

Charter schools as sites of neoliberal cultural reproduction: Prestige, performance, and inequity in the International Baccalaureate era

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Abstract

Set in a racially and economically marginalized South Bronx middle school during the late charter school era, and informed by a retrospective autoethnography, this study engages curriculum inquiry to examine how the International Baccalaureate (IB) program operates within the racialized governance of neoliberal education reforms, where symbolic prestige coexists with—and often obscures—racial capitalism and neoliberal racism (Lipman, 2011). Drawing on *currere* as a narrative and temporal mode of inquiry, this study uses narrative vignettes constructed from field notes, written reflections, institutional documents, and embodied memory to illuminate how the IB’s cosmopolitan rhetoric, embodied in the school’s “RISE” core values (Responsibility, Integrity, Scholarship, Excellence) circulates across the manifest and latent curriculum. While the prescribed curriculum and accountability structures promise rigor and global citizenship, the latent curriculum enforces neoliberal disciplinary norms and conceals structural inequities, including segregated facilities, underinvestment, and the erasure of students’ lived experiences. Framed through theories of cultural capital and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973, 1986), in dialogue with intersectional and decolonial frameworks (Fregoso Bailón, 2025; Kumashiro, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), the study advances narrative as a method of ideological critique and argues for decolonial approaches to teacher preparation and policy grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy, critical reflexivity, and material redistribution.

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Introduction

Standing around the long dining table in the dark, reeking cafeteria, we formed a human chain—hands outstretched, bracing ourselves to keep our middle schoolers from spilling into the rest of the hall. Beyond our line, timid elementary school students sat stiffly over their lunches, watched by the staff whose you-are-not-welcome-here gaze carried unvarnished hostility; under their breath, they muttered obscenities. Ours, however, was no abstract “chain of signifiers” along which, as I had come to learn during my graduate surveys of poststructuralist linguistics, meaning is always-already deferred, at times even lost. Here,

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freighted with social content, the referent, in all its historical materiality, returned with a vengeance: Our chain—the teachers’ chain—posing as a protective wall against an eruption of youthful energy, in fact marked the fault line that both delimited and territorialized an increasingly volatile pedagogical and institutional border zone: that which capriciously separates the public school from the charter school system.²

But in this bureaucratic tangle of institutional protocols, any “meaning” was certainly lost on all of us. We had been trained as educators, practitioners committed to cultivating human potential, not carceral wardens, as it were. Yet here we stood, policing a corridor between two age-segregated cohorts: our six-graders on one side, the public school’s first- through third-graders on the other, my colleagues and I stationed uneasily in between. Trying to register the absurdity of the moment, I recalled what the charter school principal had told me four months earlier in my job interview: “Here at Bronxview, our strong teachers distinguish themselves through their students’ consistently high test scores.” Good teachers, he continued, were those “who succeeded in boosting students’ test scores.” His matter-of-fact delivery made me wonder whether the circular logic of that claim had escaped him entirely; or whether its self-confirming logic was precisely the point: a way of collapsing the complex work of teaching into a single metric of value. As an immigrant and first-year teacher, I registered those words not only as an institutional directive but also as an initiation into the hidden curriculum of labor discipline—an early glimpse of the ways in which larger structural forces would frame my work and my students’ experiences.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) has long carried an image of serving an “elite group of university-bound global nomads in expensive, private international schools” (Hill, 2012, p. 344). Yet its curricular presence within racially and economically marginalized charter schools in the United States raises critical questions about how such an “elite” program functions in contexts marked by structural disinvestment, racialized governance, and material scarcity. Set at Bronxview Academy Charter School in the South Bronx over the course of one academic year, this retrospective autoethnographic study examines the implementation of the IB program alongside the school’s related pedagogical practices. Narrative vignettes, constructed from contemporaneous field notes, informal written reflections, institutional documents, and embodied memory, form the basis for examining how curricular and pedagogical practices intersect with broader social and material conditions. By situating the enactment of IB within the spatial, material, and ideological conditions of marginalized urban schools in the United States, this study addresses a critical gap in scholarship on neoliberal curricular reforms.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1973, 1986) theories of cultural capital and social reproduction, alongside intersectional frameworks (Kumashiro, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), this study critically examines the prescribed curriculum as it operates in neoliberal educational reforms (Kumashiro, 2012; Lipman, 2011). Situated within this historical and policy context, the manifest curriculum (e.g., IB framework, accountability measures, and dominant academic discourse) reveals uneven and selective enactments of IB principles, while the latent curriculum (e.g., expressed through dress-code enforcement, surveillance practices, bodily regulation, spatial arrangements) operates in tandem. Together, curricular levels reinforce disciplinary norms aligned with neoliberal values, which are

² At Bronxview Academy, teachers had to escort students to and from the adjacent public-school cafeteria and remain with them during lunch, eliminating their mid-day break and creating five consecutive instructional periods, adding to an already taxing workload.

codified in the school's "RISE" core values—Responsibility, Integrity, Scholarship, Excellence—and coalesce into a hidden curriculum that privileges symbolic prestige and institutional branding over students' lived histories, epistemologies, and material realities.

Informed by Pinar's (2023) articulation of curriculum as fundamentally concerned with the question of "what knowledge is most worth?" (p. viii), the analysis relocates that question to the work of teacher education itself. Here, curriculum is approached not as a fixed or prescribed text but as a lived pedagogical process through which knowledge is enacted, regulated, and contested. In dialogue with Fregoso Bailón (2025), the analyses that follow advance a decolonial curricular orientation that treats marginalized students' struggles not as deficits to be remediated but as generative sites of knowledge, critique, and curricular possibility. Taken together, the findings foreground the need for teacher preparation that cultivates curricular intentionality and deploys narrative as a method of ideological critique, capable of exposing racialized neoliberal logics while working toward forms of curricular and political emancipation within existing policy constraints.

Positionality: Transnational Schooling, Language Hierarchies, and Power

I was born and raised in Tehran in a middle-class, secular family. Although religious discourse permeated Iran's national curriculum, my parents did not practice; nonetheless, I was educated in a state-controlled, ideologically prescriptive, and gender-segregated system that afforded little space for individuality or cultural difference. Those formative experiences sharpened my awareness of the ways in which power works through curricular and institutional structures. I grew up bilingual in Farsi (Persian) and Azeri (Azerbaijani Turkish), yet internalized language hierarchies that stigmatized Azeri, distancing me from my heritage language—a tension that would later inform my perspective as both an educator and researcher.

I moved to the United States in 2013 as an international student in a master's program in TESOL, following eight years of teaching English in Iran. My first full-time U.S. teaching position, at a South Bronx charter school during the 2016–2017 academic year, followed a student-teaching placement in an affluent, predominantly white Long Island district. The stark contrast between these settings rendered systemic inequities unmistakable. Yet despite my TESOL training, I felt unprepared for the rigid, if misplaced, demands of the IB framework and for the institutional erasure of my students' lived histories, linguistic repertoires, and material conditions.

As an autoethnographer, I regard my roles as educator and researcher as inseparable. Drawing on embodied memories alongside contemporaneous field notes, informal written reflections, and institutional documents, I examine how my positionality, mediated by linguistic and cultural identity and immigrant status, frames both the questions I ask and the analyses I offer. This dual perspective enables a critical interrogation of schooling's structural and ideological conditions in a neoliberal, racially stratified urban context. In what follows, I mobilize this positional stance to advance a decolonial rationale for teacher education: a praxis that disrupts colonial narratives by centering marginalized voices and lived experiences, cultivating what Fregoso Bailón (2025) terms "decolonial subjectivity" (p. 440) to challenge power, sustain epistemic diversity, and reclaim education as a site of liberation.

School Context

Bronxview Academy Charter School, located in the South Bronx, serves a student population that is approximately 37% African American, 59% Hispanic, with 16% emergent bilinguals and 18% students with special needs. The school exemplifies a common charter-school arrangement in the United States, relying on the public-school system not only for funding and resources but, in this case, for physical infrastructure as well. Housed in a single-story, low-ceiling, prefabricated structure situated in the courtyard of a K–5 public school, Bronxview occupies a space that encroaches on the public school’s basketball court. The K–5 school nominally “shares” its courtyards, classrooms, auditorium, restrooms, library, cafeteria, science lab, nurse’s office, and the main entrance with Bronxview, which in turn renders spatial boundaries between the two institutions formally porous yet unevenly negotiated.

As the prevailing staff narrative had it, the public school—flagged for low test scores in 2014—soon found itself hosting Bronxview as a kind of institutional growth on its metaphorical neck. During the year of my fieldwork, Bronxview operated without psychologists, counselors, social workers, or speech pathologists. The school employed one special education teacher and one English as a New Language (ENL) teacher, despite evident need for additional staff. When the school psychologist went on maternity leave, no replacement was hired; instead, an IB coordinator with no training in counseling was assigned to meet regularly with students around “college and career” readiness. This reassignment effectively recast the role from one oriented toward psychological support to one aligned with institutional performance imperatives. Supporting this arrangement were two “deans” (i.e., nineteen- and twenty-year-old men without higher education credentials), who routinely relied on harsh, punitive disciplinary measures.

Retrospective Autoethnography

This study adopts a retrospective autoethnographic approach (Bell et al., 2020) to examine how neoliberal curriculum reforms, specifically the implementation of the IB program in a South Bronx charter school, are lived, negotiated, and reproduced in practice. Autoethnography, as Reed-Danahay (2009) explains, situates the self within the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in ways that “raise provocative questions about social agency and socio-cultural constraint” (p. 28). At its core, the method attends to “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111), making it particularly suited to tracing how policy, curriculum, and power converge in everyday school life.

In educational research, scholars have emphasized autoethnography’s capacity to disrupt dominant narratives by foregrounding the situated knowledge of those positioned at the margins of institutional power. Kelly (1997) underscores the value of memoir for educational research conducted by members of socially marginalized groups, while Berry (2005) highlights its capacity to expose social and political oppression from historically grounded perspectives. In a similar vein, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that stories by people of color can “catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism” (p. 58). Taken together, these perspectives position narrative not as anecdote but as a mode of critique.

In this study, retrospective autoethnography is further mobilized as a decolonial methodology, aligning with Bell et al.’s (2020) description of it as “a methodology for

decolonial moves” (p. 850). This approach positions personal narrative not merely as introspective reflection, but as a critical analytical practice that systematically connects lived experience to larger structures of power, resistance, and institutional reform. Drawing on my dual positionality as teacher and researcher, I treat narrative as a method for rendering visible the systemic ideological forces that often remain naturalized or unexamined in educational research. In what follows, I deploy retrospective autoethnography to trace the ways in which IB implementation in a South Bronx charter school both reflects and reproduces neoliberal logics of discipline, prestige, and accountability, while also revealing the limits such reforms impose on culturally sustaining and decolonial pedagogical possibilities.

Data Sources and Narrative Construction

The narrative vignettes that constitute the analytical core of this study were constructed from multiple overlapping data sources: namely, embodied memories, contemporaneous field notes, informal written reflections, and institutional documents. These narratives are therefore understood not as transparent representations of an objective or singular reality, but as interpretive constructions mediated by retrospection, positionality and analytical intent. From this standpoint, narrative is treated not as a neutral medium of reporting, but as a methodological practice through which meaning is produced, situated, and theorized.

Accordingly, the vignettes are not offered as isolated anecdotes, but as situated analyses of mutually constitutive intersections of race, cultural capital, social reproduction, curriculum, and ideology in a charter-school context. I acknowledge that storytelling is necessarily partial: each narrative presupposes a particular standpoint, mediated by context, power relations, and the limitations of memory and access. Not every voice can be represented, and many stories inevitably remain untold.

Nevertheless, the accounts that follow seek to bear witness to the complex, and often contradictory, realities of marginalized students whose experiences are routinely rendered invisible and whose voices are silenced within dominant educational discourses and prescribed curricula. Rather than aspiring to a comprehensive or exhaustive account, this narrative intervention aims to make visible—if only provisionally—the lived consequences of neoliberal schooling practices, including IB implementation, as they are enacted through everyday pedagogical, disciplinary, and institutional arrangements.

Analytical Approach

Analysis proceeded iteratively through cycles of narrative writing, rereading, and theoretical reflection (Saldaña, 2018). Narrative episodes were revisited through reflexive memoing to identify recurring patterns related to spatial segregation, disciplinary practices, the erasure of students’ lived experiences, meritocratic discourse, and the production of symbolic capital. These emerging themes were interpreted through Bourdieu’s (1973, 1986) theories of cultural capital and social reproduction, read in dialogue with intersectional and decolonial frameworks (Fregoso Bailón, 2025; Kumashiro, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Rather than seeking reliability through replication, analytical credibility is established through reflexivity, theoretical coherence, rigor, and resonance (Tracy, 2010). Although the curricular and pedagogical practices examined here were not originally undertaken as research, ethical

considerations guided the retrospective analysis throughout. All names of individuals and the school are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been altered to protect confidentiality.

This analytical approach, in turn, treats narrative not as evidence of isolated experience but as a lens for examining the ways in which localized practices participate in larger regimes of governance and meaning-making. To situate these narrative patterns in a wider field of power, the analysis now turns to the historical and policy conditions through which charter schools have emerged as key instruments of neoliberal educational reform.

Historical Context: Charter Schools in a Neoliberal Era

The charter school movement, originating in the 1970s with Ray Budde's proposal for "charters" to reform traditional schooling (Budde, 1988), gained momentum in the 1980s amid broader neoliberal reforms. In the wake of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the Reagan administration's push for market liberalization, public education became a target for privatization advocates who framed teachers, unions, and bureaucratic governance as obstacles to innovation and economic competitiveness (Harvey, 2005; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017). As Lipman (2011) explains, neoliberalism operates not only as a set of policies but also as a new sociocultural dominant that promotes excessive individualism, unfettered capital flows, reduced labor costs, and the withdrawal of the state from social welfare, all under the premise that market competition is inherently more efficient (p. 6). This ideological shift—that is, treating education less as a public good and more as a market commodity—has profoundly shaped U.S. school reform over the past four decades.

Federal initiatives like *Race to the Top* (2009) tied funding to competitive, data-driven accountability measures, accelerating the expansion of charter schools.³ Between 2010–11 and 2021–22, the number of charter schools grew from roughly 5,300 to 7,800, even as traditional public schools declined in number (NCES, 2023). Many charter schools operate with significant autonomy from district oversight, often with anti-union policies, extended instructional hours, and considerable private philanthropic support (Blum, 2022). Advocates present "autonomy" as liberation from bureaucracy, but critics note that it frequently replaces public oversight with the influence of private capital, which narrows the purpose of education to human capital development and market competitiveness (Bartell et al., 2019; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017).

In New York City, co-location policies are emblematic of the neoliberal turn in urban education. Similar strategies have unfolded in Chicago and New Orleans, which, like New York, became testing grounds for reforms marked by disinvestments, widening racial "achievement gaps," and radical governance shifts. In Chicago, Mayor Daley's Renaissance 2010 sought "to reinvent the third largest U.S. public school system as an education market" by closing or privatizing scores of schools in Black and Latino neighborhoods and reopening many as charters or contract schools (Lipman, 2012, p. 33, 48). These education reforms were entwined with the city's Plan for Transformation (PFT), which demolished tens of thousands

³ In the words of former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, "I am a deep believer in the power of data to drive our decisions. Data gives us the roadmap to reform. It tells us where we are, where we need to go, and who is most at risk. . . . we need robust data systems to track student achievement and teacher effectiveness" (Duncan, 2009a). In a follow-up statement, he reiterated the centrality of data in "race to the top," emphasizing the role of data driven instruction and noting that "Many teachers are hungering for data to inform what they do" (Duncan, 2009b).

of public housing units and replaced them with mixed-income developments under HOPE VI. As Lipman (2012) argues, both initiatives represented neoliberal urbanism: that is, the merger of capital and city management to advance gentrification, downtown development, and “corporate-state governance partnership.” The same logic that privatized schools also privatized housing, social services, and public assets, displacing low-income communities of color in the process (pp. 33-34).

Charter expansion, then, was not a neutral reform but part of a racialized reorganization of urban space. Chicago’s charter schools clustered disproportionately in historically under-resourced African American and Latino neighborhoods already scarred by decades of racism and disinvestment. Parents’ turn to these schools reflected, as Lipman (2012) notes, a “reasonable response” to the persistent failure of public schools to provide equitable education (p. 48), even as charter expansion itself displaced, rather than resolved, those structural inequities.

Detroit’s trajectory reveals a parallel pattern, though rooted in its particular history of industrial decline and racialized governance. Wright et al. (2020) trace the city’s educational crisis not to alleged failures of Black leadership, as state narratives often implied, but to decades of deindustrialization, White flight, and systemic divestment. They show how “contested fiscal definitions” justified “Public Act 4 and Emergency Management,” producing racially biased rationales for stripping local control of schools. As Wright and colleagues observe, Detroit’s “blackening” during the Great Migration was met with a “fearful White imaginative” that paired demographic change with deficit narratives of Black communities, laying the groundwork for neoliberal austerity (p. 427). In New Orleans, the post-Katrina rebuilding process entrenched charterization under the banner of renewal, while in New York, as in Chicago, the convergence of corporate influence, gentrification, and racial inequities reconfigured public schooling into a competitive marketplace (Lipman, 2011, 2012; Watkins, 2012).

In this context, Bronxview Academy’s annexation of space from a K–5 public school exemplifies the convergence of privatization and racialized spatial reorganization. Serving predominantly Black and Latinx students in a historically marginalized community, the school competes with its host institution for scarce resources under policy regimes that designate such schools as “low-performing.” The conditions that follow—high teacher turnover, an overwhelmingly early-career workforce, the absence of protected prep-time, extended workweeks, and an intensified emphasis on standardized testing—echo reforms in cities such as Chicago, New Orleans, and Detroit, where neoliberal agendas have restructured teaching labor and recast education in market metrics of performance and “success.” Against this backdrop, the IB curriculum, heralded as a “gold standard” of rigor and global competitiveness, collides with the material, racialized, and political realities of the South Bronx. With this historical and policy context in view, the analysis now turns to the ways in which these forces are taken up through Bronxview’s manifest and the hidden curricula.

The Manifest Curriculum: IB and the Reinforcement of Neoliberal Values

This section advances the argument that the implementation of the IB in the South Bronx exemplifies the ways in which neoliberal racial capitalism is mediated and made legible through curriculum, performance metrics, and material conditions of schooling, including the

students' lived realities, institutional infrastructures, and the labor management. Rather than operating as an autonomous framework of academic rigor, IB functions as a site through which larger political-economic forces are transcoded into pedagogical practice, institutional prestige, and metricized regimes of performance and accountability that privilege branding over structural equity. The analysis thus unfolds across four interrelated themes: (1) IB as an Instrument of Neoliberal Prestige; (2) The Ascendance of Metrics and the Masking of Structural Inequity; (3) Material Conditions as Curriculum; and (4) Curricular Alienation and the Misrecognition of Local Knowledge.

IB as an Instrument of Neoliberal Prestige

The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), founded in the late 1960s in Geneva, Switzerland, was originally designed as a pre-university curriculum for the children of mobile professionals and diplomatic elites (Peterson, 2003; Resnik, 2012). In North America, IB has increasingly been taken up by public schools as a means of signaling academic distinction — that is, projecting the aura of elite private education while responding to parental demand for ostensibly rigorous academic standards shaped by neoliberal ideology (Tarc & Beatty, 2012). As Kumashiro (2012) notes, “neoliberalism values competitive markets and the freedom of individual choice within them” while resisting redistributive policies (p. 38). In education, this tendency recasts schools as marketplaces, families as consumers, and curricular programs such as IB as status-bearing commodities through which institutions compete for enrollment, resources, and prestige. Harvey (2005) further argues that that neoliberalism cloaks the “reconstitution of naked class power” in “wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights” (p. 119), which in effect masks structural inequity behind the rhetoric of opportunity.

Charter schools like Bronxview Academy epitomize this paradox: public in form yet governed by market imperatives, they occupy a liminal space in which privatization advances under the banner of reform, penetrating what has historically functioned as one of the last remaining bastions of universal public education.⁴ In this context, IB functions less as an apolitical curricular intervention than as a mechanism of symbolic capital: that is, it seems to confer legitimacy, distinction, and competitive advantage while displacing attention from students' lived realities and systemic inequities. This ideological configuration sets the stage for the ascendance of metrics and performance regimes that follow.

The Ascendance of Metrics and the Masking of Structural Inequity

Bronxview Academy emerged on the premises of a public school long labeled “low-performing” by official metrics. Such designations, however, exemplify how quantitative indicators come to stand in for structural analysis. At the time of Bronxview's founding, nearly 40% the host school's students were experiencing homelessness (NYS Department of Education). What does it mean, then, to evaluate “educational quality” through accountability frameworks that reduce schooling to test performance while invisibilizing such material realities. Rather than addressing these systemic inequities, officials redirected resources to

⁴ At the time of writing, the current U.S. administration has signaled its intent to dismantle the Department of Education, a move that would remove a critical layer of federal oversight from public schooling. Such an action, far from merely reorganizing bureaucratic structures, would accelerate the privatizing trajectory of contemporary reform and intensify the commodification of education, which in turn entrenches the structural inequities already produced by market-oriented policies.

establish a charter school on the same site, effectively short-circuiting the historical roots of disinvestment and marginalization.

What is at stake, then, is not test performance alone but the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, and more fundamentally, a sustained commitment to education as a public good. From the standpoint of neoliberal regimes of accountability, data-driven instruction and high-stakes testing function less as pedagogical diagnostic tools than as mechanisms aligned with corporate interests, including testing conglomerates such as Pearson. This tendency fetishizes metrics at the expense of historically and socially grounded interventions that would engage students in the fullness of their social being, not collapsing the complex lives into decontextualized data points. Drawing on Fregoso Bailón's (2025), this analysis underscores the epistemic valence of everyday life whose forms of knowledge exceeds what quantitative measures can apprehend.

Ladson-Billings (2006) similarly cautions that the national fixation on test scores masks the structural conditions underlying educational outcomes: "what is actually happening to African American and Latina/o students is really more like the national debt. We do not have an achievement gap; we have an education debt" (p. 5). This debt, she argues, is not the product of individual effort or moral failure but the cumulative result of "historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies" that have produced a heavily stratified society (p. 5, 10). History, therefore, rather than "nature," political economy rather than individual will, and social being rather than essentialist explanations mark the true coordinates of this debt. The narrowing of educational horizon produced by the dominance of metrics carries material—not merely discursive—consequences.

Rather than closing these "gaps" through culturally sustaining curriculum, the IB program often deepened them. Despite its "prestigious" reputation, teachers received little preparation for its delivery, and its neoliberal, class-specific content sat uneasily against the South Bronx context. Nor did the curriculum align with New York State standards, the benchmarks by which students would ultimately be tested and judged. From the first day of school, faculty were reminded of the most important dates: state exams, admin inspections, and the annual IB observation. Beyond administrative mandates, however, there was scant evidence of investment in the program's pedagogical substance; its perceived success seemed tethered less to student learning than to its capacity to attract state and IBO funding.

Faculty meetings each month were almost entirely consumed by discussions of bi-weekly diagnostic test data for Math and ELA, which cost nearly three hours of instructional time. The principal would review results and solicit suggestions for boosting scores on the next round of assessments. Professional learning over the course of the year was therefore scattered and piecemeal, narrowly fixated on short-term testing gains rather than sustained pedagogical growth or students' basic needs. This narrowing of purpose reflects what Kumashiro (2012) calls the prevailing "common sense" in schooling, which collapses a school's vision into two metrics: the individual teacher's performance and standardized test scores. As he observes, the corollary of narrowly defining "the good teacher merely in terms of the ability to raise test scores" amounts to "categorizing all others as bad, even those who, in so many other ways, are successful, admirable, valuable, impactful, effective, ethical, and good" (p. 21): a definition that closely mirrors Bronxview's principal's own characterization of what constitutes a "good" teacher during my job interview.

This reductive framework also narrows teacher evaluation to a single metric, and, in doing so, forestalled possibilities for substantive education change. In effect, by centering individual performance over systemic analysis, it diverts attention from structural and institutional mechanisms that mediate students' lives. As Kumashiro (2012) notes, neoliberalism disregards systemic and historical inequities (e.g., racial discrimination in employment and economic policies favoring the wealthy) that produce profoundly uneven starting points. It nevertheless promotes an understanding of equality and freedom premised on a nonexistent level playing field that normalizes outcomes in which a few succeed while many are left behind (pp. 38–39). Such a narrow, market-driven vision of schooling is symptomatic of a more thoroughgoing reification under neoliberal social reproduction that eclipses the larger social and economic mediations through which educational inequities are produced and sustained.

The problem, ultimately, is not the wholesale rejection of data or its potential value in educational reform, but rather the uncritical valorization of narrowly defined, decontextualized metrics as the primary measure of educational worth. When market-driven data regimes displace attention to students' concrete social and cultural realities, structural inequities are not "resolved" but rendered invisible—that is, masked by the very tools purported to ensure equity and accountability.

Material Conditions as Curriculum

At Bronxview, what teachers identified as most urgently needed had little to do with data or formal assessment. My own experience corroborates this: educators and students confronted systemic inequities not abstractly, but through the daily absence of basic material supports. Teachers lacked a functioning lounge, forcing them to work in hallways or the courtyard; students navigated long distances and multiple flights of stairs simply to access restrooms; and classrooms operated without adequate computers, grade-level libraries, science labs, or preparation time. More broadly, the school lacked essential infrastructures and personnel, including a gymnasium, auditorium, separate entrance, school psychologist, speech pathologist, nurse, and social worker.

Such conditions are not anomalous but recur across overcrowded, underfunded schools serving primarily students of color, where chronic resource scarcity structures everyday schooling (Kozol, 2005; Oakes, 2002; Oakes et al., 2004). As Ladson-Billings (2006) argues, the sociopolitical dimensions of the "education debt" have long excluded families of color from meaningful participation in school governance, with formal avenues like parent-teacher organizations and school councils often inaccessible (p. 7). At Bronxview, scarcity was not a temporary inconvenience but a constitutive condition that produced a dehumanizing environment for teachers and, more acutely, for students. It foreclosed the cultivation of relationships rooted in *conscientização*—namely, Freire's (1970) call to recognize and confront the social, political, racial, and economic contradictions that mediate schooling—and routinely undermined students' academic development. In this context, material deprivation does not merely impede IB's curricular ambitions; it exposes the contradictions at their core.

Curricular Alienation and the Misrecognition of Local Knowledge

Despite its cosmopolitan veneer and emphasis on "globally recognized" authors, the IB's prescribed curriculum, as implemented at Bronxview, seems to privilege a rigid Eurocentric—largely Anglo-American—canon that systematically misrecognizes the knowledge and lived experiences of students in the South Bronx. While presented as universally relevant, this

curricular framework operates through symbolic exclusion, rendering students' local histories, struggles, and epistemologies intellectually peripheral or deficient (Bunnell et al., 2017; Walker, 2010). The result is curricular alienation: a condition in which students are present in the classroom yet positioned outside the domain of legitimate knowledge.

This misrecognition surfaced most starkly during an ELA discussion of *The Great Gatsby*. When the teacher invoked the novel's "universal themes" of ambition and success, a student challenged the premise, noting that for many in her community, daily survival and paying rent took precedence over promises of wealth and getting ahead that felt out of reach. She asked why the curriculum could not also include texts that represented experiences closer to students' own lives. Her intervention exposed a central contradiction: what the curriculum presented as universal was in fact a particular, class-specific set of (bourgeois) values and experiences masquerading as universal, while students' own social worlds were rendered peripheral. Rather than engaging this critique, the appeal to universality functioned to foreclose it.

A similar dynamic emerged in a later discussion of global inequality. When prompted to consider the healthcare situations in Uganda and Nepal, students asked whether they could also discuss the overcrowded local clinics, environmental asthma triggers in their housing, and gun violence in their neighborhood. Although the teacher acknowledged these concerns, she emphasized the IB's global focus, thus deferring local issues. Students expressed frustration, questioning how they could meaningfully engage distant problems when their own experiences were rendered secondary. In this moment, the discourse of "global citizenship" operated less as an enlargement of provincial horizons than as a hierarchy of relevance, which seemed to position students' immediate lives as epistemically insufficient for curricular consideration.

These forms of alienation were compounded by the school's limited preparation for the IB program. Teacher training consisted of two brief virtual sessions led by an instructor whose experience in IB Visual Arts bore little relevance Bronxview's complex instructional demands. Teachers received minimal guidance on scope, sequence, or cross-content integration, even as they struggled with classroom management, student trauma, and the absence of critical support staff. The introduction of a "prestigious" curriculum under such conditions revealed a familiar neoliberal pattern: symbolic capital was imported to signal rigor, while material and economic capital—long eroded through racialized disinvestment—and the relational supports necessary for equitable education were withheld.

Ultimately, these scenes thrown into sharp relief how IB's global discourse produces curricular alienation not through outright exclusion, but through ideological misrecognition and misplacement. Students' experiences are neither denied nor fully acknowledged; they are rendered marginal by a curriculum that seems to elevate abstraction, distance, and prestige over the concrete, situated knowledge of students' lives. As Apple (1995) argues, ideology functions through "lived meanings, practices, and social relations that are often internally inconsistent" (p. 14), simultaneously illuminating and obscuring inequity. At Bronxview, IB's global discourse gestured toward universal inclusion while reproducing exclusion by sidelining students' immediate histories and needs. As Kumashiro (2012) warns, "language has the power to mask certain realities or dehistoricize certain concepts" (p. 10). And it is precisely this form of discursive dehistoricization that this study seeks to expose in the context of IB at Bronxview.

The Latent Curriculum: The Dress Codes, Control, and Neoliberal Values

Extending the preceding analysis of IB's manifest curriculum, this section turns to the school's latent curriculum: namely, the quotidian disciplinary practices through which neoliberal norms were reproduced, enacted, and normalized. At Bronxview, control operated not only through regimented routines of escorting students to the cafeteria and monitoring their movement in hallways but also through the enforcement of a strict dress code: that is, school-branded button-downs or polo shirts, cardigan sweaters or sweatshirts, khaki pants with brown or black belts, solid-colored socks, and only black sneakers or shoes. The ideological logic animating these practices was made explicit in the principal's remarks to a colleague, delivered with unwavering certainty: "our kids are here every day, showing up and doing their best," unlike students at other schools who "skip class, get into trouble; they're delinquents and thieves, and face no accountability." Bronxview, he insisted, "holds them to strict standards," which is why "they come."

Those standards materialized most clearly in the hallways. A dean stopped a ninth grader whose shirt hung loose: "Tuck that shirt in, or you'll have detention after school." When the student adjusted it while muttering under his breath, the assistant principal warned, "Next time, suspension." "It's just a shirt. Chill," the student replied. "It's the rule," the assistant principal countered, adding, "rules get you ready for the real world." Dress code enforcement operated with bureaucratic precision: every infraction—say, an untucked shirt, a wrong-colored sweater, bright sneakers—was carefully recorded. Deviations were met not with conversation or mediation, but with detention slips, suspension notices, and calls home.

In the faculty room, neatly stacked IB binders labeled "Unit Plan," "Assessment Data," and "Performance Targets" sat untouched, their bureaucratic order standing in stark contrast to students' lived experiences. A colleague flipped through one, shaking her head: "They keep talking about global-mindedness, but some of our kids don't even have a quiet place to sleep at night, or food to eat at home. How can we talk about internationalism when half the class is worried about eviction notices?" This disjuncture between institutional expectations and students' material realities surfaced repeatedly in interactions with families.

During one meeting, a guardian raised concerns with the school's IB coordinator about the demands placed on her child. She explained that he worked late shifts at a neighborhood store to help cover household rent and often returned home exhausted, struggling to manage the volume of assigned work alongside academic responsibilities. The coordinator responded by stressing that academic intensity was a defining feature of the IB program and that skills such as organization, perseverance, and sustained effort were essential for success. He then added that many students relied on private tutoring to manage the workload. The guardian replied that private tutoring was financially inaccessible to their family and that her child's labor obligations were not a matter of choice. The coordinator reiterated that the IB Diploma provided access to elite postsecondary opportunities but required exceptional dedication. The guardian, in turn, questioned why dedication was defined through the expectation that students suppress, or disregard, their familial and economic responsibilities.

This exchange sharpens how IB presupposes a normative student subject unencumbered by economic hardship or the material realities that condition working-class lives. The guardian's frustration exposes the widening gap between institutional expectations and students' lived realities, which the school often attempted to paper over through symbolic measures. administrators frequently invoked Bronxview's uniform as an embodiment of its four RISE

core values. In practice, however, the exhaustive policing of the student body—and of students' bodies—became a defining feature of the school's latent curriculum, what Philip Jackson (1968) termed the "hidden curriculum." Repeated injunctions to "tuck that shirt in" did more than regulate appearance; they inscribed a moral economy of respectability and control that rendered students' lived circumstances—poverty, wage labor, housing instability—epistemologically illegible within the school's normative framework.

As Althusser (2014) contends, even Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), such as schools can assume overtly repressive functions, deploying: "methods of punishment, expulsion, selection . . . to 'discipline' not only their shepherds, but also their flocks" (p. 244). At Bronxview, the principal framed the dress code as a mechanism for reducing gang activity and making poverty less visible. In practice, its enforcement frequently crossed into punitive excess. In one instance I witnessed directly, a special education student was forced to stand in the corner of a classroom for nearly six hours without food or water; when I intervened, I was formally reprimanded and warned that further interference would result in termination.

The injunction "Tuck that shirt in!" echoed through the hallways daily. Deans routinely entered classrooms mid-lesson, singled out students—"you in the red sweater, you in blue, and you in yellow sneakers"—and escorted them to the office, disrupting instruction and reasserting disciplinary authority. This fixation on sartorial compliance came at the expense of sustained curricular engagement. My objection, therefore, is not to the existence of a reasonable or dignifying dress code, but to its deployment here as a disciplinary spectacle that substituted visible order for material equity and masked the structural realities of poverty, housing instability, and economic precarity, in direct contradiction to the school's professed RISE values.

In examining the ideological functions of the curriculum, whether in Bronxview's adoption of IB or its enforcement of a strict dress code, I draw on Apple's (1971) insight that "the curriculum field has its roots in the soil of social control" and that schooling operates as a key mechanism through which such control is secured (p. 344). Building on Jackson's formulation, Apple defines the "hidden curriculum" as "the norms and the values that are implicitly, but effectively, taught in schools," which shape what students come to recognize as legitimate knowledge and conduct (pp. 27–29). Extending Roberta Sigel's argument, Apple (2018) further observes that as a form of "incidental learning," the hidden curriculum "contributes more to the political socialization of a student than do, say, civics classes" (p. 87). Together, these critiques illuminate Bronxview as an implicit site of ideological struggle, where learning to write, speak, think, and form judgment—the very processes through which students are socialized—assume explicit socioeconomic and political dimensions.

Looking back on my residency at Bronxview Academy, it becomes clear that the school offered little meaningful support to early-career teachers navigating an exceptionally demanding pedagogical and social terrain. Chronic disciplinary crises, administrative mismanagement, inadequate professional development, and the absence of sustained social-emotional supports for students collectively undermined the possibility of a coherent instructional framework. Rather than addressing these structural conditions, administrators concentrated on testing protocols and the school's outward performance of being "IB-ready" for annual inspections. Teachers who struggled with classroom control, or whose prior preparation had left them ill-equipped for the South Bronx context, were frequently dismissed and rapidly replaced in

advance of IB walk-throughs. This cycle of institutional damage control, oriented toward safeguarding reputation and funding rather than pedagogical stability, produced staggering attrition: by the end of the year, 85 percent of the teaching staff had either resigned or been terminated, with many positions filled only through hurried, ad-hoc hiring processes that nevertheless left the school persistently understaffed.

Racial Capitalism, Neoliberalism, and the Social Reproduction of Inequity

Reflecting on the commodifying logic of the market, Freire (1997) critiques the ethical bankruptcy of neoliberal reforms, in which education is recast as a market good rather than a social right: “The ethical requirements are becoming more and more critical in a world that is becoming less and less ethical. Thus we can never really solve the problem of teacher preparation with mere technicist proposals” (p. 313). Freire links this erosion of ethics to the quantifying logic of the market, which reifies what are in fact interconnected spheres: word and world, subject and object, individual and social, culture and economy, politics and education. Lipman (2011) similarly argues that neoliberalism operates not only as a policy regime but as “a new social imaginary, a common sense about how we think about society and our place in it” (p. 6). Its racialized dimensions, what O’Neal and Bridgeforth (2025) call “neoliberal racism,” reproduce inequity through race-evasive, meritocratic discourse that disavows historical and structural causality. Against this ideological opacity, my methodological aim, much like Freire’s, is to rearticulate the structural relations neoliberalism works to obscure. Education, as an Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 2014) of bourgeois culture, is deeply imbricated in economic, political, and racial power, yet neoliberal privatization masks these overdeterminations beneath a rhetoric of individuality, excellence, and choice that valorizes knowledge only insofar as it can be monetized. As Lipman (2011) observes, this neoliberal turn legitimates “corporate and financial actors to make crucial decisions about public education, without public accountability,” not only through the privatization of individual schools but also by authorizing capital, working with state power, to reshape the very “institutions of social reproduction” themselves (p. 59).

Furthermore, this account of neoliberalism as the operative logic of late capitalism foregrounds the market’s expansion into domains once imagined as sites of resistance to commodification, namely, what Jameson (1991) describes as “the penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious” (pp. 36, 49). Even the category of Nature, long conceived as humanity’s absolute “other,” has been subject to critical denaturalization that reveals the social mediations through which it is produced as self-evident. A similar impulse animates Freire’s (1997) insistence that teaching biology must address not only “the nature of the life-forms” under study, but also “solidarity, ethics, love, dignity, respect for others, [and] the nature of democracy” (p. 314)—in short, “the principles of collectivity and cooperation” (p. 250). Freire’s and Jameson’s theoretical advantage here lies in reading history back into what appears natural or given, thereby reinserting “natural history” into human history and exposing the political stakes of what is too often goes unquestioned.

The counter-discourse I seek to stage insists on reestablishing connections that neoliberal schooling systematically severs: namely, between teacher, curriculum, and student as socially situated subjects, and between education and the lived realities of world, society, and history. What is needed is a reconnection between the students and the material realities that condition their existence, between the word—language, representation, consciousness—and the world of context, material life, and history. As Freire (1970) writes, “Human beings are because they

are in a situation. And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it" (p. 109). Such a pedagogy illuminates both the truth of a person's situation and the situated character of truth itself. To ignore this situatedness, or to disregard the asymmetrical cultural, economic, and political relations of power that mediate it, is to pervert the truth and suppress the register of historicity—that is, of becoming and change. Neoliberalism, epitomized by Fukuyama's "End of History," works precisely to seal off this register, advancing a late-capitalist worldview dominated by instrumental reason and profit that proclaims itself "the best in the best of all possible worlds." As Lipman (2011) observes, systemic disparities in urban schools reproduce "Eurocentric and racist curricula, racial segregation, criminalization, lack of space for genuine participation of communities most affected, and cultural marginalization and psychic assault on working class students of color" (p. 47). Critical analysis, whether of global neoliberalism or its microcosm at Bronxview, demystifies this "End of History" as ideological artifice, offering instead an X-ray of the racialized structures of power, property, and domination that sustain it.

To unpack how these ideological formations materialize at Bronxview Academy, Bourdieu's (1986) distinctions among economic capital (money, property), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, credentials), and social capital (networks, membership) are instructive. Social capital, he notes, often circulates as symbolic capital in the form of prestige or honor. Yet it is crucial not to lose sight of the other term in the matrix—capital—which, even in classical political economy, presupposes historically specific social relations. In the South Bronx, these relations are sharply racialized as well as economic. The shared facilities with the co-located public school (e.g., the gym, auditorium, library, nurse's office, schoolyard) become contested sites where resource scarcity intersected with racialized boundaries. At Bronxview, the interplay of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital thus assumed a distinctly racial dimension.

The school's hybrid status grafted neoliberal ideology—rooted in, yet obscuring, racial capitalism (Robinson, 2019, 2020)—onto the terrain of sociocultural capital. In this configuration, education functions less as a transformative practice than as a mechanism for circulating and reproducing symbols that mask and perpetuate racialized hierarchies, nowhere more visibly than in the slogan "RISE." The IB Program exemplified this contradiction: its ideological mission expressed through the idioms of multiculturalism, intercultural understanding, and global citizenship (Singh & Jing, 2013), while its latent curriculum enforced conformity and exclusion. These claims rang especially hollow at Bronxview, where "global citizenship" was promoted without even the provision of foreign language instruction. Under the banner of an "international school system," IB institutions, "not subject to any national system of control," effectively "act like private entities" (Brown & Lauder, 2009, p. 131), commodifying education in ways that reproduce inequity while cloaking it in the virtuous discourse of diversity and global engagement.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) demonstrate that access to cultural capital remains inseparable from the command of economic capital, sustaining an "industrial mode" of education in which families secure elite credentials and cultivate dispositions that convert into cultural surplus and material advantage. Ethnographic research confirms this reproduction of privilege: middle-class students benefit from learned habits such as confidently engaging authority figures or eliciting greater institutional support (Calarco, 2011), receiving more attentive treatment in healthcare (Lareau, 2003), and navigating elite postsecondary institutions with

comparative ease (Jackson, 1968). The implications sharpen when viewed through the Ivy League, long a repository of bourgeois ideals of global reach yet increasingly operating as a set of transnational corporations. Harvard, for instance, has invested in large-scale farmland acquisitions that “may not respect indigenous rights” (Grist Magazine, 2018; Taylor, 2018), while Ivy League institutions collectively amass vast real estate holdings (Grist Magazine, 2020).⁵

The flip side of such expansion turns on the systematic defunding of public higher education, driven by corporate tax cuts and lobbying that shape federal policy: what Watkins (2012) calls “the mugging of public education” under the banner of “reform,” a process bound up with “urban gentrification and the new social order” (p. 2). As Lipman (2011) emphasizes, these transformations are racialized: “[d]eclining school enrollments in specific places are socially produced in the nexus of capital accumulation, White advantages, and the cultural politics of race and class” (p. 68). This has precipitated the erosion of creative writing, world languages, and the humanities in undergraduate education (Shumway, 2017). In this light, the Ivy League’s rhetoric of “global citizenship” indexes not so much a genuine ethics of international responsibility as a form of symbolic capital mobilized as a branding strategy, which sits in sharp tension with the material consequences of its own neoliberal practices.

Thus, the education system functions as a primary mechanism for reproducing inequity and legitimizing existing hierarchies within and beyond its institutional boundaries. It does so by recoding structural disparities in resources and power—rooted in class society (Zweig, 2012)—as matters of cultural capital and meritocratic distinction (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). O’Neal and Bridgeforth (2025) similarly caution that “race-evasive, race-neutral” policy discourse sustains “white dominance” by suppressing historical analysis and “whitewashing curricula.” Bronxview’s implementation of IB reproduced this pattern by erasing linguistic diversity and decentering the needs of its predominantly Black and Latinx students. While elite New York public schools such as Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, and Brooklyn Tech (longstanding feeders to the Ivy League) treat foreign languages as a curricular core, Bronxview offered none. Nor did the emergent bilinguals receive the ENL services to which they were legally entitled. In this context, what does IB’s rhetoric of “global citizenship” amount to if not a hollow signifier that exposes a profound gap in equity promised and opportunity delivered?

Bourdieu’s (1973) concepts of cultural capital and social reproduction remain especially generative for analyzing IB’s operation in the South Bronx. Reframed as symbolic “goods,” cultural capital functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that regulates access to elite educational spaces, thereby sustaining hegemonic processes of social reproduction. Its efficacy derives from the prestige attached to particular artifacts, dispositions, identities, and institutional affiliations, while its unequal distribution both reflects and reinforces racial, gender, and class hierarchies. As O’Neal and Bridgeforth (2025) argue, “neoliberal racism, white supremacy, and race-neutral policies works to sustain racial hierarchies while masquerading as objective governance” (p. 802) More critically still, the ostensibly “democratic” character of cultural capital—its apparent openness to acquisition and circulation—produces the illusion of a level

⁵ Recent clashes between the current U.S. administration and Ivy League universities, such as threats to withhold billions in federal funding from Harvard and Columbia, underscore the degree to which these institutions operate much like transnational corporations: their symbolic prestige is inextricable from their economic capital, and both are leveraged in political and market negotiations.

playing field. By transcoding structural, economic, and racial disparities into cultural registers of taste, merit, and refinement, cultural capital offers a symbolic resolution at the level of culture while leaving the concrete material and racial inequities of the prevailing social order fundamentally intact.

At Bronxview, the fetishization of cultural capital appeared most clearly in the halo surrounding RISE and in the administration's rhetoric of human potential: namely, the promise that students might one day become "international leaders," "global citizens," or successful entrepreneurs. Yet this promise was perpetually deferred, receding toward an ever-shifting horizon. Students themselves were perceptive: one remarked that the dress code "makes us look like we fit in but doesn't fix what we really need," while another described the biweekly testing regime as "just numbers on a page that don't see who I am or what I'm going through." Althusser's (2014) account of the educational ISA is instructive here: the school's role in reproducing capitalist relations of production is "covered up and concealed by a universally reigning [bourgeois] ideology . . . which represents the school as a neutral environment purged of ideology" (p. 252). The point, however, is not to romanticize the public-school system as immune to neoliberalism—public schools have always served ideological functions—but to recognize that their public status, union protections, and diversified funding streams have historically afforded some degree of curricular and pedagogical autonomy. By contrast, the charter model seems to be operating within a more nakedly neoliberal ethos. At Bronxview, IB's implementation thus functioned ideologically to stage an illusion of "equal opportunity" at the level of curriculum, even as students' lived socioeconomic realities stood in stark contradiction to that claim.

Implications for Teacher Education

This study underscores the urgency of preparing educators to navigate the disciplinary regimes, ideological mandates, and racialized structures that characterize late-stage neoliberal schooling. Teacher education must foreground how macro-level reforms—privatization, funding structures, accountability regimes—materialize as everyday practices of surveillance, exclusion, and stratification (Kumashiro, 2012; Lipman, 2011). Beyond mastery of content and pedagogy, teachers require the capacity for ideological critique and structural analysis in order to recognize and contest the racialized and class-specific mechanisms through which educational inequity is reproduced in schools on a daily basis.

My own trajectory into teaching makes visible what is at stake when teacher preparation programs fail to cultivate this critical orientation. As discussed earlier, my graduate training at a reputable private university on Long Island, New York offers a lens onto the limitations of conventional teacher education and did little to prepare me for the sociopolitical, historical, and material realities of schooling in the South Bronx. As an international student enrolled in a two-year, full-time master's program in Education with a specialization in TESOL—marketed specifically to global cohorts—I moved through a curriculum that prioritized technical competencies while largely sidestepping the social, historical, and political foundations of education. Although the program included coursework on immigrant students' inclusion, linguistics, and TESOL methods, it systematically avoided sustained engagement with the racialized and neoliberal architectonics of U.S. schooling, the ideological functions of language education, and the historical and structural conditions shaping

historically marginalized students in the United States. What was notably absent were courses grounded in decolonial or critical literacy frameworks, which ultimately positioned teaching as a neutral and ahistorical professional skill rather than a political, ethical, and ideological practice. In this respect, my own preparation mirrored the schooling I later encountered at Bronxview: both privileged technical compliance and surface-level notions of “rigor” while rendering invisible the deeper material and structural conditions shaping students’ lives.

These curricular omissions were compounded by institutional indifference to the structural constraints international students face in navigating teacher certification. Although the program funneled us into internships in public schools on Long Island—serving predominantly upper-middle-class white students and bearing little resemblance to the urban classrooms where many of us would later teach—it offered no guidance on certification pathways or the legal limitations attached to the international student visa status. Only through my own research did I learn non-green card holders cannot obtain professional certification without permanent residency. This oversight reflects an institutional willingness to recruit tuition-generating global cohorts without attending to the long-term professional conditions under which they are expected to work. As such, my experience underscores how teacher education not only reproduces neoliberal logic of marketization but also participates in forms of global labor extraction, preparing international students for schools whose sociopolitical contexts they were never meaningfully taught to understand.

These experiences further emphasize the necessity of cultivating epistemic reflexivity in teacher preparation, grounded in lived experience, narrative as a method of ideological critique, and intentional curriculum design. This commitment to draws on Pinar’s (2023) articulation of *currere* as a theorization of the educational journey. Understood as an embodied engagement with time and subjectivity, *currere* situates lived experience in larger historical, political, and ideological formations. In this framework, narrative is not just mimesis but analysis, which enables educators to “expand the inner space of freedom” (Pinar, 2023, p. 1) through collective meaning-making and critical self-understanding. Such an approach resists the flattening effects of presentism that characterize neoliberal schooling and teacher preparation alike in that it creates the conditions under which teachers might help “our children, our students, find their way out” (Pinar, 2009, p. 51) of the oppressiveness of the present. Positioned this way, *currere* functions both as a pedagogical and political method that foregrounds temporality and historical consciousness as prerequisites for ideological critique and curricular transformation.

Extending this critique, Ibarra and Fregoso Bailón (2024) argue that “Western curriculum theory” has often treated curriculum as “static and linear,” even as lived experience disrupts this so-called stability and unsettles its “historically-centric perspectives.” Such a disruption opens space for what they describe as “generative knowledge from the exteriority” (p. 1), which in turn gives rise to “narrative curriculum”: that is, “the recollected lived experiences that encompass our daily lives which inform our actions, guide decision making, and which we often document in external memory via journals” (p. 1). This orientation is especially vital in contexts marked by racism and class inequities, where centering narrative allows educators to engage the realities students inhabit, rather than abstracting them away under the rhetoric of neutrality or universality.

Ibarra and Fregoso Bailón (2024) further contend that “curriculum theory is enriched” when narratives are understood as social practices in their own right; not merely reflections of

practice, but forms shaped by and shaping “the matrix of dispositions” (p. 10). Approaches such as narrative as a mode of critical inquiry, autobiographical reflection, and community-grounded research foreground positionality, affect, and situated knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Paris & Winn, 2013). In this sense, linking lived curriculum to narrative curriculum entails “systematizing the experiences contained in narratives from communities in their struggle for liberation,” thereby transforming them into both “anecdotal” and “theoretical resources for curriculum theory” (Ibarra & Fregoso Bailón, 2024, p. 4).

Finally, this study contends that teacher preparation must take up the project of decolonizing the curriculum, with the imperative to recenter students’ multiple identities through culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) and curricular design that disrupts deficit discourses masked by technocratic notions of “rigor” and “college-readiness.” One productive point of departure lies in the pedagogy of the Normalistas, teachers who, as Fregoso Bailón (2025) observes, have “produced epistemic insights through channels not validated by the Western intellectual canon” (p. 438). For Fregoso Bailón, a genuinely transformative “decolonial turn” emerges not from abstract theory alone but from the daily life and metaphorical imagination of ordinary people (p. 449).

Preparing teachers for this work thereby requires cultivating pedagogical courage and the capacity to mobilize narrative as a mode of ideological critique, which can illuminate and discursively challenge the underlying racialized, neoliberal, and class structures that condition schooling, while also opening space to imagine curricular and political emancipation. At the same time, such work must remain attentive to its limits: substantive transformation ultimately depends on structural policy change and sustained collective praxis beyond the classroom.

Breaking the Hegemonic Chains of Neoliberal and Racialized Social Reproduction

As this study has demonstrated, Bronxview Academy’s prescribed curriculum and strict dress code were framed as mechanisms of student uplift even as they obscured the deep structural inequities shaping the lives of its historically marginalized students. Although these findings are not advanced as universally generalizable across the charter sector, they nevertheless throw into sharp relief how such initiatives exemplify a systemic neoliberal tendency: namely, the reframing of systemic disparities as individual deficiencies to be remedied through behavioral discipline and selective access to cultural capital. Following Lipman (2011) and Kumashiro (2012), these reforms can be read as racialized strategies of governance that displace responsibility for entrenched inequities onto the very communities they marginalize. At Bronxview, this displacement crystallized in the aspirational RISE, which promised global citizenship while withholding the material, linguistic, and institutional resources needed to make such promises a reality.

Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of cultural capital and social reproduction help explain why these promises remain unrealized: students were expected to acquire, class-mediated, bourgeois dispositions in a context stripped of the resources that would make such acquisition possible. Ladson-Billings’s (2006) notion of the “education debt,” in this sense, can scarcely be repaid through symbolic capital alone. That neoliberal reforms often operate through gestures of symbolic inclusivity (Kumashiro, 2012) was evident at Bronxview, where the rhetoric of global

citizenship and internationalism nevertheless served as a veneer for exclusionary practices: an incongruity students apprehended without recourse to abstract theory. Their insights arose from an epistemic grounding in the harsh, racialized, and materially precarious conditions of daily life. Living these inequities, rather than merely learning about them, furnished the standpoint through which students recognized and sometimes resisted the contradictions of the hidden curriculum. Acts of refusal—noncompliance with dress codes, they wry humor threaded through their narratives, and the frictions produced by spatial injustice—functioned as counter-discourses, which illustrate the urgency of a critical literacy grounded as much in lived experience as in formal schooling.

From my positionality as an embedded teacher-researcher, I approached this study as an epistemic project: documenting institutional tendencies and their immediate, racialized consequences as they unfolded in students' lives. From this vantage point, the neoliberal grafting of economic power onto symbolic capital comes into sharp relief (Lipman, 2011; O'Neal & Bridgeforth, 2025; Robinson, 2019, 2020), which was enacted and normalized in the everyday routines of Bronxview's corridors. Breaking such hegemonic institutional chains requires more than policy reform; it demands a reorientation of teacher education and pedagogy toward culturally sustaining, critically reflexive, and materially redistributive approaches. Drawing on hooks's (1994) conception of "Engaged Pedagogy," Berry (2005) reminds us of "life experiences of the students within the context of the curriculum as a means of validating the curriculum is important" (p. 38). Such validation depends on educators capable of seeing through the manifest curriculum to apprehend the symbolic violence it encodes and the material one it is predicated upon. In this sense, the task is not only to expose the inequities sedimented in schooling but to imagine, with students, curricular and institutional forms that gesture toward a more just and genuinely human future.

If the late charter school era is marked by the exhaustion of its founding promises, then the work ahead lies in developing practices that neither romanticize student resilience nor reinscribe the inequities they face. Narrative and ethnographic inquiry can illuminate and symbolically challenge the racialized, class, and neoliberal structures of schooling; their transformative potential ultimately hinges on sustained collective praxis, material redistribution, and a refusal to let the rhetoric of reform stand in for the work of justice in all its social, racial, cultural, economic, and historical complexity.

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