at the time of the study, but some did, however I would like to keep this point vague in order to maintain confidentiality. The topic was brought forward during participant interviews referring to whether or not having children should matter when it comes to public schools and who has a voice. I too have considered this, and have devoted my career to education and believe that no matter if you have children or not, you as a member of the community have a vested interest in public schools. Better public schools translates to better educated and productive members of society which impacts everyone in the community.

Logan, Clifford, and Felicia were motivated to protect children from the indoctrination they perceived taking place in public schools in the form of social emotional learning (SEL). In addition to SEL, sex education, LGBTQIA+ education, socialism and Marxism were also seen as finding their way into public schools and having a negative influence. This was representative of more right-leaning, conservative perspectives recently held in American society. Activists groups such as Moms for Liberty (M4L) who are active with:

Nationwide chapters combat what they consider the "woke indoctrination" of children by advocating for book bans in school libraries and endorsing candidates for public office that align with the group's views. They also use their multiple social media platforms to target teachers and school officials, advocate for the abolition of the Department of Education, advance a conspiracy propaganda, and spread hateful imagery and rhetoric against the LGBTQ community. (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.)

In stark contrast, Natalie maintained that more inclusivity was needed in our schools and advocated for the acceptance of all individuals, especially those that identify as transgender. Natalie wanted public schools to be for all students regardless of sexuality and/or gender orientation. She was opposed to book banning and worked against groups like M4L in an effort to not only demonstrate solidarity with historically marginalized groups, but to also use her white womanhood to push back against her shared demographic.

Logan also expressed that he wanted what was best for the future. He reflected on classical texts and analyzed the work of educational philosophers and pedagogists to help him determine what we needed to be leary of and how such a transformation might take place. Logan did not like what he perceived going on in public schools and felt that he would be resentful if he was to look back, knowing what he knows, and did nothing for the future. Clifford had worked with children for decades. Like myself, he had spent a career in education experiencing the extreme highs and lows reflective of the profession. He too wanted what was best for students and had continued to advocate on their behalf. Felecia had felt the harsh impact of high stakes testing take a toll on her child which then prompted her to activism that she continued to do with the future education of other children taken into consideration.

Educating Others

In addition to advocating for children and the future of our society, all participants expressed a desire to inform others. Similar to the idea that once you see something you can't unsee it, the participants felt a need to share what they had discovered. All of them thorough researchers and writers, felt compelled to investigate a topic and produced a curriculum package to share publicly. I believe this was what initially drew me to the idea of the Ed Crit approach and the instructional arc to help form my research questions. As an educator I have spent decades developing lesson plans and curriculums that answer the questions reflective of the arc, and believe that we have the individual ability to construct our own curriculums by choosing what we want to investigate and that we can also be subject to the curriculums of others (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). This can take the form of lectures, books, videos, podcasts, or anything ingested to help inform oneself regarding a chosen topic.

Both Logan and Clifford conveyed that they didn't think many people were aware of what was going on and felt the need to educate others. Natalie and Felecia, however, didn't assert this as much and both seemed more focused on connecting others with resources and providing direct help in some form. Natalie and Felicia provided just as much information in their publications and audiovisual materials as Logan and Clifford, however, their intent did not seem as explicit to educate others, but rather to get the information out in any way possible. Granted, this was still educating others, however, in a less direct instructional approach. I understand the desire to want to educate others, afterall I have devoted my career to education. In addition, when discovering new topics I have always wanted to share with others and have felt that same need to pass along information deemed important and potentially transformative.

A Quest for Truth and Change

I have grouped the concepts of truth and change together as there appeared to be a unique dance between the two when it comes to the PICT activists. In their quest for truth, diving deep in their research going places the common person would not normally venture, they found what others were unaware of and what made their research and activism stand out. A new truth discovered, no doubt creating a transformative experience worthy to be shared with others. A truth meant to educate and inform, and create positive change in regards to our public education system. I also believe that truth can create change and that transparency in education is indeed beneficial, but transparency can also be abused when ranking schools by standardized assessments that many educators and parents believe are harmful to student, teacher, and school perception (Hutt & Schneider, 2018).

Logan dove deep into primary sources as did Natalie in order to research the history of education, educational philosophers, and pedagogy in order to construct narratives that they could cite and share with others via publications and audiovisual materials. Clifford and Felicia looked more towards education law and policy, and more specifically the individuals and advocacy groups behind such policies in a quest to follow the money and expose bad practice. All were researching to find the truth, to show the truth and share it with others. Through their research and activism each was pushing against something perceived to be untrue, and much of their research was done to prove what they saw as unquestionably false. In doing so, their intent was that more people would become aware, minds would be changed, and a new future in education would take hold.

Processes and Strategies

The processes and strategies of the PICT activists were reflective of the operational curriculum and "That which actually is taught" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 52). When addressing my second research question, *What processes and strategies do such activists utilize for the promotion of their ideas and concerns regarding a PICT*?, I analyzed the content of their message and how it was communicated to others. I wanted to find out how educational activists that want to expose and/or debunk a PICT go about their activism, and what they believe to be an effective way to advocate in this regard. Like a teacher in front of a class, how did they deliver their content, and what did they believe was the best method to do so? All participants proved to do a lot of researching and writing, engagement through social media and in person, and commented on how they dealt with opposing activists.

Research and Writing

An important part of all participant's processes was copious amounts of reading and writing. Logan was heavily invested in and focused on the primary sources of educational philosophers and pedagogists in order to "decode" what they were saying within their dense texts, and more importantly what their intentions were for school students and society. In addition to primary sources, Logan also read a lot of work by those with similar activist intent as him such as Christopher Rufo (2021) and James Lindsay (2022) who have both written books citing a PICT tied to LGBTQIA+ education, critical race theory (CRT), socialism, and Marxist indoctrination in public schools. Natalie on the other hand, utilized primary sources and educational history texts with a broader scope and mix of authors. Like Logan, she was also well read when it came to educational philosophers and pedagogists, and her approach to research involved authors she both agreed and disagreed with. Natalie had her share of what she called

"hate reads" which she read in order to disprove and push back on, however, she balanced that with other educational reading that she more philosophically aligned with. She was able to provide me with several book recommendations from both of her reading categories.

Felicia and Clifford were also avid readers, however, it appeared that most of their reading and research focused on local education laws and policies that they were advocating against. Both had testified in public and when they did so they were well prepared with all the policy information being disputed, related historical references, and information regarding the politics and background of those that may appear to be fraudulent and taking advantage of an education system under siege due to the accountability movement. Felicia and Clifford also knew their education history, but their focus was more on the laws that brought our society to this point versus the work of specific pedagogists and educational theories.

In addition to a lot of researching and reading, all participants were heavy producers of written materials. All had created a large body of work both available through traditional publications and online. All participants had produced either videos or podcasts to help promote their work which was publicly available online. In addition, several had produced online articles and blogs to complement their activism. It was not just a matter of research that took place, there was also a large amount of production. The interpretations and analysis of their research, similar to this study, was meant to share their findings with the world. Each activist approached their research with their own motivations and intent, and what they pulled from their research often supported the narrative they were crafting within their activism.

Engagement

All participants engaged with their audience both in person and online. At this point in his activism Logan appeared the least in person, however, he had given several presentations and

might be doing more in the future. Since Logan was relatively new to the activism scene, it seemed like this form of contact would likely increase as he continued to amplify his message. He appeared to be open to advocating in person and presenting, but less interested in educational policy and law. Natalie, Clifford, and Felicia all made it a point to show up in person and testify in front of lawmakers, school boards, and even appeared against opposing groups. If they wanted to speak, they were usually well prepared and had calculated remarks to support their activism. All three shared video recordings of their in person activism in action. Although the videos were brief, it was easy to see their confidence and comfort when speaking publicly.

In addition to their in person activism, all participants engaged with an online audience. As stated earlier in regards to their publications, much of their written materials were available online in the form of articles, blogs, websites, podcasts, videos, and social media posts. Natalie and Felicia spent a lot of time promoting their activism on Twitter/X and other social media sites, and engaged with an online community. Based on my observations, Natalie tended to engage a lot more with the opposition than Felicia who instead posted her own activism, the related activism of others, or documents and information to support her activism. Natalie engaged with others in a positive way wanting to dialogue, and in a way find out where the person was coming from and their perspective. Natalie utilized several strategies to help maintain healthy conversations on Twitter/X and would block someone if necessary, but was also not afraid to have the last word and would do so until satisfied her point was made.

The Opposition

For a PICT activist there always seemed to be some form of opposition. For Felicia and Clifford, their focus was on lawmakers and educators attempting to take advantage of the education system by defrauding families and making billionaires richer by investing in their

educational technologies involved in testing and curriculum. The ties between politicians and tech billionaires was one they hoped to expose, and thought that our students were suffering under such mandates and that their data were susceptible. Felicia and Clifford were also pro teacher and pushed back against policies that took away a teacher's autonomy. This was a common theme that was relayed as a loss of power from the teacher, to the school, the district, and then the state leading to a reliance on federal funding to support students and their schools.

Natalie had "nothing to lose" and took on the opposition directly. She would debate online, but found that debating in person was usually preferable and yielded better results. She felt that when you were able to connect on a human level and dig a little deeper into why someone may hold certain beliefs, you had an opportunity to change a mind, or at the very least get them thinking. Logan took on the opposition through his research, writing, and podcasting. He was more passive towards opposing activists and instead put his ideas of opposition out into the world for public consumption. During the study I did not find evidence of Logan confronting opposition directly, however, in his writings he was very direct about what he saw wrong with our education system and named names when it came to educational philosophers and pedagogists that he found detrimental to society.

Implications and Outcomes

When addressing my third research question, *What are the implications and outcomes of PICT activism for public education, teachers and students, and our greater society?*, it was important to ask participants about the impact they believe their activism has had. This would be difficult to measure on an individual level, but I do believe more research could determine how PICTs have influenced education policy and public perception. The themes that emerged in regards to outcomes and implications were what was wanted for the future of public schools,

being able to change the minds of others, and how this might influence education policy to transform.

The Fight for Public Schools

Logan, Clifford, and Felicia were proponents of dialing things back and advocated for a more traditional, classical model of education. Natalie, however, was progressive in her stance and advocated for more inclusive schools accepting of all individuals which was why she pushed back against the narratives that LGBTQIA+ education and CRT was a form of indoctrination (Ferlazzo, 2022; Joyce, 2022; Niemczyk, 2022). Instead, she perceived it as a form of educating others about acceptance and caring. Natalie stated that she thought most people in opposition to this type of education did not have any relationships with those that fall within the LGBTQIA+ demographic, and that such an experience would probably change their perspective on the topic.

However, Logan, Clifford, and Felicia did perceive CRT and LGBTQIA+ education as an element of progressive indoctrination infiltrating schools. Logan attributed it to the work of progressive educators and philosophers, while Clifford and Felicia focused their attention and blame more on the accountability movement (Ravitch, 2020; Spring, 2014a). Where the two concerns intersected, Clifford stressed that in order to meet the mandates of the accountability system's federal testing and standards, schools had to adopt progressive standards and curriculum unrelated to academics and instead focused on character development such as SEL. Logan did not see much hope for public schools, however, Clifford, Felicia, and Natalie all advocated for public education and perceived its demise as detrimental to society, and more specifically historically marginalized communities (Rooks, 2017).

Changing Minds

At the time of this study, Logan did not feel that he had made much of an impact on others with his educational activism. However, Logan still maintained his intent to get the information out and warn others of a progressive agenda to indoctrinate public school students. Through his activism, Logan wanted to create a better future as he perceived the current trajectory as morally detrimental to education and society. In addition, Logan's targeted audience of the "common man" put him in a position of knowledge and being the one who has taken the time to dissect primary sources. His highly cited publications and ability to maintain his messaging while appearing on podcasts placed him at an advantage when attempting to sway his audience's opinion.

In contrast, Natalie, Felicia, and Clifford had good success changing minds while advocating in person. Each took the time to meet with activist groups, attend school board meetings, and testify during formal government proceedings. Sometimes they were just there to show their support for students and parents, but they had also presented prepared statements, spoken from the heart, and even confronted the opposition. Their end goal being to change a mind, win someone over, and prompt a new perspective regarding their particular PICT being exposed and/or debunked. In doing so, an intended transformative experience may have occurred causing a change in outlook regarding public education.

Education Policy

Although Logan stated that education policy does not concern him much, the implications of his activism and those activists similar to him working to expose a PICT of indoctrination through various means such as CRT, SEL, LGBTQIA+ education, socialism, and Marxism have had a major impact on American education policy (Ferlazzo, 2022; Joyce, 2022;

Niemczyk, 2022). Clifford and Felicia also believed that this type of indoctrination was taking place, and pushed back on technology in the classroom and high stakes testing policies that they maintained allowed this form of indoctrination to enter public schools and perpetuate. Alternatively, Natalie pushed back on this particular PICT of indoctrination and advocated for educational policies that promoted acceptance of LGBTQIA+ students and teachers. This was reminiscent of Dewey (1916) as he remarked that, "The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs creates for all a new and broader environment. Common subject matter accustoms all to a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon than is visible to the members of any group while it is isolated" (p. 21).

Suggestions for Future Research

I believe there is much more to be explored in the world of PICTs and that they have indeed influenced educational policy and public perception. Their impact on society and public schools are worth investigating as conspiracy theories are somewhat common in the United States (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019) and public education is currently embroiled in another iteration of our divisive culture wars. Conspiracies are abundant regarding indoctrination, and various threads could be explored such as that of human capital and the worker to consumer cycle (Spring, 2014a), as well as the maintaining of the status quo through a nationalistic Eurocentric form of curriculum and instruction (Grande, 2004).

Similar to the work of Natalie, I also think that future research would be beneficial in order to help debunk PICTs that are untrue and instead used for such purposes as political rhetoric to sway public perspective. The alternative narratives regarding Dewey explored by King (2018) are a good example of why future research would be beneficial. By knowing more about PICTs, teacher educators can be more informed when confronted by rhetoric either new

and/or contrary to their understanding. In addition, it is important to fully understand what education policies are working, and which are having a negative impact without PICT rhetoric creating false narratives and confusing the important issues. With a better understanding of PICTs, educational stakeholders can approach public education problems with a clearer picture of the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of the educational activists that work to expose and/or debunk a PICT.

Closing Comments

When I first came across PICTs five years ago I was intrigued. Always the skeptic, I could not believe what I was hearing as an elaborate conspiracy of powerful figures and historical connections unfolded (Gatto, 2015). I had been a public school educator for close to two decades and had never heard of such a thing. Both a public school advocate and simultaneously disenfranchised by poor public school policy, I was an educator searching for answers to help preserve what I believed in while simultaneously questioning those beliefs.

The PICT activists that participated in this study were much more certain in their beliefs than I, and their activism was a direct result of those strongly held beliefs. They were empowered to act with the knowledge they had gained through countless hours of research and writing. As a result they had produced publications, audiovisual materials, and other online content to engage with the public and share their message. I have found my research into PICTs fascinating, and the activists that work around them sincere and strong willed individuals invested in education. Although I do not agree with all of their ideologies and opinions, their voices are worth hearing and can help inform future research exploring the many nuances of PICTs.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, I have observed with amazement how what first appeared to be some obscure conspiracy tied to public education indoctrination, has now

taken the media spotlight being perpetuated by groups like M4L and beginning to have quite an influence on educational policy (Ferlazzo, 2022; Joyce, 2022; Niemczyk, 2022). Numerous states, including my own, have adopted laws limiting sex education, LGBTQIA+ education, and SEL. This has already had an impact on the school I work at and our approach to these topics. As educational activism increases (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018), and so does the trendiness of conspiracy theories (Hobbs, 2017), it is important for educational stakeholders and activists to be aware of PICTs and the intentions and motivations, processes and strategies, and implications and outcomes of their rhetoric whether being exposed and/or debunked. Educating ourselves will help us to block out the conspiratorial noise, and focus on truly fixing public education for the benefit of all.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date:	04/13/2023
Principal Investigator:	David San Juan
Committee Action:	**IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**
Action Date:	04/13/2023
Protocol Number:	2303048747
Protocol Title:	A WORD OF WARNING: EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISTS THAT EXPOSE PUBLIC INSTRUCTION CONSPIRACY THEORIES
Expiration Date:	

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:

Institutional Review Board

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).

- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).

- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.

- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Interim IRB Administrator, Chris Saxton, at 970-702-5427 or via e-mail at chris.saxton@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - http://hhs.gov/ohrp/ and https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/.

Sincerely,
Nicole Morse
Interim IRB Administrator

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX B

INTRODUCTION EMAIL

Introduction Email

Hello _____,

My name is David San Juan and I am currently a doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado. I have been an educator for over 20 years and have taught in both public and private schools internationally and in the states.

I am contacting you to gauge your interest in several brief interviews and observations for research I am conducting regarding educational activism. The purpose of my research is to better understand the activists and activism that seeks to warn the public of harmful and/or conspiratorial agendas regarding public education. To do so, I would like to interview you, observe your activism in action, and explore your publicly available content related to your activism. I believe you have a unique perspective to share, and I would appreciate an opportunity to explore it with you further.

All research conducted will have full Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and your information will be kept fully confidential. I am happy to discuss the project further if you are interested.

Please let me know as soon as you can as interviews and observations will begin in several weeks.

Thank you for your time,

David San Juan, sanj0491@bears.unco.edu

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF
**NORTHERN
COLORADO**

Participant Interview Consent Form

Researcher: David San Juan, sanj0491@bears.unco.edu
Research Advisor: Christy McConnell, PhD, School of Teacher Education
Email: christine.mcconnell@unco.edu   Phone: 970-351-2438

By signing this form, you are indicating the following.

You are choosing to volunteer to participate in a qualitative research study conducted by David San Juan at the University of Northern Colorado. You understand that the intent of the study is to better understand the perspectives of educational activists who acknowledge and actively share information warning of harmful agendas and/or conspiracy theories regarding the public education system.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You understand that you will not be paid for your participation. You may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

You understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and an open forum to share their unique perspective. If, however, you feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, you have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

Participation involves being interviewed several times by the researcher from the University of Northern Colorado via an online platform. The interviews will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Notes may be written during the interview and an audio/video recording of the interview, and any follow up interviews, will be made for transcription purposes. You understand that the researcher will have sole access to these recordings and that they will be destroyed after a period of three years. If you do not want to be audio recorded (video is optional and left to the discretion of the participant), you will not be able to participate in the study. In addition, the researcher will observe your activism in person and/or via social media platforms utilized to interact and communicate with other activists and the general public.

You understand that the researcher will not identify you by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview. While confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, we will use the best practices available to secure your confidentiality in this study. All data collected will be destroyed after three years.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read

the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, IRB Administrator, Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

_____   _____   _____

Participant Signature   Participant Printed Name   Date

_____   _____   _____

Interviewer Signature   Interviewer Printed Name   Date

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

INTERVIEW #1:

Introduction and Background

Please describe your professional background (years of experience, positions held, locations, etc.). Tell me a little bit about yourself.

How else would you describe yourself professionally? Personally? What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

What do you feel defines you as an educational activist?

How did you get your start, where do you see yourself going?

What is your educational philosophy?

Intentions and Motivations

What motivates you? As an educational activist? What drives you to share your message?

What are your greatest concerns in regards to public education? What educational agendas concern you? What are you warning us about?

What do you believe set you on this path? Mentors, experiences, life changing events?

Who do you commonly reference/listen to/read in regards to this topic? Who do you respect within the activist circles that share your message? (What sources would you cite as the best reference that support your rationales and perspective?)

To help define things a bit, with your work and what you're trying to expose, do you see a hidden conspiratorial agenda at work at all? If so, to what degree? (Are you trying to expose a conspiratorial agenda or possibly those who utilize this form of rhetoric in their education advocacy?) That which is done in the shadows to the detriment of public education.

What are your intentions? What outcome would satisfy you? How would you describe your intentions regarding your message? (What is your ideal end goal? What are you hoping to accomplish?)

How would you summarize *why* you do what you do?

Is there anything else you would like to share at this time?

What ideas do you have for me to observe your activism in action? (presentation, social media interactions, book tour, public speaking, any other ideas related to how you put your activism into action)

Are you still/when are you available for your second interview?

INTERVIEW #2

Processes and Strategies

What have you been doing since we last spoke in regards to your activism?

What strategies do you utilize to share your message? Why? What action do you perceive as ideal to dissolve these harmful agendas and/or conspiracies?

What do you do in person versus online in regards to your activism? How does it compare/contrast?

How long have you been an educational activist? How has your activism evolved from when you first began?

Do you have any "hate reads"? Books or articles that you read in order to dissect and possibly disprove? (what, who, etc?)

How do you approach an opposing activist in order to change their mind?

Similarly, what would it take to change your mind?

Implications and Outcomes

What type of influence do you believe your activism has had? On public opinion? Policy? How about the activism of groups/individuals with similar intentions?

What successes and celebrations have you witnessed within your activist community/movement? Any failures?

What sort of impact has your activism had on you personally? Expected, unexpected?

What is important to you and your activism moving forward? What are some essential next steps to keep your message going/help amplify your message?

Outro

What is your greatest concern for the future of public education? Greatest hope?

Are there any agendas and/or conspiracies regarding public education that you happen to find ridiculous (not worth it/not fact-based)? (The other end of the spectrum in educational activism?)

Do you know of any individuals that would be good participants for this study? Those you agree/disagree with?

What else do you feel is important to share regarding your activism that we haven't yet covered?

Are you available for another interview?

APPENDIX E

FINAL FOLLOW UP EMAIL

Final Follow Up Email

Hello _____,

Thank you again for participating in my doctoral dissertation study! Your participation was invaluable, and I am very grateful that you were able to set aside your time to help me with this endeavor. To finalize the data collection component of my study I wanted to touch base and follow up with one final question.

As discussed during your interview, you were selected to be a participant because I identified you as an educational activist working to expose some form of conspiratorial agenda related to public education. As defined in my study, this type of activist is an: "educational activist working to expose a conspiracy directed at the United States public education system. A public instruction conspiracy theory (PICT) is what such activists seek to investigate and disclose for the benefit of our society" and "it is their intent to inform the general public of a PICT they perceive as detrimental to American public schools."

With this in mind, what I would like to know are your thoughts regarding this terminology, and how that resonates with your activism. Do you identify as someone trying to expose a PICT? This may mean that you are attempting to expose a conspiracy in the works, expose a conspiracy as false (debunk), and/or any other connection to the terminology you feel connects with your activism.

If you could, please let me know your thoughts by August 8th as that will be around the time of data collection finalization. If you have any questions and/or need further information regarding this final question, please do not hesitate to email.

Thank you again for your participation, and I look forward to your response!

Best,

David San Juan

APPENDIX F

TRANSCRIPT REVIEW EMAIL

Transcript Review Email

Hello _____,

Thank you for your response to the final follow up question. I truly appreciate your participation in my study and believe that it will help add to future research regarding educational activism and reform. I have attached the transcripts from your interviews for your review. It is important to note that although I have made a number of corrections, the transcription software is far from perfect when it comes to spelling and grammar. However, if a direct quote is cited in the study, additional audio and/or video review will occur to aid in any corrections that need to be made in order to maintain and be true to content, context and tone. As a reminder, your confidentiality will be maintained and any names or other identifying factors will either be changed and/or omitted. Please take two weeks from today to review your transcripts and email me back with any major corrections (by August ____). It is not necessary to contact me if you have no corrections to report.

Thank you again for your participation, and please let me know if you have any further questions and/or comments you would like to share.

Sincerely,

David San Juan